

Emotional Literacy

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One of the important things parents do for their kids is teach them vocabulary for things that are part of their everyday life, ideas that are important to understand, and skills that will help them succeed in their future life. Some of the most essential vocabulary to teach is that of emotions. What words do we use to describe emotions? How do we recognize what someone else may be feeling? How do we recognize and manage our own feelings?

Understanding these ideas builds emotional intelligence. Kids with emotional intelligence:

- Experience fewer negative emotions overall *and* when they do have a negative emotion, they can calm themselves down more quickly
- Develop resilience - a wide array of coping skills for handling everyday frustrations
- Do better in school and at work – partially because they're better at focusing their attention on work and not being distracted by their feelings and partially because they have more empathy – which helps them succeed in relationships wherever they are.

Teaching the Words for Feelings

The four basic emotions are sad, mad, glad, and scared. But there are lots more nuanced words in each of those categories, and building your child's emotional vocabulary helps them better understand and describe their feelings, like articulating the difference between feeling disappointed or hurt or betrayed, feeling irritable, annoyed, or outraged. When you see someone having a feeling (in person, or in a book or video), label it and talk about it. When you're feeling emotional and your child notices, label it and talk about it. When your child is overwhelmed by a feeling, just having you label it can help them to calm down.

Teaching how to recognize feelings in others

We want our children to be empathetic, and we want them to be able to interpret how others are feeling. But those are learned skills that need to be taught. Often, people's *words* tell us little about how they feel... we figure out their feelings by looking at their faces, watching body language, and listening to the tone of their voice. We can help our children learn this skill.

- When you're reading any book (or watching any movie), point to a character and ask your child how that character is feeling. Talk about how you can tell.
- When people watching, help your child notice expressions and body language. Ask them to guess how the person is feeling. If you see someone who is upset, like a child crying on a playground, use this as a chance to talk (quietly) with your child about how that child is feeling.
- When playing pretend games, or playing with toys, role play lots of different emotions and responses to situations that would provoke emotional reactions.

Teaching them to recognize their own feelings and what triggers them

- Label: When a child is expressing strong emotions – maybe crying loudly, or yelling, or clinging, label the feeling. (Do your best guess at what they are feeling!)
- Ask them to label: Once they've learned the vocabulary - ask them how they're feeling. You can suggest options but try not to push a feeling on them. "I'm wondering if you are feeling ____."
- Help them notice cues: Help them learn to recognize subtle signs that a feeling is *starting* to happen. Tears welling up or feeling 'choked up' mean they're sad. Steely glares or clenched fists may show they're getting angry. It's easier to manage a feeling when it's just starting to build!

- Help them describe how BIG the feeling is. You could use a thermometer image, where low on the thermometer, they're feeling cool and collected, and then they start getting heated up, and then they're boiling over with big feelings. Or you could use a scale from 1 – 5. If they can notice a feeling when they're angry level 1 or 2, they can usually take a few deep breaths and calm themselves down. If they're angry level 3 or 4, they'll need to work hard to use their calm-down strategy. If they get up to 5, they're usually in meltdown and need an adult's help to calm down. Help them realize that the earlier they catch something, the more manageable it is.
- Preventing: Once they can recognize a feeling coming on, help them learn about triggers: what causes them to feel that way? What can they do to reduce those triggers, or what can they do to keep themselves calm when they can't avoid a situation?

Teaching appropriate expression of emotion and calm-down strategies

It is natural and healthy for us to feel emotions in response to things that happen. Having feelings is OK! For children and for parents. (And this includes "negative" emotions!)

We can help our children learn about appropriate ways to express emotion: talking, drawing, crying, stomping their feet or jumping it out... whatever you think is appropriate to the situation.

Also teach calm down strategies. For some kids, just taking a few deep breaths is enough. Some need a more systematic approach. One approach is called the "turtle technique" and has 5 steps:

1. Notice you're having a problem. 2. Stop. 3. Take 3 deep breaths. 4. "go into your shell" and calm down, 5. Try again – consider trying other solutions.

Do empathize, but also set limits

Some ways of expressing emotions are OK – like saying you're mad or drawing an angry picture. Some are not OK – like hitting someone or breaking something because you're mad. We want to teach our children that their FEELINGS are always OK. But sometimes their BEHAVIOR is not. We can, and should, set appropriate limits on behavior. "I understand that you're angry – I would have been angry too! But it's never OK to hurt other people. Let's think about other ways you could have responded."

And we don't change the rules just because something makes them sad: "I know you're sad that I said no more candy. My job is to keep you healthy, so we have to stick to our 2 sweets a day rule."

Teaching about causes for feelings – practicing emotions

Watch movies or plays with a wide range of emotional experiences. Read books to your child that show a wide range of emotions. Read them with plenty of emotional tone in your voice. Talk about the feelings. Ask your child when they have felt that way. Ask them what helps when they feel that way.

It's OK to let them read sad books and watch sad movies. Letting your child sob over a book lets them practice those feelings, when they know it's just fiction and they can let it go. And it's helpful to practice grief before you experience it in real life.

Won't talking about being sad just prolong the feeling?

Some parents struggle with seeing their child sad. They often try to "cheer them up" as quickly as possible, offering toys, food, or other distractions to "make it better." This could lead to long-term bad habits, like using food for comfort or practicing retail therapy. But, more importantly, it doesn't honor the child's emotional experience, instead dismissing it, and it doesn't teach the child that they can sit with their sadness for a while and then move through sadness into feeling better.

For more info: For a longer version of this article, recommendations for kids books, and more resources, check out: <http://gooddayswithkids.com/2015/02/13/emotional-literacy/>