

NAMING EMOTIONS

What is this developmental skill?

Naming emotions is the ability to put words to internal emotional experiences. Having emotional vocabulary helps children communicate their needs instead of expressing feelings only through behavior.

How does this normally develop?

Children gradually learn emotional language through everyday conversations with caring adults. They begin with simple emotions like happy, sad, and mad before learning more complex feelings such as disappointed, embarrassed, worried, frustrated, proud, or lonely.

How can neglect interfere?

Neglected children often have fewer conversations about emotions. If caregivers were emotionally unavailable or focused only on behavior, children may never develop a rich emotional vocabulary. Without words, emotions are often expressed through aggression, withdrawal, or impulsive behavior.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Use only a few emotion words.
- Say "I'm mad" for many different feelings.
- Become physically aggressive instead of expressing emotions verbally.
- Struggle to explain what upset them.
- Shut down when asked how they feel.
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Parenting Implications

Teach emotion words during calm moments rather than emotional crises. Expand beyond basic feelings by introducing words like disappointed, nervous, overwhelmed, proud, hopeful, or confused. Model your own emotions appropriately by saying, "I'm feeling frustrated, so I'm going to take a deep breath."

From Understanding to Attunement

Children cannot communicate feelings they do not have words for. Every new emotion word gives your child another way to seek support instead of communicating through behavior.