

Raising Emotionally Aware Children: How to Help Your Child Develop Emotion Understanding

It's no secret that one of the greatest concerns that parents have about child-rearing is ensuring that they're raising kids who are kind and care about others around them. In a world that seems to be fueled by negativity, whether that's in politics, on the internet, parents are constantly looking for ways they can help their children become more empathetic and emotionally intelligent members of society. There's no shortage of books for parents to read around this topic including Hunter Clarke-Fields' *Raising Good Humans: A Mindful Guide to Breaking the Cycle of Reactive Parenting and Raising Kind, Confident Kids*, as well as esteemed family psychologist John Gottman's *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*.

But with the myriad of other books on parenting, who actually has the time to do all this reading? Parents are already so busy juggling child-rearing, jobs, and housework, there's only so much time they can dedicate towards reading entire books on raising emotionally aware children. Parenting is hard, and it's impossible to act on every piece of advice that comes your way. Instead, I'd like to provide you with some information on one facet of raising emotionally intelligent children—emotion understanding.

[Cognitive psychologists define emotion understanding](#) as the basic ability to interpret another individual's emotions through implicit or explicit cues. If you see someone crying because they injured themselves, would you say they're sad or excited? If someone is smiling because they just received a gift, does this mean they're happy or angry? Children with good emotion understanding skills are able to correctly associate these events with the appropriate emotional response someone may display. They would be able to tell you that if someone just lost a prized possession, then this person must be experiencing some sadness.

This ability to understand what another person is feeling is tied to another concept in cognitive psychology called theory of mind. [Researchers define theory of mind](#) as the ability to understand another person's thoughts beliefs, desires, and feelings. This is often assessed in children using a [false-belief task](#) in which researchers provide children with scenarios in which children are meant to guess a character's mental state. In this oft-used procedure, children are shown that an object, such as a toy, is placed inside a chest in front of a character. When the character leaves, the experimenter removes the object from the chest and places it in another container. When the character returns, the child is asked where they think the character believes the object to be. If the child correctly answers that the character believes it's in the second container, they are believed to have developed theory of mind.

Why are these psychological concepts so important? Researchers believe that theory of mind and emotion understanding are related constructs that are predictive of prosocial skills, such as helping behavior or practicing empathy. [A study by Cutting and Dunn in 1999](#) found that the development of theory of mind was necessary in order for children to demonstrate emotion understanding. [Eggum and colleagues in 2011](#) further found that emotion understanding and theory of mind predicted prosocial behavior over time. In other words, children need to understand what someone is thinking before they can understand what they're feeling. When children are able to understand another person's thoughts, they are better able to infer the emotions that person is experiencing. This is where parents come into play. As a parent, you can work with your child to develop their ability to understand what another person is thinking, and thereby what they're feeling. But how exactly can you do that?

1. Talk with your child about their emotions.

In the early years, the language that parents use is immensely important for children's socio-emotional development. [A study conducted by researchers in Germany](#) found that children who used more emotion words performed better on emotion understanding tasks. Using words such as "happy," "sad," "scared," and "angry," among many others, demonstrates an awareness of emotions. By properly identifying these emotions, your child will be better able to apply what they know about their own mental states to other people's mental states.

2. Respond to your child's sadness and frustration with sensitivity.

When parents are sensitive to their children's needs, especially when kids experience negative emotions, children can become much more capable at attending to their own and others' emotions. Provide supportive responses by working with your child to solve the problem they're facing, offering emotional support, and validating their feelings. It's important to avoid punitive or minimizing responses, such as yelling at your child for crying, ignoring their pain, or telling them that there isn't any reason to be sad. If you're coparenting with someone who doesn't always respond sensitively to your child's negative emotions, this can be especially important as [one study published by Child Development in 2007](#) found that as long as one parent is responding to their child in a supportive manner, children will still be able to adequately develop the skills for emotion understanding. Guiding kids appropriately through their negative feelings can help them understand not only their own emotions, but other people's emotions as well.

3. Be expressive with your own emotions.

This may seem counterintuitive to the typical advice parents receive, but emotion expressivity is important for children to witness. [Research conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles](#) found that primary caregivers' emotional expressiveness was associated with their toddlers' emotion understanding. When primary caregivers, typically mothers, were more expressive with their emotions, their children performed better at emotion understanding tasks. The authors of this study point out that it's important for children to see emotions being openly expressed in reaction to a given event, as this allows children to associate the emotional response to the event that took place. When children witness your laughter, joy, and sometimes even your sadness in response to life events, they are better able to connect human emotions to life experiences. For instance, if your child saw you laughing out loud because you just heard a funny joke, your child would associate the emotional response (laughter) with the appropriate event (joke), which thereby advances their emotion understanding.

My hope is that, even though parents are inundated with parenting advice all across the internet, you'll be able to take the research detailed here to inform your understanding of instilling emotional awareness and understanding within your children. Cultivating these skills is important to providing kids with the foundations to be kinder, emotionally aware adults in the future. No parent is perfect, and we certainly shouldn't expect parents to be on their game at every single moment in their execution of this advice. But if you're a parent reading this, I hope that you've picked up some strategies that might make your parenting journey just a little bit easier.

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