Avi is a child who likes only chocolate ice cream and can’t stand vanilla. He is 3 years old and is attending a friend’s birthday party for the first time. The party is ending, and it’s been an exciting time, but everyone is tired and getting cranky. Out comes the ice cream! It is vanilla. Disappointed, Avi begins to look very unhappy. He goes to his father and says “I want chocolate ice cream.” Dad says “Sorry, Avi; they don’t have anything but vanilla.”

“I want chocolate,” Avi begins to whine. The other parents look at Dad. He becomes tense. How should he handle this? Dad knew he couldn’t get Avi a substitute, but he realizes that his son is upset, and he can provide understanding and comfort.

“You wish you had chocolate ice cream.” Avi looks up and nods. “And you are angry because we can’t get you what you want.” “Yeah.” “You wish you could have it right now, and it seems unfair that the other kids have ice cream and you don’t.” “Yeah,” Avi says more assertively but no longer whining. “I’m sorry we can’t get you your favorite ice cream, and I know that it’s really frustrating.” “Yeah,” Avi says, looking a lot less upset. “I am really sorry.” Avi looks relieved and when his father suggests “We can get some chocolate ice cream when we get home.” He looks quite pleased and
runs off to play. Many years later Dad learns that some people who have sensitive tastes find vanilla aversive.

This type of empathic understanding of a child's feelings is central to emotion coaching in parenting. The father's actions were so much more effective than coaxing Avi to have what he doesn't want or telling him that he is ungrateful, that he should be more flexible and eat what he is given. If parents were able to enter their children's shoes and see the world through their eyes, chances are that children would feel a lot less isolated and lonely. Ignoring children's feelings does not make the feelings go away; rather, bad feelings tend to shift when children can talk about them, put them into words, and feel understood and soothed by parents' comfort and concern. The children then see their parents as allies in their struggle to make sense of things in their inner and outer worlds, and they then turn more often to their parents for support.

As easy as it is to understand what empathy is, it is extremely difficult to practice with one's own children. I speak from experience. Parents have to be able to slow themselves down and be able to rid themselves of the many anxieties that might stop them from feeling empathic. Anxieties such as wanting to protect one's child from the rejections he or she suffers, worries that their children won't turn out “right,” expectations of how one wants one's children to be, and self-conscious concerns about others watching and wanting to do parenting right are all part of being a parent. If one's daughter comes home and says her friends rejected her, it is important to stop and respond to her hurt rather than rushing in to solve it, give advice, or try to get her to be less sensitive. This style of relating is part of emotion coaching.

Emotion coaching of parents involves helping parents become emotion coaches with their children. This involves guiding parents toward awareness and management of their own emotions as well as teaching them how to deal with their children's emotions. At times, work with parents involves coaching the parents alone on how to help their children focus on and manage their emotions. At other times, work with parents together with their children is indicated. In the latter case parents are coached on how to respond to their children's emotions as they emerge in actual interactions. For example, parents who are having problems with their children can be coached in how to hold their infants, how to be vocally responsive, and how to be more attentive and reciprocating in their gazes.

EMOTION COACHING IN PARENTING

John Gottman, a psychologist who has studied parenting emotion philosophies, found that children of parents with an emotion coaching philosophy functioned much better in a number of domains than did children
of parents with an emotion dismissing philosophy (Gottman, 1997). In Gottman’s (1997) study parents’ attitudes toward emotions and their interactions with their 5-year-old children were measured at Time 1. Three years later, at Time 2, the children, who were now 8 years old, were again studied on a number of indexes. These included teacher-rated peer relations, academic achievement, parent reports of the children’s need for emotion regulation, and the children’s physical health. The children with emotion coaching parents at Time 1 had better academic performance at Time 2. Controlling for IQ, their math and reading scores were higher. They were also getting along better with their peers, they had stronger social skills, and their mothers reported that they had fewer negative emotions and more positive emotions. These children had lower levels of stress in their lives, as measured by stress-related hormones in their urine, lower resting heart rates, and quicker recovery from stress. They also were reported to have had fewer infections and colds. The general conclusions of this study were that parents whose children were doing best on the above indexes at Time 2 showed specific characteristics at Time 1.

The parents of the successful children showed higher levels of emotion awareness of their own and their children’s emotions. They had an emotion coaching philosophy that offered acceptance of and assistance in dealing with anger and sadness. Also, rather than being either derogatory (intrusive, critical, mocking) or simply warm (positive but not emotion focused) in their behavior, they were not only warm but also more focused on emotion and able to provide direction when needed and praise when the children’s behavior was goal appropriate. This provision of structure and praise was provided in a relaxed manner, for example, stating simply the goals and procedures of a game to be played and not overwhelming the children with too much information. These parents waited for their children to act, not pushing them, and then commented primarily when the child did something right. Parents who were low on this dimension gave little structure and too much information to children, which either excited or confused them. They commented on mistakes and were usually critical.

Emotion coaching helped these children regulate their emotions and develop the ability to soothe themselves. Emotion-focused mentoring of children’s feelings had a soothing effect on children, and this led to change in their parasympathetic nervous system responses, affecting such things as heart rate and attentional abilities. Of great interest is that children who at age 5 received emotion coaching—the ability to talk about emotions while having them—were not overly emotional with their peers at age 8. In fact, just the opposite was observed. Being appropriately cool was the norm, and children with good emotion coaching seemed to be most competent with their peers because they had developed the skills to handle situations appropriately. They probably were more aware of their emotions,
could regulate their upset feelings more easily both physiologically and behaviorally, and could better attend to salient aspects of the situation. They probably had also learned how to learn in emotion-evoking situations.

