

Emotion Coaching

Coaching your teen through “emotional storms”

A guide to help you, help your teen learn how to be more emotionally aware and emotionally regulated (and decrease the amount of emotional dysregulation in your home!)

Ann Coleman, JD

Parent Educator and Host, Speaking of Teens Podcast

Speaking
of
Teens

Why Learn To “Coach Your Teen Through Emotional Storms?”

IT BUILDS THEIR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Over the past several decades, researchers have become convinced that a person with high “emotional intelligence” is more likely to experience overall life success than others (including those with extremely high IQs.)



Two of those skills are extremely important for teens’ and tweens’ wellbeing:

Emotional Awareness - the ability to recognize and articulate your emotions while you’re experiencing them and to recognize emotions in other people.

Emotional Regulation - the ability to manage your emotions or express them in a productive manner, rather than letting your emotions control you.

The problem is, these skills are sorely lacking during adolescence. So, it’s our job to help them with this - and the best way is to learn how to coach them through their emotions as discussed on the following pages.

NOTE: To learn more about emotional intelligence and emotion coaching, listen to Speaking of Teens episodes [6](#), [78](#), and [95](#)

EMOTION COACHING IS THE KEY TO PARENTING EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT KIDS

Psychological researcher, Dr. John Gottman, and his team, conducted research on parents and children for a decade in the laboratory. They discovered that children of parents who did some very specific things had much better outcomes. They termed what they witnessed, “Emotion Coaching” and found that these kids grew up to be “emotionally intelligent” adults. They were able to regulate their own emotions better, relate to other people better and had more positive lives overall (better relationships, academic success, mental health, etc.)

On the following pages I’ve broken down the elements of emotion coaching to simplify the process for you. I’ve also explained a few other principals that will help get this right.



Disclaimer: I am not a mental healthcare provider and nothing I’ve written in this Guide should be taken as advice regarding your child’s mental health. I have researched and interpreted the information contained in this Guide from various credible resources including scientific journal articles. Please consult your child’s pediatrician or mental healthcare provider if you suspect they may have an emotional or mental health issue or disorder.

BECOME MORE AWARE OF YOUR TEEN'S EMOTIONS



From around age 10 or 12 until the mid-20s, the adolescent brain goes through a major phase of brain growth – similar to the first 3 years of life (they're very similar to giant toddlers really!)

This growth has a *huge* impact on their thoughts, emotions and behavior. They think more negatively, they react more emotionally and they do more risky things. This is not their fault. They are not doing it on purpose. They're doing the best they can with the brain they have at the moment. So, they need your help learning to be more emotionally aware and regulated.

I urge you to take the time to learn more about your teen's brain so you can become more empathetic, which will help you as you try to regulate your own emotions. *Listen to episodes 3 and 4 of **Speaking of Teens**.*

Also, begin to pay close attention to what makes them angry, annoyed, sad, frustrated, nervous, etc. What time of day is it more likely to occur? What tips you off prior to a meltdown? *Become more aware of their emotions.*

SEE THEIR OUTBURSTS AS OPPORTUNITIES

Don't try to avoid their unpleasant emotions. Don't try to distract them, fix their mistakes or give them advice (unless they ask, and even then, tread lightly!)

Unpleasant emotions are unavoidable for *all* of us and your teen can handle them with your help. This is part of developing emotional intelligence. They must learn to accept their feelings and move forward (with your help.)

Remember their outbursts or meltdowns are literally *a cry for help*, and are an opportunity to *deepen* your emotional connection with them and to *help them* become more emotionally intelligent. Repeat this to yourself: **“When they’re at their worst is when they need me the most!”**

Just imagine them as a toddler again - that’s what you’re dealing with right now!



REGULATE YOUR OWN EMOTIONS



It's critical for your teen and your relationship with them, that you get a grip on your own emotional responses to their behavior, if you haven't already.

Journaling is scientifically shown to improve emotional awareness and regulation. When you have an emotional encounter with anyone (especially your teen), journal it. Write down the circumstances, what you were thinking, what was said, etc. Get curious about your own emotions, think about connections to things in your past, how you were raised, etc. You'll soon begin spotting patterns.

Mindfulness meditation is another scientifically proven method to help with your emotions. Listen to episodes [65](#) and [96](#) of the ***Speaking of Teens*** podcast for more information about mindfulness. There are a multitude of apps, books and blogs that can help you to start a mindfulness meditation practice. It's honestly one of the best things you can do for your overall mental health.

CHECK YOUR PARENTING STYLE

We all gravitate towards a particular “parenting style”, all of which are categorized by the amount of control a we exert over our kids.

The most controlling style is called **authoritarian** (aka, “my way or the highway” parenting style), which has been shown by volumes of scientific research to be horrible for kids and teens. Authoritarians are all about the parent’s authority and the kid’s *obedience*, not a warm, loving relationship.

