

Helping children recognise feelings

Recognising what you're feeling is the first step in learning to regulate emotions. For some children, this comes naturally and will develop on its own; others, including many autistic children, may need a bit of help learning to recognise when they're having an emotion, and/or what the emotion actually is.

Below are some ideas for games and activities that can help teach children to recognise their feelings, as well as helping you to recognise when a child may be expressing a feeling in an unexpected way. They can be used as written here, adapted to suit your individual child and their abilities, or used as a jumping-off point for making up your own activities.

An important note: throughout all of these activities and whenever you are working on emotional skills, give your child lots of processing time. Identifying and talking about feelings is hard work! Try not to spend more than 10-20 minutes in total over the course of the day actively working on emotional skills (unless your child is really enthusiastic about doing more!). Some children may also need time to accurately identify their feelings – if your child tells you in the moment that they're feeling angry, but comes back hours later and says that actually they were scared or upset, the second version is more likely to be true.

Body, hands, and voice

Ask your child to list all of the feelings they know (with a couple of examples to prompt them if needed). Get your child to show you what they do with their body when they're happy, angry, excited, worried, etc. Show them what you do with your body when you're feeling the same things – it can help to exaggerate your responses and make much bigger gestures than you normally would to make your feelings clearer. Get your child to show you what they do with their hands for each feeling, then how they show each feeling with their voice.

This activity is a way to get children thinking about what particular emotions feel like, without having to get their heads around abstract questions like “what does anxious feel like”. Some autistic children who really struggle to identify their emotions may find it easier to work backwards in figuring out what they're feeling – “I want to stomp and yell so I think I'm feeling angry” – and this activity can help children who need to work backwards to identify the physical signs of different emotions. (For many autistic children, this kind of working backwards is something they need to do on their own without adult input. It's common for autistic children to express their feelings in ways that are difficult for those around them to interpret, which can lead to adults' misinterpretations getting muddled with children's concepts of their own feelings.)

Watching how your child expresses particular feelings can also help you identify their feelings when they are expressed in ways you don't necessarily expect. Your child might flap their hands a particular way when they're excited, a different way when they're anxious, etc.

Inside Out

In the movie *Inside Out*, the main character Riley's feelings are represented by little people inside her head, who interact with each other and drive her emotional responses. If you and your child have seen the movie, it makes a great starting point for this activity – but it still works if you haven't.

Ask your child what it would be like if the feelings in their head were people, or animals (depending on what you think your child will relate to). What would they look like? Would they like each other? Which ones would get along, and which ones wouldn't? What kind of conversations would they have? When they argue, which ones would win?

This can be a fun activity for creative or imaginative children – if your child enjoys drawing, get them to draw some of the feelings-people. If you're using animals, look up photos online of the different animals, and find some that your child thinks look like their feelings (birds and big cats can be particularly good for finding silly, expressive faces!). For children who are nonspeaking or have limited speech, drawing their feelings as people or animals, or picking from pictures of animals can work as a replacement for verbally discussing what your feelings-people look like.

The *Inside Out* metaphor can also help children express complicated emotional interactions. A child who reacted aggressively to something because they were scared may find it easier to say something like "Scared doesn't like being in charge so Angry had to come out", or "Scared and Angry got in a fight and Angry won".

How many are you feeling?

Make up a concrete scale to use with your child to talk about how intense their feelings are. This could be a visual scale that your child can point to, or just a set of words that you and your child agree on (a numerical scale will make more sense for some children, a scale that goes from 'a little bit' to 'lots' will make more sense to others).

Talk about each feeling your child can name, and what could cause them to feel a little bit, a medium amount, lots, or the most of that feeling. (If your child struggles to name any feelings, tools like the ['How I feel' worksheet](#) can help increase their emotional vocabulary.)

If your child is doing really well, try extending the activity a bit further, and talk about what sorts of things you can do about each feeling. Your child might be able to cope with being a little bit angry by going and sitting by themselves for a while, but if they're the most angry in the whole world they might need to go outside and yell.

It's important to always believe the level your child says their feelings are at. Autistic children experience the world differently, so what might be a minor irritation for you could be a source of the most frustration or worry in the world for your child. Believing the level your child says their feelings are at also helps your child learn what level gets what response, and correct their own assessment if the response feels wrong.

Make your own vocabulary

If your child isn't sure of the word for a particular feeling, make up your own! You may find that once you've made up one or two, your child comes up with several more. This can be really helpful – often concepts like 'sensory overwhelm' or 'executive dysfunction' can be hard for young children to get their heads around, but they know what these concepts feel like. There are also some emotions that autistic people commonly feel which just don't have words (for example, the feeling of intense frustration leading into a meltdown, which for many people feels very different to what we normally mean by 'frustration').

Some examples from young autistic children:

'Gacky' – used for any sensory experience that is unacceptable in a way that the child doesn't have the vocabulary for

'Brainshrieky' – a feeling of intense wrongness connected to something in the environment; the child is not able to function until the wrongness is fixed (for this child, it was usually something very simple, like opening or closing a window)

'No' – usually as an answer to 'How are you feeling?', meaning the child had used up all their energy and needed a break.

What do your feelings need?

Talk about what your child wants or needs when they feel a certain way. For younger children, this can be a list of concrete actions – when your child is angry, they need to be left alone, or to go under a pile of blankets, or to stomp around outside. For older children, if you feel they're ready, start including reasons – when your child is angry, they need to stomp around outside because it helps to let the anger out without hurting or scaring anyone. Write down your list (or use pictures to illustrate each need), and put it somewhere easily accessible. When your child is having a big feeling, they can grab the list and point to what they need; or you can get the list to give them some options.

Thinking about different needs that go with different emotions can help your child come up with their own strategies as they get older; they can't necessarily always go stomp around outside whenever they're angry, but if they know that stomping helped because it let the anger out without hurting anyone, they can come up with alternatives that achieve the same thing. (For young teenagers or children who particularly enjoy this exercise, you can try coming up with a list of alternatives – "what if you were angry and you couldn't go outside?" "What if you were sad and you didn't have your comfort item?")

Feelings journal

For older children or young teenagers who are still struggling with recognising their feelings, try making a feelings journal. Check in at a set time each day (or a few times a day) – did you feel good or bad today? Can you identify any specific good or bad feelings? Why do you think you felt that way?

Regularly stopping to think about how they feel and what might have caused it is a way for children to practice identifying their feelings, as well as identifying triggers for negative feelings.

It's important to follow your child's lead on how private their feelings journal should be – if they want to share it with you, that's great, but if they don't want to share it, then it's essential that it remains private.