Parental characteristics that had such a powerful effect on their children that defined emotion coaching were

1. Awareness of even low-intensity emotions in themselves and their children.
2. Viewing their children's negative emotions as opportunities for intimacy or teaching.
3. Empathizing with and validating their children's emotions.
4. Assisting their children in verbally labeling their emotions.
5. Problem solving with their children, setting behavioral limits, discussing goals, and offering strategies for dealing with negative-emotion-generating situations. (Gottman, 1997)

These parents clearly possess all the elements of emotional intelligence, emotion awareness, empathy, and the ability to think about and regulate emotions. Notice that parenting with emotional intelligence involves more than either warmth or limit setting, alone or in combination. It involves an emotion coaching style of attending and managing: being aware of, and being able to deal with, emotion. Parents need to feel comfortable with their own emotions. They do not need always to express them, but they must not ignore them. A crucial element of emotion coaching is being able to talk to children while they are experiencing their feelings and helping them put these feelings into words. This helps the children make sense of their feelings and the situations that evoke them. As with adults, putting emotions into words for children is a way of integrating reason and emotion and creating new links between different parts of the brain. This helps integrate feelings into a meaningful story that explains things. In addition, helping children make transitions from one emotional state to another is an important aspect of coaching. Here bridges between different states are built, and flexibility in moving between states is encouraged. A crying child first is soothed and then is offered a new, exciting stimulus, such as a funny face and sound or an experience, like being swiftly raised in the air with a sound of a new wheel. This helps the child transition into a new emotional state. Repeated experiences of this type help the child develop his or her own ability to soothe and shift states.

An emotion-dismissing parental attitude, in contrast, viewed children's sadness and anger as potentially harmful to the child. These parents believed they needed to change these emotionally disruptive experiences, as quickly as possible, and that the child needed to realize that these negative emotions were not important and would soon disappear if the child just rode them out. It is not that these parents were necessarily insensitive
to emotion, but their approach to sadness, for example, was to ignore or deny it as much as possible and to mollify anger or punish it. They said such things as "Seeing my child sad makes me uncomfortable" or "Sadness needs to be controlled" (Gottman, 1997). These are not the parents to whom emotion is a welcome addition to life. Rather, they believe it is "not OK" to have feelings, that feelings need to be minimized and avoided, and that negative feelings are dangerous and even from the Devil. Some parents minimize sadness in themselves—"What's the good of being sad?"—and in their children—"What does a child have to be sad about?"

Parents have a tremendous opportunity to influence their children's emotional intelligence. Babies learn from their parents' responses to their emotions that emotions have a sense of direction and that needs can be satisfied. They learn that it is possible to go from one feeling to another rather than become overwhelmed by their emotions. In particular, they learn that it is possible to go from distress, anger, and fear to feelings of calmness, satisfaction, and joy. They begin thereby to build the bridges that will be so important in life to help them transition from disturbance to calm. Babies with unresponsive parents learn that when they are in distress and cry out they experience only more distress. They have never had a guide who conducts them from one place to another, who guides them from distress to comfort, so they don't learn how to soothe themselves. Instead, a bad feeling is a black hole that swallows them up.

Coaches need to recommend to parents that they should begin very early to teach emotional intelligence skills to their children and continue this teaching all the way through childhood. The skills in which parents need to be coached include opening channels of emotional communication with their children right from infancy, so that they help their children develop an early "emotional vocabulary" on which to build. Parents need to learn to encourage their children to talk about how they feel about the events in their lives and to listen to how their children feel without passing judgment. Parents need to recognize the less intense emotions in their children, not only the intense ones. If a child seems hesitant or nervous about the choir audition tomorrow, it is better to talk to him or her about it today than for the child to freeze tomorrow. Providing activities and playthings that help children explore and express their feelings also is very helpful in developing an emotional vocabulary. To develop their children's emotional intelligence, parents should choose toys and games that help kids recognize their feelings, identify their feelings, communicate their feelings, and hear what other people are saying about their feelings.

PARENTS AND THEIR INFANTS

Emotions are central to how parents and children relate. Through emotional expression parents and children come to learn about each other's
desires, intentions, and points of view. Children’s emotions signal what is working or not working for them in their relationships long before they can talk. Being aware of children’s emotions from birth onward is thus one of the most central tasks of parenting. Infants are very labile and easily aroused. Unable to control their own responses, they are prone to sudden frustration, boredom, and fatigue. They depend on adults to read their emotion signals.

