

# Emotions Vocabulary Cards

Age-appropriate emotion words from basic to complex

## Why Emotional Vocabulary Matters

Children who can name their emotions experience them less intensely — a phenomenon neuroscientists call "name it to tame it." Putting a word to a feeling activates the prefrontal cortex, which dials down amygdala reactivity. A child with 5 emotion words has 5 ways to understand their inner world. A child with 50 has a much richer internal landscape and far more options for regulation.

### Level 1: Starter Emotions (Ages 2–3)

These are the foundation. Children at this age can learn to identify these in themselves and others with practice and labeling from caregivers.

EMOTION	SIMPLE DEFINITION	BODY CUE	WHEN KIDS FEEL IT
Happy	Things feel good	Smiling, bouncy, relaxed body	Getting a hug, playing, hearing a favorite song
Sad	Things feel bad or lost	Droopy face, crying, low energy	Losing a toy, saying goodbye, getting hurt
Mad / Angry	Something isn't fair or isn't how I want it	Tight fists, hot face, loud voice	Toy taken away, told "no," can't do something
Scared / Afraid	Something might hurt me	Heart beating fast, wanting to hide or cling	Loud noises, dark room, unfamiliar people
Surprised	Something I didn't expect	Wide eyes, open mouth, gasp	Peek-a-boo, unexpected visitor, loud pop
Disgusted	Something is yucky	Scrunched nose, tongue out, pushing away	Bad taste, bad smell, something slimy

### Level 2: Expanding Emotions (Ages 3–5)

Preschoolers can begin distinguishing between similar emotions and understanding that feelings have causes. Add these as they master the starter set.

EMOTION	SIMPLE DEFINITION	DIFFERENT FROM	EXAMPLE SCENARIO
Frustrated	I keep trying but it's not working	Mad (frustrated is about effort, mad is about fairness)	Puzzle piece won't fit, can't zip jacket
Excited	Something great is about to happen	Happy (excited is about anticipation)	Birthday tomorrow, going to the park
Worried	Something bad might happen	Scared (worried is about the future, scared is right now)	First day of school, parent leaving
Lonely	I want someone to be with me	Sad (lonely is specifically about connection)	Playing alone, friends are busy
Proud	I did something difficult or good	Happy (proud is tied to accomplishment)	Built a tall tower, helped a friend
Shy	I feel unsure around new people	Scared (shy is social, scared is danger)	Meeting new kids, being center of attention
Jealous	Someone has something I want	Mad (jealous involves wanting what another has)	Sibling gets a gift, friend has a new toy
Silly	I feel playful and giggly	Happy (silly is more energetic and goofy)	Making funny faces, being tickled
Calm	My body and mind feel quiet	Happy (calm is about peace, happy is about joy)	After deep breaths, lying in bed, being held
Nervous	My body feels jittery inside	Worried (nervous is the body feeling, worried is the thought)	Before a performance, trying something new

### Level 3: Nuanced Emotions (Ages 6–9)

School-age children develop the cognitive capacity for more complex emotional understanding, including mixed emotions, social emotions, and emotions about emotions.

EMOTION	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Disappointed	What I hoped for didn't happen	Rained on the day of the field trip
Embarrassed	People saw me do something I wish they hadn't	Tripped in front of the class

EMOTION	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Grateful	Someone did something kind for me and I feel warm about it	Friend shared their lunch when I forgot mine
Overwhelmed	Too many things at once — I can't handle it all	Lots of homework, noisy environment, too many choices
Curious	I really want to know more about something	Seeing how something works, wanting to explore
Confused	I don't understand and that bothers me	Instructions that don't make sense, conflicting information
Guilty	I did something that doesn't match my values	Lied to a friend, broke something and didn't tell
Hopeful	I believe something good could happen	Waiting for test results, trying out for a team
Annoyed	Something small is bothering me	Sibling making noises, being interrupted
Brave	I'm scared but I'm doing it anyway	Speaking up, trying something new despite fear
Left out	Others are included and I'm not	Not invited to a party, picked last for teams
Impatient	I want something to happen NOW	Waiting in line, waiting for a turn

## Level 4: Complex Emotions (Ages 10+)

Preteens and teens develop the capacity for abstract emotional thinking, self-conscious emotions, and understanding emotional complexity — including feeling multiple things at the same time.

EMOTION	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Anxious	Persistent worry that something bad will happen, with physical symptoms	Can't stop thinking about the presentation; stomach in knots
Resentful	Lingering anger about something that felt unfair	Still upset about being blamed for something a sibling did
Nostalgic	Happy-sad about something in the past	Missing elementary school friends while starting middle school

EMOTION	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Ambivalent	Feeling two contradictory emotions at the same time	Excited about moving but sad to leave friends
Ashamed	Deep feeling that something is wrong with me (not just what I did)	"I'm so stupid" — different from guilt, which is about behavior
Envious	Wanting what someone else has and feeling bad about yourself because of it	Friend gets straight As without trying, and you struggle
Contemptuous	Feeling superior to or disgusted by someone	Looking down on someone for their choices or mistakes
Vulnerable	Emotionally exposed and unprotected	Sharing something personal, asking someone out
Empathetic	Feeling what another person is feeling	Crying during a sad movie, hurting when a friend hurts
Bittersweet	Happiness and sadness intertwined	Last day of summer camp — the best week but now it's over
Inadequate	Feeling like I'm not enough	Everyone else seems to understand the math but me
Validated	Someone acknowledged my experience and it felt real	Parent said "That does sound really hard" instead of "You'll be fine"

**TEACHING TIP**

How to teach emotion words: (1) Label your own emotions out loud: "I'm feeling frustrated because traffic is slow." (2) Label their emotions: "You look disappointed that we can't go." (3) Read books with emotional content and pause to discuss. (4) Use "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_" as a family practice. (5) Never dismiss: "You shouldn't feel that way" teaches them not to trust their inner world.