



Big Feelings, Bright Choices

Social and Emotional Learning
Conversation Cards for Kids Ages 5-8

Guide Booklet

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The Thinking Behind the Deck

Children experience big feelings long before they have the words to name them. A child may not be able to say, “I felt left out,” but the feeling can still run deep and show up through behavior instead.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the quiet, everyday work of building those skills: noticing a feeling, considering what someone else might feel, and deciding what to do next. Like reading, these skills grow in small steps over time, and they are often easier to practice in ordinary, lower-pressure moments than in the middle of a hard one.

That is what the name describes, and it is how every card is built. **Big Feelings** comes first: looking closely at what is happening, thinking about what someone might feel, and connecting it to the child’s own life. **Bright Choices** comes next: thinking of a response and practicing it while the pressure is low.

Why Cards Help

An illustrated card can be a gentle way into a conversation that is hard to begin directly. Talking about a character caught in the rain can feel easier than talking about something that happened at school, and the picture gives you both something to look at instead of looking only at each other. Over time, these conversations can build a shared language for feelings and give the child a chance to try out responses before they need them in a harder moment.

This deck is made for a grown-up and a child to use together, not something to hand a child to work through alone. Your attention is what turns a picture into a conversation.



How Each Card Works

The prompts on a card build on one another. Each one asks a little more than the last, moving the child from what is plainly in front of them to something they could say or do.



LOOK

The child names what they see. Everything needed is in the illustration, so there is nothing to remember and nothing to work out. This is the easy way in.



THINK

The child notices clues and considers possibilities about what a character might feel or why they did what they did. The goal is not to know for sure; there is no single answer key.



CONNECT

The focus moves from the picture to the child's own life. This is often the slowest step. Give it time, but do not press for an answer.



SOLVE

The child offers a way forward. Not the “correct” answer, but their answer: something to say or something to do. Small and doable beats clever.

TRY THIS

The first four steps build an idea. “Try This” turns it into a short practice moment—say the words aloud, make the gesture, or rehearse what to do right there at the table.

Knowing what to do and being able to do it are different skills. This last step helps connect the two. A phrase rehearsed while everything is calm is easier to reach for later, when things are harder.



Inside the Deck

The deck holds 75 color-coded cards across five categories, with 15 cards in each. Together, they explore five areas of social and emotional learning.



SELF-AWARENESS

Noticing what is happening inside: naming feelings, reading body signals, recognizing strengths and likes, being yourself, and noticing mixed feelings.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

Working through big feelings and everyday challenges: calming down, handling frustration, waiting, and moving from one activity to another.

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Understanding other people: noticing feelings, seeing different perspectives, thinking about fairness, showing kindness, and respecting differences.

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Building and navigating relationships: sharing and taking turns, asking for help, including others, listening, and making up after conflict.

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

Thinking before acting: weighing choices, being honest, thinking ahead, solving problems step by step, and making safe choices.



The Deck at a Glance

- The deck is organized into 5 categories, each with 5 themes and 3 cards per theme.
- The themes draw on familiar, everyday situations children may encounter.
- Every card stands on its own. There is no set order—you can start anywhere.

SELF-AWARENESS

1-3	Naming feelings
4-6	Reading body signals
7-9	Knowing strengths and likes
10-12	Being yourself and belonging
13-15	Noticing mixed feelings

SELF-MANAGEMENT

16-18	Calming down
19-21	Handling frustration
22-24	Handling the wait
25-27	Handling transitions
28-30	Riding out big feelings

SOCIAL AWARENESS

31-33	Noticing others' feelings
34-36	Being fair
37-39	Seeing other perspectives
40-42	Showing kindness
43-45	Respecting differences

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

46-48	Sharing and taking turns
49-51	Making up after conflict
52-54	Asking for help
55-57	Including others
58-60	Showing you are listening

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

61-63	Weighing choices
64-66	Being honest
67-69	Thinking ahead
70-72	Solving problems step by step
73-75	Making safe choices

Parts of a Card

FRONT OF CARD



A - Scenario illustration
B - Card number (front)
C - Category color
D - Category name
E - Theme
F - Card number (back)

G - LOOK question
H - THINK question
I - CONNECT question
J - SOLVE question
K - TRY THIS activity
L - Grown-Up Tip

BACK OF CARD



Grown-up Tip

A short line of guidance for the grown-up: what to try if the child stalls, where the conversation tends to go sideways, how long to wait. Read it before you begin, not aloud.

How to Use the Cards

1. **Pick a card:** Look through the themes for something that fits, or lay a few cards face up and let the child choose. Children often engage more when they have a choice, and what they reach for is often what is already on their mind.
2. **Read the Grown-Up Tip:** Scan it before you begin. It is written for you, and it is quick.
3. **Look at the picture first:** Put the card between you, sitting side by side, and give the child a moment with the illustration before any question. That unhurried pause sets up everything after it.
4. **Guide, do not script:** The questions are a starting point, not lines to get through. Use one question or all four. If the child turns toward something that matters more to them, go there.
5. **Use “Try This” if it fits:** “Try This” is optional. It lets the child practice the idea instead of only discussing it. Use it when the child is interested and the moment feels right.
6. **Stop when interest fades:** Ending early is fine. One good question can be enough. There is no need to finish a card.