At first, attending to children’s emotions comes naturally to many parents. At birth and in the first years parents listen and watch attentively to every nuance of expression, trying to understand this wondrous little being and all of the desires of his or her majesty. The child cries, and they run to comfort him or her. The child smiles, and they are overjoyed. Parents generally are incredibly attuned to their infants, far more so than any other species. Human infants are born far more helpless than other mammals: They need caretakers. Children are totally dependent on parents for their survival. Parents are so attuned that not only are they fascinated and attentive by every coo and gurgle but they even go in the quiet of night and check to see if their children are breathing. At the other end of the parenting spectrum are those parents who not only are not attuned to their infants but also bewildered by the little bundles of emotions. They cannot fathom why infants don’t come with operating manuals. These parents need more explicit training in recognizing emotions, in understanding what they mean and what to do. In such cases parent–infant coaching is highly indicated (Stern, 1995). Van den Boom (1994) found that a 3-month coaching intervention for irritable 6-month-olds and their mothers designed to enhance maternal sensitive responsiveness improved the quality of mother–infant interaction, infant exploration, and infant attachment. At the end of the 3 months of training mothers were more responsive, stimulating, visually attentive, and controlling of their infants’ behavior. Infants had higher scores on sociability, self-soothing capacity, and exploration, and they cried less. At 12 months the infants who had received the intervention were more securely attached than those who had not received the intervention.

Human infants, as well as being far more dependent than other species, have also far higher neural plasticity. Because they are so ready to learn, what happens to them early on, especially in their emotional experience, shapes them in profound ways. Family life provides infants with their first emotional lessons. It is in this intimate school that children will learn who they are on the basis of how they are treated. They will learn how others will react to their feelings, and from this they will begin to form attitudes about their own feelings and will learn how to handle them. It is not that infants come into the world as blank slates to be written on by experience. They have their own temperaments, capacities, and emotional tendencies. Infants definitely are active agents who promote their
own development, but they need a lot of assistance from caretakers to help them find their feet. Once they do, they are truly up and running, all over the place.

Amazing as it is, the brains of these dependent little beings contain the seeds of many of their future capacities for mastery of their worlds. These seeds are just waiting for an opportunity to develop. Infants are born with lots of emotional capacities that provide all they need to survive in a close bond with a caretaker, the closest emotional bond they will ever experience. Of special significance are the capacities for connection provided by an innate emotion system. How these emotions are responded to lays a foundation for further emotional development.

A nursing baby whose needs are responded to with loving attention and cradling affection absorbs his or her mother's loving gaze and receptive arms along with the milk and drifts contentedly back to sleep. This child learns that people can be trusted to notice one's needs and can be relied on to help and that his or her own efforts at need satisfaction will meet with success. A child who encounters the tense arms of an irritable, overwhelmed mother, who looks vacantly ahead, waiting for the feeding to be over, learns another lesson. Tensing in response to the mother's tension, this child learns that no one really cares, that people can't be counted on, and that his or her efforts to get needs met will not prove satisfying (Stern, 1985). Depressed mothers have been found to spend less time looking at, touching, and talking to their infants; show little or negative affect; and often fail to respond to infants' signals. Their infants in turn show abnormal activity levels and less positive affect. It appears that because of their frequent exposure to their mothers' maladaptive responses, these infants themselves develop a dysfunctional style of interacting (Field, 1995). A parenting style that is responsive and sensitive to children's signals results in infants high in social and cognitive competence.

Legerstee and Varghese (2001) studied the role of mothers' affect mirroring or empathic responsiveness on the development of 2- to 3-month-old infants. Mothers were classified as high affect mirroring if they exhibited the following behaviors: were more attentive, maintaining, joining, or following their infant's focus of attention by, for example, commenting “Are you looking at your socks? Those are pretty socks, aren't they?”; were warm and sensitive in their response to their infant's affective cues, including promptness and appropriateness of reactions, acceptance of the infant's interest, amount of physical affection, positive affect, and tone of voice; and were socially responsive, imitating the infant's smiles and vocalizations and modulating negative affect. Notice the similarity between these dimensions and those of empathic following recommended for empathic emotion coaching. Infants with mothers who responded in these ways were found to be more responsive, reflecting back the mothers' affect and smiling, cooing, and gazing at their mothers more than at mothers who
were characterized as *low affect mirroring*. These infants showed more social behaviors, more often shared affective states with their mothers, and discriminated between live interactions with their mothers and film replays of their mothers. They interacted more with their real mothers than with a film of them, whereas infants with low affect mirroring mothers did not.

Infants enter the world with a highly interpersonally responsive emotion system that is raring to go. They respond positively to facial configurations soon after birth. Masks shaped like a face soon evoke a smile. Young children respond with fear to looming shadows and even avert their gaze from fast-approaching objects. The latter response was shown in an experiment by simulating a fast-approaching missile with an expanding dot on a TV screen (Sroufe, 1996). The dot grew rapidly to fill a screen on which the infant’s gaze had been fixed. The babies automatically turned their heads and eyes away to protect their faces from the apparently fast-approaching missile.

Infants also begin to learn very early in their development. By the time they have reached the ripe old age of about 4 days, they can discriminate and show preference for a breast pad saturated with their own mother’s milk over one saturated with a stranger’s milk. Soon they distinguish between animate and inanimate objects, showing greater interest in and preference for living over nonliving objects. Novel stimulation, even novel sequences of the same flashing lights, attracts their attention more than the same old thing over and over. The first weeks and months are very busy, not only for caretakers but also for infants as their brains grow and develop, and more differentiated, neuronal connections, lay down a set of pathways of great consequence. The roads less traveled will wither and simply fade away, while those most practiced will become well-constructed highways to the future.

