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"My child will actually say 'I am upset'… Before all they would do was scream": Teaching parents emotion validation in a social care setting

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Abstract

Background: Emotion validation by parents has positive outcomes for children's emotional development, particularly in vulnerable families, but there is a lack of research on supporting health workers to teach emotion validation to parents whose children are open to early help and children's social services. There is also a theoretical debate about how best to conceptualize emotion validation and why it is beneficial to children. The purpose of the study was to test the feasibility of teaching emotion validation skills to parents and family workers in a social care setting and to examine the effects of such teaching on children's emotion awareness and emotion regulation.

Methods: This small scale qualitative feasibility study involved 11 parents (with children aged 2–5 years) who were receiving early help social services and five family workers. All parents took part in a 4-week course teaching emotionally validating parenting: either in a group class (six parents) or one–one delivery at home via a family worker (five parents). Effects on parents, children, and family workers were assessed using semi-structured interviews.

Results: Six themes were identified in qualitative analysis: (1) parent became more validating, (2) parent's own vulnerability affected their ability to use the skills, (3) child became more aware of emotions, (4) child became calmer and more accepting of negative emotions, (5) child transferred emotion validation to others, and (6) family workers incorporated emotion validation techniques into their professional practice.

Conclusion: Results demonstrated the feasibility of teaching emotional validation skills to parents via both delivery methods, with positive outcomes reported for parents and children and positive impact reported on family worker practice. Qualitative analysis suggested that parental acceptance of child's negative emotions may be linked with greater self-awareness of negative emotions in the child.

KEYWORDS
acceptance, children, emotion awareness, emotion coaching, emotion regulation, emotion validation, empathy, mentalizing, parenting

1 | INTRODUCTION

Parents provide the central context in early childhood within which children learn to understand and regulate their emotions (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004). Parents' supportive reactions to children's negative emotions promote positive outcomes such as better emotion regulation in their children (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Fivush, Marin, McWilliams, & Bohanek, 2009; Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007). Teaching parents how to be emotionally supportive should therefore be beneficial to their children, and evidence suggests such benefits should be especially favourable when there is increased family risk, that is, economic disadvantage, family stress, or maltreatment (Ellis, Alisic, Reiss, Dishion, & Fisher, 2014).

However, the exact nature of emotionally supportive parenting and the best way to train it is a matter of some debate (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008), and there is a lack of relevant research in social care settings (Katz, Maliken, & Stettler, 2012). In this article, we focus on the parenting technique of 'emotion validation', and investigate the feasibility of teaching family workers to disseminate emotion validation techniques to parents in a social care setting.

2 | EMOTIONAL VALIDATION

Emotion validation is the accurate and non-judgmental communicative reference to another's emotion or feeling (Lambie & Lindberg, 2016; Linehan, 1993; Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011). This process involves a knowledgeable other, for example, a parent, finding a way to direct the child's attention to the child's own emotion or feeling in a way that helps the child both conceptualize/symbolize the emotion and 'own' the emotion as a normal part of their experiential landscape (Rogers, 1959). This can be done via verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, verbal emotion validation might be (said in an accepting way): "It looks like you are very angry" or "you seem sad" (Ginott, 1965). The caregiver could non-verbally match the child's facial expression [but it is important this is done in a 'marked' or exaggerated way, as Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist and Target (2002) point out, so the child knows it is his/her own emotion, and not the caregiver's emotion, that is being referred to]; or the caregiver could 'copy' the dynamics of the child's feeling state without directly copying the child's actions [e.g., the caregiver nodding his head up and down or blowing his cheeks out with a timing and intensity that matches the child enjoying banging her hand on the table (Stern, 1985)]. This latter process is also known as affect attunement (Stern, 1985), which overlaps with the notion of emotion validation.

