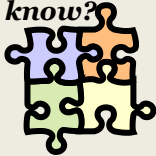


Understanding feelings and emotions

Understanding feelings and emotions is very important in making sense of social situations and interactions, and in developing empathy. We know that children with ASD often need help to understand feelings and emotions in themselves as well as in others. These skills are important in the development of friendships and social skills, and also in helping children better understand people and situations.

Did you know?



Some of these challenges relate to difficulties with *theory of mind*, the idea that other people may have their own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, knowledge or desires that are different to our own. They have difficulties “stepping into someone else’s shoes”. They might need to be explicitly taught some of those things that many children pick up naturally.

Your child may need help to:

- Understand emotions and strong feelings in themselves
- Understand emotions and strong feelings in others
- Read others’ facial expressions and understand how these relate to emotions
- Read others’ body language or tone of voice and understand how these relate to emotions
- Understand that others have different emotions to themselves
- Understand and regulate (or control) their own emotions and strong feelings

There are some things that you can do at home to encourage your child to recognise and understand emotions. Some ideas are provided below. You can also talk to your therapist for some other activities that can help.

Activities to help your child recognise and understand emotions in themselves and others

Teach basic emotions

- Teach basic feelings words and facial expressions (e.g. happy, sad, mad, scared).
- Read your child simple books about feelings. There are many books around, and these are even available at supermarkets and departments stores.
- Encourage your child to learn to label their feelings. At first, you might need to do this for them. For example, “I can see you are feeling angry. You’re crossing your arms and stomping your feet”.
- Get your child to lie on a piece of butcher’s paper and trace around their body, have them trace around yours, or draw an outline of a body on a piece of paper. Then talk to your child about what happens in their body when they feel a certain feeling, and draw or write those things on the body picture. For example, when drawing body feelings for angry, you might discuss that their heart beats fast, their palms get sweaty, their face feels hot, they think angry thoughts in their head, and they stamp their foot or kick something.
- Look in magazines or on the internet for pictures of people displaying simple emotions (e.g. happy, sad, angry). You and your child can make a poster of each emotion and add to it when you come across new pictures.



Use opportunities to discuss emotions

- Each day, ask your child, “How are you feeling today?” You might use a simple chart or flash cards with cartoon faces for them to pick how they feel and then discuss that feeling together. Talk about what sorts of things might make someone feel that way.
- Point out when you notice your child is probably feeling a particular feeling. For example, say, “You look really happy that we are going to swimming lessons,” or “It looks like you are feeling sad that it’s time to pack up your puzzle.”
- A great way to help your child learn about feelings is to discuss how characters in their favourite books, television shows or movies might feel. Pause at various places and ask your child to think about how the characters might be feeling, and how they know they are feeling that way. For example, “how do you think Thomas felt when Percy pushed in front of him?” Encourage your child to pay attention to body language and facial expression clues as well as the situation.

Teach coping strategies

- Help children cope with intense feelings by teaching coping strategies. Ideas might include taking five deep breaths, jumping on the trampoline, squeezing a stress ball or looking at a favourite book.
- Have a quiet place for children to take a break when angry or sad, and teach them how to use it and how to ask for it if needed. You could use pictures or cards for your child to pass you or point to when they need some time away from the situation.
- Share your child’s coping strategies with other people who care for them, such as grandparents, teachers or therapists so that you can all be on the same page.

Model emotions for your child

- Model how to express feelings by sharing your own feelings with your child. For example, “I’m sad that you won’t pick up your toys like I asked you.”
- Point out times when you feel angry or frustrated and model positive coping strategies. For example, “I feel angry that that car just pulled out in front of me.” Then take some deep breaths or model another coping strategy.
- Help your child make links between their emotions and what they feel in their body. You can start by teaching this with toys and move onto using yourself or family members. Start by focusing on the feeling and body signals (“Teddy feels sad. He is looking down, his shoulders are slumped, and he has his hands over his face.”)
- You can add one more step to the above process by including the context, or situation to help children link feelings to the real world. For example, “I feel happy because my team won the footy. I have a big smile on my face, my eyebrows are up high, I’m standing straight and tall, and I feel warm inside”. Get your child to take a photo of you showing this feeling so that you can discuss it together.

*** These are examples only and do not replace professional advice, if you have concerns about your child’s understanding of emotions, it is important to consult a psychologist, speech pathologist, or occupational therapist.*