At the other end of the spectrum is the **permissive** parenting style which lacks much, if any, control over the child and the **uninvolved** style, which is basically, neglectful parenting. These styles, too, have been shown to be harmful and not in a child’s best interest.

For decades, scientific research has shown that the **authoritative** parenting style is best for a child. This style is a balance between firmness and kindness.

NOTE - To determine your parenting style, you can take Psychology Today's comprehensive test [here](#).



CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION



In an emotionally charged moment, it's so important to connect with your teen before even *thinking* about correcting their behavior. Whether they're emotional already or they're not but you realize you need to correct their behavior in some way (or say something they're not going to like)...connection is first. If they're emotional, you're going to learn to help them calm down. If you just need to correct something they've done or not done (a "mistake" they've made) you'll need to find a way to make a connection first (example to follow.)

If you try to scold them when they're upset or before you've made a connection, the end result is an argument, power struggle, more intense emotions - in other words, it will only make matters worse. Force yourself, for the moment, to forget the "lesson" you want to teach or the scolding you'd like to do.

If you jump in and correct them when they're upset or you jump in and correct them without making a connection first, *they won't hear a word you say*. All of your correcting will be in vain. Wait until the storm has passed. You could even wait until the next day, but at least wait until everything has settled down.

FIND YOUR EMPATHY FOR WHAT THEY'RE GOING THROUGH

During emotionally charged moments, step into your teen's shoes. Actually, imagine *thinking* with their *brain* (don't forget to go to episodes 3 and 4 and learn about their brain!) They cannot think rationally the way we do. They have little self-control and cannot make great decisions yet. Don't make the mistake of attributing the way *you* think to your teen.

Also remember that your teen is experiencing incredible amounts of stress from school, social media, their concerns about issues like climate change and social justice, plus the impact of COVID is *still* lingering for them. Teen mental health has never been worse. **THEY ARE STRESSED.** So, just remember that.

For example, let's say you've tried to get your son on the phone for the past two hours. You know he went to the beach with friends, but you're fretting and getting more stressed out by the minute. In the meantime he's just enjoying the beach with friends and has no idea his phone died. So, when he walks in the door, you're ready to pounce...but you put yourself in his shoes and remember to connect before you correct.



In this case it might sound something like this:

"You must have had fun at the beach, it looks like you got a little sun on your face." (as you reach over and pat his head or touch his nose)

"I had a great time!"

"I'm so glad, I really like all those guys. Did you catch some good waves?"

"Yeah, we did. The storm really gave us some giant rides. I'm glad I met them, we have a lot in common."

"That sounds awesome, we'll have them over here really soon for pizza or something."

"Maybe after the game next weekend."

"Sure. (pause) Listen, I'm sure you didn't realize it but I tried to call you for a while to see if you'd pick up your sister and apparently your phone was dead."

(looking at his phone) *"Oh wow, I didn't even realize. Sorry about that."*

"I understand. I know you weren't thinking about your phone and I'm so glad you had fun. It *does* worry me when I can't reach you though. I'd really like it if, when you know you're going to be away from a charger or your car for a long time, you'd make sure your phone is fully charged before you go...just in case I need to reach you or you have an emergency. Sound good?"

"Sure, I can do that."

(hugging him) "Thank you."

No arguing, no yelling, no consequences necessary. It's amazing what a little change of attitude, some patience, a recognition of your own emotions, and simple semantics can do for the level of peace in a home!



WOW

PROVIDE A GENTLE TOUCH



If it's appropriate in the moment, one thing you can do to *connect* and help your teen or tween calm down is to give them a gentle touch on the arm or back or even a hug. This has been scientifically shown to flood the recipient's brain with oxytocin and helps release other positive hormones like dopamine and serotonin. These chemicals help counteract the stress hormones like cortisol and will provide that little buffer to help them calm down, if already upset. It can also smooth the way for a correction that's just around the corner.

Obviously, you need to be able to "read the room!" There are many situations where a touch of *any kind* could cause them to recoil or even intensify their emotions. This is why you need to be as aware as possible of your teen's emotions.

Start looking for cues when their upset and if you attempt to rub their back or touch their shoulder and they don't want you to, you'll certainly know right away. The point is, to bring calm and make that connection. Get to know your teen's needs during emotional moments so you can do both.

LISTEN TO THEM INTENTLY

We talk to or *at* our teens constantly. We remind, instruct, advise, ask, lecture, correct...all the time. But talking isn't the key to good communication - listening is.

And most of us *suck* at listening to our kids. We listen more intently to our friends, boss, and co-workers.

When our teen is emotional or we need to bring something up that will likely cause them to *become* emotional, our job is to listen and empathize.

