**Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids** Online Course

Week 4: **Emotional Intelligence and Emotion Coaching**

Transcript

Hello, and welcome to Week 4 of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids online course. This week, we're talking about emotions and emotional intelligence.

Why is emotion so important? Let's start with you and your emotions. I'm sure you're a phenomenal parent -- until you get triggered! So often, it's our own emotions that prevent us from being the parent we want to be, and nothing triggers us like our child's emotions.

Peaceful parenting has three important components. The first is regulating our own emotions, the second is reconnecting with our child or staying connected with our child, and the third is coaching our child instead of trying to control them.

One of the most important kinds of coaching we do is emotion coaching, because children are designed to follow our lead. If we're regulated and we're connected with them and they feel connected, they will usually follow our lead *until* they get emotionally triggered. So in order to be a peaceful parent, we need to become comfortable with the world of emotions.

Emotion coaching is what helps children to develop high EQ, or emotional intelligence. What is EQ? You could think of it as being smart about emotions. There are really three components: understanding your own emotions, regulating your emotions – including your anxiety, which helps you to regulate your behavior – and understanding the emotions of other people.

Why is this important? Let's back up a minute and think about IQ, intelligence quotient. Why is IQ important? Do you want your child to have a high IQ? I know I do. I think most parents do. Maybe not to the exclusion of other things, but we want our kids to be smart. All this focus on smartness and on IQ, why is that? Well, because we think it will help our child to be successful.

To some degree, being smart does help kids to be successful. But experts now think that your child's emotional intelligence is actually more important to his or her success in life than their IQ is.

Think about the world of work. People get fired because they can't manage their own emotions. Maybe they're procrastinating, which means they're not managing their own anxiety, maybe they're fighting with their coworkers, or maybe they just don't pick up on cues and they offend the boss. While their IQ might get them hired, it's their EQ that keeps them in the job successfully.

Of course, this is also true at school. If you have a child who can manage his own impulses enough to sit and focus in the classroom, he's going to be more successful in school. If you have a child who can form a relationship with the teacher, that child is going to be more successful in the classroom. If you have a child who can form relationships with the other kids and hold it together even when things get rocky, she's going to be successful at school, and in her peer group, and in any other activity she does outside of school.

As kids get older, it's emotional intelligence that helps them to develop a romantic partnership that is healthy and successful and leads to a life of happiness with their partner.

John Gottman is a researcher in Seattle. He runs the Love Lab, and he's made some amazing discoveries, he and his team, over the years. One thing Gottman and his team do is ask couples to fight about conflicts that come up regularly between them. When the couples would fight, things would get heated and then they would be asked to calm down and to move on to another topic.

Some of the couples could calm down and could change the emotional resonance between them so that they could then peacefully discuss something else or even be affectionate with each other. But some of the couples couldn't, and what the Gottman team found is that the couples who were unable to calm themselves when they got upset were the couples that ended up getting divorced.

That ability to handle our emotions, to soothe ourselves when we get upset, to shift ourselves back into a state of emotional regulation, is critical to having a healthy, long-term partnership, or really, almost any other relationship. That's why we're talking today about how you can help your child to develop that emotional regulation or that emotional intelligence.

Now we know what emotional intelligence is, but what are emotions? Emotions are signals from our body – they're feelings that we feel in the body – and they're information to urge us to either take action or to learn a lesson, information that we can consider and act on. Emotions are instant reactions to our experience.

Sometimes they're positive. Daddy picks up the little child. The child goes, "Up!" and daddy says, "Up!" Research shows the child learns the word "up" partly because of the excitement of having daddy hoist the child into the air.

We learn faster when we feel strong emotions whether they're positive or negative. Often, our emotions that we notice are negative emotions because we're predisposed to notice the negative emotions more quickly. It's called a negativity bias, and it's what keeps us safe.

The human organism is designed to try to survive, so when something negative happens, we notice it more quickly and more acutely, and we remember it for longer than if it was a positive

interaction with the environment. That's why happiness researchers tell us that if we want to be happy, we need to cultivate happiness and happy emotions.

We need to notice those happy emotions when we feel them. We need to dwell on them a little more, and magnify them, and revisit them and we will spend more time being happy than unhappy. That's a way to compensate for the brain's negativity bias that is designed to keep us safe.

Emotions are our reactions to our environment, and that means they're shaped by our perceptions. If my perception is that my child is being a brat, I'm going to have a pretty negative emotion toward her. If my perception is that my child is having a hard time at the moment, I'm going to have a more sympathetic response to her.

Our emotions are always shaped by our perceptions, and often, those perceptions are things that happen below the level of thought, so that we don't even notice we have the perception.

You're walking along a path and all of a sudden, you think you see a snake on the path. A bolt of fear goes through you. Then you realize it's just a stick, and you calm yourself down. But notice that before you even had the word "snake" in your mind, you were already reacting, drawing back, freezing, trying to protect yourself in some way from the perceived threat. Our perceptions are so instantaneous to keep us safe that often no conscious thought is involved; it's simply an instantaneous reaction to how we're perceiving the situation.

Our perceptions, of course, are shaped by our view of the world, our view of our children, our view of whether there is likely to be a snake on the path, and our thoughts. If our thoughts are a constant chatter of what a brat our child is, we're going to, of course, perceive her latest behavior as bratty. If our thoughts are, instead, an awareness that our child is doing the best she can and she's having a hard time sometimes, then we're going to be much more charitable in our reactions, and our emotions will be different toward how she behaves.

Now let's talk about how emotions work. Because emotions are information, they are designed to send us a message. When we acknowledge the emotion, when we feel the emotion, the emotion leaves. It's like any other message that's been received.

We notice our reaction to our child's behavior – she's being defiant – and naturally, our response might be that there's a threat here. Our three-year-old is not doing what we want, things could really blow up, she's being defiant, and that's "danger." We know that because when we were young children, if we were defiant, it *was* an emergency. We might have gotten hit. We might have gotten yelled at. It certainly wouldn't have been a pretty situation. Naturally, when this happens with our three-year-old and we feel that danger signal, we get tense.

Now, here's the trick. It's a message to us that there's danger, but is there actually danger in the moment? Is it really dangerous that our three-year-old is being defiant? No, it's not. Our reaction is based on the past. It's based on the fact that when we were little, if we were defiant, that could have led to some serious tears and pain.

