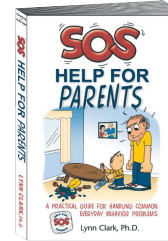


Book Pages Are Black And White



Chapter 18

Helping Your Child Express Feelings



"They said that you couldn't play with them because you are a girl? . . . I can see why you feel hurt and angry. . . ."

"No Girls Allowed!"

Relaxing in his easy chair, father jumped when ten-year-old Stacy slammed the front door and stomped into the room. Wearing a baseball cap, glove, and an angry scowl, she said, *"Next time I am going to use my bat on those boys!"*

Father: *"What happened, Stacy? Tell me about it."*

Stacy: *"I went out to play ball, and those mean boys wouldn't let me play!"*

Father: *"They wouldn't let you play?"*

Stacy: *"No! They said, 'No girls allowed,' and then they all laughed at me!"*

Father: *"They said that you couldn't play with them because you are a girl? . . . I can see why you feel hurt and angry. . . ."*

Stacy: *"Yes, they made me mad! And they hurt my feelings, too. I thought they were my friends."*

Father gave Stacy emotional support by being concerned, listening, and reflecting her feelings. He helped her realize that she was feeling more than just anger. She was also feeling hurt and rejected.

We want to protect our children from disappointments, frustrations, and conflicts with other people. However, we can't constantly keep them under our protective wing. What we can do is help them understand and cope with their feelings involving unpleasant experiences. By using *reflective listening*, we encourage our children to express and share feelings with us. *Reflective listening is briefly summarizing and restating to your child both her feelings and the situation that seems to have caused those feelings.**

By sharing unpleasant feelings with you, your child will be less hurt or burdened by them. She'll also gain increased control over her emotions and behavior, and will make better choices in meeting the challenges and disappointments of daily living. Communication with your child will improve, and you'll have a closer relationship.

How early should parents begin reflective listening? Three-year-olds aren't too young to benefit if parents are brief and use simple words. Boys need help in expressing feelings as much as girls. Boys and girls who are in touch with their own feelings become better adjusted men and women.

Use Basic Skills Of Reflective Listening

Use the communication skill of reflective listening to help your child learn to express her feelings. *Follow five guidelines when your child begins to share her feelings with you:*

*Reflective listening is also called "active listening."

1. Accept and respect all of your child's feelings. Do this by listening quietly and attentively and being nonjudgemental. Of course you needn't accept all of her *actions or behaviors*, just her feelings. She can tell you how angry she is at her brother, but she isn't permitted to express her anger by teasing or hitting him.

2. Show her that you are listening to what she says. Your close attention rewards her for expressing her ideas and feelings to you. Stop what you are doing, turn toward her, maintain eye contact, and listen carefully. Also, show her your attention by nodding your head and by an occasional, "*Um hum . . . yes . . . Mmm . . .*"

3. Tell your child what you hear her saying and what you think she is feeling. Occasionally summarize, restate, or rephrase the core of what she tells you — *both her feelings and the situation that seems to have caused her feelings*.^{*} It's not enough to only listen and understand. *You must also reflect back to her, with words, what she is saying, thinking, and feeling.* This is *reflective listening* — a skill which takes practice to develop.

Try not to repeat your daughter's *exact words*. Use *similar words* that capture the same meaning and feeling. Say to your disappointed three-year-old, "*You feel bad (the feeling) because you couldn't go to the store with Daddy this time (the situation).*"

Your child may say things which you find terribly upsetting or threatening. For example, she may say, "*No one at school likes me!*" Brace yourself and don't be swept away by a flood of concern or guilt as you listen and reflect what she says. Be a helpful parent and encourage her to express whatever she feels. She needs your help. By being an effective sounding board and mirror for your child, you are helping her to cope with her feelings and to make better choices for herself.

Children often exaggerate both their negative feelings and the distasteful situation behind those feelings. Help your child understand and clarify her feelings and her description of the situation by using reflective listening. However, don't tell her that she is exaggerating because this will make her less willing to share other feelings with you.

