

Emotion Coaching When Your Child Is Angry

Let's take an example of how you might emotion-coach when your child is angry. Say you're making dinner when you hear loud voices from the yard, where your kids are playing. Suddenly your eight-year-old bursts into the kitchen, slamming the door hard behind him. You make a decision to Stop, Drop, and Breathe. So you turn the burner low, take a few deep breaths, and glance at the clock, giving yourself permission to take 10 minutes to deepen your relationship with your son by supporting him.

First, you connect with your child by meeting his eyes and putting your hand gently on his arm, then you **empathize**. *"Wow! You seem really mad."* In this case, you think your child can handle an immediate **limit**, as you empathize again. *"No slamming the door, Mateo; it will break... I see you're furious."*

"Of course I'm furious!" He rants about how mean his brother is, and all the terrible things his brother said to him. As he speaks, you resist looking at the stove or the clock. Your face and little murmured noises communicate your concern.

When your son finally pauses and looks at you for a response, you deepen the conversation by **validating**: *"That must really have hurt to have your brother say that. No wonder you're so mad."* You give him a hug and his eyes tear up. Then he pulls himself together to again rant about how his brother doesn't even know the rules. When he looks at you expectantly, you offer nonjudgmental observations: *"So you thought you should play the game the way you always do, but your brother had a different idea about the rules? Hmm... How frustrating for both of you!"*

Because you're coaching anger, you help him notice that under his anger, there's hurt: *"So you tried to tell your brother X? And then your brother was so mad, he said things that really hurt your feelings, huh?"*

Finally, he seems calmer. Aware of the need to get back to cooking dinner, you feel out whether he's ready to move on: *"I wonder what you could do now to work this out? Do you want me to come with you while you tell your brother how you feel?"*

He responds defiantly: *“I’m not telling him anything! I hate playing with him! I’m never playing with him again!”*

You realize there’s still some hurt to express before he can move on, so you back up and empathize. *“Wow! You are THAT mad and hurt!”*

He tears up again. Then he says, less defiantly and more vulnerably, *“I WON’T. I won’t EVER play with him again.”*

You hug him. He blows his nose. Notice he hasn’t said much, but he’s felt a lot. You sense the energy shifting and see that now he can’t resist looking out the window to see whether the game is going on without him. You see that he’s starting to feel more regulated and is considering going back outside. You help him evaluate his options: *“If you feel ready to talk with your brother, I’d be happy to go with you. And I hear you might still be way too mad. It sounds like you’re so mad, you think maybe you’ll avoid problems like this if you never play with your brother ever again. I wonder what might happen then?”*

“He’ll miss me, that’s what. He’ll beg me to come play with him!” your son says defiantly.

You smile warmly. *“You want him to notice how much he likes playing with you, and miss you so much that he would beg you to play with him again!”*

Your son enjoys the idea so much he smiles. *“Well... he might not beg. But he WOULD miss me.”* Now that he feels better, he’s thinking more clearly and feels more empowered. *“I know, I’ll tell him ‘Our family rule is Be kind! If you aren’t kind to me, I don’t want to play with you!’”*

You smile back at him and ruffle his hair. *“It sounds like you know just what you want to say. And you want people to treat you right, or you don’t want to play. Good for you. I wonder what might happen if you say that?”*

“It doesn’t matter. If he’s kind, I’ll play. If he’s not, then I won’t play with him. I’ll figure something else out to do until dinner. He’ll be jealous if I get to help cook!”

Is it always this easy? Of course not. Sometimes you'll need to accompany your child and coach him as he expresses his upset to his sibling. (For examples of scripts like this, see my book [*Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings*](#).) But empathizing in this way is always where you begin. If you can resist denying your child's feelings and trying to solve the problem for him, you'll see that your emotion coaching increasingly helps him move through the emotions and shift into problem solving.

Excerpted from the [Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids WORKBOOK](#) by Dr. Laura Markham