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Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing in a Challenging and Turbulent world

Chapter overview

This chapter considers the argument for a move away from traditional behaviourist approaches to managing children's emotional responses, toward a neuro-nurturing approach which supports children's social and emotional wellbeing. As we transition from a worldwide pandemic to a new and uncertain 'post-pandemic' phase, and in light of new understandings of the impact of trauma, this chapter will offer insights into emotion-regulation approaches which best support young children's mental health and wellbeing.

Learning goals for this chapter include:

- Identifying the emotional impact of sanction and reward approaches
- Introducing the concept of neuro-nurturing
- Considering the nature of trauma and what it means to be trauma-informed
- Recognising the role of emotions
- Developing an understanding of emotion-regulation
- Introducing the approach of Emotion-Coaching

Key Terms and Concepts

Stress Response: physiological changes that occur when you perceive threat
Trauma-Informed: practice which recognises the nature of trauma and promotes physical and emotional healing and recovery
Behaviour Management: controlling a child's behaviour through techniques and strategies
Sanction and Reward: approaches which praise 'acceptable' behaviour and punish 'unwanted' behaviours
Neuro-nurturing: an approach which focuses on relational interactions which accept children's emotional communications and respond in ways that build emotion-regulation pathways in the brain.
Attachment: the process by which a bond develops between two people.

Emotion-Regulation: the ability to control how you express your emotional needs
Empathy: ability to understand the feelings and emotions of another person
Emotion-Coaching: a process which supports children's understanding and regulation of emotion

Introduction

Human beings are innately social animals and our social experiences are intensely interconnected with our emotions (Cozolino, 2014). A growing range of studies indicate the importance of approaches focusing on the teaching of emotions to young children. Immordino-Yang and Dimasio (2007) identify that emotions have a fundamental role in learning and in children's ability to adapt their learning to real life social situations. This chapter will therefore focus on the importance of developing approaches which support young children to identify and regulate their emotions.

In March 2020, a global pandemic was declared, with the World Health Organisation (2020) identifying Covid-19 as an infectious disease which would affect humans on a world-wide scale. Governmental responses included requirements for physical distancing, mask-wearing, reduced social contact, school closures and limited travel (Waddell et al, 2020). For both children and adults, this negatively impacted their social way of life, further exacerbated by separation from loved ones and distressing media reports of multiple deaths.

Similarly, there are daily reports of military conflict across the globe, affecting many millions of children and families. Burgin et al (2022) identify that one of the many long-term and significant impacts of war includes childhood trauma and its impact on children's long-term mental health and emotional stability. In addition to the horrific violence and terror of war, bereavement and the loss of family, war often results in forced migration and displacement which the World Health Organisation (2018) identifies as a significant risk factor for depression and Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in children.

Children affected by natural disasters, increasingly common in this ever-changing climate, can

suffer long-term effects from such trauma (Gifford & Gifford, 2016). Flood, hurricane, drought and earthquake expose children to feelings of anxiety, distress, fear and grief. Displacement and flight are increasingly common in response to such natural disasters, again recognized as a risk factor for PTSD (WHO, 2018). The emotions generated by such events are challenging for all in society to manage and, for our youngest children, this necessitates careful and compassionate support from adults; support which aims to regulate children's emotions and positively impact their mental health and wellbeing.

The longitudinal Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study by Felitti et al. (1998) suggests the potential for long-term effects from traumatic childhood experiences. A strong relationship was identified between exposure to traumatic events and physical and mental health. Is it possible, for example, that the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic is a traumatic event for a whole generation of children across the world? Loss of social contact, loss of daily routines, fear of the virus and experience of bereavement may lead to a trauma response for many millions of children. Perry (2020) argues however, that experiences are subjective and an event that traumatises one person may not traumatise another. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, a war, a drought or famine, may indeed trigger a trauma response for some children and Perry (2020) explains that this will be related to the nature of the child's stress response and the intensity of that response. Therefore, this chapter will consider an approach to supporting children's emotional and social development which acknowledges and soothes an individual's stress response, reflecting a trauma-informed approach to promoting children's mental health in these turbulent times.

Article 24 of the UNCRC (1989) states that every child has the right to the best possible health, and every child has the right to education about their health and wellbeing. Later in this chapter, a rights-based approach to supporting children's mental health and emotional wellbeing will be introduced. This will focus on teaching children about emotional awareness and self-regulation of emotion. First though, it is important to consider the potential impact of some of the more traditional approaches to the provision of social and emotional support in early years settings and schools; support which often takes the form of behaviour management.

Behaviour Management

For many educators, provision of social and emotional support translates to the use of behaviour management strategies such as visual charts, reward stickers and house points (Tan et al, 2022). These approaches to behaviour management in childcare settings reflect a token economy system in which behaviour and consequence are highlighted. In such approaches children are rewarded for actions viewed as positive by the adult and sanctioned for unwanted actions through the removal of reward.

Figure 1: Example of a behaviour chart based on a sanction and reward approach

Grounded in Behaviourist Theory (Skinner, 1938), this approach advocates that the best way to manage behaviour and emotion is through a system of positive and negative reinforcement. In his classic experiment, Skinner placed a rat in a box and rewarded the rat with food or sanctioned it with an electric jolt. In response to the sanction and reward system, the rat learned to press a lever to get food. Skinner termed this Operant Conditioning as the rat's behaviour was 'operating' in response to the reward (by ensuring the production of food). This approach is the basis of behavioural modification programs where adults want to control the behaviours of children. This reflects an approach which uses external regulation to control another person. Here the child does not have to internally regulate. The external reward or sanction does the regulation. It is based on the adult holding the power in the relationship.