^{*}Unpleasant situations and events do influence our feelings. However, what a person tells himself about these events (that is, silent self-talk statements) has a greater influence on his feelings. In *SOS Help For Emotions* book, I describe how beliefs and self-talk primarily cause our feelings and behavior. Also, I describe the steps for improving one's feelings by correcting one's faulty self-talk. This book, based on cognitive therapy, is suitable for helping both adults and adolescents. See ordering information at the end of this book.

4. Give her feelings a name. Labeling feelings is the first step to understanding and managing them. Look over the two lists of feelings, “Names For Pleasant Feelings” and “Names For Unpleasant Feelings.” These two lists give labels for common positive and negative feelings experienced by both children and adults. If your child is young, be sure to use simple words when you help label her feelings.

After listening carefully to what she says and watching her facial expressions, make an “educated guess” and tentatively label her feelings. For example, say to your nine-year-old, “*You seem to be feeling disappointed (a feeling) or perhaps a little resentful (another feeling) because of the way your teacher treated you (the situation).*” If you are incorrect with your first guess, then try again. Be respectful, calm, and maintain a slow pace in what you say. Encourage her to tell you if your guess is wrong and to help you correct your guess.

NAMES FOR PLEASANT FEELINGS		SOS
<i>accepted, liked</i>		<i>glad</i>
<i>appreciated</i>		<i>good, great</i>
<i>capable, confident</i>		<i>grateful, thankful</i>
<i>successful</i>		<i>pleased</i>
<i>comfortable, relaxed</i>		<i>love, loved</i>
<i>eager</i>		<i>satisfied, happy</i>
<i>cheerful, elated</i>		<i>enjoy, like</i>
<i>hopeful, optimistic</i>		<i>proud</i>
<i>encouraged</i>		<i>respected</i>
<i>relieved</i>		<i>secure, safe</i>
NAMES FOR UNPLEASANT FEELINGS		
<i>angry, mad</i>		<i>unhappy, miserable</i>
<i>resentful, want to get even</i>		<i>messed over, unfair</i>
<i>irritable, grumpy</i>		<i>unloved, neglected</i>
<i>scared, afraid</i>		<i>discouraged</i>
<i>disappointed, let down</i>		<i>embarrassed</i>
<i>lonely, left out</i>		<i>hurt</i>
<i>without a friend, rejected</i>		<i>tired</i>
<i>worthless, no good</i>	<i>bored</i>	
<i>stupid, dumb</i>		<i>confused</i>
<i>upset, tense</i>		<i>frustrated</i>
<i>worried, anxious</i>		<i>inferior</i>
<i>insecure</i>		<i>guilty</i>

5. Offer advice, suggestions, reassurance, or alternative ways of looking at the situation, only AFTER you help your child to examine how she feels. Advice, suggestions, and reassurance, if given first, will hamper your child's effort to express and understand her feelings.

How do you begin learning the skill of reflective listening? The technique for reflecting positive feelings is the same as for reflecting negative feelings. Most parents find it easier and more pleasant to practice the skill of reflective listening by beginning with their child's pleasant, positive feelings.

The next time your child tells you something and seems to have positive feelings (such as feeling excited, relieved, eager, proud, or happy) reflect these feelings. Also, reflect her description of the situation or event that seems to have caused the feelings. For example, say, *"You seem to feel relieved (the feeling) because your piano recital was cancelled (the situation)."* Or say, *"Getting invited to Mike's party (the situation) has sure made you feel excited and happy (the feeling)."* Practice the skill of reflective listening in order to learn it.

"I Feel Like I Don't Have A Friend Anymore"

When my oldest son, Eric, was four, I found him crying by our swing set in the back yard. Tears were streaming down through the dirt covering his face. Sobbing, he said, *"I hate Jeff! He threw dirt in my face!"* I tried to reflect his feelings by saying, *"You're mad at Jeff for throwing dirt, and also he hurt your feelings."* He replied, *"Yes, I feel like I don't have a friend anymore!"*

We walked to the house and I helped wash off the dirt. More importantly, I helped him cope with an insult from a friend by simply reflecting his feelings of anger and hurt. Later that afternoon, I watched Eric and Jeff happily playing together.

Reflective Listening And Problems Parents Face

Several problems may arise when your child expresses feelings to you. You can manage each of these problems.

