

# Understanding children's feelings: Emotional literacy in early childhood

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Reesa Sorin

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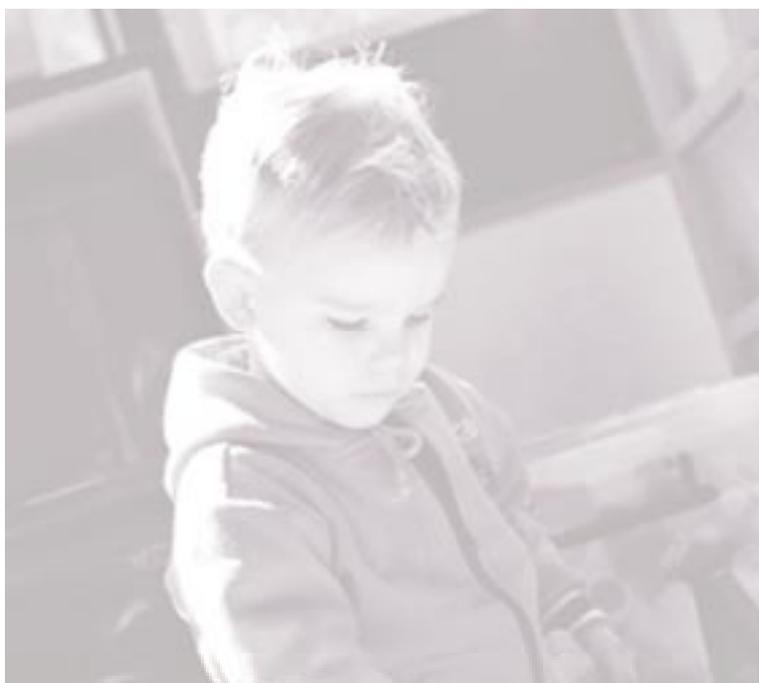
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## About the author:

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Reesa Sorin was an early childhood teacher and an art teacher in Winnipeg, Canada, before coming to Australia in 1988. Since then she has taught in early childhood centres, preschools, primary schools, TAFE and university. She is currently Coordinator of Early Childhood Education and Coordinator of Arts Education at James Cook University in Cairns.

Her combined interest in early childhood and in art drew her to the research area of emotion education in early childhood, which she believes is best taught through the arts. She has published widely about children's fears, emotion education, conceptualisations of childhood, and student mobility.

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## Chapter 1: Feelings and early childhood

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We all experience a myriad of feelings. News of a new baby, a promotion at work, or an old friend arriving for a visit might cause us to feel happy and excited. Rising interest rates or work pressures might cause us to feel anxious or apprehensive. The death of a loved one or loss of a cherished possession might cause us to feel sad or even angry. Feelings play an important part in the way we experience and come to understand our lives. Yet we often deny feeling anything but 'good' and may encourage children in our care to do the same, or at least not to express their 'other' feelings. Educational practices that focus largely on the development of thinking skills such as reading, writing and number skills at the expense of developing understandings of feelings may do the same. To teach to the whole child, we must teach to the heart as well as the mind.

Since the early 1980s, with the publication of Gardner's multiple intelligences (Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2003), the ability to understand feelings and motives has been recognised as important. Goleman (1995) defined emotional intelligence as the ability to understand and manage feelings, motivate yourself in the face of discord, and recognise feelings and feeling displays in other people. Since then, emotional intelligence or emotional literacy has been defined as the ability to recognise, appraise, express, understand and regulate feelings (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, in Weare, 2000). It is 'a way of managing your interactions with others so that you can build an understanding of your own emotions and those of others, then find a way of allowing this understanding to inform your actions' (Antidote, 2003, p. 3).

Children who manage their feelings well are said to be emotionally literate. They recognise and respond well to other people's feelings, and are at an advantage in all areas of life. On the other hand, unresolved feelings can negatively affect memory, judgement, and general learning skills (Cornelius & Faire, 1989; Lewis & Lewis, 1996; McKnight & Sutton, 1994). As early as the preschool years, children who have trouble regulating their negative feelings are more prone to displays of anger, frustration and irritation towards others and to poor relationships with both adults and other children (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1995).

