



Use “Thinking and Feeling Words” to Build Your Child's Communication Skills

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As young children grow and develop, they learn different kinds of words, all of which build their vocabulary. While their first words are about the people, objects, and actions in their everyday life, they eventually learn words that are more complicated and abstract.

A special group of words they need to learn are the words we use to talk about people's thoughts, feelings, ideas and perspectives. Researchers call these words “mental state” words because they are used to talk about what is going on in someone's mind. In this article, we will refer to them as “thinking and feeling” words.

Examples of thinking and feeling words

There are many words that can be used to talk about what people are thinking and feeling, including [1]:

- **words for talking about what people want** – *want, like, love, hope, prefer, wish, need*
- **words for describing what people notice with their senses** – *hear, see, feel, smell, taste*
- **words for describing how people are feeling physically** – *hungry, tired, sick*
- **words for talking about emotions** – *like, hate, enjoy, afraid, surprised, feel, nice, happy*
- **words for talking about peoples' thoughts, beliefs, and judgments** – *believe, think, know, guess, remember, understand, forget, good, bad, naughty*

When do children learn words for thoughts and feelings?

- **Age 2:** Young children's first words for thoughts and feelings revolve around their own wants and needs (“I **want** a cookie”), things they notice with their senses (“I **see** a dog”), and their physical feelings

("I'm **hungry**") [1,2]. Gradually, young children learn to talk about what's going on in other peoples' minds ("He's **sad**").

- **Age 3:** At this age, children start to use more complicated words like "think", "know", and "guess" [1, 3]. At this stage, children may use these words to keep the conversation going without truly understanding what the words mean. For example, they might say things like "I don't **know**", "I **think** so", or "**Know** what?" [4].
- **Ages 4 – 5:** Eventually, children start to understand subtle differences between these types of words. For example, they learn that the word "know" means that the speaker is certain about something, whereas the word "think" means that he or she is less certain [5]. It takes several years before children understand and use a wide variety of thinking and feeling words, even beyond age 8 [3].

Why are thinking and feeling words important?

Being able to understand and use words for thoughts and feelings helps children [2,6]:

- **tune in to other people's thoughts and feelings** – Children need to develop "[theory of mind](#)", which involves understanding that other people have thoughts and feelings that are different from our own. In order to develop this key skill for social interaction, children need to understand and use words that describe peoples' thoughts and feelings.
- **have conversations** – When children can talk about their own thoughts and feelings and understand what might be going on in someone else's mind, conversations can last longer and have a deeper meaning.
- **understand stories** – Knowing words for thoughts and feelings helps children understand the language used to describe characters' actions and motivations in storybooks.
- **learn to [self-regulate](#)** – When children can express their thoughts and feelings in words, it helps them learn ways to manage their emotions, attention and behaviour when they experience challenges.
- **learn the language used at school** – Words for thinking and feeling are part of the "academic vocabulary" used by teachers and found in textbooks.

How to help children learn thinking and feeling words

These words develop slowly and can be tricky for children because they describe things that can't be seen or touched. The good news is that studies have shown that children learn these types of words from their parents and teachers during everyday activities and conversation. When caregivers use more of these types of words, the children in their care use more of these words too [2].

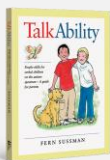
There are some simple things you can do to help children learn thinking and feeling words:

Studies have shown that children learn "thinking and feeling words" from their parents and teachers during everyday activities and conversation.

Helping children learn thinking and feelings words

- **Talk about your child's thoughts and feelings** – Children's earliest words for thoughts and feelings are usually about things they want, what they are noticing with their senses, or things they are feeling physically. By paying close attention to your child, you can figure out what your child is thinking or feeling, and then put it into a short sentence like, "Oh, you want the red crayon", "Mmm...you like how that cookie tastes!" or "You're hot – let's take your sweater off".
- **Talk about your own thoughts and feelings** – Once your child is using some language to talk about his own thoughts and feelings, try putting your thoughts and feelings into words as you have conversations with your child. For example, if your child says, "I like chocolate" while eating ice cream, you can share your own perspective ("Strawberry is my favourite.") This will help your child start to understand that different people have different thoughts and feelings, and that we can use words to talk about these differences.
- **Use books to talk about thoughts and feelings** – Children's storybooks, especially those with pictures, offer many opportunities to talk about what people are thinking and feeling. Use the pictures to explain the characters' actions and words, and what they might be thinking or feeling. For example, you might say things like "She looks mad because she missed the bus", "He thinks the treasure is still in the treasure chest", or "I bet he feels sick after eating all of that pizza!" and an object while pointing, as if to say "Hey, look at that!" or "Did you see that?!"

It takes time for children to learn about thinking and feeling words. Some children have difficulty with this type of language, such as children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). [TalkAbility™](#), our guidebook for parents of verbal children with ASD, includes many suggestions for helping children learn words for thoughts and feelings, as well as other language that helps them "tune in" to what other people might be thinking and feeling.



Find out more about "thinking and feeling words" and what techniques you can use to introduce your child to them with Hanen's [TalkAbility™ Guidebook](#) for Parents.

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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