

# Nurturing Emotional Literacy

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A Good Beginning, a recent report from the Child Mental Health Foundation and Agencies Network, emphasizes that social and emotional readiness is critical to successful kindergarten transition, early school success, and even later accomplishments in the workplace. However, according to the report, many children enter school without the social and emotional readiness to succeed.

Research has shown that many children, particularly boys, go into the adolescent years with a restricted language for expressing emotions. This "emotional illiteracy," as psychologist James Garbarino describes it, keeps some boys locked up; they are unable to articulate their experiences and may be ashamed that they can't.

But the beginnings of emotional illiteracy start much earlier, and often affect girls as well as boys. While girls are frequently encouraged to express their emotions more openly than boys, the absence of support from adults can put many children of both sexes at risk for behavioral, emotional, academic and social problems.

By helping your children express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions verbally and in writing, you can give them a better start toward emotional literacy, and a foundation to succeed in school.

In their preschool years, you can help your children express their thoughts and feelings by writing their words for them. In stories, poems, or letters, their language can become a way to support their ability to deal with a peer, with conflict, with sad or scary feelings. The words can help your children sort out their feelings, and come to terms with their own behavior.

As your children grow older, you can help them develop language they can use to deal with their emotions and behavior. One of the best activities is reading stories aloud, particularly stories that offer rich opportunities to discuss emotions. And by helping your children relate the emotions in a story to their lives and experiences, you help nurture their understanding of concepts of emotion, as well as their vocabulary.

By discussing the books you are reading, your children can learn to make predictions and inferences, imagine a setting, identify with characters, use the context to understand new words, ask questions, and become aware of the skills they are using to make sense of text - all the earmarks of active engagement in the reading process. Young children learn what language is through what language does.

By helping your young children express their thoughts and feelings verbally and in writing or drawing, and by reading and discussing stories that offer rich opportunities to

discuss emotions, and to understand how others think and feel, you can make sure their emotional development and literacy go hand in hand.

Excerpted from "Learning to Read the Heart: Nurturing Emotional Literacy" by Rebecca Novick - an article in the NAEYC journal, Young Children.

Early Years Are Learning Years™ is a regular series from NAEYC providing tips to help parents and early childhood educators give young children a great start on learning.