
Embedding emotion coaching in an early years setting: its implementation and impact from practitioners' perspectives

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Research focus

Research objectives

1. Investigate the impact emotion coaching has had on children's emotional development
2. Describe and evaluate how emotion coaching strategies have been embedded by practitioners and to what effect
3. Consider the influence of practitioners' meta-emotion on the emotion coaching of children

Background

Challenges in the early years sector

Before outlining the basis of the project, it is important to contextualise the current climate for early years settings across the country. Surveys and reports in recent years have highlighted the sector as being underfunded and undervalued, whilst staff are facing increasing demands (Lamsdale, 2020, Early Years Alliance, 2020, Pite, 2022). This not only affects the running of settings, for example due to an increase in staff turnover, recruitment difficulties or financial instability (Pite, 2022, Early Years Alliance, 2020), but also impacts significantly on staff's mental health. In their 2018 'Minds Matter' paper, the Pre-School Learning Alliance stated that 25% of the 2000 survey respondents were contemplating leaving the profession due to stress or mental health related reasons (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2018). Furthermore, fatigue, loss of motivation and anxiety were named by over half of respondents as 'health impacts due to, or related to work' (Pre-school Learning Alliance, 2018). With a number of under 5s showing signs of social and emotional difficulties and/or having experienced trauma and abuse (Nelinger et al., 2021), this is another example of the increasing emotional pressures on early years practitioners.

What is emotion coaching?

Emotion coaching is a relational approach used with children to help them better understand and manage their emotions (Gilbert et al., 2021). Initially developed by John Gottman, the approach was originally observed in parenting (Lisitsa, 2012). Since then, there has been growing traction with its use in schools, health care and other settings through the establishment of organisations such as Emotion Coaching UK and EHCAP.

Emotion coaching is based on the following core principles:

- showing empathy towards children and their feelings
- labelling and validating their emotions
- setting limits
- supporting children to find solutions (Lisitsa, 2012, Gilbert et al., 2021)

This co-regulatory approach provides children with deeper understanding of their emotions and reassurance that all emotions are normal to experience (Temple, 2021). It teaches children to express their emotions safely and be able to self-regulate (Gilbert et al., 2021).

Research in the early years

Whilst the field of research into emotion coaching in schools is growing, research into its impact on younger children is limited. There are some studies that show the benefits of emotion coaching with under 5s, namely Nicolette Shaw's research. Shaw's action research explored the use of emotion coaching in a Scottish nursery, as well as its impact on children's understanding of emotions and their self-regulation. Shaw recognised the importance of the adult as an emotion coach and co-regulator. They considered how the adult's own emotional awareness, or meta-emotion, impacted on the emotion coaching process (Shaw, 2018). This was the catalyst behind my research project in Staffordshire.

Staffordshire Virtual School project

The aim of this project was to explore how successfully emotion coaching could be implemented in an early years setting and investigate the impact this had on children's emotional development. Whilst **Shaw focused on gathering the views of children** attending the setting, I decided to concentrate on the **views of practitioners.** Their perspective on the relevance and applicability of emotion coaching in the early years could then inform the Virtual School's support for settings.

