

Emotion Identification & Regulation

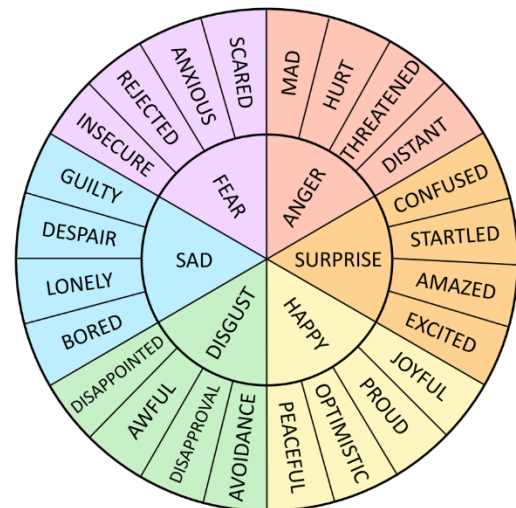
Parent Education

Introduction

According to Vanderbilt University, children experience many of the same emotions adults do, such as nervousness, sadness, and anger. However, children don't often have the vocabulary to describe the emotions they're feeling. Because of this, big emotions may be acted out in inappropriate or physical ways. As parents, it's our job to help children not only learn about and identify their feelings but find healthy ways to express them.

Identifying Emotions:

Before children can begin to express how they're feeling, they need to be able to identify their emotions. According to The Movement for Children's Mental Health (2021), toddlers can differentiate between core emotions like anger, fear, sadness, and happiness. Specifically, they learn to read faces, understand tone, and body language. As children get older, they can identify (and feel) more complex emotions. Secondary emotions, such as guilt or jealousy, also come into play at this age (The Gottman Institute, 2023).



Primary Emotions:

The first emotions one experiences and are a reaction to an event or stimulus. These are emotions that are "built-in," or that we are born with: anger, sadness, fear, joy, interest, surprise, shame, and disgust.

The Gottman Institute (2023)
Simply Psychology (2023)

Secondary Emotions:

These emotions are linked to primary emotions. They reflect "our emotional reaction to having certain feelings."

These emotions are habitual and learned from experiences. For example, if a child gets punished for crying, she may feel anxious (secondary emotion) the next time she feels sad (primary emotion).

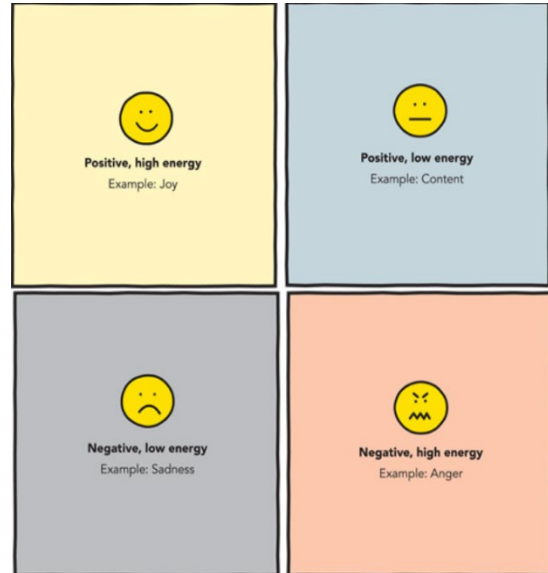
Secondary emotions serve as a defense mechanism, "covering up" primary emotions that make one feel more vulnerable or sensitive.

The Gottman Institute (2023)
Simply Psychology (2023)

How to Help Your Child:

As a parent, you can support and encourage this process in many ways. The Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation offers the following ideas for identifying emotions:

- Modeling and expressing your own emotions. For instance, saying, “I feel happy when you clean up your toys!”
- While looking in a mirror, have your child practice making different facial expressions for different emotions.
- Watch a movie or look through books or magazines and have your child try and identify the character’s emotion based on their words and facial expression.
- Start using a “mood meter” (pictured to the right) to help your child identify what they’re feeling during emotional moments.
- Play “feelings charades,” by writing down different emotions on a piece of paper and putting them into a jar. Take turns pulling out an emotion and acting it out, while the rest of the family tries to identify what you are feeling (The Movement for Children’s Mental Health, 2023).



Identifying Primary vs. Secondary Emotions:

- Ask your child, “Is this emotion a direct reaction?” If so, it’s likely a primary emotion.
- Ask your child, “Has your first emotion receded or ‘gotten smaller’?” If so, it’s likely a primary emotion. If the feeling lingers long after the event ends, it’s probably secondary.
- Secondary emotions are often linked to thoughts of, “*I should not* feel sad,” or, “*I shouldn’t* be feeling this way.”
- Remember, the main difference between primary and secondary emotions is that primary emotions are how we *react* to events and situations, whereas secondary emotions are *reactions to how we feel*!

Simply Psychology (2023)

Emotion Regulation:

According to The Gottman Institute (2023), children are born with some emotional responses, such as crying, frustration, hunger, and pain. However, as children grow older and experience more complex emotions, they need additional ways to regulate themselves. Emotion regulation

involves *knowing* what we are feeling, *exploring* why we are feeling it, and *choosing* what to do about it (Simply Psychology, 2023).

Self-regulation is one's ability to handle or manage their emotions and behavior in the face of stress or a demanding situation.

It involves resisting certain impulses or behaviors, being flexible or adjusting to change, and calming oneself down.

Self-regulation is a complex process and requires the use of many skills, such as attention, planning, cognitive development, and language.

APA (2023)
Child Mind Institute (2022)

Emotional dysregulation occurs when a child struggles to self-regulate. Some children have strong, emotional reactions with little to no warning. Others have distress that builds over time, leading to an outburst.

