

# In the frontiers of **emotionally intelligent parenting**

Dr. Sophie Havighurst and Ms Ann Harley



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# In the frontiers of emotionally intelligent parenting

When most parenting programs sang the praise of behavioural reinforcement strategies, Dr. Sophie Havighurst and Ms Ann Harley realized there was a critical aspect missing – considering the role of children’s emotions.



## How did your work preceding the development of the Tuning in to Kids® program influence you to start working with emotional socialization in children?

**S.H:** During my training as a clinical psychologist I was working in forensic mental health, which made me aware that problems in understanding and regulating emotions played a large role in offenders criminal behaviour. I became interested in prevention and explored what forms of early intervention seemed effective.

I also spent a brief period with Professor Matt Sanders and Triple P, a behavioural parenting program. This program was one of the first to establish evidence for preventing behavioural difficulties in young children. I wanted to develop a similar program that had a greater focus on children’s skills in understanding and regulating emotions, and that addressed the responsiveness of parents to children’s emotions.

I moved to Melbourne in 1999 to do a PhD exploring this topic and during this time I was introduced to Ann Harley.

**A.H:** I had worked in schools and community organisations as a teacher, parent educator and counsellor for 15-20 years. Over this time I developed and facilitated parenting and support programs for parents, and conducted training workshops on parenting for professionals.

The experience taught me that most parents love their children and want to do their best. I noticed that the area parents struggled with most, was communicating effectively around emotions, especially during times of stress.

They often lacked the understanding and the skills to manage such times and the solutions offered from the literature at the time were to focus on managing children’s behaviour, without regard for the emotions driving the behaviour.

## How did you come to realize that you shared a common interest in emotion coaching, and how this interest made you join forces to produce a parenting programme?

A colleague who noticed that we shared an interest in Dr. John Gottman’s work around ‘Emotion Coaching’ introduced us in 1999. We realized that with our shared interest and our respective backgrounds, we could develop a program that was based on Gottman’s research.

**S.H:** Ann and I shared an interest in the work of the pioneers who had conducted a landmark study examining the way parents respond to children’s emotions. This study also investigated how parental response affected the way children manage emotions.

What excited Ann about Gottman’s work was that he was the first to provide a clear and accessible framework for teaching emotion communication to parents. Most importantly, however, he also provided strong evidence showing that when parents were emotionally attuned to their children, the children were more likely to do well academically, socially and emotionally, with fewer behaviour problems and improved health outcomes. Conversely, children with difficulties regulating emotion have a more difficult path ahead, with a higher risk of developing conduct disorder and other mental health difficulties or experience substance abuse, poor peer relations, criminal behaviour and violence as they grow older.

**A.H:** We saw that traditional parenting programs aiming to handle difficult behaviour were not always successful. Recognising the importance of the recent research, we realized that there was an aspect missing in the current parenting programs – an aspect that if included might increase the success rate for interventions used with children with difficult behaviour.

When we met and started to collaborate on the Tuning in to Kids® parenting program, incorporating the research on emotion coaching, with all we had learned over the years, I felt truly excited. I began to feel that we had arrived at something that would really benefit families.

## The Tuning in to Kids® program is based on previous research that you have translated into practice, backed up by a rigorous evidence base. How did you become convinced that you needed to provide an evidence base for your program?

**S.H:** My training in clinical psychology, PhD studies and my experience with Triple P, taught me that the best way to give a parenting program legitimacy was to provide evidence of its effectiveness. When Ann and I started working together, these ideas were still pretty ‘fringe’ and not encouraged by the establishment.

We were both very clear that this was a direction we wanted to take. We decided that we would not disseminate our program until we had enough evidence from randomized controlled trials to give our program the rigorous empirical backing that only a small number of programs had achieved.

# Lending an ear to the emotional state of your children.

Developing emotional competence is a crucial step towards successful socialisation of children. Realising there was a gap between research and practice on this topic, Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley turned the research behind emotion socialisation into an extensive evidence based parenting program – Tuning in to Kids®.

## A NON-BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH TO BEHAVIOUR

Behavioural problems in children are not a new phenomenon; they are likely to have existed since time immemorial. The way we deal with difficult behaviours in the youngest members of our society has, however, widely shifted with the social influences of the time at hand.

For our predecessors, strict discipline was often seen as a virtuous path to good behaviour. During the 19th century Psychology, instead, turned to research underscoring the value of reinforcement contingencies – awarding desirable behaviour while punishing less desirable behaviour. As the scientific tide again turned, research saw a shift in focus towards the importance of emotions influencing child development and behaviour.

The early research on this theme springs from the notion that emotions are integral to human relationships, and hence greater focus should be placed on emotions in child development. The research by Gottman, Katz and Hooen that excited Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley alike showed that behavioural problems in children were often tied to poor emotion socialisation in parenting. This research underscored the importance of the parent’s socialisation practices on the emotional development of the child.

Gottman and colleagues described a number of different parenting styles. Some parents are emotionally dismissive, often warm and involved, but avoid or shut down emotions in their children and themselves. Others are emotion disapproving, believing emotions to be harmful, manipulative or unnecessary. Yet other parents have a laissez-faire parenting style, allowing all emotions but without setting boundaries around behaviour, not assisting with problem solving and not teaching children

to understand and manage their emotions. Lastly, there are parents that are emotion coaching, noticing emotions in their children and seeing these moments as opportunities to be close and to teach their children. These parents also assist children in labelling their emotions, are empathic and accepting of the child’s emotions, and if necessary they help their child to problem solve or to set limits around behaviour.