The educator chooses whether to give a sanction or a reward and decides what the sanction or reward will be. One such example being that of Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA), an approach devised to 'change' the behaviours of children with Autism (Lovaas, 1987). This technique focuses on managing behaviours through systems of positive and negative reinforcement, systems which give no voice to the child and which frame the neurodivergent child as being a problem to be fixed (Anderson, 2022). Rather than reflecting a rights-based approach, grounded in the principles of participation and empowerment of children, the behaviourist approach denies children's right to express their views and feelings, reducing opportunities for developing self-regulation skills (Osler, 2000).

Quetsch et al. (2015) claim that years of research have fully substantiated the role of behaviourist approaches for controlling 'negative' behaviours in children. Yet, while Quetsch and colleagues have provided a comprehensive review of the literature supporting the behaviourist paradigm, they have failed to acknowledge the growing body of evidence that identifies the negative impact of such an approach. Brazelton et al (1974) identify that sanction and reward systems cause frequent 'rupture' in the teacher-child relationship. These breaches in the relationship can lead to issues of low self-esteem, a loss of trust in others and can impact the child's emotional and social wellbeing. Meanwhile Payne (2015) identified that sanction and reward systems are counterproductive, often leading to confusion, anger and resentment for children. This manipulation of children's behaviour to gain adult approval can impact children's recognition of their own emotional needs (Kohn, 1995), leading to difficulties with emotional self-regulation and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, Siegel and Bryson (2014) contend that behaviourist techniques deprive children of opportunities to build the social skills of collaboration and respect; skills which enable children to become empathic individuals with awareness of their own emotion-regulation needs. They identify that the isolation experienced by children in sanctionary situations such as exclusions (e.g. time-out), can negatively affect their mental health, leading to long-term feelings of rejection, distress and anger.

Critical Reflection Questions

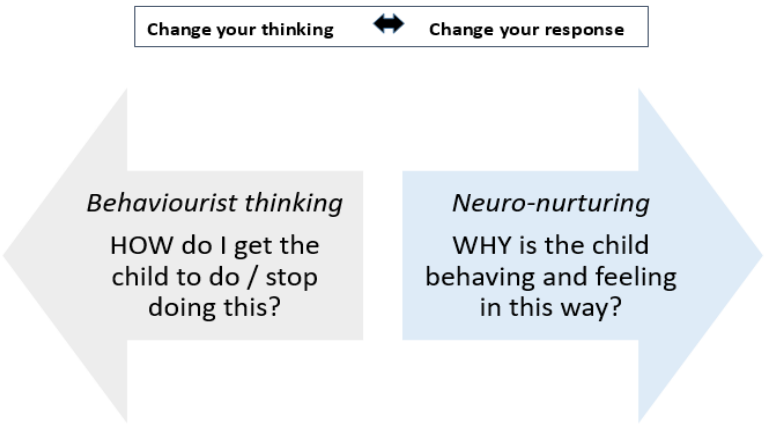
1. Instead of behaviour management approaches, how could you support children's social and emotional wellbeing?
2. What ideas do you have for engaging in a rights-based approach to supporting children's emotions and behaviours?
3. Do not worry if you do not have any ideas! Was this the way that you were 'managed' in school? If so, you may find it difficult to think of another way to do it.

Neuro-nurturing

Recent advances in neuroscience have led to new understandings of how the brain develops in response to social interactions (Lieberman, 2015). Understanding the brain as a social organ, impacted upon by social and emotional experiences, has led to recognition of the need to develop a 'brain-nurturing' approach to supporting children's behaviour (Siegel & Bryson, 2011). In this section we will develop understandings about attachment and brain development, considering the argument for focusing on supporting children's wellbeing by focusing on building relationships which are *neuro-nurturing*. This will scaffold your understanding of how to engage in warm, empathic interactions with the children in your care; interactions which support children's emotion-regulation and emotional wellbeing.

A neuro-nurturing approach focuses on relational interactions which accept children's emotional communications and respond in ways that build emotion-regulation pathways in the brain. This rights-respecting approach recognises that children have their own thoughts and feelings which adults must respond to with compassionate understanding. When you engage in a neuro-nurturing approach you are mindful of the impact you can have on the child's emotional development and you focus on supporting the child to feel safe, loved and cared for. Focusing on the child's experience, think about why the child is behaving in such a manner, why the child is responding with these specific emotions to the event, and what the child needs from you to regulate these emotions in this situation. You will then discover how, through changing your thinking, you can change your response to children's communications and interactions, you can empathise and support them to emotionally regulate themselves (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Change your thinking: Change your response



Attachment

Attachment Theory is at the heart of a neuro-nurturing approach. Based on the work of Bowlby (1958), 'attachment' describes the deep, emotional bond between two people; a bond which has profound consequences on a child's future development (Srouffe & Siegel, 2011). In Scotland, where I am an early years professional, educators are encouraged to consider children's attachment needs, focusing on developing warm, positive interactions and an understanding of how children may be taught to manage their emotions through self-regulation (Education Scotland, 2020). This approach, however, is not restricted to the Scottish context but is applicable in many different environments since it relates to fundamental considerations of children and the support that they need.

