



Big feelings, little hearts – Introducing emotions to your child: First step towards Emotional Intelligence

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“Liam pushed Sara today again and she got huge bump on her forehead”, said his teacher Mrs. Kelly.

Liam’s mother was visibly shocked to hear that. She apologized to Sara’s mother who was also sitting in room. She smiled and nodded assuring it’s all fine.

Mrs. Kelly inquired if everything is all right with Liam at home, as he seems distressed and detached at school. Liam’s mother told them that she has also noticed him agitated at home and snapping at her little sister over small things.

Later that evening Liam’s mother inquired about why he was behaving irrationally with his sister and at school.

Liam immediately got defensive and almost yelled, “sorry I will not do it again, ok and I already said sorry in school”.

Liam’s mother knew now that something is troubling him, so she insisted him to share what is going on.

He could not hold his tears anymore but still unable to express his emotions, he just said, “I don’t know”, stomped his feet and ran back to his room.

Imagine a world where your kids understand their emotions as clearly as they know their favorite colors – a world where naming, sharing, and managing feelings are as natural as playtime.

Introducing emotions to children is not just about teaching them to name their emotions; it is about unlocking a lifelong skill of emotional intelligence, starting from the very first feelings they recognize.

It is like giving them a map to understand themselves – and the world around them. It is where kids are better equipped to handle life’s ups and downs.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our emotions, as well as to empathize with others.

It involves a set of skills that help us navigate social interactions, communicate effectively, and build healthy relationships.

For kids, developing Emotional Intelligence (EI) means learning to identify their feelings, express them in appropriate ways, and respond thoughtfully to others' emotions.

These skills can be taught from an early age and, once learned - become valuable tools that they carry with them throughout life.

Emotional intelligence is a lifelong skill because it influences every aspect of personal, academic, and eventually professional life.

Here is why Emotional intelligence (EI) is so important for kids:

➔ Improved Social Relationships:

When kids understand and manage their emotions, they are more likely to form positive relationships with peers and adults.

They are better able to communicate and connect with their parents, caregivers, teachers and friends.

EI skills such as empathy, listening, and communication help children build meaningful connections, resolve conflicts, and navigate the complexities of friendships on their own or be able to seek help from adults.

→ Academic Success:

Emotional intelligence is closely linked to self-regulation, which means getting back up from failure and focus, which are crucial for academic success.

A child who can manage frustration, handle setbacks, and stay calm in the face of challenges is more likely to persist in their learning and perform better in school.

→ Resilience and Coping Skills:

Life is filled with ups and downs, and developing emotional intelligence from a young age helps kids become more resilient.

They learn to handle disappointment, adapt to change, and cope with stress – skills that are essential as they grow and face challenges that are more complex.

→ Mental Health and Well-Being:

Emotional intelligence helps kids understand and process their emotions, which is critical for mental well-being.

Kids who know how to express their feelings constructively and have strategies for managing stress are less likely to internalize negative feelings or experience high levels of anxiety.

→ Preparation for Future Success:

EI is a skill valued in the workplace and in personal relationships.

As they grow, kids who possess EI skills are better prepared for collaborative work environments, where teamwork, empathy, and communication are essential.

These skills can boost career success, as people with high EI tend to handle workplace conflicts well and maintain positive professional relationships.

In short, by fostering emotional intelligence in kids, we are not just helping them understand their feelings today; we are equipping them with tools they will use for a lifetime – tools that will support their happiness, health, and success in every stage of life.

The first step in the journey toward emotional intelligence is introducing kids to their emotions.

Toddlers in particular but also young children often feel big emotions they cannot yet name, leading to confusion, frustration, or even behavioral outbursts in case of Liam's story above.

By teaching kids to identify and label these feelings – like happiness, sadness, anger, or fear – we give them the foundation for self-awareness and self-expression.

Helping them recognize different emotions, understand that each feeling is normal, and express them safely builds a crucial sense of emotional literacy.

As children learn to articulate how they feel, they are better equipped to manage their responses and begin developing empathy for others, setting them on the path to becoming emotionally intelligent individuals from earlier on.

We as parents, caregivers or teachers can make introducing emotions to kids a fun and engaging process that helps them build a strong foundation for emotional intelligence.

Here are some practical ways and activities to introduce emotions to make learning meaningful for children:

1. Enhance emotional vocabulary:

How many emotions we as adults can name and explain.

An average person cannot name more than 12 to 15 emotions and many clearly do not have any idea of differences between some of the emotions.

If we want to start our child's journey to emotional intelligence, we have to start by enhancing their emotional vocabulary.

