

# Supporting Emotional Development with Positive Emotions

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by John Hoffman

We tend to think of supporting children's emotional development in terms of helping them deal with negative emotions. That is important of course. But let's not forget the importance of helping children understand and benefit from positive emotions. Positive emotions fuel not only happiness, but also creativity, learning, and the drive to succeed in life.

## Positive Emotion: More Than Just Feeling Good

The positive emotions that come to mind most easily are happiness, excitement, love, pride, or satisfaction. But other important positive emotions like curiosity, interest, hopefulness, and optimism also play an important role in children's learning.

Positive emotions give us energy, while negative emotions drain our energy. A child is much more likely to become engrossed or engaged in a learning experience if she is feeling curious or interested. A child is much more likely to be able to find the energy to do a difficult task if he feels hopeful or optimistic.

Supporting children with positive emotions is not simply about pleasing them, or trying to make sure they are happy or having fun every minute of the day. Here's what it takes.

**Reflecting children's positive emotions back to them.** Early in life, parents are "mirrors" for babies' good feelings. When baby smiles excitedly at her Dad, his delighted smile in return helps her learn what delight and happiness mean. This "mirroring" continues in various ways throughout childhood. When we respond to and share our children's good feelings, they learn that good feelings are acceptable and enjoyable.

**Helping children recognize and understand their positive feelings.** It might seem as though children would automatically understand positive feelings, and in a way, they do. But we can help to broaden their understanding of the things that make them feel good. For example, when a child does something well, instead of saying, "Good for you!" or "Well done!" you could say, "You feel really good about the picture you painted and you had a lot of fun doing it." This helps children understand that they can enjoy the process as well as the result, and that feeling good inside about an accomplishment is as important as what someone else thinks of your work.

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**Helping children contain positive emotions.** Even good feelings can be overwhelming at times. For example, children who are over-excited can get out of control and have trouble calming down. Over-the-top positive emotion can also be irritating to other people. Obviously we don't want to suppress children's good feelings but, as they grow, they should learn to express good feelings in ways that are appropriate for different situations.