

Narrating Your Children’s Play with Empathetic Statements

Kids learn to express themselves from those around them. Lecturing about improvement is not effective. Instead, voice the feelings you see and hear them trying to express. This builds connection and models appropriate self-expression.

In this situation...	You could say...	Why respond that way?
Child screams “I HATE YOU!!”	“I hear that you’re mad.”	It’s usually best to ignore rude language. Acknowledge their feelings. Arguing with them not to say “hate” is disempowering, and could just add fuel to a tantrum.
After two failed tries to fit Legos together a child angrily throws the box of Legos across the room.	“You look frustrated with those Legos! Do you want to ask for help?”	Saying, “We don’t throw Legos” is probably not useful. The problem is usually NOT that he didn’t know the rule about throwing toys. He may have been so frustrated that he WANTED to break a rule. You can help teach a new skill.
Child “ties shoes” by just winding the laces together. She says, “I did it!”	“You did it! You look proud.”	When a child seeks approval for something positive give them attention! Don’t focus on the product by correcting or giving disingenuous praise (“You’re the best shoe-tier ever!”) Simply reflecting in a positive tone is validating and builds self-esteem.
Child is alone playing quietly with some Play-Doh. You want to engage with him, but he ignores your attempts.	“You are rolling the Play-Doh into a ball. It looks soft. Now you are squeezing it in your fingers! I wonder if feels squishy”	When you want to validate or empathize with a child, but they aren’t giving you much to work with, simply saying out loud what they are doing shows that you’re tuned into them without interrupting play or forcing an interaction they may not want.



Examples of Empathetic Statements

Put feelings into words.

- You look really sad right now.
- You have your hands over your ears. I wonder if that noise was too loud.
- You are jumping around a lot! You have a lot of energy right now.

Validate and normalize feelings.

- It is hard when it's time to clean up.
- Sometimes kids don't want to talk. That's ok.
- All people have lots of feelings. It's ok to feel sad. It's ok to feel happy. It's ok to feel silly.

When in doubt, you can always just repeat back what they said or did (narrate).

- You are ripping that paper.
- You think milk is yucky.
- You are having big feelings about that.

One last tip:

Don't negate hard feelings by trying to make kids feel immediately happy. It's important for children to learn how to take time to feel their feelings, not just distract themselves from them.