You may have heard of attachment theory but do you know that it is not just related to birth and the parent-child relationship? Attachment can occur in your class with the children for whom you care (Garcia Sierra, 2012) and is the process by which a bond develops between two people. Rose et al. (2019, p.162) contend that a secure attachment between a child and educator will support the development of social-emotional understanding in the child, enabling them "to regulate emotions, reduce fear, attune to others, have self-understanding and insight, empathy for others and appropriate moral reasoning."

Furthermore, attachment-led relationships have positive effects on children's academic outcomes and on their higher order cognitive processes such as memory, attention and

forward planning (Graziano et al, 2007). In the UK program, "Attachment Aware Schools," when teachers in schools focused on emotional awareness and emotional expression with children this led to a significant decrease in 'disruptive' behaviours and an increase in emotionally-regulated behaviours in children (Rose et al, 2019). So, how does developing an attachment between a child and adult support social and emotional learning?

So, how does developing an attachment between a child and adult support social and emotional learning? To answer this requires a basic understanding of what is happening in the child's brain when they begin to bond with another human. Humans are innately social and the human brain is designed to look for social connections and to build upon those experiences. Schore (2003) identified that a connection as simple as a shared smile can help the brain to grow and, especially in infancy, eye contact and smiles stimulate social and emotional growth within the brain. Schore discovered that when a baby looks at its carer and they look back with a warm, affirming gaze, bio-chemicals called neurotransmitters are released. We are now beginning to understand that the brain is wired by such relational interactions, and that positive connections with other humans helps the social brain to grow. These effects of attachment are highlighted by Gerhardt (2004) who explains that a healthy emotional relationship with a child will release neurotransmitters which develop the neural pathways supporting emotional regulation, empathy and social interactions, all of which will then impact on the child's ability to learn. This has clear implications for the importance of supporting caregivers. It is imperative that parents and carers are positioned to be able to provide this important support to their children. Douglas and Johnson (2019) identified that attendance at a 10-week parent support programme, focused on understanding attachment and children's brain development, led to closer parent-child bonds, less conflict in the parent-child relationship and a reduction in parental stress and anxiety. Supporting the parents' understanding of attachment, therefore, is a crucial aspect of supporting young children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Siegel and Bryson (2011) explain how this understanding of attachment can be developed to create an approach which provides the optimum social and emotional climate for children's learning. They identify the '4 S's of attachment' which facilitate the development of neural networks and reflect a neuro-nurturing approach. For a child to learn the child must first feel seen, safe, soothed and secure.

- ✓ Seen: A child feels the adult is aware of them, listening and attending
- ✓ Safe: A child feels the adult is physically and emotionally non-threatening and trustworthy
- ✓ Soothed: A child feels calmed by the presence of the adult
- ✓ Secure: A child feels seen, safe and soothed, therefore, not engaging their stress response

This recognition that the attachment between adult and child impacts brain development has implications for the way in which you respond to the behavioural manifestations of young children's strong emotions. As educators you can support children's mental health and wellbeing by acknowledging their distressed emotion and recognising the impact that your response will have on the child's developing brain. Cozolino (2014) refers to educators as 'experiential sculptors' who shape the brains of young children, arguing that through relationships with others, the human brain will shape neural connections. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the impact of your social and emotional interactions with a child.

Commodari (2013) argues that, while a secure attachment to an educator will provide a child with a positive experience, the opposite is also evident; a negative relationship with a teacher can also impact the child's learning. In a study of young children's attachments to their preschool teachers, Commodari observed a link between the security of the attachments and children's 'school readiness.' This link was identified as being related to the language abilities that the children developed through their relationship with the educator. These social language abilities supported the children in their social interactions, developed their skills in collaborative learning activities and influenced their academic achievements, however, if a secure, empathic attachment was not evident, this resulted in risk to the child of a negative learning experience, limited opportunities for 'school readiness,' and an increased risk of difficulty with learning in school. This resonates with the 'social neuroscientific' work of Lieberman (2015) who argues that the brain is inherently 'social' and to achieve their full human potential, all individuals must be supported to engage in social interactions that build and enhance the development of neural networks in the brain.

If we recognise that our interactions can enhance young children's social and emotional

wellbeing, how might this look in practice? One such example can be seen in the link between Attachment Theory and Siegel and Bryson's concept of 'Time-In,' in which you create, "a loving connection such as sitting with the child and talking or comforting" (2014, para. 8). Space and time for attachment-led interactions can be provided to children offering opportunities to connect with another person, and to feel seen, safe, soothed and secure.

Case Study 1

In my research from a nursery class in Scotland (Shaw, 2018), Hannah identifies that being with her keyworker is the best strategy for soothing her when she feels angry.

In Scotland, the keyworker approach in childcare settings ensures that every child is cared for by an adult whose role it is to know them well, meet their individual needs and support their wellbeing (Education Scotland, 2016).

Hannah who is four years old, identifies that choosing to go to the 'take-a-break' space and sit with her keyworker, "*helps me get my power back*."

In this non-judgemental, emotionally-safe space, Hannah is supported and soothed, enabling her to regain control of her emotions.

Hannah explains, "*I say, 'I cross.' She* (keyworker*) says, 'I give you a huggle* (cuddle) *OK?' That's why it gets better."*

Hannah knows that when she needs support to regulate her emotions her keyworker will be there providing safe, soothing interactions which help her feel emotionally secure.

