

Helping Children Understand Fear, Anger, Sadness, and Joy



Adults often categorize emotions as good or bad, right or wrong. These attitudes frequently stem from how emotions were expressed and accepted in their childhood homes. Parents need to allow children to feel all their feelings, but that doesn't mean they have to agree with or accept the behavior. Parents can help children separate their feelings from their actions. (*"It's okay to be angry with your sister, but you may not hit her."*) Expressing feelings helps discharge emotional energy, and children are better able to let go of their negative feelings when parents can accept them.

Some things parents may want to do to help children deal with their feelings are:

- **Be a role model.** Express your own feelings and emotions and deal with them in a healthy way.
- **Use eye contact** and send messages that show you care how your children feel. Watch for subtle messages and facial expressions.
- **Listen reflectively.** Identify how you think the child feels. Use a statement when you do this, not a question. (*"You're really angry right now."*) Begin early to give children a vocabulary of "feeling words." Knowing the words for their feelings enables the child to talk about those feelings, rather than acting them out. Some examples of feelings words are: happy, sad, scared, angry, confused, disappointed, hurt, sorry, proud, excited, worried, and discouraged.
- **Help your child discover** her own personal expressions for releasing feelings and emotions.

When a parent is confronted with the turbulent emotions of a child, however, his or her first reaction might be to deny the child's feelings. Many parents try to talk their children out of their feelings: *"You don't really hate your brother."* *"That doesn't hurt."* But if children are to be emotionally healthy, they need the freedom to own their feelings, even if they make parents uncomfortable. Parents should try to resist the urge to deny their children's feelings, and should also try to avoid responding to children's feelings in these other ways:

- **Minimizing** (*"It's just a broken cookie. It's not a big deal."*)
- **Talking** out of it (*"You're being silly. There's no such thing as a monster."*)
- **Ignoring.**
- **Rescuing.** This can be the most damaging, because it doesn't allow children to experience the process of disappointment and loss.

When parents are able to acknowledge and accept all the different feelings their children have, they help their children to do the same. This is an important step on the road to becoming confident adults.