

New Year's Transitions and the Art of Emotion Coaching **By Tracey Ward, CGE**

As 2009 draws to an end, the frenzy of New Year's resolutions fast approach. With the post-winter break hustle of school busses, bedtimes, and homework quickly working their way back into our schedules, it can be difficult to follow through with that new exercise regimen or the weekly family game night. The New Year marks a great time to implement a fresh transition for parents and children as the second half of the school year gets underway, so how about getting the whole family involved in a New Year's resolution that will last! How about a resolution of improved emotion coaching at home? Whatever stage of development a child is approaching this January, it is important that CGEs are up-to-date on the latest emotion coaching research to provide parents with a great start to 2010.

(.continued from newsletter) Once the New Year begins, the next phase of school presents a challenging period for parents as they say goodbye to their children on their first day back at school from winter break. Parents' thoughts begin to wander... Will my child still dislike her history teacher class? Will they sit with the same friends at lunch? How many hours of times-tables practice will be equally painful for both of us? The fact is that these experiences are inevitable; all kids will face their own challenges that they must deal with independently at school. One of the most powerful tools that parents can give their children to help them thrive at school is the art of successful management of their emotions, or emotion regulation. Research has shown that emotion regulation is a skill that helps children to effectively mitigate challenging interpersonal interactions, like the ones that they face with peers and teachers at school. The good news is that parents and caregivers can use strategies with their children—like emotion coaching—that show and teach kids how to manage their emotions.

In his early work on the emotional environments found within families, Dr. John Gottman and his colleagues studied parental meta-emotion philosophy—parents' thoughts and feelings about the emotions that they experience themselves, as well as their children's emotional worlds. From this pioneering work, Gottman identified different

philosophies that parents can have towards their children's emotions. For example, some parents were highly aware of their children's feelings and often made a point of using emotional moments as times to engage with their children and teach them about emotions. Hearing parents talk about the strategies that they used for helping children manage their emotions enabled Dr. Gottman to identify "emotion coaching". Emotion coaching is a strategy that parents and caregivers can use with children and teens. Dr. Gottman has identified five steps that parents can take to be emotion coaching with their children:

- 1) Be aware of low and high intensity emotions in yourself and your child,
- 2) Recognize your child's emotions as an opportunity for teaching and intimacy,
- 3) Validate your child's emotions,
- 4) Help your child to verbally label the emotions they are feeling, and
- 5) Problem solving with your child; provide "emotional scaffolding" so that your child has what they need to learn how to solve problems and manage emotions on their own.

Taking these steps can help children on many different levels. Recent research findings suggest that emotion coaching can have positive benefits for children of all ages—during very early childhood and up through adolescence. Benefits include increased emotional competence, including better understanding of emotions and an easier ability to recover from challenging situations. Children whose parents are emotion coaching are also more comfortable with expressing their emotions, including sadness, anger, and fear. Parents who have a tendency to embrace these same emotions are also more likely to have children who can maintain control of and negotiate their emotions. Emotion coaching has also been found to help alleviate the stress that kids can suffer from when they feel overwhelmed by tough situations during adolescence. Emotion coaching may also lead to better mental health in kids, including lower anxiety, depression, and aggression, as well as physical health. Physical health benefits of emotion coaching include increased ability to regulate physiological responses to stress, such as heart rate and blood pressure, which may help kids keep their emotions from escalating. On the other hand, studies suggest that parents who are not emotion coaches—those who view negative emotions as toxic

and socialize their children by invalidating, criticizing, ignoring, or punishing these emotions in their children—are more likely to have kids who display socially inappropriate behavior with their peers and more acting out.

One of the most rewarding experiences a parent can have is to witness their child exercising the positive values and beliefs they have helped instill within them. Despite the inevitable challenges and disappointments that children will encounter in their lives, parents can hope that they will be able to provide their children with the skills that kids need to successfully overcome such obstacles. One way in which parents can help to achieve this goal is through emotion coaching. As parents and children move through various developmental stages together, including the start of the New Year, the importance of being actively involved in the emotional lives of our children should not be forgotten. By continuing to assist children by being emotion coaching, parents increase their chances of providing children with lasting emotional competence skills that will persist throughout childhood and into adulthood. Now this is a New Year's resolution worth maintaining!

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