

EMOTIONAL LITERACY

a brief guide for parents

What is emotional literacy?

Emotional literacy is best explained by looking at what a child who is **emotionally literate** is like

A child who is emotionally literate

- is aware of/can usually name or explain the feelings they are experiencing
- can usually understand what caused the feeling
- knows the best way to behave to deal with the feeling
- can take other peoples feelings into account in any situation

Why is emotional literacy important?

Anyone who has tried to think clearly when they are angry will understand the power emotions can have over us.

Emotions are an **unavoidable** part of being human and they don't need to be a problem if we have the tools to allow them to leave nearly as easily as they arrive.

Healthy emotions 'flow' backwards and forwards and don't get stuck.

Emotions are very **real** and it's unhealthy to pretend they don't exist or affect our children.

It's **how children learn to manage** these inevitable **feelings** that has a huge impact on their lives

Children who can process their feelings well...

- build and maintain healthy relationships

- communicate positively and not defensively
- deal with changes in a more positive and less anxious way
- have less stress
- get more out of life

When children cannot process their feelings successfully they become 'stuck' and every time they are in a similar situation they will respond by experiencing the same emotion.

That situation will therefore always be the trigger for that emotion.

For example, if a child always feels shame when they asked to read because they struggle with reading, and this emotion has not been processed, the child will always connect reading with a negative emotion.

What are signs of poor emotional literacy?

When a child hasn't learnt how to manage their emotions well they

- cannot describe how they are feeling
- rarely talk about their emotions
- don't ask for and don't expect help when they are feeling bad
- express their emotions in unhelpful ways – for example; hitting, shouting or sulking
- don't recognise that emotions have got the better of them

Emotional literacy for boys

Talking about feelings is not just for girls. In fact, because girls are generally encouraged to be more open about feelings, they tend to need less support. Boys are expected to be 'strong' and sadly, this often means they get the message that the only acceptable emotion to show is anger. This can leave boys feeling very emotionally 'stuck' which are not healthy.

How can I help my child to manage their feelings well?

Young children need to learn how to manage their feelings in a healthy way and they learn this mostly from the key adults in their lives. Helping your child become emotionally literate involves

1. Acknowledging feelings

Ignoring or denying how your child feels will cause further upset. Children can't help the emotions they feel and they are completely real for them – as they are for adults.

Acknowledge feelings using statements like -

“I can see you are angry” or “I would feel sad too if that happened to me”

2. Talk about feelings

Talk to your child about how they are feeling and ask questions such as

- What happened to cause this feeling?
- Can you describe the feeling?
- Would you feel the same way if this had happened to you?
- Which kind of situations make you feel happy, angry, sad, excited etc?

3. Helping your child understand the choices they have when they feel a particular emotion

A child cannot help feeling angry, worried, scared or upset, but they do have a choice about what action to take or how to behave.

Help your child to see that when they feel sad they have a choice about what to do

unhelpful things

- sulking
- moaning
- making someone else feel sad

helpful things

- talking to someone
- finding something to do that comforts them
- finding out if there's anything they can do about the situation

4. Helping your child to imagine what other people might be feeling (developing empathy)

A child that can imagine what it is like to be in another person's shoes is more likely to respond helpfully to situations with uncomfortable feelings, be better at making friends and more likely to be happy.

Help your child develop empathy by using stories, pictures, TV dramas or real life situations to talk about how people are probably feeling

-when reading a story together ask your child to try and name the feeling/emotion a character might be feeling

-when watching TV pause the programme and encourage your child to 'read' other people's faces/body language and decide what they might be feeling.

What other ideas can I use to help my child manage their feelings?

See behaviour as a clue. When your child

- sulks
- shouts
- goes quietly to their room

they are communicating a feeling through their behaviour.

These can be opportunities to open up a conversation about feelings.

You can start by guessing what they might be feeling, try saying “I wonder if you’re feeling....” and discuss with your child.

Useful books:

Mr Men books range.

'Mad isn't Bad' - Michaelene Mundy

'Everybody feels...' - Moira Butterfield

'Let's talk about feeling sad' (range) - Joy Berry

'The Huge Bag of Worries - Virginia Ironside

['Help Your Child Develop Emotional Literacy: The parents' guide to happy children \(Help Your Child to Succeed\)'](#)

- Betty Rudd

[Talking is for All: How Children and Teenagers Develop Emotional Literacy' \(Lucky Duck Books\) - Betty Rudd](#)