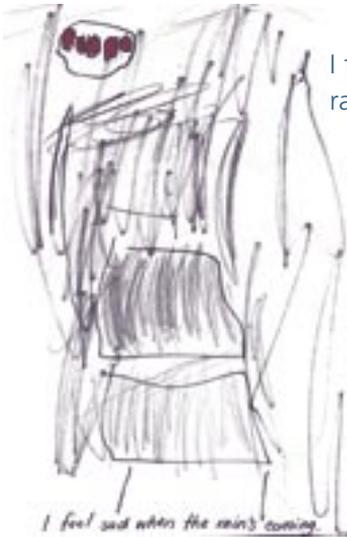
At times, young children are expected to learn to recognise and express their feelings without adult help. Yet lack of adult teaching about feelings and how to express them can put children at risk of developing behavioural, emotional, academic and social problems (Novick, 2004). Learning about feelings from the early childhood years and continuing throughout the school years and beyond can be greatly helpful to overall learning, development and socialisation.

In programs that teach about feelings, children learn to recognise, name and take ownership of their feelings and behaviour; to recognise and empathise with others' feelings; and to express feelings in ways that lead to satisfactory outcomes for all. Feelings are accepted as a natural part of life (Antidote, 2003). As Weare (2000) notes: 'All the emotions, including the negative ones, are not only a fact of life, but are at root healthy and useful, even if we need to be able to limit some of their manifestations in some circumstances' (p. 71). Children need to be able to find effective and non-destructive ways to express negative as well as positive feelings, and the best time to start this is in early childhood.



## Chapter 2: Young children and feelings

From birth or very early in life, a number of feelings seem to be present in children, including happiness, sadness, interest, disgust, fear, anger, excitement and surprise. These feelings can be triggered by a variety of situations, not always apparent to adults. The children's drawings (below) show situations that might cause children to feel happy, sad or interested.



I feel sad when the rain's coming.



I'm interested in people.

I'm interested in people.

A lizard makes me happy.



Ways of displaying or expressing feelings often vary from child to child, and this could be culturally-based, family-based or simply individual expression. But some forms of expression are common to most children. The table below suggests some ways that feelings are expressed and some situations that may relate to these expressions.

Expression of Emotion	Emotion / Situation
Smile, laugh	Situations that create happiness, excitement or humour in children, such as birthdays or special events.
Sob, cry	Sadness, disappointment and grief are usually associated with these forms of expression. However, they can also be ways of expressing fear, anger or anxiety.
Vocalise, scream	Young children may have limited vocabulary to express how they are feeling, so will use vocalisations or will scream. This often occurs as a result of fear or anger.
Verbalise – tell someone or ask someone about the feeling	With increasing language skills, children become more able and willing to tell you how they are feeling. They will describe all emotions, particularly strong ones.
Use body – gesture, movement, run, run away, jump, cower, hide	In the past our ancestors either cowered in fear or ran away. This is still the case today. Young children may hide in corners or remove themselves from fearful situations. They may also cover their faces with their hands as a way of hiding from the fearful object or showing disgust. Happiness and excitement can elicit running and jumping; anger and surprise are expressed in gestures and movement; sadness with a 'closing in' of the body; interest can be shown by moving in closer to the object of interest.
Facial expressions	Children express most emotions through their faces, but often adults don't 'read' these expressions. The children's drawings below show facial expressions related to various emotions.

**Worried Face**



**Surprised Face**



**Angry Face**



Cling to / stay near adult or peer	If a child is sad or afraid, a common reaction is to seek to be near to and in close contact with an adult or another child.
Confront – verbally or physically	Particularly in anger, children may express themselves through confrontation. This could include pushing, shouting or even hitting and kicking.
Withdraw from a situation / join in a situation	Sadness, anger, disgust and fear can cause children to withdraw from situations. Often children join in situations that are happy, exciting or surprising, or interesting.
Draw, paint, sculpt, sing, chant, dance	A number of children use these forms of expression naturally, such as painting a sad picture, chanting in excitement, or dancing happily around the room.
Dramatise - as actor or with puppets, dolls or figures	At times, it is through someone else or becoming someone else that a child is able to express his/her feelings. This is particularly the case with shy children and children with very limited vocabularies.



