



Helping a Child to Understand and Express Emotions

(Composed by Speech and Language Therapy Department)

Why work on this skill?

Children with language and/or social communication and interaction difficulties often struggle recognising and understanding others emotions. Children with Autism also typically have difficulty with 'Theory of Mind' and not being able to understand what other people are thinking or feeling. All children need to develop 'Theory of Mind'. For typically developing children it takes approximately 6 years but for children with Autism and/or language difficulties it may take longer than this. Some children may need explicit instructions to attend to facial expression and tone of voice in others. You do not need to 'set aside' a specific time to work on these skills. The below tips and strategies can be naturally integrated into everyday interactions you have with your child.

Reading Facial Expressions and Body Language:



While looking at **photographs** and **books** and watching **Television** with your child encourage him/her to look at the faces and body language of people/characters to help them understand emotions. Draw attention to specific details, for example "*Millie is happy. Look at the corners of her mouth turned up smiling and her teeth showing*" or "*Mary feels really angry. Look – her face is red and her teeth are clenched. Look at her body. She is taking deep breaths. Her body is tensed.*" It is also important to point out to your child, why the person feels that way. For example: "*She is happy because it is her birthday party*".

Theory of Mind and 'Tuning In' to other people's thoughts:



Help your child to '**Tune In**' to what other people are thinking. Here are some tips:

- Talk about what is going on in other people's minds. Encourage your child to look at faces and body language to read emotions/ feelings (see above).
- Try to link emotions to a cause. Do this for them and for other people.
- Talk often about what you believe people are thinking or feeling and explain why, for example: "*Oh look it is raining. Sean is sad because he cannot go outside today*".
- Books are a wonderful way to 'tune into' others. Books with characters and fairy tales will allow for more opportunity to discuss thoughts and feeling of others.

- Draw attention to the idea that people might feel a certain emotion even if it has not happened yet, for Example: “*Sarah thinks she will be in trouble when she gets to school because she didn't do her homework so she feels worried*”.

Predicting Emotions and Problem Solving:

If your child has a good understanding of how to read people's emotions by looking at facial expressions and body language, you can help them predict the thought processes of others and further enhance their expressive language skills by asking '**open ended questions**'. This will encourage your child give an opinion, problem solve and put themselves into other people's shoes. Try asking your child open ended questions during everyday interaction, for example: “*I wonder how John might feel if someone ate his ice?*” Here are some more examples you can use:

- I wonder why he feels.....
- What might he feel if.....?
- Can you think of how he might feel if.....?
- What do you think he feels?
- Tell me how he feels?
- Do you have any ideas how he feels...?



Emotional Understanding and Vocabulary

If your child has difficulty understanding and describing how they or others are feeling – work on **Emotion/Feeling Vocabulary**. Here are some ideas on how to get started:

- Teach one emotion at a time starting with the easiest one. The basic emotions are: happy, sad, angry, cross, worried, bored, scared, surprised. More complex emotions are astonished, nervous, jealous, bored, anxious, confident, curious, suspicious, confused, and amused.
- Give your child a name for what they are feeling. Label the emotion in the moment, for example: “*You are happy*” when your child is doing something s/he clearly enjoys. Link the emotion to the cause, for example: “*You are happy because you are jumping on your trampoline*”.
- It should be noted that if a child is in a heightened emotional state (e.g. is experiencing a tantrum or ‘melt down’) discussion around emotion should not take place at that time. Instead, the event or feelings that were experienced should be reflected upon at a later stage with the child in a calm and supportive environment. This will allow your child to recognise why s/he felt a given way.

- Use visual representations of your child themselves making specific facial expressions, for example making facial expressions in front of a mirror and then taking photographs. Using these pictures as part of a visual template for emotional expression may be used as follows:

Today I feel _____



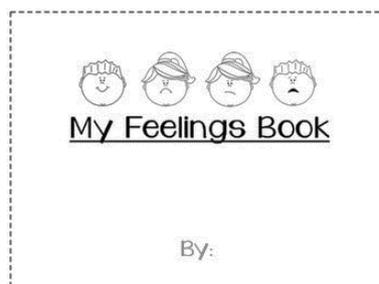
- When your child is consistently identifying an emotion in themselves or others help your child label emotions during everyday interactions or when different events/ situations naturally occur throughout the day, encourage your child to identify how they are feeling. You could help start your child off by using the carrier phrase:

I feel _____ because _____

- You could also think of different scenarios/event/ situations to encourage your child to match emotions to that situation. For example: “*Someone ate the ice cream you were saving all day for your treat after dinner. How might you feel?*” Encourage your child to identify the emotion it might trigger. Encourage your child to say why it might trigger that emotion. You can help start your child off by saying:

I would feel _____ because _____

- You can also make a ‘**Feelings Book**’. Encourage your child to draw or make a list of things that make them feel happy, sad, angry, scared etc. Here are some ideas on how to get started:
 - Encourage your child to think of **whom** they are with or the people that make them feel that emotion.
 - You could then move onto places/locations **where** they feel that emotion.
 - You could also explore times **when** and **why** they feel that emotion.
 - You could then read back the ‘Feelings Book’ with your child.





Apps to Work on Emotions/Feelings:

- **iTouchiLearn – Feelings (free):** This app gives preschool children the social cues needed to identify, interpret and communicate their emotions. There are 6 different activities to go through that identify core emotions and improve communication skills.
- **Learn with Rufus: Emotions (€4.99)** –This app aims to help children learn facial expressions that correspond to a variety of different feelings and emotions. The app describes different emotions first and then gets the child to name various emotions being shown.
- **Emotions Play kit (€0.99):** This is a multi-sensory method to help children identify & express feelings. Children experience activities, music, photography & an interactive mirror. Talks about how faces look for different emotions & allows children to take photos & talk about their own feelings and how their faces look.