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Why Marriages Succeed or Fail
(with Nan Silver)

Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child

John Gottman, Ph.D.,

with Joan DeClaire

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To the work and memory

of Dr. Haim Ginott

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FOREWORD

THESE ARE HARD TIMES FOR CHILDREN, AND SO FOR PARENTS. There has been a sea change in the nature of childhood over the last decade or two, one that makes it harder for children to learn the basic lessons of the human heart and one that ups the ante for parents who used to pass these lessons on to the children they love. Parents have to be smarter about teaching their children basic emotional and social lessons. In this practical guide for good parenting, John Gottman shows how.

The need may never have been more pressing. Consider the statistics. Over the last few decades the number of homicides among teenagers has quadrupled, the number of suicides has tripled, forcible rapes doubled. Beneath headline-grabbing statistics like these lies a more general emotional malaise. A nationwide random sample of more than two thousand American children, rated by their parents and teachers—first in the mid-1970s and then in the late 1980s—found a long-term trend for children, on average, to be dropping in basic emotional and social skills. On average, they become more nervous and irritable, more sulky and moody, more depressed and lonely, more impulsive and disobedient—they have gone down on more than forty indicators.

Behind this deterioration lie larger forces. For one, the new economic realities mean parents have to work harder than earlier generations to support their families—which means that most parents have less free time to spend with their children than their own parents had to spend with them. More and more families live far from relatives, often in neighborhoods where parents of young children are afraid to let them play on the streets, let alone visit a neighbor's

house. And more and more hours in children's lives are spent staring at a video screen—whether watching TV or looking at a computer monitor—which means they are not out playing with other children.

But in the long spread of human history, the way children have learned basic emotional and social skills has been from their parents and relatives, from neighbors, from the rough-and-tumble of play with other children.

The consequences of failing to learn the basics of emotional intelligence are increasingly dire. Evidence suggests, for example, that girls who fail to learn to distinguish between feelings like anxiety and hunger are most at risk for eating disorders, while those who have trouble controlling impulses in the early years are more likely to get pregnant by the end of their teen years. For boys, impulsivity in the early years may augur a heightened risk of delinquency or violence. And for all children, an inability to handle anxiety and depression increases the likelihood of later abusing drugs or alcohol.

Given these new realities, parents need to make the best use of the golden moments they have with their children, taking a purposeful and active role in coaching their children in key human skills like understanding and handling troubling feelings, controlling impulse, and empathy. In *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child,* John Gottman offers a scientifically grounded, eminently practical way for parents to give their children an essential tool kit for life.

—Daniel Goleman, author of
Emotional Intelligence

PREFACE

BEFORE I BECAME A FATHER, I HAD SPENT NEARLY TWENTY years working in the field of developmental psychology, studying the emotional lives of children. But it was not until our daughter, Moriah, arrived in 1990 that I began truly to understand the realities of the parent-child relationship.

Like so many parents, I could not have imagined the intensity of feeling I would have for my child. I had no idea how thrilled I would be when she first learned to smile, to talk, to read a book. I did not anticipate how much patience and attention she would require from me minute by minute. Nor did I know how willing I would be to give her all the attention she needed. On the other hand, I was surprised at how frustrated, disappointed, and vulnerable I could sometimes feel. Frustrated when she and I couldn't communicate. Disappointed when she misbehaved. Vulnerable when I had to acknowledge how dangerous the world could be; how losing her would mean losing everything.

At the same time that I was learning about my own emotions, I was making related discoveries in my professional life. As a Jew whose parents escaped Austria to survive the Holocaust, I had respected the efforts of other theorists who rejected authoritarianism as a way to raise morally healthy children. They proposed that the family operate as a democracy and that children and parents act as rational, equal partners. But my years of investigation into family dynamics were beginning to yield new evidence that *emotional interactions* between parent and child could have an even greater impact on a child's long-term well-being.

Surprisingly, much of today's popular advice to parents ignores

the world of emotion. Instead, it relies on child-rearing theories that address children's misbehavior, but disregard the feelings that underlie that misbehavior. However, the ultimate goal of raising children should not be simply to have an obedient and compliant child. Most parents hope for much more for their children. They want their children to be moral and responsible people who contribute to society, who have the strength to make their own choices in life, who enjoy the accomplishments of their own talents, who enjoy life and the pleasures it can offer, who have good relationships with friends and successful marriages, and who themselves become good parents.