### Chapter 3: Responding to and teaching children about their feelings

As adults, we don't always recognise the expression of feelings in young children. It is also the case that, at times, our ways of responding might actually limit children's understanding and expression of their feelings. Some of these responses are subtle and may come from messages we received as children about emotions, such as 'There's nothing to be afraid of', 'Boys don't cry', and 'You should be ashamed of yourself'. A simple look of disapproval, a gesture, or lack of acknowledgement of a feeling can sometimes give a message to a child that her/his feelings are unacceptable or invalid.

It is important to first acknowledge and accept what children are feeling, and then to do what is needed to help them come to terms with their feelings. The table below gives examples of ways adults can respond to children's feelings that invalidate the feeling, and offers suggestions for better approaches.

Adult's response	Why it invalidates the feeling	Suggestions for better approaches
<i>If it's something like a fear of monsters, [I] reinforce the fact that they're not real.</i>	The feeling, and perhaps the monster, is real to the child.	While the feeling should be accepted, you can reassure the child that you can't see a monster and you don't believe monsters exist.
<i>I tell them, 'I'm here and you can stay near me if you want to.'</i>	This may send a message to the child that, while they are safe with you, they are not safe away from you. This can result in children clinging to you.	It may be better to tell the child that they can stay near you while they are feeling sad, angry, afraid, etc., and that when they are feeling better they might want to go and play or undertake an activity.
<i>[I tell them] 'I can help you. Everything will be fine.'</i>	Everything will not always be fine (e.g. if parents separate or a family pet dies). You could be giving the child false information.	Accept the feelings. While things may never be the same, there are ways of dealing with them, and the first is to acknowledge the feeling.
<i>If they could tell us what's making them sad, we could help them feel happy.</i>	Why do feelings such as sadness and anger have to be changed? This gives the message that some feelings are acceptable and others are not.	It is better to accept the feeling and help the child to understand the feeling and ways to express and deal with the feeling.

<p><i>Finally you're saying, 'That's enough crying!' You just can't hear any more crying.</i></p>	<p>Crying is a way of expressing sadness, fear and other emotions. It is not harmful to others, and perhaps the child is not okay and the situation needs more attention.</p>	<p>Sometimes crying becomes a kind of over-reaction to a situation, particularly if it is getting attention from adults. You might comfort the child and, when you feel the child is more settled, ask the child to rejoin the group when he/she is ready.</p>
<p><i>You try to redirect them to do something; redirect their focus.</i></p>	<p>Redirection only postpones the feeling; it does not deal with it. Unresolved feelings can remain with people into their adult lives.</p>	<p>While a child might need a 'cool down' time, it is better to first acknowledge the feeling. The child might then want to talk about the feeling and the situation that caused it, to express the feeling through drawing, painting, movement or drama, or to move on to another activity.</p>
<p><i>If they're angry and they're showing their emotion physically, then we'll have to stop them from doing that and possibly remove them from the group, take them somewhere where they can calm down.</i></p>	<p>While it is not acceptable to be physically harmful to yourself or others, anger needs to be expressed as much as any other emotion.</p>	<p>It might be helpful to give the child time to calm down alone or with an adult. Depending on the child, this can happen in the group or away from the group. It should not be seen as punishment. But children need to be taught anger management skills.</p>





You can write your own stories about feelings or help children to write their own stories:

A creative parent or teacher can write a story with or for a child. The story should be written about things that the child knows and likes; e.g. a little girl like her or a puppy or another animal that she likes. It should be about a situation similar to the one the child is concerned about and should express and accept the child's feelings but also offer support. Repetition is helpful with young children. The child could also draw some pictures to illustrate the story or you could take some photos together and assemble the story in a scrapbook.

Another option is to find a book written about a similar situation, making sure that it includes the ideas above. Books that express only the good parts of a situation are usually not so helpful.

Beginning preschool was difficult for my son and I – here is our story. A story such as this could provide an opportunity for children to discuss their feelings, to illustrate them or to act them out. This is also a story that could have been written in collaboration with a child.

### ***Mummy, don't go!***

Last week, Jon started preschool. He thought he would like it. All summer long he had talked about going. He had been to preschool once, just for a visit, not to stay. Jon painted a picture, played on the swings and built a train. Jon liked preschool.

But last week, when Jon started preschool with all the other children, he wasn't so sure. They went into the room to meet Jon's teacher, Ms Brown. They found Jon's locker. It had a picture of a butterfly on it. Jon and his Mum made a playdough snail. Jon met Sophie and Joshua.

