

## Expressing Unpleasant Emotions with Words — Not Actions

It is important for children to be coached and taught math and reading skills, and it is also important to help children learn social and emotional skills. **We can begin teaching preschool age** children that it is normal to experience many different kinds of feelings. Parents and caring adults can do this by reflecting with words the feeling a child is displaying. When parents recognize and verbally name the feelings their preschool child is experiencing, this helps the child associate the feeling word with the inside feeling he/she is having.

Parent example:

*"You seem upset that it is time to go."*

As children grow older and go into the primary grades of elementary school, it is important that they understand all feelings are okay: the way they express those feelings may or may not be okay. Teaching **elementary age** students the "I feel message" gives them a respectful and effective way to share feelings. Teaching children to use the "I feel message" not only helps them to express their feelings with words, but it also helps them think about what could help them feel better, and allows others to understand what the child needs.

"I feel messages" include the words, "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_. I want \_\_\_\_\_." For example: "I feel upset when we have to go. I want to keep playing." Encourage your child to use the "I feel message" instead of using inappropriate behaviors or words.

You and your child can make a "feelings wheel" with all kinds of feelings faces on it; then have them practice making "I feel messages" regarding situations that have happened recently or that happen often. Once you think your child understands how to give an "I feel message," encourage and coach your child to use them when he/she is having a hard time using words to express feelings.

Actively listening to children when they are telling you how they feel can encourage them to use their words to express their feelings. You can show you are listening to them by looking at them as they speak and repeating or paraphrasing what they have just said.

Of course, a parent modeling the use of "I feel messages" is the most powerful way to help children learn how to use words to express their feelings. If the "I feel" message becomes a part of the family's way of sharing feelings, it will become second nature to the children.

Handling peer and sibling squabbles is a common challenge for most parents. Encouraging children to use the "I feel message" as a part of how parents help their children solve disagreements with each other will help establish the use of appropriate word and actions "in the heat of the moment." *The Committee on Children* who publishes "Second Step: A Violence Prevention Program" lists steps children in disagreement can use to solve their relationship problems. The

parent needs to coach children through the process until they can use the steps on their own. The steps are as follows:

1. Cool down (take deep breaths, count to ten slowly or tell yourself, "Calm down").
2. Each person gives an "I feel" message.
3. The other person "actively listens".
4. Both children think of solutions.
5. Agree on one solution that is safe, fair, everyone will feel better, and it solves the problem.
6. Do it.
7. Ask, "Did it work?" If not, together choose another solution and use it.

As your child uses "I feel messages," actively listens to others, and practices using the problem solving steps, he/she will strengthen the skills needed to develop positive interpersonal relationships. Be ready to actively listen if your child gives you an "I feel message." They are trying to share an unpleasant feeling in a socially acceptable way.

P.S. "I feel messages" can also be used to express pleasant emotions!

Dee Bostick, LPC-S, RPT-S

