



Teaching Your Child to: Identify and Express Emotions

Does This Sound Familiar?

Maggie is playing with her four-year-old son. He selects a truck puzzle and begins matching and placing the pieces in the holes. He has a difficult time turning a piece around so that it will match the hole and fit. Maggie tells him, “Let me help you turn it the right way.” Her son pushes her hand away and says in an agitated voice, “Let me do it.” He tries to fit the piece in again, but is unsuccessful. He screams and throws the piece across the room and then throws the puzzle at Maggie.

What would you do if this happened in your home? Would you throw in the towel and quit for the night, maybe try again tomorrow? OR would you turn it around and create a brand new lesson, about helping your child understand and talk about his emotions?

The Focus

Young children deal with many of the same emotions adults do. Children get angry, sad, frustrated, nervous, happy, or embarrassed, but they often do not have the words to talk about how they are feeling. Instead, they sometimes act out these emotions in very physical and inappropriate ways. For example, when Maggie's son was frustrated, he threw the puzzle piece and the puzzle.

The Solution

Parents can help their children understand and express their emotions. The following strategies are some of the ways you can help your child express his feelings:

- Help your children understand their emotions by first giving the feelings names and then encouraging them to talk about how they are feeling. For example, you might say to your child, "Daddy left on a trip, you are sad. You said you want your Daddy." By giving your child a label for her emotions, you enable your child to develop a vocabulary for talking about feelings.
- Give children lots of opportunities to identify feelings in themselves and others. For example, you might say to your child, "Riding your bike is so much fun. I see you smiling. Are you happy?" Or you might point out a situation and ask your child to reflect on what someone else may be feeling: "Joey bumped his head on the slide. How do you think Joey feels?"
- Teach your children the different ways they can respond to specific feelings, conflicts, or problems. Talk about your own feelings with your children. "Remember yesterday when the water in the bathtub would not go down the drain? Mommy got so mad and do

you remember what my face looked like when I got mad? Can you make a mad face like Mommy's?" Talk with your children about different ways you deal with specific feelings. "When I get mad I take a deep breath, count to three, and then try to think of the best way to deal with my problem."

- Teach your child to identify and express their emotions in ways that your family and friends find acceptable. For example, you might tell your child "Sometimes Grandfather is angry when things don't go well at work. What does he do? He sits on the porch until he figures out what he wants to say about it. You should sit and think when you get angry."

The Steps

1. Explain the feeling by using words your child can easily understand. Try to use pictures, books, or videos to help get your point across. "Look at Little Red Riding Hood's face; she is so scared when she sees the wolf in her Grandma's bed!"
2. Teach your child the different ways we can deal with feelings. Let your child come up with ways she can deal with her feelings. Talk about positive and not so positive ways to express feelings. There are many strategies you can use to teach new ways to appropriately express feelings:
 - Use real-life examples or teach in the moment. For example, "You are having a difficult time putting your trike in the carport. You look frustrated. What can you do? I think you could ask for help or take a deep breath and try again. What do you want to do?"
 - Teach your child new ways to respond to feelings by discussing common situations that your child might remember or that



happen frequently. For example, "Yesterday, you were angry because Joey would not let you play with his truck. You were so mad that you hit him. When you feel angry that Joey won't let you have a turn, what should you do?"

- You can use children's books to talk about feelings. For example, ask your child when reading a book, "What is (character in book) feeling right now? How do you know? Have you ever felt that way? What do you do when you feel that way?"
- Keep it simple, use visuals or pictures to help get your point across, and always try to relate your lesson back to something that happens in your child's life.
- Teach your child new strategies to use when feeling emotions that may be expressed inappropriately (e.g., anger, frustration, sadness). Strategies to share with your child might include taking a deep breath when frustrated or angry, getting an adult to help resolve a conflict, asking for a turn when others won't share, asking for a hug when sad, and finding a quiet space to calm down when distressed.

3. Praise your child the first time he tries to talk about his feelings instead of just reacting. It is **REALLY** important to let your child know exactly what she did right and how proud you are of her for talking about feelings. It should always be OK to say what we are feeling. It's how we choose to show our feelings and respond to them that requires special effort.



4. Support your child to talk about feelings and practice her new strategies for expressing emotions appropriately every chance you get. For example, you can talk about feelings when you are playing a game, when you are riding in the car, or when you are eating dinner. There will be all kinds of things that happen every day that will be great opportunities for you to talk about feelings. The more often your child practices, the faster your child will learn.

WARNING – Do not try and practice when your child is in the middle of a “meltdown.” Use quiet, calm times to teach and practice the new strategies. For example, if your child is having a “meltdown” because she does not want to wait for a cookie until after dinner, she will not be in the mood to practice expressing her frustration with words, rather than a tantrum. In this situation, you have to be deal with her emotions (e.g., “I know you really want a cookie now, but that is not an option, we are going to eat dinner in 5 minutes. You may have a cookie after dinner.”). However, you can talk with your child about the incident after she is calm and discuss the best way for expressing those emotions (“When you are frustrated that you can’t have what you want, you can tell me, but you

can’t hit me or shout at me. Earlier, you wanted a cookie before dinner and you hit me. The next time you feel frustrated, you can tell me and then take a deep breath and calm down if you feel angry.”)

