

CORE SKILL: REGULATE

Recognize and Describe Emotions



What You Need to Know

Being able to recognize and describe emotions is a core social-emotional skill for toddlers. It is important to work with children to explain what they are feeling by using language (verbally, gesturally, and/or symbolically). This will help them begin to control their emotions and behavior and learn social skills such as empathy (e.g., being able to relate to others' feelings).

Children express a wide range of emotions. At times, these emotions can be strong and overwhelming for them. Toddlers are still learning to understand and regulate their needs, wants, and feelings; these strong emotions can sometimes lead to their display of challenging behaviors, such as hitting, biting, yelling, or tantrums. When young children have an understanding of different emotions and a vocabulary to describe them, it helps them to control their own feelings and actions.

Things to Consider

Sometimes the *reason* that toddlers get upset may seem unreasonable, but it's important to recognize that what they are feeling is **real to them** no matter how small or silly it may seem. Say, "I see you are feeling sad," rather than, "Oh don't cry, there's no need to be sad."

Emotional Development

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Express a variety of emotions.	Express a wide range of emotions, including surprise, guilt, embarrassment, and pride.
Express or modify emotions in response to adults or in order to elicit a reaction from adults.	Show increasing awareness of their effect on others.
Show interest and respond to others' emotions, often by sharing the emotion (e.g., smiling when adult smiles, or mirroring excitement of other children).	Describe their feelings or emotions.
	Show understanding of others' emotions by labeling them, asking questions, or responding in appropriate non-verbal ways.
	Describe emotions of others (including characters in books).

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support emotional development:

- ◆ Introduce a Feelings Chart and use it as part of your regular routine (e.g., Morning Greetings, check-ins, and when needed throughout the day). Whenever possible, incorporate real photos of faces and feelings to make emotions relatable and more concrete for children. Direct nonverbal children to the Feelings Chart to help them label their feelings.
- ◆ Read books about feelings. Consider reading books that address the difficult and strong emotions experienced by children with disabilities, such as "Why Does Izzy Cover Her Ears?" by Jennifer Veenendall.
- ◆ Incorporate social narratives into your routine that preview feelings and emotions children may feel during different parts of the day or during new experiences.
- ◆ Use puppets to model feelings.
- ◆ Sing songs about feelings and emotions (e.g., "If you're happy and you know it" with a variety of feelings).
- ◆ Engage in dramatic play. Act out different feelings or describe those of dolls or animals.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Recognizing and Describing Emotions

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe how children recognize and/or describe emotions. Listen closely for how they use (or don't use) vocabulary or non-verbal communication to express their emotions.
Tuesday FOCUS	Label Emotions Focus children's attention on emotions by explicitly labeling your <i>own</i> emotions as well as children's and characters'. Be sure to include both positive AND negative emotions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ While reading, "They look really angry. I can tell because their hands are in a fist and they're frowning."◆ "I see you are clapping and jumping. I think that you are feeling excited to hear this song!"◆ "I'm feeling really frustrated that I can't open this jar."◆ "I heard (Child) squeal loudly when we looked at this silly picture. Did you think this picture was funny too, (Child)?"
Wednesday SCAFFOLD I	Prompt Children to Consider "Why" Someone May Be Feeling a Certain Way Help children consider the causes of emotions and/or the appropriate responses to emotions. Label and describe emotions using characters as examples. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "This child is happy. Why do you think they're happy?"◆ "Show me your happy face... what does happy look like? What makes you happy?"◆ "What do you think made them so mad?" or, "I think they're angry because they took their toy. Do you think that's what happened?"
Thursday SCAFFOLD II	Prompt Children to Label Their Own Emotions Prompt children to label their <i>own</i> emotions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "Good morning! How are you feeling today? Can you point to the picture that shows how you feel?"◆ "You are smiling, so I think you are feeling happy like this face (<i>pointing</i>). Is that right?" For children who are nonverbal or have limited/delayed language skills, offer visuals or a choice of two whenever possible. For example, "Your block tower fell down. Does that make you feel happy or sad?"
Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.