Then his Mum had to go to work. 'Goodbye Jon,' she said, kissing his cheek. 'Have a happy day at preschool.'

'Mummy, don't go. I might get lost,' sobbed Jon. 'Don't leave me Mummy!'

'Come on, Jon,' said Ms Brown. 'Here's a puzzle I know you'll like. Let's put it together.'

'Mummy!' cried Jon. 'Don't leave me! MUMMY!'

Jon's Mum stood at the door. Then she remembered something. She opened her bag and reached inside. She took something out, put it into an envelope and placed it in Jon's hand.

'What's this Mummy?' asked Jon, opening the envelope.

It was a photograph, a photo of himself and his Mum at the beach last summer. They were smiling and splashing in the water.

Jon thought back to summer. He loved playing in the water and making silly faces for the camera. Jon's Mum took him to the beach, to the playground, and to visit Grandma. She always brought him home again.

'You keep this while I am away', said his Mum. 'I am going to work now, but I'll come back to pick you up, park the car out there on the road and look through the window to find you.'

'Let's put the photo up here Jon', said Ms Brown, 'you can look at it and we'll show the other children.'

Jon looked at the picture - he knew Mummy would come for him when preschool was over.

'You can go to work now Mummy,' he said. 'I have you here with me all day.'

Jon and Ms Brown waved goodbye to his Mum through the window as she got into her car.

Jon goes to preschool every day now and waves to his Mum like that. Jon still sometimes feels sad and misses his Mummy, but, when he looks at her picture or holds it in his hand, he remembers that she is always there to care for him.

There are lots of interesting things to do at preschool and Jon met some new children he likes to play with. He especially likes the high jumping board in the playground, the bear puppet, his teacher Ms Brown, and his new special friends, Sophie and Joshua.

Teaching children about feelings and helping them to become 'emotionally literate' means recognising and accepting all feelings and guiding children to express them in ways that are not harmful to themselves or to others. 'It is neither necessary nor wise to be afraid of any of our emotions, to deny their importance, or to be unable or unwilling to feel and express them' (Weare, 2000, p. 71).

There are a number of ways of showing children that you accept their feelings, and encouraging them to understand and express them in appropriate ways. They include:

**Acknowledgement** – Tell the child you understand that they're feeling sad and that it's okay to feel sad.

**Empathy** – While sympathy involves feeling for another person, empathy is feeling with another person, or walking in another person's shoes. Explain that everyone feels angry at times and you understand why he is angry, if, for example, someone took his toy.

**Questioning/Discussion** – If a child has the words and is willing to talk, ask him to tell you how he feels and what is making him feel that way. Talk about the feeling – where it happens in the body, what made him feel that way. Children may wish to describe their feelings in terms of colour, shape, or even metaphor (for example, 'my anger is a red, square, brick').

**Offering words** – Sometimes questioning and discussion are difficult because the child lacks the vocabulary. It is helpful to offer words that might describe his/her feelings, such as, 'Are you feeling scared? Frustrated? Excited?' Expanding children's emotion vocabulary is a powerful way of helping them to understand and express feelings.

**Explanation** – At times, feelings such as fear or anger are caused by events the child does not understand. It can be useful to explain the situation. For example, 'That loud noise comes from the building site over the road. Big machines are digging into the ground.'

**Exploration** – When and if a child is ready to do so, encourage her to explore the situation that is triggering the feeling. For example, offer to take her to see the machinery on the building site. Guide her at first, and then gradually move to independent exploration if she is ready (e.g. 'Can you find pictures of earth-digging machinery in this book?'). Let the child have control of the pace at which you move.

**Taking action** – Sometimes action can be taken by the adult alone, such as removing an insect from the room. Other times, if the child is willing, the adult and child can take action together, such as going outside together to look at the spider.

**Modelling** – Lead by example. Be aware of your own range of feelings and what you consider to be acceptable ways of showing those feelings. If you feel angry, then show it in words but don't blame the child for your anger. If you feel surprised, show it in your face and gestures. If you feel afraid, sad or disgusted, show it in your paintings or in the way you move. Children pick up messages from both what you say and what you do. If there are some ways of expressing feelings that you wouldn't want a child to pick up, make sure you're not modelling those ways yourself.