Problem A — Your child expresses unpleasant feelings toward you. She may say, *"You won't let me go to the movies Friday night, and I'm mad at you!"* Allow her to express negative feelings toward you, but don't permit her to verbally abuse you. Don't allow her to call you names, swear at you, threaten, or have a screaming tantrum. Tell her that she may express her feelings,

but that you won't tolerate verbal abuse. If she continues calling you names or screaming, consider leaving the room or using a mild correction.

Children must learn to recognize their feelings and to express their feelings without being aggressive, obnoxious, or verbally abusive. Also, when you express your feelings toward your child, be sure that you follow the rules too, and don't verbally abuse him or her. Be a good role model!

Problem B — You help your child to talk about her feelings. However, she continues feeling miserable or voices irrational plans. Even after you have listened carefully, given her useful suggestions, and mentioned the possible consequences of her actions, twelve-year-old Laura may still be unreasonable. She may walk away saying, *"My English teacher is mean and unfair and I hate her! But I'm going to show her. She'll be sorry. I going to keep whispering in class and I'm going to hand in my report late!"* Often we can't directly change our child's irrational feelings and choices. Laura may have to learn to improve her behavior through natural consequences — *The School of Hard Knocks*. That is, she may continue having to stay late after school for whispering in class, and she may get an "F" on that late report.

Problem C — Your child is critical of your attempts at reflective listening. Consider the following discussion between mother and ten-year-old Bradley. Even though mother is accurate and effective when using reflective listening, Bradley temporarily becomes annoyed with her. Mother, however, appropriately continues with her reflective listening skills.

Bradley: *"I'm mad at Chad's parents. They won't let him do anything. They're always afraid he'll get hurt. They treat him like a baby."*

Mother: *"You're saying that you are annoyed at his parents because they baby him?"*

Bradley: *"That's what I said! There you go again, repeating what I say!"*

Mother: *"Well, Bradley, I am interested in your thoughts about Chad and his parents."*

Bradley: *"OK. One way that they baby him is not letting him go with me to . . ."*

In addition, your child may say that you misunderstood his feelings. Later, however, you may discover that you correctly understood his feelings after all.

If your child remarks on your reflective listening, simply “keep your cool” and tell him that you are “concerned about his feelings and thoughts.” Don’t let your child’s occasional negative reaction toward your reflective listening skills keep you from using these skills.

Enhance Your Child’s Emotional Intelligence

What is emotional intelligence? Emotional intelligence is your child’s ability to understand and manage emotions and behavior. Since your child’s emotional intelligence is learned rather than inherited, it can be improved. Your effective use of SOS methods will improve your child’s behavioral adjustment, emotional adjustment, resiliency, and emotional intelligence.

As your child grows older, help to develop the following five skills.

Five Emotional Intelligence Abilities

- Knowing and labeling her emotions
- Managing and soothing her emotions
- Recognizing emotions in others
- Managing relationships with others
- Motivating herself to achieve her goals

Children who know their feelings are better able to manage them. Children who know and manage their feelings are better able to recognize the feelings of others and to manage relationships with others. That’s why it’s important for you to practice your reflective listening skills with your child. By helping her to know her feelings and emotions, you will be helping her to increase her emotional intelligence.

Learn more about developing your emotional intelligence and helping your child develop emotional intelligence by reading and using *SOS Help For Emotions*. More information about *SOS Help For Emotions: Managing Anxiety, Anger, And Depression* is at the end of this book. Also, you may read chapters from this book at www.sosprograms.com

Your son pays particularly close attention to you when you are frustrated with a problem or having a conflict with another person. By watching you, he is learning how he might handle his own emotions, frustrations, and conflicts with others in the future. Be a good role model!

Main Points To Remember:

- Helping your child to label her feelings is the first step to helping her to understand and manage them.
- *Reflective listening is summarizing and restating to your child, both his feelings and the situation that seems to have caused those feelings.*
- Use reflective listening to help your child label, understand, and cope with his feelings.
- Practice helping your child by reflecting both his pleasant and unpleasant feelings.
- Reflective listening helps children gain increased control over their emotions and behavior.
- Use SOS to enhance your child's emotional intelligence.
- When you are upset, be a good role model for your child.