



Emotional Development in Young Children

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.
Family Science Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

Positive **emotional development** has significant benefits for young children. Young children who are emotionally stable and healthy benefit from being more attentive to learning, feeling good about themselves, having more friends and being able to better control their behavior. These all relate to long-term happiness and success in life as children grow older.

Emotions and Young Children

Emotions play an important role in our daily lives. From a young age, children show the ability to feel and respond to a variety of emotions. For example:

- Even as early as 1 month of age, infants display emotions (distress, pleasure) that indicate awareness of what is happening around them.
- By 4 months, a baby typically recognizes differences in faces expressing happiness, anger or sadness, and will react to try to change the expression on a parent's face to be happier.
- In the first two years of life, children learn to laugh not only at being tickled, but in response to their own behaviors (flapping their arms, etc.) that get an emotional reaction from others (delight from parents, other children).

All of us, including young children, are "wired" to experience and express emotion.

Emotional development relates to a child's developing ability to recognize feelings, distinguish among them, manage emotions

and be aware of and respond to the feelings of others. The development of such abilities through time results in a person's degree of "emotional intelligence," an important concept that suggests people can become competent in how they handle and express their own emotions and respond to others' emotions. NDSU Extension publication "Fostering Emotional Intelligence in Young Children" contains further information on "emotional intelligence."

Emotional development relates to how we recognize, understand and choose how we feel, think or act. It shapes our understanding of ourselves (self) and also our interactions with others (family and friends, groups, communities). It often defines what we value, and how and what we learn, as well as what and how we prioritize things in our daily lives.

Our feelings provide us with insight and energy, and are involved with almost every decision we make. Emotional development affects a child's capacity to relate to others, interact and communicate, and also his or her ability to express feelings, such as love, anger and trust.

NDSU
Extension Service

North Dakota State University
Fargo, North Dakota 58105

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Developing abilities associated with emotions are important “life skills,” meaning abilities that help us relate well to others and succeed in life.

Some of these important skills include:

- Being aware of your own feelings
- Monitoring your moods and regulating expressions of emotion
- Handling anger
- Using emotions positively to help reach our goals
- Sensing how others feel
- Using emotions positively in making decisions
- Monitoring others’ emotions to manage personal relationships

Key Aspects of Emotional Development

As with other aspects of a young child’s growth, children develop different abilities related to emotions as they mature and change. Understanding how young children develop an awareness of their own and others’ feelings, as well as the ability to manage such feelings, is important.

Young children have an enormous capacity for learning. The early years provide a valuable window of opportunity to help children learn about emotions and relationships with others. Caring adults are most important in aiding a young child’s

emotional development. Some of the best ways to develop emotional intelligence in young children include modeling and creating awareness of their emotions.

Children begin to gain greater awareness of their feelings and how to express them in different ways during their early years. Some key points to remember with young children and different stages of emotional development include:

Prenatal to 3 Months

- Infants this age develop feelings of trust and attachment through being held or having someone talk to them and respond when they fuss or cry.
- New infants need to feel tenderness and security, see smiling faces and experience responsiveness and warmth as they begin to feel what their environment is like.

3 to 6 Months

- Infants this age are learning to read emotion and express it through observation and imitation.
- Infants this age need parents and other caregivers to be responsive and attentive to them, which teaches them their emotions affect the world around them.
- Infants this age seek stimulation and emotional reassurance and connection.
- Parents can assist emotional development by using expression when talking (“baby talk”), spending lots of “face-to-face” time with a baby (gives emotional interaction) and showing different facial expressions (gives a baby practice at reading emotions).

6 to 9 Months

- Infants this age are learning expression of feelings, such as sadness, fear, curiosity and happiness.

The Emotional Development Quiz

Our awareness of emotional development in young children helps us respond to their feelings and needs. Select the appropriate answer from the answer list. Consider the importance of a child’s emotional development.

1. Toddlers still are developing social and emotional skills, but have not yet fully developed the capacity for what activity? _____
2. Children feel and express fear of war, fires, burglars or death during what age period? _____
3. An infant who is 4 months old and turns his head away during intense play is expressing what? _____
4. During what time period does a child often become very anxious when a parent he or she is attached to leaves the room? _____
5. During what age period do young children express the feeling and need for independence and exploration? _____

Answer List

- a. A feeling of being overly stimulated
- b. 1 to 3 years
- c. 9 to 12 months
- d. Sharing
- e. 4 to 7 years

Answer Key

1. D
2. E
3. A
4. C
5. B

- Infants this age are learning to distinguish between people they know and those they do not know, and feel reassurance or anxiety related to those around them (“stranger anxiety,” etc.)
- Infants can have feelings about objects, such as fear (of a cat) or desire to play (with a toy), and express invitations or interest in playing with toys, objects or adults.
- Infants this age look to parents for emotional cues about how to handle objects, events or people (this “social referencing” is a sign of emotional security with parents).
- Learn that their emotional cues, such as the “social smile,” will get an emotional response from another person, so they learn to initiate emotional responses.

