

EXAMPLE ANSWERS --

PLEASE DON'T READ UNTIL YOU FIRST TRY COMPLETING THESE ANSWERS ON YOUR OWN!

GOING DEEPER

Emotion Coaching – What Will You Say and Do?

Read the situations below. Under each scenario, write what you could say and do that would help your child with their big feelings—without necessarily doing what your child is asking.

You always begin with empathy, and sometimes that is enough. Certainly, the mistake we most often make as parents is to try to “fix” the child or the feeling, rather than just being with the emotions. But once your child has had a chance to feel the emotion, you will sometimes want to go further, as in these examples, using play or problem-solving to empower your child.

1. Your child is disappointed that it's raining.

What you say:

"Oh sweetie, it's raining, and you wanted to go out and play!"

What you do:

Mirror her feelings: I kneel down in front of my daughter, with a hand on her back, and my face at her eye level, reflecting disappointment. I let the moment of empathy sink in and see how she responds.

If she cries, I would hold her and continue to mirror her disappointment.

If she's angry, I would acknowledge her anger, and also the sadness under it: *"You had big plans for today and now you can't do what you wanted."*

If I think she could handle some playfulness, I would make an exaggerated angry face, and shake my fist at the rain, saying *"You, rain! Why couldn't you wait to fall? We wanted to play in the sun!"* and enlist my daughter with a nod and more fist shaking.

After a couple moments of shared indignation, I would make an exaggerated innocent/concerned face and pretend to speak for the rain *"Oh dear, but I couldn't help but fall! When the clouds get so full of water, they just drop me! Oh my, oh my!"*

Looking at my daughter with big-eyed surprise and concern, I would say, *"But the rain says it couldn't help but fall!"* and wait a moment for her to respond.

If she softened toward the rain, I would pretend to be the rain again, with a sad, reflective *"Lots of people are sad to see me because they don't want to get wet!"*

I would give my daughter an exaggerated mama nod to say *"Yup! That's us!"* and follow up with a hesitating, hopeful rain voice again *"I wonder if you would put on your boots and come out and play...with me?"* and see where the energy went from there. (Of course, in this instance, I am happy to have her go out in the rain.)

2. Your child says she can't sleep because she's afraid of the dark.

What you say:

"I'm sorry you're having trouble sleeping honey! I hear that you're feeling worried about the dark."

What you do:

Empathizing when someone is afraid means we honor the feeling. But we also want to help her confront the fear, and feel empowered. And to help her feel safer, I want to get her laughing, which will reduce the stress/fear hormones circulating in her body.

I would come into her room, closing the door so just a sliver of light comes in, and make my way over to her bed saying *"Of COURSE you can't sleep in all this darkness! I mean, it's dark!..."* and pretend to bump into the bed, crying out in an exaggerated way *"Agh! Something just knocked me down on the bed! Help! Help!"*

Then I would fall down (gently!) on top of my daughter, and yelp *"Argh!! What's this? It's a scary monster! Help! Where are you Zoe? It's too dark in here to see you! You're not asleep are you?"* and play-wrestle the "monster" while calling for my daughter to help *"Hurry! I don't think I can hold this monster down much longer! Oh no! It's getting me! Where are you?? I can't see a thing in all this darkness!!"*

After a while, I would let my daughter convince me that it was her and not a monster, and grab her in a terrific bear hug, saying *"Oh thank goodness, it's YOU! You saved me from that horrible monster! It was too dark for me to see it, and you saved me!"*

Then we would snuggle, relax, and check in about sleeping... *"Alright dear you, now, what's this about sleep? I'm right here to keep you safe - like you kept me safe!"*

3. Your child is angry at his sister.

What you say:

"Sammy, I heard you raising your voice, it sounds like you don't like what's happening over there! Do you want some help working this out with your sister?"