In my research I discovered that love by itself wasn't enough. Very concerned, warm, and involved parents often had attitudes toward their own and their children's emotions that got in the way of them being able to talk to their children when they were sad or afraid or angry. But while love by itself was not enough, channeling that caring into some basic skills that parents practiced as if they were coaching their children in the area of emotion *was* enough. The secret lay in how parents interacted with their children when emotions ran hot.

We have studied parents and children in very detailed laboratory studies and followed the children as they developed. After a decade of research in my laboratory my research team encountered a group of parents who did five very simple things with their children when the children were emotional. We call these five things "Emotion Coaching." We discovered that the children who had Emotion-Coaching parents were on an entirely different developmental trajectory than the children of other parents.

The Emotion-Coaching parents had children who later became what Daniel Goleman calls "emotionally intelligent" people. These coached children simply had more general abilities in the area of their own emotions than children who were not coached by their parents. These abilities included being able to regulate their own emotional states. The children were better at soothing themselves when they were upset. They could calm down their hearts faster. Because of the superior performance in that part of their physiology that is involved in calming themselves, they had fewer infectious

illnesses. They were better at focusing attention. They related better to other people, even in the tough social situations they encountered in middle childhood like getting teased, where being overly emotional is a liability, not an asset. They were better at understanding people. They had better friendships with other children. They were also better at situations in school that required academic performance. In short, they had developed a kind of "IQ" that is about people and the world of feelings, or emotional intelligence. This book will teach you the five steps of Emotion Coaching so that you can raise an emotionally intelligent child.

My emphasis on the emotional bond between parent and child has emerged from my longitudinal research. To my knowledge, this is the first research to confirm the work of one of our most brilliant child clinicians, the psychologist Dr. Haim Ginott, who wrote and taught in the 1960s. Ginott understood the importance of talking to children when they were emotional, and he understood the basic principles of how parents should do this.

Emotion Coaching gives us a framework based on emotional communication. When parents offer their children empathy and help them to cope with negative feelings like anger, sadness, and fear, parents build bridges of loyalty and affection. Within this context, although Emotion-Coaching parents do effectively set limits, misbehavior is no longer the major concern. Compliance, obedience, and responsibility come from a sense of love and connectedness the children feel within their families. In this way, emotional interactions among family members become the foundation for instilling values and raising moral people. Children behave according to family standards because they understand with their hearts that good behavior is expected; that living right is all part of belonging to the clan.

Unlike other parenting theories that offer a scattered hodgepodge of strategies for trying to control children's behavior, the five steps of Emotion Coaching provide a framework for maintaining a close personal relationship with our children as they develop.

The news of this book is that through scientific investigation, my colleagues and I have evidence that emotional interactions between parent and child are of utmost importance. We now know

with certainty that when mothers and fathers practice Emotion Coaching it makes a significant difference in their children's success and happiness.

Our work will put our approach to children's emotions into a context that makes sense for today's parents, things that Ginott never addressed in the 1960s. With increasing divorce rates and concerns over problems like youth violence, raising emotionally intelligent kids becomes more crucial than ever. Our studies shed surprising light on how parents can protect their kids from the proven risks associated with marital conflict and divorce. They also show in new ways how an emotionally connected father, whether married or divorced, influences the well-being of his children.

The key to successful parenting is not found in complex theories, elaborate family rules, or convoluted formulas for behavior. It is based on your deepest feelings of love and affection for your child, and is demonstrated simply through empathy and understanding. Good parenting begins in your heart, and then continues on a moment-to-moment basis by engaging your children when feelings run high, when they are sad, angry, or scared. The heart of parenting is being there in a particular way when it really counts. This book will show you that way.

John Gottman, Ph.D.

NOTE

We find the terminology "he or she" or "he/she" to be awkward. Traditionally, authors have avoided this awkwardness by using masculine pronouns exclusively. We believe this practice perpetuates gender bias. We have chosen instead to alternate masculine and feminine pronouns throughout the book. We hope our book will be equally useful to parents of daughters and parents of sons.

Chapter 1

EMOTION COACHING:
The Key to Raising Emotionally Intelligent Kids

DIANE IS ALREADY LATE FOR WORK AS SHE TRIES TO COAX three-year-old Joshua into his jacket so she can take him to daycare. After a too-quick breakfast and a battle over which shoes to wear, Joshua is tense too. He doesn't really care that his mom has a meeting in less than an hour. He wants to stay home and play, he tells her. When Diane tells him that's not possible, Joshua falls to the floor. Feeling sad and angry, he starts to cry.

