

Emotion-Affirming Language

Relevant Satellite Accreditation Standards

I. Interactions and Relationships

A. The provider's verbal and non-verbal communication with children helps build positive relationships and conveys support, respect and trust.

IV. Supporting Children's Development

B. The provider supports the development of positive self-esteem by helping children understand and appropriately express their feelings and needs.

1. The provider helps children express themselves, using strategies appropriate to each child's level of development.



The Basics

Emotion language is verbal communication about emotional states like sadness, fear, happiness, surprise, or anger. Educators use emotion-affirming language when **labeling** and **validating** children's emotional experience. Exposure to emotion-affirming language in early childhood is linked with later social and emotional competence and emotional wellbeing (Ogren & Johnson, 2020). Dismissive language, such as "you're okay," or "you don't need to be mad," offers minimal support, thereby children utilize maladaptive strategies for managing emotions.

Why use emotion-affirming language? Young children rely on adults to organize and support their developing emotions. Emotional states such as anger, sadness, and frustration are all emerging emotions children manage. Emotion language supports children's theory of mind, or understanding that others have separate emotional states, intentions, and thoughts (Grazzani et al., 2018). When children do not receive immediate responses for their emotions, they may...

- internalize their feelings and reduce their outward expression or
- escalate their behavior in attempts to be supported by adults.

When children receive in-the-moment emotion-affirming responses, they learn...

- that feelings are valid, natural, and manageable.
- to recognize and label feelings within themselves and others.

→ to associate feelings with specific circumstances.

[How do I use emotion-affirming language?](#) Consider developmental level when utilizing emotion-affirming language with young children. Educators help young children learn safe and socially appropriate strategies for managing emotions by (1) meeting children with empathy and respect, (2) validating the emotion and offering comfort, and (3) helping problem solve with modeling and choices. See the table below for examples to use with children under and over two years.

	Meet children with empathy and respect	Validate the emotion and offer comfort	Help problem solve with modeling and choices
<i>Examples for children under 2 years old</i>	"You are mad!"	*Educator takes a deep breath*	"Say car please."
	"You are sad that mom left."	"I'm here for you."	"Do you need a hug?"
<i>Examples for children over 2 years old</i>	"You are mad. You wanted a turn with the car."	"It's okay to be mad. Take a deep breath. You can handle this."	"You could ask for a turn or you could choose another car."
	"You are sad that grandma left."	"It's hard to say goodbye. I am here if you need me."	"What would help you feel better?"

I want to learn more!

- ["How Are You Feeling?" Strategies for Helping Children Understand and Manage Emotions](#) (Article)
- ["You're Okay" May Not Be Okay: Using Emotion Language to Promote Toddlers' Social and Emotional Development](#) (Article; *NAEYC Members Only*)
- [Fostering Emotional Literacy in Young Children: Labeling Emotions](#) (Article)
- [Teacher's Guide: Labeling Emotions](#) (Resource)
- [Feeling Faces: This is how I feel today!](#) (Resource)

Books available through Satellite's lending library:

(for Satellite participating programs only)

- *Spotlight on Young Children: Social and Emotional Development* (NAEYC, 2023)
- *Managing Emotional Mayhem: The Five Steps for Self-Regulation* (Bailey, 2011)
- *Social & Emotional Development: Connecting Science and Practice in Early Childhood Settings* (Riley, 2007)