What you do:

I would watch the kids closely. If it seemed clear that my son could use some help to resolve the issue, I would go right over to them. Beginning with Sammy, getting down at face level, and offering a warm connection via eye contact, a warm voice and gentle physical contact – maybe a hand on his shoulder: *"It looks like you're having a hard time right now. How can I help?"*

4. Your child doesn't like the dinner you've fixed.

What you say:

"You don't like any of this, Sweet Pea? Not what you were hoping for tonight?"

What you do:

When my daughter complains, I wonder if she needs connection (in this case, maybe to be seen/known for her preferences? Maybe nurturing?), or maybe she's eager for autonomy (a sense of her own power/choice?) or meaning (to know she matters?). Or, maybe she really just doesn't like this food.

I might ask *"What were you hoping to have for dinner tonight?"*

If she said (in a decisive voice) *"I want to have sandwiches for dinner tonight!"* I might nod and if I felt okay about her choice say *"Wow, you had something else on your mind! Is that something you can make yourself?"* Then I would support her to go and get sandwich fixings and rejoin us at the table.

If she said (in a whining voice) *"You never make anything I like!"* I would realize that the need is probably emotional, and doesn't have much to do with the food. So I would start by getting playful and scoop her up, connecting. I might say *"My goodness, never? Never-ever? Never-ever-ever? Oh no!! That's terrible!"* If she laughed and snuggled, I would snuggle her for a bit and empathize more, by crooning to her *"It's SO disappointing not to have the dinner you wanted...."* But then I would shift into giving her the wish in fantasy: *"Wouldn't it be great if every single dinner you got to eat exactly what you wanted?"* and then into problem-solving/empowerment: *"What can we DO about that? Do you want to be the magic master dinner planner this week, and help me make meals that you would like too?"*

And if she just melted down, I would take her in the other room and hold her while she cried, reminding myself that tomorrow she needs laughter and special time before dinner!

5. Your child misses her Daddy, who is on a business trip.

What you say:

"It's hard when Daddy's away, isn't it Sweetie? I'm so sorry you're missing him. I bet he misses you too."

What you do:

I would come close, and open my arms to offer some physical connection. I would hold her and encourage any tears. I would ask her to describe what she's missing (the way he hugs her goodnight, etc.) I would honor her feelings by pointing out that when we love people, it is natural that we miss them.

After cuddling a bit, I would help her find a positive way to express her feelings that would empower her. I might say, *"Remember last time Papa was away and you thought of things that helped you feel close to him? That time you drew him a picture and wrote him a story of what you were doing. Remember how much fun you had doing that? And how he laughed and smiled when you gave it to him? When you're ready, maybe we can think of a way to connect to him again."*

6. Your child begs for a toy at the store.

What you say:

"You really like that toy! It looks fun to play with doesn't it?"

What you do:

I would start by admiring the toy and acknowledging how much she likes it. Then I would set the limit – we aren't buying a toy today. I would offer to put it on her list for her birthday *"and if it is still the thing you want most at that point, maybe you will get it then."*

Sometimes, that's enough. But if she continues to whine about wanting the toy, I would conclude that she thinks the toy would make her feel better, and if she can't have the toy, at least she would like some fun and connection.

If I thought she could handle it, I would shift to play, by giving my daughter a mischievous grin and saying (in an impish way) *"You really want to play don't you?"* Stepping closer, *"You really, really want to play?"*, even closer, with fingers twitching, *"You really, really, really want to play?"*... *"I'll play with you!!"* and try to grab her. I would pursue her in a slow, funny way (so we would stay safe – not running) in the store, with my daughter trying to stay out of my reach and me bumbling around and never quite catching her. *"Hey, don't you*

want to play? Where are you going?" The laughter should shift the mood and end in a big hug, which should keep us connected enough to get out of the store without a meltdown.

Of course, if the meltdown turned out to be unavoidable, I would carry her out of the store. Usually this would not be the case if there were no other stressors on her, but in real life there are often other stressors!

Later, I would refer back to the item she wanted, to talk to her about our family values relating to our time, money, material goods, and the larger world.