Seven-year-old Emily turns to her parents in tears just five minutes before the baby-sitter's arrival. "It's not fair to leave me with somebody I don't even know," she sobs. "But Emily," her dad explains, "this sitter is a good friend of your mother's. And besides, we've had tickets to this concert for weeks." "I still don't want you to go," she cries.

Fourteen-year-old Matt tells his mom he just got kicked out of the school band because the teacher smelled somebody smoking pot on the bus. "I swear to God it wasn't me," Matt says. But the boy's grades have been falling and he's running with a new crowd. "I don't believe you, Matt," she says. "And until you bring your grades up, you're not going out." Hurt and furious, Matt flies out the door without a word.

Three families. Three conflicts. Three kids at different stages of development. Still, these parents face the same problem—how to deal with children when emotions run high. Like most parents, they want to treat their kids fairly, with patience and respect. They know the world presents children with many challenges, and they want to be there for their kids, lending insight and support. They want to teach their kids to handle problems effectively and to form strong,

healthy relationships. But there's a big difference between *wanting* to do right by your kids and actually having the wherewithal to carry it off.

That's because good parenting requires more than intellect. It touches a dimension of the personality that's been ignored in much of the advice dispensed to parents over the past thirty years. Good parenting involves *emotion*.

In the last decade or so, science has discovered a tremendous amount about the role emotions play in our lives. Researchers have found that even more than IQ, your emotional awareness and ability to handle feelings will determine your success and happiness in all walks of life, including family relationships. For parents, this quality of "emotional intelligence"—as many now call it—means being aware of your children's feelings, and being able to empathize, soothe, and guide them. For children, who learn most lessons about emotion from their parents, it includes the ability to control impulses, delay gratification, motivate themselves, read other people's social cues, and cope with life's ups and downs.

"Family life is our first school for emotional learning," writes Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of *Emotional Intelligence*, a book that describes in rich detail the scientific research that has led to our growing understanding of this field. "In this intimate cauldron we learn how to feel about ourselves and how others will react to our feelings; how to think about these feelings and what choices we have in reacting; how to read and express hopes and fears. This emotional schooling operates not just through the things parents say and do directly to children, but also in the models they offer for handling their own feelings and those that pass between husband and wife. Some parents are gifted emotional teachers, others atrocious."

What parental behaviors make the difference? As a research psychologist studying parent-child interactions, I have spent much of the past twenty years looking for the answer to this question. Working with research teams at the University of Illinois and the University of Washington, I have conducted in-depth research in two studies of 119 families, observing how parents and children react to one another in emotionally charged situations. We have been following these children from age four to adolescence. In addition, we

are in the process of tracking 130 newlywed couples as they become parents of young infants. Our studies involve lengthy interviews with parents, talking about their marriages, their reactions to their children's emotional experiences, and their own awareness of the role emotion plays in their lives. We have tracked children's physiological responses during stressful parent-child interactions. We have carefully observed and analyzed parents' emotional reactions to their kids' anger and sadness. Then we have checked in with these families over time to see how their children developed in terms of health, academic achievement, emotional development, and social relationships.

Our results tell a simple, yet compelling story. We have found that most parents fall into one of two broad categories: those who give their children guidance about the world of emotion and those who don't.

I call the parents who get involved with their children's feelings "Emotion Coaches." Much like athletic coaches, they teach their children strategies to deal with life's ups and downs. They don't object to their children's displays of anger, sadness, or fear. Nor do they ignore them. Instead, they accept negative emotions as a fact of life and they use emotional moments as opportunities for teaching their kids important life lessons and building closer relationships with them.

"When Jennifer is sad, it's a real important time for bonding between us," says Maria, the mother of a five-year-old in one of our studies. "I tell her that I want to talk to her, to know how she's feeling."

Like many Emotion-Coaching parents in our studies, Jennifer's dad, Dan, sees his daughter's sad or angry moments as the time she needs him most. More than any other interaction he has with his daughter, soothing her "makes me feel like a dad," Dan says. "I have to be there for her . . . I have to tell her it's all right. That she'll survive this problem and probably have lots more."

Emotion-Coaching parents like Maria and Dan might be described as "warm" and "positive" toward their daughter, and indeed they are. But taken alone, warm, positive parenting does not teach emotional intelligence. In fact, it's common for parents to be loving and attentive, yet incapable of dealing effectively with their chil-

dren's negative emotions. Among these parents who fail to teach their kids emotional intelligence, I have identified three types:

1. Dismissing parents, who disregard, ignore, or trivialize children's negative emotions;

2. Disapproving parents, who are critical of their children's displays of negative feelings and may reprimand or punish them for emotional expression; and

3. Laissez-Faire parents, who accept their children's emotions and empathize with them, but fail to offer guidance or set limits on their children's behavior.

