

Five Ways to Talk with Your Kids So They Feel Loved

These warm, nurturing messages need repeating over and over again with our children.

About the Author

"I don't recognize you." This was the first thought I had when my daughter was born. She didn't look like me (at first), and I soon learned that she didn't act like me, either.

I was a quiet and content baby, or so I'd been told; my daughter was anything but. On our first night home, she cried for hours while my husband and I tried everything we could to calm her, from rocking to singing to feeding to changing her. Eventually she did soothe, but my daughter was letting us know, loudly and clearly, that she was her own person. We had to set aside our expectations for who we thought she would be to see who she actually was and would become.

Although we were too exhausted to think about it at the time, our daughter's cries were helping us get to know her. The way we responded also helped her get to know us.

Whether an infant cries continually or hardly at all, it's important to recognize that their cries (and their smiles and coos, too) serve an important purpose—they are the tools a baby has to communicate. A cry might say: "I'm hungry," "I'm uncomfortable and need to be changed," "I want you to hold me," or "I'm tired, but I can't sleep." A smile might say: "I'm full and content" or "I love it when you hold me."

Starting when children are young, the way we interact with them helps shape how they respond to us and to other people in their lives. In my new book, [*Creating Compassionate Kids: Essential Conversations to Have With Young Children*](#), I write about the importance of caring conversations that help kids grow into the compassionate, resilient people we hope they will be. By paying attention to their cues and responding, we let our children know they are loved for who they are, help them learn to trust the adults in their lives, teach them skills to manage big emotions and challenges, and encourage them to approach others with compassion.

Although how we talk with children and the topics we choose to talk about may change over time, there are certain conversations that are important to have again and again at any age. Here are five examples.

1. You are loved for who you are and who you will become

"I don't like it when you hit your brother, but I still love you."

"You used to love this song, but you don't anymore. It's fun to see how who you are and what you like changes as you get older!"

Letting the children in your life know that they are loved for who they are now and who they will become helps create a trusting relationship, also called a [secure attachment](#). Build your relationship by spending dedicated time with your child doing something they choose, paying attention to their likes and interests. During these moments, put aside other distractions, including household chores and electronic devices. It can be tempting (and sometimes necessary) to multitask, but it is also important to show your child that you are focused on them.

Children who have secure attachments tend to have higher self-esteem and better [self-control](#), stronger critical thinking skills, and better [academic performance](#) than children who don't. They're also more likely to have [stronger social skills](#) than their peers, as well as [greater empathy](#) and compassion.

2. Your feelings help your parents and caregivers know what you need

"I hear you crying and I wonder what you are asking for right now. I'm going to try holding you in a different way to see if that helps."

"When I'm sleepy, I get pretty cranky. I'm wondering if you are feeling sleepy right now."

Although you might prefer it when your child is in a good mood (when they are easy to get along with and fun to be around), children have unpleasant feelings like sadness, disappointment, frustration, anger, and fear, too. These feelings are often expressed through crying, temper tantrums, and challenging behaviors. Our feelings serve a [purpose](#) and let us know when a child needs something. By paying attention to a child's feelings, we show them that how they feel matters to us and that they can count on us to do our best to address their needs.

When your child's feelings challenge you, ask yourself:

- Are the expectations I have for my child reasonable and realistic?
- Have I taught my child what *to* do and not just what *not* to do? If not, what skills need more practice?
- How are my child's feelings affecting them right now? Even if I think they should know this skill, is my child too upset or tired to think clearly?
- How are my feelings affecting the way I respond to my

child?

3. There are different ways to express your feelings

"It's okay to feel frustrated, but I don't like it when you scream like that. You can use words and say, 'I'm frustrated!' You can show your feelings by stomping your feet over here or squeezing this pillow instead."

"Sometimes when I'm sad, I like to tell someone how I feel and have a hug. Other times I want to sit quietly by myself for a while. What do you think would help you right now?"

It's helpful for an infant to cry and scream when they are hurt or upset, but as children get older, we don't want them to express their feelings in this way anymore. As children's brains mature and their vocabulary grows, they play a more active role in choosing how to express their feelings.

Talk with your child about your family's emotion rules. How do you want the children and adults in your family to show different emotions when they arise? You can also use storybooks to help your child see that everyone has feelings. Reading together offers a chance to talk about the challenging feelings that different characters have and to practice problem solving outside of emotionally charged

moments.

Teaching children how to express their emotions in new ways takes time, practice, role modeling, and lots of repetition.

4. Everyone is a learner and making mistakes is part of learning

“You tied your shoe! It was really hard at first, but you kept working on it and now you learned to do it all by yourself!”

“Sometimes I get frustrated when I can’t do something on the first try. I have to remind myself that learning something new takes practice. Have you ever had to practice something to learn how to do it?”

Through conversations, parents impact *how* children learn as well as *what* children learn. When children struggle to do something, this can feel frustrating, which may lead to them trying harder or giving up. Parents can help children turn challenging moments into learning opportunities by highlighting their effort and sharing the message that learning something new takes time, problem solving, perseverance, and patience. Children with this mindset [tend to](#) outperform those who believe that their abilities must come naturally (i.e., either they have it or they don’t).

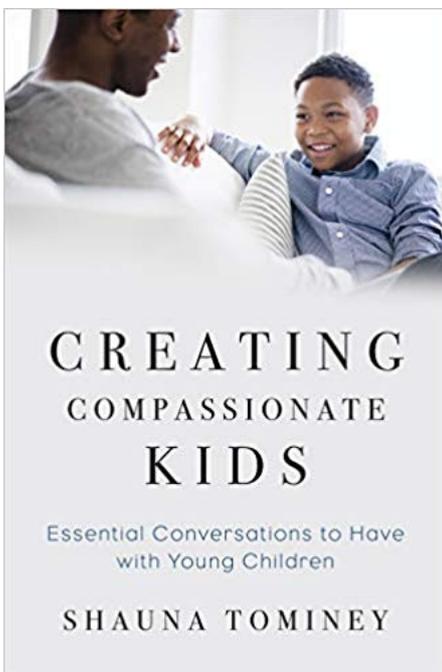
5. Your parents and caregivers are trying to be the best parents they can be

"I'm not sure what to do right now, but I'm trying my best to listen and figure out what you need."

"I'm sorry that I yelled at you earlier. I shouldn't have done that. Maybe we could talk together about what we could do differently tomorrow to help our morning go more smoothly."

Imagine your child as a teenager coming to you and saying, "I was thinking about last night. When I got mad and yelled, I shouldn't have done that. I'm really sorry. I was so upset when you wouldn't let me take the car that I just lost it." Teenagers (or children) don't become comfortable sharing and reflecting on their words and behaviors overnight, but role modeling from the important adults in their lives can help them learn.

We all have moments that we feel are parenting successes and others that we feel are parenting failures. It's important to remember that the struggles you have as a parent may be the same kind of struggles that your child has, too. Learning from you that making mistakes is okay and then seeing you work on learning and growing as a person will show your child how to do the same.



If you talk with your children about what you are working on, why it is hard, and what you are doing to improve, you can give your children ideas for strategies that they can use themselves. No matter how you feel about yourself as a role model, you are one of the most important role models in your child's eyes.

This essay is adapted from

[*Creating Compassionate Kids: Essential Conversations to Have With Young Children*](#) (W.

W. Norton & Company, 2019, 256 pages)

As I found with my own daughter, parents and caregivers have the opportunity to learn from children as they learn from us. We can use compassionate conversations to

show them that we recognize and love them for who they are as we also get to know and recognize who we are as parents.