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Authors
The Resilience Practice Framework was developed in partnership by the Parenting Research Centre and The Benevolent Society. The framework was developed by:

Laura Baldwin
Senior Research Officer, Parenting Research Centre

Dr Robyn Mildon
Director, Knowledge Exchange, Parenting Research Centre

Greg Antcliff
Director, Professional Practice, The Benevolent Society

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The Benevolent Society  Parenting Research Centre
Level 1, 188 Oxford Street  Level 5, 232 Victoria Parade
Paddington NSW 2021  East Melbourne Victoria 3002
T 02 8262 3400  T 03 8660 3500
F 02 9360 2319  F 03 8660 3599

resilience@benevolent.org.au  info@parentingrc.org.au

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# Table of Contents

What the research tells us .......................... 5
Evidence informed practices:
  Modelling empathy ............................... 7
  Praising empathy .................................. 10
  Emotion coaching .................................. 12
  Tuning in: Identifying a child’s emotions ........ 15
  Naming a child’s emotions ....................... 18
  Using emotions as a teaching opportunity–Child 20
References ........................................... 23
## Improving empathy

### Domains of resilience (resilience strings)
- Positive Values
- Secure Base
- Social Competencies
- Friendships

### Evidence informed practice
- Modeling empathy
- Praising empathy
- Emotion coaching
- Tuning in: Identifying a child’s emotions
- Naming a child’s emotions
- Using emotions as a teaching opportunity

### Practice elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice elements</th>
<th>Modeling empathy</th>
<th>Praising empathy</th>
<th>Emotion coaching</th>
<th>Tuning in: Identifying a child’s emotions</th>
<th>Naming a child’s emotions</th>
<th>Using emotions as a teaching opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provide clear explanations of how others are feeling in relation to child’s behaviour, e.g. “That makes James feel bad when you call him names”</strong></td>
<td><strong>Share simple observations of others’ emotions from parents’ own emotion. “I’m feeling pretty frustrated right now because I can’t find my book.”</strong></td>
<td><strong>Step 1. Identifying child’s emotions</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Step 2. Listen empathetically</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Step 3. Naming child’s emotions</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Step 4. Using emotions as a teaching opportunity</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Step 5. Problem solve emotionally charged situation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Develop awareness of child’s negative emotions, particularly when expressed at lower level intensity</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Intervene early (lower level intensity stage) to redirect child</strong></td>
<td><strong>Naming child’s emotions, e.g. “I can see that you feel angry/excited”</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Interactive games and strategies to develop an emotional vocabulary and learn how to label feelings</strong></td>
<td><strong>Normalise the child’s emotions</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Explore with the child what has triggered the emotion</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Teach the child to express the emotion in a more appropriate way</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What the research tells us

Caring adults who demonstrate respect, tolerance, and empathy are a positive source of strength for children. Empathy refers to the ability of the individual to identify emotions in another and to subsequently experience that emotion (or similar) themselves (Roberts & Strayer, 1996). A significant body of research has linked empathy with prosocial behaviours (Denham et al., 2008; Eisenberg, Fabs & Spinrad, 2006). Children who learn about empathy at a young age are better equipped to treat others with compassion, and go on to develop stronger social skills and adjust more easily to the school setting (Eisenberg, 2000). In contrast, children with a lower ability to regulate and understand emotions or how to treat others with compassion are more likely to act out with violence or aggression, especially against others (Denham et al., 2008).

Empathy is a complex construct, derived of three primary component skills which include: a sense of self-awareness and the ability to distinguish one’s own feelings from the feelings of others; taking another person’s perspective; and being able to regulate one’s own emotional responses (Decety & Jackson, 2004). A number of programs have been designed to promote the skills of perspective-taking and empathy, with the aim of encouraging problem solving skills and associated prosocial behaviours (see Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003 for a review). Common components of these programs include modelling and reinforcement of cooperative and kind behaviours (altruism), improving emotional competence, and teaching of problem solving skills to manage emotionally charged situations (Conroy & Brown, 2002).