Trauma-Informed Responses

There is a vast range of neuroscientific research that supports the theory that attachment experiences impact on children's regulation of their emotions and their subsequent behaviours. We now know that the interactions between a child and the world around them stimulate neurotransmitters which influence the child's brain structure. We also know that secure, nurturing environments help to support the development of neural pathways and we now understand that our interactions and relationships with children affect the structure of their brain. As we live through turbulent times involving challenges such as pandemic, war, natural disasters and forced migration, it is therefore essential that we consider the impact on children's emotional and social development and the responses

Beyond the Coronavirus pandemic that has dramatically impacted our emotional lives and human social connections, it is possible, that for some children, these pandemic experiences may continue to result in significant psychological distress and may stimulate a trauma response (Imran et al, 2020). Furthermore, increased parental stress, lack of attendance at school, reduced family income, and a myriad of social and emotional challenges may result in an increase in ACEs across a generation of children (Bryant et al, 2020).

Trauma-informed responses require an approach to supporting children's mental health through, "an awareness of the prevalence of trauma, understanding the impact of trauma, and commitment to incorporating those understandings in policy, procedure, and practice" (Yatchmenoff et al., 2017, p. 167).

Recently, a Trauma-Informed Practice Toolkit has been developed to support the whole Scottish workforce to learn about and engage in trauma-informed interactions (Scottish Government, 2021). This toolkit highlights the importance of the following factors;

- safety
- trustworthiness
- choice
- collaboration
- empowerment

In Scotland, these are promoted as the basis for building trusting relationships which can support recovery from traumatic experiences. Crucially, the focus here is on recovery. As identified previously, life events are experienced subjectively, however, where trauma has occurred for a child, it is critical that the response from adults mitigates the impact and enhances mental wellbeing. In a study considering the impact of ACEs on children's development, the key factor for improving a child's wellbeing outcomes was their relational health. Therefore, "relationally rich contexts at any point in a child's life may serve as a buffer" and "improving future relational contexts will likely improve outcome" (Hambrick et al, 2019, p.245).

According to this and many other studies, relationships are the key to buffering, supporting, and promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing. Dr. Bruce Perry, who has been researching trauma for over 30 years, argues that the most important 'reward' for humans is relational. We are social beings and any trauma-informed response will focus on the relationship between individuals. Perry (2020) explains that a trauma-informed response will focus on 'high connectedness and positive interactions.'

Reflective Questions

Think back to the behaviour charts in Figure 1 and to other sanction and reward approaches you may have witnessed in use in practice.

Now, think about a child who is crying and distressed in a nursery or school setting because someone else is sitting in their favourite seat.

1. What opportunities do these approaches give for connectedness between the distressed child and the educator (if any)?
2. In what ways might these approaches potentially worsen the connection between the distressed child and the educator?
3. How might a 'change' in our thinking and language help us to shift away from viewing the child as the problem, to a focus on what the child might be experiencing?

The Role of Emotions

Relational approaches, focusing on the interactions between child and adult, require that the adult teach the child how to recognise and respond to their own emotions. Purposefully supporting the child to develop their emotional understanding requires that you, the adult, understand the role of emotion and its importance in our lives as humans.

Emotions are key to our survival. Emotions enable us to evaluate experiences, situations, people and objects and to identify whether they are friend or foe. Emotions are part of our survival toolkit. Peil (2014) defines emotion as our 'primary sensory system,' one which has evolved to provide us with a way to 'read' our environment and to respond in self-regulatory ways that protect us. Our emotions are biologically-responsive, and inform us if our current circumstances are potentially harmful or beneficial.

Figure 3 The Stress Response in Kids (https://pin.it/2bti4y8)

Similarly, Porges (1995) suggests that, in response to a threatening environmental experience, the fight, flight or freeze system may be stimulated in an individual (Figure 3). This can cause physiological changes in the body; changes which result in experienced

emotions and the subsequent behaviours that these emotions trigger. For example, seeing a large tiger coming towards us may trigger the flight response, which increases heart-rate, increases breathing-rate and blood pressure, slows digestion and causes muscles to tense. These physiological responses prepare your body for flight when under threat, and are often experienced as the emotion of fear. Neuroscientists such as Porges advise looking beyond the emotional display of an individual and urge us to consider the underlying physiological origin of the emotion. In practice, this requires many educators to adopt a new lens on emotion and behaviour, and therefore, to adopt a new approach to supporting children's emotional and social wellbeing.

Siegel and Bryson (2011) identify that with an understanding of this physiology of emotion, you can alter or adapt your own emotional responses to children's behaviours. In a neuro-nurturing approach, you recognise and understand the child's emotions and subsequent behavioural display. Boxall (2002) stated that one of the principles of Nurture Groups is that 'all behaviour is communication.' Yet, this is valid, not just for specialist nurture groups, but for all individuals in society. By recognising what is being communicated to you by the child, through their emotional and behavioural displays, you can adapt your responses to support and nurture every child's mental health and wellbeing. Crucial then to children's social and emotional wellbeing is the role of the adult and the lessons that the adult imparts to the child about how to manage their emotions.

Becoming an Emotion Detective

Developing your awareness of behaviour and emotion through a neuro-nurturing lens will help you choose to engage warmly and empathically, gently supporting children to regulate their physiology and subsequent emotions. To do so it is important to begin to think about what emotions and feelings may be underlying a behaviour that you would see in a child.

For example

- Perhaps a child who is screaming and crying is feeling fear at being separated from their parent at the school gate?
- Perhaps a child who throws a pencil across the table feels anger at having to complete a task they do not understand?

