

About emotional development

Why emotions matter

Children's responses to the different feelings they experience every day have a major impact on their choices, their behaviour, and on how well they cope and enjoy life.

Emotional development involves learning what feelings and emotions are, understanding how and why they happen, recognising one's own feelings and those of others, and developing effective ways of managing them.

As children grow and are exposed to different situations their emotional lives also become more complex. Developing skills for managing a range of emotions is therefore very important for their emotional wellbeing.

Parents and carers have an important role to play in supporting children's emotional development. They do this through responding effectively to children's emotions, through providing examples of how they manage feelings, and through talking with children about feelings and how to manage them. In similar ways, school staff can provide important support for children's emotional development.



Children's emotional development

Emotional development is a complex task that begins in infancy and continues into adulthood. The first emotions that can be recognised in babies include joy, anger, sadness and fear. Later, as children begin to develop a sense of self, more complex emotions like shyness, surprise, elation, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride and empathy emerge. Primary school children are still learning to identify emotions, to understand why they happen and how to manage them appropriately. As children develop, the things that provoke their emotional responses change, as do the strategies they use to manage them.

Very young children's emotions are mainly made up of physical reactions (eg heart racing, butterflies in stomach) and behaviours. As they grow, children develop the ability to recognise feelings. Their emotions are also increasingly influenced by their thinking. They become more aware of their own feelings and better able to recognise and understand other people's. Thus, an emotional reaction of a 10-year-old is likely to be far more complex than that of a three-year-old.

The **experience** of emotion includes several components:

- Physical responses (eg heart rate, breathing, hormone levels).
- Feelings that children recognise and learn to name.
- Thoughts and judgements associated with feelings.
- Action signals (eg a desire to approach, escape or fight).

Many things influence the ways that children **express** emotions, both through words and behaviour. These influences include:

- Values and beliefs about appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing emotions that children learn from parents, carers and school staff.
- How effectively children's emotional needs are usually met.
- Children's temperaments.
- Emotional behaviours that children have learned through observation or experience.
- The extent to which families and children are under various kinds of stress.

Developing emotional skills

The table below shows the main pathways in emotional skill development for children in the preschool to primary age range. It is important to note that the rate of children's emotional development can be quite variable. Some children may show a high level of emotional skill development while quite young, whereas others take longer to develop the capacity to manage their emotions.

Skills needed	Children with beginning skills...	Children with developing skills...	Children with more developed skills...
Emotional self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• tend to have one emotion at a time• act out how they feel• flip between one emotion to another quickly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• start to understand that they can have more than one emotion in reaction to the same event as long as they are similar (eg happy and excited)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• understand that they can have opposite feelings to the same situation (eg feel both happy and sad that the school year is ending)
Recognising other people's emotions (social awareness)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• rely on physical clues to identify emotions (eg tears equal sadness)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• take into account clues from the situation to help explain the emotion (eg understand that a child might be sad because his or her toy has been broken)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• have a more complex understanding of the interaction between emotions, situations and people (eg feel sad because the thing that was broken was a gift from a loved grandparent who died recently)
Emotion regulation (the ability to manage emotions effectively)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• are able to use simple ways to manage emotions with support from adults (eg choose a different activity to distract them from feeling frustrated).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• are increasingly able to choose appropriate behavioural responses (eg asks and waits for assistance with a difficult task).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• are increasingly able to manage emotions by rethinking own goals and motives (eg decide that there is no point being angry about something he or she can't change).

Every child is different

There are a number of reasons why children vary in the way they express and manage their emotions. These variations may be due to events that impact on children and families at times, such as severe or chronic illness, trauma, or difficult social circumstances. Variations in children's emotional expression may also be influenced by specific family or cultural values and by differences in children's temperaments.

Children learn different ways of expressing emotion based on what is regarded as normal within their family and culture. Some families and cultures encourage children to express a range of emotions while other families encourage children not to display certain emotions, such as anger or pride. These differences also influence the ways children learn to regulate their emotions.

Learning to regulate emotions is more difficult for some children than for others. This may be due to their particular emotional temperament. Some children feel emotions intensely and easily. They are more emotionally reactive and find it harder to calm down. Some of these children react to frustration by getting angry. They may act impulsively and find it hard to control their emotions. Some children who are emotionally reactive get anxious more quickly and easily than other children. It is often difficult for children with anxious temperaments to develop strategies to manage their fears. They often try to avoid situations that worry them.

Helping children learn to accept feelings and to understand the links between feelings and behaviour supports their emotional development.



How children's sense of self influences their emotions

During the primary school years, children's sense of self is strongly influenced by the extent to which they see themselves as performing well, both at school and in other activities. This affects their emotional development. Knowing that they can be successful at what they do leads children to feel competent and confident.

When children have few experiences of success, they often have to cope with disappointment and may come to view themselves in negative ways. By learning to value their own strengths and efforts, as well as those of others, children develop the emotional resilience needed to manage disappointments and frustrations. Parents and carers can support children's wellbeing and emotional development by showing understanding of their feelings and by offering encouragement and specific praise for children's efforts.

Learning to manage emotions

Helping children learn to accept feelings and to understand the links between feelings and behaviour supports their emotional development. The following example shows how Josh's mother listens carefully and asks questions that help to identify the feelings that led him to be upset.

Josh became upset when he fell off the skateboard and the other boys laughed at him. He got angry with them and told his mother they were mean. Here Josh's mother supports his emotional development by helping him to explore his feelings.

Josh: "Those boys are really mean."

Mum: "It sounds like you're really angry with them. What happened?"

Josh: "They laughed at me."

Mum: "Oh, I see. Do you know what they were laughing about?"

Josh: "I fell off the skateboard. It wouldn't turn the way it was supposed to."

Mum: "It sounds like it was really hard."

Josh: "Yes."

Mum: "And you were trying really hard too."

Josh: (Nods.)

Acknowledging and exploring his feelings helps Josh feel understood. This makes it easier for him, with his mother's help, to think carefully about what he can do to improve the situation and feel better. Josh's mother could support this next step by asking him what he thinks would make things better for him. She might also suggest some options for him to consider. Approaching Josh's difficulty this way shows him that difficult emotions are linked to problems that can be thought through and resolved.



Key points for supporting children's emotional development

Providing effective support for children's emotional development starts with paying attention to their feelings and noticing how they manage them. By acknowledging children's emotional responses and providing guidance, parents, carers and school staff can help children understand and accept feelings, and develop effective strategies for managing them.

Tune into children's feelings and emotions

Some emotions are easily identified, while others are less obvious. Tuning into children's emotions involves looking at their body language, listening to what they are saying and how they are saying it, and observing their behaviour. This allows you to respond more effectively to children's needs and to offer more specific guidance to help children manage their emotions.

Help children recognise and understand emotions

Taking opportunities to talk with children and teach them about emotions helps children to become more aware of their own emotions as well as those of others. Encouraging children to feel comfortable with their emotions and providing them with practice in talking about their feelings helps children to further develop ways to manage their emotions.

Set limits on inappropriate expression of emotions

It is very important for children to understand that it is okay to have a range of emotions and feelings, but that there are limits to the ways these should be expressed. While acknowledging children's emotions, it is therefore very important to set limits on aggressive, unsafe or inappropriate behaviours.

Be a role model

Children learn about emotions and how to express them appropriately by watching others – especially parents, carers and school staff. Showing children the ways you understand and manage emotions helps children learn from your example. This includes examples of saying "Sorry, I lost my temper" (because no parent is perfect!) and then showing how you might make amends.



This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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