



Teaching Children to Understand and Respond to Feelings

Children often struggle not only with understanding their feelings, but also relating to other people's feelings. These skills are critical for personal well being and building relationships. This article includes steps for teaching children to understand and manage their feelings as well as identify and respond to other people's feelings.

1. Identifying Feelings – Teach children to recognize when they have a specific feeling. Whether happy, sad, or angry the first step in coping with a feeling is identifying it. Help children identify feelings by discussing emotions when they occur. If a child is angry say, "I see you are angry. You have your arms crossed and are stomping your feet." Another tool is to role play times when specific emotions surface. Use novel examples as well as recent experiences for the child. Discuss and write about different feelings in a feelings journal. Use the journal to write about events and the emotions, responses, and consequences the events elicited.



From the story *Feeling Scared*

2. Planning for Strong Feelings – Help children cope with intense feelings by creating coping strategies. Have a quiet place for children to take a break when angry or sad. Give children tools and teach them how and when to use them such as a stress ball or a trampoline. These tools help children release energy in a positive way. Encourage children to use words or write about their feelings. Establish a phrase the child can use to remove themselves from stressful or upsetting situations. The phrase gives children a way to politely excuse themselves, regain control, and then return to the situation. Select a short phrase that can be used in a variety of situations such as, "Excuse me. I need a minute to think."

3. Recognizing Other People's Feelings – Learning to empathize with other people and respond appropriately to another person's feelings, is an important skill for building relationships. Show pictures and drawings or role play situations to discuss the words, body language, and experiences that indicate a person's feelings. When discussing a child's own feelings, incorporate the concept that peers and adults have similar feelings in the same situation. This helps children develop empathy. Read stories where characters experience events that are happy, sad, surprising, or frustrating. Discuss why the characters felt the way they did and what they said or did to indicate their feelings.

4. Responding to Other People's Feelings – Not only do children have to identify other people's feelings, but they also need to learn how to respond when someone is angry, sad, or excited. Teach children appropriate responses through role play and reviewing past events. Discuss how different people in the role play feel, how their body language and words show their feelings, and the best response for the situation. Also discuss how the child would feel if this happened to them and how they would like other people to respond. This helps children learn to empathize with other people.

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