

Understanding Your Child's Emotional Needs

Recognize feelings. Explore ways to connect. Know where to find support.

What are emotional needs?

Children and teenagers experience emotions as they develop relationships, adapt to change, and learn about themselves. Emotional needs may include feeling safe, connected, heard, respected, and supported. How children express these needs varies by age, temperament, communication style, disability, and circumstances.

How might children express feelings?

Young children

may communicate through play, facial expressions, closeness, movement, or changes in behavior.

School-age children

may talk about friendships, school, fairness, worries, or disappointment; some express feelings more readily through activities than conversation.

Teenagers

may seek independence and privacy while still needing trusted adults and dependable support.

Children who use few spoken words or alternative communication

may express feelings through gestures, behavior, devices, or other communication methods.

Ways families can explore and respond

- 1 **Notice and listen.**
Observe what happened before and after a feeling or behavior, and make room for the child's perspective.
- 2 **Name feelings without assuming.**
Try "I wonder if that felt frustrating?" and let the child confirm, correct, or communicate another way.
- 3 **Offer connection and choices.**
Some children prefer conversation; others may want quiet, movement, play, or time with a trusted person.
- 4 **Practice coping approaches together.**
Families may explore breathing, movement, creative activities, predictable routines, or asking for a break.
- 5 **Revisit the conversation.**
When everyone is calmer, discuss what helped, what did not, and what the child might want next time.

When might additional support be useful?

Emotional ups and downs can be part of development.

Persistent distress, marked changes from a child's usual behavior, or difficulties affecting daily activities or relationships may warrant a conversation with a pediatrician, school counselor, or qualified mental health professional. Examples include ongoing withdrawal, intense worries, significant changes in sleep or eating, or sudden changes in functioning.

Safety matters: If a child is in immediate danger or has a life-threatening emergency, **call 911** or seek emergency care. In the United States, **call or text 988** for suicide or mental health crisis support. A disclosure of possible self-harm should be taken seriously.

Remember: No single behavior establishes a diagnosis. Families can seek information and support without labeling their child.



My Family Emotional Connection Worksheet

A printable space to reflect, invite your child's perspective when appropriate, and plan a conversation. This worksheet is not a screening or diagnostic tool.

1 What have I noticed?

My child's interests, strengths, or sources of joy:

A feeling, situation, or change I would like to understand:

When or where I notice it:

2 How does my child communicate or feel supported?

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☐ Talking or listening | ☐ Play or creativity | ☐ Movement or outdoor time |
| ☐ Quiet time or space | ☐ Visuals, gestures, or communication supports | ☐ Other: _____ |

What my child has said or shown about what helps:

3 Questions we can explore together

- ☐ What has been on your mind lately?
- ☐ What helps when you feel overwhelmed or upset?
- ☐ Would you like me to listen, help solve something, or give you space?
- ☐ Is there someone else you feel comfortable talking with?

Our own question or idea:

4 My next step

One action we may try or conversation we may have:

Person or resource I may contact:

Follow-up:

Notes:

Learn more from trusted sources

American Academy of Pediatrics — Healthy Mental & Emotional Development

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/healthy-mental-and-emotional-development-in-children-key-building-blocks.aspx>

SAMHSA — For Parents and Caregivers of Children

<https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/what-is-mental-health/how-to-talk/parents-and-caregivers>

American Academy of Pediatrics — Improving Family Communications

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/improving-family-communications.aspx>

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

<https://988lifeline.org/>

For immediate danger, call 911. For suicide or mental health crisis support in the United States, call or text 988.

Explore further with OH FAMILY

<https://www.ohfamilyinc.org> — explore family well-being and learning resources.

About this guide

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Disclosure: This guide offers general educational information and is not a mental health screening, diagnosis, or substitute for individualized medical or psychological advice. Children's experiences and support needs differ. Contact an appropriate qualified professional with specific concerns. For immediate danger, call emergency services.