

# Vital Lessons to Start Teaching Your Kids Really Young— and How to Do It

by Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.

[psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it](https://psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it)

September 11, 2018

As parents, there are lots of skills we need and want to teach our kids. Most of us focus on the basics, such as teaching our kids how to feed and dress themselves, how to tie their shoes, how to count, and read and write.

After all, these are foundational skills, which are critical for our kids to become more and more independent.

But, as child therapist Natasha Daniels, LCSW, pointed out, as we're teaching our kids concrete skills, we might be forgetting other skills that are just as significant, such as emotional intelligence. "Kids aren't always born with empathy, kindness and compassion. These skills have to be taught, fostered and grown." And we can plant these seeds as early as toddlerhood, she said.

To start, Daniels suggested helping your child to label their emotions (more on that below), and teaching them how their actions affect others. For instance, you might say: "When you shared your toy, you made her so happy" or "When you took that toy from him, you made him sad."

Third, since helping others is a powerful way to build kindness, teach your kids to do things like hold the door and give their sibling a hand, said Daniels, author of the book *How to Parent Your Anxious Toddler*.

Below, you'll find other vital lessons to start teaching your young kids right now—and the details on doing it.

**Teach your kids they're capable and competent.** Let your kids do more tasks on their own. Because the less you do for them, the more they learn what they're made of, said John Duffy, Ph.D, a clinical psychologist, author of *The Available Parent* and co-host of the podcast "*Better*" with his wife. "This gift is both invaluable and indelible. Children will maintain that sense of competence for a lifetime."

Duffy encouraged parents to challenge kids to do things they normally wouldn't—doing laundry and dishes, contributing to adult conversations about politics or religion, troubleshooting computer problems and even helping to repair a car engine.

"Invite them into these spaces. You will marvel at what they're capable of."

**Teach your kids to understand and cope with their emotions.** Parents often tell their kids to calm down, behave or do better, and get frustrated when they inevitably

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it/>

# Vital Lessons to Start Teaching Your Kids Really Young— and How to Do It

by Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.

[psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it](https://psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it)

September 11, 2018

don't, said Natalia van Rikxoort, MSW, ACC, a social worker and certified life coach who specializes in ADHD and family coaching. "What your kids won't tell you is that they have no idea what these things really mean, let alone how to put them into action."

Again, give your child a vocabulary for their emotions. If they're starting to have a meltdown, kneel down and say, "I can see you're feeling frustrated" or "I know you're really disappointed." Review a feelings chart when they're calm, she said.

Janine Halloran, a licensed mental health counselor and founder of *Coping Skills for Kids*, also stressed the importance of educating about emotions. Encourage your kids to identify when they're feeling happy, mad and sad: "What makes you feel happy? How does your body feel when you feel that way? What does your face look like?"

Reading and watching TV are great opportunities to identify feelings, too, said Halloran, author of the *Coping Skills for Kids Workbook*. You might ask questions like: "How do you think Katina felt when that happened? How would you feel if that happened to you? What do you notice about Quentin's face and body? What do you think he's feeling?"

Teach your child coping skills. Put different actions on a chart or index cards that your child finds calming or enjoyable, such as doing jumping jacks, taking a short break, playing with your pet, going outside and listening to music, van Rikxoort said. "When you sense your child is becoming overwhelmed, prompt them to choose a coping skill to use."

When your child is having a meltdown, van Rikxoort suggested focusing on what their behavior is communicating or what skill they're lacking. For instance, they get upset when you ask them to clean up their toys. Maybe it's because they're overwhelmed by such a big task, and have no clue how to begin.

"If your child is a bit older, you can talk to them about what makes cleaning up difficult and what might be done to make it easier." And you can model how to separate tasks into smaller steps, such as cleaning up the blocks first and then putting away the art supplies.

It's also helpful to teach your child to ask for help—something van Rikxoort has already started doing with her two-year-old. When her daughter gets frustrated, she says, "Help please." "Now when a toy rolls under the couch, rather than have a meltdown, she asks for help. Kids are often too embarrassed or afraid to reach out for assistance when they need it, so it's important to let your kids know that asking for help is OK."

Lastly, label your own emotions. You might say, "I feel so happy because ..." "I'm a little sad because ..." Halloran said. "When parents have more challenging feelings, they can

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it/>

# Vital Lessons to Start Teaching Your Kids Really Young— and How to Do It

by Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.

[psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it](https://psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it)

September 11, 2018

demonstrate that it's possible to make a change to how they feel," such as: "I'm feeling mad, so I'm going to take a sip of cold water and take a belly breath to calm down."

Teach your kids the golden rule. This rule encompasses everything from compassion to cooperation to forgiveness, according to Catherine O'Brien, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Sacramento, Calif., guiding new parents on the road of parenthood. It's also the foundation for essential conversations like understanding fairness and justice and building connection with others, she said.

The first step is to model the golden rule ourselves, and to treat our kids with respect. "[A]s parents, it can be easy to think of us as being the adults and them as being 'just kids,'" O'Brien said. "It puts an invisible separation between us and them. But we're all human individuals and deserve to be treated as such."

Listen intently to your kids, without interrupting or judging what they're saying. When you lose your cool, take responsibility and apologize. This shows that it's OK to get frustrated, you can work through conflict, and that everyone is accountable for their actions, O'Brien said.

Here's another strategy: Instead of forcing your child to apologize for taking someone else's toy, ask the other child how it made them feel, and then ask your child how they can help to make things fair or better, she said. (If you rush the apology, they might not realize what they did wrong, and learn that they can do whatever they want as long as they say "I'm sorry" later, she said.)

O'Brien also stressed the importance of teaching your kids that they need to ask others for permission to hug or kiss them. Everyone is different: Some kids are physical, while others freeze up when another child hugs them, she said. Similarly, don't make your child hug or kiss anyone either "because it is expected, like a grandparent, uncle or family friend."

As Daniels noted, "Regardless of what we teach, our actions will always be our children's biggest teacher." So whatever you want your kids to learn, model it. Because they will emulate it, she said. Of course, we're also human, and we make plenty of mistakes. And that's OK. Because we can also model imperfection, self-acceptance and how to pick up the pieces.

About the author

Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S. is an Associate Editor and regular contributor at Psych Central. Her Master's degree is in clinical psychology from Texas A&M University. In

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it/>

# **Vital Lessons to Start Teaching Your Kids Really Young— and How to Do It**

by Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.

[psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it](https://psychcentral.com/lib/vital-lessons-to-start-teaching-your-kids-really-young-and-how-to-do-it)

September 11, 2018

In addition to writing about mental disorders, she blogs regularly about body and self-image issues on her Psych Central blog, Weightless.

Psych Central does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment.