

## Promoting Social-Emotional Development Helping Infants Learn About Feelings

Nikki Darling-Kuria and Aidan H. Bohlander

Ms. Ellen, a family child care provider, prepares lunch for Madison, 9 months, while Madison plays with Mr. Giraffe, her favorite toy. Madison babbles joyfully as she pushes Mr. Giraffe around the empty tray of her high chair. Suddenly Madison shrieks. Mr. Giraffe has tumbled to the floor. Madison furrows her brow as she strains to reach for Mr. Giraffe. Ms. Ellen is removing warm food from the microwave and cannot get to Madison immediately, but she matches Madison's tone of voice and says, "Oh, no! I hear you are frustrated! I will be right there."

With the food safely on the counter, Ms. Ellen walks toward Madison, matches her furrowed brow, and says calmly, "Oh, I see. You are frustrated because you dropped Mr. Giraffe." She picks up Mr. Giraffe and hands him to Madison, who relaxes her brow and smiles. Ms. Ellen mirrors Madison's facial expression, smiling in return. She validates Madison's new emotion by observing, "That is so much better. You are really relieved to have Mr. Giraffe back."

**S**TARTING FROM BIRTH, INFANTS BEGIN LEARNING how to make sense of their world through interactions with caregivers. Responsive caregiving—which involves a caregiver reflecting and validating a child's feelings and behaviors—helps very young children make sense of their world. Over time, children who have this type of nurturing, reflective care can better regulate their emotions.

*Emotional regulation* is the process of recognizing and managing strong feelings. A person begins in a neutral or calm emotional state, and then something happens that causes him to experience a positive or negative emotion. Sometimes the emotion is so strong that it results in outward behavior, such as a facial expression (like a smile) or physical action (like pushing a peer). Eventually the person returns to a calm state—that is, he regulates the emotion. To do this, he identifies the emotion he feels, recalls what has calmed him in the past during overwhelming emotions, and carries out that calming process to complete the cycle (Gross & Thompson 2007). For young children, mastery of emotional regulation begins with experiencing emotions, then moves to understanding those

emotions, and finally to developing the ability to control or regulate their emotions and the behaviors they use to express them.

Infants and toddlers are just beginning to develop a cognitive filter—the ability to accurately discern information from the environment to determine what is happening and what will likely happen next. This inability leads to feelings of powerlessness, which makes it difficult for young children to manage their strong emotions. Additionally they have limited coping skills and need the help of a trusted adult to assist them first in identifying those emotions, as in the opening vignette, and then in tailoring strategies to support their growing ability to return to a calm state.

The adult's role in scaffolding children's self-regulation is critical. She provides repeated opportunities for young children to learn new self-soothing skills and to practice, over time, the abilities they need to regulate and calm themselves more independently. In the opening vignette, when Ms. Ellen mirrors Madison's facial expressions and labels her emotional state, she helps Madison begin to understand how to identify, preverbally, the feelings she is experiencing. Madison also learns that her emotional experiences and needs are important to Ms. Ellen. The next time Madison drops the toy, she trusts that Ms. Ellen will help her and as a result, her frustration may not be so intense. Through repeatedly receiving responsive, nurturing care, Madison will develop the ability to understand and regulate her emotions.



## Books to Help Teachers and Children Talk About Feelings

- *Alicia Has a Bad Day* (2002), by Lisa Jahn-Clough
- *Baby Faces* (1998), by Margaret Miller
- *The Chocolate-Covered-Cookie Tantrum* (1999), by Deborah Blumenthal, illus. by Harvey Stevenson
- *A Color of His Own* (1997), by Leo Lionni
- *The Feelings Book* (2000), by Todd Parr
- *Finn Throws a Fit* (2011), by David Elliott, illus. by Timothy Basil Ering
- *Hands Are Not For Hitting* (2002), by Martine Agassi, illus. by Marieka Heinlen
- *I Am Happy: A Touch-and-Feel Book of Feelings* (2003), by Steve Light
- *I Was So Mad* (2000), by Mercer Mayer
- *If You're Happy And You Know It* (2007), by James Warhola
- *I'll Always Come Back!* (2002), by Steve Metzger, illus. by Joy Allen
- *Llama Llama Mad at Mama* (2007), by Anna Dewdney
- *Lots of Feelings* (2003), by Shelley Rotner
- *Mean Soup* (1995), by Betsy Everitt
- *Mouse Was Mad* (2012), by Linda Urban, illus. by Henry Cole
- *My Many Colored Days* (1998), by Dr. Seuss, illus. by Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher
- *No Matter What* (2011), by Debi Gliori
- *Oops! A Diaper David Book* (2005), by David Shannon. Available in Spanish: *¡Huy! David en pañales*
- *Sometimes I'm Bombaloo* (2005), by Rachel Vail, illus. by Yumi Heo
- *Taking a Bath With the Dog and Other Things That Make Me Happy* (2007), by Scott Menchin
- *Teeth Are Not for Biting* (2003), by Elizabeth Verdick, illus. by Marieka Heinlen
- *When I Am/Cuando estoy* (2004), by Gladys Rosa-Mendoza, illus. by Dana Regan
- *When I Feel Angry* (2000), by Cornelia Maude Spelman, illus. by Nancy Cote
- *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really, Angry . . .* (2004), by Molly Bang

The suite of social-emotional skills embedded in the capacity to self-regulate—including self-soothing, self-control, emotional awareness, and empathy—is critical for success in school, work, and life. Gaps in these skills often emerge early and may have deeply concerning outcomes. However, preschoolers who can manage their strong emotions can focus on learning tasks rather than being overwhelmed by intense feelings. This leads to better outcomes. When adults support infants' and toddlers' ability to regulate their emotions, they lay the foundation of social-emotional skills that maximizes young children's chances for success later in preschool and beyond (Davis & Logsdon 2011).

