



Emotional development

Emotional development involves learning what feelings and emotions are, understanding how and why they occur, recognising your own feelings and those of others, and developing effective ways for managing those feelings.

What is emotional development?

Emotional development begins at birth

Emotional development is a complex process that begins in infancy and continues through adulthood. The first emotions that can be recognised in babies include joy, anger, sadness and fear. As children's sense of self develops, more complex emotions like shyness, surprise, elation, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride and empathy emerge. School-aged children and young people are still learning to identify emotions, understand why they happen, and how to manage them appropriately.

Emotional expression includes several components such as:

- physical responses (like heart rate, breathing and hormone levels)
- behavioural displays of emotion
- feelings that children and young people recognise and learn to name
- thoughts and judgments associated with feelings
- action signals (for example, a desire to approach, escape or fight).

Influences on emotional expression include:

- values and beliefs about appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing emotions that children and young people learn from families and educators
- how effectively children and young people's emotional needs are usually met
- children and young people's temperaments
- cultural norms
- emotional behaviours that children and young people have learned through observation or experience
- the extent to which families are under various kinds of stress.

The rate of emotional development in children and young people varies from person to person. Some children may show a high level of emotional skill development while quite young, whereas others may still be developing the capacity to manage their emotions well into adolescence.

Emotional development and sense of self

A person's sense of self is strongly influenced by their perception of themselves.

Knowing that they can be successful at what they do allows children and young people to feel competent and confident – which, in turn, affects their emotional development.

Children and young people who don't have many experiences of success can experience disappointment more often, which can lead to development of a negative sense of self. By being supported to learn to value their own strengths and efforts, as well as those of others, children and young people develop [resilience](#) to bounce back from challenges and hardship.

How can educators support emotional development in children and young people?

Providing effective support for children and young people's emotional development starts with paying attention to their feelings and noticing how they manage them.

Many learning communities incorporate specific programs to teach social and emotional skills. These skills can also be taught and learned through everyday interactions.

Tune in to children and young people's feelings and emotions

Some emotions are easily identified, while others are less obvious. Tuning in to children and young people's emotions involves looking at their body language, listening to what they're saying and how they're saying it, and observing their behaviour. This allows you to respond more effectively to their needs and to offer more specific guidance to help them manage their emotions.

Help children and young people recognise and understand emotions

Talking to children and young people and teaching them about emotions helps them to become more aware of their own behaviour, as well as that of others. It also helps them to better manage their own emotions over time.

Set limits

Let children and young people know that it's normal and OK to have a range of emotions and feelings. Teach language and skills for dealing with strong or difficult emotions, such as anger and frustration, in a positive way. It's also important to set limits on aggressive, unsafe or inappropriate behaviours.

Be a role model

Showing children and young people different ways you understand and manage emotions helps them learn from your example. If you lose your temper, apologise and show how you might make amends.

Be You Professional Learning

Check out content on social and emotional learning (SEL) and teaching for resilience in the [Learning Resilience](#) domain.

References

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