Maybe it's based on the fact that when we get into these altercations with our child, these confrontations, and she gets defiant, we get upset, we lose our temper and we say and do things that we're later ashamed about and regret. That feels like an emergency, too, because we see ourselves headed down that path again and that feels dangerous.

Or maybe, even if we can usually stay calm, we're just tired, and we're fed up, and we have to get dinner on the table, so our child's defiance at this moment does feel like an emergency to us, but again not because it actually is an emergency.

Our body, when it goes into a state of emergency, has a pretty limited repertoire of what we do. When we're under threat, the body says, "Okay, mobilize the body to fight," or if it's a bigger threat to us that we want to run away from, like a tiger, "Mobilize the body to flee." That's flight, so fight or flight. Maybe if the tiger is too close and we can't even get away, maybe we just go limp. We freeze. We play dead.

The problem isn't our emotions; the problem is that we have a fairly limited repertoire of ways to respond to an upsetting emotion. We think if our three-year-old is defiant, we can go into flight, fight, or freeze. Now, freeze doesn't usually work, and flight, well, we usually can't walk out the front door, so we end up in fight mode. We start yelling at our three-year-old.

It isn't the emotion that's the problem; it's our way of responding to the emotion. If, instead, we notice the message but we calm ourselves down, soothe ourselves, and we simply acknowledge the emotion but we don't fly off the handle, we don't get reactive and just act on either fight, flight, or freeze, once we do that, the emotion will dissipate because it's been heard.

Notice I'm not saying that you should stuff your emotions. If you don't even acknowledge the emotion, then the emotion has never been heard. It wants to be heard. What happens when you stuff your emotions? You're putting them in your emotional backpack.

Imagine you're carrying around a heavy pack on your back. Into that pack, you've put every emotion that it wasn't safe to notice. You put your fear when your father raised his voice. You put your anxiety and your fear when you realized that everybody dies someday and that your parents, indeed, would die. You put your anxiety when you were in the classroom about whether you could even make it to the bathroom in your new school when you couldn't remember where the

bathroom was. Anything that doesn't feel safe to us at that moment gets stuffed into the emotional backpack.

Some of us learned in childhood that anger was not safe, that anger was not okay, that good girls don't get angry or even that good boys don't get angry and it was dangerous. You might have stuffed away your awareness of things that made you angry. When somebody took advantage of you, maybe you just stuffed that feeling away, your sense of powerlessness. We all have stuff in our emotional backpack that was too hard for us to handle at the time.

One of the wonderful things about meditation is that as you meditate, those feelings actually come up to the surface to be listened to, to be healed, and we find ourselves unaccountably crying, for instance, even if we don't know what it's about. That's healing. The feeling arises. It passes away. You're emptying out the backpack.

When we feel the emotion, it dissipates. The same thing happens when our three-year-old gets defiant. If we notice that we just want to smack her – we notice it but we don't do the smacking – what happens is that we receive the message but we have a choice about whether to act on it.

We're not stuffing it in our emotional backpack; instead, we're acknowledging the emotion and we're taking a deep breath, we're pausing, we're noticing that we have a choice. We aren't getting hijacked by our emotion and smacking our kid or yelling. We're, instead, just noticing it. I think of it as saying thank you.

"Thank you. Is this really an emergency? No." A little mantra like this is so helpful when we get upset, because we get upset if we live with children every single day, probably many, many times a day. "It's not an emergency," we can tell ourselves. But we notice the feeling, we breathe through it, and then we don't finish our day with a backpack more full than when we began.

Let's talk more about the backpack, because our children do have emotional backpacks where they've been stuffing emotions that are too hard for them to cope with. Of course, we do, as well. The problem when we stuff emotion is that it keeps bubbling up to get healed because, truthfully, there is no backpack; there is only the body. What we used to think of as the unconscious is the body. Any body worker can tell you that. That's where we store our emotions.

The body wants to heal itself. In the same way that if there's an infection, the body will surface it, it will push the infection from a wound to the surface and burst open that wound that started to heal and the pus will seep out. It's trying to get rid of the infection. It's trying to heal the infection. The body will do the same thing with emotions. It will surface them. They'll bubble up to get healed.

Here's another thing that we have to remember about the emotional backpack. We aren't conscious of the feelings that are in the backpack. Let's say your eight-year-old son lost his soccer game and he's livid about it. He's storming around the house, ranting and raving about the other kids, the coach, how this went wrong and that went wrong, and if only, and he's furious.

You say to him, "Look, you have no right to be angry about this. If only you had practiced more and not missed that shot, then maybe you would have won," or "Be a good sport. You just have to be a good sport." You're trying to talk your child out of his feelings.

When you say that, your son hears it and he thinks, "Right, I have to be a good sport. I'm going to try and be a good sport." What does he do? He pushes the feelings down. Can he get rid of the feelings? No. They're already in his body. How does he make the feelings go away? By noticing them, by being aware of them, by accepting them.

If, instead, he says to himself, "Don't have those feelings," can he actually get rid of them? No. He can, however, get rid of his awareness of them. He can push them out of conscious control. He can put them in the emotional backpack. The emotional backpack is full of all of the emotions that we didn't acknowledge, that we cut off from our awareness, and they're in the backpack, cut off from awareness.

If we want to help our eight-year-old with his anger, what we want to do is listen to the feelings under the anger because really what's under there is disappointment that they didn't win the game. It's a sense of powerlessness that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get the coach to listen to him when he said, "But Coach, we need to do this play," or "I want to go back in. I can make a difference here," or maybe his own embarrassment and disappointment in himself that he did try to kick that goal and it went wide. He couldn't do it and he's embarrassed, and upset, and angry at himself.

All of those feelings are very vulnerable. He doesn't really want to feel those feelings. They hurt. What does he do instead? He lashes out. He gets angry at the coach and the other kids – it's their fault – rather than acknowledge his own really upsetting feelings of loss, grief, disappointment in himself.

If we want to help our son, what we need to do is make it safe for him to tell us those feelings. If we just listen, he will get under the ranting and raving to the more vulnerable feelings underneath it, and as he does that, that's the message, right? The message is, "I'm really disappointed in myself, but maybe there's something I could do about this."