Learning helps the brain grow. Children who regularly practice violin or piano early on, say between ages 4 and 10, show many more developed neuronal connections in the music-related areas of their brains. This includes much more highly differentiated areas related to finger and eye—finger coordination. Maestros’ brains therefore are being developed by early practice, in a way and at a rate that never occur again. Future musical geniuses are being formed by childhood practice that occurs soon after leaving the cradle. So too are areas of the youthful brains of soccer and baseball players being developed on childhood playgrounds. As they kick and hit balls, or anything that resembles them, the brain grows new connecting links that govern motor coordination.

Children are therefore active, forming beings from Day 1. How parents respond to their primary communications—emotions—is of great significance to children’s well-being. Awareness of children’s emotions is virtually a natural ability, especially if one has experienced good parenting as a child him- or herself or has had other good relationships. Children also
appear to be highly talented emotional beings. However, this talent tragically often erodes as they develop. As infants grow to maturity, and develop language, parents often attend less and less to their feelings, and in the busyness and stresses of life, parents often expect their children to speak up for themselves. By the time kids are teenagers they don’t want parents to know what they are feeling, and parents have often lost interest. It is in the small, everyday emotional exchanges, as well as in the big ones, that templates are laid down. Parents too often send messages such as “I’m busy with something important—don’t bother me.” Why is it that parents stop attending to their children’s feelings as they grow?

One important reason is the parents’ own philosophy of emotion management (Gottman, 1997). To the degree that parents feel that their own and others’ emotions need to be suppressed, controlled, and avoided, they stop attending to their children’s emotions. Parents believe that their children need to learn the lessons of emotional control and the merits of no longer being babies. Adulthood, in this view, involves reining in one’s emotions, at worst through physical punishment and at best by promoting rational control over one’s emotions. The view of the benefits of emotional control is rewarded by its apparent validity. Parents generally don’t want their children to be crybabies or wimps. Popularity does not go with emotional lability in childhood or adulthood. Being strong is a much-admired and -desired quality. Strength and emotional intelligence, however, in the long run come, as I have argued, from the integration of reason and emotion rather than from control over emotion.

It is parents’ own feelings and thoughts about their emotions that are the major influence on how they handle their children’s feelings. Parents raise children in their own images. Gender-stereotyped ways of dealing with emotion, for example, have been shown to be influenced by parents’ ways of telling stories to their children (Chance & Fiese, 1999). Mothers tend to tell stories with themes of disappointment and sadness. Fathers overall are less likely to use any emotion themes in their stories. Mothers are more likely to tell stories of sadness to their daughters than to their sons and have also been shown to demonstrate greater expressivity toward daughters than toward sons, which may explain girls’ greater sociability and stronger tendency to smile in social interchanges (Magai & McFadden, 1995). The way parents tell stories to their children and express emotions to their children appears to be an important avenue of imparting gender-related information about emotion and its expression. Mothers have also been found to influence the expressions of their infants over time. Magai and McFadden (1995) summarized their longitudinal study of expressive development of infants and mothers over a 5-year period. They found that mothers engaged in behaviors that could be understood as an attempt to moderate the emotional expressions of their infants. Mothers restricted their modeling to the more socially positive signals of interest and joy, and
over the years they increased their matching responses to these emotions in their infants and decreased their matching responses to infants' expressions of pain. Infants who received higher rates of maternal modeling of joy and interest showed higher gains in these emotions between 2½ to 7½ months of age.

Parents thus must learn to see their children's emotions as intimate opportunities for connecting with their children, as opportunities for getting close to and validating their children's experiences. This is the first step in helping children learn about intelligent management of emotions. Parents should not invalidate and dismiss their children's emotions; ignore them; or treat them as undesirable intrusions or disruptions to be eliminated, controlled, or got rid of.

I now look at coaching parents in how to deal with the emotions in their children that later trouble adults so much.

DEALING WITH CHILDREN'S SADNESS

The cry to be loved breaks all people's hearts. Babies' needs for love and tender care move virtually all people to provide these things. Infants who do not receive love and tender care fail to thrive and become sad and depressed. Loneliness and powerlessness are the instigators of sadness, for old and young people and, when prolonged, produce depression. Loss of friends, esteem, disappointment; failure to attain a goal; and loss of first and later loves all produce sadness in children. Not feeling loved, and insufficient autonomy or a sense of helplessness, brings on adolescent despair.

How can parents mentor their children about the sadness of life, without the experience of which no one can mature? Parents shape their children's emotions by how they respond to these emotions, by the language they use to describe the emotions, by the specific emotions they themselves display, and by responding to some emotions rather than to others. Feeling talk is very important in children's development. In one study (Sroufe, 1996), the more mothers talked to their 3-year-olds about their feeling states, the more skilled the children were when they were 6 years old at making judgments about the emotions displayed by unfamiliar adults. Witness the following feeling talk interaction between a mother and her 2-year-old son, Dennis.

Dennis: Eat my Cheerios. Eat my Cheerios. (crying)

Mother: Crying? We're having a real struggle, aren't we, Dennis? One more mouthful now. And oh, my, what do you do, you spit it out.

Dennis: Crying! (pretends to cry)
Mother: Dennis is crying. Doesn’t want Cheerios. Mommy wanted him to have one more. Dennis is sad. Crying.

Dennis: Dennis sad. Crying.