- Perhaps a child who will not answer a question is actually fearful of the repercussion if they offer the wrong response?

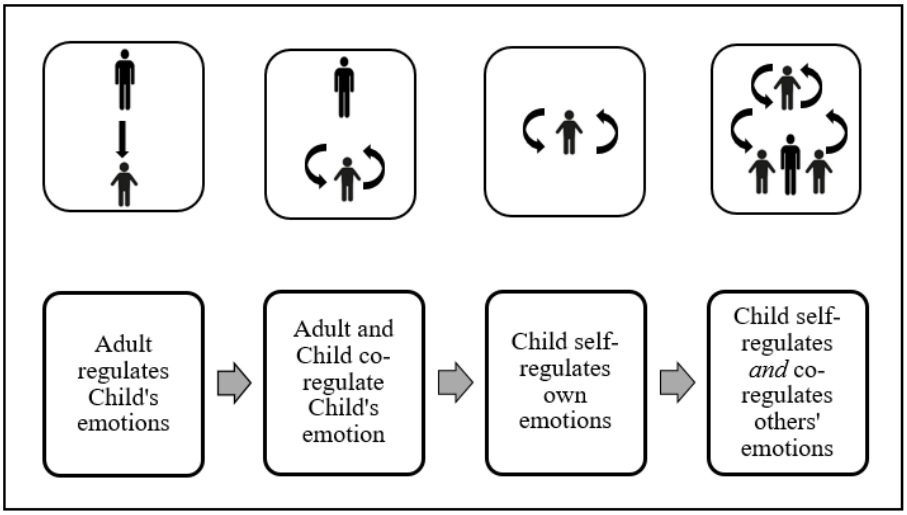
It is important that you become 'emotion detectives' and try to look beyond the behaviour, identifying the emotion and beginning to understand the possible underlying fight, fight, or freeze stress response in the child. By developing your understanding of the emotions behind the behaviours and the physiology behind the emotions, you can begin to build relationships which help children to feel seen, safe, soothed and secure. Through this empathic approach you can enable children to choose appropriate strategies to respond to their strong emotions thereby enhancing young children's ability to self-regulate their emotions and subsequent behaviours.

Developing Emotion-Regulation Skills

Recognising that emotions are purposeful and that emotions underpin behaviour, can provide you with a starting point for understanding these social and emotional communications from a child. Lauw et al (2014) found that when parents engaged in 'emotion talk' with their toddlers at home, 'challenging' behaviours were found to be reduced. The programme involved parents recognising, accepting, labelling and validating their young child's emotions, teaching the child ways to express their emotional needs. Through an empathic approach such as this a child will learn to regulate their own emotions through co-regulation by the empathic adult.

Silkenbeumer et al. (2018) similarly identified that the adult role is key in developing emotion-regulation skills in children. Emotion-regulation approaches require that the adult firstly develops the child's emotional awareness through a warm, safe, secure relationship. Secondly, the adult then supports the child to co-construct emotion-regulation strategies. My own study (Shaw, 2018) extends this, identifying a further stage in children's emotional development (Figure 4). Through repeated co-regulatory interactions with adults, children in one Scottish nursery study eventually displayed an ability to co-regulate *other* children *and* adults, not just themselves. Through empathic gesture and language, the young children in my study displayed a developing empathy, encompassing the feelings and needs of others.

Figure 4 Stages of Emotion Regulation Development (Shaw, 2018)



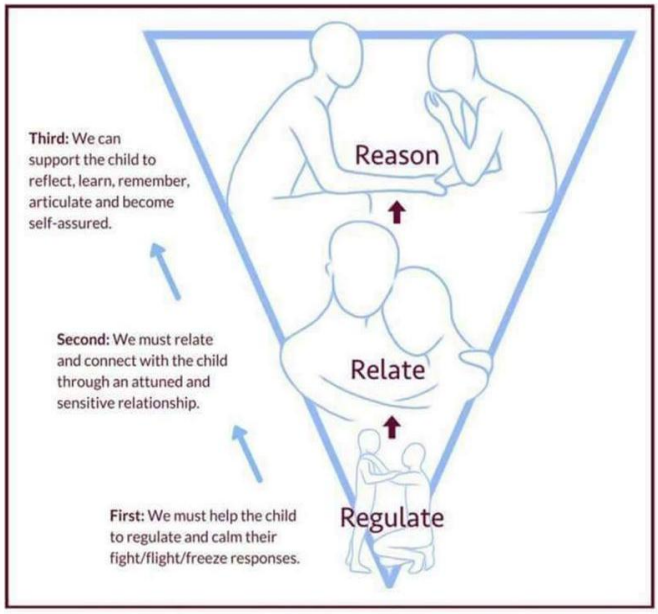
To achieve this level of emotion-regulation in young children, Perry (2020) advocates a 'biologically-respectful approach' to supporting children's emotional wellbeing, focusing on The Three R's (Figure 5).

REGULATE: Firstly you must regulate the child by soothing their stress response. When a child experiences a strong emotional reaction, the adult role is to recognise if the child's fight, flight or fear response has been triggered and if so, to be a regulatory presence whom the child can use until they can learn to self-regulate.

RELATE: Children then need you to relate to them, supporting them through relational approaches which focus on ensuring the child feels listened to and understood. As discussed above, this is developed through relationships in which adults focus on developing attachments with children, and relationships which help children to feel safe and secure.

REASON: Once the child is regulated and relating to you, you can then support the child to reason, focusing on reflection and learning together from the event.