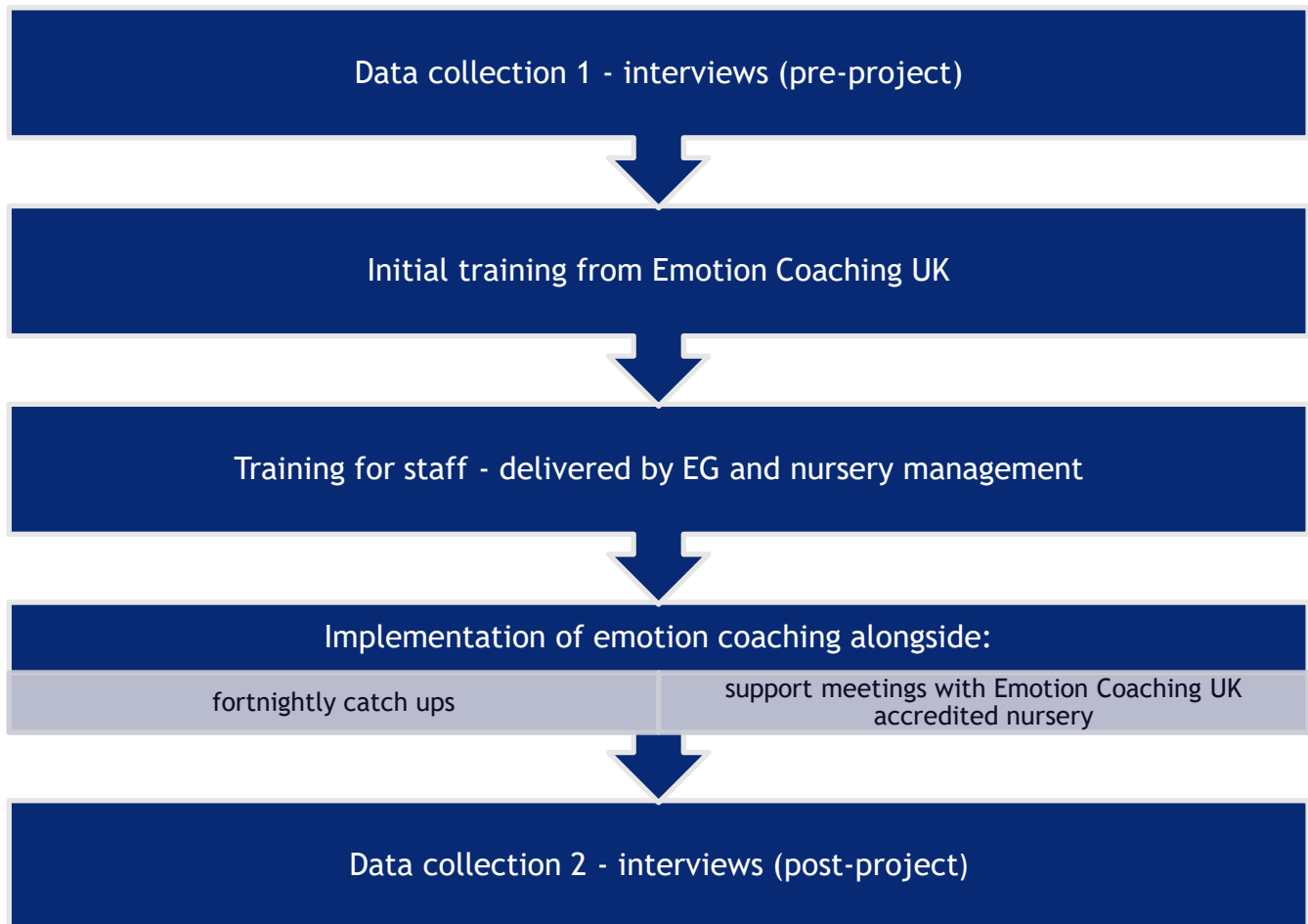
As this was a small-scale pilot study, it felt more appropriate to explore the use of emotion coaching with all children attending the setting, rather than just our looked after children who attend. If the project were to be deemed successful, more specialist research could be undertaken, e.g. investigating the impact of emotion coaching on children who have experienced trauma.

This report chronicles the journey of the setting from initial training in emotion coaching to final reflections on its impact.

Methodology

The project took place over the course of 12 weeks, starting on 17th January 2022 and ending on 8th April 2022.

Overview of the project



Sampling

This setting was identified due to their previous work with the Virtual School and their desire to develop their practice in the area of children's emotional wellbeing. They currently have over 120 children attending and 30 members of staff. The setting is open all year round and provides funded education for 2-4 year olds, as well as daycare for under 2s.

Training

In Anna Freud's 2021 report, *Their challenges are our challenges*, over half of survey respondents claimed they had not received additional training on mental health in the early years (Nelinger et al., 2021). In light of this, it was important that this project provided the selected setting with training at no additional cost and that did not require purchasing any additional resources.

On 20th January, both the setting manager and I attended the one-day introductory emotion coaching training, delivered by Emotion Coaching UK. The deputy manager/SENCO was unable to attend due to having COVID.

