

## Children and Emotions

Young children are in the process of learning about emotions, elaborating on the possibilities until they can eventually have and deal with the full range of human emotions. They tend to show their emotions more quickly and strongly than adults, with fewer gradations, and they often don't know what their feelings are or what to do about them. Adults have to help children identify their emotions—all of them, the hard to have ones and the more pleasant to have ones—and then learn how to act on them appropriately.

Before we can help children with their emotions we adults need to do several things.

- Examine our own emotions and responses to events in our own lives.
- Be aware of how we react to children's emotional displays. How do we feel when children are angry or sad? Do we need children to be happy so we can be happy? We need to work on how we respond to children so we can help them learn.
- Learn about children's emotional development, so that we have appropriate expectations. Take into account their age, developmental levels, individual abilities, temperaments and personalities. Also consider immediate states such as thirst, hunger, or tiredness, and life situations and changes such as a move or a new sibling.
- Build a trusting relationship with children. Have a history of meeting their needs reliably and being predictable and trustworthy.
- Know that this takes time and repetition, and lots of consistency.

When we feel secure in our own emotions and can express them in ways we control, we can help children learn to identify their feelings and then start to understand others' feelings.

- Identify pleasant feelings as well as hard to have feelings. If we only help children identify feelings like angry, sad or frustrated, how will they know when they're feeling content, happy, or joyful?
- Point out what you see and make an educated guess. "Your face is smiling. Does that mean you're happy about playing?"
- Point out other people's faces. "His face has tears on it. He is crying. He might be sad."
- Point out the emotions in books, especially when the words and illustrations match. "This sounds scary and look at his face—he does look scared."
- Label your own feelings with simple words and let your face match the words and let words and expression match the event. For example, don't say you're sad when you're actually frustrated.

At the same time children are learning to label feelings with words, they have to learn to act on feelings appropriately. For this, they also need our help.

- Accept all feelings, no matter how strong they are, how quickly they change, or how uncomfortable they are for you.
- Have predictable routines, so children have a good idea of what's expected at any given time. Give plenty of warning before changes.
- Have consistent limits for behaviors. Actively teach children ways to express their feelings. We accept all feelings, but not all behaviors. Give children controlled freedom—set the boundaries within which children get to make choices. For example, teach children what is ok to do when they're angry and what is not ok.
- Be an example of expressing emotions appropriately. Be explicit about expressing all sorts of emotions. Do “play by play” talk about what you're feeling and how you're handling your feelings.
- Remember that just as you aren't responsible for “fixing” your child's feelings, children aren't responsible for adults' feelings. They need to learn how to behave appropriately because it's the right thing to do, not because it makes us happy.
- Give children plenty of time to play on their own. Children often act out their feelings as they play. They also do things that make them feel challenged, satisfied and successful—true sources of self-esteem.
- Give children time to play with peers, in a safe place with help to deal with emotions. Peers can trigger many strong emotions in children that parents don't provoke. The only way to learn to deal with these feelings is through practice.
- Special time. Give your undivided attention to your child during special time “dates”. This give a strong base of trust and love for all the other emotional work we have to do to help children have their feelings and grow to understand them and know what to do about them.
- Unconditional love through it all.