The flipside of this is emotional invalidation, in which the child's emotion is rejected in some way or incorrectly labelled – "Don't be angry"; "You're not really sad" – or there is a failure to attune to, or accept, the child's feelings. This may lead the child to become alienated from his or her true feelings (Rogers, 1959), and therefore to have poorer emotion awareness (Linehan, 1993). Note that if verbal and non-verbal channels are incongruent within the parent (e.g. "you

Key messages

- Teaching emotional validation to parents in social care settings is feasible and should be made more available either in day care centres or via home visits by social or health care professionals.
- The ability to use emotion validation may be reduced when the parent is highly emotionally vulnerable, and further research is needed to address the learning needs of that group.
- The use of the tool *My First Emotions* to help scaffold children's learning of emotion awareness and emotion regulation is promising, but further work is needed to explore its measurable effects using standardized methods of evaluation.
- Emotionally validated children are reported to pass validation onto others such as parents, siblings and peers, and the extent and persistence of such learning transfer warrants further more systematic investigation, and has implications for the development of prosocial behaviour in children.

are so sad" said sarcastically or with anger in the voice, then the overall effect will be one of invalidation).

Emotion validation is not the same as empathy, although there may be some overlap between the two concepts, depending on how empathy is defined. Emotion validation is an *action* – a communicative act, whereas empathy is usually thought of as a knowledge state or a feeling (that may then lead to an action; Batson, 2009). Empathy may underlie emotion validation, but due to the many different senses of empathy in the psychological literature (see Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016), the complex question of the exact relationship of empathy to emotional validation is beyond the scope of this paper. We can only make a few brief comments on this.

One debate in the empathy literature is whether empathy has to involve one's own similar *feelings* in response to another's feelings, or whether one can just use one's *knowledge* of what it is probably like for the other person (Batson, 2009). But whether empathy is based on shared feeling or folk psychological knowledge is a moot point for emotion validation: the key issue for emotion validation is that one performs a *communicative act* that accurately and non-judgmentally refers to the emotion of another. In a limiting case emotion validation can even be a guess, which one then corrects after feedback ("Oh I see, you're not sad you're angry"), and in such a case, the concept of validation includes being open to be corrected by the target. How one achieves validation is therefore not relevant as to whether an act counts as validation or not, although of course it is of interest for psychological theory. In summary, the four conditions of satisfaction for emotion validation are (1) you notice another's emotion; (2) you make a statement or perform a non-verbal communicative act that refers to

their emotion state; (3) the statement or act in (2) is accurate (or has been corrected by feedback from the target); and (4) the statement or action in (2) is not judgmental.

Emotion validation is one of the key components of a parenting style or a set of beliefs known as 'emotion coaching' (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). The other four components of emotion coaching are parents are more aware of emotions, view the child's negative emotion as an opportunity for teaching, assist the child in emotion labelling, and problem-solve with the child. The opposite of this is 'emotion dismissing' parenting in which negative emotions in children are viewed as something to be avoided or quickly shut down.

Both emotion validation and emotion coaching have been linked to positive outcomes for children. For example, Lambie and Lindberg (2016) found that observed maternal emotion validation during a game played with children led to increased self-reported emotion awareness by the children (aged 4–7 years). Shipman et al. (2007) found that mother's emotional validation predicted more adaptive emotion regulation in children and emotional invalidation predicted less adaptive emotion regulation.

Regarding emotion coaching, Lunkenheimer et al. (2007) found that emotion dismissing by parents was linked to poorer emotion regulation and more behavioural problems in the children. Emotion coaching did not lead to direct benefits for children's emotional and behavioural outcomes but protected children from the detrimental effects of emotion dismissing responses. Similarly, Ellis et al. (2014) found that maternal emotion coaching partially mediated the relation between family risk and child emotion regulation.

2.1 | Teaching emotional validation to parents

If emotion validation is important for children's emotional development, then teaching parents to do it should be beneficial for their children. A few studies have looked at teaching emotion coaching, but none have specifically isolated emotion validation.

In a series of studies, Havighurst and colleagues (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior, & Kehoe, 2010, Havighurst et al., 2013, Havighurst et al., 2015) evaluated a six-session group parenting programme for emotion coaching called Tuning into Kids. Parents were randomized into an intervention group and a waiting list control. In all studies, parents in the intervention group showed improvements in emotion coaching, and their children [aged 4–5 years (Havighurst et al., 2010, Havighurst et al., 2013) or 5–9 years (Havighurst et al., 2015)] had greater emotion knowledge and reduced behaviour problems compared with the control group.

