

Emotions & Empathy

Looking for ways to help your children do well in school, get along with others, and manage their feelings and behavior? Teaching them to be emotionally “smart” can help them do all of those things—and make them less apt to participate in bullying. Use these simple strategies to build important emotional skills like identifying feelings, expressing emotions in healthy ways, and having empathy for others.



Name their feelings

Kids need names for feelings. Being able to label emotions such as anger or sadness helps them recognize their emotions when they happen. In turn, knowing what they're feeling can help them find ways to cope.

To build your youngsters' "feelings vocabulary," describe emotions you see them experiencing. *Examples:* "I saw you throw the puzzle pieces down. You seem frustrated." "When Sarah wouldn't share her toys, you looked sad." When reading books together, talk about what the characters might be feeling, such as, "This little boy is walking away with his head down. His friends don't want to play. How do you think he feels?"

Another idea is to make cards with names of emotions on one side and pictures representing each feeling on the other. For young children, start with basic emotions like happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and disgust. As they become more familiar with their emotions, consider adding others, like love, pride, confidence, security, loneliness, nervousness, embarrassment, and jealousy.

Connect faces with feelings

To be emotionally smart, it's important for children to learn how to "read" others' feelings by noticing their

body language and facial expressions. Why? Being able to identify another person's feelings is an important part of nurturing empathy—a concern for others that helps prevent bullying.

To teach this skill, incorporate simple games into daily routines. At home, make faces in the mirror and name the emotion you're displaying (surprised, excited, mad). Or act out emotions for each other to guess. When you watch TV, turn down the volume, and talk about the characters' emotions. ("That person's jaw is clenched, and his arms are crossed. He looks mad.")

Give them guidelines

Once your kids are able to recognize their feelings, provide ground rules for managing them. A good rule of thumb is, "When expressing anger, you cannot hurt yourself, others, or property." Also, let your children know what they can do. For example, they might run in the yard, push on a wall, draw





an angry picture, punch a pillow, scrunch up some newspaper, or act out their feelings with puppets.

You can also show your children ways to relax when they're nervous or upset. Encourage them to breathe in deeply while counting to three and then exhale slowly. Or have them close their eyes and tense all their muscles, count to six, and then release. They could also imagine being in a peaceful place, such as the beach.

Act with empathy

Chances are you're already teaching your kids empathy, or concern for others' feelings, without even realizing it. Just meeting their needs helps them learn to care for others.

Whenever possible, find opportunities to help your youngsters think about how they would feel in someone else's shoes. While reading a book, you might say, "Oh no! The little girl's sandcastle got messed up. How do you think she feels? What might make her feel better?" Together, brainstorm ideas like offering to help her rebuild the castle.



Praise the positive

If your children do something mean or inappropriate, explain why you disapprove. *Example:* "It was unkind to tease Michael about his lisp. That probably made him sad. Let's think about how you might feel if someone made fun of how you talk."

Keep in mind that it's more effective to compliment behavior you do want than to punish behavior you don't want. When your youngsters handle their feelings well or show concern for others, be sure to let them know. *Examples:* "It was smart of you to go calm down in your room." "Grandma was so happy you called today!"

Lead by example

When it comes to expressing feelings and showing empathy, your example makes the biggest impression.

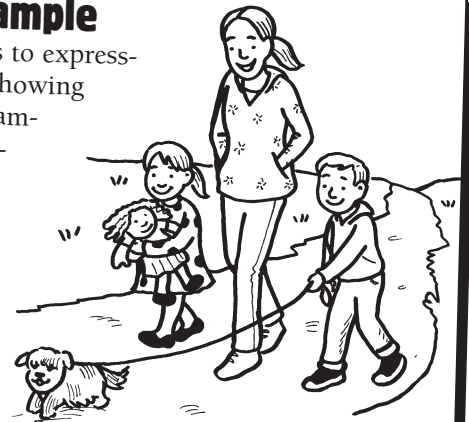
You can show your kids how you'd like them to act when they feel lousy by letting them see you work out your feelings

in safe, healthy ways. For example, you might say, "I had a long day at work. Want to go for a nice walk with me?" Other strategies for relieving stress include breathing deeply, taking a warm bath, calling a friend, or writing in a journal. *Tip:* It's okay to tell your children how you're feeling, but only to a point. They shouldn't feel overwhelmed or that they need to comfort you.

If you have an outburst in front of your youngsters, address it with them. Let them know why you were upset. Then, explain that you handled your feelings the wrong way and that you'll try to do better next time.

Example: "I'm frustrated because we just bought our car and it needs repairs. But I shouldn't have slammed the door. Next time, I'll try to cool down by counting to 10."

Finally, let your children see you demonstrating empathy. For instance, you might take a meal to an elderly neighbor or put money in a donation box. Tell your kids what you're doing and why. *Example:* "Mrs. Smith lives alone. She enjoys having visitors and getting a nice, warm meal."



Early Years