

Feelings matter



Early childhood is when children begin developing their social and emotional skills which influence children's mental health and wellbeing, now and in the future. Children learn these skills through their important relationships including families, caregivers, peers and early childhood staff.

Further information about developing children's social and emotional skills is available in the other KidsMatter Early Childhood Component 2 resource sheets, including *Social and emotional development*, *Growing together in relationships*, *It's good to be me!*, *Getting along*, and *Further resources*.

Children's developing emotional skills

Children begin developing emotional skills from birth. Emotional skills include being able to recognise, express, understand and manage a wide range of feelings. These skills are important for children's developing ability to interact successfully with others and their physical world. Children who can understand and manage their feelings, stay calm and enjoy their experiences, are more likely to develop a positive sense of self and be confident and curious learners.

Children develop their emotional skills through their relationships with important others, such as their parents and carers. Babies move from relying on adults to help them organise and regulate their emotions (e.g., through adults soothing and calming them by rocking, patting and holding), to being able to deal with some of their feelings on their own as toddlers. Supported by their increased language, thinking, planning and organising abilities, preschoolers develop more advanced emotional skills such as being able to wait longer for things they want and having more understanding of the feelings of others. They also learn to predict how what they do will affect others (e.g., "You will feel sad if I don't let you play with me.")



Ethan's story



Five-year-old Ethan was feeling sad because his friend Sarah from next door had hurt his feelings. Ethan's mum, Amanda, comforted and cuddled him saying 'There there sweetheart, do you want to tell me what happened?' Ethan's little brother, three-year-old Cameron, watched from a distance.

"Ethan's sad?" Cameron asked his mum as he came over to her and his brother. Amanda stretched her arms out to encourage Cameron to join her and Ethan. "Why don't you ask Ethan?" suggested Amanda.

"Ethan, are you sad?" Cameron asked his brother. Ethan nodded, cuddling into his mum. "What do you think you could do to help?" Amanda asked Cameron softly. Cameron cuddled his brother and patted his back gently. Then he went to find Ethan's favourite teddy.

Later, when Ethan was feeling better, Amanda talked to Cameron about how he had supported his brother. "You helped Ethan when he was feeling sad. He felt better when you brought him his favourite teddy."

Good feelings are catching! Children imitate the emotions expressed by others around them especially their significant caregivers.

We can help children learn to manage their emotions by soothing them when they are upset, modelling effective ways to manage feelings (e.g., saying 'I'm upset, I just need a minute to calm down') and talking about feelings in everyday conversations. This includes feelings of happiness and excitement and not just when someone is upset.



Feelings matter is continued on the next page





What parents and carers can do

- ▶ Be a role model for your child—show them that having difficult feelings is part of everyday life and show them how to deal with them (e.g., “I’m feeling really tired and I think I need to have an early night.”).
- ▶ Try to understand the meaning behind your child’s behaviour and respond accordingly (e.g., when a baby cries, they are generally letting you know that they need something).
- ▶ Make talking to your child about feelings a normal part of every day. You can do this by naming feelings in yourself and others, and encouraging your child to do the same.
- ▶ Encourage your child to express his or her emotions in healthy ways, such as talking about sad feelings or saying why they may be feeling angry and helping them to become calm (e.g., by being still for a few moments) and move on to more pleasant activities.
- ▶ Be as warm, caring and responsive towards your child as you can—children learn to recognise your usual way of responding which is built up over many interactions so it’s important to keep in mind that you don’t have to be perfect all of the time.
- ▶ Remember that children are affected by the feelings, behaviours, and interactions of others—it’s important to monitor your own wellbeing and ask for help and support when you need it so that you have the energy to be there for your children including showing ‘feel good’ emotions such as happiness, joy, enthusiasm and excitement.

Being able to recognise, express and manage a wide range of emotions in themselves and others benefits children’s mental health and wellbeing. Caregivers can help children learn about feelings and how to manage them effectively.

What early childhood services might also be doing:

- ✦ having conversations with children and reading stories about feelings
- ✦ describing and labelling emotions and linking emotions to behaviours during everyday experiences (e.g. asking a child how they are feeling after their block tower has just been knocked over)
- ✦ encouraging children to talk about their feelings
- ✦ helping children to be calm and manage their feelings
- ✦ teaching children about considering the feelings of others (e.g., showing how to comfort a child who has fallen over).



"The emotional life of the toddler" (1995) by Alica F. Lieberman, Simon & Schuster, is a book for parents and child care staff providing information and practical advice on developing children's emotional skills.

The following websites may also be of interest to you: www.kidscount.com.au – see 'Understanding children's development' and <http://raisingchildren.net.au> – see 'Behaviour', 'Connecting & Communicating', and 'Development' under the babies', toddlers' and preschoolers' tabs.

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. KidsMatter Early Childhood welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing



The KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets are resources that have been developed in collaboration and with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. While every care has been taken in preparing this publication, the Commonwealth does not accept liability for any injury or loss or damage arising from the use of, or reliance upon, the content of this publication.