

Family information: Emotions

We all experience a range of emotions every day. Our feelings are necessary for us to survive and co-exist harmoniously with others. Without pleasant feelings (e.g. feeling pleased, proud, excited, curious, loving) we would not learn what makes us happy and what we want to strive for. Experiencing a lot of pleasant feelings can help children become more resilient and bounce back more quickly from a difficulty or setback.

Unpleasant feelings are also important, too. Without unpleasant feelings as warnings (e.g. fear, worry and anger) we would be less able to protect ourselves from possible danger or to stand up for ourselves. Some unpleasant feelings (e.g. embarrassment, disappointment and sadness) also motivate us to think deeply about some of the difficult and challenging situations we sometimes have to cope with (e.g. failing, loss and rejection). This type of reflection helps us to learn from our experiences and become better able to make good decisions and solve problems.

Our unpleasant emotions can sometimes ‘hijack’ us and we react to them by behaving in ways that alienate others or work against us. Learning how to express their emotions in a positive and assertive way helps children to feel more in control when things are difficult for them.

◆ Key messages to communicate to your child about their feelings

Talking to someone else can help.

When you are feeling sad or disappointed it can help if you talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling. They can help you check whether you are seeing things clearly and help you to solve problems.

Don't let yourself be ‘hijacked’ by your feelings.

‘Hijacked’ means that your feelings have taken over and you are no longer in charge. If your feelings are taking over, go to a quiet place or do something that will help you calm down (e.g. throw a basketball through a hoop, play music or play with a pet). If you calm down, you have a better chance to understand your feelings. Your anger should never be expressed in a way that hurts others, damages property or hurts yourself.

Correctly naming your feeling can help you to manage it better.

Being able to name your feeling will help you to feel more in control. For example, if you know that you are feeling angry, then you also realise that you need to calm down and speak up for yourself in a calm but strong way. If you can correctly name what you are feeling as ‘disappointment’ rather than ‘anger’, then you might realise that it is not helpful to feel so upset and it’s easier to calm down.

It helps to ask: ‘Did they really mean it?’

Sometimes we get upset and angry over something that a person has done, but it was just an accident or they were a bit thoughtless and they did not mean to hurt us or hurt our feelings. Before responding in an angry way, think about whether their actions were deliberate and intended to harm you or just an accident or mistake.

Unhelpful thinking makes you feel worse.

Unpleasant feelings can get worse because of the unhelpful things you say to yourself about them. No person and no event makes you feel a certain way. Sometimes it is understandable that you feel angry or sad because of what’s happened but that event or person hasn’t made you have that feeling. One of the best ways to be in control of your feelings is to use helpful thinking and ‘self-talk’.

Sometimes we have mixed emotions about the same thing.

Talking with your child about their mixed feelings will help them make sense of their different feelings (e.g. they can feel pleased about being given a part in the school play but also nervous).

You can change a bad mood into a good mood.

It’s normal to sometimes feel sad, lonely, disappointed, angry or worried. You can help yourself feel a little better if you do something physical (e.g. walking, or sport), something that creates positive feelings (e.g. playing with your pet, making or drawing something or looking at photographs taken on a holiday) or do something kind or helpful for someone else.

In order to understand others, you need to learn to work out how they are feeling.

This is called empathy. Empathy is trying to understand other people’s feelings, and letting them know that you do understand and care – this is important for making and staying friends and for supporting other people.

◆ What can you do to help your child become more able to understand and manage feelings?

Teach your child how to manage their strong feelings.

Use the following five steps to help your child when their emotions are 'hot' such as when they are sad or afraid or angry. These five steps provide an opportunity to be close to your child and teach them how to manage strong feelings.

1. Take notice when your child is feeling sad or angry or upset.
2. Listen to your child and show them you understand how they are feeling.
3. Name the emotion in words your child can understand.
4. Help your child look for solutions to the problem within acceptable limits.
5. Finish with a hopeful or optimistic statement, saying that you believe they can do something to deal with the situation, or find a way to feel better about it.

An example of the five steps in action.

Your child comes home from school looking upset:

You: How was school today? (Notice that your child is upset.)

Child: Awful, Ella was sick and she won't be back till Friday and I had no one to play with. Everybody else had someone to hang around with at lunchtime except me.

You: You must have felt lonely then, and probably a bit sad. (Listen and name the emotion your child is feeling.)

Child: I don't want to go back to school till Ella comes back.

You: Well I can understand why you feel that way because it isn't nice to feel all by yourself and left out. (Show empathy.) But you can't stay home from school just because Ella is away. Can you think of any ways to make you feel less lonely tomorrow? (Help with problem solving but within stated limits.)

Child: I suppose I could go to the library at lunchtime.

You: Yes, that could be good. What about Tran – you two have always got on well. He'd probably be happy to catch up with you. Things always seem better in the morning, too. (Take an optimistic approach.)

Help your child learn to change a bad mood into a good mood.

When they are feeling down help your child choose something to do that would make them feel happier such as drawing, reading, watching a funny movie, playing a game, doing something nice for someone else, asking a friend over or playing a physical game outside.

Help your child to correctly name their feelings.

Sometimes children make a mistake about how strong the feeling is; for example, they say they are really angry when they are just annoyed. Help them to use more low-key language like 'cross' instead of 'furious', and 'down' instead of 'depressed'. Children also make mistakes about what they are feeling. For example, they may say they are angry when they are really scared because the sensations in their body are similar. Say 'perhaps you're also feeling ...' as a prompt.

Help your child to understand and experience positive feelings.

Identify times when you can help your child to notice and 'savour' pleasant feelings (e.g. feeling proud, excited, satisfied, relieved, joyful, and hopeful) that arise from a positive experience. Name the feeling that would be associated with the experience and ask them questions to help them to re-live the positive feelings they are experiencing. For example:

Child: I helped Uncle Bill to feed the animals when I was staying on the farm.

You: What fun! You must have felt very excited about doing something like that and proud that he trusted you to help him.

Help your child to learn to recognise other people's feelings.

Whenever you see an opportunity, talk to your child about how others might be feeling (e.g. during a family or school situation, in a story or movie, on the news).

Model handling your own difficult feelings well.

When you are feeling worried, sad, disappointed or unhappy let your child see and hear you managing your feelings in a constructive way that includes using helpful thinking.