Where to start?

If you are not sure where to begin, try cards 8, 23, 42, 52, and 63. These are gentle openers, one from each category.

When a Conversation Stalls

Conversations stall, and that is normal. A pause can mean a question landed somewhere real, not that the card failed. Where it pauses tells you what to do next. Sometimes that pause sounds like, “I don’t know.”

“I don’t know” is okay. Offer one small prompt if it helps, but there is no need to pull an answer out. Sometimes moving on is the best next step.

Stuck at LOOK or THINK: If the child says “I don’t know,” go back to the picture. Try “That is fine. Point to the part you noticed first,” or ask about a different corner of the scene. If the answer is an unexpected one, take it and ask what made them think that. Their reasoning is the more interesting thing. Correcting them here can end the conversation.

Stuck at CONNECT: Sometimes “I don’t know” means “I’d rather not.” Give the child a little extra time. If silence remains, share a brief memory of your own, then leave a quiet space for them to step in. If they pass, move on.

Stuck at SOLVE: If nothing comes, offer two options and let the child pick. Choosing between two ideas is still their choice, and it gets them to something they can practice.

Stuck at TRY THIS: Lower what the step asks for, or skip it. Accept a whisper, a gesture, a quick drawing, or a nod while you say the words. If the child uses augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), that is how they do this step, not a smaller version of it.

A stall is not a stop. A quiet child may still be thinking. A child who turns away, changes the subject, or says they are done is telling you something else. Take that as a cue and put the card down.



Guiding Principles

Choose calm moments: Use the cards when feelings are steady, not in the middle of a hard moment. A child who is already overwhelmed may have a harder time stepping back and reflecting, and a card offered then can feel like a lecture. These cards are practice for hard moments, not something to reach for in the middle of one. The cards can work well after dinner, in the car, or at bedtime.

Short and often beats long and rare: One card can be a complete session. A few short conversations across the week may work better than one long session.

Never use a card as a consequence: Do not reach for one to make a point about how the day went. Children can quickly notice when a card is being used to correct them, and the deck can start to feel like a punishment instead of a place where nothing is at stake.

Accept a pass without asking why: A child may pass on any personal question, answer for the character, say “I don’t know,” point, draw, or come back later. No explanation is needed. Passing still counts. Even without an answer, the child has still had a chance to look, think, and hear the question.

Protect privacy in groups: Some cards touch on family, culture, or honesty, and a Connect question may bring up something personal. Before you begin, remind the group that anyone can pass or answer about the character instead of themselves. If a child does share something personal, acknowledge it briefly and avoid asking for more in front of the group. Follow up privately if needed. In professional settings, follow your organization’s safeguarding and reporting requirements.

Accept all forms of communication: Faces and bodies are clues, not tests. Welcome different guesses, and let children respond with words, gestures, pointing, drawing, acting it out, or AAC. Communication does not have to look the same for every child.



The Companion Web App

The app is a directory for the whole deck, useful when you are looking for something in particular. You can browse or filter by:

- **Feelings:** Every feeling the deck explores, with the number of cards for each.
- **Conversation Depth:** More Concrete or More Layered, based on the kind of thinking each card invites.
- **Categories and Themes:** All five categories and 25 themes.

You'll also find notes on timing, context, and access ("Before you use this"), along with a digital copy of this booklet.

Printable Activity Pack

The app also includes a printable activity pack:

- ✓ **Feelings Poster:** A feelings poster to point to when the words won't come.
- ✓ **Body Map:** An outline for showing where a feeling shows up in the body.
- ✓ **Things That Help Me:** A page for children to fill in with things that help them feel better, calmer, or more comfortable.
- ✓ **Draw the Face:** Five scenes from the deck with blank faces, for children who would rather draw than answer with words.
- ✓ **Weekly Check-In:** A simple template for making check-ins part of the routine.

See page 12 for the QR code.



Scan to open the companion web app



poeticcatlab.com/start

The app opens in your browser, with nothing to install.

Legal Disclaimer

Big Feelings, Bright Choices is an educational conversation tool for adult-facilitated use with children. It is not therapy, counseling, clinical assessment, or diagnosis, and it is not a substitute for care from a qualified healthcare or mental health professional. If you have concerns about a child's development, emotional well-being, or safety, consult a qualified professional. The Poetic Cat Lab, InnerSpark LC, and their respective creators, officers, and affiliates assume no liability for any direct, indirect, incidental, or consequential damages, losses, or decisions arising from use or misuse of this product. Use of this product constitutes acceptance of these terms.



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