

Helping Children Navigate Big Feelings

As young children begin to explore their world and develop important language and learning skills, you will one day realize they have grown into their own little person. As our children learn to express themselves, their personalities shine though with LOTS of big feelings and emotions!

According to a national parent survey conducted by Zero to Three (2015), two-thirds of parents (66%) believe that children age 2 or younger should have the ability to control their emotions (e.g., not throw a tantrum when upset). However, according to research, this ability does not actually begin to develop until around 3.5 to 4 years. Understanding what your child is capable of when it comes to emotions and self-control is half the battle when figuring out how you can help your child through the emotional ups and downs of the early years.

Developing Emotional IQ

Taking the time to notice and label emotions helps kids begin to pay attention to how they are feeling. This is important because paying attention to our emotions is the first step to learning how to manage them.



Sometimes just naming an emotion helps to defuse it. Too often we try to pretend we aren't feeling negative emotions until it's too late and we are feeling terrible (from frustrated to enraged; disappointed to meltdown). Acknowledging an emotion feels validating and helps you begin to think constructively about what to do with that feeling.

Parents can help teach children to do this by modeling it in their own behavior. For example, if you are upset because you forgot something at the grocery store, share that feeling: "I'm so frustrated right now! I forgot the milk!" Then, after you've acknowledged how you feel, you can model coping and problem solving skills. You might say, "I'm going to take some deep breaths to calm down — that often helps me." Then once you're calm, you can say, "Now how can I solve this problem?" Brainstorm ideas together with your child.

Children will begin to pick up on the skills that you model for them, but they also need some extra support as they begin to learn how to deal with their emotions. If you notice your child is beginning to look upset, ask them to describe how they are feeling in their body. Can they label their feeling?

Make sure if your child tells you that she's feeling sad, or anxious, or angry, you don't immediately try to talk them out of it. Sometimes hearing "Oh, it isn't that bad!" can make kids feel like



their emotions are wrong and inadvertently teach them that they shouldn't share how they are feeling. Instead, you can validate the emotion ("Yes, that does sound frustrating" or "You do look disappointed") and then encourage healthy ways of dealing with that feeling.






Heading Off Big Emotions

Another important part of a child learning to consciously label their emotions is that it encourages them to start paying attention to how they feel, which means that they might notice an emotion earlier, before it starts to feel overwhelming.

Parents can sometimes be blindsided by the strong emotions children show during tantrums. But kids don't go from calm to sobbing on the floor in an instant — even if it seems like that. Emotions build over time, like a wave. Kids can learn to manage those emotions that seem overwhelming by noticing and labeling them earlier, before that wave gets too big.

Many kids benefit from rating how strong their emotions are on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being calm and 10 being furious. You can model doing this, too. When you are feeling frustrated because you forgot to get milk at the grocery store, you might announce that you're at a 4. It might feel silly to do this at first, but it teaches kids to pause and notice how they are feeling. For kids who appreciate visual aids, something like a "feelings thermometer or chart" might help.

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*for more ideas on teaching children about emotions throughout daily life, check out this article:
<https://www.ecmhc.org/ideas/emotions.html>*

5	Rage, Furious	
4	Angry, Mad	
3	Frustrated, Confused, Annoyed, Sad	
2	Nervous, Worried, Anxious	
1	Happy, Calm, Satisfied, Pleased, Okay	

The Book Nook

The Way I Feel / *Así es como me siento*
 by Janan Cain

Grumpy Bird
 by Jeremy Tankard

Ruby Finds a Worry
 by Tom Percival

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For your local parenting resources visit us at:
orparenting.org

References

- Tuning In: Self-Control
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1601-tuning-in-self-control>
- Helping Kids Deal With Big Emotions
<https://childmind.org/guide/parents-guide-to-problem-behavior/helping-kids-deal-with-big-emotions/>
- Ideas for Teaching Children about Emotions
<https://www.ecmhc.org/ideas/emotions.html>

