

HOW TO HELP KIDS PROCESS FEELINGS

Things to Do:

- An easy tool to help kids and to help ourselves to model appropriate handling of feelings is “I statements” such as “I feel hurt”, “I feel afraid”. These “I statements” are nothing more than statements that begin with I, name a feeling, and give a brief explanation. For instance, “I felt let down when I found the lawn was not raked before you went out with Rick.” By modelling statements that show we can identify, own, and express our feelings, we’re teaching our kids a basic lifeskill.
- Help kids to identify their feelings by mentioning feelings they seem to be having. “You look sad today. Want to talk about it?” “You’re smiling a lot today. You’re happy about something.”
- Read stories focussing on certain feelings; then talk about those feelings. **The Velveteen Rabbit, Charlotte’s Web** and **Winnie the Pooh** come to mind. Such stories contain many examples of how the characters live through situations that trigger important feelings. For instance, in **Charlotte’s Web**, when Charlotte is concerned about Wilbur, her barnyard friend, we can talk about feelings associated with loyalty, fear, and perseverance. Stories are especially useful because all of us, and especially kids, usually have a much easier time identifying **someone else’s** feelings.
- Have kids describe the feelings they get from a certain situation. For instance, have kids cut out pictures from old magazines and do a collage depicting how they felt when the home team won the basketball championship or how they felt the day they moved into the new house or when they didn’t make the team. Younger kids (ages 6-11) usually love to cut and paste, and even older kids (junior high and high school) enjoy this activity. Pictures found in magazines and pasted on a sheet will often allow the more non-verbal children, to develop the skills they need to express their feelings openly.
- Expose kids to a rich, constructive vocabulary of feeling words. One way is to give them a sheet of feeling words and discuss them together.
- Be a good listener. Often our kids primarily need a sounding board for their feelings.
- Set aside some time each day for shutting off TVs, radios, phones, record players, VCRs, and any other distractions that interfere with free expression of feelings at home.

- Support kids when they express feelings. Frank statements such as “I’m glad you could tell me that” or non-verbal support such as hugs make a real impact on our kids.
- Be patient with kids’ direct or indirect expressions of feelings (“I hate you” versus slamming the door or using sarcasm). Help them identify the feelings: invite them to share. (“You seem really angry. Can you talk to me about it?”) Sometimes they find it difficult or impossible to share certain feelings with parents, so give them a chance to talk with others. They need a wide range of options. For instance, when Jean broke up with her boyfriend she chose to share the feelings with Aunt Susan. Though this was difficult for her mother to accept, it was easier for Jean to talk with her aunt than with her mother at that point in her life. What was important was that she was talking.

Things to Avoid:

- Don’t make judgements about feelings. Feelings are not good or bad. (“It’s silly to feel that way.”)
- Don’t set consequences when kids are sharing their feelings honestly. Avoid language or actions that might seem like a threat or punishment. (“You might feel sorry now, but you’ll be a lot sorrier when I’m finished with you.”)
- Don’t dominate the conversation. It’s one thing to be a good model; it’s another to take over. Appropriate sharing is fine, but when kids have feelings it’s important to let them own them. (“I know exactly how you feel. Last week at work when Jerry...” – and the parent rambles on and on with his or her own story, forgetting the youngster’s problem.)
- Avoid rescuing. Kids have to own their feelings and eventually make their decisions about how to deal with them. Being sensitive and supportive doesn’t mean rescuing. (“You’ll be better if I take you to a movie.”)