Modelling and reinforcement of empathy
Adults are significant role models who play a key role in assisting their children to develop empathy and understand different points of view. A parent can convey important messages to their child about empathy through modelled behaviour, which children observe and replicate (Strayer & Roberts, 2004). Describing feelings throughout the day, and having conversations about how other people might feel, can all help build empathy. For example, adults can help children make links between everyday situations expressed on television or in books by describing the feelings of that person. Studies show that family conversations about the emotional experiences of others are associated with children’s performance on perspective-taking tasks (Dunn et al., 2001). Adults can help shape altruistic behaviour (for example, when a child helps another child who has fallen over) by providing clear, specific praise when they observe their child treating others with compassion. This has been demonstrated by studies which show mothers who praise their pre-schoolers’ altruistic behaviours tend to have children who display a greater number of prosocial actions toward peers (Garner, 2006; Hastings et al., 2007). Thus, parental modelling and reinforcement of empathy provides an important contribution to the development of children’s prosocial behaviours, and strengthening peer relationships.

Regulating emotional responses
Children are likely to show empathic concern for others if they have parents who help them cope with negative emotions in a sympathetic, problem solving-oriented way. Longitudinal research by Gottman and colleagues has provided detailed descriptions of the way in which different parenting styles affect children’s emotion regulation and other aspects of development. These studies found that parents who have difficulty in labelling their child’s emotions, or who tend to minimise their children’s emotions, have children with poorer emotion regulation skills. In contrast, parents who respond positively to their child’s emotional expression display greater levels of warmth, are less critical of their children’s emotions and behaviour, and have children who are more likely to have better cognitive and social skills and abilities (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 1996; Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach & Blair, 1997). Practitioners can facilitate the implementation of these skills by providing parents with the rationale and the skills to respond and help their child regulate their emotions. Practitioners can also provide incidental teaching opportunities for emotion regulation to children in classroom or other child care settings (see Conroy & Brown, 2002). For example, if a worker observes a young child scribbling a hole in a picture she has drawn, he may reflect her affect by stating: “Catherine, you look very frustrated.” This process assists the child to recognise and label her own feelings, and in turn be better equipped to express her emotions (such as frustration) in future situations (Kostelnik, 2002).
Problem solving skills to manage emotions

Emotion coaching is a process that can be taught to parents and/or significant caregivers to aid children’s emotion regulation. It involves several key skills which focus on increasing the caregiver’s ability to become more adept at recognising and helping the child label their emotions, empathising and validating children’s emotions, using their child’s emotional expression as a teaching opportunity, and setting limits and helping the child solve problems. Studies show children who receive emotion coaching are more likely to have better cognitive skills, stronger social skills, display more prosocial skills, and have fewer physical illnesses than children who do not experience this style of parenting (Gottman, 1994). In families where children witness or experience domestic violence, emotion coaching has been shown to influence the relationship between domestic violence and the children’s aggression, social withdrawal, and anxiety (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2006).

Teaching skills to increase empathy

The next section outlines strategies that caregivers and parents can use to improve children’s emotional competence and empathy. These strategies involve teaching parents and other significant caregivers to model and reinforce empathy, help the child label their emotions, and use problem solving strategies to deal with challenging situations.

When teaching the following skills, you will need to give the parent an opportunity to practise. Providing the parent with a model or demonstration of it first and then having the parent practise the skill will lead to a higher level of success. See Guide 6: Practitioner skills: Parent skills training which outlines a detailed process of how you do this.

This guide is designed to assist practitioners to enhance children’s ability to understand and regulate their own emotions. Once a child has greater social-emotional competence, they are more likely to express empathy and respond in more socially desirable ways with others across a range of settings (Eisenberg, Smith, Sadoovsky & Spinrad, 2004).
Modelling empathy

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<tr>
<td>Caregiver/parent; toddler, pre-school, school-aged child</td>
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Adults are significant role models who play a key role in assisting their children to develop empathy and understand different points of view. Describing feelings throughout the day, and having conversations about how other people might feel, can all help build empathy. This is an important skill in helping the child engage in more prosocial behaviours. Children who learn about empathy are better equipped to treat others with compassion and studies suggest they go on to develop stronger social skills and adjust more easily to the school setting. In contrast, children who have not been taught about empathy or how to treat others with compassion are more likely to act out with violence or aggression, especially against others.

Outcomes
- Increased emotional knowledge
- Increased prosocial behaviour and peer acceptance
- Increased child ability to regulate own emotional states
- Increased parent–child emotional bond and attachment
- Decreased behavioural problems.

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Provide rationale**

Modelling empathy and talking to children about others’ empathetic behaviour will help her learn about other people’s emotions, and relate them to her own.

