



TEACHING CHILDREN TO NAME THEIR FEELINGS

Emily J. Adams

The toddlers stop playing when they see their family child care provider, Anita, setting up an art experience. As she places bowls of inviting materials on the table, Anita notices her audience. “You look so excited about our project! You are being so patient while you wait to get started!”

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.



ANITA IS USING one of the most powerful strategies for supporting infants and toddlers in their social and emotional development—labeling the emotions they are feeling in the moment. Anita recognizes that the children are both “excited” and “patient.” When adults provide words for the emotions that they believe infants and toddlers are experiencing, it gives children the language to describe the feelings.

Understanding your own emotions as well as the emotions of those around you is called *emotional literacy* (CSEFEL 2008). Emotional literacy helps children build friendships and develop empathy—the ability to imagine how others are feeling—and respond appropriately.

Teachers, family child care providers, and family members can create an environment that supports children’s emotional learning. Think about how long young children spend listening to and practicing language before they themselves can speak; it’s the same with emotional literacy. When educators create a climate of empathy and emotional support, very young children can learn more about themselves and better understand their own and others’ emotional experiences. These early experiences lay the foundation for a lifelong ability to reflect on one’s own emotions and understand and respond to the feelings of others.

Young children experience a wide range of emotions

The feelings that adults label for infants and toddlers on a regular basis are the foundation for the children’s emotional vocabulary. Think, for a moment, about all of the emotions you experience in a typical day. You might, at times, be happy, stressed, tired, attentive, engaged, jealous, frustrated, excited, or hopeful, to name just a few. Infants and toddlers may not have the

language to express themselves, but they are experiencing the same variety and intensity of emotions as adults. Often the intense emotions, both positive and negative, can be overwhelming for young children. Over time, you can help them learn ways to regulate their responses to their strong feelings.

Creating a Feeling Words list

Adults can support children’s expanding emotional vocabulary—the words for emotions that children know—by making a Feeling Words list. While it’s often easier to come up with words for positive emotions (*happy, silly*) and negative emotions (*angry, jealous*), neutral words are important too. Neutral words include feelings like *comfortable, patient, calm, interested, observant*. When you use neutral words with infants and toddlers, they can begin to connect the words with their feelings. For example, they can connect the word *calm* with how calm feels. Then, when a toddler becomes overly excited or exuberant, and you ask him to “calm down,” he will better understand what you mean.

Keep in mind that the categories of *positive, negative, and neutral* refer to the charge or feeling of the emotion and are not meant to value emotions as good or bad. It is important to learn how to recognize “negative” feelings, such as anger, sadness, grief, and frustration, and how best to regulate and manage these emotions. If a child feels frustrated when her blocks keep falling down, it is an opportunity to support the child’s ability to regulate that feeling. She can take some deep breaths to calm down and use that frustration as a motivation for doing things in a different way. Because life will be full of difficult emotions, it is critical to help children learn how to regulate the negative emotions without feeling bad that they have them.

Involving families

At the beginning of each year Anita works with families to write a list of “feeling words.” Near where family members sign their children in and out, there is a sticky note pad for jotting down feeling words. Parents may then put the words on a poster board under the appropriate category of positive, neutral, or negative. Anita encourages parents to add to the list when they share about their child’s evening and morning. One mother described her son as waking up and being “cheerful,” while a father shared that his teething infant was “grumpy.” Anita says, “Those are great feeling words. Would you mind writing them down?” Over time a wonderful list grows, and Anita hangs it in her home and shares copies with the families.

By involving families in making a list of words, Anita seeks parents’ input *and* includes them in their children’s emotional education. The parents’ contributions prompt Anita to begin conversations with families about how best to support their child’s emotional literacy. She is also creating a space in which to learn more about each family’s culture when it comes to emotion words they use (or don’t) and how much they talk about emotions (or don’t). As Anita increases her understanding of the ways families talk about emotions at home, she can more easily mirror the language families use with their children.

Anita uses the feeling words poster as a reminder to use many positive and neutral words with young children throughout the day, and to help children recognize their negative emotions. Over time she notices the older toddlers saying, “I am being so patient” or asking for help when they are anxious. She knows that the foundation she is building with these

children and their families will support their emotional abilities for the rest of their lives.

THINK ABOUT IT

- What are you already doing to support children’s emotional literacy? Pay attention to how you respond to infants and toddlers. Think about how your response might contribute to what they are learning about feelings.
- What can you do to include parents and family members in their child’s emotional development?

TRY IT!

Get together with a colleague or coteacher and make a list of all the emotion words you can think of. You can use some of the words from this article to get you started. You may also want to invite parents to participate. Observe children over the course of the day and note all of the emotions they seem to be experiencing. Aim to have many more positive and neutral emotions listed than negative ones. Post your long list of positive or neutral words to help you remember to use those more often. Start using the words—it is never too early to start labeling the emotions a baby might be feeling!

References

CSEFEL (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning). 2008. “Module 1 Infant Toddler: Social Emotional Development within the Context of Relationships.” <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/inf todd/mod1/script.pdf>

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