



Parenting the Preschooler

Social Competence & Emotional Well-Being Fact Sheets

How do you help your child understand their feelings?

Ages & Stages

PRECHOOLER A child who is 3 to 5 years of age.

YOUNG CHILD A child who is 0 to 8 years of age.

Minding Our Language

Families come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A “family” may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. “Parents” may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else. When we use the words “family” and “parent” in these materials, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.

All people have feelings. We all feel happy, relaxed, silly, sad, lonely, angry, and lots of other emotions every day. For preschool-aged children, many of these feelings are very new and they may not know how to talk about them. Usually preschoolers will describe how they feel in basic terms like “good” or “bad” instead of using feeling words like “lonely,” “angry,” “happy,” or “surprised.” Young children need to learn to describe how they feel and also to understand what caused their feelings.

You can do many good things to help your child understand their feelings and use those feelings to make good choices:

- Express your feelings out loud using feeling words. (*“I’m frustrated.” “I’m impatient.” “I’m thrilled.”*) Help your child see it is normal for people to talk about how they feel and to have a lot of different feelings.
- Teach them to pay attention to their own feelings in daily life. Help figure out how their body reacts when they are feeling a certain way. Does their stomach flutter when they are nervous or does their head hurt when they are mad?
- Give your child words for their feelings by labeling what you see. (*“Wow, it looks like you’re really angry.” “You seem so happy today.”*)
- Talk to your preschooler about how they are feeling. Help them figure out why they are feeling that way. (*“You seem very sad. I wonder why you are crying.”*)
- Accept their feelings. If your child says they hates their sister, for example, acknowledge their feelings. (*“Hmmm . . . you are angry, what can we do to change that?”*) Avoid dismissing or denying her feelings. (*“Don’t you ever say something like that about your sister,” “That just isn’t true! Now say you are sorry.”*) Explain that feelings don’t go away just because someone says they should.
- Make faces and ask your child to tell you what you might be feeling with each expression. This can help them understand what mad, sad, glad, scared, and other emotions look like.
- Read stories out loud to your child. Talk about how they imagine the characters are feeling and what those feelings look and sound like.
- Let your home be a safe place for your preschooler to share all kinds of feelings – good and bad.

Find Out More

MSU Extension provides the following resources for parents and caregivers of preschoolers and young children at no or low cost. Be sure to check out these and other MSU Extension resources available at www.extension.msu.edu.

Extension Extras (<https://bit.ly/2LC2vdX>) – These compilations of news articles, activities, parenting tips and advice are published online Monday through Friday. The resources are designed for parents and caregivers of young children who are home all day during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Each day has a theme: Mindful Mondays, Tips on Tuesday, Working Wednesdays, Thinking Thursday, and Fun Fridays.

Extension Extras Enrichment Kits (<https://bit.ly/35QAplQ>) – These kits feature five or six early childhood activities with learning goals focused in areas such as social and emotional health, literacy, and STEM; a supply list; suggested children's books; introduction letters explaining how to use the materials; and an evaluation. The kits are available as free downloads.

Early Childhood Videos (<https://bit.ly/3ioyEkS>) – These short videos offer parents and caregivers of young children information on parenting topics. Titles include "Perspective Taking," "Family Movies," "Goals of Misbehavior," "Using Thinking and Feeling Words," "The Waiting Game," and "When Siblings Fight."

Building Early Emotional Skills (BEES) in Young Children (<https://bit.ly/38XW4Kl>) – This page provides links to a variety of free online parenting courses, workshops, and events offered by MSU Extension for parents and caregivers of young children aged 0 to 3.

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