

EXPRESSING THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

What is this developmental skill?

Expressing thoughts and feelings is the ability to communicate internal experiences using words rather than behavior alone. It includes describing emotions, opinions, preferences, worries, and ideas. This skill supports emotional regulation, healthy relationships, and problem solving.

How does this normally develop?

Children learn emotional language when caregivers notice, name, and validate feelings. Adults help children connect internal experiences with words by saying things such as, "You look disappointed," or, "That made you really excited." Over time children begin identifying and expressing these experiences independently.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect often leaves children with little emotional coaching.

Children may:

- Have a very limited feeling vocabulary.
- Express emotions primarily through behavior.
- Believe emotions are unsafe.
- Struggle to describe internal experiences.
- Suppress feelings entirely.

What might this look like?

A child throws a chair instead of saying, "I'm frustrated." Another says only "fine" regardless of how they feel. Older children may appear emotionally detached because they have never learned language for their internal experiences.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers can help by:

- Naming emotions during daily life.
- Validating feelings before solving problems.
- Modeling emotional expression.
- Reading books about emotions.
- Accepting all feelings while setting limits on behavior.
- Helping children connect emotions with experiences.

From Understanding to Attunement

When behavior becomes the child's language, ask yourself: "*What feeling does this child not yet have words to express?*" Helping children find words often reduces the need for behavior to communicate.