

Raising an EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT Preschooler

Tips on “Emotion Coaching”
Children of 3 to 5 Years Old



Department of Health

Online Version



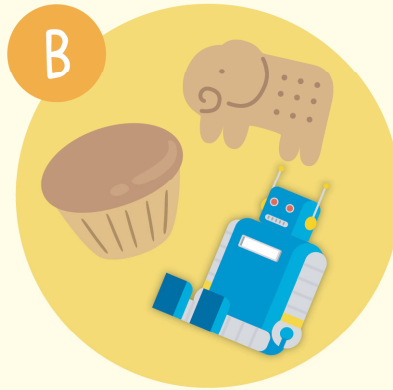
Watch Video



As your child enters the preschool years and expresses more clearly, do you take greater pleasure in interacting with her? At the same time, when your child insists on her way or fluctuates in mood, are you more emotionally affected? Is any of the following your usual response?



Explain why she should not insist her way and tell her to cooperate



Tell her a joke or try to cheer her up with snacks or toys



Tell her there is nothing to be so upset about



Tell her that “you look ugly”, “no one likes a fusspot”, “crying doesn’t help”, etc.



Warn her firmly that she may be punished, e.g. by not taking her out, if she keeps whining



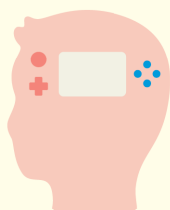
Give in right away, satisfy her demands or delay/ give up your instructions

These responses, whether downplaying or suppressing the emotions, or giving in to make the emotions go away, are common and likely well-intended attempts to help the child calm down and cooperate as quickly as possible. However, they somehow suggest that the child should not have these emotions. Research shows that if parents always respond to children’s emotions in these ways, they are more likely to have difficulties in regulating emotions and behaviours; instead, addressing children’s emotions positively with **empathy**, and providing guidance in **emotion regulation** and **effective problem-solving**, may foster **Emotional Intelligence** (also known as emotional quotient, or “EQ”).

“EQ” refers to the ability to recognise, regulate and express emotions; high “EQ” is found to associate with:



Stronger attention and better academic performance



Higher self-control and fewer behavioural problems



Stronger social competence



Better health



In the long run, greater resilience, and better interpersonal relationships

Learn More about Emotion to Foster High EQ!



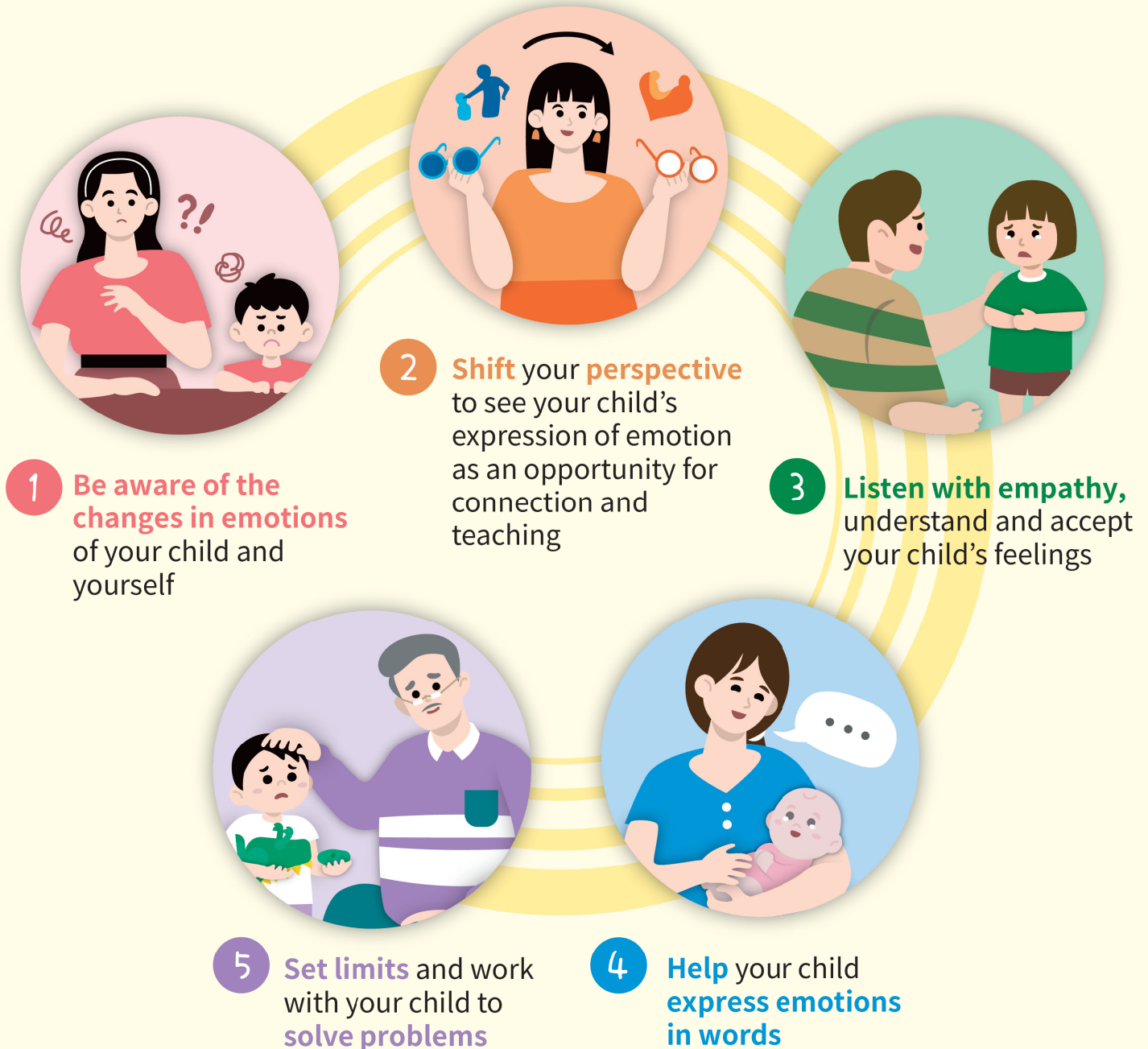
We are all born with emotions, positive and negative, which are **natural and spontaneous responses** of varied intensity that serve the **functions** of prompting us to **take care of our needs**, respond to our immediate situation, as well as **communicate and connect with others**. We may have different emotional reactions to the same event, **there is no right or wrong way to feel** and it is not helpful to compare them. We could avoid becoming overwhelmed and effectively manage emotions by noticing, understanding, and accepting them.



