

Emotion Coaching in Schools: Evidence from Six Countries

A cross-national synthesis of theory and emerging evidence on social-emotional learning

United Kingdom · Norway · Australia · Türkiye · Kyrgyz Republic · Switzerland

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Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is now mandated or strongly encouraged in school systems worldwide — but delivery depends on how teachers respond to children's emotions every day.

Teacher **emotion socialization** — how adults react when a child is upset, angry, or anxious — shapes emotional development yet is rarely targeted directly.

Emotion coaching (EC) is a concrete, teachable practice for this gap. Originally a parenting approach, it is emerging as a whole-school strategy to strengthen SEL delivery.

What is Emotion Coaching?

A relational, supportive response to children's emotions built on **empathy, validation, and guided problem-solving**.

It grows from John Gottman's **meta-emotion philosophy**: a child's emotion is an opportunity for connection and teaching, not a problem to shut down. Research consistently shows emotion-coached children have higher emotional competence and fewer behaviour problems.

EC also reflects a co-regulation rationale — a calm, attuned adult helps a dysregulated child return to a state where learning is possible.

The Five Steps

1 Become aware
Notice the child's emotion early.

2 See an opportunity
Treat it as a moment to connect and teach.

3 Empathize & validate
Listen; name the feeling as legitimate.

4 Label the emotion
Help the child put the feeling into words.

5 Limit & problem-solve
Set limits where needed; solve it together.

Four Emotion-Response Styles

EMOTION COACHING	EMOTION DISMISSING	EMOTION DISAPPROVING	EMOTION LAISSEZ-FAIRE
“You seem really frustrated — that makes sense.”	“You're fine — don't worry about it.”	“Stop crying right now or there'll be trouble.”	“It's fine — whatever you feel is OK.”
Validates the feeling, then guides behavior	Ignores, distracts from, or downplays the feeling	Criticises or punishes the feeling	Accepts the feeling, sets no limits
Feeling accepted; behavior may be limited	Feeling overlooked; child left to self-manage	Feeling judged; child feels shamed	Feeling allowed; behaviour unchecked
Builds self-regulation over time	Suppresses expression; regulation not learned	Lowers self-worth over time	Weak limits & self-control

Method

Design. Author-involved narrative synthesis of N = 18 EC studies across six countries (UK 7, Türkiye 5, Norway 3, Kyrgyz Republic / Australia / Switzerland 1 each). Not a meta-analysis: no pooling or effect sizes; some reviewed studies were conducted by the authors. Only 5 of 18 were RCTs, 2 of them larger efficacy trials.

Programs included. All interventions were based on either Emotion Coaching UK (built for education) or Tuning in to Kids (TIK, from parenting practice) — Tuning in to Students (Australia) is a new TIK-based program for secondary schools. Samples spanned preschool to secondary, mainstream and special education.

Outcomes examined. Teacher emotion attitudes, empathy, satisfaction and well-being; student SEL skills, emotion regulation, and student–teacher relationships.

Six Countries at a Glance

Country	Program / approach	Focus / key finding
United Kingdom	Emotion Coaching UK (whole-school relational behaviour management)	Increased practitioner confidence & sense of professional competency; fewer exclusions & disruptive behaviour, better attainment
Norway	TIK-based programs (TIKiS & TIK-KT) — three RCTs, kindergarten & primary teachers	LK20 curriculum; reduced emotion-dismissing, better classroom climate
Australia	Tuning in to Students (new TIK-based program) — RCT, secondary school staff	Secondary teachers; improved emotion competence, less emotion-dismissing
Türkiye	Emotion-friendly kindergarten programs (EC UK-based); two TIK-based studies, incl. one RCT	Kindergarten teachers; culturally familiar, fewer problem behaviours
Kyrgyz Republic	Tuning in to Kids, delivered one-to-one	High school-violence context; warmer teacher–student relationships
Switzerland	Tuning in to Kids, adapted as a teacher webinar	Regular & special education teachers; empathy up, emotion-dismissing down

Program names and per-country findings are compiled from the reviewed EC studies. Per-country evidence is uneven — several countries rest on a single study (Australia, Kyrgyz Republic, and Switzerland: one each).

Results

For teachers

- Greater emotion awareness
- Increased empathy
- High satisfaction with EC training
- Improved well-being & confidence (self-report)
- Better classroom management
- Less distress & fewer punitive responses

For students

- Improved social-emotional skills
- Fewer disruptive behaviours
- Stronger peer relationships
- Closer bonds with teachers & family
- More engagement & curiosity
- Fewer exclusions, restraints & absences (UK)

Key pattern: Teacher-level effects were the most robust finding; student-level effects remain preliminary. Benefits appeared consistently across very different languages, systems, and cultural norms around emotion. Student effects were secondary and more mixed (some trials found no change), so findings need replication in larger studies. Across all six countries, EC showed high acceptability & feasibility.

Emotion Coaching in Action

Child: “I hate this! I'm never going to get it right!”

Dismissing: “Don't be silly, it's easy. Just try again.”

Coaching: “This is really frustrating, isn't it? It's hard when something won't work. Let's take a breath — then figure out one small next step together.”

Child spills glue over their work and gets overwhelmed:

Dismissing: “What a mess! You’ve had all year to learn how to glue!”

Coaching: “Thanks for your courage to ask for help. Oh no — it spilled over your work, that’s disappointing. Shall we hang it up to dry first?”

Conclusions & Implications

- EC is a promising, culturally adaptable strategy for delivering school-based SEL.
- Convergent findings suggest EC strengthens teachers' emotion socialization across all six countries; whether EC works equally well across cultures still needs direct study.
- Given the global SEL mandate, EC warrants broader implementation and rigorous, scaled evaluation.
- **Bottom line: EC is a practical lever for making SEL curricula work in real classrooms.**

References: Burkhardt et al. (2026), Eur. J. Psychol. Educ. Res., 9(2), 91-116; Gottman et al. (1996); Gottman & DeClaire (1997) · Havighurst et al. (2009, 2024) · Rose, McGuire-Snieckus & Gilbert (2015) · Gus, Rose & Gilbert (2015) · Kuru et al. (2021). Full reference list available from the authors.