

How children's emotions develop and change

Children grow and change in many ways during their primary school years. As well as growing physically, children develop socially, emotionally and cognitively.

Why emotions matter

Children's responses to the different feelings they experience every day have a major impact on their choices, their behaviour, and on how well they cope and enjoy life. Emotional development involves learning what feelings and emotions are, understanding how and why they happen, recognising one's own feeling and those of others, and developing effective ways of managing them. As children grow and are exposed to different situations their emotional lives also become more complex. Developing skills for managing a range of emotions is therefore very important for their wellbeing.

Parents and carers have an important role to play in supporting children's emotional development. They do this through responding effectively to children's emotions, through providing examples of how they manage feeling, through talking with children about feelings and how to manage them.

Children's emotional development:

Emotional development is a complex task that begins in infancy and continues into adulthood. The first emotions that can be recognised in babies include joy, anger, sadness and fear. Later, as children begin to develop a sense of self, more complex emotions like shyness, surprise, elation, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride and empathy emerge. Primary school children are still learning to identify emotions, to understand why they happen and how to manage them appropriately. As children develop, the things that provoke their emotional responses change, as do the strategies they use to manage them.

Very young children's emotions are mainly made up of physical reactions (e.g., heart racing, butterflies in stomach) and behaviours. As they grow children develop the ability to recognise feelings. Their emotions are also increasingly influenced by their thinking. They become more aware of their own feelings and better able to recognise and understand other people's. Thus, an emotional reaction of a ten-year-old is likely to be far more complex than that of a three-year-old.

The **experience** of emotion includes several components:

- Physical responses involving heart rate, breathing, hormone levels, etc.
- Feelings that children recognise and learn to name.
- Thoughts and judgements associated with feelings.
- Action signals – for example, a desire to approach, escape or fight.

Many things influence the ways that children **express** emotions, both through words and behaviour. These influences include:

- Values about appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing emotions that children learn from parents, carers and teachers.
- How effectively children's emotional needs are usually met
- Children's temperaments.
- Emotional behaviours that children have learned through observation or experience.
- The extent to which families and children are under various kinds of stress.