Understanding Big Emotions in Little Children

Helping Toddlers Feel Safe, Heard and Understood

For toddlers, feelings can be powerful and difficult to put into words. Frustration, excitement, disappointment and tiredness may all lead to big reactions. Learning to manage emotions takes time, and young children rely on calm, caring adults to help them feel safe as these skills develop.

Understanding the Feelings

Behind a big emotional response there is often an unmet need or a skill that is still developing.

Communication Is Emerging

Young children may not yet have the words to explain exactly what they need or feel. An adult can help put words to the feeling once things are calmer.

Transitions Can Be Hard

Changes in activity, separation or unfamiliar situations may feel overwhelming.

Rest and Routine Matter

Hunger, tiredness and overstimulation can make emotions harder to manage. Noticing patterns may help families plan quieter, more predictable days.

Self-Regulation Takes Practice

Children gradually learn to settle with supportive adults before managing feelings more independently.

Five Ways to Offer Support

1. Remain Calm and Present

A steady voice and reassuring presence help children feel secure. Some children want a cuddle, while others prefer a little space.

2. Name the Feeling

Simple words such as “You’re frustrated” help connect experiences with language. You can acknowledge the feeling without agreeing to every request.

3. Hold Gentle Boundaries

Acknowledge feelings while calmly preventing actions that could hurt others. For example: “I won’t let you hit. I’m here to help.”

4. Offer Small Choices

Two manageable options can restore a sense of control when appropriate. Do not offer choices when your child is too distressed to decide.

5. Reconnect Afterwards

Once your child is calm, offer comfort and practise what to do next time. Learning these skills takes many repetitions and plenty of patience.

Supporting Emotional Wellbeing at Dovecote

At Dovecote Nursery, trusting relationships and predictable routines help children feel safe and understood. Our educators respond to emotions with warmth, patience and clear, age-appropriate boundaries.

By working closely with families, we aim to provide consistent support while helping children gradually develop the language and confidence to express their feelings.

Children do not need to have small feelings; they need adults who can help them through big ones.