## BRINGING THE RESEARCH TO LIFE

Tuning in to Kids® was born out of the realisation that this new research was not reaching those who needed it most. Starting out on a small scale, Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley set out to create a parenting program that helped parents to emotion coach their children and also integrated aspects of attachment theory, emotion-focused cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness, child development theories and the neuroscience on brain-behaviour relationships. Together Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley shaped the program to teach parents how to be emotionally responsive to their children as well as to help them understand and manage their own emotions.

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**It has made me a calmer parent and my child is calmer and we feel closer to each other. He is also better able to manage his behavior.**  
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In order to gather the evidence for whether the program was effective in helping parents and improving children’s emotional development as well as their behaviour, they assembled a battery of questionnaires and observation tools that allowed them to assess how parents responded to emotions in their children. Whether and how parents emotion coach proved to be challenging to measure. The



questionnaires available were often not accurate about what parents were doing when they or their children were really emotional.

“People often think they are emotion coaching, but when kids become emotional, it often brings out automatic reactions in parents that shut down the child’s expression of emotions or escalates it. Consequently, questionnaires are not always that accurate at capturing whether people are emotion coaching.” Working out these problems in evaluating this aspect of parenting required many years of trial and error to determine the best ways of measuring whether parents were learning to emotion coach.

## CONSTRUCTING AN EVIDENCE BASE

Starting out on a small scale, Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley set out to compile a pilot study assessing the effectiveness of their new program. The data from the pilot was encouraging enough to launch the first randomized controlled trials with parents in the community as well as parents with children who had clinical-level behaviour problems.

The first studies proved to be highly successful, showing significant improvements on nearly all outcome variables. Parents who received the Tuning in to Kids® program improved their ability to respond to children’s emotions in supportive and teaching ways. Parents were also much less likely to be dismissive or critical when their children were emotional. “Our



research often shows that parents reduce emotion dismissing with statistically large effect sizes while we get small to moderate effect sizes in increasing emotion coaching. Empathy usually also increases more than parents ability to scaffold and teach about emotions. However, we believe, and other research also shows, that if you reduce the critical and negative environment this makes a really big difference to children's development and wellbeing."

Furthermore, children of parents participating in the program experienced significant reductions in behavioural problems. This effect was most clear for the children who experienced behavioural difficulties at the onset of the study and who had clinical level problems, however Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley emphasize that Tuning in to Kids® is a program for all parents, promoting optimal development of all children. They want to avoid stigmatization of the program focusing only on children with behavioural problems. Since those first studies the program has been further adapted and disseminated to more than 3500 professionals who have been trained to deliver the program in a wide range of community and clinical settings.

#### EVER EXPANDING ADAPTATIONS

Since the first controlled trials, Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley have completed another four randomized controlled trials studying the effectiveness of the program in different contexts with their colleagues Dr. Katherine Wilson and Dr. Christiane Kehoe as well as many other research assistants and students. The program has now been expanded in a variety of directions, including programs aimed at parents of toddlers and teenagers (for which they are currently conducting randomised controlled trials), a program tailored to suit fathers, and programs targeting childcare workers. The program has also been evaluated in different settings to prove that the program retains its validity when used in a community, school or clinical setting. Modifications for children with anxiety, chronic illness and children who have experienced complex trauma have also been conducted. Future studies are planned with teachers, students and parents in a whole of school approach to Tuning in to Kids/Teens, and the team are also collaborating with international colleagues to evaluate the program for use in other countries.

Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley believe that

emotion coaching is a style of communication that allows the recipient to feel understood, no matter their age. A colleague at the University of Canberra has begun a study to investigate the effectiveness of the program in the aged care setting.

#### WITHOUT WESTERNISED LIMITATIONS

With the help of international efforts, the program materials have now been translated into German, Turkish, Persian, Hebrew, Somali, Vietnamese, Amharic, Arabic, Norwegian and Chinese. These translations are valuable not only for using the program outside Australia, but they are also invaluable tools in the local setting. Many parents attending the Tuning in to Kids® programs have a culturally heterogeneous background. These translations take into account the different needs of parents from other cultural circumstances, assuming a profound respect for each culture. However, the idea to equip parents with tools to handle emotions remains the same.

"All of us, from whatever cultural background, experience emotions the same way. However, our attitudes and beliefs about emotion are culturally prescribed and affect how we behave towards our children and ourselves."

Dr. Havighurst and Ms Harley are on a mission to improve child and family psychological health in the world: "We believe we can make a difference in how people treat children on a much larger scale." Considering what they have achieved in only fifteen years, they are likely to succeed in their mission.

## Researcher Profile



#### Dr. Sophie Havighurst

Senior Lecturer at Mindful, Centre for Training and Research in Development Health, Department of Psychiatry, University of Melbourne.

Dr. Havighurst is the Principal Investigator of the Tuning in to Kids® research program and a program author. She holds a diploma in clinical psychology and a PhD focusing on child psychology. She coordinates and teaches courses for child and adolescent mental health professionals and has a small private practice.

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Ms. Ann Harley manages the national and international training of the Tuning in to Kids® and Tuning in to Teens™ parenting programs and is a program author and Principal Trainer. She has been involved in delivering parent education for more than 30 years. She holds a MA in Education focusing on the Tuning in to Teens™ program.

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#### WEBSITES

**W:** <http://www.gottman.com/>

**W:** <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/Search?q=Melksham%20Emotion%20Coaching%20Project>

**W:** <http://www.ehcap.co.uk>

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