9 to 12 Months

- Children begin to understand they can share feelings, and others will understand them and know how they feel inside.
- Children become more attached to specific people (“mom”) and often become anxious when those people leave, crying or being upset.
- Reassure children when you leave the room or keep in visual contact if possible.

1 to 3 Years

- Children this age recognize their independence from others and express anger, control or other feelings about needing autonomy (desire to put on own clothes, etc.).
- Children this age become aware of other children and their feelings, but still are developing emotional skills for social interaction, such as sharing, etc. Adults need to have reasonable expectations for feelings about others (empathy, etc.), encourage and model sharing with others.

Emotionally Healthy Children

Supporting positive emotional development helps children experience happiness. Research shows emotionally healthy children:

- ✓ Are better learners
- ✓ Have more friends
- ✓ Have fewer behavior problems
- ✓ Are better at resolving conflicts
- ✓ Feel better about themselves
- ✓ Have better impulse control
- ✓ Are better able to delay gratification
- ✓ Are better able to resist peer pressure
- ✓ Are happier, healthier and more “successful”
- ✓ Are less violent, more empathetic
- ✓ Are less likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors (drugs, alcohol, delinquency)

- Children feel the need to explore and find autonomy, and adults should understand the common use of “No” or behaviors that push boundaries as an expression of this feeling.
- Children this age can identify feelings that adults help them label, such as “sad,” “happy” or “scared.”

4 to 8 Years

- Children this age begin to understand and express fear of natural disasters, war, death or other concerns. Parents can assist in coping with such anxiety.
- Children this age are asked to control emotional responses as they enter school settings or other areas where behavior must be controlled. Practice of emotional responses in such situations and familiarity with the environment can be helpful to children this age.
- Children can brainstorm ways to overcome or handle particular emotions, such as fear or anger, with guidance from parents and caring adults.
- Children increase their ability to get along with others, but may need continuing help to manage hurt feelings or emotional upset with friends or peers.

Children and Emotions

Children enter life and immediately begin to express and experience emotions. As with other areas of development, learning the abilities associated with emotional development takes time and experience. Each domain of development has particular skills associated with it that children can learn and apply in practical ways.

The primary skills associated with emotional intelligence include awareness of your own emotions, managing your emotions in positive ways, sensitivity to others’ emotions and empathy or reaching out to others emotionally. Developing and practicing these skills occur best when they are modeled in caring, meaningful ways in the home.



From the very beginning of infancy, parents can help build emotional abilities in children as they grow and develop physical, verbal and social abilities.

Recommended Resources

■ Books and Articles

Freedman, J., Rideout, M.C., Jensen, A.L. and Freedman, P. (1997/98). *Handle with Care: Emotional Intelligence Activity Book*. San Mateo, Calif.: Six Seconds Publications.

This is an excellent resource for ideas and activities to promote emotional intelligence in young children.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

This book brought the topic of emotional intelligence to widespread public attention. This and other books by this author are useful introductions to the topic.

Gottman, J. (1997). *Raising Emotionally Intelligent Children*. New York: Fireside.

This is an excellent resource by a well-recognized scholar on parenting children to maximize their potential and emotional intelligence.

McCown, K.S., Jensen, A.L., Freedman, J.M. and Rideout, M.C. (1998). *Self Science: The Emotional Intelligence Curriculum*. San Mateo, Calif.: Six Seconds Publications.

This is a useful curriculum and resource designed for use in school and other settings. It's full of activities and ideas related to emotional intelligence.

Shapiro, L.E. (1997). *How to Raise a Child with a High EQ: A Parent's Guide to Emotional Intelligence*. New York: HarperPerennial.

This is an accessible and user-friendly book on raising children to be emotionally intelligent.

■ References

Bar-On, R. and Parker, J.D. A. (2000). *The Handbook of Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Jossey-Bass.

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Elias, M.J., Zins, J.E., Weissberg, R.P., Frey, K.S., Greenberg, M.T., Haynes, N.M., Kessler, R., Schwab-Stone, M.E. and Shriver, T.P. (1997). *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: A Guide for Educators*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Publications.

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