Rose, McGuire-Snieckus, and Gilbert (2015) evaluated the effectiveness of emotion coaching training for practitioners who work with children and young people in schools, early years settings and youth centres (ages 0–16). Using a mixed method approach, increases in participants self-reported emotion coaching were found via questionnaire, although effect sizes were small. In a qualitative analysis, one theme identified was that emotion coaching promoted children's awareness of emotion and improved their emotional regulation.

In a review, Katz et al. (2012) called for more research to look at the role of professionals in teaching emotion coaching skills, and Ellis et al. (2014) suggested further research focusing on emotion coaching skills in mothers in higher risk families (i.e. those with economic disadvantage, family stress, or maltreatment) as the needs were greatest in this group.

2.2 | Theoretical issues in the processes underlying validation

There is thus some evidence that emotionally validating parenting and emotion coaching beliefs have beneficial effects on children's emotional awareness and emotion regulation skills. However, there is still some debate as to the mechanisms and processes underlying these benefits. There are two theoretical issues regarding emotion validation: one relating to the sender (the parent) and one relating to the receiver (the child).

The question relating to the sender is: What exactly is it about the parent's communication that is helpful for the child? Is it that the parent is using mentalization and treating the child as a psychological agent (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008) – that is, "as a system which can reason about either their own or other people's explicit goals, intentions, and beliefs" (p. 737); leading in turn to greater mentalization in the child? Or is it, more specifically, that the parent is accepting the negative feelings of the child, leading the child to acknowledge negative emotions as part of the self? (Linehan, 1993; Rogers, 1959).

The second question – relating to the receiver of emotion validation (the child) – is: How does emotion validation assist the child in regulating their emotions? There are again two possibilities (see also Eisenberg et al., 1999): (a) down-regulation theories, and (b) 'sideways' regulation theories. According to the down-regulation theory, emotion validation has a direct soothing effect on the child, for example, by activating the parasympathetic nervous system (Gottman et al., 1996) and lowering the child's emotional arousal (Eisenberg et al., 1996).

According to the view we call sideways-regulation of emotion, the child, after being validated, does not directly down regulate but instead changes their relationship with their emotions (see Hayes, 2004, for a similar distinction). For example, changing one's relationship to one's emotions may include becoming more aware of the emotion and taking more 'ownership' of it (Lambie & Lindberg, 2016), or it may be to be able to express the emotion without shame (Tomkins, 1963).

3 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The foregoing review suggests three main research questions (listed below). Because the theoretical issues are about the content of emotion validation discourse and the nuances of reported child behaviour we have chosen a qualitative methodology.

1 Is it feasible to teach parents emotional validation skills in group and social care settings, and to coach family workers to deliver such teaching?

   1.1 Do family workers find teaching emotional validation to parents a useful and practical addition to their professional practice?

2 Does teaching emotion validation skills to parents increase their emotion validation skills in practice?

   2.1 How can we best characterize the nature of parental emotional validation in terms of how the child is being treated?

3 Do parents report that their use of emotion validation increases their child's emotional awareness and emotion regulation skills?

   3.1 To what extent do the benefits reported in children rest on apparent down-regulation versus acceptance of negative emotions?

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Participants

A total of 11 parents (9 female, 2 male) and 5 family workers (all female) took part in the study. The age range of the parents was 20–39 years. Four parents (36%) reported GSCE (General Certificate of Secondary Education: high school level) qualifications, and none reported college level qualifications. The parents were from the Wisbech area of Cambridgeshire, and were accessing social service provision. They were recruited after being identified by family workers as being in need of the programme. Wisbech is in the top 10% most deprived regions of England (Smith et al., 2015). The family workers had been professionally qualified from between 2 to 10 years.

