

Emotional Development. Teaching Emotions to Children

Learning how to communicate and how to handle emotions are big skills for young children. They begin to learn these skills early in their development but emotions can be confusing and overwhelming which can often lead to behavioural communication and problems.

When I work with parents at my clinic, I encourage them to teach their children emotion regulation skills. Emotion regulation is about teaching children about emotions, helping them to identify, communicate and regulate strong emotions. I encourage parents to provide their children with emotional education to empower their children and to give them enduring tools to manage life's challenges.

Emotions are not something to be ignored or invalidated. The emotional wellbeing of children is just as important as their physical health. Emotional development aids good mental health and resilience.

By allowing emotional expression, you can help your child:

- Express themselves and manage a range of emotions
- Feel safe and secure
- Adjust well to change
- Build self-confidence
- Regulate their emotions
- Build tolerance to frustration
- Foster healthy interactions and relationships
- Feel less overwhelmed

Here are some exercises and strategies to help emotional development and expression for children.

Use Language To Describe Emotions: Help your child identify and name emotions. Naming emotions helps soothe a child. Help your child build vocabulary for different feelings.

Use Art: Encourage your child to draw or colour their feelings.

Name Your Feeling Game: Use games or creative ways to teach your child the names of a range of emotions. Try to ban "I'm ok" with this game.

Create A Feelings Chart With Photos Of Emotions: These charts and photos help children learn their emotions but also they learn how to recognise other people's emotions and facial expressions.

Read Books About Feelings. There are lots of child friendly books that talk about feelings. Some ideas include: *Lots of Feelings* by Shelly Rotner, *The Feelings*

Book and Feelings Flashcards by Tom Parr. Books offer a great way to discuss emotions from a safe distance.

Create A 'Check-In-Moment' Or 'Reflection Time': No matter what age your child is, having time to *check in* and reflect on how their day went, how they felt with any significant event from the day and how they feel in the 'check in' moment encourages emotional expression and effective communication.

Working With Anxiety: There is a common misconception that anxiety 'is a negative emotion' and 'unsafe'. This is not true. Anxiety, can feel uncomfortable but it is not dangerous. However, when we get caught up thinking negatively about this emotion we communicate to the body 'danger' which then triggers the amygdala in the brain and the body prepares for action leading to the physical symptoms of anxiety. Our misinterpretation about this emotion often lead to increased anxiety. Therefore, it is important to communicate the facts about this emotion so that children do not try to avoid this feeling or fear it. If they develop a healthy relationship with anxiety they will be less likely to avoid change and be able to problem solve and manage this emotion throughout their life.

Validating Emotions: When your child expresses their emotion, let your child know that it is ok to feel that emotion and that emotions are not dangerous. Emotions are a natural and important part of life. Try not to change their emotion. By communicate this fact, it encourages emotional expression and can often prevent secondary emotions such as shame for how they are feeling. It is also beneficial to normalise emotions by communicating that you understand their feelings, that you too have felt the same emotion. After you validate their emotion, you can then move onto problem solving skills in how to manage emotions and letting them suggest their own solutions. If your child communicates through misbehaving, take time to explore their emotion but set clear limits on behaviour.

Observation: Observe both verbal and non-verbal cues in your child such as facial expression, tone of voice and gestures. Also, be mindful of your own emotions and try to work on daily mindful observation and awareness of your emotions as this in turn supports your own wellbeing.

Be A Role Model: As with all parts of parenting, you are a role model. Practicing responsible emotional regulation and problem solving skills will go a long way in helping your child's emotional well-being. Any opportunity to model emotions and guide your children is an opportunity for them to grown and develop emotionally.