

RECOGNIZING EMOTIONS

What is this developmental skill?

Recognizing emotions is the ability to notice and identify feelings in ourselves and others. Before children can manage emotions, they first need to recognize what they are experiencing. This includes noticing body sensations, facial expressions, tone of voice, and changes in energy that signal different emotions.

How does this normally develop?

Infants rely on caregivers to notice and respond to their emotional states. As children grow, caregivers label emotions by saying things like, "You look frustrated," or "You're excited!" Through repeated interactions, children begin connecting physical sensations and experiences with emotional words. Over time, they become better at recognizing emotions in themselves and others.

How can neglect interfere?

Children who experience neglect often receive little help understanding their emotional experiences. Their feelings may be ignored, minimized, or misunderstood. Instead of learning that emotions provide important information, they may learn to suppress feelings or become overwhelmed by them. As a result, they may struggle to recognize what they are feeling until emotions become very intense.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Seem unaware of their own emotions.
- React with anger when actually feeling scared or sad.
- Have difficulty identifying emotions beyond "mad" or "fine."
- Misread other people's emotions.
- Become overwhelmed without understanding why.
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Parenting Implications

Caregivers can help by consistently naming emotions without judgment. Rather than asking, "Why are you acting this way?" try, "I wonder if you're feeling disappointed because your game ended." Reading books, discussing characters' feelings, and talking about emotions throughout the day builds emotional awareness.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of seeing emotional outbursts as misbehavior, recognize that your child may not yet understand what they are feeling. By helping children notice and name emotions, you provide the first step toward emotional regulation.