

Developing an Emotional Language

by John Hoffman

Learning to express emotions in words is a very important part of children's emotional development. It can help children manage their feelings and, in some cases, reduce aggressive behaviour. Here are ways to help them learn.

- **Describe your own feelings with words.** Explain how you are feeling not only when talking to your children, but also when talking to other people in front of them. Try to say things like, "I'm really angry about what you did (or I'm really happy about what you did) rather than "What the heck is the matter with you? You're making me crazy!"
- **Describe your children's feelings with words.** Obviously you're going to say things like, "Oh, you poor little guy," at times. But fairly often, give a name to the child's feeling: "That made you sad, didn't it?" "Your brother really hurt your feelings when he said that." "Wow, I bet you're happy about scoring that goal!"
- **Talk about other people's feelings.** "That man over there looks really excited, doesn't he?" "Aunt Joan was really curious about your rock collection, wasn't she?" There is no need to be obsessive about correctly naming every single emotion your children experience or observe. But short conversations that use the language of emotion help children develop "emotional literacy," a set of communication skills that help people manage their emotions throughout life.
- **Use play for teaching.** For the most part, play should be fun and mostly without direction. But you can also find teachable moments during play. With younger children, you can play with dolls or puppets and have the child describe what the doll or puppet is feeling; this is especially helpful when children are perhaps a little scared of expressing certain emotions. ("He's really angry or scared...") With older children, you can talk about what one of the characters is feeling when reading a story together. ("What do you think Anne felt when Marilla accused her of being really vain"; "What must Joe have felt when he couldn't find his brother Frank in the snowstorm?")