**Stories and pictures** – There are a number of good quality children's picture books and picture sets that deal with a variety of feelings. They can be a source of words and discussion about the child's feelings and ways of expressing them, or an entry point to other activities that explore feelings. There are also picture books and sets which have no words but can offer children the opportunity to explore the situation, sequence the story, and identify the feelings in each picture.

The following suggestions, drawing from the arts, allow adults to take a playful approach in helping children to understand and manage their feelings. They are not meant to be adult-directed, but to guide children who are interested in exploring their feelings in these ways.

**Drawing and painting** – Besides being ways of releasing emotions, free drawing and painting offer opportunities to explore and give colour and shape to children's feelings. Make sure you include black, white and the primary colours in the paint choices you provide.

**Sculpture** – Manipulating clay or playdough is another good way of releasing emotions, and can also be used to represent feelings. For example, ask a child to use clay to show what their anger looks like or to make impressions in the playdough to show their excitement.



*I feel happy when my  
mam cuddles me.*



*I feel happy when my mummy  
takes me to the movies.*



**Movement and dance** – With or without music, children can express their feelings through movement and dance. They can dance together in celebration of happiness; move like they are excited, sad, sleepy, etc. Ask them to show disgust through their faces and bodies and to move in ways that shows fear or surprise.

**Drama** – With or without props, you can encourage children to re-enact a situation that caused a feeling, and together you can work through the situation. You can also describe an emotional situation, such as losing a favourite toy, and encourage children to explore the situations through drama. Simple, scripted plays (depending on children's reading ability) or oral retellings of stories are other good sources of dramatic play about feelings. Role-plays and puppets allow children to take on other viewpoints, as they can act out different parts, e.g. as themselves and then as another person. You can introduce small figures (either in sand or on a large piece of fabric as a stage) as symbols for exploring feelings.

**Music** – Collect a number of pieces of music (without words) that evoke different feelings. They can be used in drawing or painting activities, as children listen to the music and paint the colours, lines and shapes that the music makes them feel. If they wish, they can describe the feeling in words, but it is enough just to express the feeling through art. Music can also be used for free expression dance or movement experiences, where children are encouraged to move in the way the music makes them feel. There are songs about feelings (e.g. *If you're happy and you know it*) and you can also rewrite the words to songs (e.g. *Mary had a little lamb* could be written as *Mary felt so sad one day*). Children can create chants about feelings, as a way of expressing the feeling and possibly dealing with it.



**Partnerships** – It is important to establish good partnerships with children, parents, family members, community members, and other children’s services professionals. These partnerships are invaluable in helping to recognise feelings. For example, a child may be afraid of dogs but, because there are generally no dogs in her early childhood centre, the caregivers may be unaware of this fear. Through a partnership with the family, this kind of information can be shared. A partnership approach to developing ideas for responding to and teaching children about feelings allows for consistency between the home and school and helps to strengthen understanding about emotions. Discuss and document situations that trigger feelings, how feelings are expressed, and ways of responding to them. Neither educators, nor parents, nor early childhood professionals have all the answers, but, together with the children, a much deeper understanding of emotions can be developed.

Here is an example of how a caregiver helped a child to express his feelings through chanting.

### **Brett and the bear**

Two-year-old Brett told me that he was afraid of bears and monsters. When I read him the story, *Where the Wild Things Are*, he said that Max, the main character, had tamed the monsters by saying ‘Don’t be scary’ and ‘Monsters, go away,’ expressions that he repeated several times as a chant.

I offered Brett paper and crayons and he drew a picture of a monster, a bear, a snake and five lions. He told the creatures in the drawing to ‘Go away’, and together we chanted ‘Go away monsters, go away!’

After we chanted, I folded the picture and put it away. Brett did a second drawing, this time of himself and his creatures having a good time. Then we read the book, *Going on a Bear Hunt*. As the people in the story reached the bear, I suggested to Brett that he might like to chant ‘Go away, bear, don’t be scary!’

He wanted me to read the story over and over again and at each reading he chanted, ‘Go away, bear, don’t be scary!’, laughing heartily after each reading.

Re-reading a story like this as often as the child wants can help the child to control his feelings.