As your child grows, more sophisticated psychological and social needs underlie his richer emotional expressions. For example, when he excitedly shows you his craft, his ‘pride’ helps him gain recognition and build self-esteem; when he cries or even refuses to let you go when you drop him off at preschool, his ‘fear’ reflects his need to have the company of a close and reliable caregiver to cope with the unfamiliar environment.

The Key to Foster High EQ

To raise a child of high “EQ”, parents need to perceive emotions positively, **respond sensitively** to their child’s **emotions and needs**, and **solve problem** collaboratively. You may make use of the **5 steps of Emotion Coaching*** to address your child’s emotions while guiding him to cooperate and solve problems:

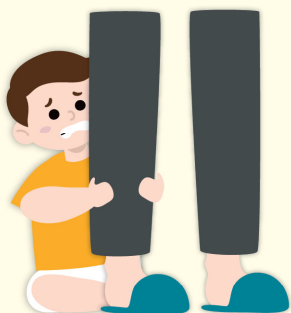


* Research conducted by Dr. John Gottman, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Washington, suggests that guiding children to regulate emotions and problem-solve through the 5 steps of emotion coaching has a positive impact on their emotional intelligence and long-term development. On this basis, Associate Professor Sophie Havighurst, Ann Harley, and their team at The University of Melbourne developed an evidence-based parenting programme called Tuning in to Kids® to facilitate caregivers to recognise, understand and regulate their child's emotions, and build an intimate parent-child relationship. The suggestions in this leaflet are developed with reference to the above findings and parenting programme.

5 Steps of Emotion Coaching

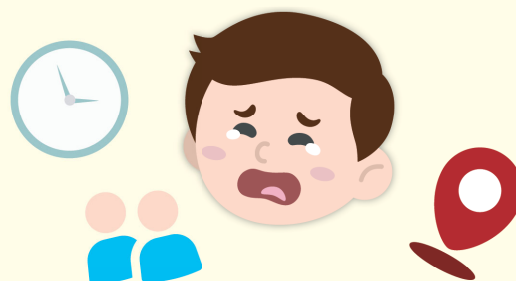
1. Be aware of the changes in emotions of your child and yourself

Spend more time with your child and pay attention to these characteristics:



- **Ways of emotional expression**

(e.g. cries when angry, hides behind you when nervous)