Twelve children were indirect participants – their behaviour was reported on by parents and family workers, but they were not formally observed or tested. The children were seven girls and five boys, with an age range of 2–5 years (mean age: 3 years, 2 months).

4.2 | Measures

The parents filled in open-ended answer sheets (as some of the parents declined to be audio recorded), and the family workers took part in an audio recorded interview. The questions for parents (with follow up probes) were as follows: (1) was the intervention helpful? (give examples); (2) what do you think of emotional validation (do you use it?; give examples); (3) has your child changed as a result of you doing this course? (give examples; has it affected how they talk about emotions?; has it affected their ability to cope with emotions?); and (4) have you been affected as a result of doing this course? (has your confidence in parenting been affected?; has it affected how you deal with your own emotions?).

The questions for family workers were identical topics for the first three questions (but with the focus on the parent's and child's behaviour: e.g. how helpful was the intervention *for your client*? and how was the child of your client affected?). The fourth question for the family workers was the following: has delivering this material had an effect on your professional practice or your views on emotion? (give examples).

4.3 | Materials

The intervention was a 4-week parenting course designed for the present study, based on the set *My First Emotions* (Lambie, Fursland, & Potter, 2016), a commercially available set of toys and books designed to teach young children about emotions. The set contains a parenting guide specifically on emotional validation; five story books about happiness, love, fear, anger, and sadness; a small emotion toy (similar to an emoji) for each emotion; a soft rabbit puppet with a pouch to put the emotion toys into; an activity book with emotion related activities and games to play; and a set of cards depicting emotion faces and emotion situations (based on the characters in the books).

The emotional validation course consisted of four skills, which were directly taken from four of the chapters in the *My First Emotions* parenting guide: Week 1 – talking about emotions with your child; Week 2 – validating your child's emotions; Week 3 – helping your child regulate their emotions; and Week 4 – setting boundaries and looking after yourself. The theme of validation ran throughout the 4 weeks and was emphasized in each session – for example, in Week 4, it was explained how boundaries can be used in conjunction with validation [using the motto that "all feelings are OK (and can be validated) but not all behaviours are OK" – e.g. "I understand why you are very cross with your brother, but hitting is not allowed – use your words not your fists"]. In Week 3, the main regulation techniques discussed were encouraging children to talk about emotions (and using validation to do this), hugging/soothing, and calm breathing.

In teaching emotion validation, we focused mainly on the verbal channel, but non-verbal affect attunement was also mentioned. The main idea taught was to notice and verbally comment on the child's emotion, but to do so in a non-judgmental way. The issue of mismatches between the parent's verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g. the parent saying "I know you are sad" while looking angry) was discussed in Week 4 in relation to the parent 'being allowed' to talk about their own emotions too (in a non-blaming way) – for example, "I am feeling angry right now. I need to some time to calm down".

4.4 | Procedure

British Psychological Society ethical guidelines were followed, and ethical approval for the study was granted by the lead author's institution. There were two strands to the research: in the first strand, emotional validation skills were taught in a group parenting class (by the first author) over 4 weeks (1 h/week) in a child and family centre in East Anglia in the United Kingdom; in the second strand, family

workers taught emotional validation skills to parents over 4 weeks (1 h/ week) in one–one sessions at the parent's home. The family workers were first trained by the first author in a 1-day course and delivered the same learning materials (*My First Emotions*, and the PowerPoint slides and handouts) as the group class.

At the beginning of the first session, parents in both strands filled in consent forms and demographic questions and were given the *My First Emotions* box to take home and keep. At the end of the last session they filled in the open-ended question sheets and were debriefed.

The family workers, as well as coaching parents, were also participants in the study. Before the first session, they signed consent forms, and at the end of the 4-week course, they attended a focus group with other family worker participants and were interviewed for 1 h and then debriefed.

5 | RESULTS

Qualitative data were collected from all five family workers and from nine parents in total (we were unable to collect first-person data from two of the parents in the one–one delivery, although family workers gave third-party reports in these cases).

Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed, and open-ended responses to questionnaires were typed up. The ldata were analysed using a mixture of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Data were coded and interpreted using the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

After the initial familiarization stage, the first and second authors independently coded all the text and produced 176 and 190 initial codes, respectively, yielding an initial inter-rater agreement of 92%. Following discussion agreement was reached on 182 coded items covering the whole data set. Initial themes were generated and checked against each coded item using a spreadsheet and were iteratively revised until six final themes were constructed and agreed upon. In the quotes below, participants are identified using two letters and a number: PG refers to a parent from the parenting group (numbered 1 to 5); PF refers to a parent working with a family worker (numbered 6 to 9); and FW refers to a family worker (numbered 1 to 5).

5.1.1 | Theme 1: parent became more validating

In total 12 of the 14 participants (86%: eight of the nine parents and four of the five family workers) reported an increase in parental use of emotional validation. Parents reported using the books and toys in order to validate, as well as using emotional validation spontaneously in everyday life. On the whole, parent's descriptions of emotional validation showed that they did understand the concept.

We read the books every night. And we use the rabbit and put the emotions in his pouch. When my daughter gets upset, I've been saying, because I read it in the book "I can see you're upset, I understand you are upset. Tell me why you are upset". (PG4).

And family workers confirmed that parents were using more validation: "I think the Mum in particular found it useful how to word things. How to reframe … not just to say 'stop whinging', but to have another way of talking to the little girl" (FW1).

Most parents mentioned that they had not really practiced emotional validation before doing the course: "I used to ignore my son until he was calm enough to get through to him, but now I … tell him I know how he's feeling" (PG2); "I did not use emotional validation much before the course and if I did only commented on positive emotions. I now use it frequently for all emotions" (PF7). The increase in validation was frequently described in terms of a decrease in invalidation:

> I feel I listen to my child more since doing the course and think more about how she might be feeling rather than dismiss those feelings I now try not to use the phrases "do not be silly" or "it does not matter". (PF7)

5.1.2 | Theme 2: parent's own vulnerability affected their ability to use the skills

In four cases (29%: one parent and three family workers), reports reflected a theme regarding some difficulties the parent had with using the skills effectively, and this was based on the parent's own vulnerabilities. Examples include low literacy levels in the parent causes difficulties reading the parenting guide and the parent being uncomfortable with using pretend play with the rabbit.

Another important difficulty (mentioned in two cases) was the parents own ability to deliver emotional validation in a calm way, particularly in situations in which the parent is stressed or angry. In many situations in which a child needs to be validated, the parent will also be emotionally activated – partly because the child's negative emotion is itself a stressor. The parent may also have their own social and emotional problems. Several of these factors are at play in this report:

> He will tell me his emotions—he'll say "I'm angry". It's just trying to get him to calm down that's difficult. He does not like me or other people being sad. Like if I tell him off, he does not like it that I'm sad, that I'm upset. "Be happy Mum". He's very strong willed and bossy. He wants to be in control. (PG6)

In the above description, it is implied that the mother "tell[s] him off" in a way that expresses her own heightened emotions – and her child cannot tolerate her negative emotions. There are background social reasons why both mother and child have a decreased tolerance of negative emotions (in this case, the mother went on to report domestic violence from a previous partner), but the mother's own

understandable difficulties with accepting negative emotions makes it harder for her to fully practice emotional validation with her son.

5.1.3 | Theme 3: child became more aware of emotions and talked more about own emotions

In total 79% of participants (eight of nine parents and three of five family workers) reported that children had shown an increase in emotional awareness, which was mainly manifested by talking more about their own emotions, e.g. "She is now always telling me when she is happy or sad or scared" (PF9). Some participants gave vivid examples contrasting the child's new found acknowledgment of emotions with what they used to do before: "They do talk a lot more about emotions. My child will actually say 'I am crying, I am upset'. Sometimes they will tell me the reason. Before all they would do was scream" (PG4);

> the youngest of the two that I did it with [3 year old girl] ... she actually said that she'd been pushed over at nursery, and then she said how it made her feel – it made her feel sad – and actually for her that was a massive thing because they were not open about their emotions at all before this. (FW2)

