

# Toddler Emotions

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Toddlers are full of emotions. On any given day, they can range from giggles of glee to sobs of misery. How we respond to their emotions helps to shape their perception of their feelings and their skills at handling them.

## Emotional development

Children begin life with very simple emotions, which become more complex over time. Developmental theorists differ in opinions of *exactly* when children reach each stage, but the general order of development is:

Distress vs. contentment: From birth, newborn babies have two broad emotional states. They have moments of distress – hunger, pain, overstimulation – the sense that things are not right. When their needs are tended to, then they experience satisfaction, content that once again, all is right with their world. Our role as parents is to meet their needs in a calm, consistent manner. When they are in distress for no apparent reason, and are not able to calm down, our role is to be present, supporting them until they can settle.

Interest and joy: Around 6 weeks to 4 months, babies begin to show strong interest in things around them. The social smile appears at 6 weeks, and laughter in the coming months. As parents, we can notice what they are interested in, and help them to explore it.

Basic Emotions: These emerge somewhere between 3 and 7 months. It is also during this time that children *begin* to notice other people's emotional expressions.

- Anger – there is a shift from the newborn's generalized distress to anger that needs aren't being met instantaneously
- Sadness – babies may be more likely to show anger than sadness
- Surprise – as babies start to create mental rules about how things 'usually' work, then they also show surprise when things happen differently than expected (note, after the initial surprise reaction, they may be delighted, angry, or terrified of what has happened.)
- Disgust – any parent who has started a child on solid foods has at some point seen this expression!
- Fear – around 6 – 7 months, some children develop fear of strangers, or of new toys, noises, sudden movements, etc. Separation anxiety tends to hang on till around 14 months or so, then decline

The parent's role is to be present and supportive, begin to label the emotions the child is feeling, and model a calm response to a situation, so when the child looks to you for cues, they see them.

Social referencing – Around 8 – 12 months, when encountering a new or confusing situation, a child looks to their caregiver for guidance. They use the parents' facial or vocal cues to decide how to respond.

Individual identity: Around 18 months to 3 years, a child becomes aware of himself as an individual, separate from the parent of caregiver.

Self-aware emotions: These emotions arise after they see themselves as individuals, around 18 – 36 months. These emotions either build or diminish their sense of self.

- Pride
- Envy

- Shame – the sense that they are a bad person, or incompetent, inadequate.
- Guilt – the sense that they have done something wrong or behaved badly. (Note that this is more about the behavior than about their self-worth.)
- Empathy – this takes quite a while to develop, as it requires them to not only see themselves as separate from others, but *also* understand that other people could have a different view of a situation or a different feeling about it than they have.

A child learns about when they should feel these emotions from the adults around her. If caregivers cheer and applaud an accomplishment, the child learns that it is a thing to be proud of. If the caregiver scolds behavior, the child learns to feel guilty when they do that behavior. (Note: this may not be enough to stop him from doing it!) If a caregiver tells a child she is bad and should be ashamed of herself, she will be. Try to talk instead about what behavior you hope to see from your child in the future, and express confidence that they will be able to do that some day.

Understanding the causes of emotions. Around 2 – 3 years old, they start to understand what kind of situations typically make people happy. Around 4 years old, they start to understand what situations make people scared or angry (i.e. when I do this, mom usually gets mad), start to predict what people will do based on emotions, and recognize cues about how another person is feeling. (They can label a smile as happy earlier on, and can label an angry or sad face by late preschool.) Talking about emotions and reading books which include emotional expressions can help to build emotional literacy.

Learn rules of emotional display, learn coping skills and self-regulation: From age 4 through adolescence, children sort through the rules of how and when it is appropriate to express emotions. They learn to identify an emotion as it is coming on, and use self-calming skills to manage it. They learn the ability to talk about emotions rather than having to express them physically.

Part of this emotional maturity is based on life experience with emotions, and skill-building in how to cope with them. But part of it is due to the physiology of brain development. Toddlers simply have a hard time regulating their emotions. The part of their brain that will someday help regulate emotion is still developing. Just because you say “it’s not worth getting upset over this” doesn’t mean they can stop being upset.

### **Why do toddlers have meltdowns (tantrums or tears)**

Life can be hard for a toddler, and sometimes things happen that make them so sad, or so mad, or so scared that they have an emotional meltdown where they are completely overwhelmed by their feelings. Here are some of the reasons toddlers melt down:

1. Rules: They want to do something that is not allowed, and are angry that you are blocking them.
  - “I really want to hold those scissors! You were just using them. Why won’t you let me??”
2. Impossibilities: They want something that’s not possible, and can’t understand when you explain.
  - “Last time I asked for crackers you gave me crackers. Now, you say you don’t have any???”
3. Lack of control, lack of choices about where they go and what they do.
  - “I was having a great time playing, and you just put my coat on and carry me out the door??”
4. Frustration: They want to be able to do something, but they’re just not yet capable of it.
  - “You can put the puzzle together, but I try, and I try, and I try, and it doesn’t work!!”
5. Can’t communicate: They need or want something and don’t have the words to tell you what it is.
  - “When my big sister asks for something she gets it. When I ‘ask’, I don’t! That’s not fair!”

6. Separation and/or unfamiliar situations: Being away from their familiar supports is hard.
  - “I count on you for everything, and you’re not here!!”
7. Fears: The world can be a scary place when you’re small and don’t understand much!
  - “That vacuum cleaner is really really loud, and I’m afraid it will hurt me!!”

On a good day, when your child is rested and you’re calm, they may be able to handle any of these things. But when they’re tired, hungry, sick, cold, hot, or overstimulated, even little upsets become overwhelming. Or if *you’re* tired, hungry, or stressed, you may not notice early cues and they may end up in a meltdown.

### **Preventing Meltdowns**

Even if you were the perfect parent, and did absolutely everything right, there would still be times when your child melts down!! But there are some ways that we can reduce the incidence:

- Meet physical needs: Your child is less likely to melt down if he is rested, fed, and comfortable.
- Be aware of your child’s capacity for stimulation: Children all have a different threshold where they overload, and different things that overwhelm them. Some are particularly sensitive to noise, others to bright lights, others to crowds. When planning your day, think about how much they can manage.
- Be aware of triggers: Minimize the things you know upset your child. (Note: I am not suggesting you walk on eggshells, trying desperately to never upset your child! But, pick your battles. If something is necessary for them to learn to adapt to, then we do it and coach them through. But, if something that is not necessary upsets them, you can decide whether it’s worth it.)
- Set expectations: Tell them ahead of time what to expect, what behavior you’re expecting of them, and what the consequences will be if they can’t behave that way.
- Give choices whenever possible. Letting them choose which shoes to wear, or what cup to drink of increases their sense of control. (But don’t give choices mid temper tantrum! Too overwhelming.)
- Set limits and follow them consistently. Don’t be afraid to say no! We don’t always give kids what they want, and we don’t want them to think they’re the boss of the family. When you set limits, you’ll face the occasional tantrum, but over time – with consistent enforcement, the child learns and respects family limits, and will have fewer meltdowns than a child who never knows if a rule will be enforced.
- Watch for early cues: Notice when your child is reaching the end of her rope. Let her know that you’ve noticed – that helps her learn to recognize it for herself. Change your plans or actions as needed to manage the situation before it explodes.
- Talk about meltdowns when they’re NOT having one. Ask your child to let you know when they have one coming on. (Note: it will be a while before they’re capable of that!) Praise your child when they’ve done a good job of calming themselves down – we want to reinforce their efforts at self-regulation.

### **Anatomy of a Tantrum – What Research Shows**

Researchers developed a “onesie” that parents in the study could put on a toddler that would then record for several hours, and possibly catch a meltdown. Then they analyzed the pattern of the tantrums. Sad sounds – whimpering and crying – are heard throughout the tantrum; and mixed in were peaks of yelling and screaming – angry sounds. Children tend to build up to a peak of anger quite quickly, then do something physical (throw things, throw themselves on the floor, hit), and then they collapse into sadness.

