

# Supporting Infant & Toddler Emotional Development: Name it. Claim it. Explain it.

Children are born with strong emotions. For infants, emotional states shift from “stirred-up” to “calmed-down” (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2015). Soon infants’ emotions differentiate into recognizable fear, anger, and pleasure. Throughout the second year of life more specific emotions are apparent, including pride and empathy (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2015). A key developmental task of the infant and toddler years is learning to identify and manage emotions.

It is important to consider all of children’s emotions as valid, but to recognize that we need to help young children find appropriate ways to process those emotions. Infants and toddlers often have very little control over their environment, and it is easy for adults to forget that infants and toddlers may have very strong feelings about their experiences in that environment. This is often most clear if one child bumps or hits another child. Adults are often quick to respond with, “You’re okay.” because we see that no one is bleeding or physically harmed. We may even intend it to be a reassuring and comforting remark. However, when we stop to consider that the instance was not so much about physical pain as about having your personal space rights violated, we can empathize and we can validate the child’s feelings. This does not mean accepting the child’s angry response of hitting back! But it does mean changing the conversation from telling children they are okay to asking if they are hurt, scared, or angry.

This information brief describes a strategy that can be used any time you are talking with a child about their emotions; but especially when you are trying to support a child in understanding and regulating their feelings.



**“Name it! Claim it! Explain it!” is a strategy to help children recognize and address their feelings, and to help them learn to do so independently.**

## Name it. Claim it. Explain it Strategy

1) **Name it.** Help children name the emotion you think they are feeling. For older children, you can ask. With infants and younger toddlers, you can give them a label.

- “It looks like you feel mad.”
- “You look upset. How did that make you feel?”

2) **Claim it.** Give children a chance to claim the emotion, especially if you labeled it for them. This means going beyond saying, “I see that you are sad. If you are sad...” We can misinterpret cues, and we want to give children a chance to own their emotions. This can be in the form of a question or repeating what children say.

- “It looks like you feel mad. Are you mad?”
  - Sometimes children will indicate that you were correct, but other times they may indicate that they are feeling another emotion.
- “You look upset. How did that make you feel?” (Child responds “sad”). “Oh, that made you sad?”

3) **Explain it.** This one has two parts. You want to help children explain what you think caused the emotion and what they can do to work through it. All emotions are valid, but not all expressions are appropriate! Start by stating what you think caused the emotion (or asking verbal children questions), and then move to what they can do now.

- “It looks like you feel mad. Are you mad?” (pause for child verbal or nonverbal response) “I think you are mad because your friend took that ball away from you. When you are mad you can tell your friend ‘I don’t like that’ and you can stomp your feet.”
  - Give age appropriate choices for dealing with an emotion. An 18 month old stomping her feet to deal with strong emotions is appropriate and better than hitting a friend.
- “You look upset. How did that make you feel?” (Child responds “sad”). “Oh, that made you sad? What do you think made you feel sad?” (pause for child to respond) “What do you think would help you to feel better?”

### Reference

Gonzalez-Mena, J. & Eyer, D. (2015). *Infants, toddlers, and caregivers: A curriculum of respectful, responsive care and education (10<sup>th</sup> Ed.)* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

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