Practice Makes Perfect

Here are some activities that you can do with your child to help him or her understand feelings.

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Play **Make a Face** with your child. You start the game by saying, “I am going to make a face, guess what I am feeling by looking at my face.” Then, make a happy or sad face. When your child guesses the feeling word, respond by saying, “That’s right! Do you know what makes me feel that way?” Follow by describing something simple that makes you have that feeling (e.g., “Going to the park makes me happy.” “I feel sad when it rains and we can’t go to the park.”). Please note, this is not the time to discuss adult circumstances that are linked to your emotions (e.g., “When your Daddy doesn’t call me, I feel sad.”). Then say to your child, “Your turn, you make a face and I will guess what you are feeling.” Don’t be surprised if your child chooses the same emotion that you

just displayed; it will take time before your child can be creative with this game. Once you guess, ask your child to name what makes him have that emotion. Keep taking turns until your child shows you that he is not interested in continuing the game.

Share a story in a new way. Read a book to your child that shows characters who experience different emotions (e.g., sad, happy, scared, worried, confused, etc.). Stop on a page where the character is showing the expression. Ask your child “What do you think he is feeling?” “Why is he feeling that way?” or “Look at her face, how can you tell that she is ___?” Other questions could be “Have you ever felt ___? What make you feel that way?” or “What will happen next?” or “What should he do?”

Do not pause too long on one page and only continue the discussion as long as your child shows an interest.

Make an **emotion book** with your child. An easy project to do with your child is to create a homemade book. All you need is paper, crayons or markers, and a stapler. You can make a book about one emotion and have your child fill the pages with things that make her feel that way. For example, a “Happy Book” may have pictures that you and your child draw of things that make her happy, pictures cut out of magazines that are glued on the pages, or photographs of friends and family members. Another approach is to have the book be about a variety of feeling words and do a page on each of several emotions (happy, mad, surprised, scared, irritated, proud, etc.). For children who have a lot to say about their feelings, you may want to have them tell you a sentence about what makes them



feel an emotion so you can write the sentence on the page. Then, your child can cut out a picture to glue in the book or draw a picture to go with the emotion. Warning, this activity is more likely to be enjoyable to your child if you do it together, but might be difficult for your child to do alone.

Play “**Mirror, Mirror...what do I see?**” with your child. Using a hand mirror or a mirror on the wall, play this game with your child. Look in the mirror and say “*Mirror, mirror, what do I see?*” Then make an emotion face. Follow by naming the emotion by saying, “*I see a sad Mommy looking at me.*” Turn to your child and say “your turn.” Help your child remember the phrase “*Mirror, mirror what do I see?*” You may have to say it with your child. Then, tell your child to make a face and help him say the next sentence “*I see a happy Patrick looking at me.*” Don’t be surprised if your child always wants to use the emotion that you just demonstrated. Play the game until your child loses interest.

Teaching Feeling Words

We often only think of teaching common emotions like happy, sad, mad, etc. But there are many other feeling words that children should learn to express, such as the following:

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| Brave | Cheerful |
| Cheerful | Bored |
| Confused | Surprised |
| Curious | Proud |
| Disappointed | Frustrated |
| Embarrassed | Silly |
| Excited | Uncomfortable |
| Fantastic | Worried |
| Friendly | Stubborn |
| Generous | Shy |
| Ignored | Satisfied |
| Impatient | Safe |
| Important | Relieved |
| Interested | Peaceful |
| Jealous | Overwhelmed |
| Lonely | Loving |
| Confused | Tense |
| Angry | Calm |



Expressing Feelings

Sometimes children express their emotions in ways that are problematic. Your child might cry when frustrated or throw toys when angry. Here are some different ways you can teach your child to act on feelings:

- Ask for help
- Solve problems with words
- Say it, don’t do it (*say “I am mad” instead of throwing toys*)
- Tell a grown-up
- Take a deep breath
- Describe what you are feeling
- Think of a different way to do it
- Relax and try again
- Walk away
- Ask for a hug

Putting it All Together

Understanding emotions is a critical part of children’s overall development. It is up to adults to teach children to understand and deal with their emotions in appropriate ways. They are experiencing so many new and exciting things for the first time. It can be overwhelming! We need to be sure we always validate our children’s emotions and don’t punish them for expressing their feelings. You might want to remind your child that, “It’s ok to tell me how you feel, but it’s not ok to hurt others or things when you feel (name feeling).” Teach them about their emotions, help them come up with new ways to deal with emotions, give them lots of time to practice their new strategies, and always remember to give lots of positive encouragement when they use the new strategy instead of reacting in the “old” way!



The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



Child Care Bureau



Office of Head Start