7. Your child shouts at you in anger.

What you say:

"I hear how upset you are! Everyone gets angry sometimes. I'm here, and I'm going to keep us all safe. Tell me what's upsetting you?"

What you do:

I know my daughter needs connection and relief from these painful feelings.

I support myself to stay present and calm by reminding myself that she's showing me her hurt and trying to free herself of these feelings, that she hates feeling this way and wants to feel close to me again too. I remind myself that she needs my help, and that I can help.

So I listen. When she yells what she's mad about, I listen, and nod. I might say. *"Oh, my goodness, I see how upset you are about this"* or *"No wonder you're so upset"* or *"I didn't realize how strongly you felt about this."*

I would not try to teach or correct or demand respect at this point. I would watch my daughter closely and try to feel what might be happening for her – the grief or fear under the anger.

I would focus on my deep and unwavering love for her and look for opportunities to support her process by allowing and validating (even if only silently) any feelings that surface for her. I would just stay close and present with her as she moves through these big emotions.

8. Your child doesn't want to go to school in the morning.

What you say:

"You've been home having fun with Papa and me all weekend, and it's hard to think about leaving us to go back to school today isn't it?"

What you do:

I would help my daughter to mourn the coming disconnection by coming close and empathizing: *"We all played so much together, and had so much fun!"* I would pause to see her response and repeat anything she says, like *"Sometimes you really wish you could be at home all the time, huh?"*

Then I would acknowledge her wish: *"Wouldn't it be great if we could be home together like that all the time?"* but begin to get her laughing by exaggerating what that would be like: *"We could do everything together and never leave!" "Someone could bring us food and new clothes when we needed them!"* If I had time, I might flop down on her and say *"Wouldn't it be great if we could be this close together all the time? Hey, where are you going?"* and chase her around for more laughter and closeness.

After a bit of playfulness, I would put the experience into perspective, *"Remember that it was hard to go to school last Monday too? You were sad and wanted to stay home and play with Papa and I. But you took a deep breath and thought about how much you were looking forward to seeing Ruby, and you got excited about going."*

I would give her some space to think about that, and then add, *"When you came home, you told me your day was a million thumbs up! A MILLION! You ended up making a great time of being at school!"*

"How about today? What are you looking forward to doing at school today?"

"I'll be there right at 3 to hear everything, and to play! Will you think about what you want to do together this afternoon?"

9. Your child is jealous of his brother staying up late.

What you say:

"It sounds like you want to stay up later, Daniel. It's hard to see Oliver still up when you're heading to bed. When you're older, I bet you're going to enjoy seeing what it's like down here after 8, aren't you? I'm afraid you might be disappointed - it's pretty boring!"

What you do:

I'm guessing my son may be yearning for inclusion (not wanting to miss anything), community (being with others), or play (wanting to keep having fun).

I support my son to go to bed at his bedtime, and later talk to both boys about when they go to bed, making sure to make it clear at what age bedtime will shift to give my son something solid to look forward to.

I would also look for opportunities to foster connection between my sons, *"I bet you're looking forward to playing with Oliver more aren't you? And I bet he's looking forward to more brother time too!"*

10. Your child loses the game and has a tantrum.

What you say:

"You're so upset. You really wanted to win that game! I'm sorry it's so hard right now sweetie!"

What you do:

I bet my son is needing connection and a sense of competence; he may have a full backpack from earlier hurts and need support to release these painful emotions. I would soften and stay close and compassionate, providing him with space to cry if he can, and focusing on keeping everyone safe.

Later, I would help him work through these feelings by initiating physical games with the theme of winning and losing - like challenging him to just try to tackle me down, and swaggering around boasting that I'm twice his size and there is absolutely no way he would ever be able to do it...and then letting him get me down every time, fighting and kicking and saying "no fair" and pretending to fight hard to get away, *"I don't know how you got me down, but you'll never be able to keep me down! Argh! I can't get up!! Help!!"*