



Success in School and Life

Learning about Emotions

What do children need to be successful in school and life? Most parents feel that learning their ABCs, numbers, and colors is the way to school success, but teachers tell us that emotional intelligence may be more important than knowing all the right things. Kindergarten teachers say that if a child can share with others, express his feelings and ideas with words, and can be sensitive to others' feelings, then he is really ready for kindergarten.

How can you build your child's emotional intelligence? The first step is to help children learn the language of feelings. Children can't learn to talk about their feelings until they have been taught the words to describe them. Talk with young children about feelings when they are happening. When your child is playing with joy, use the word "happy." When your child is angry, say, "You seem angry." When your child is frustrated, use this big word to describe this big feeling: Say, "It looks like you're frustrated." It often calms children to put their feelings into words.

Sharing books is another great way to help children learn about feelings. Many stories for young children involve characters who show strong feelings—mad, sad, happy, frustrated, annoyed, or frightened. When you are reading a story, take a moment to talk about the feelings of the characters; children can learn a great deal from this. When children have the words to describe how they feel, it is less likely that the feeling will come out in misbehavior.

The next step is to help your child learn how to "read" the feelings of other people. People vary in how naturally empathic they are, but everyone can learn to be more sensitive to the feelings of others. Children learn this best when they are playing with other kids. When a child is sad or mad (or having any strong feeling), gently describe to your child how you know this through their nonverbal signs. For example, clenched fists and tight face muscles can mean anger. When children learn to read emotions on people's faces they become better at finding the right things to do. They might go and get a blanket for a child who is sad, or help find a toy for a mad child. Encourage them to try to help other children. When they do, they are learning to be caring and sensitive friends.



Learning to Solve Problems

All children have problems getting along with others. Young children often try to solve these problems with force: grabbing, pushing and shoving, and biting. The preschool years are the perfect time for children to learn better ways, so that by the time they are in elementary school they have the skills to get along positively with other children. But how do children learn to get along with others? The most important skill we can give young children is to teach them to solve their own problems. Adults won't always be around to solve problems for kids, and children who solve problems with force will eventually find it hard to make and keep friends, so it is critical that children learn the skills they need to handle problems on their own.

You can guide your child toward solving problems with other kids. Most kids are not short on problems to solve. They happen anytime you put two preschoolers together. The next time your child is fighting over a toy, don't put it away. Instead, set it aside and say, "You two have a problem; you both want the toy. When you have a plan for sharing the toy that you both agree to then you may have the toy." Both children want the toy, so they need to figure out a way to work together to get what they want. Sometimes this is all it takes to get kids talking to each other and working out a solution. Other times you may need to provide more specific help and make some suggestions. Often it isn't just who has the toy, the problem is how to play with it. If the children are fighting over a milk carton, you might say, "You could pretend that you are going to the store first and buy it and then you can pretend to cook with it."

Sometimes the idea that the children come up with is highly unlikely to be successful. For instance, two three-year-old girls were fighting over a pair of high-heel dress-up shoes and decided to share them by having each child have one. Their child care provider decided to let them try it, even though it seemed like a solution that was doomed to fail. "They aren't going to learn this unless they try it out. We had to go back and resolve the problem because the girls were fighting again, but it was worth it since the kids were learning to become better problem solvers."

When children are given a chance to practice problem solving, they become better at it. Research has found that kids with problem-solving experience come up with more solutions than those with no experience, and that their solutions are better suited to the situation and more positive rather than forceful.

"Peace Building and Conflict Resolution in Preschool Children," Anita Vestal and Nancy Aaron Jones, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Vol. 19, No. 2, p. 131, 2004.



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