Emotion Coaching: A universal strategy for supporting and promoting sustainable emotional and behavioural well-being

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This paper positions Emotion Coaching as a universal strategy for supporting sustainable emotional and behavioural well-being within community and educational contexts. It offers Emotion Coaching as an effective strategy that promotes resiliency skills and locates it within the broader social agenda. The paper will address the key elements of Emotion Coaching which reflect a bio-psycho-social model for universal well-being and are informed by theory and research from neuro-science, interpersonal neurobiology, developmental psychology and attachment theory. The paper will review the growing international evidence base for Emotion Coaching and its multi-disciplinary application to a range of professional and personal contexts. Emotion Coaching helps to create nurturing relationships that scaffold the development of effective stress management skills, develop capacities to promote emotional and behavioural self-regulation and support pro-social behaviours. We argue that Emotion Coaching is a simple, cost-effective, empowering and universal tool that can harness well-being through improved communication, relationships, self-regulation, attainment, health, and resilience.
Keywords: *Emotion Coaching; relationships; interpersonal neurobiology; pro-social behaviour; emotional well-being.*

WORLDWIDE CONCERN FOR, and understanding of, childhood well-being has increased over the past decade (UNICEF, 2007). This is reflected in the increasing dominance of well-being discourse in cross party political thinking with national and societal success no longer being considered to be exclusively defined by traditional economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP), but also by measuring well-being (Stitzleg et al., 2010). As childhood is increasingly seen as not only a pathway to becoming an adult but also as a stage in its own right (Ben-Arieh, 2007), a multi-dimensional view of childhood well-being has emerged, with childhood relationships considered a key factor of well-being (Rees et al., 2010; Statcham & Chase 2010). Several factors contribute to a 'relationship': features of the individuals involved, each participant's representation of the relationship, the interpersonal exchange between the two people, and the external influences of the system in which the relationship is embedded (Pianta et al., 2003). It is the qualities of interpersonal relationships between children and key adults that is considered significant and integral to this discussion.

This paper proposes that Emotion Coaching can be both a technique (or tool) and a philosophical approach to emotions (Gilbert, 2013). Emotion Coaching supports the relationship between children and key adults, with the goal of improving children's competencies to manage difficult feelings. It can be used as an 'in the moment' technique to manage and guide a child whose behavioural response may be inappropriate or unproductive for their own and others' well-being, as well as an integrative tool to develop relationships with children and improve their emotional well-being. It is a multi-disciplinary approach that can be used in any community and educational context.

Footnote: In this article, children and young people will be referred to as 'children', and parents and carers will be referred to as 'parents'.

The importance of relationships

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) informs the following discussion of children's relationships at home and at school, emphasising the primacy of human relationships and interactions in all aspects of a child's development. Children's interactions and relationships with adults are bi-directional and co-constructed, and are integral in the development of their well-being (Rees et al., 2013). Relationships are mediated by conscious and unconscious processes. Children may either be aware of these processes, via interpersonal relationships (Hattie, 2009), or unaware of these processes, via the effect of relationships on their developing brain (Siegel, 1999), but they are inextricably linked. Siegel (2001) draws on interpersonal neurobiology to explain the ways in which relationships and the brain interact to shape our mental lives. Emotion Coaching supports the development of child-adult relationships, engendering pro-social behaviour (behaviour which is positive, helpful, and intended to promote social acceptance and friendship) and the scaffolding of self-regulatory skills.

Interpersonal relationships

For emotional and psychological good health a child needs to have secure attachments with the main significant adult or adults and experience environments that provide consistent and warm relationships (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment is fostered through attunement – where the emotional and physiological states of a child are the focus of attention by an adult (Trevarthen, 2011). Attunement promotes a sense of 'felt' security in children enabling them to develop mental representations of the self (internal working models) which guide their thoughts, feelings and behaviour and supports the teaching of coping strategies when the child is distressed (Sroufe, 1997).

Children have identified two aspects as key to their relationships with adults: (i) the nurturing aspect of adult relationships; and (ii) adults treating them with respect and allowing them freedom of choice and expression (Pianta et al., 2003; Rees et al., 2013). By viewing the child-adult relationships as a system, important relationships, such as adult-pupil relationships, can also be seen as functional mechanisms through which settings can engage with developmental processes in children (Cozolino, 2013; Riley, 2010). Smyth declared 'what is required to keep young people in schools, switched on, tuned in and learning in meaningful ways, are… trusting and respectful relationships' (2007, pp.227–228).

