

Emotion-Coaching

An Overview

Step One: Label and Validate the Feelings-at-Hand

Before we can accurately label and then validate our children's feelings, we need to empathize with them—first to understand what it is they are feeling, and then to communicate what we understand to them. This is simple, but not always easy.

Say Molly is feeling bad because she got into some trouble at school for talking too much in class (no idea where she might have gotten that tendency). Kids frequently displace negative emotions onto their loving parents and caregivers, meaning that while Molly might be mad at herself, a classmate, or her teacher, it would be normal for her to displace that emotion onto me when she got home. So when I tell her she can't have a playdate with Claire right that second, it provokes an angry fury, during which she throws her backpack against the wall I've asked her to hang it on and calls her sister a "stupid idiot" she would never want to play with "in a million years."

Instead of dealing with the bad behavior right away (time out!) this is a terrific opportunity to accomplish the first step in emotion-coaching: validating and labeling the negative emotions.

Me: "Molly, I can see that you are very angry and frustrated. Is there anything else that you are feeling?"

Molly: "I am SO SO SO MAD AT YOU."

Me: "You are mad at me, VERY mad at me. Are you also feeling disappointed because I won't let you have a playdate right now?"

Molly: "YES!! I want to have a playdate right NOW."

Me: "You seem sad." (Crawling into my lap, Molly whimpers a little and rests her head on my shoulder.)

I've now helped Molly identify and label several feelings: angry, frustrated, disappointed, sad. The larger our children's emotion vocabulary is, the easier it is to label emotions in the heat of the moment. I have also validated how Molly has been feeling: she knows I think it is okay to have felt all those "bad" things. Interestingly, now she is calm, tired—clearly needing a snack and a cuddle.

Step Two: Deal with the Bad Behavior (if applicable)

At this point, I just want to move on and forget about the back-pack throwing and name calling. But it is very important to set limits so that kids learn how to behave well even in the face of strong, negative emotions. I tell her that she needs to go to her room and have a 5 minute time-out, and I make it clear that these behaviors are not okay: "It is okay to feel angry and frustrated, but it is never okay to throw things or call people mean names. When the timer goes off, please apologize to your sister and come have a snack." Ten minutes after the initial incident, I am sitting with Molly while she eats. Time for step three.

Step Three: Problem Solve

Now is the time to dig a little deeper, to help Molly figure out how to handle the situation better in the future. After we've labeled and validated the emotions arising out of the problem, we can turn to the problem itself: "Molly, did anything happen at school today that is also making you feel bad?" At this point, Molly told me all about the scene at school where she had to sit at a table by herself because she was too disruptive during reading. I relate to how bad it would feel for my hyper-social and teacher-pleasing child to be both isolated from her friends and to have disappointed her teacher, so it was easy for me to empathize here. We talked about how sad and lonely she felt doing her work alone when the other kids were working together, and how embarrassed she felt by being singled out. We also talk about how she felt hungry and exhausted when she came home from school.

I did not tell her how she ought to feel ("Molly, I hope you feel bad for throwing your backpack against the wall") because that would make her distrust what she did feel (the backpack-throwing might well have felt good). The goal is to put her in touch with her emotions, good or bad. So even during the problem solving, I was labeling and validating more of her feelings: lonely, embarrassed, hungry, tired.

Next, brainstorm together possible ways to solve a problem or prevent it from happening again. The more we parents can stay in our role as a coach—holding back all of our terrific (bossy!) ideas and letting kids come up with their own—the better. When we talk about what Molly can do when she feels angry (instead of throwing her backpack, for example), she is more likely to actually try solutions if they come from her. She decides the next time she comes home from school feeling frustrated and disappointed, she'll walk the dog around the block while she eats her snack until she feels better.

That's all there is to it! First, label and validate the emotions you see. Second, deal with misbehavior if you need to. Finally, help your child solve the problem.

This document on Emotion-Coaching is not intended to serve as a therapeutic intervention or provide any clinical recommendation. The information in this document was adapted from *Greater Good, The Science of Happiness-UC Berkeley*