



First Feelings, 12 Stories for Toddlers
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ISBN: 9781433643842

HAPPY:

“I want my child to be happy.” That’s a universal wish among moms and dads. It’s obviously easier to parent a happy child than one who is angry or frustrated. Plus, researchers tell us happy children are more likely to be successful in school. But the happy glow isn’t limited by age: the happier we are, the more successful we become. In this story, you and your child read about some of the ingredients that contribute to happiness: kindness, generosity, creative expression, and being around people who love in a low-stress environment. Yet in a consumer-driven world where “things” have high value, happiness can hide.

Ways to help your child be happy:

- Teach your child to be grateful.
- Offer open-ended ways for your child to be creative.
- Point out signs of God’s goodness to your child.
- Smile!

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PROUD:

“Look at me!” Whether a child calls out from the top of a slide or before jumping into a pool, that self-focused message might appear to be the type of prideful behavior warned against in Scripture (Proverbs 11:2). However, we need to respond to a young child’s call for attention with affirmation and encouragement.

A young child has a lot to learn and limited abilities. As he stretches his skills, he needs to hear repeatedly, “I love you, and I’m proud of you.” What a blessing that “God works in all of us and helps us in everything we do” (1 Corinthians 12:6)

Of course, we need to draw a line between pride in God-given abilities and conceited behavior. We can help a young child feel good about what he does because of who he is, a child whom God blesses.

Help your child develop healthy pride:

- Catch your child doing good.
- Expect your child to be good.
- Repeatedly tell your child, “I love you, and I’m proud of you.”

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JEALOUS:

Everyone feels jealous at some time or another. Helping a child deal with the emotion can be more complicated when a child lets everyone in the vicinity loudly and visibly know how he's feeling!

In our materialistic world, children (and adults) are often tempted to feel jealous. After all, there's so much neat stuff available! A sense of competition or comparison often underlies an emotional outburst. And even during early childhood, social situations (as shown in this story) can trigger a sense of inadequacy or low self-worth. Because a young child often equates time with love, spending time with your child is one of the most effective jealousy-prevention techniques.

Help your child cope with jealousy:

- Avoid comparing children.
- Lavish your child with time and attention.
- Acknowledge and affirm your child's individual strengths.

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MAD:

A young child's anger can come from deep inside. When this happens, a child might lose control because anger adds energy and fuels the emotion. He might kick, yell, throw things, or have a total meltdown. A young child's brain hasn't developed enough to allow him to stop and think about how to react to a situation.

This sense of being totally overwhelmed is called emotional flooding. It commonly happens when a child is mad. Learning to identify anger and appropriately express and understand it is a lengthy process that can begin during these early years.

Help your child learn to deal with mad feelings:

- Be proactive, staying alert to situations that commonly trigger an intense reaction.
- Realize that a young child is most likely to act out when he is hungry, tired, or thirsty.
- Communicate that you still love your child and understand what she is feeling.

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EXCITED:

Exuberant moments happen frequently during the early years, simply because many experiences are new and explode with possibilities. A young child gets so excited that anyone nearby naturally absorbs some of that energy. The animated joy that at times consumes a child hints at the pure joy we have as believers. We celebrate with the psalmist and say, "Hallelujah! My Soul, praise the Lord" (Psalm 146:1 HCSB).

Sometimes, a child's excitement overflows into out-of-bounds behavior. That's when we help a child channel that boundless energy into acceptable physical actions. As shown in this story, a child might act like a silly zoo animal or even jump up and down. (It's totally acceptable for parents to jump up and down too!)

Help a child celebrate excitement:

- Channel excitement into socially acceptable behaviors.
- Provide a physically active means of expression.
- Seek opportunities to share your child's excitement.

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FRUSTRATED:

Every young child (and every parent!) experiences a certain amount of frustration. There are simply countless things a preschooler cannot do yet and numerous things he wants. He doesn't even have the verbal skills to say, "I'm frustrated." A preschooler can identify with the words of Paul: "I don't understand why I act the way I do" (Romans 7:15).

A young child controls very few aspects of life. He doesn't determine his bedtime, his menu, or any part of his daily schedule. Adults even remind a child when to use the bathroom! Naturally, an independent - seeking preschooler wants to button his coat ("I do it") or put on his shoes (on the wrong feet) or whistle like Grandpa. But physically, he can't, at least not yet.

Ways to lower the level of frustration:

- Use humor. Silliness cuts through tension.
- Invite your child to make simpler choices: "Do you want to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt?"
- Encourage your child to use words to explain how he feels.

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EAGER:

A young child lives in the moment but is always eager for the next big event. Because he has not yet developed a sense of time and space, a preschooler doesn't understand the concept of yesterday, today, and tomorrow referenced in Ecclesiastes 3. Youthful exuberance for "right now" often coincides with anticipation about what might happen in the future. That's the reason a four-year old might ask at his July birthday party, "When is Christmas?"