School experience has a powerful influence on a child's life and their sense of well-being and pupils' level of satisfaction with their relationships with teachers is the most important contributory factor to their overall happiness at school (Rees et al., 2013). Positive relationships with adults in schools enable children to function effectively (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Teacher-pupil relationships become more influential for pupils as they get older, and are particularly important for children deemed academically at risk (Commodari, 2013; Roorda et al., 2011). Rees et al. (2013) identified that 11- to 18-year-olds, particularly male pupils, felt a decline in a sense of 'being listened to' at school. The reasons pupils were reluctant to approach teachers for emotional support included that they lacked trust in the teachers, were unsure how teachers would respond or teachers were too busy to give them attention (Harden et al., 2001; The Young Foundation, 2012). Mirroring these concerns, was the key finding of the enquiry into emotional well-being and mental health of children in the youth justice system; too little attention was paid to the crucial importance of relationships in supporting children's emotional well- being and managing challenging behaviour (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2011).

Currently in schools, relationships are predominantly addressed through non-statutory frameworks, curriculum support and interventions. However, schools have found

it challenging to translate and adapt individual social and emotional learning programmes into whole school approaches (Department for Educational and Children Services, 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The progress and integration has been hindered by curricular frameworks not having the full support of all staff (Roffey, 2010), insufficient training provided to implement the goals (Murray-Harvey, 2010) and, critically, curricular frameworks that do not address the central role of pupil-teacher relationships (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010).

Interpersonal relationships lie at the heart of Emotion Coaching; which offers adults the opportunity to develop relationships with children utilising empathy and attunement. It can supplement traditional behaviourist programmes, which often focus more upon establishing external controls of behaviour, rather than on fostering security, trust and respect through nurturing relationships.

Interpersonal neurobiology
Our knowledge of the physiological, psychological, sociological, and neurobiological components of childhood has increased, and the recursive, symbiotic nature of the relationship between the physical, social and economic environments acknowledged. The interaction of genes and experience shapes the structure of the developing brain (McCrory et al., 2010) and the nature of a child's relationships guides these interactions (Shonkoff, 2010). There is now a sound rationale for interventions that work with the brain, mind and body to support children's emotional and social learning (Cozolino, 2013; Immordino-Yang, 2011).

Although the brain has specialised regions of function, it is the quality of connectivity and thus the degree of integration of the neuronal networks that influences self-regulation and learning capacity (Seung, 2012; Siegel, 2012). Mirror neurones have been identified as playing an integral role in supporting the understanding of the action-intention in others,

thereby promoting the development of pro-social behaviour and empathy (Decety & Meyer, 2008; Lepage & Theoret, 2007).

Psycho-physiological regulatory ability to respond appropriately to stimuli and return to a normal resting state is known as vagal tone. Optimal resting vagal tone and appropriate reactivity is thought to underlie healthy, adaptive behavioural and emotional responses to environmental demands and is influenced by genetics, experience and the environment (Geisler et al., 2013; Porges, 2011). Nurturing environments, which offer appropriate sensory stimulation and secure attachments and relationships, promote the development of vagal tone and help establish more effective physiological reactivity in times of distress (Feldman et al., 2010). In young children, higher vagal tone positively correlates with higher self-esteem, academic success, positive peer relations and pro-social behaviour and play, and is conducive to positive engagement and communication (Gottman et al. 1997; Lagace-Seguin & d'Entremont, 2006).

Evidence of neuroplasticity, the brain's innate ability to engage and respond to changing environments and experiences, presents developmental challenges and opportunities. The brain has the potential to develop adaptive capacities through positive relationships, however, continuous adverse childhood experiences can be detrimental to brain structure and undermine cardiovascular and immune systems, metabolic regulation and the overall stress response system (Cozolino, 2013; Shonkoff, 2010). Chronic deprivation of attention, insecure attachments, frequent, prolonged episodes of intense and unregulated stress, and inconsistent, unresponsive or frightening relationships lead to persistent activation of children's physiological stress response system (Balbernie, 2001; Shonkoff et al., 2012). The resulting toxic stress weakens and disrupts the developing neuronal architecture of the brain and can detrimentally affect the establishment of higher vagal tone (Cozolino, 2014; Porges, 2011).

Responsive relationships are 'developmentally expected and biologically essential' as the developing brain architecture is shaped by reciprocal and dynamic interactions, and well-being reflects nurturing environments and supportive relationships (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012, p.1). Although neurological development continues throughout childhood, the part of the brain which undergoes most change in later childhood is involved with internal control, multi-tasking and planning, self-awareness and social cognitive skills. This reinforces the integral role relationships play in any child's development (Blakemore, 2012; Blakemore & Frith, 2005).

