

# The Benefits of Helping Preschoolers Understand and Discuss Their Emotions

By MindShift

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By Deborah Farmer Kris

Terrible Twos. Threenagers. Fearsome Fours. These are years marked by tantrums and meltdowns — palpable reminders that young children haven't yet learned how to regulate their emotions. But rather than wait for them to outgrow this phase, caregivers can use this window to teach emotional literacy skills that will yield immediate and long-term benefits.

Increasingly, research confirms the efficacy of explicit training in emotional intelligence starting at a very young age. According to multiple studies, preschoolers who participate in social-emotional skills programs exhibit less aggression and anxiety and become better social problem solvers. While these outcomes may make for a more peaceful classroom environment, the benefits outlive preschool: prosocial behavior in early childhood is strongly linked with future academic performance and mental health. In other words, when children learn how to calm themselves down, use language to express their feelings and treat others with kindness, they are laying the foundation for future success and wellness.

Even without a formal curriculum to draw on, parents and early childhood educators can do a lot to foster young children's emotional literacy.

## What Parents and Teachers Can Do

### 1. Name emotions

Reflective listening is a hallmark of effective counseling. Therapists listen to patients and then reflect back what they hear as a way to strengthen the patients' self-understanding. Toddlers and preschoolers have limited expressive language skills, but parents and teachers can "listen" to their *behavior* — be it yelling, pushing, crying, or withdrawing — reflect it back, and help them put a name to what they are feeling. It might sound like this:

- "You are mad! Baby brother ripped your picture and you are MAD."
- "You are sad. Grandma left and you didn't want her to leave. You feel so, so sad."
- "You are happy! You got a big balloon and you are jumping up and down because you are so happy!"
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As children mature, you can use this strategy to introduce nuances that will build their emotional vocabulary: "You sound *frustrated*. Your tower fell down and you worked hard to make it tall! That's *disappointing*." Or, "You look *startled*. That thunder was really loud, and it *surprised* you."

### 2. Normalize emotions

Emotions should not be classified as good or bad. Even so, strong emotions can scare or overwhelm kids, so normalizing their response to stimuli — helping them see that everyone feels mad, sad, or scared sometimes — can comfort them and build their perspective-taking skills

After the child has calmed down, circle back and briefly summarize what happened, including how the child felt. Then, remind them that everyone — including you — feels this way sometimes. For example, "When grandma left this morning, you felt very sad. You kicked and cried. You wanted grandma to stay and play with you. Everyone feels sad sometimes. I felt sad when grandma left, too. I like talking with her and watching her read books to you. It's sad when people say goodbye. Do you want call her tomorrow to say hello or draw her a picture?"

Some advanced warning: Don't be surprised if a child wants to hear the story about "the time I got mad at Target" multiple times. But such repetition has its benefits: with the triggering event safely in the past, you and the child can use it as a reference point when encountering future emotional stimuli.

### **3. Develop Strategies**

At some point, almost everyone learns that throwing a physical tantrum in the middle of the checkout aisle is not a wise choice, but that doesn't mean we don't feel frustrated when we are running late and stuck in a slow line. We can't always control how we feel, but we can control how we express our emotions. Building on Fred Rogers' legacy, the PBS show Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood provides memorable musical prompts about how kids can respond to emotional stress – everything from "When you feel so mad that you want to roar, take a deep breath and count to four" to "Saying I'm sorry is the first step, then how can I help?" to "You can take a turn, and then I'll get it back."

You can help children develop with similar simple, memorable strategies. If a child is struggling with a particular aggressive behavior, help them verbalize both what they can't do and what they can, such as, "When I'm mad, I can't hit my brother, but I can stomp my feet or squeeze my ball." You can also model the connection between mood and healthy eating, exercise, and sleeping: "Sometimes when I'm frustrated, I eat a healthy snack or take a nap to help me feel better."

### **4. "Read" pictures**

Research indicates that reading fiction promotes empathy. For little ones, picture books offer an additional tool for teaching emotional literacy: illustrations that serve as visual context clues. When a happy, scary, or frustrating event occurs in a story, pause and look at the picture together. "Look at her – how do you think she's feeling right now?" Examine characters' facial expressions, how they are standing, and what they are doing. Employ this same technique when you watch media together. A few picture book authors who are particularly skilled at exploring emotion in print and picture are Kevin Henkes, Patricia Polacco and Mo Willems.

### **5. Practice mindfulness**

Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism but has been adopted by clinicians and teachers as a way to support mental health and improve emotional self-regulation. A key principle to this practice is calming your body and mind and paying attention to the sensations around you – the sounds, smells, and sights. Practice sitting quietly with your child or students for 60 seconds – and then share what you each saw and heard. Take "listening walks" around the park or neighborhood. Before bed – or at the end of the school day – share small moments that made you happy.

Ultimately, emotional literacy is as foundational as learning the ABC's. As psychologist Daniel Goleman reminds us, "If your emotional abilities aren't in hand, if you don't have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can't have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far."

Deborah Farmer Kris has taught elementary, middle and high school and served as a charter school administrator. She spent a decade as an associate at Boston University's Center for Character and Social Responsibility researching, writing, and consulting with schools. She is the mother of two young children. You can follow her on Twitter @dfkris.

[http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2015/04/13/the-benefits-of-helping-preschoolers-understand-and-discuss-their-emotions/?utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=npr&utm\\_term=nprnews&utm\\_content=20150417](http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2015/04/13/the-benefits-of-helping-preschoolers-understand-and-discuss-their-emotions/?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=20150417)