Set aside your own agenda, what they've done wrong (if anything) and *listen* to what they're saying. Don't interrupt, but get curious. Ask questions to help figure out what they're feeling if you need to.

You'll learn what not to say and what to say instead in the next sections.



AVOID INVALIDATING THEIR EMOTIONS



We *invalidate* our kids' emotions when we say things like, "calm down", "You don't like him anyway", "It'll be fine", or "You won't remember this after high school". We do the same when we give them unsolicited advice (e.g., "You should just ignore them", or "I'd just do the same thing to them").

We don't mean to make them feel worse. Most of us grew up with our parents doing the same thing to us - it feels natural. Maybe we don't like seeing our teens angry, nervous, or sad, or maybe we see their emotional display as manipulative, or spoiled. Perhaps we see them as selfish, dramatic or over-the-top. But now that you understand their brain, (don't forget those episodes!) you should be able to banish these thoughts, right?

When we invalidate their emotions, we show them we *don't* understand, we're telling them they're silly, stupid or wrong for feeling what they feel.

Invalidation leads to more emotion as they kick it up a few notches to convince us they have a right to feel however they feel!

VALIDATE, REFLECT, GIVE THEM AN EMOTION WORD

Of course, the opposite of invalidating their emotions is to validate or acknowledge them. Let them know they have a right to feel any way they feel (it doesn't matter what you think they *should* feel.)

You've listened, empathized, asked curiosity questions, so you probably know what emotion they're experiencing. And since teens are not very emotionally aware, it's your job to help them explore and put a label on what they feel. They may know they feel *bad*, but not realize which *bad* feeling it is (annoyance, fury, agitation, grief, fear, etc.)

Validating their emotion can sound something like, "I see how *annoyed* you are right now." They'll let you know if you're not right.

Even if the emotion is in response to something you've said or done, you can do the same thing. For example, "I understand your frustration. I love those shoes too. I want you to have them, but we'll have to wait until next Friday when you get your allowance." Sometimes, you can validate their feelings by just using one word (e.g., "Wow" or "hmmm").



NUDGE THEM TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM



Once they know how they feel, they must decide what to do about it. Fight the urge to give advice or take charge and fix the problem for them. They only need a bit of guidance.

If your daughter's angry because a teacher gave her a lower grade than she thinks she deserves: She could stay quiet, do things differently the next project, or talk to the teacher about changing the grade.

You can't decide this *for* her but you can guide the conversation to allow her to come up with and explore these options on her own. Listen more than you talk. Ask questions. Give hints. But allow them to get there as independently as possible (even if they ask your advice).

Our goal is to help them learn how to regulate their emotions, to manage them and know what to do with them. But it's not our job to solve their problems, fix their mistakes or give them unsolicited advice.

Mistakes happen and they're the best way to learn and grow. If they're not allowed to resolve their own mistakes or problems, they'll be at a huge disadvantage in life.

Your "Cheat Sheet" for Emotionally-Charged Moments With Your Teen

- ♥ Repeat to yourself, "Connection before Correction" and set aside correcting their behavior for the moment
- ♥ Stay CALM. Breathe, remind yourself they need you to help them get through this
- ♥ Remember that their brain causes intense emotions with very little rational thinking - that's why they need you!
- ♥ Imagine yourself in their place, at their age, in this situation...*empathize* with them - it will help you connect better in the moment
- ♥ Remember a gentle touch goes a long way to help calm them (if appropriate in the moment)
- ♥ Listen and ask questions so you can really understand and show them you "get it"
- ♥ Let them know their emotion is valid by providing a name for it (e.g., "I know you're *frustrated* with the homework today.")
- ♥ Sit back and *guide* them through fixing their own mistakes
- ♥ When all is calm you can *then* discuss any problems with their behavior (e.g., "Next time, please call me and let me know what's going on.") - remember kind and firm rather than harsh and stern

YOU CAN DO THIS!

I know this is a lot - especially if you've never heard any of this before. If you'd like more guidance, together with weekly meetups with me, monthly Q & As with guest experts and being in a community with like-minded parents, then be sure to check out [PARENT CAMP](#).

It's never too late to have a better relationship with your teenager. Positive change *is* possible.



Hey there!

I'm Ann Coleman and struggled parenting my son during his teen years. After turning things around, I continued studying the science of adolescence and of parenting adolescents. I made the switch from attorney to parent educator and podcaster to help you avoid the mistakes I made.

What's contained in this Guide are just some of things you'll learn in **PARENT CAMP** to strengthen the relationship with your teen, decrease the conflict and improve their behavior. Check out the **PARENT CAMP** membership and learn about the course, the weekly meetups with me, the monthly expert Q & As with subject matter experts who cover everything from drug use to self-harm, and the community forum, weekly challenges, and more.

Ann Coleman



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