

## Parenting with the Assumption of Emotional Coherence

### Part 1: Building a Positive Relationship

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For an introduction to the concept of emotional coherence, please see:

[Introduction to the Emotional Coherence Framework.](#)

It's usually in times of conflict that people come up with the idea of improving their communication skills, because family problems can cause enormous pain and people start looking for solutions. I would like to be an advocate for a proactive approach: learning and practicing healthy communication skills as much as possible during times that are problem-free! This low-stress, gradual building of competence will make it easier to use those skills when problems do arise. Not only that: You'll end up spending a lot more enjoyable, conflict-free time with your children, building your positive relationships in an ongoing way. So that's where we'll start.

This is **part 1** of a four-part series of short articles for parents. In parts 2 and 3 we will look more closely at those times in which a family member has a concrete problem and give tips on handling them effectively. In part 4 we will examine conflicts between family members.

Misunderstandings and conflicts are normal in family life and are something that all parents confront. It's how you deal with problems when they do arise that is critically important. In parenting, when you approach such difficulties from the point of view of *truly wanting to understand* what's leading to a person's feelings or behaviors, the effort can be hugely rewarding in a myriad of ways—whether that person is your child or yourself.

Children, and in fact all of us, are unique individuals and full of surprises, so a complete understanding of what another person means, thinks, or feels is not altogether possible—and yet that kind of understanding is a worthwhile goal to pursue in parenting.

The idea that a person's behaviors and feelings make deep emotional sense for that particular person is what we refer to as *the assumption of emotional coherence*.

When parents and other important caretakers radiate approval and acceptance, then children are empowered to develop self-confidence and self-esteem. The more of the time we manage to be accepting of our children and their behavior, the easier it is for them to grow up believing they are worthwhile people. The more time children spend feeling accepted and approved of by their parents, the more energy they have for investing in emotional growth, because there's no need for them to waste emotional energy in defending or explaining.

Children need to learn how to recognize what they're feeling and that it's okay to talk about those feelings. If you get into the habit of observing and commenting on your child's positive emotions, he or she will learn from you as a role model that it's okay to talk about feelings. Both you and your child will develop this skill on an ongoing basis and it will feel more and more natural. Then when there are problems, it's that much less difficult to talk about the more uncomfortable sorts of feelings.

If your six-year-old has just received a party invitation from her best friend, and you notice how pleased she looks, you can say "You seem really happy about that birthday party invitation!" She will feel seen and heard and accepted with her happy emotions. This way of mirroring in words what you believe another person is expressing is often called *active listening*.

If your ten-year-old gets a better grade than he expected on a math test, and he seems surprised and proud, you can comment to him "You're surprised that you got such a good grade on the math test. You look proud!" Even if you're not quite on the right track, no matter: If your child is accustomed to this natural way of acknowledging feelings, he will feel free to offer a course correction. Accept this new information gratefully.

According to a small survey I did, the characteristic that teens most wished they could improve about their parents was their ability to be good listeners. In fact, this was true of "grownup children" as well, when they looked back on their own childhoods and parents.

It's very smart to pay attention to children when they're behaving in ways that please you, and it can make your life easier. Children realize quickly that they don't have to make trouble in order to get your attention!

The flip side of this is that your child can get to know you better in a very pleasant way if you get into the habit of telling him or her how *you* feel when you have no complaints. We tend to air our gripes easily when something doesn't please us, but it's not natural for most of us to talk about our feelings when everything's okay.

If your son has brought all his belongings back from a camping expedition, he'll be glad to hear about your positive feelings: "I can really depend on you to look after your belongings! I feel good about letting you take things on a trip when I know you'll bring them all back."

As you're relating something positive, try stating your own feelings rather than presenting your opinion as if it were fact. For instance, "I really like that poem you wrote for the class project" is a very different statement from "That's a good poem you wrote for the class project," even if they appear similar on the surface. When you're expressing your own subjective experience, you're sharing an important part of yourself, rather than asserting

some absolute standard. Be careful to describe your opinion or feeling, rather than stating an objective “truth,” because your child might very well be having a different experience or be of a different opinion.

Talking to your child about your positive feelings is a good way to get him or her to pay attention to you in an enjoyable atmosphere. If it’s already the norm to communicate with one another about feelings, your child will be a lot more likely to pay attention to you when things aren't going so smoothly between the two of you.

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This material has been drawn from [How to Connect with Your Child](#) by Robin Ticic.