The more emotions they are aware of, more emotions they can clearly distinguish from each other, better prepared they will be for managing their own emotions and understanding other people's emotions.

You can start with few basic emotions that you are familiar with and keep on adding 2 to 3 emotions every other day (you can vary depending on age).

This will help not just your child with enhanced emotional vocabulary but you as parent also. Better vocabulary helps them express their feelings better.

2. Emotion flashcards and visual aids

Kids can learn a lot through visual representations, and emotion flashcards are a simple way to introduce them to basic emotions like happy, sad, angry, and scared.

Flashcards typically have a facial expression on one side and the name of the emotion on the other.

Kindergarten teachers usually use these type of flashcards to teach many other things to students.

You can also lay out several emotion flashcards and ask children to match the card to a face they think expresses that feeling.

You can model each emotion's expression or ask kids to mimic it.

You can hold up a flashcard, and ask your child to share a time when they felt this emotion. This particular activity will encourage them to relate the feeling to a personal experience, making the emotion more memorable and meaningful.

3. Emotion charades

Emotion charades is an interactive way to introduce and practice emotions with kids.

It combines movement and play with learning, which helps children grasp emotions more quickly especially with those who are kinesthetic learners (those kids who learn best through physical activities such as touching, moving, or performing hands-on tasks).

You can write different emotions (such as excited, frustrated, and surprised) on slips of paper, fold them, and put them in a bowl.

Kids take turns picking an emotion and acting it out without using words. The other kid guesses the emotion.

4. Feelings journal

A feelings journal is a personal space where children can reflect on their emotions.

It helps kids practice identifying and naming their feelings, building self-awareness.

You can encourage kids to write about how they felt during the day.

For younger kids, they can draw their face showing how they felt, such as a smiling face for happiness or a sad face for disappointment.

You can also provide kids with stamps or stickers with various emojis and have kids choose one that represents their feeling each day.

This visual element makes journaling more fun and accessible for young children.

5. Book reading (choose emotionally-themed books)

Reading books (particularly focusing on character's emotions) give kids the chance to see characters experiencing feelings and managing them in constructive ways.

It has an added advantage of building habit of book reading, which is common habit among successful people.

Read a book like “The Color Monster” by Anna Llenas, where each color represents a different emotion.

After each page, ask your child to identify the color and emotion and talk about what it might feel like.

After reading, ask your child if they have ever felt the way the character did. Discuss what made them feel that way and how they reacted.

6. Bedtime stories

Bedtime stories play vital role in child’s development as it is the time of the day when they get into lower energy cycle and more open to listening, understanding and learning.

Parents should take this as opportunity to teach about emotions in a fun way.

Make story time before sleep a routine that your child looks for every night.

When the storyline progresses, during the development of characters and events, emphasize on emotional aspects of the characters. Linger the story for few nights so they see characters able or unable to express and manage their emotions.

It would be a great activity to introduce expressing emotions to your kids.

7. Emotion Sorting Games

Emotion sorting games are a tactile way for kids to practice identifying and categorizing feelings based on facial expressions or situations.

You can create cards with different facial expressions and scenarios, like a child receiving a gift (happy) or losing a toy (sad), kid going to the park (excited) or getting a scraped knee (distress).

Ask children to sort the cards into categories by emotion.

8. DIY Emotion Puppets

Puppets play is wonderful activity for imaginative play and role-playing, helping kids act out and understand emotions safely.

You can use puppets, stuffed toys or even socks (put your hand in sock to make talking puppet).

Have kids create simple puppets using paper bags or socks.

Each puppet can have a different facial expression, such as happy, sad, angry, or scared.

Using their puppets and voice, kids can act out different emotional situations, such as a puppet feeling left out, and work through how the puppet can handle those feelings.

Liam in our story was upset because his best friend Ben with whom he spent last year was moved to different section this year and everyday he would see him playing with his new friends during recess.

As a kid, it was difficult for him to identify and name the many emotions he was feeling let alone manage those emotions.

Unfortunately, many adults struggle to manage their emotions just because they lack EI skills, as we do not learn these skills automatically with age.

Introducing emotions to kids is a powerful first step in nurturing their emotional intelligence and helping them develop skills that will benefit them for a lifetime.

When children learn to identify and express their feelings, they gain the foundation for self-awareness, empathy, and resilience.

By providing kids with tools to understand their emotions, we empower them to handle life's challenges with confidence, build meaningful relationships, and thrive socially and academically.

Remember, teaching emotional intelligence is a journey that begins with these small, intentional steps.

As parents, educators, and caregivers, the time and effort we invest today in helping kids understand their emotions will shape them into empathetic, resilient individuals who approach the world with a sense of balance and understanding.