If parents asked a lot of questions, or tried to verbally reason with the child, it would prolong the tantrum. When a toddler is very angry, he can't process language, and asking questions just pushes him into overload.

Researchers felt the trick to end a tantrum is to get past the anger. Either ignore the child, or respond with as few words as possible. When the child has released anger, what's left is sadness, and they will seek comfort.

Source: [www.npr.org/blogs/health/2011/12/05/143062378/whats-behind-a-temper-tantrum-scientists-deconstruct-the-screams](http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2011/12/05/143062378/whats-behind-a-temper-tantrum-scientists-deconstruct-the-screams) and [www.education.com/magazine/article/science-of-tantrums/](http://www.education.com/magazine/article/science-of-tantrums/)

### **Managing a Tantrum**

- Don't "over-respond". Keep your response calm and low key. You don't want to pay *too much* attention to the tantrum as you don't want to reward the behavior.
- Stay calm and take control of the situation. A tantruming child is often overwhelmed by the strength of his own emotions, and needs you to model emotional stability and also to take charge of the situation.
- Don't ask questions or try to talk the child down with a lot of words. If you need to talk to change your child's behavior, or move her to a safer / more appropriate place, give very simple commands.
- Stay close by. Don't hover or crowd, as this may provoke more anger – he may yell at you to 'go away'. But, staying nearby helps the child feel safer and tells him you're there when he's ready for comfort.
- Don't let your child hurt herself, or anyone else. (Including you.) Keep her from damaging possessions. At times, you may need to physically restrain her to keep things safe – it's OK to firmly hold an upset child in a gentle and supportive way. Sometimes she will resist the hold for a bit, then shift from anger to sadness in your arms.
- Once the tantrum blows over, calm and comfort the child.
- Tantrums often frighten a child, who can be scared by how out of control they felt, so they may need help calming their fear.
- Sometimes your child will calm down, but *you* will still be full of tension and stress from the experience! Think about self-care methods that help you release that tension and move on – a few deep breaths, a drink of water, taking a short break... Get support from other parents.
- For older children (3 – 5 years), talk about the tantrum later that day when everyone is calm. Validate the emotions they were feeling at the time, but also discuss other ways they could have managed those emotions. Develop plans for how to handle similar situations in the future.

### **Separation Anxiety**

Many children first show fear around the age of 7- 8 months. The first reactions may be simple startle reactions to loud noises or sudden movements. But a major source of fear may be new people or new situations – this stranger fear is especially common from 8 – 14 months.

But other kids go through it from 18 months – 3 years. Or they may experience it when a new stress appears: a move to a new home, a new baby in the house, or starting pre-school.

Ways to reduce separation anxiety: There's lots of ideas here... if you're just going to be gone for a short while, you might not use many of these. If you're going away for an extended period, you might use them all.

- Preparation and Practice
  - Meet the caregiver in advance, spend time together, demonstrate to your child that you are comfortable with this person
  - Visit the environment in advance, get familiar with. Try a few short stays on low stress days when you don't *need* to be away, so that the child is up to a longer stay when you do.
  - Prepare your child– talk about when/where you'll be going, and also talk about when you'll be back. Sometimes talking about this upsets your child, but better that than to be surprised to discover you gone. When talking about this, show confidence that they will handle it well
  - Read books about parents going away and coming back. Find some recommendations here: [www.disneybaby.com/blog/7-books-to-help-ease-separation-anxiety/](http://www.disneybaby.com/blog/7-books-to-help-ease-separation-anxiety/)
- Packing for the separation (if the caregiver is coming to your home, show them where to find these!)
  - Make sure your child has some familiar objects – favorite books, or toys, comfort foods
  - Consider a special activity for your child (e.g. blowing bubbles may be a guaranteed pleasure for your child whether or not you're there)
  - Give them part of you to hold on to – a picture of you, a love note from you, a recording of your voice that a caregiver can play if they're feeling lonely
- When the time comes to separate: Say goodbye briefly before leaving, be cheery and positive demonstrating your confidence that they'll be fine while you're gone
  - Don't try to sneak out! Your child may cry when you leave, but will soon settle down. But if you sneak out, that's very distressing when your child notices you're gone.
- Ask your caregiver not to mention you unless the child brings you up, but if they do, then to calmly and simply explain where you are and when you'll be back, then encourage the child to play.
- Don't call on the phone. Your child may be happily settled in, and the phone call may upset them.
- Be casual when you return: In the book *Owl Babies*, when the mother comes home, she says "What's all the fuss? You knew I'd come back." And the babies say "I knew it." If your child tells you (or shows you) that they were sad that you were gone, you can empathize with that, but also reinforce that they were safe and well cared for while you were gone, and you came back just as you had promised.

