

Therapy Thursday- BIG Feelings

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Let's Talk BIG Feelings!



Feelings are a natural part of everyday life. Young children experience complex emotions just like adults. They get frustrated, sad, worried, excited, and overwhelmed; however, they usually haven't mastered the ability to use logic and words to manage their feelings in the same way. Instead, young children may communicate their feelings in other ways often through more physical, challenging, and less controlled methods.

No one is born knowing how to control strong emotions. Just like other skills understanding and managing feelings takes practice and support. An important role for caregivers is to connect with children during times of strong emotion and to nurture their ability to respond in healthy and adaptive ways. It's important to remember that all feelings are real and valid. The only way for

young children to learn to resolve emotions is to go through them. Young children need our support to make sense of their experience and to learn how to manage feelings in a positive way.

Here are a few things to remember when supporting a child through BIG feelings:

- **Connect first** – Tune into the child's cues by looking at their body language, listening to what they say, and observing their behaviour. Connect with them and let them know you see their experience (e.g., "I see you're upset").
- **Behind every behaviour is a feeling** – Try to understand the meaning behind the child's behaviour. This will help you assist the child to find other ways to express their feeling. For example, is the child saying:
 - I need help.
 - I'm having a hard time.
 - I'm overwhelmed.
 - I'm tired.
 - I'm not ready yet.
 - I need a break.
 - This change is uncomfortable for me.
 - I don't feel heard.
 - I don't feel safe.

- **Label the feeling** – Help the child name their feeling. This will build their emotional vocabulary so they can eventually talk about their feelings using words (e.g., “I see you’re frustrated.” “Your tears tell me you feel sad.”)
- **Offer choices** – Offer choices that allow the child to show their feeling in a healthy, adaptive way. Join alongside the child and engage in these activities together. Remember everyone is different and each child will prefer different options. These choices might change over time or even by the day! For example, you could suggest:
 - Pounding playdough
 - Scribbling with sidewalk chalk or colouring a picture
 - Knocking down blocks
 - Blowing bubbles or a pinwheel
 - Squeezing something tight
 - Shredding or tearing newspaper
 - Karate chopping a cardboard box
 - Stomping like a dinosaur or crawling like a bear
 - Drinking a cold glass of water
 - Asking for a hug
 - Running, jumping or riding a bike outside





- **Stay with it** – We all want hard times to pass and big feelings to calm. When a child is having a hard time, resist the urge to make their big feelings go away or stop. Remember emotions come and go. The feeling won't last forever and the child must experience it to practice managing it differently. Stay present with the child and support them through the experience. When feelings are minimized or dismissed, they are more likely to be expressed in unhelpful and challenging ways.
- **Model for the child** – Young children can learn about feelings and how to express them appropriately by watching others. Talk about how you feel and how you're handling your own emotions. Point out how others feel in books and television shows. Notice when someone has handled their feeling well or when they could consider a different choice.
- **Celebrate** – Encourage the child by celebrating when they express their feelings in a helpful way. This shows that feelings are normal and can be handled. It also increases the likelihood that the child will repeat the positive emotional response next time.

Supporting a child through BIG feelings isn't easy and every child is unique. If you have any questions or want to talk more, please do not hesitate to reach out to your child's psychology team member!

Learn more at <https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-children-calm-down/>

References:

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