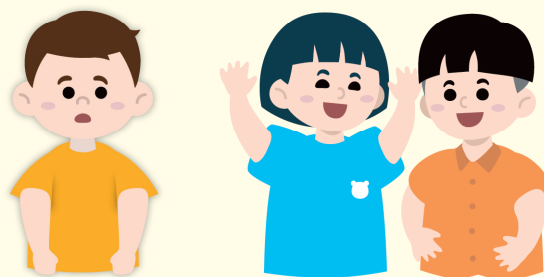
- **Pattern of emotional changes**

(e.g. whether he is calmer or more irritable at certain times, places or with certain persons)



- **Cues associated with low-intensity emotions**

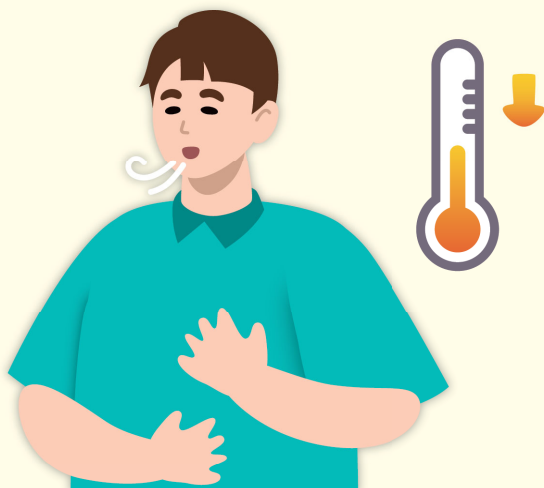
(e.g. frowning, looking away)



- **Unique temperament**

(e.g. slow to warm up, introverted)

You may find it easier to understand the above if you **closely observe your child** from a young age. By noticing his emotional changes and intervening early, you could better help him regulate his emotions.



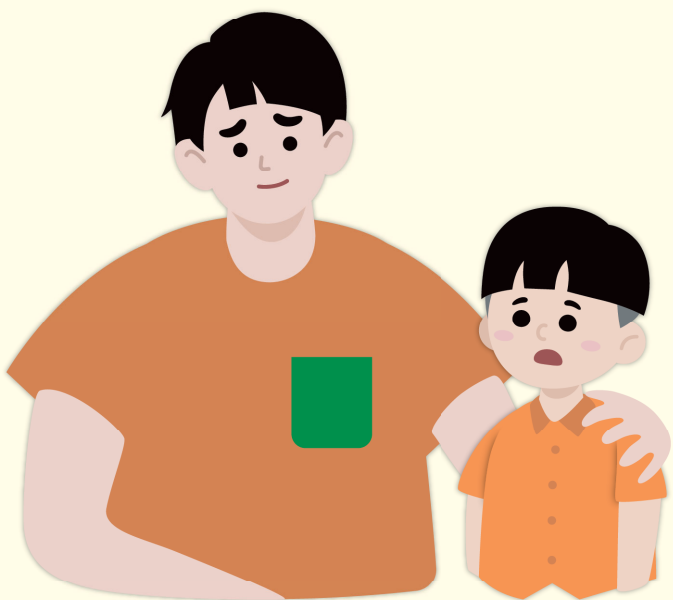
Meanwhile, **be mindful of your feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations**; you may also ask someone you trust to prompt you when you show emotional changes. It is difficult to respond calmly to your child when you are emotional. Take a few deep breaths or drink some water to manage your feelings before you “emotion coach” your child.

2. Shift your perspective and see your child's expression of emotion as an opportunity for connection and teaching

As a parent, you may inevitably become confused and annoyed when your child is upset, withdrawn or refuses to cooperate. If you **shift your perspective**, you can see that rather than opposing you on purpose, your child is struggling to regulate her emotions and behaviour effectively. Besides, this is a **valuable opportunity** to connect with and teach her emotion-regulation and problem-solving. Then, you may find more strength and wisdom to be your child's "emotion coach".



3. Listen with empathy, understand and accept your child's feelings



Children need to be **heard, accepted, and understood**, avoid asking too many questions. When your child could not describe his feelings and experiences clearly, try to understand his feelings and needs by **putting yourself in his shoes** and observing the causes and consequences of his emotions. **Focus on him** in the process, use your gaze, facial expressions, and body language (e.g. **sitting close to him or holding him**) to show your **care and presence**.



Even if you find your child overreacting or is getting what he deserves, criticising or lecturing him at this point cannot help him calm down or take in your advice.