Then once he's had a chance to feel those feelings, he is motivated to make something different in the future. Then, and only then, not until then, you can even begin to coach him. You can even

ask him questions like, “I wonder if there’s anything that you could do differently next time.” That empowers him.

Notice he finishes that interaction empowered to make a difference in the future. If you just tell him to be a good sport, how does he finish the interaction? With a backpack full of junk that’s going to come out the next time he plays soccer, when it gets stimulated. It’s going to make him even more anxious and his next kick is going to have an even harder time going into the goal.

It doesn’t help to try and talk our children out of their emotions; what helps is to acknowledge the emotion and help them go under the anger to the more vulnerable feelings underneath.

Of course, when we help the child to become more aware of their emotions, then they’re not stuffing them in the backpack, out of conscious awareness. Remember, feelings in the backpack can’t be controlled because they’re not conscious anymore. If the child can’t control their emotion, they’re prone to outbursts of emotion and they’re prone to not being able to control their behavior. This is the missing link in why children act out.

When they have stuffed their feelings down, those feelings are always bubbling up to get healed. Instead, if we accept the child’s emotions, then the child can accept their own emotions and can become wiser about them, can acknowledge them, so the feeling begins to dissipate, and the child can notice what action they could take in response to this emotional message.

If your child says, “I know what I’ll do next time. I’m going to scream right in the coach’s face,” or “I’m not even going to ever pass the ball. I’m just going to dribble it down the field all by myself,” you can just take a deep breath yourself – it’s not an emergency – and you can say to your child, “I can see why you would want to do that. What do you think would happen then?” As your child notices what would happen then, they begin to realize that maybe that course of action isn’t exactly the way they want to respond to this emotional message. Maybe there is something else they can do.

That’s what emotion coaching is all about. We start by accepting our child’s emotions. Then we help our child to feel and acknowledge their emotions, and to go deeper into the emotions so that they don’t just get stuck on the anger, and they learn emotions are not dangerous. “I can tolerate my emotions as they occur,” rather than having to push them out of awareness into the backpack where they build up and they explode.

This understanding of emotion teaches us some things about anger that most people don’t know. Anger is a signal to us that we’re threatened. Sometimes it’s a threat in the moment – there’s a tiger or there’s a burglar – and we respond immediately, before we even think, by running in the other direction. Or if we have to grab our child before he runs in the street, we’re grabbing our

child before we can even think. We respond immediately with a sense of fight, to fight the situation and keep ourselves and our children safe.

Sometimes, though, anger is not a threat in the moment. It feels like a threat but it's our old experiences shaping our reaction to the current situation. Imagine road rage. Here's a driver. He's just been cut off at the intersection. He's furious. He's out of his car. He's screaming at the other driver. Now, he thinks that his rage is appropriate to the situation. The other driver cut him off, after all. The other driver caused the situation and caused him to get angry.

But you and I know that that's not really what's going on; what's going on is that he's overreacting to the situation. Because I'm hoping that you and I, if we were cut off in traffic, would not be out of our cars screaming at the other driver. In fact, this guy who's screaming with road rage, felt disrespected, probably, when the other driver cut him off and that disrespect was an overreaction because he's felt disrespect in the past, disrespect that was so upsetting to him and so threatening, he put it in his emotional backpack.

Now when something happens that he feels disrespected, that disrespect feeling gets triggered. That feeling that it's an emergency that someone's disrespecting him gets triggered and he's out of his vehicle screaming at the other driver. He thinks there's a threat, but there isn't. It's his old experiences that are shaping his perception of the current situation.

He's been hijacked by the past. Like when our three-year-old is defiant to us or our eight-year-old is angry about the soccer game and we respond by shutting him down, it's usually because we're triggered, because something in our old experience says, "This is dangerous." It feels like a threat.

Sometimes we're not aware of what the trigger is and the feelings are just bubbling up to get healed. Let me give you an example. Let's take a very powerful emotion that no one is exempt from in human life, grief. Let's say I'm at the hospital. Heaven forbid, someone I love has just passed away. I'm trying very hard to hold it together, and then someone I love and trust walks into the room and takes me in their arms, and what happens? I burst into tears, and I sob and I sob. That's the beginning of healing.

If I'm lucky and if I'm brave, I will keep sobbing that day, and the next day, and every day for a good long while. Over time, my grief will begin to lift. Often, people say time heals all wounds but that's not true. We know it's not true because there are cases of what we call complicated grief or unresolved grief where people don't actually heal from their grief despite the passage of time.

So it's something besides time that's happening. What's happening is that we're feeing the grief. We're receiving the message. We're thinking about the person. We're getting some emotional closure, which simply means that we're coming to accept the fact of our loss. As we feel the loss, it diminishes over time.

Grief never vanishes completely. Maybe in the beginning, it will fill up every aspect of my life and color everything I feel. If you think of my life as a pie chart, it's the whole pie. Even if I go to work, even if I relate to someone else, everything is colored by my grief. But over time, the grief begins to shrink somewhat so that instead of being the whole pie chart of my life, it's one piece of the pie, maybe even a slender piece.

I can always stumble into that place and feel tremendous grief, but I'm able to carry on, function, and have a rewarding life. I wake up some morning, the sun is shining and it is worth it to me to go on and to live even in the face of this tremendous loss of this person who I'm leaving behind. That's healthy grieving.

But what happens if I just can't face the grief? Maybe I had a tremendous loss as a child and if I face this grief, it opens the door to that grief, and it's just too much because when I was a child, I couldn't face that grief, it would have killed me, and I'm terrified to open that door now because I just have a sense of panic.

If I allow myself to feel this grief, I will cease to exist. I will become so overwhelmed, I will never climb out of this abyss. So I push the grief off. I don't even acknowledge to myself how much I feel. I push it into my emotional backpack out of my conscious awareness. But then what happens? Well, it's in my body. It's making me tired. It might make me sick, and it wants to heal itself. The body wants to heal, so the grief bubbles up to get healed.

Imagine I'm at my desk at work typing away at my computer, and all of a sudden, the feelings start to come up and I'm swamped with grief. Maybe I cry or maybe it's just too threatening – that's why I stuffed these feelings to begin with, remember? – and I stuff them down again. I respond to those feelings as if I'm being threatened. It isn't a tiger exactly, but it's still something dangerous. I respond the way we all respond when we're under threat – fight, flight, freeze.

