

FOCUS

On Early Childhood Mental Health



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Emotional Literacy

Emotional literacy is a fancy term for the ability to recognize, understand and express emotions or feelings in appropriate ways. Developing emotional literacy is one of the most important tasks for young children. If children learn early how to describe and express their emotions in healthy ways and to accurately “read” and respond to the emotions of others, they will be less likely to get into fights, better able to handle frustration, and more likely to do well in school.

Tips for helping your child understand and express emotions/feelings:

- Express your own feelings. Talk out loud about what you are feeling throughout the day.
- Label your child's feelings. For example, if Grandpa drops by unexpectedly and your child runs to hug him, you can say, “Wow, you're really happy and surprised to see grandpa!” Ask questions that give your child examples of feeling words: “Are you feeling sad? Frustrated? Scared? Excited?”
- Play games, sing songs and read stories with feeling words. A good song is “If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.” You can add verses like “If you're angry and you know it, stop and think.” Or play a game of “feeling face charades,” by letting your child guess what feeling you are showing on your face. Or when you read stories, talk about what the characters in the story are feeling.
- Show empathy—or understanding—of what your child is feeling. Say, “I know you're sad today. I felt sad too when my best friend had to go away.”
- Ask your child to talk about what he or she is feeling. Say, “What's making you feel that way? Let's talk about it.”
- Use art activities—like drawing, sculpture, music, dance or drama—to give your child a chance to explore and express feelings. For example, play music that expresses different moods and tell your child to dance to the music in a way that shows how the music makes them feel.
- Encourage your child to feel empathy for others. When another child shows excitement, anger or sadness, say something like, “Maria is angry because Jared took away her toy. Remember when you felt angry? What can we do to help her feel better?”

Sources: “Fostering Emotional Literacy in Young Children: Labeling Emotions,” *What Works Brief 21*, from the Center on the Emotional and Social Foundations of Early Learning (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/briefs/wwb21.pdf>); “Nurturing Emotional Literacy,” *National Association for the Education of Young Children* (<http://www.naeyc.org/ece/2002/08.asp>)