To give you an idea of how differently Emotion-Coaching parents and their three noncoaching counterparts respond to their children, imagine Diane, whose little boy protested going to daycare, in each of these roles.

If she was a Dismissing parent, she might tell him that his reluctance to go to daycare is "silly"; that there's no reason to feel sad about leaving the house. Then she might try to distract him from his sad thoughts, perhaps bribing him with a cookie or talking about fun activities his teacher has planned.

As a Disapproving parent, Diane might scold Joshua for his refusal to cooperate, telling him she's tired of his bratty behavior, and threatening to spank him.

As a Laissez-Faire parent, Diane might embrace Joshua in all his anger and sadness, empathize with him, tell him it's perfectly natural for him to want to stay home. But then she'd be at a loss for what to do next. She wouldn't want to scold, spank, or bribe her son, but staying home wouldn't be an option, either. Perhaps in the end, she'd cut a deal: I'll play a game with you for ten minutes—then it's out the door with no crying. Until tomorrow morning, that is.

So what would the Emotion Coach do differently? She might start out like the Laissez-Faire parent, empathizing with Joshua, and letting him know that she understands his sadness. But she would go further, providing Joshua with guidance for what to do with his

uncomfortable feelings. Perhaps the conversation would go something like this:

Diane: Let's put on your jacket, Joshua. It's time to go.

Joshua: No! I don't want to go to daycare.

Diane: You don't want to go? Why not?

Joshua: Because I want to stay here with you.

Diane: You do?

Joshua: Yeah I want to stay home.

Diane: Gosh, I think I know just how you feel. Some mornings I wish you and I could just curl up in a chair and look at books together instead of rushing out the door. But you know what? I made an important promise to the people at my office that I'd be there by nine o'clock and I can't break that promise.

Joshua (starting to cry): But why not? It's not fair. I don't want to go.

Diane: Come here, Josh. (Taking him onto her lap.) I'm sorry, honey, but we can't stay home. I'll bet that makes you feel disappointed doesn't it?

Joshua (nodding): Yeah.

Diane: And kind of sad?

Joshua: Yeah.

Diane: I feel kind of sad, too. (She lets him cry for a while and continues to hug him, letting him have his tears.) I know what we can do. Let's think about tomorrow, when we don't have to go to work and daycare. We'll be able to spend the whole day together. Can you think of anything special you'd like to do tomorrow?

Joshua: Have pancakes and watch cartoons?

Diane: Sure, that would be great. Anything else?

Joshua: Can we take my wagon to the park?

Diane: I think so.

Joshua: Can Kyle come, too?

Diane: Maybe. We'll have to ask his mom. But right now it's time to get going, okay?

Joshua: Okay.

At first glance, the Emotion-Coaching parent may seem much like the Dismissing parent because both directed Joshua to think

about something other than staying home. But there is an important distinction. As an Emotion Coach, Diane acknowledged her son's sadness, helped him to name it, allowed him to experience his feelings, and stayed with him while he cried. She didn't try to distract his attention away from his feelings. Nor did she scold him for feeling sad, as the Disapproving mother did. She let him know that she respects his feelings and thinks his wishes are valid.

Unlike the Laissez-Faire mother, the Emotion-Coaching parent set limits. She took a few extra minutes to deal with Joshua's feelings, but she let him know that she wasn't going to be late for work and break her promise to her co-workers. Joshua was disappointed but it was a feeling both he and Diane could deal with. And once Joshua had a chance to identify, experience, and accept the emotion, Diane showed him it was possible to move beyond his sad feelings and look forward to fun the next day.

This response is all part of the process of Emotion Coaching that my research colleagues and I uncovered in our studies of successful parent-child interactions. The process typically happens in five steps. The parents:

1. become aware of the child's emotion;

2. recognize the emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching;

3. listen empathetically, validating the child's feelings;

4. help the child find words to label the emotion he is having; and

5. set limits while exploring strategies to solve the problem at hand.

THE EFFECTS OF EMOTION COACHING

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES it make when children have Emotion-Coaching parents? By observing and analyzing in detail the words, actions, and emotional responses of families over time, as we have done in our studies, we have discovered a truly significant contrast.