

# Supporting Emotional Wellbeing in the Early Years

Dr Madeehah Qureshi and Dr Abigail Freedman

*Educational Psychologists*

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# Overview

1. Early brain development
2. The power of play
3. Understanding behaviour
4. Co-regulation
5. Emotion coaching
6. Looking after yourself -  
the key person



# What is emotional wellbeing and why is it important?

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- Ability to produce positive emotions, moods, thoughts, and feelings and adapt when confronted with adversity and stressful situations
- Relates to improved mental and physical health
- Increased resilience
- It will have a positive impact on social interactions
- If left unsupported can lead to lower resilience/emotional difficulties



# Early Brain Development

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A baby is born with more than 100 billion brain cells.

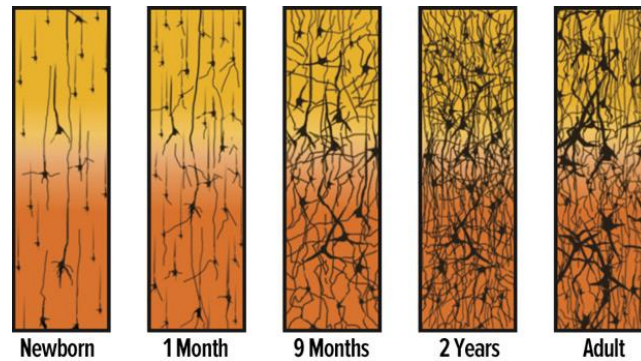
The brain is most flexible, or “plastic,” early in life.

The development of the brain is influenced by many factors, including a child’s **relationships, experiences and environment.**



# Importance of the environment on brain development

- Babies' experiences are equally as important as genetics in brain development and help decide how brain cells will connect to each other.
- If no environmental influence is present certain neural connections will wither and be discarded.
- Stimulation in the environment is crucial to brain development and growth.



# The power of play

Social and emotional wellbeing comes from children feeling safe, secure and valued. The sense of wellbeing frees children to explore and learn.

They learn ways understand the world, knowing that they can get help and support when they need it. They gradually learn to identify and express their feelings and gain skills and understandings about relating to others.

Much of what children learn about making relationships and managing emotions occurs through play.



What you see:



Feeling loved  
Feeling satisfied  
Feeling confused  
Feeling detached  
Feeling secure  
Feeling sad  
Feeling connected  
Feeling angry  
Feeling joyful  
Am I safe? Am I loved?  
Can I do things for myself?  
Am I capable? Am I nourished?  
Do I belong? Am I respected? Do I  
have power? Am I secure? Am I included?  
Are my thoughts valued? Am I understood? Do I matter?

(What's really going on)

# What is self-regulation?

- Being able to regulate your emotions
- Being able to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting experiences
- Calming yourself down when you are upset
- Handling changes in expectations or routines
- Handling frustration without outbursts

...which is all very difficult for young children.





# How familiar are you with Emotion Coaching?

1) I know nothing about it

2) I know a little about it e.g. I've spoken about it with a colleague

3) I know a fair amount about it e.g. I've been to a training about it before today

4) I know lots about it and have been using it in school already

# What is Emotion Coaching?

- Emotion Coaching is an **evidence-based strategy** based upon the work of John Gottman.
- Adults can use this approach to **pre-empt or respond to children's behaviour**.
- Emotion Coaching enables children to manage their behaviour by helping them to **understand** the different **emotions** they experience, **why** they occur, and **how** to handle them.



# Messages we receive when those around us use Emotion Coaching

- We **all have feelings** and need to **recognise them** in ourselves as well as others.
- We are **understood, accepted, supported, cared about and respected**.
- **All feelings are normal** but need to be **regulated and expressed constructively**.
- We are **empowered** and it's **safe to engage in problem-solving**.



# Importance of supporting emotional regulation

- Behaviour is a means of **communication**.
- Children may find it difficult to express their **unmet needs** which can result in what is perceived as 'challenging behaviour'.
- When children behave in a way that challenges us, we need to question **why** they're behaving in this way and what the **message** behind the behaviour might be.



