

The Feelings Detective

From the practice of Elliott McCray, Ed.S., The McCray Learning Lab

What this builds (transformative SEL): Identity (“Who I am”) with a thread of Curiosity (“I wonder”).

Little kids often have just three feeling words (*mad, sad, happy*) for a whole world of feelings. When a feeling is big and doesn't have a name, it can spill out as a meltdown. This story teaches two skills that researchers call the heart of self-awareness: **noticing** the clues (on a face, in the body) and **naming** the exact feeling. Naming a feeling really does help calm the feeling brain. Kids sometimes call it “name it to tame it.” Naming doesn't make a feeling *disappear*; it makes it feel more like something you can carry.

Try these at home

- When your child is upset, notice out loud first: *“Your face looks scrunchy and your fists are tight.”* Then offer a word: *“Are you feeling frustrated?”*
- Grow the word bank in calm moments: point out **proud, nervous, jealous, disappointed** in books, shows, and your own day: *“I feel nervous before a big meeting.”*
- Let every feeling be okay. There are no “bad” feelings, only big ones: the goal is naming, not getting rid of them.
- **Big, lasting feelings.** Some feelings (missing someone, a deep sadness) can be very big and stay a long while, and naming them helps but doesn't fix them. Those are exactly the times to sit close, listen without rushing, and, if it feels too heavy, reach out to a counselor, doctor, or other trusted helper. You don't have to have the right words; being there is the thing.

This is a practice tool for rehearsing skills, not therapy, counseling, or a clinical service.

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