

Teaching Your Child About Emotions



Identifying, understanding and responding to the emotions of others are very important social skills for all of us to have. These skills help us to understand and develop relationships with other people. When we know that someone we care about is sad, we might offer them a hug or a few kind supportive words to cheer them up. When we think that someone is afraid, we may try to comfort and support them. These types of interactions help us bond with each other. Most of us learned skills such as how to “read” other people’s facial expressions, tones of voice and/or body gestures very easily and naturally when we were very young. We learned through social interactions with peers, parents and other adults. We somehow picked up this important social information without it being explicitly *taught* to us. For some children, identifying and understanding emotions does not come so easily. Some children might not notice important nonverbal cues (such as the shape of a person’s eyebrows, the movements of the body or the tone and pace of the voice) that are used to tell the difference between emotions. Without being able to correctly identify and understand the emotions of others, children are more likely to respond inappropriately during interactions. For these children, emotions must be taught explicitly or very clearly. By four to six years old, most children can recognize and understand the basic emotions: *happy, sad, angry* and *afraid*. More complex emotions (such as pride, guilt and shame) are built on the basic emotions. A child should have a good understanding of the basic emotions before she is introduced to the more complex emotions. As a parent, teacher or early childhood professional you can try these games and activities with your child to introduce and practice the recognition of emotions. **1. Bringing your child’s attention to emotions** Some children need to be taught to look at faces to get social information. Find as many opportunities as possible for your child to practise recognising, labelling and responding to her own emotions, as well as other people’s emotions. Here are a couple of examples:

- If your child is angry because she can not have a second popsicle, say, “You are angry right now because you want another popsicle and I said ‘No’. Your hands are folded and you are using a big, loud voice.”
- If your child is happy that she gets to colour, say, “You are happy because you get to colour.” Your mouth is smiling and your eyes are big and wide. You are using a happy voice.

Use naturally occurring opportunities to help your child recognise emotions. When someone in your child's environment is expressing an emotion, point this out for her and say, "Look, Janet is smiling. She feels happy." Here are some other suggestions:

1.

- While watching TV or videos use your remote control to pause a scene and point out and label a specific emotion.
- When someone (family members, teachers, friends, etc) is expressing an emotion, use this opportunity to label the particular emotion

2. Learning the Names of Emotions Once your child is looking closely at faces, it is time to teach the names of the emotions. Start with the basic emotions: *happy*, *sad*, *angry*, and *afraid*.

- Start by using realistic photos. You can use familiar faces through photographs, pictures from magazines, etc.
- Show your child a picture and label it, "happy", "sad", etc. Depending on your child's ability, you could say, "The boy is feeling happy."
- Place two different emotion pictures on the table in front of your child and ask her to point to or give you an emotion (e.g., you can say "Give me a happy face"). At first, you may need to help your child give you the correct picture.
- When your child can select the correct picture without any help, introduce a new emotion.
- Increase the number of pictures your child has to choose from until there are four different emotion pictures for her to choose from.
- When your child has learned the names of the basic emotions using realistic pictures, use a variety of other pictures and drawings of emotions to help her "generalize" the emotion and the name. In other words, to recognize the emotion on different faces and in various settings.

3. Saying the Names of Emotions When your child knows the names of the four basic emotions, it is time for her to try to say the names.

- Show your child a picture of someone expressing an emotion and ask, "How is she feeling?"
- You might have to help your child at first by saying (modeling) the name of the emotion for her to copy.
- Introduce a new emotion when your child can successfully label the emotion on which you are working.

4. Acting out the Emotions Now it is time for your child to try acting out the emotions.

- Stand in front of a mirror with your child and take turns "making faces". For example, make an angry face and ask, "How do I feel"? If your child can label your emotion, tell her, "Now you make an angry face".
- Explain to your child what you are doing to make the emotion ("My eyes are getting smaller and my mouth is getting tight, like a little ball").

5. Role Playing Depending on your child's ability, you could try to "role play" situations in which certain emotions are likely to be felt. For example, you could pretend that you are going to buy ice cream and feel happy about this.

- Take turns with your child acting and guessing the emotions.
- Use exaggerated nonverbal language, gestures and facial expressions at first. As your child becomes more comfortable with recognising emotions, you can act more naturally.
- Set up dramatic play situations at home to practise expressing and recognising emotions.

6. Video Modelling Many children love to watch TV. You can use this interest to help teach your child more about emotions.

- Make short videos of other adults or children expressing an emotion in an appropriate situation.
- Watch the video with your child and help her label the emotion.
- Point out the important features such as the shape of the mouth, eyes and eyebrows, specific body movements and gestures and the sound of the voice.

7. Games If your child enjoys playing board games, use this great opportunity to practise what you've already taught about emotions. Take a look at the For More Information box for a list of fun games that can help you teach emotions. **8. Story books** Books are another great way to help your child learn about other people's emotions in different situations. Look for books with your child's favourite television or movie character to make the learning fun. Here are a few other books that you may find helpful to read with your child:

- "*How are you peeling?*" by S. Freymann, J. Elffers
- "*The social skills picture book: Teaching play, emotion and communication to children with autism.*" by J. Baker