Feeling Words

As they grow up, children have feelings and reactions that are new to them. It is important for them to be able to express these feelings. They need to understand that other people have feelings, too. They also need to learn that other people may feel differently about things than they do. Teaching children to use feeling words is a good way to start them toward achieving these goals.

Feeling words include “happy,” “glad,” “sad,” “mad,” “angry,” and “scared.” Teaching children to use these words helps them to express and understand their own feelings and the feelings of others. You, your child’s brothers and sisters, and other people will better understand how your child feels when he or she uses these words.

Using words is also a good way for children to get their feelings out without getting into trouble. It is much better to have your child use words to express anger, for example, than to use inappropriate behavior, such as hitting or kicking, to get a point across.

Tips on helping a child use feeling words
You can teach your child to express feelings through words. A little patience and some advice will go a long way. Most importantly, you have to be willing to listen to what your child has to say.

Help your child label feelings
- Children need to learn the words that describe the way they feel. When children are able to label their feelings, they are better able to understand the connections between how they feel and why they feel that way.
- Use feeling words when talking to your child about feelings. For example, “I can see you are sad that you can’t finish the game because it is bedtime. But we have a busy day tomorrow and you need your rest.” Or, “I see you are happy about going to the pool.”

Explain your own feelings
You are your child’s best teacher when it comes to learning about feelings and understanding the feelings of others.
- Share and explain your own feelings. Do it often, not just every once in a while.
- Use feeling words. For example, “I am happy that you cleaned up all of your toys.” This helps young children better understand the concept of feelings and develops their vocabulary at the same time.
Talk about the feelings of others
Look for opportunities to talk about what other people are feeling.
- Watching television together or reading a book offers opportunities to do this. Ask your child questions about a character's feelings. For example, “How do you think he feels about losing his dog? If he finds his dog, how do you think he will feel?”
- You might draw pictures of characters doing things that make them happy, sad, angry, etc. Talk with your child about each character and his or her feelings.

Work with your child on using feeling words
Using feeling words and describing and explaining their own feelings do not come naturally to children. They need help getting started, and they need you to set an example.
- If your child is obviously excited or upset, help put those feelings into words. Ask how he or she is feeling and why. For example, “You look angry. Are you angry because you can’t go outside and play?”
- Teach your child to express feelings appropriately with words. For example, rather than allowing your child to come running to you crying when she is upset that a friend took her doll, encourage her to explain to the friend why she is upset. Suggest ways she might do that. “I was playing with the doll first, and I get angry when you don’t share.”

Always remember to:
- Find the time to listen to your child.
- Encourage your child to talk about feelings.
- Use feeling words yourself.
- Calm your children if they are angry or upset—and stay calm yourself.
- Keep trying. Teaching a child to use feeling words might take some time.
- When your children explain their feelings, be quick to praise. “You explained that very well. I know just how you feel.”