Maybe freeze is my way of responding. I get up from my desk and I go get a candy bar out of the vending machine. We all use sugar to make ourselves feel better, to control our moods, so it's a really good way to freeze the feelings, but maybe it's not enough. Maybe when I go home, I have a glass of wine. Maybe that's not enough. Maybe I have ten glasses of wine. People often self-medicate with drugs and alcohol.

Maybe I do so much of it that I end up in rehab. What happens when I get to rehab? Of course, they take the wine away, and the first thing that happens is all of those emotions, all of that grief, bubbles up to get healed.

We know the way it works when we stuff our emotions is they're bubbling up to get healed, and one thing we do to handle our emotions on a daily basis is we self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. That freezes the emotion. We also might shop a lot. Shopaholics, it's a little addiction. We all have little addictions. Of course, screens are our big addiction in our modern culture. I think that screens are so addictive because they combine the freeze effect of numbing us out with the flight effect of distraction and escape.

What would it look like if my tendency when I got upset was not to freeze myself but to distract myself? That would be flight. We have fight, flight, or freeze. With flight, maybe I turn on a screen of some sort, which allows me to do both flight and freeze, to distract myself and to numb myself all at once.

Then, of course, there's another reaction, fight. For me, with my grief, what could fight look like? Well, I'd get angry. It's a normal part of grieving, to get angry. But some of us get stuck in the grief and we can't move through it to accept the loss and come to terms with it.

When we're stuck in the grief, what do we do? Maybe we sue the doctor. It's so interesting what happens in these circumstances. When we sue the doctor, we don't grieve while the lawsuit is pending. It doesn't matter who's right, and it doesn't even matter who wins the lawsuit in the end. Once it's settled, then we fall apart.

Whether we won or lost, we fall apart at that point and we finally grieve. But while the lawsuit is going on, we don't grieve. Our anger keeps us mobilized in a state of rage and it fends off our grief. We're just angry at that doctor who ruined our lives. But once the lawsuit is settled, then we fall apart and the grief swamps us because we no longer have the defense of that anger. It's over.

This is what Gordon Neufeld calls the tears of futility: when we switch from the fight response of the sympathetic nervous system into the parasympathetic nervous system, which is a more normal way for us to be, when we make that switch, there's a signal sent to the lacrimal glands of the eye, which is where the tears come from. Then we finally begin to cry and to grieve.

The reason I go into detail about this example is for you to see how your child responds to a full backpack. Some kids will come home from a day at preschool or a day at any school where they had a hard time and they'll sock their brother or they'll just be really difficult, and demanding, and whiny. Those are signs of a full backpack.

Your child has been stuffing those feelings all day and they need help with the feelings. Right now, they feel like it's their brother's fault – just like the guy with the road rage – or they feel like it's your fault, or they don't know who's fault it is, but they are miserable and they react by feeling like they're under threat. They go into fight, flight, or freeze.

What does freeze look like with your child? They might demand treats to numb themselves out or they might demand screen time, which is also flight and gives them a way to distract themselves from the emotions. Kids will often come home and demand either treats or screen time.

That's one reason that treats – sugar – and screen time are so addictive to children who have a harder time managing their emotions. It helps them to manage their emotions, but it doesn't really, because all it does is distract them from the emotions or numb them out. Really, what would be much better is if they could feel the emotions and then they would learn to manage them.

Of course, you're familiar with fight. The reason he hit his brother is he is in fight mode. The reason he's giving you a hard time, being demanding, and nothing you do is right? He is in fight mode. The child doesn't sue the doctor, but many things that children do are just like suing the doctor.

You're in charge of whether he can use his screen. You're in charge of whether he gets a treat. But even if he can't control those ways to handle his emotions and stuff them down, he can control fight. He can always move into fight mode and pick a fight with you, or with his siblings, or with someone.

This brings us back to our secrets about anger. Anger is the body's fight response to feeling under threat. Maybe the threat is happening in the moment because her sister got too close to her game, and she lashes out at her sister. Maybe it's because someone was mean to her at school today, or she felt like they were mean to her at school today, and so she responds to her sister even though her sister didn't do anything.

Those times when kids are mean to their sibling and the sibling did nothing, it's either because someone else was mean to them or because they're holding a grudge from something where they think their sibling wronged them in the past or you showed the sibling too much attention in the past. They're responding to a threat that they perceive in the current moment even though it's based on an old experience or an experience that happened earlier today at school.

Anger is the body's fight response to feeling under threat, but what is the actual threat here? The threat is a more vulnerable emotion than the anger. The threat is the grief, maybe, or the hurt

when someone was mean to her at school or the fear when the baby has been on your lap a lot lately and your child looks at the baby and feels threatened and afraid you don't love her as much as you used to. Or maybe powerlessness, like "No matter what, nobody understands what I'm going through."

Those really awful emotions, the bottomless grief, that sense of powerlessness, which is really threatening to us because it threatens our very survival, are deep fear. When your child is afraid you love her sibling more, she's worried about her own survival. Maybe you actually don't love her anymore and without your love, she will not survive. She knows that on some level.

All of those very threatening feelings are very hard for a child to acknowledge consciously. They can't put them into words, so they end up in the backpack. What happens? They bubble up as threats and the child lashes out in anger.

One secret about anger: it's always about something else. It's about a sense of powerlessness, or fear, or grief, or some other feeling that your child can't articulate and can't handle, so instead, they lash out.

You may think that it's a healthy thing to express anger because that helps work out the anger. Of course, we want to get the kid's feelings out of the backpack. To some degree, this is true, but it's a little tricky, so let's explore this.

There was a time during the encounter groups of the 1960s when we thought that if we just gave somebody a baseball bat and let them beat up a chair, they would feel better because they would get a chance to get out all their anger at a certain person who they imagined in the chair. They would have a chance to get all that anger out, and then they wouldn't be carrying that anger around.

But we now can hook that same person up to monitors to monitor what goes on in their brain, and in their body, and in their arousal system. We know that as they use that baseball bat, they actually get more angry. After they're done, they might be tired, but they're not actually less angry.

When we act violently or express anger, even verbally by swearing or yelling, we actually make ourselves more angry because the body assumes that if we're acting in this way, there is something to be angry about. There must be a threat, and the body mobilizes with more fight response to that threat.

It's not so different from the research showing that if you smile, you feel happier. The body assumes that since you're smiling, there's a reason to smile, and it makes you happier. It's a way to feel happier.