Figure 5: The Three R's



https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Three-Rs.pdf

Such a co-regulatory approach to supporting children's emotional and social wellbeing requires that the adult to whom the child attaches must have emotional understanding and insight, must be able to regulate their own emotions and must be able to empathically respond to the child. Gilbert (2017) argues that your personal emotional awareness impacts on your willingness to accept emotions as fundamental to learning. Gilbert found that understanding that '*emotions matter to learning*' was key to the successful implementation of an attachment-led programme of emotional learning for educators. Yet, as some studies have shown educators have identified that they need more support with these aspects of professional practice (Dingwall & Sebba, 2018). As an adult, you will have first experienced emotions within your own childhood, then throughout a lifetime of experiences you will have developed personal responses; responses which reflect your own emotional understanding and your own habitual reactions. Reporting on the Attachment Aware Schools programme, Dingwall and Sebba (2018) identified that many practitioners communicated a significant lack of confidence in knowing how to support children's emotional needs. The educators identified feelings of being inadequately prepared to support children's emotional anxieties. The report recommendations highlight the need for initial and continuing training to help educators to address the concepts of attachment and emotion regulation in their practice.

Critical Reflection Questions

Gus (2018) proposes that to support adults in implementation of such an emotion-regulatory approach the training needs to be cumulative and characterised by repetition of experiences in practice.

1. Do you agree with Gus (2018) that repeated experiences in practice would develop your regulatory skills, or can you think of other tools that may better support you?
2. What strategies and approaches do you think would best support *your* ability to emotionally-regulate yourself and others?

As you consider these reflective questions, it may help to consider the strategies which young children identify as helping them to be able to emotionally-regulate. Figure 6 highlights a selection of the strategies identified as helpful by children aged 3-5 years old, when they are needing to regulate themselves (Shaw, 2018). This demonstrates the potential for self-regulation of emotion and behaviour in young children through supported identification of personal regulatory strategies.

Figure 6 Emotion-Regulation Strategies identified by nursery-aged children (Shaw, 2018)

HAPPY	SAD	SCARED	ANGRY
Play	*Go and play outside*	*Run away*	*Get mummy and daddy*
dance	*listen to music*	*cuddle*	*tell teacher*
hug	*give them a toy*	*find somebody to help*	*cuddles*
get a friend	*find a friend*	*Daddy*	*run*
draw	*read a book*	*cuddle teddy*	*Take-a-break*
	go to the Take-a-Break Space	*play games*	*cool down*
	drink water	*scare them back*	*slow walk*
	breathe	*Nan and Papa*	*quiet place*
	cuddle	*deep breaths*	*deep breaths*
		hug	*cuddle blanket*
		hide	*say 'stop'*
		calm down	*go by myself*
		get a drink	*drink water*
		eat snack	*hug*
		draw picture	*say 'I love you'*
		read book	*sleep in my bed*
		wait	*have nice music*

In the next section you will be introduced to a neuro-nurturing, emotion-regulating approach that can be used in practice to support children's social and emotional wellbeing. By providing young children with the opportunity to identify a causal emotion, to consciously regulate the emotion and then to make positive choices about the subsequent behaviour (Shaw, 2018), this approach will ensure you are inclusive, respectful, empowering and focused on building children's capacity to manage and maintain their own emotional wellbeing and mental health.

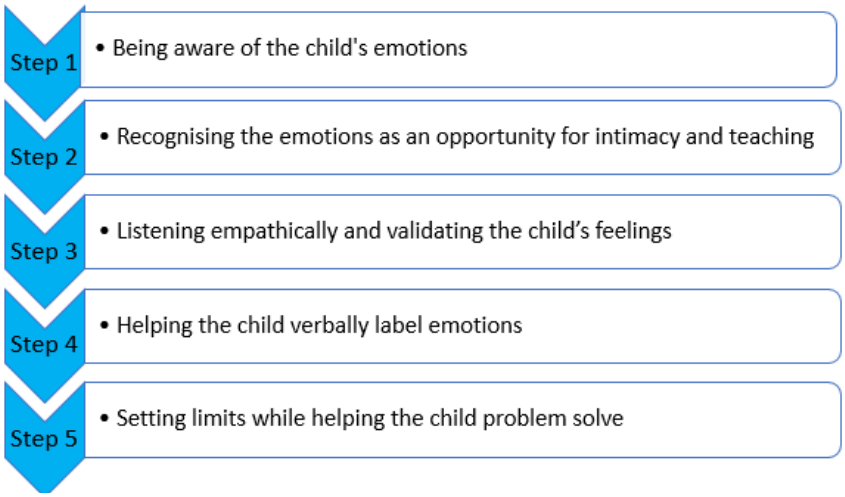
Introducing the Approach of Emotion-Coaching

Emotion-coaching is a highly effective five-step process (Figure 7) which provides educators with a practical application of an attachment-led, neuro-nurturing pedagogy. Originally proposed as a parenting technique by Gottman (1997), emotion-coaching enables adults to,

> teach their children strategies to deal with life's ups and downs. They don't object to their children's displays of anger, sadness and fear. Nor do they ignore them. Instead, they accept negative emotions as part of life and they use emotional moments as opportunities for teaching their kids important life lessons and building closer relationships (p.21).