For example:

*Because children are responsive to their parents’ expectations, children will respond to your message that helping others is good, and in turn will try to do this more often. When parents help their children become more attuned to the reactions of other children and adults, children are able to use those reactions to learn which behaviours are appropriate.*

**STEP 2: Provide clear explanations of how others are feeling in relation to the child’s behaviour**

Teach the parent to provide simple, clear explanations about how other people feel when they are sad or hurt. This is especially important if the child has caused these feelings in another. When this happens, explain to the parent that they need to be firm when discussing how these feelings work.

For example: *“It makes James feel bad when you call him names”.*
STEP 3: Share simple observations of emotions

Teach parents to take note of their child’s behaviours, and use this as an opportunity to model empathy and perspective taking.

**For example:** “Elizabeth, you seem quiet today. [Pause for response]. Often when I’m quiet, I’m worried about something.”

Encourage parents to verbalise their own emotions to the children by telling them how they are feeling and why.

**For example:** “I’m feeling pretty frustrated right now because I can’t find my book.”

STEP 4: Use others’ behaviours as role model for empathy

Encourage parents to notice when someone else behaves kindly. This reinforces the child’s understanding of how people’s actions can affect the child emotionally.

**For example:** “Remember that girl on the bus, the one who moved seats for us? She was very nice to us, and she helped us sit together so that we can look out the window.”

STEP 5: Be a good role model for empathy

Explain that parents can role model empathy through their own behaviours and approach to parenting their children. For example, encourage them to show empathy towards their children by comforting them when they are down, giving hugs often and having a caring attitude. This encourages children to respond to parents and peers using prosocial behaviours.

The same rationale applies to parents who may provide a model that tends to be unresponsive or indifferent to their child’s emotions. Children who are not taught about empathy or how to treat others with compassion are more likely to act out with violence or aggression, especially against others.

**For example:**
“If your child does something you don’t like, it’s unhelpful to yell at them or hit them. This teaches them that yelling and hitting are acceptable ways to handle feelings. The risk is that they might do those things to other children. On the other hand, when you give your child a big hug when he is upset or has hurt himself, he is likely to do the same to a friend at kindergarten or at school, or when he sees that they are feeling upset.”
Helpful hints and tips:

- **Deliver emotional messages in emotional tones.** It is important that the parent expresses the overall emotional feeling of the conversation’s direction to the child when providing praise. Pitch, volume and speed of delivery can all change a communication’s emotion. Saying the words “Well done for being a nice boy to the dog in the park” in a monotone fashion conveys a much less emphatic message than saying “well done for being a nice boy” slowly, softly and lifting the pitch when saying “nice boy.” One conveys a robotic ‘text book’ approach, while the other conveys genuine emotion.

- **Children as young as 12 months can show empathy.** Children as young as two understand when parents say things like “hitting your little sister makes her frightened and sad”.

- **Although children show empathy early on, it doesn’t mean they will show it every time.** Sometimes young children might not show any empathy at all, and at times they might even laugh when they cause another person distress. Research suggests most children will not develop a fully-fledged theory of mind until about the age of four years.

- **Discourage expectations of perfection.** It is important that parents encourage empathy, but don’t expect perfection from their children regarding this skill.
Praising empathy

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Adults are significant role models who play a key role in assisting their children to develop empathy and understand different points of view. Children should be encouraged to feel pleasure when they show empathy by being praised and rewarded for their efforts and behaviour. Adults can help shape altruistic behaviour (for example, when a child helps another child who has fallen over) by providing clear, specific praise when they observe their child treating others with compassion.

Outcomes
- Increased emotional knowledge
- Increased prosocial behaviour and peer acceptance
- Increased child ability to regulate own emotional states
- Increased parent–child emotional bond and attachment
- Decreased behavioural problems

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Provide clear, specific praise for empathetic behaviour**
Teach the parent to label praise when the child has performed an act of kindness.

For example: “You were very generous to share your pencils with your baby brother!”

**STEP 2: Reflect what aspect of emotion was created through empathetic behaviour**
Reinforce the child’s understanding of how his positive actions affect others emotionally by using clear, specific language.

