

Talking with preschoolers about emotions

Just like adults, children need to develop strategies for managing their emotions, so that they can build social-emotional skills. When children are more socially and emotionally aware and skilled, they can more effectively navigate relationships, calm down and problem solve when challenges arise. But unlike many adults, it can be difficult for children to recognize and understand emotions in themselves and others without adult support. The process of calming down when upset and using words to describe feelings and address challenges requires a lot of practice. It also requires a lot of adult support. When adults provide support and explanations, it helps children understand what they can do to manage their feelings. Children who learn how to understand emotions in themselves and others are better able to regulate their own responses to strong emotions.



Helping children to identify and label emotions is an important first step. Many preschoolers do not yet have the vocabulary to identify feeling words like angry or frustrated, or have the skills to “read” facial cues or to interpret body language. Adults support children’s social-emotional development when they label and talk about emotions.

Support children’s emotional understanding:

- Ask children how they feel and notice children’s feelings throughout the day. For example, when a child has a concern or problem, ask questions or make comments like, “How are you feeling?” or “It looks like you might be feeling sad about something.”
- Talk with children throughout the day about emotions. For example, when reading books to children, label the characters’ emotions and point out the facial expression and body language of the characters in books.
- Talk about how you are feeling during the day in appropriate ways. For example, “I am feeling happy today because today we are going on our field trip!” or “I am feeling sad today because I had to take my sick dog to the vet.” Direct children to look at your facial expressions and body language as you say, “How can you tell I’m feeling happy today?”
- Talk about how people might feel in different situations to help children understand the different contexts of feelings and that all people have feelings. For example, when reading books or talking with children about their own lives, ask questions like, “Why do you think she felt that way? How could you tell she was feeling sad?”
- Label and define feelings for children when they do not have the words to express how they are feeling. For example, “It looks like you might be concerned that you won’t get a turn on the swings today. That feeling is called worried. Let’s figure out a plan to help you with the problem if you are feeling worried.”

When children experience strong emotions, it’s important for adults to support their efforts to calm down so they will be better able to talk about how they are feeling. After children learn how to calm down and talk about how they are feeling, they can then begin to problem solve. When children are able to problem solve challenges, they are better able to focus on tasks, to learn, to form friendships and to navigate social situations. Talking about problems and how to solve them helps children develop more flexible thinking, and helps them to think about different ways to solve a problem. As children are able to better problem solve on their own it helps build their confidence and sense of “I can do it!” attitude.

Support children’s self-regulation and problem-solving skills:

- Help children when they need to calm down. For example, when it looks like a child is beginning to get upset say, “It looks like this is a good time to calm down. Let’s take a deep breath together.”
- Help children frame how they are feeling so that they can talk about the problem. For example, after a child has calmed down, reinforce feeling talk and problem-solving talk by saying, “You took a breath and calmed down, now you can say how you are feeling and what the problem is. Then we can figure out how to solve the problem.”
- Model feeling talk and problem solving throughout the day. For example, “I think I need to take a deep breath and calm down. I’m feeling frustrated because I can’t find the book I was going to read to you. I’ll have to think where I put it. I had it when I walked over to the book nook. If I walk over there, maybe I’ll find it.”



Helping children develop emotional understanding requires repeated and intentional practice. Adults support children’s development when they help children identify, label and talk about emotions, and when they support children’s efforts around problem solving.

- Encourage children to share their feelings with each other. For example, when problems arise, encourage children to talk with each other about their feelings and about the problem. This process helps children label their feelings so that they can calm down, talk about a problem and talk about a solution to the problem.
- Help children make the connection that all feelings are ok, but not all behaviors are ok. For example, “It is ok to feel frustrated when you have to wait your turn for your favorite center. It is not ok to push your friend.”
- Be a cheerleader for children when they are problem solving! For example, “Tamara, you calmed down and told Jeremiah how you were feeling. Then you talked to Jeremiah about how to solve the problem so you could both play with the blocks. You were both great problem solvers!” Be specific when offering praise to children about their problem-solving efforts.

References:

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Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning
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