



Understanding and managing emotions – children and teenagers

Understanding and managing emotions is important for development and wellbeing during childhood and adolescence.

Children and teenagers who can understand and manage their emotions are more likely to:

- express emotions by speaking calmly or in other appropriate ways
- bounce back after feeling strong emotions like disappointment, frustration or excitement
- control impulses
- behave positively – that is, in ways that help with getting along with others, staying safe and developing well.

And this is good for children because it helps them learn, make friends, become independent and more.

Your child's ability to understand and manage emotions develops over time. When your child is young, they'll need help with understanding emotions. This mostly involves recognising and naming emotions, which lays the groundwork for managing emotions as your child gets older.

As your child grows, they'll learn more strategies to manage their emotions without your help. Understanding and managing emotions is also called emotional regulation. It's an important part of your child's self-regulation.

Children 3-8 years: learning to understand and manage emotions

Children develop their ability to recognise and name emotions through plenty of practice. It's easier for children to practise through play, when they're relaxed, or before their emotions get too intense.

Here are ways you can help your child practise recognising and naming emotions:

- **Talk about the emotions that characters in books, TV shows or movies might be experiencing.** For example, 'Look at Bluey's face. She looks sad'.

- **Read books about emotions with your child.** To start with, you could try *The way I feel* by Janan Cain, *All about feelings* from Usborne, or *F is for feelings* by Goldie Millar and Lisa A. Berger.
- **Show your child how you recognise your emotions and help them to recognise theirs.** For example, 'When I broke that glass, I yelled loudly. Does that happen to you when you make a mistake and feel angry?'
- **Help your child work out how their body feels when they're experiencing an emotion.** For example, 'You look nervous. Does your tummy feel wobbly?'
- **Give your child opportunities to explore emotions through play.** Play ideas to develop pre-schooler emotions and play ideas to develop school-age emotions include messy play, drawing or painting, puppet play, dancing and music play.
- **Do an emotions activity with your child.** You choose an emotion like 'excited' and act it out with your child. You can turn this activity into a simple guessing game.

You can also start helping your child learn simple strategies to manage their emotions. For example:

- Teach your child ways to calm down from strong emotions. This might be counting to 10 or taking 5 deep breaths.
- Suggest ways for your child to react to strong emotions. This might be clapping their hands when they're excited, asking for a hug when they're sad, or squeezing their cushion hard when they're angry.

It can be hard for your child to use strategies like these when they're very upset. They might shout or hit things instead. So you might need to help your child calm down. When they're calm, you can help them understand that strong emotions are OK, but behaviour like shouting and hitting isn't.

Pre-teens and teenagers: strengthening emotional skills

Pre-teens and teenagers often feel strong and sometimes overwhelming emotions like shame and humiliation. They might know the words for these emotions but still have trouble recognising them when they're upset. Also, because of teenage brain development, teenagers don't always have the skills to express and manage emotions in an adult way.

That's why pre-teens and teenagers still need help with understanding and managing emotions. With practice, your child will be able to manage their emotions without you.

Here are ideas to strengthen your child's ability to understand and manage emotions in the teenage years:

- **Step in when you can see emotions building up.** The sooner your child can spot their emotional changes, the easier it will be for them to stay in control of their behaviour.
- **Help your child notice early physical signs of strong emotions.** For example, 'When I was stuck in traffic yesterday, my heart was racing and I felt really hot. Does that happen to you when you're frustrated?'
- **Help your child notice early behaviour signs of strong emotions.** For example, 'You're starting to hit that keyboard quite hard. Do you need to stop for a minute and get some fresh air?'
- **Talk with your child about what you do when you notice the signs that strong emotions are building up.** For example, 'When I start to feel really angry with myself, I focus on something I'm proud of instead. Would that work for you?'

- **Work with your child on a list of things they could do when they notice strong emotions building up.** It could include going for a run, listening to music on their headphones, or meditating. Try to include plenty of options so your child can choose ones that feel right in different situations.

Remember that talking with teenagers about emotions won't be as effective when they're struggling with the strong emotion. You need to step in before the emotion becomes intense or wait until the emotion has passed.