Here mother and child are beginning to develop a shared experience in which they are learning to better understand each other. No one truly knows why Dennis was originally crying, but his mother is trying to understand, and Dennis is learning what his mother thinks about why he is crying. Together they are constructing a shared view of what is occurring. The mother is a mentor, a type of emotion coach, who here is simply helping Dennis put words to feelings and connect them to the situation. Later, as Dennis develops, his mother will do more coaching, helping him with appropriate forms of expression and action. By age 3, when children see another child crying or hurt, they respond with concern and might run to get the child’s mother. Even earlier than this they understand causes of feelings and common antecedents of sadness, saying such things as “Mommy sad; what Daddy do?” or “I cry. Lady pick me up and hold me.” Parents need to be coached to engage in feeling talk.

**STEPS IN DEALING WITH SADNESS**

Parents can deal successfully with their children’s sadness by following these proposed steps. These steps can be taught in a psychoeducational group and can be given to parents as a guide.

1. Be aware of even low-intensity sadness in yourself and your child. You need to pay attention to nonverbal signs or mild verbal ones of disappointment, loneliness and powerlessness, or giving up, not only to crying and more noisy forms of distress.

2. View your child’s sadness as an opportunity for intimacy or teaching. Intimacy often involves sharing hurt feelings. There can be nothing as precious as sharing your child’s hurt feeling; this is a real opportunity to be close. Being able to help alleviate sadness as a bonus will bring relief and will send you soaring to heights of satisfaction and gratitude. Don’t be scared of your child’s sadness; you will then only teach your child a fear of sadness. Don’t avoid sadness; if you do, your child will learn to do this, too. However, as children get older and reach adolescence they begin to separate from parents and form their own identities. Being autonomous becomes the important goal. Now you have to change your style to suit your child’s mood. Your adolescent’s sadness now can be discussed or shared only by invitation. Don’t miss the op-
portunity. If your child shows you that he or she is sad, this is a sufficient invitation. You can say you would be sad if that had happened to you. Your mentoring should continue as your child grows, but when your child is older, don't say your child is sad until he or she does. Approaching too close to a feeling that has to do with weakness, such as sadness, when the adolescent is struggling with issues of competence and strength and is not yet ready to deal with these feelings, is potentially disastrous. Approach will result in your adolescent shrinking away and may hurt his or her pride rather than promote the openness you seek.

3. Validate your child's sadness. This is crucial. It is painful enough to be sad; to have this invalidated with "Don't be a crybaby" or "There is nothing to be sad about" is shame producing. Validation involves saying something like "It is sad or disappointing when X doesn't work out." Find some ways of truly understanding the validity of your child's sadness.

4. Assist your child in verbally labeling his or her emotions. As in the earlier example of Dennis and his mother's feeling talk, starting from an early age, talking about feelings is an important way of helping your child develop awareness about his or her own emotions as well as empathy with others' feelings. Both are crucial aspects of emotional intelligence. It is important to notice sadness and disappointment early, put them into words, and open them up. This prevents the sadness from escalating into withdrawal. It is important, however, with children to distinguish early on among primary, secondary, and instrumental sadness. Most children learn pretty quickly that sadness sometimes gets them their way. Thus they try using it to achieve their aims. To validate sadness that is expressed deliberately on a child's face, so that he or she can get his or her way, is to validate the wrong thing. Rather than responding to an instrumental expression of sadness with "Mikey is sad," it would be best to say "Mikey wants a candy," and some coaching might be helpful; for example: "You don't have to be sad to get a candy."

5. Finally, problem solve with your child. Set behavioral limits where necessary, and discuss needs and goals involved in the sadness and strategies for dealing with sadness-generating situations. After the sadness has been validated, proposing solutions in a nonimposing fashion can be helpful. When Amanda is sad that the blocks she was so carefully erecting into her own leaning tower collapsed, she cries. Mommy says, "It's so disappointing when the blocks fall that you just want
to cry. Mommy's sad too when it doesn't work.” (Amanda is still crying.) “You don’t want the blocks to fall down. When we're sad when the blocks fall down we cry a little, and then we wipe our tears. There we are.” (Amanda stops crying and starts looking around at the blocks.) “Now, let’s see where those silly blocks are that fell down. Let’s see if this time we can put the big one on the bottom.” Rather than ignoring Amanda’s sadness and starting to build blocks straight away, the mother recognizes her crying as an opportunity for closeness and teaching, and she coaches Amanda on dealing with sadness. Note the conducting from one state to another that is occurring.

DEALING WITH CHILDREN'S ANGER

Toddlers are among the angriest people in the world. They are small and helpless—their skills for mastering the world are just beginning to develop. Much that they do, they do poorly. This produces loads of frustration. If adults become exasperated with them it only increases their sense of hopeless failure. Children's anger is explosive—a brief burst of it and they return to normalcy with bewildering speed. Children between the ages of 1 and 2 years can be pretty ferocious together in a playpen. They might bite, scratch, hit, pull hair, and steal each other's toys.