This approach supports you to focus on children's 'emotional moments,' using them as an opportunity to empathise with children and to engage in teaching children how to recognise and regulate emotions. Havighurst et al. (2013) confirm that by embracing this approach, the causes and consequences of emotions are highlighted more frequently and children display less distressed behaviours. An increase is often seen in the adult's own emotional awareness and a reduction occurs in the adult's dismissive attitudes towards emotions and behaviours.

Figure 7 The Five Steps of Emotion-Coaching (Shaw, 2018; adapted from Gottman, 1997).



Emotion-coaching adults aim to support children's emotional understandings and self-regulation skills. Young children respond positively to this consistently empathic approach, with children calmed and soothed by these relational interactions. Emotion-coaching supports de-escalation of emotional situations, develops children's awareness of emotion, helps children to feel safe with the adult and helps children to regulate their own emotions and resultant behaviours (Shaw, 2018). To understand how this can occur in your practice it is important to consider the ways in which this approach and each of the five steps, meets children's need for attachment-led, neuro-nurturing interactions.

Emotion Coaching

Step 1: This requires that you, the adult, are regulated. You must engage your calm, thinking brain, regulate your own emotions, and be ready to receive the communications the child is sending through their behaviour. Do not allow your own emotions to overwhelm you otherwise you will find it very difficult to regulate, reason and relate with the child. The child will feel 'seen' when you respond in this calm, empathic way.

Step 2: Instead of reacting to the child's behaviour, engage in rational thinking and recognise that this is a moment of intimacy where you can help the child to learn about emotion-regulation. Remain calm and recognise that you can now support the child to build the

pathways in the brain that lead to emotion-regulation. The child will feel ‘seen’ when you respond in this way.

Step 3: Listen to the child’s communications. Identify and validate the emotion they are experiencing. This does not mean you are validating the behaviour, but that you are respecting their experience of the emotion. Focus on the emotion and the way it is making the child’s body feel. Through listening you are showing the child that you are calm. This helps to regulate the child and begin to dampen down their fight/flight/freeze response. The child will feel ‘safe’ when you respond in this way.

Step 4: The child’s communications, coming from their distress, means they are not yet ready to reason or problem solve. Help to reduce the fear and stress for the child by naming the emotion to help them understand what they are feeling – helping to develop the child’s own emotional awareness and understanding. The child will feel ‘soothed’ when you respond in this way.

Step 5: Once the child is emotionally-regulated, and is now relating to you, begin to gently engage in reasoning together. In a safe and soothed manner, the child can now reflect with you on the event and solve the problem together.

Case Study: Emotion Coaching

Clare, 3 years old, is waiting to be collected from nursery. She is talking excitedly about her daddy coming to collect her from nursery today. The door opens and Clare's mummy walks into the room.

Clare: *No!* (Drops to the floor and screams).
Mummy: *What's wrong Clare?*
Clare: *Daddy!* (Lying on floor, crying)
Mummy: *Daddy couldn't come. He is too busy today* (Angrily)
Clare: *Daddy!* (Sobbing)
Mummy: *Come on, we'll see daddy later* (Lifts Clare up onto her feet)
Clare: *NO! I wanted daddy to get me!* (stamps foot, moans, folds arms, makes angry face).
Teacher: *Are you feeling really angry Clare?*
Clare: *Yes! I wanted my daddy* (shouting)
Teacher: *I can see you are really feeling angry. I think you are so disappointed that daddy is not here. Is that right? (Looking at Clare)*
Clare: *Yes* (Looks at teacher and stops shouting)
Teacher: *I am sorry your daddy could not come today because I know you want to show him your painting.*
Clare: *Yes, I've got a picture for him* (Moves closer to teacher)
Teacher: *Oh I understand. That must feel disappointing (Looking at Clare). Can you think of anything you could do just now to help you feel calm again, then we can sort this out together?*
Clare: *I know! A drink of water*! (Runs to the water machine, pours a cup of water, takes a sip, takes a very deep breath, smiles).
Clare: *OK, I'm calm now* (smiling)
Teacher: *That drink of water helped? I can see it has cooled your body down a bit?* (Smiles)
Clare: *Yes, I feel better* (smiles and takes mummy's hand)
Teacher: *I know you wanted to show daddy your picture. Maybe you could take a photograph of it to him and send it to his phone? What do you think Mummy?*
Mummy: *Oh that is a great idea. Daddy would love to get a message from you Clare!* (Smiling, Gets phone out of bag)
Clare: *Yes! I will send a photo! Daddy will love that.* (Smiling)

(Shaw, 2018)

Reflective Questions

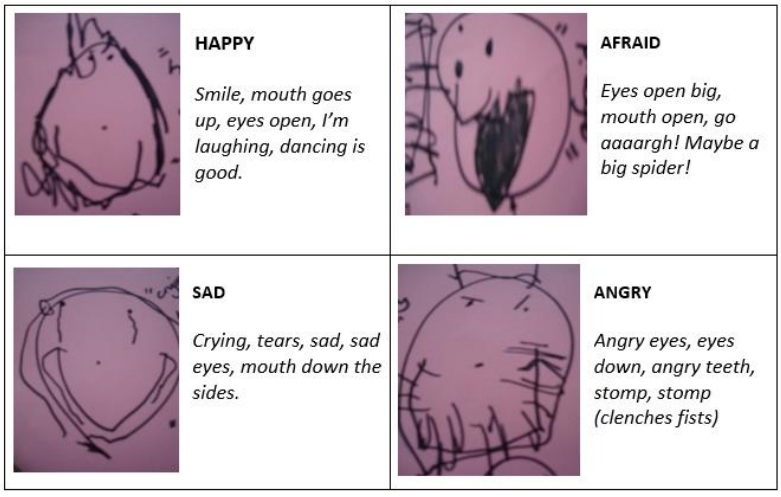
Can you identify when…

1. Clare was listened to empathically?
2. Clare heard her feelings validated?
3. Clare heard her feeling labelled?
4. Clare used a strategy to soothe herself?
5. Clare solved the problem with support?

