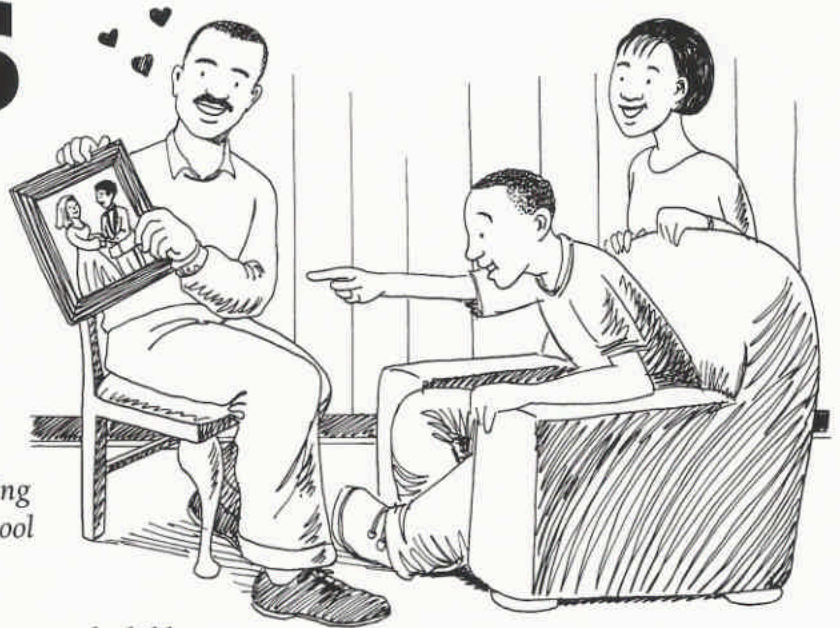


Emotional Smarts

Helping middle graders manage feelings

Looking for ways to help your children fare better in school, get along with friends, and be less apt to strike out in anger? Experts agree that teaching kids to be emotionally “smart” can help them in school and with friendships and make them less prone to violence.

The good news? Parents can use simple strategies to teach children three of the most important emotional skills: identifying feelings, handling emotions, and having empathy for others. Try these suggestions to boost your middle graders’ emotional intelligence.

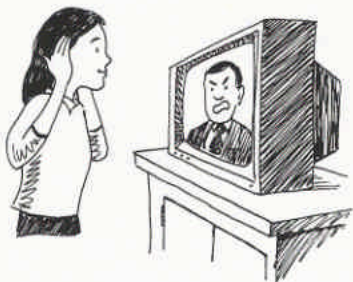


Name their feelings

Kids need names for feelings. Being able to label emotions such as anger or sadness helps them recognize their emotions when they happen. In turn, knowing what they’re feeling can help them find ways to cope.

To build your youngsters’ feeling vocabulary, describe emotions you see them experiencing. *Examples:* “You seemed aggravated when Josh refused to play video games.” “Are you jealous of Jessica’s new friend?” Talk about how people you see in the news could be feeling. (“That young man was sentenced to prison. How do you think he feels?”)

Another idea is to make flash cards with names of emotions on one side and pictures representing each feeling on the other. You could choose from happiness, sadness, anger, fear, love, confidence, loneliness, nervousness, embarrassment, and jealousy, to name a few.



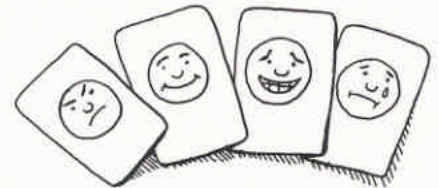
Connect faces with feelings

To be emotionally smart, it’s important for children to learn how to “read” others’ feelings by noticing their

body language and facial expressions. Why? Being able to identify another person’s feelings is an important part of nurturing empathy—a concern for others that helps prevent violence. In fact, experts say that youngsters who bully others often misread people’s emotions—for example, thinking another child is giving a dirty look when the child is simply daydreaming.

To teach this skill, incorporate simple games into daily routines. At home, turn down the volume of the television and talk about the actors’ emotions. (“That person’s jaw is clenched. He looks angry.”) At the grocery store or mall, watch people and guess their feelings. (“She looks confused. Think she’s having trouble picking a sweater?”)

Tip: For a fun family activity, try a game of “feeling charades,” and let each family member act out an emotion for the others to guess.



Give them guidelines

Once your kids are able to recognize their feelings, provide ground rules for managing them. A good rule of thumb is,

continued



Tip: Recognizing feelings in themselves and others is a key part of learning empathy. See the ideas under “Name their feelings” and “Connect faces with feelings” on page 1.

Praise the positive

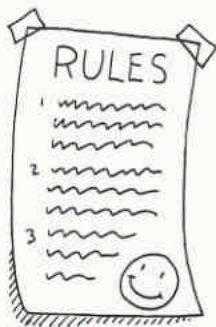
If your children do something cruel, explain why you disapprove. *Example:* “It was unkind to tease Susan about her lisp. That probably made her sad. Let’s think about how you might feel if someone made fun of how you talk.”

Keep in mind that it’s more effective to compliment behavior you *do* want than to punish behavior you *don’t* want. When your youngsters handle their feelings well or show concern for others, be sure to let them know. *Examples:* “Thanks for helping your brother feel included!” “Grandma was so happy you called!”

“When expressing anger, you cannot hurt yourself, others, or property.” Also, let your children know what they *can* do. For example, they might go for a jog, draw an angry picture, punch a pillow, yell in their rooms (if that’s okay with you), write in a diary, or talk to a trusted person.

You can also show your children ways to relax when they’re upset. Encourage them to breathe in deeply while counting to three and then exhale slowly. Or have them close their eyes and tense all their muscles, count to six, and then release. They could also imagine being in a peaceful place, such as the beach.

Finally, teach your youngsters steps for working through unhappy feelings. Help them identify the feeling (Ask, “What am I feeling?”); accept the feeling (“My feelings are okay; it’s what I do with them that counts”); decide what to do to feel better (“I could call Timmy”); and act on the decision (call his friend). For example, a middle grader who realizes he’s feeling lonely could tell himself that everyone feels lonely sometimes, decide to call a friend, and make the call.



Act with empathy

Chances are you’re already teaching your kids empathy, or concern for others’ feelings, without even realizing it. Just meeting their needs helps them learn to care for others.

Whenever possible, find opportunities to help your youngsters think about how they would feel in someone else’s shoes. *Example:* “How do you think Aubrie felt when she found out Stacy was talking about her?”

Lead by example

When it comes to expressing feelings and showing empathy, your example makes the biggest impression.

You can show your kids how you’d like them to act when they feel lousy by



letting them see you work out your feelings in safe, healthy ways. For example, if you’ve had a hard day at the office, take a walk instead of yelling at the dog. Other strategies for relieving stress include breathing deeply, taking a warm bath, calling a friend, or writing in a journal. *Tip:* It’s okay to tell your children how you’re feeling, but only to a point. They shouldn’t feel overwhelmed or that they need to comfort you.

If you have an outburst in front of your youngsters, address it with them. Let them know why you were upset. Then, explain that you handled your feelings the wrong way and that you’ll try to do better next time. *Example:* “I’m frustrated because we just bought our car and it needs repairs. But I shouldn’t have slammed the door. Next time, I’ll try to cool down by counting to ten.”

Finally, let your children see you demonstrating empathy. For instance, you might take a meal to an elderly neighbor or put money in a donation box. Tell them what you’re doing and why. *Example:* “Mrs. Smith’s husband died, and now she lives alone. She enjoys having visitors and getting a nice, warm meal.”

Middle Years