

CORE SKILL: REGULATE

Recognize and Describe Emotions



What You Need to Know

When you label infants' emotions, you are letting them know that you both recognize and value their feelings. Your expression of sensitivity to what infants are feeling in the moment helps comfort and soothe them. And, when infants feel secure that their needs will be noticed and cared for, they are eventually able to start exploring and developing their *own* self-soothing skills (e.g., suck on their fingers, or twist their hair). Infants continue to need your assistance in helping to soothe and regulate their emotions as they develop, especially in stressful situations. By labeling and describing their emotions over and over, you are helping infants develop an awareness of their emotions while linking their feelings with language – an important building block for being able to then manage these feelings.

Things to Consider

Infants use sounds, facial expressions, and body movements to express how they are feeling. Often, infants have distinct cries to indicate different wants and needs – they may have a “hunger” cry that sounds completely different from their “tired” or “bored” cry. They also communicate their emotions through nonverbal cues, such as pushing their food away when they are done or moving their arms and legs when they are happy. Being attuned to these subtle cues and describing them in words helps infants understand that you are a resource that can help them communicate (both verbally and non-verbally) their feelings in the classroom.

Emotional Development

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Express a range of feelings (e.g., (dis)comfort, enjoyment, fear, surprise, anger, and (un)happiness), facial expressions, body movements, and/or gestures.	Express a variety of more complex emotions (e.g., frustration, nervousness, or uncertainty).
Express their feelings in order to elicit a response from a familiar adult.	Express or modify emotions in response to adults or in order to elicit a reaction from adults.
Attend with interest when others communicate that they are happy, sad, or fearful through their facial expressions, voices, and/or actions.	Show interest and respond to others' emotions, often by sharing the emotion (e.g., smiling when an adult smiles, or mirroring excitement of other children).

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of emotion recognition:

- ◆ Introduce and read books that talk about and/or illustrate feelings. Offer books that have real images of children's faces/emotions.
- ◆ Use puppets to talk about and model emotions.
- ◆ Sing songs and make-up phrases/rhymes that incorporate emotion words (e.g., “Hungry, hungry, are you hungry?”).
- ◆ With older infants, show pictures or a feelings chart with facial expressions, and label the different emotions that they represent.
- ◆ Provide mirrors to play with and label facial expressions (yours and the infants).



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Recognizing and Describing Emotions

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe the ways in which <i>each</i> infant expresses their needs and feelings. Pay close attention to the sounds, facial expressions, body movements, and gestures that they use to communicate their emotions. Paying close attention to their cues will help you put infants' feelings and needs into words, while also making sure that you are responding sensitively to them.
Tuesday FOCUS I	Label Emotions (their emotions) Focus infants' attention <u>on their own emotions</u> by imitating and/or describing infants' feelings and needs as expressed through facial expressions, gestures, body movements, or sounds. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ When a child rubs their eyes and begins to cry, their teacher says, "You are tired, aren't you?" The teacher then sits them in a rocker and begins to rock and hum. When calmed, they place the child in their crib and gently pats their tummy before walking away.◆ Imitate an infant's "dance" by moving your arms as they do. Emotionally connect with their excitement (e.g., babble or smile back to them if they do, or celebrate their "dance") and say, "You love this song! Look at how you dance. You're excited!"
Wednesday FOCUS II	Label Emotions (your own and others') Focus infants' attention on emotions by explicitly labeling and/or narrating <u>your own and others' emotions</u> . Be sure to highlight and/or exaggerate facial expressions associated with feelings, and include both positive AND more challenging emotions. Your own emotions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ While frowning and scrunching your brow, "Grr. I am feeling frustrated that I can't open this jar!"◆ While smiling, "Welcome! I am happy that you're back with us. I missed you while you were sick." Others' emotions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ When an infant gazes or points toward an emotion picture on a book, say, "They are crying, look at their tears (<i>and point to them</i>). They feel sad."◆ When another infant shows excitement while playing with a toy, smile, point, and say, "Look, at (Child) smiling. They are so happy to be playing with their favorite car. Yay, (Child)!"
Thursday & Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing infants on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus. Find ways to intentionally label infants' emotions throughout the day. By doing so, you are letting infants know that you are picking up on their cues and that their feelings are important!