For example:
“When you tell your child exactly what impact his positive actions have on another person, he is likely to feel good about himself. In the example above, you might say to your child: “When you noticed Jack was upset and wanted to join in colouring, you shared your pencils with him. That made him happy. See how he’s smiling?” The combination of verbal praise, in addition to feeling good about himself after seeing the positive effect of his actions, all work together to motivate him to continue to carry out empathic behaviours. Eventually, he will do this without being prompted or praised by yourself or others.”
Helpful hints and tips:

- **Children as young as 12 months can show empathy.** Children as young as two years understand when parents say things like “hitting your little sister makes her frightened and sad”.

- **Although children show empathy early on, it doesn’t mean they will show it every time.** Sometimes young children might not show any empathy at all, and at times they might even laugh when they cause another person distress. Research suggests most children will not develop a fully-fledged theory of mind until about the age of four years.

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### Opportunities to provide praise for empathy

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sharing</th>
<th>Helping</th>
<th>Doing small jobs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For younger children: Toys, games, pets.</td>
<td>For example, a sibling or peer when they are feeling sad or have injured themselves.</td>
<td>Research suggests that children who learn responsibility also learn altruism and caring. Praise for tasks such as feeding pets teaches empathy, “Look how Rover’s wagging his tail! You’re being so nice to him. He’s really happy you’re giving him his dinner.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Older children and adolescents: Clothes, computer games, or volunteering.</td>
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Emotion coaching

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The quality of a caregiver’s social and emotional practices has a strong impact on the level of a child’s emotional competence, adjustment and resilience. Emotion coaching involves a 5-step process that can be taught to parents to help strengthen a child’s emotional competence. These steps include helping adults become adept at: (1) becoming aware of their child’s emotion states, (2) empathising and validating the child’s emotions, (3) using their child’s emotional expression as a teaching opportunity, (4) helping the child label the emotion he is feeling, and (5) setting limits and helping the child solve problems. Once a child has a greater understanding and insight into their own emotions, they are more likely to be able to empathise with the emotional experience of others. Emotion coaching also helps children avert negative emotions and enhance positive emotions.

Outcomes
- Increased child ability to regulate own emotional states
- Improved quality of parent–child interaction
- Decreased behavioural problems
- Increased prosocial behaviours
- Increased levels of peer acceptance and relationships
- Better adjustment to school setting and academic performance.

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Provide rationale**

Provide some background as to why emotion coaching is important to helping kids.

For example:

“The way children are taught to understand and regulate their emotions has been linked with emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is associated with the ability to understand and describe one’s own feelings and communicate to others how one is feeling. When a child learns to regulate her own emotions, she is more likely to show less reactive behaviours at home, and studies have shown kids that are better able to do this also do better at school, with their peers, and have fewer behavioural difficulties.”

Explain and normalise emotion-dismissive behaviour.

For example:

“Lots of parents say they try not to pay too much attention to their child when he expresses negative emotions because they are concerned that talking about the problem will make the issue worse. Other parents (often fathers) say they do this because they are teaching their child to ‘toughen up’. When their child is upset, they might say something like: “Jack you don’t really mean that. Things are not that bad. Come on, cheer up. How about you watch some TV and forget about it”. Of course, there are some situations when children need to be redirected, or behaviours such as whining could be ignored, and techniques like that are good ones to use. Using that approach every time a child shows distress, however, may mean that children do not learn to trust their feelings, regulate their own emotions, and solve problems.”
## Five steps of emotion coaching

### STEP 1: Become aware of child’s emotions
See also *Tuning in: Identifying a child’s emotions*, page 15

Help the parent become better at identifying their child’s lower intensity emotions such as disappointment, frustration and irritability before these escalate to more high-intensity emotional expressions.

Parents can also act as role models as they understand emotion and trust themselves.

### STEP 2: Use the emotion as a teaching opportunity
See also *Using emotions as a teaching opportunity–Child*, page 20

Encourage the parent see the expression of negative feelings as a time to talk openly and honestly, rather than dismissing the child’s emotion as unreasonable or irrational.

Provide psycho-education, if necessary, to help the parent normalise that their child’s reactions to a given situation is age appropriate.

Help the parent use the opportunity to explore with the child and teach them about the meaning and origin of the emotion.

### STEP 3: Label the emotions
See also *Naming a child’s emotions*, page 18

Help parents find additional words to verbally label the emotion the child or adolescent is having.

For example:

When a child is angry, they might also be
- Jealous, frustrated or feeling betrayed.

When a child is sad, they might also feel
- Left-out, hurt or abnormal/different to other kids.