# Why might children use less appropriate behaviours?

- We are driven to **meet our needs** in different areas of our lives.
- Striving to meet our needs leads us to experience **feelings and thoughts**.
- These feelings and thoughts cause us to **behave** in a way we think our needs will be met.
- When our basic needs are threatened, we may be left feeling **anxious/uncertain** and **react to these feelings**.
- Our ability to react appropriately depends on our **past experiences** and the **resources we have to draw on**.
- The combination of factors can lead to behave in an **unexpected or inappropriate way**.

## Discussion activity:

**Think about a child you know that struggles to manage and learn from everyday challenges:**

*What behaviours does this child demonstrate that shows that they are less able to manage everyday challenges?*

*How are these behaviours affecting the child or young person's ability to manage in school?*

*Type your answers in the chat*

# What are the benefits of Emotion Coaching?

Gottman's (1997) research showed that children who are emotion coached:

- Achieve more academically in school
- Develop more friendships
- Have fewer behavioural problems
- Have fewer infectious illnesses
- Are more emotionally stable
- Are more resilient

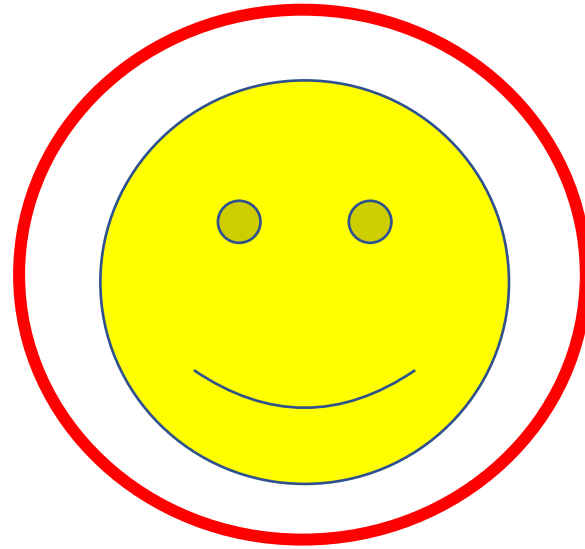


## Internal Frameworks



Internal regulation  
(Emotion Coaching)

## External Frameworks



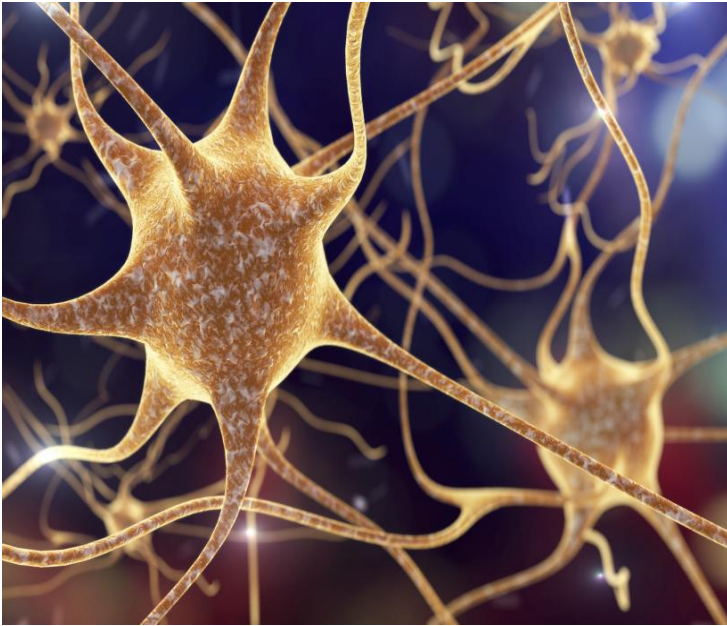
External regulations  
(Sanctions &  
Rewards)