Increases in child emotion awareness were sometimes described as being scaffolded by the books and the emotion toys:

> he gave me a late bedtime the first night we brought this [the set] home, cos he was so fascinated by it. He wanted every story rather than just the one ... so we do it every time, putting the emotions in the rabbit. And he is talking about emotions more. (PG6)

5.1.4 | Theme 4: child became calmer and more accepting of negative emotions

In total 64% of participants (five parents and four family workers) reported that a child calmed down more easily as a result of the course, and only one parent reported difficulties with getting her child to calm down. Calming was often mentioned in the context of tantrums: "A lot less tantrums. For my family because that was one of the main issues, because there was very difficult behaviour, and even Mum said 'tantrums have reduced greatly'" (FW2).

A subtheme was the child calming down more quickly despite still expressing negative emotions frequently, a theme we called *sideways emotion regulation by the child* to distinguish it from direct down regulation (see Section 1): "Angry is one that gets mentioned a lot cos 'he's angry all the time'...but 'calming down after a tantrum has improved'" (PG2);

> It's been a much easier week as the validation – 'it has not stopped the emotions' – it just means he calms down quicker. We went on a day trip to the wildlife

centre. Normally he grumbles a lot in the car. But I used it [validation] all day and he calmed down much quicker. (PG3)

5.1.5 | Theme 5: child transferred emotion validation to others

This theme emerged inductively from the data as it was not probed by any of the questions. Seven of the 14 participants reported that a child had started spontaneously validating other people. The range of other people validated by the child was wide: examples were given of parents, siblings, peers, or the child's own cuddly toys being validated: "My daughter 2 years 2 months now talks more about how she is feeling, e.g. 'are you sad?' when I knock myself. I have also noticed her use emotional validation in her play with her teddy" (PF7);

> even the 2 year old [boy] – it brushed up on Mum and Dad's observational skills because they commented that they could hear him using those phrases in play... And [with the 3 year old girl] things like when she dropped her teddy she said 'Oh teddy hurt. Teddy sad'. (FW3).

It is interesting to note that children were also observed using validation outside of the home setting at school:

> we use the books every night, and we use the rabbit, and obviously my son will ask me how I'm feeling as well...at school they say he's forever asking people how's their day going. So, it's nice to know he's trying to do it at school. (PG5).

5.1.6 | Theme 6: family workers incorporated emotion validation techniques into their professional practice

All five family workers mentioned some positive impact that the emotional validation course had on their professional practice. There were three main types of impact on their practice. First, using emotional validation more: "I do find myself commenting more on children's emotions and modelling that to parents" (FW3). One family worker gave an example of adding the learning materials to her own teaching sessions:

> And it was interesting because one of the Mums made a comment about she felt the preschool ought to come on the course, because she'd witnessed something that had happened so I'm actually going to go to that preschool and talk a bit about emotional validation next term. (FW5).

Second, the "feelings versus behaviour" distinction (from Week 4 of the course) was mentioned as particularly useful and was transferred to other clients:

> I found the week 4 information – the behaviour versus emotions stuff – I've used that with lots of families, just that section. Explaining that difference between – all emotions are alright, not all behaviours are alright, and I've found that really useful with lots of different families...I've been pinching bits to use. (FW1).

And third, several family workers mentioned the usefulness of using props to scaffold parent–child emotion talk:

> I think it [the toy set] gave them a focus to have quality time with their children... I think sometimes if you are lacking in confidence to play with children, you need something tangible to help you with that, to guide you. So I think the fact that you provided the props as well was very useful. (FW3).

6 | DISCUSSION

This study investigated the feasibility of teaching emotion validation to parents and social care professionals and explored some theoretical issues about the effects of emotion validation on children. We shall group the discussion around each of our research questions in turn.

1 Is it feasible to teach parents emotional validation skills in group and social care settings, and to coach family workers to deliver such teaching?