Staff received an in-house training session held in February, which I developed and delivered alongside the manager and the deputy manager. It was a condensed version of the introductory training from Emotion Coaching UK delivered in a Saturday morning session. 13 members of staff were able to attend and all rooms/age bands were represented.

As an interim measure to maintain momentum and engagement, the manager and deputy manager held a staff meeting with an emotion coaching focus prior to the in-house training.

Additional support

Following the in-house training, fortnightly 'catch-ups' were arranged between the manager and I. These were to reflect on progress and challenges and set the focus for the following two weeks.

Throughout the project we were scheduled to have regular meetings with an Emotion Coaching UK accredited nursery. This was to act as a 'buddy' system to offer advice and guidance to the Staffordshire setting. Unfortunately, staff shortages at the supporting nursery meant that regular meetings were difficult to arrange. We were able to hold one meeting with them in attendance, and they were able to share their emotion coaching journey. This provided a link for the Staffordshire setting if they felt they needed further advice and guidance.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit in-depth responses from staff which could be explored at their own level. On 17th and 21st January, pre-project interviews were carried out with six members of staff who had provided consent to participate in the study. These members of staff were interviewed a second time on 4th and 6th April. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Zoom. They were then transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings

Pre-project interviews

The interviews were broadly split into three sections:

- Existing strategies used by practitioners to help children manage their emotions
- Practitioners' knowledge of emotion coaching
- Practitioners' observations and thoughts on children's emotions

Existing strategies used by practitioners to help children manage their emotions

In this section of the interview, distraction and time out were most frequently cited as strategies used to manage challenging behaviours. Practitioners recognised that all children are individual and respond differently to strategies. Other approaches were also mentioned, such as engaging the child in physical activity, use of now and next boards and supplying comfort objects.

“I just sit them down, I don't tend to question them why, if it's anything like that [feeling scared] because we wait for them to talk to us. So if they want to tell me what's happened, I would sit and listen to them and say, 'No it's okay, don't worry, it's okay now, you're fine' and then just carry on with the day, because I don't want them to keep revisiting why they're scared.”

“We just go with them really, cos some children, when they're angry, they'd rather you sit there with them. And some of our children would rather you leave them to calm down and then they come and find you. So it just depends on them really.”

Most practitioners acknowledged that relationships between staff and children were vital. These bonds would help them engage with the child and find out what has upset them. They often tried to reassure children and provide positive reinforcements.

Practitioners' knowledge of emotion coaching

Two key themes were identified here - one focusing on children and the other on adults. Some participants believed that emotion coaching would give children a greater understanding of their emotions. However most participants predicted that emotion coaching would give *them* the tools to manage their own emotions. Participants recognised that their level of emotional self-regulation can impact on their children's regulation.

"I'm an anxious, worrying person...I shout, and I know I shouldn't shout, but I shout sometimes. So I also want to learn, rather than my first instinct going, 'No stop it!', 'Right come on, let's try something new'. So that's why I wanted to do it really, cos it can be really tough and it is sometimes mentally draining to be honest."

Practitioners' observations and thoughts on children's emotions

Participants noted that their children find it difficult to identify, express and process feelings. Some of the examples given were children who had additional learning needs or communication difficulties.

"Anxiety and the fear side of it can definitely be masked, because obviously they're not very good at showing, they don't understand the emotions do they, so they know that they're feeling something...it's either a tantrum or they are just genuinely upset, they're just sitting there crying."

Participants could clearly recognise physical and verbal signs of when children were happy, sad, anxious or fearful.

Age was mentioned as a factor in how effectively their children could self-regulate i.e. the older the child the more likely they were to self-regulate. However, these were general

statements and participants recognised that other factors such as adverse childhood experiences and the effects of COVID and lockdown could also impact on self-regulation.

As referred to at earlier points in the interviews, participants frequently referred to the importance of relationships between the child and them as their keyperson. They expressed their motivation to make nursery a happy place for them.

COVID was discussed in all interviews. Some participants acknowledged that it had had an impact on their children's self-regulation and behaviour. There were references to the isolation children experienced during lockdown and how they now had 'to deal with big emotions in a big world'. The lack of social interaction at this time could also have contributed to more 'boisterous' play and difficulties reading social cues in play. Instant gratification and a possible over-reliance on technology were also mentioned which some participants believed contributed to children's difficulties listening, engaging, and following instructions whilst at nursery. As well as its impact on children, COVID was also referred to throughout the interviews as adding extra pressure on staff e.g. staff shortages.

