



pact's

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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Emotion Coaching Teaching Your Child to Self Regulate

by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka

All children must learn to manage and communicate their emotions; this self-regulation can sometimes be a special challenge for adopted children who have experienced loss and/or trauma early in their lives. Pact is grateful to Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, author of such acclaimed parenting books as *Raising Your Spirited Child* and *Kids, Parents and Power Struggles*, for sharing with our readers some of her work on how parents can act as emotion coaches.

"Go away!" This was not the greeting Sarah expected when she picked up her son from a friend's house. Heat flashed through her body, searing her face red. "This is normally where I would blow," she told me later. "But today was different. I took a deep breath and asked him, 'Do you need another minute?' I think he was shocked," she laughed. "Actually so was I. 'Yeah,' he replied, so I told him, 'I will sit on the bench by the door for five minutes while you finish.' Within moments he came and sat down next to me. We talked briefly about what he had been doing and then he was ready to go. He walked out. No shouting, stomping or name-calling, he simply got in the car."

Sarah was being an emotion coach. She used empathy to diffuse a potentially explosive situation. But she knew from attending my *Kids, Parents and Power Struggles* seminar that her work was not yet finished.

Sarah hesitated, worried that if she brought it up again, her son would lose it and end up in a meltdown after all. "It would have been a lot easier to quit right there," she told me. But again, she took a deep breath, and quietly remarked, "I think I surprised you."

"Yeah," he grunted. "I was almost winning and then you showed up."

"Hmm, so you really were not too happy to see me?"

"No! I wanted to win."

"That's understandable, but when you greet someone with

'Go away!,' that does not feel very good. Let's plan that the next time I arrive unexpectedly you can say, 'Mom, you surprised me. May I have a few more minutes, please?' Those words would make it much easier for me to listen to you."

Ben nodded. "Let's try it!" Sarah laughed. "Hi, Ben, I'm here!" And much to her amazement Ben actually replied, "Mom, may I have a few more minutes?" Now they both were giggling, Sarah in relief and Ben because this all seemed a bit silly. He had no idea that he had just learned an essential life lesson—how to assert himself respectfully—from a very effective emotion coach.

The latest research is demonstrating that the ability to "self-regulate" is an essential life skill. Self-regulation describes the capability to change one's response (whether that is an action, thought, feeling or desire), "overriding" a knee-jerk response and instead starting, stopping or changing that reaction to a more appropriate one.

Understanding one's own emotions, recognizing the emotions of others, and as a result responding in a suitable way are key factors in the self-regulation process. And not only is "self-regulation" important for working with others, it is also essential for developing cognitive skills such as focusing, remembering, controlling impulses, problem-solving and performing at peak levels.

As a parent, you are teaching these skills every day, in every interaction you have with your child. It begins with:

Establishing clear expectations and standards

If behavior is unsafe, hurtful, or disrespectful to self, others, or the environment, it needs to be stopped and addressed. It is essential to have a behavioral "target," a standard to work toward. If standards are unclear, non-existent, or inconsistently enforced, then it is much more difficult for a child to learn what is and is not acceptable.

So the next time words come out of your child's mouth that should not be spewing from anyone, much less a ten-year-old,

don't ignore them. Take a deep breath. You don't have to get angry. Your job is to be the role model and coach. Simply stop, and respond, "Try again. I'm listening. I think you have something very important to say. Say it in a way that makes me want to help you."

If your child is young and does not have the words, teach him the words you want him to use, such as:

"I don't want to do that. May I please have a choice?"

"Dad, could you please give me...?"

"I'm getting frustrated, please help me."

"Please pay attention to me."

If your child hits you, take his hand and stop him, even if doing so means he'll become angrier. If he misuses a toy, or throws a ball at the ceiling light, stop what you are doing and calmly take it. This lets your child know that if he cannot stop himself, you will help him stop because these behaviors do not meet the "standards" of your family.

Staying connected and "tuned in"

One of the challenges of being an effective emotion coach is that you have to stay "tuned in" to what is going on. Ever noticed that many of the most challenging discipline situations happen while you're on the phone? That's because even though you are physically present, your attention is diverted elsewhere. Staying tuned in allows you to respond early when the emotions are less intense, making your work much easier. A child who is just starting to feel frustrated is much easier to calm and re-direct than one who is entirely overwhelmed and losing it.

Staying tuned in also increases the odds that your "best guess" empathy will be correct. Imagine this scenario: instead of immediately assuming your eight-year-old has started one more fight with his little brother, you are able to look squarely in the eyes of the four-year-old, and ask, "What were you trying to tell your brother when you hit him?" You know he's actually the culprit because you saw him walk over and slug the eight-year-old who had been quietly playing.

When you are attuned to what just occurred it's simpler to guess what your child might be feeling. You'll know that he was surprised, irritated, or embarrassed and can sensitively respond.

Take time to calm

The heat of the moment is not a teachable moment. That's why it is essential to calm your child before you attempt to teach him a more appropriate response. Have "calming baskets" or spaces filled with "lovies," favorite books, drawing materials or other soothing activities available throughout your home.

If your child is too upset to work with you, let him know you'll wait until he is and that during that time he can do something that calms his body. If no calming materials are available, you can do what Sarah did, simply stop and sit down for a moment until your child is composed. The key is to not go on until your child is calm and ready to work with you.

So if it's time to clean up and your preschooler refuses to help, select a small pile of toys and inform him that you will save these for him to pick up because everyone needs to help. In the meantime he can look at a book and calm himself, but he'll need to take care of it before he comes to lunch. Once he is calm, you can work with him and help him pick up the toys, but do not go on until he has.

This is also true for your older child. If he refuses to help with something, let him know what his part will be. If he needs to calm himself before beginning the task, that is fine, but before he goes out with his friends it needs to be completed. The choice will be his.

Re-Do

The last step of emotion coaching is often the most forgotten step and yet it may be the most important. This is the step where you come back after everyone is calm to talk about what each person feeling, teach the words and actions that would be more appropriate to use the next time the child feels this way, and actually practice with her.

I remember conducting a home visit when a three-year-old screamed at her mother, "Get me lunch!" I responded quickly, "Oh, that was a lion's voice. We never talk to our mom in a lion's voice. Can you find the quiet little kitty cat's voice and say, "Mom, I'm hungry. Could you please make me lunch?" She shook her head vigorously and turned away. "I bet you can find that kitty cat voice," I said. "We'll wait, and when you do, your mom will help you."

I then went on talking with her mother. Not two minutes later the little girl sidled up to her mom's side and in a very quiet, respectful tone, asked, "Mom, would you please make me lunch?"

Teaching your child the words, tone of voice, and actions you want her to use is essential. If she is young, actually practicing them with her is a must. If your child is older, you can simply say, "That's what I expect you to say/do next time." Then if the situation arrives again and the child "forgets" you can simply remind her: "We've talked about this. I'm listening. Try again." Then wait until she does.

Once you become comfortable functioning as an emotion coach, you will realize that it becomes part of your everyday conversations. When a child balks at a request, instead of getting angry, you'll quickly be able to respond with empathy ("Did you have another plan?") and keep the conversation going. Most importantly, one day you'll actually see your four-year-old walk up to the eight-year-old and politely ask, "When will you be finished? I'd like a turn."

When this happens, close your jaw that has dropped in astonishment and pat yourself on the back. You have taught your child how to manage emotions, an essential life skill.

Mary Sheedy Kurcinka (www.parentchildhelp.com) is a best-selling author and internationally recognized lecturer and parent educator. Her books are available for purchase on Pact's website.