Even at these young ages children express different kinds of anger: helpless anger, just standing and screaming when a toy is stuck behind the couch; more goal-directed anger, by pulling angrily on the toy to free it; and retaliatory anger at the child who stole the toy. As children grow, so does their retaliatory anger. Most parents are shocked to see their child destroy a toy in a fit of anger. A severe lecture or punishment often follows this unacceptable behavior. The child's hostility must be subdued. What happens instead is it becomes hidden. It is remarkable that, in a culture in which people stress the importance of learning how to spell, starting with the ABCs and building up to an adult vocabulary, that people don't see how important it is to learn one's emotional lessons step by step until one is emotionally eloquent. Learning math requires first differentiating between 1 and 2, then learning to count to 10, and so on. Learning emotion regulation similarly is a complex learning process; one cannot learn it all at once. In learning to regulate emotional expression, a global emotional response such as anger needs to become differentiated by experience into a variety of subtle and appropriate responses. First one needs to be aware of one's anger; then name it; and then, in small steps, learn what to do to achieve its aim. Only then will children be able to differentiate their anger so as to satisfy Aristotle's requirement of being angry with the right person,
Anger and aggression in adolescents have become a problem in North America that has no easy solution. Prevention is what I propose here. Emotion coaching from early on will provide the connection and the integration of emotion tolerance and regulation skills that will help prevent adolescent explosions. Parents need to connect with their children to address the emptiness, pain, isolation, and lack of hope felt by so many of them.

Angry children who receive no emotional guidance, no coaching or mentoring, become angry adults. Unless parents can sit patiently with their children’s anger, assimilate it, tolerate it, empathize with it, and validate it, and then, at a pace appropriate to the child, begin to put words to it and guide it in constructive ways, it has no opportunity to develop and grow. Only with this kind of attention will anger grow into more differentiated, socially appropriate forms of expression. Children’s retaliatory anger peaks in their early school years and then diminishes until it almost disappears in most teenagers. Teens tend to sulk and be oppositional, and they get angry with those who impose on them. They get especially angry with siblings and when they feel too confined, are lied to, or are shamed.

Many parents deal with their children’s anger by driving it underground rather than helping their children make sense of their anger and use it in problem solving. Children come into the world with different temperaments and differ in their degrees of irritability and anger. Crabby babies can become happy adults, but infants who begin life with bad moods will not be as easily soothed and may grow into angry children, especially if they happen to have parents who are too harshly controlling or anxiously unsure. The following guidelines can be given to parents to help them deal with their children’s anger.

**STEPS IN DEALING WITH ANGER**

1. Be aware of anger in yourself and in your child. You need to pay attention not only to your child’s tantrums but also to his or her irritability and resentment.

2. View your child’s anger as an opportunity for getting closer to what is happening in him or her and for teaching. Recognize this anger episode as one in which you can help your child learn something about how best to deal with this anger. Don’t drive the anger underground—it is not a toxic product to be buried. Also, don’t allow yourself to be dominated by a tantrum and give in to get rid of it. View it as an opportunity for your child to learn and you to teach, not a disaster.

3. Validate your child’s anger. To validate anger rather than see-
ing it as a volcanic eruption to be capped you are going to need to be comfortable with your own anger and its expression. Remember, anger is saying, “I'm offended.” Find out about the offense your child has experienced and discern your child’s reasons for being angry. Seeing how your child's experience makes sense is one of the most important parts of validation. Convey this understanding even if you feel it important to set a limit, for example, “I know you are angry (or upset) that your brother took the toy. I know you want it, but I want you to let him have it now. It is his turn.” It is also helpful to empathize with your child’s anger against you. Saying “I can understand how you would be angry at me for limiting your TV” is helpful. This maintains a connection and validates the child's anger.

4. Assist your child in verbally labeling his or her anger. This is generally done first by offering words, but as the child grows and is able to name feelings, first ask, “Are you angry?” and later ask, “What are you feeling?”

5. Problem solve with your child, set behavioral limits when necessary, and discuss goals and strategies for dealing with anger-generating situations.

DEALING WITH CHILDREN’S FEARS

The fear of separation is many children’s most basic fear and becomes anxiety over a lack of safety. Most babies show a fear of heights, of falling, and of sudden noise. Many fears grow with imagination. At about age 8 months the fear of separation begins. This is the time at which babies’ cognitive capacities have developed sufficiently that they can recognize familiar people and objects. Separation from familiar caretakers produces imagined consequences too frightening to anticipate, and the appearance of strangers presents them with a sight too terrifying to behold.

Many fears are learned. Children often fear what their parents fear, or they learn the lesson of fearfulness and begin to fear other things. Studies have shown (Magai & McFadden, 1995) a correlation between the number of fears held by children and their mothers. When parents themselves are anxious with other people, children will interpret this as a fear of strangers. If adults are highly anxious about their children’s health or injury, the children will conjure up dire consequences. Fear of the dark, fear of water, and fear of cows or dogs are other common childhood fears. On the other hand, often fears come of their own accord and tend to disappear as the child grows.

Severe or harsh punishment produces fear, as does a parent’s explosive
temper. Children who have come from homes in which there has been violence or intense marital or familial dispute tend to walk through life on eggshells. This is a survival skill learned in the family so as not to precipitate the inexplicable wrath that could descend at any moment. The direct result of frightening or unpleasant family situations is an increased load of anxiety on the children. Domination, lack of respect, constant criticism, expectations that are too high, and having to take sides in parental disputes all produce a weaker sense of self and anxiety. Growing up in an environment of suppressed hostility between parents is highly confusing and anxiety provoking for many children, who sense the danger but cannot quite identify its source. They just feel anxious.