Emotion Coaching is proposed as an effective tool and approach for helping to establish such nurturing environments and supportive relationships. Children who are emotion coached are better able to establish good vagal tone, calm and regulate functions within their brain and body, and develop a more effective stress response system (Gottman et al., 1996).

Promoting the quality of key relationships

Parent-child relationships

Promoting and maintaining effective parent-child relationships is a fundamental element of current parenting programmes, but Lindsay et al. (2011) believe there is a need for a broader and more explicit focus on child-parent relationships. Programmes, which focus upon child-parent relationships and teaching children about their emotions in the moment, are consistent with this idea of a broad and explicit model of parenting. The child-parent relationship becomes the unit of analysis and the key concepts underpinning effective relationships are explored. These include: emotional awareness, meta-emotion philosophy and representational models.

1. Emotional awareness

Emotional awareness is understanding one's own feelings and how these influence the manner in which we deal with others, or situations (Gottman et al., 1996; Siegel 2011). Katz and Windecker-Nelson (2004) found that mothers of children with conduct problems were less aware of their children's emotions, had poorer insight into emotional experiences, less able to differentiate emotions, and had fewer strategies to teach their child about emotions.

2. Meta-emotion philosophy (MEP)

This refers to the thoughts and feelings an individual has about their own emotions and those of others (Gottman et al., 1996). Parental warmth and parental MEP have been identified as distinct and important parenting dimensions (Katz et al., 1996). Gottman et al. (1996) identified links between parents' MEP, parenting styles and their children's ability to regulate emotion. Differing parental MEP leads to different parenting styles: emotion coaching, emotion disapproving, emotion dismissing and laissez-faire parenting (Gottman et al., 1996). Focussing on MEP is new and significant as traditional emphasis of parenting courses has been on parental affect and discipline (Katz et al., 2012).

3. Representational models

Representational models (or internal working models) are an individual's set of stored feelings and beliefs that guide behaviours and feelings in their relationship, and this then affects subsequent relationships (Bowlby, 1988). The strongest predictor of a child being insecurely attached is if the parent is also insecurely attached themselves (Moullin et al., 2014), and the quality of the parent-child relationship also influences the relationship the child forms with their teacher (Pianta, 2003). A teacher's own experiences of attachment affects their attachment relationship with pupils, and newly qualified teachers who view their relationships with their own parents as secure, form secure relationships with their pupils (Kesner, 2000).

Tuning into Kids is a parenting programme that uses Emotion Coaching to focus on emotions, assisting parents to establish better relationships with their children and learn how to be emotionally responsive to their children's emotions (Havighurst & Harley, 2007). Improvements were found in parent emotion coaching, parent emotion regulation and child behaviour. Six months after the intervention there were also increases in observed parents' social engagement with emotions and child emotion knowledge. These changes were found across home and school contexts (Havighurst et al., 2013). As we all live in a socially constructed world our understanding and practice of interpersonal relationships in families is relevant and transferable into systems where professionals interact with children. Emotion Coaching is an aspect of the family relationship dynamic that can be easily transferred to professional settings such as schools.

Adult-pupil relationships in educational establishments

Teachers' stress positively correlates with poor pupil rapport and lower levels of effectiveness (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Kokkinos, 2007). Teachers have identified that emotional management is integral to their work and recognise that well-developed emotional regulation is also protective against burn-out and maximises their professional effectiveness (Gross, 2013; Split et al., 2011; Sutton et al., 2009). However, although McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) found much has been written on promoting children's peer relations, they found a dearth of guidance on policy and practice development for pupil-adult relational matters. This is in stark contrast to a plethora of educational research on topics such as managing behaviour, academic achievements/attainments and reforming the curriculum. This anomaly is the result of the historical tension between needing to raise educational standards, as measured by individual scores in examinations, and the need

to develop the well-being of the community (Roffey 2010).

Noble and McGrath (2012) have identified that there are recognisable behaviours that teachers display when they have positive relationships with pupils. Whilst these behaviours are certainly elements for establishing and maintaining cordial relationships in general, the features seem to be grounded in maintaining discipline and order; a way of externally regulating pupil behaviour rather than assisting them to develop their ability internally to regulate their own behaviour. Riley (2009, p.626) advocates that 'the adult attachment model of reciprocal care-giving and care-seeking is a more appropriate lens through which to view the teacher-student relationship'. What appears to be lacking in the literature about adult-pupil relationships is guidance on how such relations between pupils and adults in educational establishments can be fostered and sustained.