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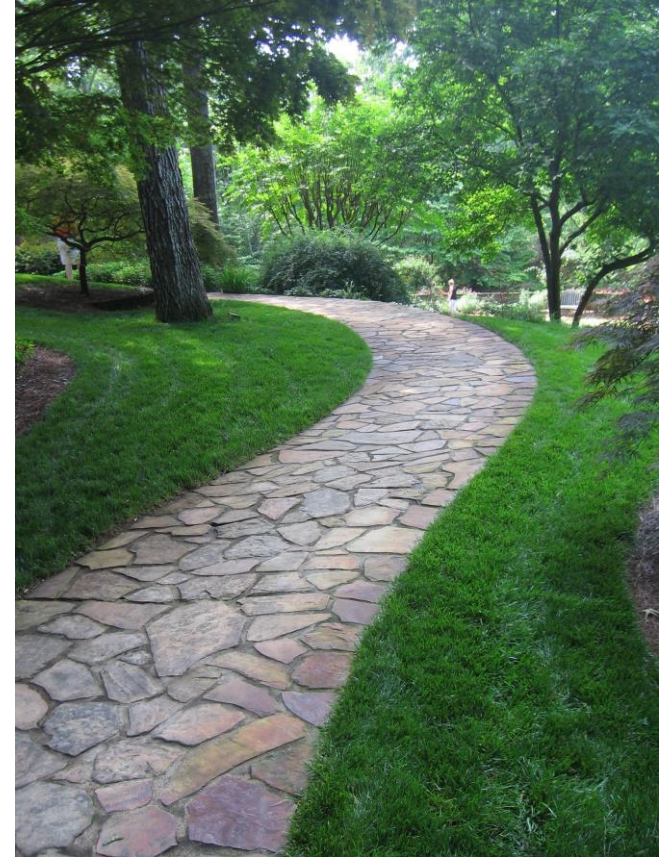
Emotion coaching  
develops internal  
regulation



# Building brains with connections



The more ***brain pathways*** are used, the more established they become, the easier they are to use, and the more they become the ***chosen routes***.

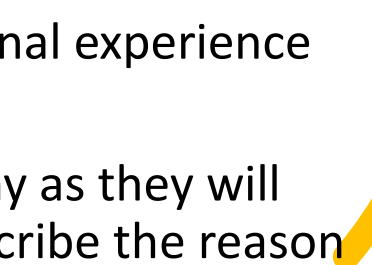


# 5 steps to emotion coaching (co-regulation)


- 1) Be **aware** of the child's emotion
- 2) Recognise the child's emotion as a perfect moment for **intimacy** and **teaching**
- 3) Listen with **empathy** and **validate** your child's feelings
- 4) Help the child learn to **label** their emotions with words
- 5) **Set limits** when helping the child to solve problems or deal with upsetting situations appropriately



# Empathise, validate and label

- Recognise all emotions as being natural, normal and not a matter of choice.
  - Recognise behaviour as communication (relational vs. behavioural model)
  - Take on the child's perspective (mentalising/mind-mindedness)
  - Look for physical and verbal signs of the emotion being felt
  - Use words to reflect back the child's emotion and help child/young person to label emotion.
  - Affirm and empathise, allowing the child to calm down through co-regulation.
  - Provide a narrative/translation for the emotional experience (creating cognitive links)
  - Avoid asking why they are feeling a certain way as they will often have no idea/not have the words to describe the reason
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# Empathise, validate and label

- Key phrases:
  - I see/I notice...
  - I hear...
  - Are you feeling...?
  - What else are you feeling?
  - I imagine that feels...
  - Tell me about that.
  - Are you saying....?
  - It sounds to me like you are feeling...Is that right?
  - How does that make you feel?
- 



I Wonder.....

I Imagine.....

I Notice.....

'I wonder if you feel frustrated by this  
....'

'I imagine that would make anyone  
feel upset ...'

'I noticed you looked happy about  
that....'

# Setting Limits (if needed)

- First, establish rapport. Co-regulate and attune with the child. E.g. eye contact, arms open, sympathetic body language. The adult should set the emotional tone. Mirror neurones then engage the child's social and emotional brain. Then the teaching and co-learning can happen. State the boundary limits of acceptable behaviour
- Identify the goal the child was trying to reach with behaviour
- Make it clear certain behaviours cannot be accepted
- But retain the child's self-dignity (crucial for responsive behaviour and well-being)



# Problem solving with the child

- When the child is **calm** and in a relaxed, rational state:
- **Explore** the feelings that give rise to the behavior/problem/incident. Remember that all feelings are acceptable. We manage our feelings by making choices about how we respond.
- **Scaffold** alternative ideas and actions that could lead to more appropriate and productive outcomes. Trust the child to come up with ideas. Don't jump in with solutions.
- **Empower** the child to believe s/he can overcome difficulties and manage their own feelings/behaviour
- If your child comes up with an unworkable solution, it is ok to go forward with it as long as it is harmless