Overprotective parenting also will create fearfulness in children that they are not well equipped to survive on their own and that they require protection. Children raised in a warm environment in which their fears are noticed, in which they are helped and encouraged to put their feelings into words, and in which actions are taken to deal with their fears will have lower levels of fear. No one can be inoculated against all fear, but children who are raised in a secure emotion coaching environment are less likely to suffer from deep anxieties later in life.

Fears of inadequacy, which none of us overcomes entirely, begin in childhood as children become more autonomous and have to face the world alone. This fear is most acute in teenagers, who have a stronger need than most to belong or fit in. They fear being criticized, mocked, or made fun of. They form ideal images that they often find hard to live up to. Overconfidence, with no doubts, does not make for ideal adaptation; a certain amount of unsureness is healthy. The following guidelines for dealing with fear can be given to parents.

**STEPS IN DEALING WITH FEAR**

A child comes running in the night, afraid of the dark in his room. The noises outside scare him, and he imagines all kinds of monsters out there, in his closet, or under his bed. Provided these are not chronic and too overwhelming, in which case underlying problems might be signaled, how do parents handle the child's fear? The following steps will help.

1. Be aware of even low-intensity fears in yourself and your children. The issue here is being realistic. If you are overattentive to fears—your own or your children's—you will produce overanxiety, but if you ignore your children's fears they will not go away. Statements such as "Be a big boy or girl" in response to fear will only produce shame about the fear. Notice whether your child is afraid when you put him or her to
2. View your child's fear as an opportunity for intimacy or teaching. Rather than simply mollifying your child or minimizing his or her fear with "There is nothing to worry about," take it seriously. Recognize that something more is needed. Attempt to give what is needed and not more.

3. Validate your child's fear. For some reason, perhaps because adults are so afraid of their own fear, adults tend to humiliate children for being afraid. Even with the best of intentions, either thinking the child is cute or remembering their own fears, adults often are amused by children's fears, laugh about them, and say things like "Don't be silly." This is very humiliating. Children's fears and anxieties are valid, not silly. Once the child has been validated at least he or she now no longer feels alone in a fear that no one understands. Possibly a child's fear is the emotion with which adults most need to empathize, because being connected to a secure adult helps calm a child's fears. Nothing is worse than being ridiculed for one's fears. I still remember picnicking with my extended family on a family holiday and being afraid of cows that were approaching our picnic site. I struggled, trying not to show my fear. No one else seemed afraid, and I wanted to be a big boy, but my fear overcame me. Although my mother usually was protective, she was influenced by the context of relatives, particularly by one who took the "don't pamper him; he has to grow up" and mocking "don't be a sissy" approach, and so I was left to suffer on my own. I felt so alone in my obviously irrational fear. Even the other children weren't afraid, and my mother was providing no protection. I ran back to the car and in humiliation ate my hot dog in the safety of the back seat. I still remember the awful feeling in my stomach and the suppressed tears of shame and anger at my relative. This did not help me deal with my fear. I got over my fear on other occasions, when my mother, unembarrassed and unconstrained by a family chorus, helped me approach cows, reassured me of their harmlessness in spite of their size, and showed me how to feed them grass and even touch them. The ability to do these things was exhilarating, and I felt proud of myself, as I felt my mother was.

4. Assist your child in verbally labeling his or her fear. The answer lies in naming the fear, either with questions such as "What are you afraid of?" or, if you and your child don't know, taking the opportunity to explore this together. Make
helpful comments or conjectures, such as “I understand you are afraid of the cows” or “Are you afraid of the dark and the sounds outside?”

5. Problem solve with your child; set behavioral limits; and discuss needs, goals, and strategies for dealing with fear-generating situations. When a child is afraid of the dark, sleeping in the parents’ room is not a good solution even though that’s what the child wants and would solve the immediate problem. A clear “No, that is not a good idea; Mommy and Daddy need to sleep in their beds and you in yours” sets the limit. Solutions might involve nightlights, a certain amount of checking under the bed, and investigating the sources of noise to reassure the child that there realistically is no danger. Soothing is also important to help the child relax. Facing fears in small steps is the right approach, but this must always be done in a validating, understanding context.

DEALING WITH CHILDREN’S SHAME

Shame is among the most excruciating of childhood experiences. Children need to be proud of their small selves in order to feel big. To be belittled when one is so small is too diminishing. Children need to be the apples of their parents’ eyes. Their excitement needs to be seen and validated, otherwise they shrink, red-faced into the floor. To them this is a fate worse than death and is avoided at all costs, especially as the child grows into adolescence. Embarrassment develops with age. By the time the child recognizes him- or herself as a separate person and can evaluate the self from the perspective of another person, the capacity for embarrassment has begun. If a parent ignores a child’s pride the child will feel shame. Support and validation are the antidotes to shame. If a parent shames a child, the parent must correct this immediately by reaffirming the child’s importance to the parent. Prototypic of more intense shame experiences for a child is loss of bladder or bowel control and soiling oneself in public. This is the worst sort of humiliation. Reassuring the child that he or she is not defective for having made a mistake, or for his or her inability to control this time, puts the accident in a temporary context and removes it as a basic flaw of the self.

