

# EXPRESSING FEELINGS

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Emotions are a very important part of a child's life. Adults usually think of emotions as "feelings." Feelings affect the ways children react to other people. A child's feelings are often expressed with actions. These actions help tell others what a child is thinking.

Feelings — all feelings — help children understand themselves and others. From jumping with joy to crying with pain, all feelings are important. Everyone has a right to their own feelings — whatever they are.

Healthy feelings do not just happen. Parents must help children learn how to express feelings without hurting others. It is important for parents to pay as much attention to how a child *feels inside* as how he *behaves outside*.

Encourage children to talk about their real emotions. With help, children can learn that whatever feelings they have are okay. *Feelings are not good or bad, right or wrong — only actions are.*

Where do children learn these actions? In the home, children learn from parents, brothers and sisters. Outside the home, they learn from friends and grown-ups. But wherever children are, they try to copy adults. That is why it is important for parents and others to handle their own feelings in healthy ways.

A child's surroundings can encourage honest and open expression of emotions. Children need to know that parents accept their feelings as real and important. Be interested in what your child thinks and feels.

**Honesty, openness and interest** are three things that give children an early start toward the healthy expression of feelings.

## Anger

It is normal to feel angry sometimes. Anger is a healthy emotion for people. Even children feel anger. Sometimes it makes them feel better. Anger helps get the "mad" out, too.



*A child becomes angry when another child grabs a toy.*

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At times, angry feelings result in hurtful actions. These actions must be stopped. Children should not be permitted to hurt other children, their parents, property or themselves. It is important that parents not make children ashamed of their feelings. However, children need to learn to express anger without hurting others or feeling guilty.

Younger preschool children (3-year-olds) usually show anger in physical ways: biting, hitting, kicking or breaking things. As they get older (4 to 5 years of age), children will use words to tell others they are mad. Help and encourage your child to say, "It makes me mad when you do that," or "Stop hitting me — it hurts."

What makes a child angry?



Children become angry when they are stopped from doing something they enjoy.



Children become angry when others tease or make fun of them.

Many children learn that anger is a sure and easy way to get adults' attention. They see others get results from temper tantrums. So children think it will work for them, too. If parents let temper tantrums attract their attention, children may use them every time they get angry.

### Now it is your turn . . .

1. *Set a good example.* Be careful about how you express your own anger. Using harsh language, screaming or hitting family members hurts. Remember, children learn most of their actions from parents.

2. *Talk about anger.* Find out what made your child mad. Help him understand his feelings so he will learn that anger is a normal feeling. Let him know that *you* understand and are willing to help. He needs to know it is okay to feel angry sometimes.

3. *Help a child learn to express anger.* Teach him ways that he can control his angry feelings. Suggest that your child use *words* when he is mad. Try "I am mad because . . ." or "It makes me mad when . . ." Let your child know you love him, even when you do not approve of some of his actions.

## Fear

All children have fears. They are usually afraid of things that are strange or different. Fear of being left alone is the *greatest fear* of preschoolers. Young children are not sure that their parents will come back when they leave. For this reason, children should not be left completely alone (at home, in cars, etc.). If you must go out and leave your children with another adult, explain carefully to them that you will return. Children need this assurance.

Other things young children are afraid of are:

- Death
- Loud noises
- Strangers
- Unfamiliar situations
- High places
- Fire
- Illness

Preschool children cannot understand the difference between real and imaginary dangers. Many fears are new to children and must be explained. An example is the first time children hear a siren. Parents need to explain what a siren is and why it is loud. This helps children deal with their fears better. It is important for parents to handle children's fears openly and honestly. Then children can learn what to expect and how to react when they are frightened.



Children are afraid of pain.

Parents may teach their children to be afraid by showing their own fears. Children often copy their parents' reaction. For example, if you are afraid of thunder and lightning, this often teaches a child to be afraid.



Children are afraid of imaginary monsters and darkness.

Some fears are learned through a frightening experience. A child may see a friend bitten by a dog. He or she may then begin to fear *all* dogs.



Children are afraid of some animals.

Some fears warn children of real danger and make them more cautious. Being aware of danger helps children learn that they need to be careful. Parents can teach their children to be careful without being afraid of fear. Children need protection from real dangers, such as a hot stove, electrical outlets, high places or household cleaners. But it takes time for children to learn safety from danger. *Be patient and alert!*

### Now it is your turn . . .

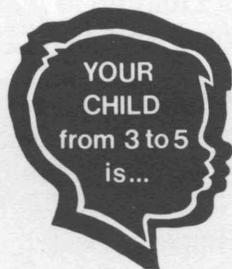
1. **Talk about fear.** Parents can sometimes prepare a child for a frightening experience ahead of time without scaring him. Then the child knows what to expect. If your child has to go to the doctor, explain what will happen there. You and your child may want to act out what it is like to go to the doctor. *Sharing* this fear will help your child understand what is going to happen and make him or her less afraid.

2. **Allow for expression.** Help your child express fears openly. A child needs to know that parents accept fears and will not laugh at or punish him or her for being a "sissy." Encourage your child to tell you when he or she is scared. Try "It's all right to feel afraid," or "Tell me what you are afraid of. Together maybe we can work it out."

3. *Explain fears honestly.* Never lie to a child about fear or something which may hurt. Your child needs to know he or she can trust you to tell the truth. When a child needs to get a shot, tell him or her it might hurt some. If you tell a child it will not hurt, and it does, you are not being truthful. Honesty and trust between parents and children are very important. Tell your child as much as you think he can understand for his age.

#### References

- Hurlock, E. B. *Child Development* (5th edition.). New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972.
- Jersild, A. T., Telford, C. W., & Sawrey, J. M. *Child Psychology* (7th edition.). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1976.



## EXPRESSING FEELINGS!

### Growth Measuring Stick

#### 3-Year-Olds

- Often enjoy quiet times
- Talk about dreams
- Ask to be carried and babied when tired
- May have an imaginary friend
- Are beginning to be sympathetic
- Are beginning to express feelings in more acceptable ways
- Are warm and friendly towards parents



#### 4-Year-Olds

- Are becoming more independent
- Say "no" and "I won't" often
- Have a short attention span
- May boast, name call or tattle freely
- Express more fears, but can understand many dangers
- Show their temper and are beginning to use words to express feelings
- Make up stories to protect self and friends; do not think of it as "lying"



#### 5-Year-Olds

- Are more self-confident
- Still need guidance and help from parents
- Love praise and work hard to get it
- Are more calm and independent
- Can better understand and express their own feelings
- Are less physical when angry
- Are very anxious to please

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