If acting out your anger doesn't make you less angry, what will? We can find a clue in the fact that anger is the body's fight response to threat. If your daughter is angry at her little brother, maybe she's perceiving him as a threat. It doesn't mean she should beat him up with a baseball bat, and it doesn't even mean he's done anything wrong. But to help her get past her anger, she needs to get to the feelings underneath, her fear that you love him more, her fear that he's competing with her for scarce resources. If she can tell you about those feelings, she'll find she's not as angry.

When my daughter was born, my son – who was then four – would say things like, "I hate her. I don't know why. I just do." Instead of focusing on that word "hate" or even on his anger, I would try to speak to the feelings that were causing him to feel hatred -- because hate is not a feeling; hatred is a position we take. "I'm so angry at you. I will never work things out with you. I hate you." That's a position we take, a stance. It's not actually an emotion.

What was the real emotion my son was feeling? He was feeling afraid and he was feeling grief for the wonderful life he'd had where he had 100% of my time and attention and his father's, up until that time. I responded by saying, "It's so different now having the baby around. It must be so hard for you to have to share me all the time. It must be so hard to wait when you want my help with something and I have to change the baby's diaper or feed her. Sweetheart, any time you feel this way, you can come and tell me. I will always understand and I will try to help you feel better."

Then I would take his tense little body and his angry little face in my arms, and hold him, and reassure him that no matter what, I would love him. His little body would melt and sink into my arms. Then he would give me a hug and he would go play with his trains. Then maybe 20 minutes later, I would look up and I would see that he had gone over to his little sister and he was petting her gently or talking to her kindly.

I didn't have to help him express the anger or get over the anger. All I had to do was help him go under the anger to the feelings that were upsetting him. Once I acknowledged those, then he didn't need the anger anymore, because the anger was his defense against those feelings.

Once I acknowledged those more vulnerable feelings, he felt them, and they disappeared. He didn't have all those feelings bubbling up that he had to defend against by going into fight mode. Acting out the anger might have convinced him that he had something to really be angry about, if I had said, "Tell me why you're angry."

Now, it's okay to have kids tell you about their anger. We all need a witness when we feel like we've been wronged. We all need to tell someone else how we feel like we've been wronged. It's okay for kids to draw angry pictures of how they wish the baby got flushed down the toilet. But

we can help kids through those feelings faster by focusing on what's under the anger. That's what matters most. To heal anger, go under it to the more vulnerable emotions that are driving it. That's the big secret about anger.

Now, let's talk about full backpacks. How will you know if your child has emotions stuffed in their backpack? They'll be rigid because they're trying so hard to keep those feelings down, that they're trying to control themselves and they end up trying to control their environment and trying to control you.

They often become very demanding, and defiant, and rude. They go into fight, flight, or freeze, so they're begging for treats or screen time or they're starting fights, lashing out. Sometimes they just get overwhelmed. They're almost ready to cry, so they get weepy or whiny.

Whining drives parents crazy but, in fact, you'd rather have your child be whining than be lashing out in anger. When your child gets whiny, if you can retrain yourself to see it as a symptom of a full backpack, you'll be able to respond to help your child empty that backpack. Your child will stop the whining and will feel so much better.

When you see your child exhibiting one of these symptoms – whether it's rigidness, or lashing out, or being whiny – you know it's a full backpack. Of course, it would be fantastic if your kid could say something like, "Boy, school was terrible today. Those mean girls made fun of my lunch, and they made fun of my dress, and they wouldn't let me play with them outside. They ran away from me and said that there was something wrong with me.

"Then when the teacher called on me, I didn't know what to say. Then I was trying to ask a friend something, and the teacher said that I was talking and I couldn't go to recess in the afternoon. I am so fed up with everything. I feel terrible."

Wouldn't it be great if your kid could say that? No. What does your kid do? Comes home and is whiny, or uncooperative, or defiant, or screen addicted. When your child is difficult, when they're driving you crazy, most of the time it's a sign of a full backpack.

What can you do to help your child? Laughing can work wonders. Laugh when you can. Laughing helps reduce the top layer of stuff in the backpack. You can also think of it biologically. It transforms the body chemistry. It reduces the stress hormones circulating in the body, which are signaling your child to be vigilant or controlling, and signaling your child to react and lash out, and signaling your child to self-protect.

Anxiety always makes a child more likely to be reactive and less cooperative. Laughter reduces the child's anxiety. It actually transforms the body chemistry by reducing the stress hormones. It also increases oxytocin and other feel-good hormones, so your child actually feels better and

feels more connected to you. Any time you laugh with another human being, you're connecting with them.

Use laughter anytime you suspect your child has a full backpack – when you can. Sometimes, of course, you can't. Your child is already too far gone. A whining child might be able to pull it together when you get playful with them.

Dr. Larry Cohen, the author of *Playful Parenting*, suggests that when a child is whining, you play a little game with them where you say, "Wow, where's your strong voice? It was here a minute ago. It's gone. Is your strong voice under here? Is your strong voice over there?"

Your child might start laughing and saying, "No, here's my strong voice," and they're no longer whining. They've been able to pull it together because you've helped them to laugh, which has diminished their feeling of overwhelm and anxiety. The top layer of stuff in the backpack that was bothering them has now been emptied.

But it doesn't always work. Sometimes the novelty of it works the first time and sometimes it'll work if your child is not too far gone. But a child who is really overwhelmed by all those feelings coming up from the backpack just needs to let them out. Usually what that means is they need to cry, not laugh. Laugh when you can; cry when you have to.

When your child gets really difficult and obnoxious and they're driving you crazy, remind yourself that they almost certainly just need to cry. What's stopping them from crying? They don't feel safe with those feelings. After all, that's why they stuffed them in the backpack to begin with.

Maybe those feelings are from during the day, when they were apart from you at school, or maybe the feelings are from this morning when they wouldn't get themselves ready to leave the house, so you were frantic and yelled at them. Either way, there's a reason they stuffed the feelings. They didn't want to feel them at the time. They didn't feel safe at the time.

Now, do you think they actually want to feel those feelings? No. They stuffed them because they didn't want to feel them, so your child will resist feeling these feelings.