STEPS IN DEALING WITH SHAME

1. Become aware of even low-intensity shame or embarrassment in yourself and your children. Name it. Validate the child,
and help him or her recognize that mistakes are acceptable and do not diminish the child's self in the eyes of you or others.

2. View your child's shame as an opportunity for intimacy or teaching. Teach him or her that all people mistakes and that this does not make your child an unacceptable person.

3. Validate your child's shame. Acknowledge and normalize the child's experience: “It feels awful to think that others will tease you,” “You are not the only one whom this has happened to,” and “I remember when . . .” all help.

4. Assist your child in verbally labeling his or her shame. Give a name to this feeling of wanting to shrink into nothing and hide from the eyes—and, in the case of loss of bowel control, the noses—of others.

5. Problem solve with your child. Set behavioral limits and discuss goals and strategies for dealing with shame-generating situations. Discuss with your child how such a situation could have been prevented. Teach the child that telling the parent who is giving one a ride home that one needs to go to a toilet is better than trying to hold it in until one gets home. Tell the child that you understand that it might be difficult to ask but that this is the best way.

DEALING WITH ONE'S OWN EMOTIONS AS A PARENT

If anyone had told me the depth of emotion, especially difficult emotions, I would experience in parenting, I would have thought the person greatly prone to exaggeration. Sure, I expected to feel love, joy, happiness, excitement, worry, and frustration, but I did not expect to be pushed to the farthest limits of my experience. In addition to the feelings I expected, I have felt extreme helplessness, rage, pride, fear, anxiety, and worry beyond anything I had ever felt before. I have also felt sadness, a deeper and more poignant sadness than I could have imagined: sadness at my children's hurts that I could not heal; at their disappointments and failures that I could not prevent; and at their leaving, which I could not stop, nor wished to. I needed every ounce of emotional intelligence I had to negotiate the most challenging of life's tasks: parenting.

One of the most remarkable parts of this emotional journey was the extent to which I had to confront my own feelings and grow emotionally. My children were a mirror for my own emotions, and keeping clear what they truly felt and not confusing it with what I felt was highly challenging. Parenting made me realize many things about myself. Sometimes—often, I hope—I was able to see and hear them and understand what they felt,
but at other times my own feelings would become so strong that they obscured the separation between us. If they were sad, I would be sad. I would overidentify with their sadness and become overtaken with my own sadness. On other occasions I would imagine they were hurting when they were not and feel my own hurt through them. This is not some strange insanity. All parents do it. The conspiracy of silence that surrounds the emotional experience of child rearing needs to be broken. The issue is not whether all parents to some degree project their feelings onto their children and become so enmeshed that they lose their boundaries. In these states a child's hurt is the parent's hurt, the child's loss is the parent's loss, the child's victory is the parent's victory. Instead, the issue is whether parents can distinguish fantasy from reality. Can parents recognize and find out what they are feeling rather than believing what they imagine, that their feelings are really their children's? Even when parents' feelings and their children's are the same, it is very different to hear and respond to a child as a parent versus overidentifying and being overwhelmed by one's own unresolved feelings triggered by one's children's feelings or circumstances.

In addition to adults confusing their feelings with those of their children, an area of definite difficulty is that of parents overreacting to their children: feeling threatened by their anger, defensive at their criticisms, hurt by their separations, needing their attention, and feeling rejected by their disinterest can evoke parents' own maladaptive responses. These will impair parents' ability to be a mentor or emotion coach. Parents who often feel anger, sadness, or fear in their parenting experience these emotions too intensely, have difficulty calming down, and are out of control. Coaches need to work with these parents to help them deal with these maladaptive states. Angry feelings are usually the most difficult ones with which parents must deal. They need to acknowledge their anger but learn to regulate it so that they don't lash out and then feel guilty afterward, although if they do so, an apology is always welcomed by children, who need the love of their parents and can be very forgiving. It is important for parents to be able to express anger when they are mad at their children, but it is doing this constructively with which they may need help. This means communicating anger with “I” statements and not condemning or criticizing the child, for example, saying “I am mad,” not “You are bad.” Parents need to be able to talk sensibly about their anger, to disclose it as information to be dealt with rather than to attack. Throughout their expressions of anger they need to continue to communicate their caring and respect for their children and communicate that what their children do matters to them. Sometimes it would be a lot better if parents saw their children as they see other adults—as sensitive, feeling beings—and applied the same rules of interaction to them. For some reason parents tend to lose sight of the fact that their children have feelings, and even though they have the best intentions toward their children they try to teach them or control them.
and just end up nagging and arguing. It is so easy as a parent to forget that children are real people, too. This is in part because children don’t yet speak in a way parents can understand, so the parents lose sight of their children’s inner worlds. Parents need to remember that their children do feel, all the time.

Children are simultaneously the most forgiving and the most condemning of their parents. An infant bears no grudge at a parent’s neglect, and children tolerate parents’ moments of anger and impatience the way few others would. But if there is no lasting love, and especially if no understanding is developed, this precious bond becomes contaminated with anger, hurt, and recrimination. As much as children grow to seeming independence they, as do parents, always remain interdependent beings. People always need, and benefit from, human connections of some kind. Family ties are the strongest of all emotional bonds. Parents need, therefore, to pay special attention to their children and learn to be good emotion coaches.