Our results showed that parents in a social care setting responded well to learning emotion validation skills both in a group context and in one–one sessions with a family worker. A sub-question was whether family workers found teaching emotional validation to be a useful addition to their professional practice. Two main areas of transferrable positive impact were noted: (a) the family workers reported that they themselves now used emotion validation more in their professional practice and (b) they reported that they transferred specific techniques such as the feelings versus behaviour distinction to other clients not on the course.

2 Does teaching emotion validation skills to parents increase their use of emotion validation skills (as reported by the parents and by family workers)?

Overall, eight of the nine parents (89%) reported that they used more emotional validation after the course, and four of the five family workers (80%) reported that their client had started using more emotional validation. The possibility that parents might just be reporting in a way to please the researcher is belied by a number of observations.

First, most parents gave specific and appropriate examples of validating their child that went beyond the examples given in the learning materials. Second, the family workers were reporting on what they observed the parent doing so their data are reports of observations. And third, there were a few examples of additional third party reports of the parent using emotional validation [e.g. the report (see above) from a nursery teacher to a family worker that she had observed the parent validating the child in the nursery setting].

Overall, the results suggest that emotional validation behaviour by the end of the course did increase in the parents (at least as reported by parents themselves and by family workers), and this is in line with the findings of Rose et al. (2015). However, one area of difficulty with emotion validation that came up was the difficulty in one dyad (see PG6, above) for the mother and child to tolerate each other's negative emotions. The issue of dyadic meta-emotions is an important one to address in this context – for example, when I am angry that you are annoyed with me; or I am anxious that you are sad. We touched on this issue in Week 4 of the course when we discussed the parent's own emotional reactions and whether they themselves had been validated in the past and whether they had someone to validate them now. But this was only discussed briefly and the authors acknowledge that a longer course would be required in order to more comprehensively support parents to reflect on their own emotional reactions their own relationship to emotion validation.

2.1 How can we best characterize the nature of parental emotional validation in terms of how the child is being treated?

On the whole the qualitative results favoured the idea that parents were treating their child with acceptance of negative emotions, rather than merely treating their child as a psychological agent (as suggested by Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). For example, one mother reported: "I now try not to use the phrases "don't be silly" or "it doesn't matter", and another said "I did not use emotional validation much before the course and if I did only commented on positive emotions. I now use it frequently for all emotions".

What is interesting about these remarks is that in both cases what the parents report themselves previously doing counts as treating their child as a psychological agent: but in neither case is the parent fully validating. In the first case – saying "it doesn't matter" – the parent is saying, in effect: "you are a person and things matter for you, but I am saying you are wrong in this case and this 'shouldn't' matter". It is perfectly possible to treat someone as a person for whom things matter (i.e. as a psychological agent) but nevertheless invalidate them. In the second case, the parent acknowledges that they did not previously commit to comprehensive emotion validation – they only validated positive emotions but not negative ones. What these cases suggest is that it is *acceptance of the child's negative emotions* that is important and not merely treating the child as a psychological agent.

Instead of parental mentalizing, we suggest that the active ingredient in emotional supportive parenting is the further element of parental acceptance of the child's negative emotions. It is not that the parent communicates "I know you have a mind", or even "I know you

have emotions", but "I know you have negative feelings, 'and it is OK' to have those". The parent authenticates the child's negative emotions, and this, in the terminology of Rogers (1959), would mean more congruence between the child's phenomenal experience and their developing self-concept. This is also in line with Linehan's (1997) view of emotion validation.

3 Do parents report that their use of emotion validation increases their child's emotional awareness and emotion regulation skills?

We found that 11 of 14 participants (79%) reported that a child involved in the course had increased their emotional awareness. This finding supports one of the themes reported by Rose et al. (2015) that emotion coaching promotes children's self-awareness of their emotions and fits with the observational findings of Lambie and Lindberg (2016).

Nine of 14 participants (64%) reported that a child involved in the course was now 'calmer' than before. We can interpret this as one indication that parent's believed that emotion regulation skills had improved, particularly as several parents mentioned that their child's calming after a tantrum had improved. A limitation of our study was that we did not focus very much on teaching parents how to problem solve emotional situations with their child (e.g. "that made you sad, what did you do, were you able to talk to the teacher?"). These skills were briefly mentioned, but our main focus was on the emotion validation stage, and more complete emotion regulation may well involve additional problem solving techniques (Gottman & DeClaire, 1997).