Children need adults who model healthy emotional regulation. This happens, in part, when caregiving adults are mindful of their own behavior. Teachers can use the skill of self-awareness to think about how their reactions to a situation will impact children's understanding of their own emotions. For example, an adult can give voice to her own emotions and reactions to help children understand the connection: "Oh no! I'm disappointed because I burned the cookies. I was really looking forward to eating these cookies. But I have to throw them away." And when an adult responds calmly to a child's emotional distress and gives voice to the child's feelings, she helps the child understand that his feelings are manageable and are important to her.

For example, the adult might say, "You are so excited about playing at the water table!"

Consistently being responsive and nurturing may be challenging when teachers are faced with many demands on their time and attention. So it is important to embed strategies throughout daily caregiving routines to support very young children in practicing emotional regulation.

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Some strategies that Ms. Ellen uses in the opening vignette include

- Giving voice to Madison's emotions
- Matching the tone of Madison's feeling
- Responding quickly but calmly
- Maintaining communication with Madison throughout the experience

Ms. Ellen knows that Madison is beginning to understand her own feelings and wants to help her recognize the range of emotions she is experiencing. Her responses will help prepare Madison for using a variety of skills that will help her succeed in the future.

### Think about it

- Who helped you regulate your emotions when you were a child?
- What strategies do you use to calm yourself now when you feel overwhelmed by emotions?
- How can you learn more about the different ways that families express their emotions? How can you learn more about the expectations families have for their child's self-regulation and emotional expression? How will this information benefit your work with children and families?

### Try it

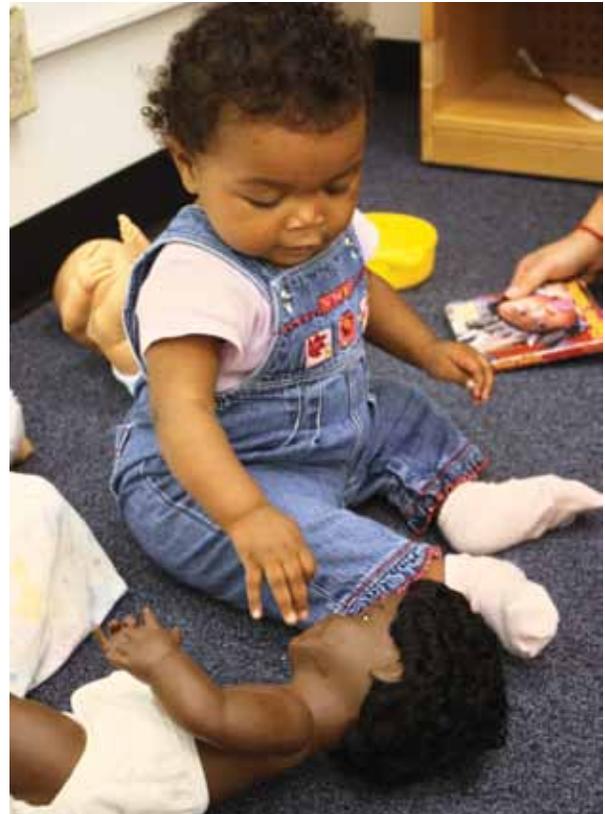
- Practice naming a child's feelings (both positive and negative) and matching the child's tone; then move to a more neutral tone.
- Give your own feelings voice so the child can begin to connect your words with your emotions. For example, you might say, "Oh no! It's thundering and I am sad we can't swim in the pool!" (exaggerating sad face).
- Read stories that discuss feelings young children experience and make connections between characters and children's own emotional lives when appropriate (e.g., "You feel like a happy jumping bean right now!"). (See "Books to Help Teachers and Children Talk About Feelings," p. 95.)

## References

- Davis, D.W., & M.C. Logsdon, eds. 2011. *Maternal Sensitivity: A Scientific Foundation for Practice*. Psychology Research Progress series. New York: Nova Science.
- Gross, J.J., & R.A. Thompson. 2007. "Emotion Regulation: Conceptual Foundations." Chap. 1 in *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*, ed. J.J. Gross, 3–24. New York: Guilford.

## Resources

- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu>.
- Galinsky, E. 2010. *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs*. New York: Harper Collins. Available from NAEYC.
- ZERO TO THREE's Development of Social-Emotional Skills: [www.zerotothree.org/child-development/social-emotional-development/social-emotional-development.html](http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/social-emotional-development/social-emotional-development.html).



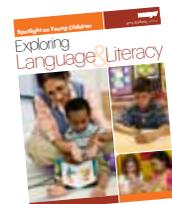
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