

Making sense of children's emotions

Ten year old Tom, his friend Louis, and Tom's six year old brother, Josh, were trying out Tom's new skateboard. Louis already knew a bit about skateboards, and he offered to show Tom and Josh how to do turns. It was harder than it looked. Tom slipped off and tumbled over. The others laughed. "Show me again," Tom said to Louis. After watching Louis carefully and trying again, Tom was starting to get it. "I just need to keep practising," he thought.

Then it was Josh's turn. "I can help you if you like," said Louis. Josh wanted to do it by himself, but he couldn't get the hang of it. When he tried to turn, the skateboard kept going straight and Josh landed on his bottom. The boys laughed, but Josh didn't think it was funny. He got really angry at them. Then he ran inside to tell his mother how mean the two older boys were.

Understanding emotions

Children's emotional reactions may be more complex than they appear. In the story Josh blames his hurt and angry feelings on the other boys. But was their behaviour the main problem for Josh? Or was it really that he was frustrated and disappointed over not being able to handle the skateboard as well as he would have liked?

Learning to manage feelings and emotions is a very important part of children's development. Emotions affect children's ability to learn and relate to others, as well as their overall wellbeing.

Everyone has feelings. It takes time to learn how to manage them effectively. Learning to think through emotional reactions helps children find better ways of managing them.

Emotions and self-concept

Children's emotions are not just a response to things that happen. They are influenced by what children think, especially by what they think about themselves and their abilities. Children often need support from parents and carers to manage their feelings effectively, particularly when they are young.

Showing that you understand and accept children's feelings is very important for supporting their emotional development. When children feel understood it is easier for them to learn to think through their feelings and work out effective ways to handle them.

In the story, when Tom fell off the skateboard he told himself he could do it if he kept practising. This helpful thinking allowed him to put aside feelings of frustration and embarrassment, and keep trying.

How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can support children's emotional development by tuning into feelings, helping children understand feelings, and encouraging them to work out ways to manage feelings effectively. The following suggestions may be helpful.

- Tune into children's feelings and try to understand things from their point of view. This allows you to help them identify their feelings and the ways that feelings work.
- Show that you accept and respect children's feelings. Accepting feelings is necessary before working out a way to manage them.
- Remember that it's not always easy for children to know what is bothering them, and they may not always want to talk about it.
- Show children how you manage your own feelings effectively. If you act calmly it will help to reassure them that they can manage even difficult feelings.
- Acknowledge children's efforts to manage feelings. This helps them see their progress and motivates them to use the helpful strategies they are developing in other situations.

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Something to try

- Observe your child and take note of the situations that seem to trigger a particular emotional response.
- Think about how your child might be feeling given his or her age and stage of development.
- Talk and listen to your child about how he or she is feeling. Acknowledge both your child's feelings and his or her efforts to cope.
- Talk about helpful ways of managing feelings and encourage your child to try out different options.
- Use stories to help children understanding feelings of others.

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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