### STEP 4: Listen empathetically and validate the child’s emotions
See also *Naming a child’s emotions*, page 18

Have the parent make an attempt to reflect their child’s emotion by stating what they think the child might be feeling.

For example:
- “I wonder if it is not only that you are mad at me about not letting you go, but you are disappointed because you wanted to go to the party with your friends?”
- “It sounds like you feel sad because your friend Katie is going away, is that right?”

### STEP 5: Help the child solve problems
See also *Guide 3: Increasing coping/self regulation–Problem solving*

Teach the parent the six steps of problem solving. Encourage the parent to use these steps with the child to help them identify more solution-focused ways of managing the situation.

1. Define the problem
2. Brainstorm solutions
3. List the pros and cons of each solution
4. Choose a solution
5. Make a plan
6. Implement the plan and check in
When emotion coaching is not appropriate:

When time limits are an issue. For example, when a parent notices their child becoming emotional when being dropped off at school, yet they need to be at an appointment at work, this will mean they do not have the time to devote to working through the steps of emotion coaching adequately.

When family members or friends are present. This reduces the intimacy required for talking through the emotional issue together. It may also embarrass the child, and mean that both the caregiver and child are restricted in their ability to talk openly and honestly.

When the caregiver is feeling tired or emotional. Feeling tired, tense or emotional themselves, caregivers may find themselves less willing and patient to deal effectively with their child’s emotions. Encourage the caregiver to use their own coping strategies first, and then try engaging in this process with their child.

When there is a need to address serious misbehaviour. While a caregiver may understand the emotions that may underlie or motivate the misbehaviour, empathising with serious misbehaviours (such as lying or truancy from school) is not appropriate. It is important to separate the emotions behind the serious misbehaviour. Initially, discuss the misbehaviour and express disappointment and anger. Consequences for the serious misbehaviour may need to be implemented. Once this has been achieved, caregivers may focus on trying to understand, label, validate and problem solve the emotions that underlie the serious misbehaviour.

Tuning in: Identifying a child’s emotions

WHEN caregivers become attuned to a child’s emotions, they are better able to understand, tolerate, and respond appropriately to a child’s emotions. Assisting caregivers to identify and respond to strong emotions in the earlier stages may prevent the child’s emotions from escalating and being expressed as misbehaviours. Affirmation of the child’s feelings by an important adult strengthens the trust that their needs will be heard and met. Longer term outcomes for children include developing an understanding of their own emotions and therefore better regulation of these emotion states, as well as providing a model for children to use in shaping their own response to the emotions of others (empathy).

Outcomes
- Increased child ability to regulate own emotional states
- Increased child ability to soothe and calm themselves when upset
- Increased parent–child emotional bond and attachment
- Decreased behavioural problems.

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Introduce rationale**
Recognising and responding to lower-level intensity emotions before they escalate can reduce the need for parents to implement consequences for inappropriate behaviours associated with higher-level intensity emotions (such as anger).

**For example:**

“When you are tuned in and notice the early signs of your child’s strong emotions, such as irritability and frustration, you can respond to your children’s emotional state sooner. This means your child does not need to escalate their behaviour in order to get attention (often negative attention) from you or other important people in their lives. It also means that your child feels increasingly more intense emotions that can escalate to misbehaviours, such as tantrums or other aggressive behaviours.”

**STEP 2: Discuss child’s emotion states and behaviours**
Talk to the parent about how their child expresses their emotions. The aim is to encourage parents to notice and label their child’s emotions by observing and reflecting their child’s body language, facial expressions and other cues. It may be useful to begin the exercise when the child is in a relatively calm situation. Ask the parent questions such as:

“What facial expression does your child have when she is relaxed/happy?”
“What sort of emotions do you think she is having right now?”
“What tells you she is pretty calm and relaxed?”
Next, compare the current (relatively calm) situation to situations where the caregiver has noticed their child was anxious, disappointed, frustrated or when they have expressed grumpiness or irritability. These are lower level intensity emotions that may lead to higher level intensity emotions (anger) and misbehaviours (hitting other children, tantrums). When asking parents to reflect on the lower-level intensity emotions, parents may find it difficult to relate to their child’s emotional states, but rather will find it easier to describe situations or typical behaviours when their child is “naughty” or “plays up.” Use these as a way to identify how the child expresses emotions. When discussing these emotions, concentrate on guiding the parent to reflect on the behaviours occurring in the build up (antecedents) to the highest-level emotions. The aim of this exercise is to identify the early signs and signals that a child may be experiencing distressing emotion.