An unexpected finding was that participants reported that half of the children involved in the course had started doing emotional validation themselves – that is, validating a parent, sibling, peer, or cuddly toy. Such learning transfer has been observed in empathy research (e.g. Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979), but we are not aware that it has been previously reported in relation to emotion validation. Our data are only second-handing reporting and not observational, but it suggests that learning transfer of emotion validation is something worth looking at in future observational studies. If young children who are validated do indeed learn how to validate others in different contexts – for example, at nursery school – it would be interesting to explore the processes underlying this.

3.1 To what extent do benefits to children rest on down-regulation versus acceptance of negative emotions?

Some researchers (e.g. Gottman, et al., 1996; Eisenberg et al., 1996) have argued that emotion validation or emotion coaching acts to down regulate children's emotions, in other words to directly lower their emotional arousal overall. Indeed, Gottman, et al., (1996) wrote that children who have been emotion coached appear more 'cool and unruffled' (p. 262) and have learned to 'inhibit emotional responding' (p. 262). An alternative view, which we called the 'acceptance of emotions' or 'sideways regulation' view would be that validation changes one's 'relationship' to one's emotion, rather than down regulating one's emotions directly.

Deciding between these options is not easy to answer given the nature of our data, but it is suggestive that the way parents talked about this was to say that although emotional validation had not 'stopped' their child's negative emotions, it meant their child calmed down 'more quickly'. This implies that parents did not notice a reduction in negative emotions per se. What they did notice – with eight out of nine parents reporting this – was that their child now 'talked more' about their emotions. Talking more about one's emotion implies a change in attitude to the emotion, rather than a reduction in its occurrence (consider this parental report: "They do talk a lot more about emotions. My child will actually say "I am crying, I am upset" ... Before all they would do was scream" – a change from affect-laden action to self-awareness and self-labelling). Perhaps this change in attitude to emotions could be conceptualized as greater acceptance of negative emotions, although more direct observational research would be needed to test this.

7 | LIMITATIONS

There was no control group so it was not possible to calibrate any benefits against alternative interventions or 'treatment as usual'. Furthermore, the small sample size and lack of standardized measures meant that effect sizes and other statistical analyses were not possible.

8 | CONCLUSIONS

The research affirms the feasibility of two methods for teaching emotion validation to parents in a social care setting: running group classes, and also one–one sessions with a family worker, although parent's own emotional vulnerability may be a limiting factor in being able to learn the skills effectively. Family workers found the inclusion of emotional validation techniques to be a valuable addition to their professional practice.

Parents who attended the course (or did the course at home) reported increases in their own use of emotion validation, and increases in their children's emotion awareness, and their children's levels of emotion regulation. According to parental reports, children were also observed to transfer emotion validation to others, such as peer and siblings.

Parents reported that children talked more about their negative emotions and calmed down more quickly, although not that their negative emotions had stopped. Parents also stated that they (the parents) now talked more about their child's negative emotions than they had before. One way of making sense of these reports is that the parents became 'more accepting of the child's negative emotions' and, as a result, the child started taking more ownership of their own negative emotions. This is just a speculation and further work using direct observations and reports from the children themselves would be needed to corroborate it, but it contrasts with a general view (more at odds with our parental reports) that supportive parenting involves the parents simply treating the child as a psychological agent and therefore scaffolding their child's general skills of mentalization (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). Our speculation would be in line with those views that argue

that beneficial developmental effects on mental health are via a congruent sense of self (see Gilbert & Irons, 2009; Schore, 2002) rather than via reflective or mentalizing abilities in a more general sense.

Overall, we suggest that further work is needed using standardized measures and a randomized control group design in order to test the efficacy of a programme using *My First Emotions* to teach emotion validation to parents, and also further work using observational and self-report measures from children in order to examine how their sense of self is affected by emotion validation.

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