

Should Christians Parents Participate in Emotion Coaching?

I. Important Thoughts on Psychology and the Bible

- The word psychology means “study of the soul.” Biblically speaking, the human soul is an organic and spiritual unity between the human body and the human spirit. This is explained for us in Genesis 2:7, “*And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*”
- All of this to say, since modern psychology denies the existence of the biblical spirit, it cannot fully comprehend the magnificent unity that is the soul and is therefore incapable of providing genuine answers to soul-care. In regard to the study of the soul, it’s only *half* a science because it disregards the spiritual realities of life.
- So, with that, we need to understand that to the degree that Dr. Gottman (or any other psychologist or psychiatrist) ignores the teachings of Scripture, his system becomes more and more untrustworthy. And, unfortunately, there is nothing about Dr. Gottman or his studies that leads me to believe he knows the Lord.
- My blanket response to the question “*should Christians utilize secular psychology*” is “*in part.*” As I mentioned before, psychology provides fantastic observations. People respond to various incentives, stimuli, pressures, and pleasures in observable ways and modern psychology is a wealth of information in that vein.
- But the moment I break from psychology is when they try to provide *answers* for the soul’s problems. This is due to the fact they only see half the problem.

II. Pros and Cons of Emotion Coaching

- **“Be aware of your child’s emotion.”**
 - We have to live with our family members according to knowledge. There’s absolutely no room for ignoring our children’s spiritual needs. Emotions are a reaction to stimulus and they grow out of our belief-system. So, every time our children’s emotions break forth, they’re telling us something about how our children interpret life and their place in it. We need to be very aware of this.
- **“Recognize your child’s expression of emotion as a perfect moment for intimacy and teaching.”**
 - As intentional, premeditated parents, we understand that every moment in life is a teachable moment. This is clearly even more important at times that our children may be betraying a misunderstanding concerning God, themselves, and the world. Dr. Gottman - who doesn’t believe that an almighty God tasked us with the privilege and responsibility to parent, believes we should never shy away from parenting opportunities. How much more seriously should Christians view these moments?
- **“Listen with empathy and validate your child’s feelings.”**
 - Okay, here’s where I need to split a sentence. The first part of this thought is great - “Listen with empathy.” I believe that though the English word “empathy” doesn’t appear in our Bibles, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another is clearly taught in verses such as Galatians 6:2 where we are instructed to “bear one another’s burdens,” and in examples where Christ wept as others wept.

- However, the call to “validate” our children’s feelings may be misleading. It’s one thing for a child to say, “*I’m angry!*” and for us to respond, “*I see you’re angry.*” But it’s something completely different for parents to give the child the impression that the feeling they’re experiencing is an appropriate response to the situation without first discerning whether or not that is true.
- Let me elaborate. Dr. Gottman made the observation that “*All feelings are acceptable. All wishes are acceptable.*” Unfortunately, this is a falsehood for two reasons.
 1. A man’s desires can be very wicked. Genesis 6:5 says “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”
 2. There are acceptable times for acceptable emotions, but there are also unacceptable emotions. Joy and peace are always acceptable. Psalm 16:11 says “*You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.*” Anger can be appropriate at times and in the right ways. But it’s not always acceptable. Ephesians 4:26 says “*Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.*” Here we see both appropriate and inappropriate times for anger. However, anxiety is never acceptable. Philippians 4:6 tells us “*Be anxious for nothing.*” And I Peter 5:7 commands you to cast “*all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.*” So, when God says we should *not* feel an emotion, that settles it for the Christian parent.
- **“Help your child learn to label their emotions with words.”**
 - Our kids ride an emotional rollercoaster most days, and we need to help them decipher, interpret, name, and understand the reality behind their feelings. Just like we teach them their left and right and colors and the names of their body parts, they need us to explain to them what they’re feeling. But we mustn’t stop there.
 - If my daughter is angry because her brother was unkind, I should help her to realize that what she’s feeling is called anger, but then I need to help her understand the spiritual reality at play in the situation. I need her to understand *why* she got angry. James 4 tells us “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.” When she’s able to see that not only is she experiencing anger, but she’s experiencing it because she was being just as selfish and unloving as her brother was, and they both were doing that because - at that moment - neither of them really cared about God’s Word and the commands He gives us about being kind and loving - instead they were arguing because their selfish lusts were being denied . . . they will not only understand themselves better, but they’ll also have eternally valuable insight into Who God is what He expects from them. And, if they’re born again and filled with the Holy Spirit, trying to parent my daughter out of her inappropriate anger response will be much easier because I’m appealing to God and His Truth to do it.

- **“Set limits when you are helping your child to solve problems or deal with upsetting situations appropriately.”**
 - Our This sounds fantastic, but his explanation is scary. His idea of “setting limits” is best explained by a blog he wrote.
 - “The key element of limit setting in this case, contrary to much popular parenting literature, is to avoid harsh criticism of your child’s actions and instead focus on the emotions underlying their behavior. Here, we take Ginott’s (Jinott’s) advice in making it clear to a child that, although their behavior might not always be acceptable, their feelings and wishes always are.”
 - Again, we see the failure philosophy inherent in the system. However, it’s nice that at least he recognizes that there is such a thing as unacceptable behavior. Unfortunately, he doesn’t understand that both the unacceptable behavior *and* the unacceptable emotions are rooted in unacceptable beliefs about God. And instead of criticizing the child’s actions, he wants us to get lost in the emotions.
 - Unfortunately, this contradicts Scripture as well. We, as parents, are commanded to teach our children, love them, nurture, and admonish them, but we’re also called to rebuke and correct. The most loving thing we can do is tell them they are sinning against God, but that there’s hope for forgiveness and change.

I. Conclusion

- So, should Christian parents advocate Emotion Coaching? I suppose the answer isn’t an easy one. Some of you may say, there are a lot of good ideas. With just the right tweaks, the system almost sounds biblical. And I would give you that. Unfortunately, if you tell everyone: “*I really like Emotion Coaching my child.*” They’re left to assume you accept and advocate the system. So, unless you’re going to explain the faults in the system every time, I believe you’re doing more harm than good. You may inadvertently encourage a young parent to research Emotion Coaching and take it at face value simply because you said you do it. And then they’d be reinforcing very unbiblical ideas in their home.
- Here’s my official answer. I’ve never been one with a deep-desire to be hip and trendy. God’s Word is enough for me; it provides everything I need to parent for life and godliness. Therefore, in discussions like these, I wouldn’t find it valuable to say that I’m an Emotion Coach just because there are a number of similarities. However, being knowledgeable about the system makes me a better apologist as I encounter people who subscribe to the system.
- I’d much rather be an intentional, premeditated, disciple-making parent. It may be a little wordy, but it’s biblical.