For example:

Practitioner: “So you tend to notice Jessie sucks her thumb (even though she stopped doing that a while ago) whenever she is in a new situation. What does her face look like? What other behaviours happen when she sucks her thumb?”
Parent: “Whingeing, she talks in baby voice and complains about a sore stomach.”
Practitioner: “How do you think she is feeling when she is doing that?”
Parent: “Bored”. After some reflection and discussion about the new situation, the parent may be guided towards: “anxious, worried, scared”.

Hierarchy
1. When Sally is in a new situation
2. Starts to suck her thumb
3. Starts to whine and complain (baby voice)
4. Says she wants to go home
5. Tantrum

**STEP 3: Create hierarchy of emotion states**

Use the hierarchy to teach parents to intervene at the lower level intensity emotion states. Encourage the parent to take the time to listen to the child and acknowledge his feelings before focusing on problem solving these feelings. Assist the parent to recognise and support the child when his feelings overwhelm him. See the diagram below for an example of this.
Creating a map of important people and places in the child’s life can strengthen a parent’s skills in understanding their child’s emotions. (see Guide 1: Increasing safety: Social connections maps) Provide the rationale to parents that having a sound knowledge of their child’s ‘world’ will mean they are better placed to explore the possible sources of their child’s emotional states (particularly if the child feels unable to verbalise them himself). Encourage the parent to spend more time at day care centres, school or after school activities if it becomes clear that they do not have a good understanding of their child’s experience. If you have already completed the Social Connections Map with the child, refer to this with the parent.

Questions to ask the parent to help them generate a ‘map’ of their child’s life include:
- “Who are your child’s closest friends?”
- “Which teacher intimidates your child at school? Which makes her feel safe?”
- (For school-aged children): “Which subjects interest the child the most and which cause the biggest struggle?”

If you have access to a video camera, you could choose to take a five minute video of the child engaged in an activity. Use this video to assist you with Step 2 to help you reflect with the parent about how the child is looking, facial expressions etc.
Naming a child’s emotions

A critical factor in developing emotional competence is the ability to recognise and name one’s own emotions. Children begin to understand labels for their own and other people’s emotions when parents talk to them about the feelings that other people express in a variety of situations. If parents talk about each person’s ‘inner world’ of thoughts, feelings and perceptions, children can begin to understand that someone else might see, feel or think differently to them. If a child can recognise his own feelings, he can begin to empathise with other people’s feelings. A further benefit of being able to label emotions correctly is that it can give the child a language to communicate how they are feeling, which they can use in place of a behaviour to show how they are feeling (e.g. saying “I’m feeling angry” rather than having a tantrum).

Outcomes
• Increased child ability to regulate own emotional states
• Less likely to develop internalising or externalising disorders
• Decreased behavioural problems, such as impulsive or aggressive responses
• Increased peer acceptance by enhancing children’s social skills
• Increased parent–child emotional bond and attachment
• Increased academic competence.

How you do it:

**STEP 1: Assist the parent to label the emotion**

 Assist parents to label their child’s emotions by describing and extending on how their child is feeling. For example, when a child is angry, a parent might suggest or wonder whether the child might also be jealous, frustrated or feeling betrayed. When a child is sad, they might also feel left-out, hurt, or feel ‘abnormal’ or different to other kids. Encourage the parent to attempt to label their child’s feelings.

For example:
“*When you notice your child is feeling a lower-level intensity emotion (frustrated, grumpy, sad), have a go at putting that feeling into words. Try clarifying each statement with a question. This helps to make sure you have got it right. Importantly, this also shows your child that you are really listening and interested in how they are feeling.*”

Prompts:
“I can see by your face that you are _______."
“It seems like you are feeling ______________.”
“It sounds like you felt ______, is that right?”
“Did you feel________ when____________?“
“Were you feeling________ when____________?”
STEP 2: Connect emotions to the feelings of those around them

Encourage the parent to talk to children and label what they are feeling and what others are feeling and expressing throughout the day.

For example: “You’re smiling. I think you’re very happy with that toy.”
“Look at Sophie and Sarah. They’re laughing. I think they’re happy playing together with the blocks”.