### **How NOT to Respond to Children's Emotions**

John Gottman describes some ways that parents respond to emotions that are not helpful for developing emotional intelligence. The Dismissing parent tells the child "there's no reason to be unhappy" or tries to distract the child without addressing the feelings or their causes. The child feels ignored, feels like their feelings are irrelevant, and they won't come to you for support in the future. The Disapproving parent scolds or punishes a child for expressing negative emotions. The child feels ashamed of his emotions and thinks something is wrong with him when he has feelings. The Laissez-Faire parent says "Your feelings are all OK, do anything you need to do to let it out. The child *does* learn that it's OK to have feelings, but they're not given any guidance on managing them or any limits on their behavior. This will cause them difficulty in school and social situations. The Emotion Coaching parent labels the emotion and empathizes with the child, but also sets limits and provides guidance on how to express the emotions appropriately.

Dr. Becky Bailey has YouTube videos which demonstrate dismissing, punishing, ignoring, rescuing, and helpful emotion coaching in an entertaining, memorable manner: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pHvNMHuLBY>

## **How TO Respond: Emotion Coaching**

After Gottman observed these positive parenting behaviors in parents with good relationships to their children, he developed the 5 Steps of Emotion Coaching

**Step 1: Be Aware of Emotions (Yours and Your Child's)**. Throughout the day, stay tuned in to your child's lower-intensity feelings. Watch body language and other cues. What cues tell you how he's feeling? Also tune into your own emotions: children learn about emotions by watching how you react to things, how you show your feelings, and how you manage intense feelings.

**Step 2: Connect with your Child – Recognize emotional expression as a chance to connect and to teach.** If you were raised in a family where emotions were not talked about or welcomed, you might want to pull away from an unhappy child, or try to talk her out of her feelings quickly. Instead, try to move in closer when your child is expressing emotions. Encourage your child to talk about her emotions. Try to see things from her perspective.

**Step 3: Listen to your Child – Validate their Feelings.** Don't dismiss his feelings, or tell him that he's foolish to feel that way. Let him know you take him seriously. Ask him to put his feelings into simple statements: "I feel \_\_\_\_." Use reflective listening "it sounds like you feel \_\_\_\_." Show that you understand.

**Step 4: Name Emotions.** Even before your child can talk, you can teach the words that describe emotions. You can talk about a wide range of emotions, when people feel them, and how people express them. Talk about how you feel. When your child is emotional, help her identify how she *does* feel, without telling her how she *should* feel. When a child can name her feelings, she can manage them better.

**Step 5: Find Solutions.** Validate emotions but set limits on behavior.

- a. Set limits. Let them know that it's OK to feel angry / sad / disappointed. But, set limits on problem behavior. Discipline misbehaving children for what they *do*, not how they *feel*.
- b. Identify goals. Ask them what they want or need.
- c. Think of solutions. For older children, allow them to brainstorm a wide variety of possible solutions. For a two year old, you offer two suggested solutions. For a three year old, give three choices.
- d. Evaluate the solutions. Explore which they think would work better.
- e. Let your child choose the solution.

Emotion Coaching is not always possible. If you are in a hurry, or out in public, or in a place where safety is an issue (e.g. a parking lot), or too upset yourself to be effective, you may need to just do anything you can to get the situation under control, and talk it through later.

