



Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders OAFCCD

Words and Feelings

Children with speech and language disorders often have difficulty expressing their emotions. Children that don't have the language skills or vocabulary to express feeling sometimes become frustrated, and this can lead to behaviour problems. When children are sad, angry or tired, they may need help in identifying and dealing with their feelings.

Provide child with the words

When children are learning to talk we constantly label items, actions and feelings. However, when a child has difficulty talking we may concentrate on functional language and forget about their emotions and feelings. It is important to continue labelling feelings and to let them know you understand. For example:

"You feel sad because Sarah went home."

"You feel mad at me because I won't let you have more candy."

"You feel frustrated because the homework is hard."

These sentences may be too long or complex for the child to say, but by putting their feelings into words it will help them to feel understood. It will also provide the child with the language of emotions.

Provide child with strategies to deal with feelings

Ideally, we want children to use words, not actions like hitting or kicking, to deal with their frustration or anger. For children with speech or language disorders this may not be easy. It is important that your child has some words or gestures to control a situation. Control words like, "Stop", "Wait" or "No" can be used by the child to express their concerns and get others to listen.

It is also important to help the child problem solve and find solutions. The parent or adult may have to ask a number of questions to get information about the problem and help the child find a solution. For example:

Child: "I hate Mike. He's mean."

Parent: "You feel mad at Mike, because he has done something."

Child: "Mike took my car and I want it."

Parent: "You feel mad at Mike because he took your car and you want it back."

Child: "Yes"

Parent: "What can you do to get the car back?"

Child: "Go get it."

Parent: "Yes, you could go and take it from Mike, but that might make Mike feel angry. What else could you do?"

Child: "Give him truck."

Parent: "Yes, you could offer to trade the truck for the car."

Other solutions that you could offer the child, include waiting until later to ask for the car, starting a different game with Mike, or asking a parent or another person to talk to Mike. Remember to praise the child when they use their words to solve a problem or find a better way to express their feelings.

Let child know what behaviour is not allowed

It is important that a child knows what they can't do to express feelings. Be clear about your expectations and identify unacceptable behaviour.

"I know you are angry at your friend but hitting is not allowed."

"When you are mad at me, you can't scream at me."

It is very important to use "I -messages" and keep the message focussed on the unacceptable behaviour.

"I can't understand you when you scream."

Comfortable environment

Some parents have reported that their children are slow to notice when they are too hot, or when they are tired. These children may not pick up on environmental clues, like an open window which is making the room chilly. Others become unhappy without realizing it is because they are hungry or thirsty.

For example, a child may not realize they are too hot because the sun is shining through the window and warming the room. If they are working hard on a math problem and having difficulty, they may not have realized they need to remove their sweater. Parents may need to describe the problem and encourage the child to change the environment.

Parent “I see you are having difficulty with the math problem, perhaps it is getting too warm in here and you are feeling hot.”

Parent: “I see that you are getting frustrated with that project, perhaps you are tired and should take a break.”

Non-Verbal Language

Some children with language impairment are also unable to recognize non-verbal cues, which creates difficulties in judging the feelings of others. Feelings are expressed in facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. You may need to teach your child to look for these emotional clues.

TV can be a great teaching tool and family situation comedies can provide lots of opportunities for looking at non-verbal cues. It can be a casual discussion as you are watching a favourite show, or you can use a taped show, with the sound off, to illustrate different feelings and emotions. Ask the child to guess how the character is feeling, and tell you what clues he is using.

You can help the child to notice and describe facial expressions, posture, and gestures and what they mean. Picture books, such as the Mr. Men series (Mr. Silly, Mr. Grumpy, etc), can also be used to identify feelings and expressions. More subtle clues, such as interpersonal space, speech patterns and attitudes, are harder to notice, but you can point them out and discuss what they mean.

Teenagers can be very emotional!!

The range of emotions will become more complex as the child grows up. Young children may occasionally feel embarrassed when they are caught doing something wrong, but teens, who have a greater need to fit in, may constantly be embarrassed by their own actions, or yours. A teen that has a crush, or falls in love, will be experiencing new emotions and will often be unsure how to express their feelings.

Communicating with teens can be difficult but parents should continue to use many of the same strategies. Provide words to label the emotions and describe the feelings. Help the teen to identify problems and possible solutions. Be clear about your behaviour expectations and the consequences.

Remember we can't always make our children feel better, but we can give them the language to describe their feelings and the ability to problem solve.

Source: OAFCCD [September 2003](#)