Parenting a child who lives in the present while already celebrating the future makes life exciting! When all this positive energy gets bundled together, an overeager child can act out.

Help your child learn self-control:

- Model patience in everyday situations.
- Have developmentally appropriate expectations so your child experiences the satisfaction that comes with finishing a task. For example, choose puzzles with the number of pieces that match your child's skill level.
- Emphasize taking turns so your child learns to wait patiently.

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AFRAID:

A young child who is afraid will be comforted by a physical action. When a child wakes up with a bad dream, we give a hug. Because young children communicate physically, that gesture assures them, "I'm here to help you."

Thinking happy thoughts, as suggested in this story, or visualizing a safe scene can also calm a child. Your child might be comforted by a biblical image such as angels going up and down a ladder to heaven in the story of Jacob's dream (Genesis 28:12).

Help your child cope with fear:

- Remember that toddlers are frightened of things that are unfamiliar or things they don't understand: Separation, strangers, animals, and crowded, noisy places.
- Understand that preschoolers are learning to distinguish between what's real and what's not, so the monster in the closet is as real to them as a toy truck. Explain the difference. Hold up the toy and say, "This is real. A monster is just pretend."
- At all ages, focus on helping a child cope with a fear instead of trying to trace the origin. We can't always track what causes a child to be fearful.

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WORRIED:

We worry about our children, and our children worry about us! We each worry about things that probably won't happen, situations out of our control, and how effectively we will handle the inevitable events in life. This all happens even though Paul clearly said, "Don't worry about anything" (Philippians 4:6 HCSB).

A child's worries are influenced by his or her stage of development. As shown in this story, a young child might worry about a costumed character, whereas an older child knows the bunny is merely a person who is dressed up.

As adults, we can compartmentalize or mentally stash away our worries. But young children can't do mental gymnastics. Tossing concerns into a "worry bucket," as suggested in the story, can be a developmentally appropriate coping mechanism.

Help your child cope with worry:

- Talk with your child about a specific worry to make it seem more manageable.
- Model prayer as a way to cope with worry. For example: When I begin to worry and don't know what to do, help me, dear God, remember that I can talk to you."
- Give reminders (and a hug) that you will always help your child.

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SAFE:

Your child was born after September 11, 2001, but he is growing up in the shadow of that tragic day. Before then, parents focused on helping a child be safe. Today, the goal is for a child to be safe and feel safe.

This attention to physical and emotional safety impacts your family every day, from teaching a child (even at a young age) how to deal with bullies to helping him find a secure place during a storm. You communicate in countless ways, "Here's what I do to help you stay safe."

Even in these unsafe times, we can join with the psalmist each night and say, "I can lie down and sleep soundly because you, Lord will keep me safe" (Psalm 4:8)

Help your child feel safe:

- Remind him of the many actions you take to keep him safe.
- Limit exposure to images, people, and situations that might cause anxiety. Maintain consistent routines that provide security.

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SAD:

We try so hard to make a child happy that a compassionate parent might feel like a failure if a child is unhappy. The psalmist used words like “brokenhearted” and “crushed in spirit” to convey the depth to which sadness can spiral downward (Psalm 34:18 HCSB).

Although everyone experiences sadness, a young child often needs support and encouragement to bounce back. In this story, the physical action of making a card for a sick friend became a positive coping mechanism. In life, both little things (like a broken sea shell) or bigger things (Grandma’s leaving) can trigger sad feelings for a child. Our goal as parents is to show a child he can deal with sad feelings and move forward.

Help your child cope with sadness:

- Encourage your child to think positively.
- Look for action-oriented solutions to sad situations.
- Tap into a young child’s physical means of expression by prancing around the room, making up a silly dance, or shaking off sadness from the top of your head to the tip of your baby toe.

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SURPRISED:

Surprise! That single word accurately expresses some of the emotion communicated in Lamentations 3:23. We also enjoy seeing a child’s delight when he opens a present or tastes an unexpected treat. But because a young child’s experiences are so limited, the unknowns that accompany some surprises add an element of potential worry.

When a situation includes the threat of a negative element, like the noise of fireworks in this story, a child’s response will be guided by his reading of the body language of a trusted adult. His reaction to a surprise will be shaped by listening carefully not only to the words you say but your inflections and tone as well.

Surprises can be fun, but it is a depth of trust relationships and the consistency of routines, traditions, and patterns that give a child confidence to enjoy unexpected pleasures.

Help your child savor surprises:

- In casual conversation, alert your child in advance to potentially frightening or negative elements in a surprise.
- Celebrate surprises with your child.
- Prepare for wild or exuberant responses to a surprise – young children respond physically.

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