STEP 3: Structure activities to encourage parent/child labelling emotions

Interactive strategies to encourage feelings labelling between the parent and child can provide an additional tool for parents to open up conversation and help them and their child label emotions. Increasing conversation around emotions reinforces the importance of emotion recognition, both to the child and the caregiver. Set activities for the parent and child to do together in between home visits. See below for suggestions.

Feelings faces poster (Domitrovitch, Greenberg, Kusche & Cortes, 2004)

The feelings faces poster is a poster showing pictures of faces with lots of different expressions. It is useful for helping children to identify how they are feeling.

Some suggestions for using the feelings faces poster:

- Suggest that parents point out and then talk about the different faces on the poster
- Act out different feelings, or discuss situations that create the feeling and sensations associated with that feeling
- Use the feelings faces poster to ask children about how they are feeling
- For example, parents could say “Show me how you are feeling on the feelings faces poster?”

Emotional expression games (using flash cards)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imitating and guessing about faces</th>
<th>Explaining facial expressions</th>
<th>Creating emotion flash cards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Shuffle the cards and put them face down. The first player picks a card, keeps it to herself, and then mimics the facial expression on the card. The other player(s) have to guess the correct emotion. | Players take turns picking a card from the deck and inventing a reason for the facial expression displayed. For example, if the player picks a card with a woman showing disgust, the player might say “She just ate some broccoli!” | Have the child and parent create their own ‘feeling face’ flash card by drawing together. Some questions the parent can then ask the child to further help label emotions include:
- “What is the feeling face you drew?”
- “How did you feel in your body when you felt like this?”
- “What thoughts were going through your head when you had this feeling?” |

Practice guidelines for age-appropriate labelling of emotions

- **Recognising and labelling feelings, ages 2–3 years.** Children will begin to increase understanding and use of language related to emotions, and will be beginning to label feelings she recognises in herself and others. For example, she might say, “Mummy is happy now” or “Why are you cross, Grandpa?”

- **Recognising and labelling feelings, pre-school years.** Children begin to label their own feelings and those of others based on facial expressions or tone of voice. For example, she might look at a picture in a book and say, “The boy is sad”. The link between emotion recognition and empathy may be noted at this stage – “The boy is sad, he can’t find his truck”.

- **Recognising and labelling feelings, school age.** At this stage the child uses more complex language to express her understanding of feelings and their causes; for example, “I sort of want to try riding on that, but I’m sort of scared, too.”
Using emotions as a teaching opportunity—Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>HOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent/caregiver; toddler, pre-school, school-aged child</td>
<td>Agency, home setting</td>
<td>Practitioner led, one-on-one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching a child about negative feelings by discussing a situation openly and honestly strengthens a child’s ability to recognise and regulate their emotions. Often, a parent will express uncertainty about whether to address their child’s distress during an emotional response because they feel concerned that this may exacerbate the intensity of the situation. Using emotions as a teaching opportunity actually does the opposite; it helps contain the child’s fears about the intensity of the emotion they are experiencing and thus enables them to learn more both about themselves and the event which has triggered the emotional response. Subsequently, they are then in a better position to self-regulate and/or use problem solving to manage emotion in a more appropriate manner. Critically, it also creates a greater sense of intimacy and emotional connectedness between the caregiver and child, further strengthening a child’s sense of safety and security within their relationship to others.

Outcomes
- Increased emotional knowledge
- Increased child ability to regulate own emotional states
- Decreased behavioural problems
- Stronger social skills and prosocial behaviour
- Increased parent–child emotional bond and attachment
- Increased problem solving skills.

How you do it:

STEP 1: Provide rationale

Rather than dismissing a child’s emotion as irrational, or avoiding discussing it altogether, parents can reduce the likelihood of higher-level intensity emotions by teaching their child to understand (and therefore cope) with the strong emotions associated with a trigger event.

It is also an opportunity for teaching, and a chance to emotionally connect with their child. Importantly, helping a parent notice a child’s emotions at a lower level intensity is the most useful time to teach the child before the child becomes flooded with negative emotions.

For example:
“If your child seems nervous about starting a new afternoon activity such as swimming lessons, have a go at exploring the child’s fears the day before attending. Rather than dismissing the fear as irrational or something he will ‘get over’, take these concerns seriously and then help him to problem solve solutions to his worries. This can often prevent kids from throwing a full blown tantrum.”
STEP 2: Normalise the child’s feelings and emotions about the current situation

Encourage the parent to see the expression of negative feelings as a time to talk openly and honestly, rather than dismissing the child’s emotion as unreasonable or irrational.

