



## Emotion Words Appropriate for Young Children

Children as young as four months old can already recognize certain emotions. Using emotion vocabulary with infants and toddlers is essential for supporting their social and emotional development. When caregivers consistently label and talk about feelings—such as saying “You look sad,” or “Are you feeling excited?”—they help young children begin to recognize, understand, and eventually manage their own emotions. Early exposure builds emotional literacy, which forms the foundation for healthy communication, empathy, and self-regulation as they grow. It also fosters stronger bonds between children and caregivers, as children feel seen and understood. By giving children the words to express how they feel, caregivers empower them to navigate their world with greater confidence and resilience. The following emotion words are appropriate for young children to be exposed to and learn.

Age Ranges	Common Emotions Experienced by Children	Appropriate Emotion Words to Use
Newborns up to 6 months	Children in this age range commonly experience feelings, emotions, and states of being such as anger, discomfort, pleasure, and affection for caregivers. Babies smile socially when enjoying interacting with others. Babies show contentment through relaxed bodies and making soft sounds. They show interest and joy by looking, smiling, and moving their arms and legs. They show distress through stiffening their body and making sounds of distress.	happy, sad, tired, calm, safe, loved, mad, hungry, fussy
6 to 18 months	Children in this age range can be wary of heights, strangers, and separation. They also commonly experience surprise, fear, shyness, dislike, and lots of joy and happiness. They express emotions through facial expressions, body cues, and vocalizations. They recognize and replicate changes in tone of voice. They may express their emotions through smiling, hugging, kissing, snuggling, or through frowning, fussing, or being clingy.	The words above, plus: excited, scared, silly, shy, upset, grumpy, pleased
18 to 24 months	Children in this age range may experience jealousy, fear, worry (especially around their own safety), extreme sadness if experiencing a loss, self-awareness, pride, shame, and early guilt. Children in this range have difficulty understanding mixed emotions and expressing them in a predictable way and are experimenting with the volume of their voice. Children in this age range often use the word, “no,” and may or may not mean it. They may express their emotions through increasingly physical means, like hugging, petting, moving closer to someone, hitting, kicking, biting, and pushing.	The words above, plus: sorry, tired, gentle, helpful, glad, afraid, worried
24 to 36 months	Children in this age range begin to talk about feelings and link them to what’s happening. They also become capable of identifying a full range of emotions (using one word at a time). Children gain vocabulary, recognize emotions in themselves and others, and are capable of learning emotional regulation and imitating others’ emotions.	The words above, plus: angry, proud, jealous, brave, lonely, kind, hurt