It is important to remember that, while stories help deal with feelings, the feelings may be coming from a situation somewhere in the child’s life that he or she is unable to deal with. The underlying situation must be addressed as well, otherwise the unresolved feelings could interfere with the child’s life in other ways.



## Chapter 4: Activities – some specific activities to develop emotional literacy

### How do you feel?

Set up four centres: musical instruments (bought and homemade); figures and symbols (in sand or on a cloth); drawing-paper and crayons or textas; and a box of dress-up clothes and props. Ask children to show you how they are feeling, but not by using words. They can select one of the centres and use the materials provided to express how they feel. They may wish to share their feeling expression with the whole group, or to do it only for themselves.

### Sculptor and clay activity

Put children into groups of four and appoint one to be the 'artist' or 'sculptor'. Give each group a feeling word (e.g. happy, sad, angry) and ask the sculptor to shape the members of the group (in clay) to show that feeling. 'How would you look on your face and in your body if you were happy? Sad? Angry?' Each group can present their 'sculpture' to the class and the class must guess which feeling they are portraying.

### Body image

This is one of the only times I'd recommend using a colouring-in sheet. Give each child a sheet of paper with a body image on it (like a gingerbread person, but with no facial features). Ask them to choose colours and to show through their colours and the marks on the paper (either inside the body image or outside) where they feel happy, sad, excited, disgusted, etc. Let them know that we experience feelings in our bodies as well, and not just in our minds.

### Movement and music activity

You can use the same instrumental music from the activity on page 13 for this activity. Form children into a circle, then get them to face outward. Ask them to close their eyes and listen to a piece of music. Ask: 'How does it make you feel?' Encourage children to use their bodies to express the feeling of the music – 'How would you move your arms, legs? What sounds would you make?' Encourage them to become part of the music as they feel it in their bodies and minds and to express it through their own sounds.

### Anger activities

Children should understand that it is okay to be angry, and important to find ways that help them to express their feelings that aren't hurtful to themselves or to others. It is also important to think about why they are angry and what they can do about it. Anger itself does not need to be redirected, but the energy that goes with the feeling can be expressed in a number of safe ways, including:

- telling someone they feel angry and why they feel angry;
- drawing or painting their feeling;
- roaring like an angry lion;

- Woodchopper activity: Feet apart, knees bent outward, hands grasped together above the head. Bring them down as if chopping wood, from above your head to between your legs, shouting 'Huh!' as you go;
- taking some time out and finding your own space; and
- with the help of an adult, creating a book with ideas about how to manage anger.

### **Fear chants**

Get the children to suggest situations that cause them to be afraid, or use one of the following:

- There is a bully hurting you and your friend.
- You believe there is a ghost in the toilet.

Get the children to create a chant to express and confront the fear. It can be a call and response, where the adult calls out a line and the children echo, or just a whole group chant. You can add instruments or props to go with the chant.



## Chapter 5: Conclusion

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Understanding feelings and developing emotional literacy are essential components of early childhood education. Academic learning is not enough. To develop each child's full potential, we must look at, and actively teach to, the emotional and social areas of development as well. We can't rely on children developing such skills naturally as they grow, as is shown by learning blocks and social problems later in life. In young children who do not yet read or know many words, these skills can be taught through the modelling of feelings and ways of expressing feelings, and through a variety of verbal and non-language-based activities. The arts are particularly useful vehicles for exploring emotions.

While most adults respond to feelings as they occur (e.g. following a fight between two children), it is better to teach children about feelings as part of daily living. It is through educating the heart as well as the mind that early childhood educators address the needs of the whole child and help to establish a solid foundation for future education and life paths.

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A number of websites offer books and training about understanding feelings.

## Children's books about emotion issues

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## Understanding children's feelings: Emotional literacy in early childhood

The complex area of emotional development is one that challenges early childhood teachers, parents and carers. In *Understanding children's feelings: Emotional literacy in early childhood*, Reesa Sorin explores how children can be supported and encouraged to be aware of their feelings and to understand how they can deal with them. Sorin suggests using a variety of activities from the arts, to enhance the expression of feelings and to address some of the difficult areas.

The inclusion of emotional literacy is an important component of early childhood education, to develop each child's full potential. Actively teaching emotional and social development is preferable to a reliance on children developing such skills naturally as they grow—this book offers a great resource to make a start or augment your existing approach.

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