Murray-Harvey (2010) suggest that educators and parents need further convincing of the importance of individual social and emotional well-being as an achievement in its own right, and particularly its link with academic outcomes. Reticence to change practice may reflect a lack of consensus about how best to incorporate the promotion of social and emotional well-being into schools (Pianta et al., 2003). Roffey (2010) identified that for successful implementation and integration of intervention programmes, the symbiotic relationship between the two educational systems, one which concerns school culture and climate, and the other the social and emotional curriculum for pupils, must be recognised and addressed. Failure to adequately connect and coordinate these two systems lies at the heart of the apparent unease about developing inter- and intra-personal skill programmes in schools.

Furthermore, discussion and consensus on how to enable emotional growth, self-regulation and the personal and professional skills needed to support frameworks for social and emotional learning in schools,

is needed. If all adults in the school were trained in Emotion Coaching, there would be a shared awareness of, and ability to identify and value pupils' emotions. Emotion Coaching can enable staff to engage proactively with pupils' more intensive emotions (and behaviour) so that the child's emotional (and behavioural) regulation is empathetically supported and consistently guided. It also provides staff with a tool to generate improved stress regulation for themselves and others.

What is Emotion Coaching?

Emotion Coaching helps children and young people to understand the different emotions they experience, why they occur and how to handle them (Gottman, 1996, 1997). It is based on the principle that nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships provide optimal contexts for the promotion of children's outcomes and resilience. These relationships support the development of empathetic responses and thought constructions (meta-emotion philosophy) promoting better self-management and regulation (Gottman et al., 1997; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Klein & Knitzer, 2006; Lantieri & Goleman, 2008).

Emotion Coaching rests on the premise that the emotions of anger, fear, sadness, joy, and disgust are innate, universal and guide actions to adapt behaviour to ensure survival. It is a technique and an approach that uses moments of heightened emotion and behaviour to guide and teach the child about more effective responses. Through empathetic engagement, the child's emotional state is verbally acknowledged and validated, promoting a sense of security and feeling 'felt'. Porges (2011) suggests that prosody, eye gaze, facial expression and the body language of the adult can convey calmness and safety, dampening down the vagus nerve's defensive system, so allowing the child to physiologically and psychologically start to calm down. At the same time inappropriate behaviours are not condoned, as children need to learn to adhere to commu-

nity conduct codes. When the child is calmer, it is possible to discuss the incident in a more rational and productive manner, and move onto problem solving and solution-focused strategies, contingent on the child's age and ability. Through repetitive, consistent use, Emotion Coaching helps children to regulate their emotions, negative externalising behaviour is reduced and resilience promoted (Shortt et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012).

Gottman et al. (1997) identified five steps that Emotion Coaching adults use with children to build empathy into relationships, thereby modelling prosocial emotional intelligence:

1. Being aware of the child's emotion
Prior to feeling what a child is feeling, adults need to be aware of emotions in themselves. Emotional awareness is recognising when you are feeling an emotion, can identify the feelings and are sensitive to the presence of emotions in others.

2. Recognising emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching
Negative experiences can serve as opportunities to empathise, build intimacy/connectivity with children and teach them emotional skills. By acknowledging low-levels or low intensity emotions adults and children practice listening and problem solving and this is foundational for effective management of more intense emotions.

3. Listening empathically and validating the child's feelings
An adult needs to watch for physical evidence of a child's emotions and use their imagination to see the situation from the child's perspective. Words need to reflect back, in a soothing, non-critical manner, what they are seeing and hearing.

4. Helping the child verbally label the emotions
Providing words can help children transform an amorphous scary, uncomfortable feeling

into something definable with boundaries and thereby normalise emotional experiences.

5. Setting limits while helping the child problem-solve
This process can have five parts: (1) limit setting (if appropriate); (2) identifying goals; (3) thinking of possible solutions; (4) evaluating proposed solutions; and (5) helping the child to choose a solution.

Evidence-base for Emotion Coaching
The original evidence base for Emotion Coaching comes from American longitudinal research studies. Children who have been Emotion Coached achieve more academically in school, are more popular, have fewer behavioural problems, have fewer infectious illnesses, are more emotionally stable and resilient, and are buffered from the deleterious effects of family break-up (Gottman et al., 1996). Recent evidence from Australia and elsewhere, using randomised control trials, identified that Emotion Coaching positively supports children with depression (Hunter et al., 2011; Katz & Hunter, 2007), internalising difficulties (Kehoe et al., 2014), conduct behavioural difficulties (Havighurst et al., 2014; Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004), and those exposed to violent environments, including interparental violence, maltreatment and community violence (Cunningham et al., 2009; Katz et al., 2008). Emotion Coaching has also been used to improve the psychological functioning of children who have experienced complex trauma (Murphy et al., forthcoming). It has been identified as a protective factor for children with oppositional defiant disorder (Dunsmore et al., 2012) and for children deemed at risk (Ellis et al., 2014), as well reducing externalising behaviours of children with autistic spectrum disorder (Wilson et al., 2013). Emotion Coaching is positively correlated with secure attachments (Chen et al., 2012) and believed to instil the tools that aid children's ability to self-regulate emotions and behaviour (Shortt et al., 2010).