4. Help your child express emotions in words

Guiding a child to **express emotions in words** can help him calm down and **learn to regulate emotions**. Offer assistance based on your child's age and language abilities: if your child struggle to express himself clearly, **help him put feelings into words based on your observations** to aid his gradual understanding of these emotions and the corresponding feeling words.

As your child grows, you may reflect the various emotions that your child is experiencing at the same time, e.g., **"The toy is broken, you are unhappy and feeling a bit angry"**, or introduce more complex feeling words based on his comprehension abilities, such as **"disappointed"**, **"nervous"**, **"uneasy"**, etc., to foster your child's abilities to understand and express feelings.



You may also further **show your empathy**, e.g., **"Mummy feels a bit scared like you when I saw the big dog!"** Alternatively, use **open-ended questions** such as **"How do you feel?"** to guide him to talk about his feelings. Yet, asking questions constantly may discourage the child from talking, you may encourage him to share his emotions by describing his feelings in **simple sentences**.

5. Set limits and work with your child to solve problems

Guiding the child to understand **limits** and **rules** and **solve problems** jointly are an important part of “emotion coaching”. However, before the child feels understood, rushing into this step may counteract the effects of the earlier steps.

A child may behave inappropriately, such as screaming, throwing things, stamping feet, etc., during emotional outbursts. Apart from showing understanding, parents need to let him know that **there is no right or wrong way to feel**, but **some behaviours are undesirable**, e.g. **“You want to keep playing, you are mad that you have to tidy up now. You may sit aside and calm down; toys are not for throwing!”**

For younger children, parents may **propose two or three solutions** for them to choose from. For children approaching school-age, try to **come up with solutions together**; if they could not think of any on the spot, you may offer some hints or suggestions.



Parents may also refer to the following parenting series for more **positive parenting** principles and tips.



**Managing the Behaviour of
your Preschooler I**



**Managing the Behaviour of
your Preschooler II**

Application of the 5 Steps of Emotion Coaching:

SCENARIO A:

It is time for a bath, but your 3-year-old son is busy playing and ignores your calling

1 Be aware of the emotions



You notice that your child is not responsive to your calling and appears somewhat reluctant and bothered; you also feel impatient with his attitude.

2 Shift perspective



You take a deep breath and remind yourself that the child is not cooperating because he can't control his behaviour well yet; this is a moment for connection and teaching.

4 Help express emotions in words



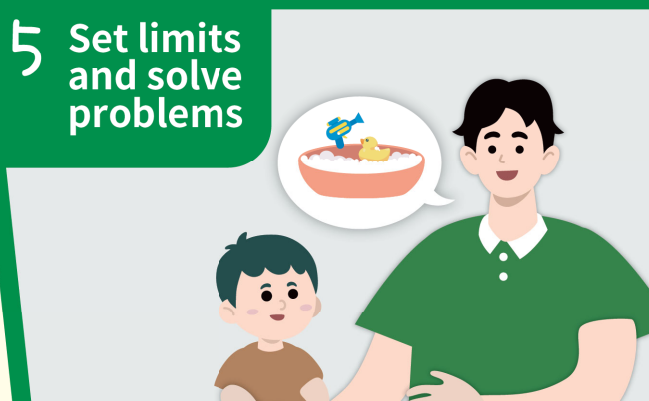
After figuring out the possible causes and feelings of your son's behaviour, you may sit across from him, hold his hand gently, and describe his feelings, e.g. **"you want to keep playing, don't" you?"**

3 Listen with empathy



You try to deduce the causes and feelings underlying his behaviour. At his age, your child does not have time concept or understand the importance of bathing yet; his turning away from you maybe his way of saying, "I want to keep playing!" instead of intentional opposition.

5 Set limits and solve problems



As you notice that your child is less worked up, you start setting limits and offer him some options.

SCENARIO B:

Your 4-year-old son excitedly shows you his drawing. At the same time, you notice his stained hands and clothes and the mess behind him

1 Be aware of the emotions



You see that your child is deeply satisfied with his work, but you feel irritated for the mess he created.

2 Shift perspective



You remind yourself that this is a child's way to explore and use his creative energy, he is not yet aware of how upsetting is the mess he's caused.