As they get used to this, some kids will come to you and say, "I just need to cry." I remember one little girl. She was four. She would come home from preschool every single day and hit her mom and act out. Her mom started saying to her, "Honey, I think you just need to cry," and holding her. Within a few weeks, the child would come home every day, hurl herself into her mother's arms and say, "I just need to cry." Then she would sob.

Her mom said to me, “How long is this going to go on?” because it was going on day after day. I said, “I don’t know. Let’s see. I think she’s just emptying her backpack.” Sure enough, then it was down to every other day, and then it was every third or fourth day, once a week, once every couple of weeks. But this was a highly sensitive child, so I’m imaging she continued to do this every few weeks because, in fact, she really did just need to cry.

Wouldn’t it be great if all of our children could do that once we gave them that emotional permission? But many kids won’t. Instead, they will drive you completely bananas by acting out, looking right at you and dumping their food on the floor, jumping on the couch with their shoes on, all the things they know are against the rules.

The reason they’re doing this is they’re suing the doctor. They’d rather fight with you than feel the feelings. If they can have a fight with you, you’ll fight back and they can stay mobilized just as I would be mobilized while I was suing the doctor and wouldn’t have to feel my grief.

When your child starts to act really obnoxious and difficult or if they’re whining, just remind yourself, “Wow, he probably just needs to cry.” Instead of getting provoked and fighting back, just remind yourself that you don’t have to attend every fight you’re invited to. Instead, take a deep breath, remind yourself your child needs your understanding, he’s having a hard time, and shift yourself consciously into a state of empathy.

What is empathy? It comes from the insula in our nervous system. It’s basically feeling what someone else is feeling. When you empathize with your child, you try to see it from their point of view and you say, “Wow, you seem to be having such a hard time.” Your child says, “Of course I’m having a hard time!” Often, they respond to your initial empathy with an outburst of anger because the truth is they don’t want to feel your empathy.

Remember what happened when I was feeling grief in the hospital and someone I trusted empathized with me? I burst into tears. Your child responds to your empathy by wanting to cry because finally it’s safe, and they can feel those feelings and let them out.

But your child doesn’t really want to feel those feelings, so what do they do? They lash out. You say, “Oh my goodness, you seem so upset,” and they say, “Of course, I’m upset!” Once again, you have to take another deep breath, remind yourself they’re having a hard time, don’t get provoked and say, “Oh my goodness, I see. I didn’t understand.”

You might think you have to analyze what’s going on. “Oh, you’re disappointed because blah, blah, blah.” When you do that, you’re going into your head and away from your heart, and you’re analyzing your child, so they actually feel less safe, not more safe.

Imagine you came home from a meeting at work and you were very upset, and your partner said to you, "You are very sad and mad about this." You'd want to slap them. With your child, if you just go into your head and you say, "You seem very sad and mad," of course, your child feels analyzed. They don't feel safe. They don't feel understood. They feel like you're manipulating them.

Instead, stay out of your head. Just see it from their point of view with your heart and your gut. When your child says, "Of course I'm upset! You promised me this! Now we don't get to go to the park!" you can say, "Oh sweetie, I'm so sorry. I know you were counting on going to the park. I didn't understand how disappointed you would be."

Now, you might have a really good reason for not going to the park. It doesn't matter. You don't have to review it now. You already told your child the reason. All you have to do now is see it from his point of view. He's allowed to be disappointed.

If you say, "Oh, you're so disappointed," and he responds with anger, "No, I'm not disappointed! I'm mad at you!" then that's okay, too. It just means the disappointment feels so awful to him that he doesn't even want to go there yet. He's not quite ready, so he's stuck in his anger. He wants to stay there and fight with you.

Again, you take another deep breath and you say, "Oh sweetie, I'm so sorry. I wish we could do this. I see how much you wanted to." You can just acknowledge what he wanted and that he's not getting it and that that feels terrible. If you really feel that in your gut, in your heart, he'll feel your empathy and he'll begin to soften.

Often, you'll get tears in your own eyes as you begin to see it from your child's perspective because you're picking up their intensity of feeling. As you do that, your child's response will be to tear up himself. He'll stop fighting, and that message will go to the lacrimal glands to cry and you'll see him start to crumple.

You've done it, not by talking him out of his feelings, not by making him feel something, but simply by feeling it from his perspective and acknowledging it, which made it safe for him to feel those feelings. Now he's feeling that disappointment that felt so awful to him and maybe he's crying or maybe he's just collapsing in your arms.

That's the way that he moves through his anger and his deep feelings of disappointment or whatever to come out the other side, because once he feels those feelings, they dissipate. He got the message. He doesn't have to feel them anymore, and he no longer needs the anger. The anger was just a defense so he wouldn't have to feel the deeper feelings.

If you want to help your child past anger, the way to do it is to always to make it safe enough for him to go under the anger to the feelings that are driving the anger. Once he no longer has those feelings of, let's say in this case, disappointment, then he doesn't need the anger to defend himself anymore.

As you're helping your child with emotions, just keep reminding yourself, "Don't get provoked. He's having a hard time. Create safety." You don't have to make him feel anything; just create safety. The way you create safety is by accepting his emotions and by loving him through it.

As the feeling moves through your child's body, she might tremble, she might cry as we've discussed, she might yawn, which is a way that the body has of releasing emotion. All of these responses are the body's letting go of the tension that it's been storing in these emotions.

Sometimes kids like to struggle against you. That struggle usually implies that there was fear in there. What happens when we feel fear is that we want to run. Your child might actually run away from you and crawl under a bed or go into another room. Don't crawl under the bed with your child, but just stay close. Stay near enough to say, "I'm right here when you're ready. I see you're upset, but I'm right here when you're ready."

If your child does try to hit you, you can say, "I won't let you hit me, sweetie." You can push against my hands if you want." That allows your child to struggle, which gets their fear out and makes them feel stronger. But, of course, don't let them hit you.

As you accept feelings this way, what are you teaching your child? Everybody has emotions. Everybody cries sometimes. Emotions are safe.

In contrast to this, think about if you shushed your child when they were crying. If you said, "Now, now, don't cry. We'll make it better. It's going to be okay." What are you teaching your child then? Emotions are dangerous. It's not okay to cry.

The problem with that is it keeps your child from developing resilience. First of all, it makes them anxious. They have to stuff all those feelings back in the backpack. The feelings are always bubbling up to get healed, and that causes anxiety because the child is constantly under threat from those emotions. It also sabotages the development of resilience.