"I think with COVID and isolating I've got 5 staff members off and it does bring my anxiety right up to here... Sometimes you feel like you're dealing with too much and it just gets on top of you."

Post-project interviews

The same members of staff were interviewed in the final week of the project. Two staff members had not attended the in-house training.

The interviews were broadly split into three sections:

- Reflections on emotion coaching in the setting
- Practitioners' awareness of their own emotions
- Next steps

Reflections on emotion coaching in the setting

Of the four steps in the approach adapted by Emotion Coaching UK (need ref?), most participants said they had adopted steps one and two into their practice. These were:

- showing empathy towards children and their feelings
- labelling and validating their emotions

All room-based participants could give examples of emotion coaching in action and how it had made a positive difference in a child.

When reflecting on the changes that they had made since the training session, many of the participants referred to their increased use of empathy with the children. They understood that a child's thoughts, feelings and experiences influenced their behaviour. Several participants explained that they now try to stop and 'take a breather' or 'a step back' in situations where a child is exhibiting challenging behaviour. There is increased connection with the children in order to understand their emotional needs.

"I react differently. I take time to think about how I'm going to react to that situation."

“I think people are talking about things more as well so if a situation’s happening with a child, instead of just kind of reacting, they’re taking that step back, they’re kind of talking to other staff about it and then kind of helping the child rather than quickly kind of like, ‘Right we’ve got to do this now’ - actually routine it can wait a little bit. This child needs that little bit of support first. And then reflecting on it after and then asking us, ‘Do you think we did okay or are there things we could have done?’”

Participants shared that they are having more discussions with their children about feelings and are asking more probing questions to elicit more thoughtful responses. Visual aids from the film ‘Inside Out’ were used in the staff training and had then been adopted by staff in the setting as prompts for discussion. Children were encouraged to share when they might feel the core emotions such as disgust, joy etc. If a child shared that they felt an emotion, staff encouraged them to elaborate and explain why they felt that way. For instance, one participant quoted a child as saying, ‘Well I’m angry because you put too many peas on my plate and I don’t like peas.’ This deeper discussion was being used with children of all ages, not just older children who some participants initially implied had a higher level of emotional literacy.

Practitioners had also been labelling and validating feelings of their children, which seemed to have a new significance following the training. To aid this, the setting were using the picture prompts from ‘Inside Out’ as and when situations arose, not just in planned group discussions. For example, one participant had the pictures on a lanyard and had used them with different children to help them identify how they were feeling.

“I think labelling, I don’t think I’d ever really thought of it before, I’ve never thought about having to label their emotions. You just kind of think they already know they feel sad or they feel cross. But actually unless anyone teaches them they don’t know.”

Practitioners’ awareness of their own emotions

All six participants shared that they were more aware of their own emotions; even those who had not attended the training. Some noted that they were more relaxed, as much for themselves as with the children. They reported not feeling as anxious about their work.

“I think if I’m having a bad day, I’m like, ‘I’m really cross with this’, ‘I’m frustrated’, I label it more, so people know how you feel rather than kind of, ‘I’ve got a facial expression, you should have known how I felt.’ Yeah you need to talk about it, you need to say the words or they won’t know how you feel or if you’re struggling. You need to talk about it yourself so then you can go into the room and if there is a child with really bad challenging behaviour, you kind of feel your emotions, you understand your emotions a bit more so empathy builds then for the child.”

Next steps

All six participants, including the two participants who had not attended the training, expressed their intention to continue using emotion coaching.

Some participants, particularly the setting manager, were keen to continue using the ‘Inside Out’ picture prompts and develop these into an emotions board as well as the lanyards.

Some participants stated that it would be useful if all staff in the setting were trained so that the approach was used consistently. The training would also need to be refreshed e.g. in staff meetings, to further embed this. The two participants who were not able to join

the training said that it would have been more beneficial to have been there in person, despite picking up information from other staff and observing them model it.

