

Emotional development: Suggestions for families

Understanding and managing feelings

Children's abilities for recognising, understanding and managing their emotions are influenced by the ways the adults who care for them acknowledge and respond to their feelings. When children learn to manage their emotions they are also better able to manage their behaviour. Parents, carers and school staff can provide important support and guidance for children's emotional development.

Helpful ways of supporting children's emotional development

Listen and validate the child's emotional experience

Listen to what children say and acknowledge their feelings. This helps children to identify emotions and understand how they work. Being supported in this way helps children work out how to manage their emotions. You might say, "You look worried. Is something on your mind?" or "It sounds like you're really angry. Let's talk about it."

View emotions as an opportunity for connecting and teaching

Children's emotional reactions provide 'teachable moments' for helping them understand emotions and learn effective ways to manage them. You might say, "I can see you're really frustrated about having to wait for what you want. Why don't we read a story while we're waiting?"

Encourage problem-solving to manage emotions

Help children develop their skills for managing emotions by helping them think of different ways they could respond. You might say, "What would help you feel brave?" or "How else could you look at this?"

Set limits in a supportive way

Set limits on inappropriate behaviour so that children understand that having feelings is okay, but acting inappropriately is not. You might say, "I know you're upset that your friend couldn't make it over, but that does not make it okay to yell at me."

Some unhelpful things to avoid

Dismissing children's emotions

Telling children not to feel the way they do (eg, by saying, "Don't be scared/sad/angry"), can lead children to believe that their emotions are wrong and they are bad for having them. Remember that all feelings are okay and for children to learn how to manage them they first need to be acknowledged and understood.

Lying to children about situations to avoid emotional reactions

Telling children things like, "It won't hurt a bit" (when you know it will), can actually increase the emotional reaction. It teaches them not trust the person who has lied. It is important to communicate with children about difficult situations that affect them in ways they can understand. Providing information to children at their level, with reassurance, helps them be prepared and work out ways to manage their emotional responses.

Shaming children for their emotions

Sometimes adults tease children about their emotional responses or try to talk them out of feeling a certain way, which can lead feelings of shame. Saying things like, "Why are you crying like a baby?" or "You're such a scaredy-cat!" undermines children's confidence. Instead of helping them to feel brave it may lead them to feel guilty for experiencing that emotion.

Ignoring children's emotional responses

Sometimes adults may think that the child will just grow out of their emotional responses and ignore them. This can communicate to children that their emotions are unimportant and limits their opportunities to learn effective ways of managing their emotions.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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