Let's consider a child who's having a birthday. She wants to have her party at the cool place where all the kids have been having their parties, but that's expensive; it's not in your budget this year. There's no way you want to spend that kind of money for this birthday party, so you say to your daughter, "Sweetheart, I'm sorry. We're not going to have your birthday there. That's not in our budget. You can have your birthday at the park or you can have your birthday at the pool. We can do a soccer party at the park or we can have a party at the pool."

Your seven-year-old says, “No, I have to have my party where everybody else has their party!” and she cries and she cries. Now, you could tell her she’s being greedy. You could tell her she’s being inconsiderate. You could tell her she’s being a brat because she’s just focusing on herself and not on how you’re going to make your car payment.

But, instead, you just empathize, “I know. You wish you could have it there. I’m sorry, sweetie. Not this year. Maybe in the future. But you know, we could have a great soccer party at the park. We could even make a cake shaped like a soccer ball.” “No, I don’t want that! That’s not what I want!”

So you let her cry. I’m not saying you walk away and let her cry – although there may be a time after you’ve listened and listened where you do that – but you start by staying with her, letting her cry, and empathizing with her. She tells you all the reasons she’s unhappy about this, and eventually when she goes to bed that night, she maybe is still very sad. But the next morning, she wakes up. The sun is shining. She says over breakfast, “I guess I could have a soccer party at the park. Mom, Dad, will you help me make a soccer cake that’s shaped like a soccer ball?”

What’s happened here? She was allowed to have her feelings. She learned something. Feelings are not dangerous, but crying doesn’t mean you always get what you want. In fact, you don’t; but you do get something that maybe is even better.

You get parents who understand, no matter what, who don’t make you feel like a bad person for having these feelings and you learn that even though times can be hard, when you don’t get what you want and you’re disappointed by what life throws at you, you can make the most of it. In fact, you can create a pretty good life for yourself even if you don’t always get what you want.

Part of the reason is that your parents are there for you, and they understand and they help you make it through with their understanding. Your child is developing resilience, so she can cope with disappointment in the future.

Notice that as we empathize with our child’s feelings, we’re not responding by giving them everything that they want. Maybe we will. Maybe we’ll change what we’ve said and say, “You know, I didn’t realize this was so important to you. We’re going to talk about this after dinner and maybe we’ll rethink this.” Maybe sometimes that happens, but in general, you’re not changing your rules or what you’ve told your child is going to happen.

What you are doing by understanding is you’re helping your child cope with it. You’re helping your child grieve because she didn’t get what she wanted, and you’re helping your child learn that it’s okay to not get what you want, which is the beginning of resilience.

Embracing emotions helps your child accept her own emotions, helps her feel them – so they diminish and they're not in the backpack, making her more anxious – and also helps her build resilience.

Would the same thing happen if we just sent her to her room to cry about this birthday party she can't have? No. Everybody needs a witness, so we can feel more deeply what we're feeling. It's like in the hospital when someone who understood me helped me grieve. If I had just tried to grieve myself, I would have felt some of it but I might not have felt so safe to really go there.

It's fine after you've listened to your child for a while to say, "Sweetheart, I have to start dinner. You can come with me, or you can stay here and be sad for as long as you want and I can listen some more later to your feelings about this. Right now, I'm going to cook dinner." You give her a hug and you leave. That's okay because you've already listened for a while and you've promised to be there again later if she still needs you.

But if you had started by sending her to her room, she wouldn't have ever felt the feelings. She would have stuffed them down, and then she would have been very difficult to live with and very resentful about the whole birthday party. She wouldn't have worked it through.

You may be noticing that your child's crying makes you uncomfortable, that when your child cries, you just want them to shut up and you'll do anything to stop them from crying. That's a normal reaction. We are designed by our biology to respond to our child's crying to try to meet their needs so that they stop crying.

When children cry, it drives us crazy, and there may even be some old baggage there. Maybe when you cried when you were a child, no one took good care of you. Maybe you were smacked or told to shut up. Maybe it was an emergency when you cried, so if your child's crying drives you crazy, it may also be that you have some old baggage about what happened to you when you cried.

But I encourage you, when your child cries, if it makes you uncomfortable, just notice it. Just acknowledge it. It's a message. Maybe the message is your child has a need – a need to cry, a need to feel understood – that you can meet.

Or maybe the message is that you have some old baggage that's making it very uncomfortable for you to listen to your child's pain, and if you heal that baggage, not only will you be able to be there for your child, but you'll be healing something inside yourself that will make you feel lighter, and happier, and less likely to be triggered in any number of situations.

Never punish a child for crying. If your child's crying drives you crazy, notice the feelings, acknowledge them, but don't act on them. Every time we notice our feelings and resist acting on

them, we're building mental muscle, or you could say you're building neural pathways that allow your pre-frontal cortex – the reasoning, rational part of your brain – to override those messages that come from the amygdala and the rest of your alarm system that say, "He's crying! He's crying! Stop him from crying! It's an emergency!"

Every time you can resist that message and your pre-frontal cortex can say, "It's okay. It's not an emergency," and you can soothe yourself through the feelings, those feelings will diminish. You're emptying your backpack, you're healing your old wounds, and you're also building the neural pathways that allow you to regulate your own emotions.

How do you help your child regulate? Empathy. You always start with empathy. If your child expresses any emotion – positive or negative – if you respond by seeing it from their perspective and matching their emotion, your child feels understood and you're creating safety. That means that your child in general feels safe to express their emotion.

When your child says, "It's rainy and I didn't want it to rain today. That stupid rain!" you might be tempted to say, "We don't use the word "stupid" in our house," and "The plants needed the water." Instead, you can say, "Oh sweetie, you didn't want it to rain today. I'm sorry. You sound so disappointed." That helps your child to acknowledge his own upset, maybe to tell you more about it, he feels closer to you, and the feelings dissipate.

When kids are upset, mildly or extremely, always start with emotion and connection. Then if kids are able to laugh, you could get them laughing. When your child is being provocative and really giving you a hard time, grab them up in a bear hug. Throw them around. Say, "Are you out of hugs again?" Maybe they'll start laughing and that'll be that, or they'll start laughing and then they'll dissolve into tears. That's great. The laughter emptied out the top layer of stuff in the backpack and the tears now are able to flow.