UK research into the use of Emotion Coaching in community and education settings is also emerging. A mixed-method pilot study (*N*=127), conducted over a two-year period, demonstrated that Emotion Coaching can be an important tool in improving relationships and self-regulation in a variety of settings – schools, youth and children's centres (Rose et al., forthcoming). The training cohort included parents, but the majority were professionals from a range of multi-agency, education and community contexts. The practitioners participated in an initial four-hour training session in Emotion Coaching followed by four monthly, hour-long, setting-based booster meetings. Various measures were collected on the impact of Emotion Coaching. These included the use of pre- and post-impact data; including behaviour indices for children and a psychometric questionnaire (developed specifically for the pilot) addressing adult meta-emotion philosophy and self-regulation. Qualitative data were obtained via focus group discussions and recordings of booster meetings. Findings from the pilot highlighted that the use of Emotion Coaching in school and community settings:

- Improved professional practice, enabling adults to communicate more effectively and consistently with children in stressful situations, helped to de-escalate volatile situations. A secondary school teacher said that Emotion Coaching:

    'gives a structure which stops the staff being drawn in to an emotional situation and teaches the pupil about the emotions and helps pupils become gradually more analytical and independent.'

- Improved adult self-regulation – adults found difficult situations less stressful and exhausting, with a positive impact on adult well-being as well as the children's. One primary school teacher said:

    'I show more empathy with how the child must be feeling and it helps you slow down to consider why a child is upset/angry. Because I now use this, I think the relationship I have with the children is much more relaxed.'

● Had a positive behavioural impact upon the pupil-teacher call-outs and exclusions were significantly reduced; Emotion Coaching promoted children's self-awareness of their emotions, positive self-regulation of behaviour and generated nurturing relationships. A 13-year-old boy reflected:

> *'When people like take the mick out of me, like in class I'd just get angry and I just hit 'em. Now the teacher talks to me and it calms me down – the other kids don't really pick on me now' cos they know that I don't react.'*

Findings also revealed that adults using Emotion Coaching were less dismissive of children's emotions and behaviour (Gilbert et al., 2014; Rose et al., 2013, Rose et al., forthcoming). This evidence corroborates research that shows children are capable of learning new behavioural strategies through their relationships with teachers (O'Connor et al., 2012).

The future

Emotion Coaching is an approach that recognises the powerful, symbiotic relationship between learning, experience and the environment (Shonkoff, 2010). It harnesses the physiology of emotional responses to manage more effective engagement of the rational aspects of the brain in behavioural outcomes. Emotion Coaching is a proven strategy that can support the development of emotional and behavioural well-being in children by enhancing the quality of the relationship between adult and child and paying attention to the emotions underlying observed behaviours. Emotion Coaching is both a technique and an approach, a way of being and a way of becoming (Gilbert, 2013), and can easily be adopted into an individual's everyday interactions with children and others.

Emotion Coaching has a positive influence on neurobiological and physiological development by helping to establish good vagal tone, and giving children a skill-base to engage in prosocial and resilient behaviours. It allows children to feel listened to, and teaches them, through empathic support, role modelling and co-constructed problem-solving, to deal with life's challenges. Adults can use 'emotional moments' as opportunities to scaffold children's self-management of their emotions and behaviour. Emotion Coaching provides an effective meta-emotion philosophy allowing adults, particularly when dealing with emotional children, to remain calmer, thereby optimising access to rationality and behaviour control. It empowers adults to feel more confident in their relationships with children and can be used with all ages supporting longer-term solutions to children's well-being and resilience.

Rodriguez, (2013, p.11) believes that 'the teacher student interaction is the engine behind the synchronous educational experience that characterises the best teaching and learning brains'. We concur, and propose that Emotion Coaching training should be integral to initial and on-going practice training and work-place induction programmes for all who work with children. It should be offered to supplement the more behaviourally-based parenting and behaviour management programmes. As a simple, adaptable and low-cost strategy that enhances adults' personal skills in relating and communicating effectively with children about emotions and behaviour, Emotion Coaching contributes to improving personal and collective well-being.

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