



# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

## Read My Face! Understanding Facial Expressions

by Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.

Facial expressions make up the universal language of emotion. With facial expressions alone, we instantly convey happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Reading and interpreting facial expressions is essential to understanding emotions and the social cues of others and, in understanding, we are able to show compassion and empathy. When a child or adult has trouble picking up on facial expressions, he/she may misjudge people's meanings and moods. Here is some interesting information to help children and adults read and interpret these important social cues. The major emotions include:



**Happiness** – We express true happiness with a genuine smile called a Duchenne smile. All smiles involve a major facial muscle pulling the lip corners up, but a genuine smile happens around the eyes. Two facial muscle movements not only curl the lip corners up, but they tighten

and make wrinkles around the sides of the eyes, creating pouches just below the lower eyelids. When you see lip corners up and wrinkles around the eyes, the person is feeling genuine happiness.

The tell-tale signs of amusement are the open mouth and the backwards head movement. And like a genuine smile, you can tell a genuine laugh when you see the muscles contracting around the eyes, making crow's feet. Genuine laughter often relaxes all muscle movements in the body because of shifts in our respiration patterns that happen when we laugh. This rapid shift to a state of relaxation shuts off feelings of aggression or frustration.

When we feel love, our facial expression often resembles happiness; a major muscle pulls the lip corners up, and there's a tightening of the lower eyelid. But the distinct expression of love combines these muscle movements with a tilt of the head to the side. The tilt is a sign of intimacy and connection beyond simple happiness.



**Sadness** - When we are sad, our eyebrows slant slightly or flatten. Facial muscles pull the eyebrows in, but the inner part of the muscle pulls them up. There's also a little pouching in the inner part of the forehead, and we will often look down. Plus, the corners of the lips pull straight

down, giving the mouth an upside-down, curved look.

Sometimes we may confuse shame with sadness; but shame doesn't involve the muscle movements of the sad face. Shame is a very simple expression, but a powerful one. Shame involves a gaze aversion, with the head moving down so that the chin tucks into the neck. You'll see this particular expression especially when people are experiencing psychological pain, such as when they see other people suffer. It's an expression closely related to sadness; but, rather than suffering in their own sadness, they experience the pain and suffering of others through empathy.

(continued...)



# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students  
(cont.)



the facial expression of fear with surprise.

**Fear** – We express fear when we feel physically or psychologically threatened. When we’re afraid, our jaw drops, our eyes open wide, and our mouth hangs open and may pull sideways. Our eyebrows are relatively flat when we’re afraid; they arch more when we’re surprised. At times, we might misinterpret



furrowed (tightened) eyebrows could protect the eyes. People sometimes confuse the look of anger with disgust, but disgust involves raising the upper lip and wrinkling the nose.

**Anger** – We express anger when we feel aggressive, threatened, or frustrated by tightening the muscle movements around our lips, eyes, and in the brow. Some researchers think we make this expression when we’re angry because it could protect the face in the event of a physical conflict—for example,



The lips press together tightly to restrain self-control and shyness. Embarrassment sometimes looks like

**Embarrassment** – We express embarrassment when we feel self-conscious or awkward in front of other people. We avoid eye contact with others, move the head down and to the side, and even make a little smile – exposing the neck. However, the embarrassed smile is different from other smiles.

shame, but when we’re ashamed, our head moves straight down, not to the side, and we don’t smile. With about 30 percent of embarrassment episodes, people touch their face. Some experts believe that touching the face is a defensive movement to protect the face after the person violated some social rule.



classic signs of power and dominance that suggest that we’re feeling strong and good about ourselves. Shame is the opposite of pride. Shame often constricts our posture, and we drop our jaw as a sign of submissiveness.

**Pride** – We show pride when we are happy with ourselves and feel power, dominance, or supremacy over others because of our accomplishments. The corners of our lips rise slightly, signaling that we are happy. What distinguishes pride from happiness is that the head tilts back with a slight jaw-thrust, and even crossing of the arms in front of the chest – classic signs of power and dominance that suggest that we’re feeling strong and good about ourselves. Shame is the opposite of pride. Shame often constricts our posture, and we drop our jaw as a sign of submissiveness.



and our jaw drops. Sometimes, we might confuse surprise with fear; but when we’re afraid, our lower eyelids tighten, our eyebrows look flat and tense, and our lip corners go sideways making the mouth look tighter.

**Surprise** – We exude an emotion of surprise upon a completely unexpected event. Experts believe our eyes open wider when surprised in order to absorb as much of this new information as possible (e.g., seeing a long-lost friend, receiving an unexpected award, etc.). Our upper eyelids rise up, our eyebrows arch,

Resources:

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. Teaching your child to identify and express emotions. Retrieved August 2016. [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/familytools/teaching\\_emotions.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/familytools/teaching_emotions.pdf)

Funderstanding. Social-emotional learning: Identifying emotions in others. Retrieved August 2016 from <http://www.funderstanding.com/featured/social-emotional-learning-identifying-emotions-in-others/>

The Science of People. Reading microexpressions. Retrieved August 2016 from <http://www.scienceofpeople.com/2013/09/reading-microexpressions/>

For more FREE Handy Handouts®, go to [www.handyhandouts.com](http://www.handyhandouts.com)