

UNDERSTANDING **EMOTIONS** IN CHILDREN



With children, emotions can take many forms of reactions and behaviors, ranging from internalized feelings to visible outbursts.

[Emotions](#) are the mental reactions that a person experiences, resulting in physiological and behavioral changes in the body. Toddlers and young children may not understand how to convey what they are feeling, or even understand why they are reacting a certain way.

It's important to have an understanding of what to look for as your child emotionally develops, and help guide them through the feelings they will inevitably experience.

Let Them Know They're Safe

When your child is displaying behaviors that are unusual for them, it's important to give them a [safe place to express](#) how they're feeling while teaching them ways to understand and convey those emotions. Remember, children don't have many life experiences and won't always know how to cope with new ones. Emotions are normal, and so is learning how to handle them.

Lead By Example & Create Routines

When your child gets emotional, work with them to find healthy outlets, like deep breathing or singing their favorite song. It's also important to set boundaries: for example reiterating that "it's never OK to hit someone when angry or frustrated."

- Children mirror what adults do. [Lead by example](#). If angry, verbalize the anger and take measures – like deep breathing – to show your child how to handle the emotion.
- Begin teaching healthy emotional responses to your child when they are young by reading stories and asking what they think characters are feeling (and why).
- Incorporate discussions throughout the day (whether it's dinnertime, during your bedtime routine or play toys or games with your child) focused on normalizing different emotions. Consistency is key as children's emotions develop. They do better with routine.
- Most importantly, regardless of what your child is experiencing, listen to them. Don't discredit or invalidate their feelings. Instead, ask them questions to have them describe their emotions and how they can appropriately react to those thoughts and feelings.



Work Through Difficult Emotions Together

As children mature and begin to recognize and cope with new emotions, they'll achieve other social milestones including following directions, making friends, empathizing with others, staying on task and solving problems.



Anger:

Displaying hostility or aggression

How to handle:

Reiterate that it's OK to feel mad, but it's not OK to become physically aggressive. Take a walk and practice deep breaths. Exploring why they are feeling this way can be beneficial in deciding how to proceed.



Sadness:

Generally being "down in the dumps" or disappointment

How to handle:

Practice deep breathing and work with the child to think of things that make them happy. Possibly make a gratitude list or ask them to draw how they're feeling. Better understanding the source of sadness helps to determine the best way to move forward.



Fear:

Being afraid of things/people that are not familiar; timid, unnatural behavior; [anxiousness](#)

How to handle:

Acknowledge that the child's fear is valid and that you take it seriously. Stay away from saying, "You'll be fine," or brushing off the concern. Once the child feels more at ease, talk about how you can work through that fear together.



Jealousy:

Feeling a loss of love or attention; comparison of material things

How to handle:

Jealousy can manifest in a variety of behaviors - some children begin purposefully acting in ways that make adults angry for the attention it brings. As a parent, try not to punish the child for jealous behaviors, but instead look for ways to make the child feel like their own, unique individual. Avoid comparisons, give responsibilities and incorporate one-on-one time with the child to help them feel seen and heard.

Frustration vs. Anger

It's important to note there is a difference between frustration and anger. Frustration builds up over time, often internally. It can present externally, like not being able to put a puzzle together after several attempts, causing the child to cry or yell.

Anger can happen in a flash and is aggressive. The child may lash out, for example, throwing the puzzle against the wall or at a person.

When to Ask for Help

If it gets to the point where your child isn't sleeping or eating normally, or they become physically aggressive, it could be time to contact professionals for more guidance. If that's the case, remember that you are not alone, and that with help, you and your child can get back to a normal, happy life.

Therapists are equipped with guiding conversations and techniques to guide children on appropriate ways to handle their emotions. When talking with your child about going to therapy, it's important to explain that the therapist is there to help them and you – together.

Call Meridian today to set up an appointment: 330-574-6952

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