

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 and skills we teach are about 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 their increased empathy, which helps them succeed in relationships wherever they are.

Teach the Words for Feelings

You've already taught your child lots of words, right? From dog to banana to daddy and bye-bye. You can easily teach feeling words. Start with the three basic emotions: "sad", "mad" and "scared." As your child gets older, you can teach words for a much wider range and degree of feelings. When you see someone having that feeling (in person, or in a book or video), label it and talk about it. When you're feeling emotional yourself and your child notices, label it and talk about it. When your child is overwhelmed by a feeling, just having you give it a name can help them calm down.

Teach 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, listening to the tone of their voice, and understanding what emotions might typically arise in various situations. We can help our children learn this skill of interpreting emotions.

- 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 you are people watching, help your child notice expressions and body language. Ask them to guess how the person is feeling. If you see a child crying on a playground, use this as an opportunity to talk (quietly) with your child about how that child is feeling.
- Play the "make a face" game: tell them to "make a sad face", "make a silly face."
- Make simple stick puppets with sad faces, happy faces, etc. and do puppet shows.

Stages of learning to recognize their own feelings

- Label: When a young toddler is expressing strong emotions – maybe crying loudly, or yelling, or clinging, label how you think they are feeling.
- Ask them to label: Once they've learned the vocabulary - if they're emotional, ask them how they're feeling. You can suggest options, but try not to push a feeling on them.
- Help them notice cues: Once they've got a grasp on what a feeling is, help them learn to recognize when that feeling is *starting* to happen. Help them notice the body cues that tell them

they're starting to feel strongly. Tears welling up or feeling 'choked up' mean they're sad. A steely glare, furrowed brow, or clenched fists may be clues that they're getting angry.

- Preventing / Managing: 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 it?

Teach appropriate expression of emotion

It is natural and healthy for us to feel emotions in response to things that happen. Having feelings is OK! (And this includes "negative" emotions!) Some ways of expressing those 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 let our children know that their FEELINGS are always OK. But sometimes their BEHAVIOR is not. We can, and should, set appropriate limits on behavior.

We should also help our children learn appropriate ways to express emotion.

For toddlers and preschoolers:

- Sing the song *If you're Happy and You Know it*, but add in verses like "If you're Mad and you know it, stomp your feet" and "If you're sad and you know it, you can cry."
- You could read books like the series "Feelings for Little Children", which include [When You're Mad and You Know It](#) that gives options for ways to express that feeling.
- Offer physical ways to let anger out, like running around the house, or stomping their feet, or hitting a pillow, or pounding on play-dough.

For elementary school age – talk about appropriate times and places to express emotions, and help them learn how to calm themselves at school and in social situations and then to process those emotions when they're at home and/or with close friends and family.

Teach about causes for feelings – practicing emotions

Watch movies 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.

As your child gets older, 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 move on. It's helpful to *practice* grief before you experience it in real life.

A particularly helpful resource for kids age 4 and up is the Pixar movie *Inside Out*. It does a very nice job of simplifying emotions down to a few easily understood characters, and also makes clear that they all have an important role in our emotional world.

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, it dismisses it, and it doesn't teach the child that they can move through sadness into feeling better.

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