3 Listen with empathy



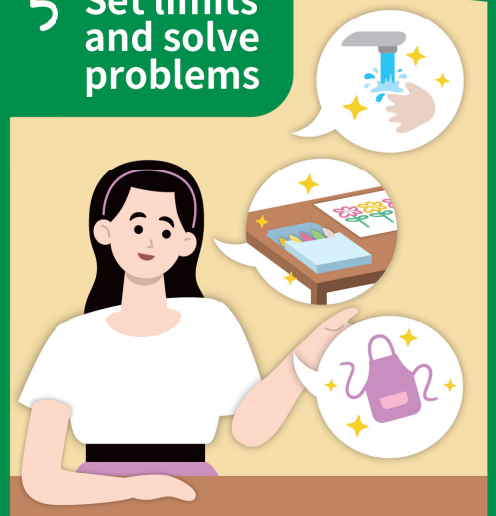
Through your child's facial expressions, voice and moves, you understand his excitement and eagerness to share his joy with you.

4 Help express emotions in words



You may label the feelings that you see your child displays, and describe what you see in his drawing to encourage him to share more about it.

5 Set limits and solve problems

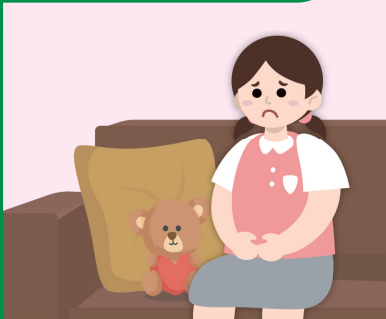


As you share your child's joy, he feels that you share his emotions and are close to him. You may then express your feelings, set limits and invite your child to solve problems together, **"I don't like to see the mess, let's clean your hands and tidy up."**

SCENARIO C:

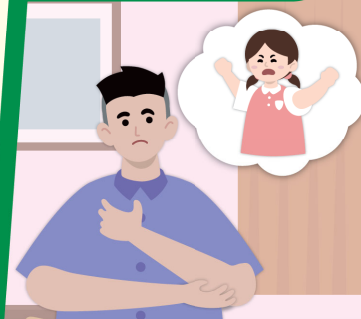
Your daughter in K3 protested “I am not going to school tomorrow!”
after she comes home from kindergarten

1 Be aware of the emotions



You notice that your child looks down, which is different from how she usually looks when she comes home from preschool.

2 Shift perspective



You remind yourself your child seems upset and this is a moment for connection.

3 Listen with empathy



You could ask her directly about her distress first; when she seems hesitant to talk, you may describe her feelings based on your observation, **“You sound a bit uneasy, is that because of something going on tomorrow at kindergarten?”** Communicate with her patiently to understand her distress.

4 Help express emotions in words



You may continue to label your child’s possible feelings, encourage her to keep expressing her emotions and thoughts, and show your acceptance.

5 Set limits and solve problems



As your child’s face seems less tense, it is time for problem-solving.



Pay attention to your child’s reactions when discussing, and provide chances for her to express her views towards your suggestions. If she seems reluctant to continue the conversation, you may save this for later; if she consistently shows fear of failures, you may casually share with her your own experiences of making mistakes or being teased, and how you responded.

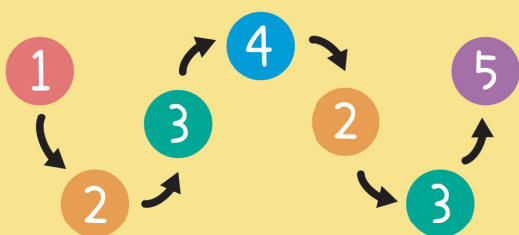
Key Points in Using the 5 Steps of Emotion Coaching:

The time needed to respond to emotions may vary depending on the child's abilities, intensity of his emotions and complexity of the problems

The 5 Steps of "Emotion Coaching"



While your child may not be able to calm down easily, it does not mean that "emotion coaching" does not work; practice often so you could use the 5 steps more proficiently and foster your child's emotional intelligence



The "5 steps" may not happen consequentially

In the process, you need to **continuously** pay attention to the emotional changes of both parties, keep listening empathically to your child's feelings, and at times remind yourself to "shift perspective" again

You may not be able to go through all 5 steps due to various situational factors; **handle flexibly** when needed (e.g. in face of immediate danger)



No parent can always perfectly respond to his child's emotions and needs; respond consistently is good enough



Family Health Service

Website: www.fhs.gov.hk

24-hour information hotline: 2112 9900

The content of the leaflet will be updated.
Please refer to the latest information
on the Family Health Service website.

FHS-P39A (Reprinted Feb 2023)

Printed by the Government Logistics Department