



PARENT COACHING: THE PATH TO A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER SOCIETY

Coach and parenting specialist [Val Mullally](#) explains how parent coaching supports the parent not only in what they do but also in how they choose to be, which can significantly impact both parent and child wellbeing.

There is a crisis in children's mental health. Over 6% of children aged 6-11 and 10% of teenagers in the United States are diagnosed with anxiety issues.¹ Life is becoming increasingly stressful for children and for parents.

In the late 90s, I began exploring emotional intelligence. I became convinced that young children could learn to 'name, claim and tame' emotions – a skill that could significantly impact their long-term wellbeing. Having successfully introduced an emotional intelligence programme for young children in South Africa, that idea became the foundation for the Koemba approach: a blend of parenting insights and skills, developed from a meeting of education with coaching and supervision. The word 'Koemba' is based on a Cameroonian word for 'the smile on a child's face as they dream peacefully'.

My 'parent coaching' model integrates the tenets of a coaching approach into parenting (for more detail see *Baby and Toddler on Board*). The base of the model (see Figure 1) is a reinterpretation of the third cornerstone of Co-Active coachingⁱⁱ: 'dancing in the moment'. To convey this concept in my training, I use an image of a young couple dancing in a forest. This evokes many facets of what it means to be an effective parent coach (someone who coaches parents), or coaching parent (a parent who embraces coaching principles); qualities such as attunement, creativity, spontaneity, sensitivity, flexibility and being non-coercive.

I envisage dancing in the moment not as one of the four cornerstones of Co-Active coachingⁱ, but more helpfully represented as a circular space, within which the other three principles are intertwined; imagine a three-leaved design within a circle.



FIGURE 1. A model for parent coaching, based on the principles of the Co-Active Model

1. For more information on the Co-Active Model, see coactive.com/about/what-is-coactive/#the-co-active-model

The circular space represents the coach 'dancing in the moment'. This safe yet vibrant coaching space is undergirded by the three other Co-Active coaching principles, which – in addition to dancing in the moment – are as follows:

1. the agenda comes from the client²
2. the client is naturally creative, resourceful, and whole.
3. coaching addresses the client's whole life.

Parent coaching that is based upon these principles will ideally lead to the parent embracing a parenting style that will support their children to flourish. These three principles form the foundation of a coaching approach to parenting, which I interpret as being grounded on the premises that:

- (where possible) the agenda comes from the child.
- the child is naturally creative, resourceful, and whole.
- a coaching approach addresses the life of the family as a whole.

From these three principles I have created three tenets of an approach to parenting that the parent coach needs to embrace.

#1: FOLLOW THE CHILD'S LEAD

As a society we seldom consider that the child, like every other person, has their own agenda. The tenet 'follow the child's lead' is supported by the first parent coaching principle: where possible the agenda comes from the child.

The task of the parent coach is to follow the client's lead, compassionately hold the listening space and deftly use coaching tools, such as asking 'what might that behaviour be telling you?' This approach aims to open the parent's awareness to follow the child's lead.

#2: CROSS THE BRIDGE

We seldom stop to consider that society's attitude towards parenting is not one of wholeness but one of 'how do I fix this child?' When things are difficult and relationships strained, the message we can easily imbibe, and pass on to our children, is that they are 'broken' or 'wrong'.

Just as the coach seeks to create a relationship based on the premise that the client is naturally creative, resourceful and whole, 'cross the bridge' is the action we take to take to live out the principle that the child is naturally creative, resourceful and whole.

Think of an image of a child on the opposite side of a river to you. There is only a narrow pedestrian bridge for you to cross over. To leave your world, and cross over into the child's world, you need to leave your baggage behind – you need to 'park' your own busyness, your agenda, your own opinions, your solutions, your emotions, your fears... Our baggage gets in the way of parenting from a base of mutual respect. Of course, it is important to be aware that the child has limited life experience, and that the young brain is still under development, but much of society's common mode of parenting underestimates the child's innate wisdom and can consequently erode the child's self-esteem.

The coach needs to use coaching tools to assist the parent consciously park whatever it is within themselves that is blocking progress, to enable them to 'cross the bridge'.

We cannot support a person to develop to their full potential if we are standing in a separate, disconnected place of judgement. I propose that it is the task of the parent coach not only to park their own stuff so that they can 'cross the bridge' into the client's world, but likewise to co-actively figure out with the parent what is needed to cross the bridge into the child's experience of life.

#3: HEARTH THE HOME

This tenet embraces so much. The image of the hearth communicates a sense of warmth, connection, communication, safety and nurture. Yet, the hearth is not the end in itself. When one has received the goodness of the hearth, one is revitalised, strengthened, encouraged and equipped to step out into the adventures of life. This is supported by the parent coaching principle that addresses the life of the whole family. If there is a challenge for the child, then there is a challenge for the whole family. Something that affects one person affects the whole.

A parent coach can support their client to reflect on how to create the environment that gives every family member the courage, resilience and insights to discover and celebrate the adventure of life. Parent coaching at its finest creates the vitality, strength, courage and wisdom for the client and family to live their lives fully in their 'hearthed' home.

Embracing this Koemba parent coaching framework can enable parent coaches to raise parents' awareness, helping them create a nurturing environment for their children. This, in turn, can develop empathy and understanding of the interconnectedness of us all, as the family is the primary organisation that links all of us to our societies and our global, networked world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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2. The third edition of *Co-Active Coaching* has changed this cornerstone to 'Evoke transformation'. However, as children are naturally in the process of transformation, the earlier model feels appropriate for the parent coaching framework.

i. www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html
ii. Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House and Sandahl, Phillip. 2007:3