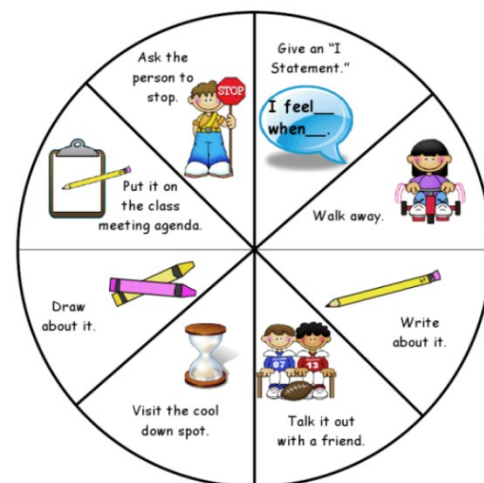
A child's ability to regulate negative emotions depends on genetics, natural temperament, and the environment in which they grew up. For instance, a baby that has always struggled to self-soothe may have a hard time regulating when older. In the home, parents may give in to tantrums or work *too* hard to calm down their child, teaching them to rely on others for regulation. Other factors, such as being hungry or tired, also affect self-regulation.

APA (2023)
Child Mind Institute (2022)

How to Help Your Child:

- **For Toddlers:** some of the most effective strategies include situation selection, modification, or distraction. In other words, help your toddler avoid distressing situations altogether, or distract them (The Gottman Institute, 2023).
- **For Children, Adolescents & Teens:**
 - **Journaling.** Writing things down can help you sort your thoughts and identify what you are feeling. Sometimes, journaling can be helpful when we are unsure what's bothering us – it can help those thoughts and feelings come to the surface. Whether you write a little or a lot, journaling is a great way to identify *and* regulate emotions!

The Wheel of Choice



- **Mindfulness.** This is a practice that is proven to increase one's awareness of themselves and their emotions. Whatever you may be experiencing, mindfulness teaches us to notice and accept our feelings without judgement.
- **Talking It Out.** Talking to another person helps not only clarify what you may be feeling, but sharing what's bothering you with someone else usually helps us feel better. We are no longer alone in our stress and can now regulate through problem-solving or simply by feeling heard.
- **"Practice Runs."** When teaching emotion regulation, don't avoid challenging or difficult situations. Rather, coach children through them and provide a supportive framework (Child Mind Institute, 2022). For example, your child becomes anxious in the grocery store. Do a "practice run," by making a quick visit to the store and engaging in deep-breathing or distraction. Whatever the stressor may be, provide your child with support but allow them enough space to problem-solve on their own.

Additional Parenting Tips:

Check Your Expectations. Remember, managing negative emotions is a complex skill – one that many adults struggle with, too. We can't expect children to behave or respond perfectly, especially if they are genuinely scared or anxious (APA, 2023).

Model Healthy Habits. Practicing your own healthy emotion identification and regulation in front of your children helps teach them what to do. Not only do kids pick up on our emotions, but they also see how we express them. As parents, if we can slow-down and model self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-regulation, it creates a calm and non-judgmental environment for our kids to do the same (Child Mind Institute, 2022).

Emotional Empowerment. According to The Gottman Institute (2023), when we teach children their emotions are valid, they see feelings as normal and manageable. Provide your child with a safe, supportive space where they feel free to express themselves. Studies have shown that children who feel safe are more likely to develop and use appropriate emotion-regulation strategies. Throughout the process, Vanderbilt University encourages parents to provide praise, validation, and lots of support!

Practice, practice, practice! The Child Mind Institute (2022) reminds parents that emotion regulation needs to be approached just like any other skill: isolate that skill and practice. If parents can shift their perspective and see self-regulation as a skill to be taught (as opposed to bad behavior), it can change the narrative and way you respond to your kids. If things don't go perfectly the first time, try not to get frustrated – consistency is key.

Don't Practice During a Meltdown! When first starting out, practice identifying and regulating emotions when your child is calm, *not* when they are in the middle of a meltdown (Vanderbilt University). If your child is experiencing a big emotion, it's unlikely they will want to pause and express their feelings in words. After they calm down, discuss the incident with your child and talk about what could be done better next time. The more we can practice self-regulation skills when we are calm, the better we are able to use them in the face of stress!

Know When to Seek Support. When problems begin to interfere with health, friends, family, school, and other aspects of daily life, it's time to seek outside support (APA, 2023). If your child needs additional help with self-regulation, consider reaching out to teachers, school counselors, or behavioral health professionals!

Additional Materials & Resources:

Books:

How Do You Feel? by Lizzy Rockwell (Ages 0-3)

Breathing Makes it Better by Christopher Willard and Wendy O'Leary (Ages 3-7)

Big Feelings by Alexandra Penfold (Ages 4-8)

When I Am Angry by Michael Gordon

Wilma Jean the Worry Machine by Julia Cook

Videos:

Emotion Regulation with James J. Gross, PhD

<https://youtu.be/Yd6hR1qCfSM>

Coping Skills for Kids

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vs-MyQgfH3A>

Emotion Regulation Activity

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORRdf_nLc_I

Apps: Mood Meter (Marc Brackett, Ph.D.)

Websites & Articles:

Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation:

<https://www.ecmhc.org/ideas/emotions.html>

Child Mind Institute:

<https://childmind.org/article/can-help-kids-self-regulation/>

The Gottman Institute:

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/age-age-guide-helping-kids-manage-emotions/>

Vanderbilt University:

http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching_emotions.pdf

References:

Adapted from: American Psychological Association (2023)

Adapted from: Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

Adapted from: Child-Mind Institute (2022)

Adapted from: The Gottman Institute (2023)

Adapted from: The Movement for Children's Mental Health (2021, 2023)

Adapted from: Simply Psychology (2023)

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