Or your child loves the throwing around. Then when you toss them on the couch to go back and finish cooking breakfast, then they come right back to you and they do something else provocative, almost smiling at you like they're initiating another game, at which point, you can say, "Oh sweetie, you want another hug. You can always tell me when you want a hug. But right now, if we're going to be on time, I have to finish cooking breakfast. Come here. Let me give you a hug while I turn these eggs." That might be enough for your child. They just need the connection.

Or maybe it's not enough and he throws something. He's letting you know he is actually going to have a meltdown, at which point, you turn off the eggs, you help him as much as you can, and then you say, "Sweetie, I really want to hear this more and I can listen more after school, but right now, we have to get ready for school. I'm so sorry I can't listen more right now."

If you've allowed a little extra time – which, of course, is not usually the case, but if you have a child who blows up frequently, you'll need to do that – then you're going to be okay with this.

If you do preventive maintenance, which we talk about in Week 6, you'll be able to, in advance, help kids with preemptive scheduled meltdowns so that they're less likely to do it when you're trying to get them out of the house in the morning.

There will always be times you can't predict the meltdown, but if you look at it, most of the time, you can actually prevent a meltdown by staying regulated yourself – so you can empathize – staying connected to your child and doing preventive maintenance – so you don't find yourself in this position when you're trying to get your kids out the door.

When your child is having a hard time, you can always just say to them, "Oh sweetie, I'm so sorry," and soften yourself. When you soften yourself, your child is no longer on the attack because there is no fight. They don't need to attack you. They don't need to be in fight mode. Even if they're angry because they don't want to feel the feelings, they begin to soften, too.

What does the child learn? Self-regulation. They learn emotions aren't dangerous. "I can weather them and come out the other side. I can feel my emotions as they arise. I can choose whether to act on them or not. I can manage my emotions." They learn also "Other people's emotions don't scare me. I can relate to other people. I don't have to stuff my emotions and then self-medicate. I can handle whatever life throws at me."

Parents are often afraid that if they allow their child to indulge in big emotions, the child will be spoiled or will become a drama queen. But that's not what spoils children. Spoiled means a child doesn't care what someone else feels or wants; they only are focused on what they want. Kids who act like that are usually kids who have not actually had their needs met, so if they haven't had their needs met, they become very demanding.

Sometimes kids act like this because parents are afraid of the child's emotions. Parents are always shutting down the child's emotions and not letting them actually feel the emotions. Imagine the seven-year-old wants her party at the special party place and the parents say no, and the child has a meltdown, and the parents look at each other and they can't bear these feelings of their child. They look at each other and they say, "Okay, okay, we're going to do the party at the special place. We'll do it."

But then, they've actually gone beyond their comfort level financially, so they're anxious. They're angry at their child on some level because they feel like she manipulated them into this. It's not good for the kid, either, because look what the child learns. Sure, she learns "If I have big emotions, people will give me what I want."

But she learns something else. “My parents are afraid of my emotions. When I have big emotions, my parents tell me not to have them and they will do anything – including buying me off with the party I want – so that I don’t have those big emotions. Emotions must be very dangerous. I will have to stuff my emotions now because I’m realizing emotions are very dangerous. I shouldn’t have my emotions.”

When your child is upset and throws their toy, and the toy breaks, and the child cries because it was their favorite toy, many parents will say, “Don’t cry! Don’t cry! I’ll get you another on!” But actually, it’s good for the child to grieve. They learn a very important lesson about what happens when you throw your toy, and they’re not likely to do it again because of that lesson.

If you punish your child for it, then they focus on their anger at you and how unfair you were. But if you just say, “I know. It’s so sad. Your toy broke. You loved that toy. You got so mad, you threw it, and then it broke. I know, sweetie. I’m so sorry. You really miss your toy,” then the child learns “I have some control and power here. I’m the one who made the decision to throw the toy.” But if you say, “Don’t worry, don’t worry. I’ll get you another one,” not only don’t they learn the lesson; they learn from you that their emotions are dangerous.

If you want to avoid spoiling your child or having a drama queen, let them have the feelings, but don’t change your response. Don’t change what decision you have made when your child has big feelings. Stick to your guns, but do it in a way that’s kind so that they can really just feel the feelings and not get distracted by having a fight with you about whether they were right or wrong.

Feelings are messy. They’re inconvenient. We all have old, unresolved feelings, triggers. I think everyone has triggers from their childhood, and we’re all working them through. I think of it as peeling an onion. As we get further and further down, eventually, the onion has less power in our lives. There’s less fear, there’s less upset in our lives because we’ve peeled so many layers of the onion simply by sitting and feeling the feelings as they come up, tolerating them, and not acting on them.

But do we ever get through the onion? There are very wise teachers who say we probably don’t, and there are other very wise teachers who say we probably do. Either way, I know from personal experience and from working with hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of parents, that we can definitely reduce the size of the onion so that we don’t get triggered very often and so that when we do get triggered, we can notice ourselves getting triggered and we can not fly off the handle.

Emotions will always be messy. We will all have emotions for as long as we live. We will probably all get triggered for as long as we live. But we can avoid getting hijacked by our old

stuff by just staying aware, and noticing, and refusing to act on it. We can give our child the tools to learn this very early in life and to increase their EQ, their emotional intelligence, by responding to our child with empathy, which teaches them not only empathy for other people but also to regulate their own emotions.

Kids develop high EQ when we share their experience. Think of the acronym SHARE as being S for Soothe the child, so they develop the ability to soothe themselves through those big feelings; H, we Help them with their emotions; A, we Allow all emotions even when we need to limit behavior, so we set limits, but we do it with empathy for what the child is feeling; R, we regulate our own emotions, which is what allows us to empathize; and E, we empathize. SHARE, we're sharing the child's emotional experience. When we do that, the child is developing high EQ and self-regulation.

Don't worry about how well or how poorly your child regulates his or her emotions; just show up with empathy and you'll see your child begin to make progress. Sooner or later, all kids can learn to regulate themselves, and it doesn't happen from us clamping down on them and telling them not to feel things; it happens from us empathizing with their experience.

Thanks so much for joining me today and for your commitment to your child and to your own growth. This ends Week 4 – Emotions – of the Peaceful Parents, Happy Kids class. This is Dr. Laura Markham of AhaParenting.com.