



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Giving Feelings a Name:

Why Emotion Words Matter for Young Children

Big feelings are a normal part of being three or four years old. And here's something that might surprise you: children begin experiencing real emotions — joy, fear, sadness, anger — from the very first months of life. One of the most helpful things adults can do is describe what children are feeling.

What research tells us

When adults name feelings for children, their brains actually calm down faster. It helps their brains regulate. Children feel heard.

Learning feelings words also helps children notice, name, and understand what they are feeling. Over time, it helps them notice others' feelings (also called empathy). Children who learn these words early have better friendships, do better in school, and handle stress more easily as they grow.

Remember: feelings are not good or bad. It's what we do — or don't do — with our feelings that matters. Parents can help children understand that all feelings are normal. Boys can feel sadness or worry. Girls can feel angry and frustrated. All of us will experience the whole range of feelings across our lives.

Why preschool is such an important time

Between ages 3 and 5, children's brains are growing fast. This makes it a great time to practice words that describe feelings.



What this can look like at home

Use feelings words in small, everyday moments:

- While reading a book together: "The puppy looks scared. Have you ever felt scared like that?"
- During a hard moment: "It looks like you're feeling disappointed. That makes sense."
- When things go well: "You seem really proud. You worked so hard."
- During play: "Let's pretend my car lost the race. He is so frustrated!"
Or: "My bear is going to the doctor. She is worried."

Use words that go beyond happy, sad, and mad. Words like frustrated, nervous, proud, and surprised give children more tools to understand how they feel.

A note on hard moments

When children are upset, it can be tempting to say things like "you're fine" or "don't be sad." This is a very natural response. We just want the hard feelings to go away. But when feelings are brushed aside, they tend to come out in other ways. You might see challenging behavior, tantrums, or worry. When your child is upset, respond by acknowledging that feeling: "I know that you're disappointed that we can't play anymore, because it's a lot of fun to play and make new friends." This shows children that you recognize their feelings.

Remember, adults don't have to fix the feeling. Just naming it goes a long way.

Have more questions?

Talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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