Reflections, conclusions and recommendations

Objective 1: Investigate the impact emotion coaching has had on children's emotional development

This was difficult to quantify and verify as we can only rely on practitioners' examples that were shared in the interviews. As the study progressed, there was a gradual shift towards objective 3 which focused on practitioners' meta-emotion. This was deemed to be of more importance to the success of emotion coaching than originally thought. On reflection, the investigation into the impact of children's emotional development could be a research study in itself. It could be beneficial to replicate Shaw's study with this setting as part of an action research cycle. Child-centred research methods could be used to better illustrate their responses to emotion coaching rather than the methods used in this practitioner-focused study.

That being said, all participants in this study could give specific examples of the positive impact emotion coaching had had on their children and expressed a desire to continue embedding the principles of emotion coaching. This indicates that it has been valuable for the children that have the participants as their keyperson.

Objective 2: Describe and evaluate how emotion coaching strategies have been embedded by practitioners and to what effect

Participants could give specific examples of how they were using emotion coaching with their children. The increased use of empathy and labelling and validating children's feelings were used more than limit setting and problem solving. Participants shared how these two steps had changed their mindset and their daily practice. They recognised this had a positive impact on the children in their care.

In hindsight, I should have questioned why limit setting and problem solving were used less. It might have been that practitioners' questioned whether all ages would have been able to respond to these last two steps, or that they did not feel as confident in adopting them and therefore required more training. Considering this, it would be useful to revisit this with the setting, again possibly as part of an action research cycle, with added emphasis on implementing steps three and four of the emotion coaching approach. Other research methods could be used, such as observations, which would give the researcher a more informed picture of how the approach is being used and to what effect.

Objective 3: Consider the influence of practitioners' meta-emotion on the emotion coaching of children

As previously mentioned, this became the objective of most interest as the study progressed. It became clear that practitioners' mental and emotional wellbeing was a crucial factor in successfully implementing emotion coaching. Participants were acutely aware that their emotional state impacted on their children's. In the final interviews, most participants had noticed a change in themselves and their ability to identify and validate their own emotions. They appeared to place more value on showing empathy to themselves in order to better empathise with their children.

Nevertheless, the impact cannot be easily qualified, especially in a small pilot study such as this. Not every member of staff participated in the study and not every member of staff attended the training. It would be worthwhile repeating the training, and indeed the project as a whole, with all members of staff in attendance, and assessing their attitudes and responses to emotion coaching and the idea of meta-emotion. The intention of this research project was to gather as much data as possible from as many participants as possible. However, as is often the way in research, this did not go to plan due to various barriers, including the impact of COVID and low participant consent.

Other considerations

Although this is a small-scale study, from which results cannot be generalized, there are many positives that have resulted from it. It is clear that, to those who participated, emotion coaching has enabled them to make a positive change for their children. What is challenging to pinpoint is what led to this success. For example, the same results might not have been reached if I as a researcher and a facilitator was not as involved e.g. if I had not arranged fortnightly ‘catch ups’ or co-delivered the in-house training. It could be argued that this involvement was necessary to model the empathy and understanding that encapsulates emotion coaching. Whilst it would be worthwhile to replicate this study on a larger scale with more settings, how possible would it be to provide the same level of support to a larger number of participants and how important would this be?

It would also be valuable to explore the use of support networks in Staffordshire’s early years sector and capitalize on expertise. This could be especially useful with sharing knowledge and strategies, but also building empathic relationships with practitioners across the county. With the sector facing numerous challenges, it could be said that this is needed now more than ever. However, there are many logistical barriers to this, as illustrated in this study when attempting to arrange meetings with the supporting setting. Therefore careful planning needs to be carried out so that support can be effective, meaningful and accessible.

More thought could also be given as to what specific support we as a Virtual School offer to our early years settings. As discussed in this report, settings are encountering ongoing difficulties, many of which are unique to them and differ from schools. Thus a more tailored and individual support package should be offered to settings.

To summarise, this research project has shown clear benefits of emotion coaching in an early years setting and demonstrated that it can be implemented and embedded with

younger children. However, this project should be a springboard for further research which can delve deeper into the implementation and impact.

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