



I'm Not Going to Feel My Feelings — and You Can't Make Me!

by Linda K Sibley

"I'm not going to Confident Kids anymore," a young boy told his parents. "I don't have any feelings so I've got nothing to talk about there!" This is not an unusual comment from kids in our Confident Kids support groups.

At ages five, six and seven years old, many kids have figured out that facing their feelings is not always very much fun - and have decided that the best way to deal with those troublesome feelings is simply *not* to deal with them at all!

As adults, many of us know what that's like - and how much trouble we've had all our lives because we made similar decisions when we were young!

If you are a parent, or have kids in your life you care about, you may be concerned about seeing this pattern developing in the kids you care about. But like many adults, you may also feel at a loss to know what to do - "I have enough trouble figuring out how to deal with my own feelings - how can I possibly know how to deal with my kids' feelings?" is a common cry we hear from parents in our support groups. So, let me offer you a crash course in helping your kids learn to openly and honestly face their own feelings. But be warned! The concepts that follow are simple to talk about, but take focused time and energy for you to make a reality in your relationships with the kids you care about!

1. Never label feelings as "good" or "bad". Train yourself to ***use the terms difficult or uncomfortable feelings*** rather than *bad* feelings. To say that a particular feeling is *bad* reinforces the tendency to avoid or get rid of it; we teach our children to stay away from bad things, not embrace them. However, to say that a feeling is *uncomfortable* or *difficult* invites us to find ways to deal with it; life is full of challenges to deal with difficult or uncomfortable situations!

2. Ask: "What are you thinking about right now?" rather than "What are you feeling?" Asking a child, "What are you feeling?" often results in a response of "I dunno," which yields only a quick end to your conversation. But ***as they tell you what they are thinking about, you can guide them to talk about what they are feeling.*** For example, a mother was having trouble getting her child to go to preschool. Each morning the boy complained of stomach aches and



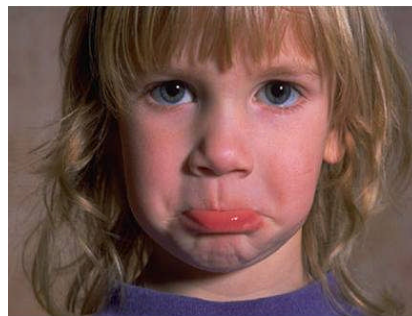
cried to stay home. Repeated attempts to get her child to talk about what he was feeling led nowhere. But in response to the question, “What are you thinking about right now?” the answer came, “I’m thinking about Billy.” As a result, the mom was able to have a conversation with her child about a child who was biting him. She was not only able to intervene on his behalf, but **created an excellent opportunity to talk with him about the fear he was feeling and teach him how to handle it by solving the problem causing it.**

3. Name that feeling! Naming our feelings accurately is a large part of resolving them. For instance, to say “I feel awful,” or to hear our kids say “I feel yucky,” is not very helpful. However, when we can say, “I feel jealous,” or “I’m angry,” or “I feel lonely today,” gives us a place to start. I can figure out what to do to resolve loneliness or jealousy - I can’t do anything about “awful” or “yucky!” Teaching children a rich vocabulary of feelings words gives them a valuable resource for living a healthy life. **Begin with a basic vocabulary of the following words:**

Angry, Sad, Afraid, Hurt, Jealous, Guilty, Proud, Happy, and Loved.

As they grow, add other words to increase their vocabulary and their ability to sort out their feelings and name them accurately.

4. Get those feelings out. Finally, teach your children how to express their feelings openly and honestly, rather than hide from them. Kids need to learn that all feelings need to be expressed, and that hiding from their feelings does NOT make them go away! On the other hand, having what I call a “feelings free-for-all” does not help, either. Children can learn that there are healthy and unhealthy ways to express their feelings, and develop self-discipline in choosing how they will express them. In Confident Kids, we teach this rule: **You may express your feeling in any way you like EXCEPT you may never hurt yourself, another person, or property.** For example, it’s okay for kids to punch a pillow when they feel angry; it’s not okay to punch someone else or throw their toy truck through the TV screen! The activity box below will give you more information about how to teach your kids healthy and appropriate ways to “get those feelings out!”





ACTIVITY: Make A Family Feelings Box

Gather together all the items you can think of that could help your kids express their feelings in healthy ways, taking into consideration that everyone will have different ways that work for them. For example, you may think “Mary likes to write letters to her Dad when she is angry with him, so I’ll put letter writing items in our feelings box.” Do the same for each family member. Here are some suggestions:

- **An old cell phone or a picture of a telephone** — to remind family members they can call someone to talk about their feelings.
- **A phone list of safe people children can call** — so they will never be at a loss for someone to turn to for help, when needed.
- **Notebook and Pen** — to journal feelings or write a poem.
- **Stationery with Envelopes** — write letters about your feelings (letters can be sent or torn up or burnt!).
- **Drawing Supplies** — drawing feelings is a great way to get them out.
- **Box of Tissues** — sometimes we just need to cry!
- **Running Shoes** — do something physical to get feelings out.
- **Large Red Heart** — represents being with someone we love to talk to or hug or hold!

When you have assembled all the items you want, get a box large enough to hold them and let your kids decorate it. You may want to letter the rule about expressing feelings on the front or top of the box, to help children remember to choose only healthy ways to express them. As they work, talk with your kids about how they could use each item to express their feelings in healthy ways. Then, place all the objects into the box and place it where all family members can get to it easily. The next time any family member—including you—struggle with difficult or uncomfortable feelings, direct them to get the box out and choose an item to help them *get those feelings out!*

RESOURCE: If you would like more information about helping your children learn to handle their feelings in healthy ways, pick up the book, *All My Feelings Are Okay!* by Linda Sibley. This book contains the same information taught in the Confident Kids Support Groups, but can be used by parents or other adults to teach children on a 1-to-1 basis. You will find the teaching material, stories, games and related Bible stories a great aide in teaching kids how to deal with their feelings! Find out more at: www.confidentkids.com/resource_catalogue.htm.