As is evident in the case study above, through using an emotion-coaching approach, you can respond to children's emotions rather than to the outward display of behaviours. As the child realises that you understand their emotional turmoil and that you are regulated and calm, the child then uses your calmness to help regulate themselves. The child in the case study had on a previous occasion, identified that a cold drink of water helped to calm her body. This was now one of her strategies that she had learned to use when needing to regulate her emotional responses. Therefore, emotion-coaching enables children to choose appropriate strategies to manage their emotions and enhances young children's ability to manage their emotional wellbeing.

Young children, even at the ages of 3 and 4 years old, are capable of emotional understandings, of emotional self-awareness and of self-regulation of their emotions and behaviours (Shaw, 2018). When children experience emotion-coaching it provides them with an increased repertoire of emotional language and supports their developing understanding of the emotions behind their behaviours. Talking about emotions and understanding the physical experience of emotion is at the heart of emotion-coaching. Children who learn *how* to communicate their feelings and *how* to express them in an appropriate way, have the key to self-regulation (Gottman, 1997). The young children in the Scottish nursery class repeatedly displayed that communicating and sharing ideas about emotions led them to a greater overall understanding of emotion and a wider array of strategies for self-regulation (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Drawings and Description of Emotions by Cara, 4.5 years old (Shaw, 2018)



My own study found that the emotion-coaching approach provided early years educators with a practical application of an attachment-led pedagogy (Shaw, 2018). With our understanding of Attachment Theory, has come an understanding that how children 'attach' to adults can impact upon their social-emotional wellbeing. Therefore, co-regulating, empathic, nurturing relationships appear to be crucial to supporting children's mental health. Furthermore, repeated experiences of these empathic interactions with adults, supports young children's developing emotional intelligence and subsequent social skills. Young children can learn to regulate, not only their own emotions but also others' emotions, leading to development of their own increasingly empathic co-regulatory thinking and behaviours. Wang and Wang (2015) argue that empathy is a predictor of children's later emotional-social wellbeing and emotion-coaching not only impacts upon children's emotional understanding and self-regulation skills but additionally develops emotionally-empathic responses in children. If, as Siegel and Bryson (2011) argue, the brain is inherently adaptable in response to experiences, then an emotion-coaching environment consisting of co-regulation, self-regulation and empathy, must surely be a 'neuro-nurturing' environment for our young children.

Conclusion

This chapter recommends that, rather than 'disciplining' a young child's behaviour patterns through sanction/reward approaches, you should focus instead on supporting children's emotional self-awareness and enable the development of emotion-regulating behaviours through your own empathic, co-regulatory responses. Adult intervention via sanctioning distressed behaviours denies young children the opportunity to identify the causal emotion, to consciously regulate the emotion and then to make positive choices about the subsequent behaviour.

Instead, attachment-led practice necessitates that emotional moments be used as teaching opportunities with a focus on validation and regulation of children's emotions. Through this approach children's comprehension of their own emotions and their own behaviour are nurtured, resulting in a burgeoning self-confidence. This creates a positive mental health approach in which teaching emotional thinking skills and social-emotional awareness

supersedes the traditional sanction/reward approaches.

Supporting a child in this way, through their own personal challenges and turbulent times, will create emotional ownership, maturity, independence and empowerment; will positively influence patterns of conscious thinking and behaviour and will improve subsequent mental health outcomes in their life. To finish this chapter, here are the voices of the children to tell you what emotional ownership and empowerment really feels like (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Young Children's Voices (Shaw, 2018)

- *It helps me get my power back 'cause it's quiet.*
- *I breathe, relax. In the Take-a-Break space I just get calm.*
- *I look at the pictures like the angry one then the happy one. When I look at the one I'm feeling it makes me happy.*
- *I just go on the cushions and look at the pictures…happy ones, sad ones, scary ones and angry ones.*
- *It's so nice and quiet. People go away and I get peace and quiet.*
- *I hold toys and it makes me calm down.*
- *No people come out here. I like that. Its peace and quiet.*
- *She makes me feel better… she gives me loads of hugs.*
- *You give me hugs. You read books. 'Cause I love you. You always help me.*
- *He'll calm me down. He talks to me and I get calm.*
- *I say, 'I cross.' She say, 'I give you a huggle OK?' That's why it's better.*
- *She cuddles me. It feels good.*

For Further Reflection

Consider the following questions:

1. What do I need to know more about to be able to confidently regulate children's emotions?
2. How will I share these new understandings with colleagues in practice?
3. How could I adapt a 'behaviour' policy to focus more on relationships?

Websites

https://www.emotioncoachinguk.com/
Information and links to studies about Emotion Coaching in Schools and Nurseries

https://www.mindsightinstitute.com/
Information about the work of Dan Siegel focusing on mind, brain and relationships.

https://www.nurtureuk.org/
Information about a charity who support social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing of children

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNuxy7FxEVk
Video from Perry, B.D. (2020, April 2nd). *Regulate, Relate, Reason (Sequence of Engagement)*

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