An important part of this step is to normalise the child’s feelings about the current situation. Parents could be encouraged to think of a similar adult situation or share similar stories of their own experience, which also demonstrates empathy and understanding.

For example:
“When I was younger, I didn’t want to learn to drive because I was scared. I was worried I couldn’t do it and going on the big roads made me feel nervous. Now I drive on them nearly every day to pick up your big sister from school.”

STEP 3: Teach and explore with the child what has triggered the negative emotion

Provide the child with an explanation of why they may be experiencing negative emotions. Encourage the child to reflect on what else might be contributing.

For example:
“Sometimes people don’t want to see the dentist because they feel worried that their teeth might feel sore, or they are scared of the instruments in the office. Or, it might be because they have never been to the dentist before and they don’t know what to expect. I wonder if any of these things sound like they might be happening for you?”

The parent might also explore with the child and help them to recognise how they are feeling in their body as a signal of distress, in order to increase the child’s emotion recognition skills.

For example:
“When you feel scared, what does your tummy feel like? What else feels weird?”
“When you feel angry, how does your body feel? Do you get all tense or shaky? What else happens to your body?”

STEP 4: Teach the child to express the emotion in a more appropriate way*

Once the child and parent have gained greater understanding about the emotion, the parent may also set limits around the child’s behaviour and/or teach the child more appropriate strategies for dealing with the problem.

For example:
“It’s ok to feel worried about going to swimming lessons and you might be a bit mad at me for saying you need to go; but it is not ok to slam the door to your bedroom and scream at me. What can we do to make your first swimming lesson tomorrow easier?”

*See Guide 3: Increasing coping/self regulation: Problem solving
STEP 5: Reflect on outcome of strategy and make a plan

The aim of this step is to increase the parent’s efficacy to address their child’s negative emotions or signs of distress. Afterwards (and when the child is out of earshot) have the parent identify what things they noticed about the things you (or the parent) said to the child (and what you did not say or do) and how the child responded.

Some questions to ask the caregiver might be:
- “Did you notice that Sarah responded fairly calmly as we talked about her fears?” [And if so]
- “Did this surprise you at all?” – [If so] “What were you expecting might have happened?” [Commonly, parent reports: “I thought she would get even more hysterical if we talked about how scared she felt”]
- What might have happened if we had ignored her when she was grumbling at you in the beginning?”

Help the parent plan ahead.

For example:
- “In what situations might you not use this strategy?” (See next section)
- “When would be a good time to use this strategy?”

Practice guidelines for age-appropriate labelling of emotions

In the following situations it may not be appropriate to use these strategies:

- **When time limits are an issue.** For example, when a parent notices their child becoming emotional when being dropped off at school, yet they need to be at an appointment at work, this will mean they do not have the time to devote to working through the steps adequately.

- **When family members or friends are present.** This reduces the intimacy required for talking through the emotional issue together. It may also embarrass the child, and mean that both the caregiver and child are restricted in their ability to talk openly and honestly.

- **When the caregiver is feeling tired or irrational.** Feeling tired, tense or emotional themselves, caregivers may find themselves less willing and patient to deal effectively with their child’s emotions. Encourage the caregiver to use their own coping strategies first, and then try engaging in this process with their child.

- **When there is a need to address serious misbehaviour.** While a caregiver may understand the emotions that underlie or motivate the misbehaviour, empathising with serious misbehaviours (such as lying or truancy from school) is not appropriate. It is important to separate the emotions behind the serious misbehaviour. Initially, discuss the misbehaviour and express disappointment and anger. Consequences for the serious misbehaviour may need to be implemented. Once this has been achieved, caregivers may focus on trying to understand, label, validate and problem solve the emotions that underlie the serious misbehaviour.
References


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National Office
Level 1, 188 Oxford Street
Paddington NSW 2021
PO Box 171
Paddington NSW 2021
T 02 8262 3400
F 02 9360 2319
Donations 1800 819 633
www.benevolent.org.au
or find us on

Queensland
9 Wilson Street
West End QLD 4101
PO Box 5347
West End QLD 4101
T 07 3170 4600
F 07 3255 2953