# Problem solving with the child

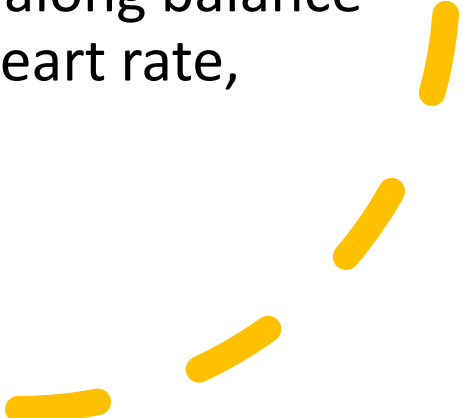
- Key phrases:
- What can you do to solve this problem?
- What would happen if...?
- Let's look at some different choices.







Things we  
can do to co-  
regulate a  
child

- Children who are very dysregulated need to regulate before emotion coaching can be used
  - The way to do this is through ***rhythm***: patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activities
  - These might include:
    - Walking, running, dancing, singing, deep breathing, pushing, colouring, jumping, trampolining, swinging, drumming, tug of war, bouncing on a fitness ball, walking along balance beam, balance board, measuring heart rate, deep pressure activities
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# Things we can do to co-regulate a child

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## Grounding and calming strategies

- Grounding helps **keep someone in the present**. It works by **focusing outward** on the external world. You can think of it as distraction, centring, a safe place or looking outward.
- Strategies include:
  - Counting breaths in and out, watching clouds, counting backwards from 20
  - Counting how many steps the child can walk with a beanbag on their head
  - Placing a cool cloth to their face
- Let child know they are **safe** and **secure**
- *“I can see you and I’m going to stay near you to make sure you stay safe”.*

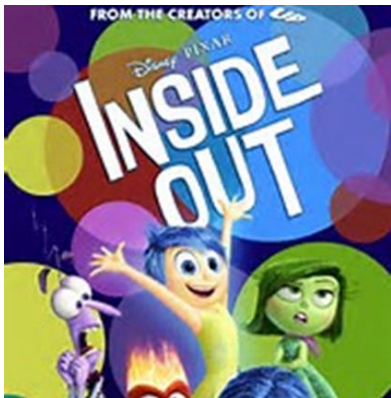




# Calming activities



- Vary with the child
- Could include:
  - colouring
  - sensory play
  - music
  - dance
  - time out area (tent, book corner)
  - breathing techniques
  - stress ball



# Resources

# Books

- *When my worries get too big* by Kari Dunn Buron
- *The colour monster* by Anna Llenas
- *Everybody worries* by Jon Burgerman
- *Small things* by Mel Tregonning
- *The story of Tracy Beaker (and others)* by Jacqueline Wilson
- *Wolves in the walls* by Neil Gaiman
- *Conversations that matter* by Margot Sunderland
- *How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

# What happens when children are not emotion coached?

## Children who are not emotion coached:

- Lack the ability to self-soothe
- Are less able to control their emotions
- Find alternative outlets for dealing with their emotions
- Are less sensitive to social cues
- Have more trouble with school work
- Have more trouble getting along with other children
- (Have more stress-related hormones)
- (Have more illnesses)



(Gottman, 1997; Goleman, 1995)



# VERY IMPORTANT – LOOKING AFTER THE KEY PERSON

- Children can display a number of behaviours which include avoiding, rejecting, challenging, escaping, demanding, clinging and becoming dysregulated.
- It's natural to feel ineffective, guilty, angry, frustrated, hopeless, anxious. **It's because you care.**
- These triggers are natural and instinctual, think about when a baby cries.
- If you are not regulated, you can't regulate the child.
- **'Put your own oxygen mask on before others'.**

# What about practitioner's self-regulation?

“Put on your own oxygen mask first before helping others”

= **Self-regulation before co-regulation**

When you are feeling sad, angry, frustrated, upset or hurt, what helps you to self-regulate and feel better?

**Type your answers in the chat!**





# Thank you for listening!

We hope this has helped you think about different ways to support children and your own emotional wellbeing so that you can look after yourself and put into practise strategies to:

- Build resilience
- Reduce your stress
- Get quality sleep
- Be mindful
- Cope with loss
- Strengthen social connections





Questions?