TALK WITH KIDS ABOUT EMOTIONS

Difficulty: CASUAL | Frequency: VARIABLE | Duration: VARIABLE

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Most parents want their children to develop strengths of the heart, like empathy and generosity. But these strengths can be abstract, and trying to teach kids about them in general can leave you wondering whether they are really "getting" it.

Empathy—sensing what others might be thinking or feeling—first requires an awareness of other people's emotions, which is what emotion labeling provides.

Emotion labeling is a simple technique that can be done in everyday moments, like while grocery shopping or driving. Teaching children to see the world through another person's perspective helps them to recognize and internalize the emotional states of others, and differentiate them from their own. Children's perspective widens and their capacity for responding to another child with empathy grows. With more empathy, kids may be more willing to help and share with others—one type of empathic response—which can foster greater social competence and positive relationships.

TIME REQUIRED

This practice takes less than five minutes. You can try it whenever the opportunity arises in daily life.

HOW TO DO IT

Emotion labeling is one way to help children understand other people's feelings. It involves directly pointing out and naming feelings so your child can build their emotion vocabulary and recognize the contexts that give rise to various emotions. In this way, they can begin to understand that emotions are complex and nuanced.

For example, if you learn that your child's neighborhood playmate is mourning the loss of their pet, help your child gain awareness by describing the possible emotions the friend might be feeling in these circumstances: depressed, lonely, grieving, confused, angry. For example, you might say, "I heard that his dog was sick and died. He might be feeling so sad and overwhelmed right now."

Have conversations about what some feelings have in common, like how some can be "big" and uncomfortable, like feeling discouraged or afraid. Talk about how small kindnesses can make a difference in helping someone through intense emotions.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Dickerson, K. L., & Quas, J. A. (2021). Emotional awareness, empathy, and generosity in high-risk youths. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 208*, 1–18.

Children ages 6–17, including children who were maltreated and in foster care as well as children living with their parents, were offered candy. They were told they could select as many candies as they wanted, but that the next child would only get to pick from the candy remaining.

The emotion labeling group was told, ‘‘I heard that his/her dog ran away and his/her grandma is sick. He/she is so sad!”—while the control group was not given any information about the next child. Then, children privately decided whether to share by leaving candy in a closed box. Afterward, the researchers measured the children’s empathy by asking them how the other child felt with a question like, “What was going on with him/her?” They also asked children how good or bad they felt for the other child.

The children tended to show more empathy and, in turn, share more candy with the next child when the researchers labeled the next child’s emotion.

WHY TO TRY IT

When adults label the emotions of others, children are able to make sense of internal experiences that people may be having that are not obvious on the surface. Empathy appears to be a natural outgrowth of that understanding, particularly when kids realize that others are sad. And when children feel empathy, they may spontaneously share and be generous, rather than needing to be prompted.

Emotion labeling appears to be a simple, effective tool to raise children's social awareness of the emotional states of others and promote social connectedness.

SOURCES

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This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.