## **Emotional Intelligence**

Talking about feelings and learning how to manage them helps children develop emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence falls into multiple domains:

- Self-awareness – recognizing and understanding your own emotions
- Self-soothing – capable of managing your emotions
- Empathy – recognizing emotions in others
- Handling relationships – managing other's emotions

## **Benefits of Emotional Intelligence**

Children and adults with a high degree of emotional intelligence gain many benefits:

- They know it's OK to experience a wide range of emotions
- They have fewer negative emotions *and* they can calm themselves down more quickly
- They develop a wide array of coping skills for handling everyday frustrations and bouncing back from major challenges
- They do better in school and at work – partially because they're better at focusing attention
- They have more empathy – which helps them succeed in relationships
- Form stronger friendships
- Have fewer infectious illnesses
- Were less likely to experience peer rejection, negative interactions with teachers, and school failure

## **Your Role as a Parent**

Your job is to provide role modelling and support for how to handle emotions, not to guarantee your child is always happy. As parents, we can't ensure that our children are never sad. And facing and overcoming life's little sadnesses helps your child build emotional resilience and coping skills that will help him master the big sadnesses that may come his way. We also can't ensure our children are never angry. Often we are the direct cause of their anger as we set limits, and give guidance about appropriate behavior. If we can set clear limits and follow them consistently, even in the face of our child's anger or tears, we help to prepare them for school, for work, and for life. But we can set limits in a way that still validates their emotional experience.

## **Most Recommended Sources**

Emotional Coaching [http://www.mandalachildrenshouse.com/DYK/Emotional\\_Coaching\\_5\\_05.pdf](http://www.mandalachildrenshouse.com/DYK/Emotional_Coaching_5_05.pdf)

Tip sheet on tantrums: [www.parentingcounts.org/professionals/parenting-handouts/information-for-parents-temper-tantrums.pdf](http://www.parentingcounts.org/professionals/parenting-handouts/information-for-parents-temper-tantrums.pdf)

12 ways to Support Emotional Literacy, from Becoming the Parent You Want to Be: <http://lifelistsblog.wordpress.com/2008/08/01/12-ways-to-support-childrens-emotional-literacy/>

## **Other Sources**

Slides on emotional development: <http://www.slideserve.com/tosca/lecture-outline-components-of-emotions-theories-of-emotional-development-emotional-milestones-identifying-others-em>

Expressing emotions: [http://www.ecpac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Newsletter\\_Emotions\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.ecpac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Newsletter_Emotions_ENG.pdf)

Managing Anger: [http://www.ecpac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Newsletter\\_ManageAnger3.pdf](http://www.ecpac.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Newsletter_ManageAnger3.pdf)

Stopping a Tantrum: [www.empoweringparents.com/Stopping-a-temper-tantrum.php?&key=Younger-Children](http://www.empoweringparents.com/Stopping-a-temper-tantrum.php?&key=Younger-Children)

Separation: [www.whattoexpect.com/toddler-behavior/toddler-separation-anxiety.aspx](http://www.whattoexpect.com/toddler-behavior/toddler-separation-anxiety.aspx)

Emotion Coaching:

- Tip sheet: [www.parentingcounts.org/professionals/parenting-handouts/information-for-parents-emotion-coaching.pdf](http://www.parentingcounts.org/professionals/parenting-handouts/information-for-parents-emotion-coaching.pdf)
- Emotion Coaching in depth: <http://www.gottmanblog.com/2012/06/emotion-coaching-step-1-empathy.html>
- Emotion coaching by Benaroya: <http://www.gottmanblog.com/2012/06/emotion-coaching-step-1-empathy.html>
- [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising\\_happiness/post/emotion\\_coaching\\_one\\_of\\_the\\_most\\_important\\_parenting\\_practices\\_in\\_the\\_histo/](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/raising_happiness/post/emotion_coaching_one_of_the_most_important_parenting_practices_in_the_histo/)