

Self-awareness promotes self-management

Self-management is the ability to monitor and adjust one's responses. Self-awareness, recognizing one's feelings and related emotions and how they influence thoughts and actions, is an important foundation skill in the development of self-management, which in turn, is a critical aspect of healthy social emotional development.

Parents and caregivers begin to assist children to become self-aware in infancy by engaging in mind mindedness. This means that adults reflect the infant's probable thoughts and feelings. We talk to infants about what we observe in their facial expressions, what we see them looking at or how we interpret their movements. *I see you smiling at the puppy and I bet you are thinking about the dog we saw at the park. It looks as if that makes you happy, or You are wiggly and your face looks sad. Are you telling me you want to get out of that seat?* As children grow we continue to foster their self-awareness by continuing to suggest to them what they might be thinking or feeling.

It is important for children to understand that other people have thoughts, feelings and emotions as well. We tell them what we are thinking and feeling and what we are doing to regulate our thoughts and emotions. *I am feeling really tired so I am going outside to take a breath of fresh air to wake myself up or I am feeling excited about the party and I can't concentrate so I am going to make a list of things I need to remember to do.* We also encourage children to imagine what someone else might be feeling in everyday situations. *How do you think Victoria felt when she brought cupcakes to school for her birthday? Do you think your baby brother is happy now that he has his bottle?* We support children to talk about their emotions with their peers. *I feel sad when you are sick.* We can use books to increase awareness of the thoughts and feelings of others. Initiating discussions about the characters in a story gives children an opportunity to increase awareness of thoughts, emotions and the effect these have on our bodies as well as to reflect on ways to cope with challenging situations. This practice places social emotional thinking at the centre of our conversations about books.

Children with diverse special needs may require extra support to become self-aware. We may continue to use mind mindedness beyond infancy and obtain additional visual supports to help children develop this skill. Children's literature that specifically targets social emotional language and offers clear illustrations can be helpful. Activities such as adding characters and their emotions to pictures and drawings can expand children's learning and help to increase their awareness of feelings and subsequent actions.

Body awareness – a sense of our body parts, their dimensions, how they move in space and how they fit into spaces, what they can do – is an important aspect of self-awareness. Sensory processing is the way in which the brain receives and responds to information coming through the senses and is another aspect of body awareness. Some children with special needs require additional help to increase awareness of how their bodies feel and the way in which they express feelings and emotions. Activities that have a high sensory content can be used to increase general body awareness. These might include:

- Activities that offer intense tactile experiences such as arts and science activities involving manipulation of objects with different textures, temperatures and weights
- Nature-based play and exploration
- Intense movements such as swinging, climbing, bouncing and swimming
- Deep pressure touch experiences such as chores that require pulling, pushing and carrying
- Games that involve body contact like rough housing or playing in small or squishy spaces

Some children express intense emotions when engaging in sensory motor play. Caregivers can take this opportunity to co-regulate by reflecting these emotions to the child. This is a step towards self-management.

Children develop an awareness of their own sensory profile and how it influences their emotions when we watch them and comment on our observations. *Oh I see you don't want to play on the grass because you told me it tickles your feet and makes you feel upset.* Adding a strategy to reduce the stressor assists the child to manage his feelings so he can participate in typical childhood activities. *Tell yourself - it's Okay. I can just touch the grass with my hands –it will be Okay or Tell yourself - I can keep my shoes on and sit on the blanket- I will be Okay.*

When we nurture self-awareness in children they develop self-management skills. Self-management is the ability to regulate one's thinking, emotions, motivations and actions. Ideally, children learn to self-manage in a variety of settings and with a variety of caregivers. Children regulate their behaviour by managing stressors, controlling impulses, and working towards goals. Parents and teachers can help children to coach themselves by teaching them how to use self-talk to manage stress, to provide motivation, to encourage specific behaviours and to evaluate achievements.

Self-calming techniques such as self-talk and deep breathing, described in other Clinical Perspectives on the CFA website, are strategies children can learn to help to achieve self-management. When children are calm, taking the time to ask questions is a way to help children learn self-management. Children are encouraged to think about how it feels in their bodies when they are upset, agitated or worried and how it feels when they are calm. Children are challenged to consider the connection between feelings, thoughts and subsequent actions when we ask them about strategies they use to manage a particular situation. This process of thinking about their thinking helps children increase their self-awareness building a solid foundation for self-management.

For further information:

visit us at <https://bc-cfa.org/>

Visit your local library or bookstore and ask for books about emotions and feelings such as *How do dinosaurs say I'm Mad* by Jane Yolen & Mark Teague

Search for games that promote co-operative play and social emotional learning such as *Feelings playing cards* by Jim Borgman