



Exploring Emotions

Ros Bayley &
Kay Margetts

HOW YOU CAN HELP CHILDREN TO RECOGNISE
AND TALK ABOUT THEIR FEELINGS



Published in 2011 by TEACHING SOLUTIONS

PO Box 197, Albert Park Vic 3206
Australia

info@teachingsolutions.com.au

www.teachingsolutions.com.au

Copyright © MA Education Limited 2004. This edition is adapted from a book written by Ros Bayley and first published by MA Education Limited (under its former imprint Step Forward Publishing).

ISBN 978-1-921613-47-0

Illustrated by Cathy Hughes

Printed in Australia by OPUS Group

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Promoting emotional competence

Emotional competence may be even more important for children than academic achievement. If this is the case, it is really important that those who care for and educate children have a thorough understanding of what it is and how we can help children to develop it.

People who have well-developed emotional understanding and skills in managing emotional situations are described as being emotionally competent, emotionally intelligent or emotionally literate.

Put simply, an emotionally competent person:

- is able to understand, express and manage their emotions
- can read and understand the emotions of others
- responds well to others and has the ability to get on with a wide range of people
- has positive self-esteem and self-image
- is comfortable with who they are
- is usually easy to talk to
- shows empathy for others
- works well as part of a group
- is optimistic and confident
- has the emotional strength to deal with the ups and downs of daily life
- has good interpersonal skills
- sorts out problems in an assertive rather than an aggressive way
- can think reflectively and make links between their actions and their emotions

Emotionally competent people are also able to delay their gratification, and this is important when you think about how many things in life require hard work and determination. Because something may be worth waiting for does not mean that

everyone can do it, but this is one of the key qualities that characterises a person with emotional competence.

'The more we learn about how the brain works, the more we begin to realise that effective learning depends on emotional energy.'

The secret of success

Looking at the characteristics of an emotionally competent person, you can begin to see why these qualities are fundamental to success both at school and in life in general. Academic achievement without emotional competence is not much use to anyone. Most of us know people who have achieved highly academically but who are completely incapable of sorting out simple problems in daily life.

Daniel Goleman (1995, p.36), who has spent many years researching emotional intelligence, says: 'People who cannot marshal some control over their emotional life fight inner battles that sabotage their ability for focused work and clear thought.'

Mind over matter?

The more we learn about how the brain works, the more we begin to realise that effective learning depends on emotional energy. As human beings we are driven more by emotion than logic — it all depends on how we feel and how well we can manage those feelings.

Think for a moment about the last time you were 'full of feeling'. Maybe you were angry or upset about something, and the more intense these feelings became, the harder you found it to think rationally. In such situations, our emotional brain overpowers our thinking brain, making rational thought difficult, and this is when we often do things that we later regret.

However, the higher our level of emotional competence, the greater our capacity for dealing with such situations. Emotional understanding and skills enable us to function more effectively under stress and help us not to lose our heads, and even when we do respond in a way that we later regret, we are much more likely to be able to sort our way out of the difficulties we find ourselves in.

To be well-integrated people, content in ourselves, able to build to build fulfilling relationships, and help others with their problems, we all need ongoing, introspective awareness of what we really feel (Weare 2000, p. 68).

Can it be taught?

Nobody can be emotionally competent all the time. Our emotional state is constantly changing in response to the various situations in which we find ourselves, but in the light of what we know, two questions seem paramount: is it possible to teach children to be more emotionally competent? and if it is, will this improve their learning and help them to be more successful in life? The answer to both of these questions is a resounding 'yes' and here are some suggestions for how this might be achieved in some key areas.

Understanding emotions

- Acknowledge and talk about children's feelings. This will help them to become increasingly able to identify and describe how they feel and lead to greater self-awareness.
- Value all of a child's emotions, including those that may be viewed as negative. Remember, all feelings are real for the

person who is feeling them, and you can acknowledge someone's feelings without needing to agree with them.

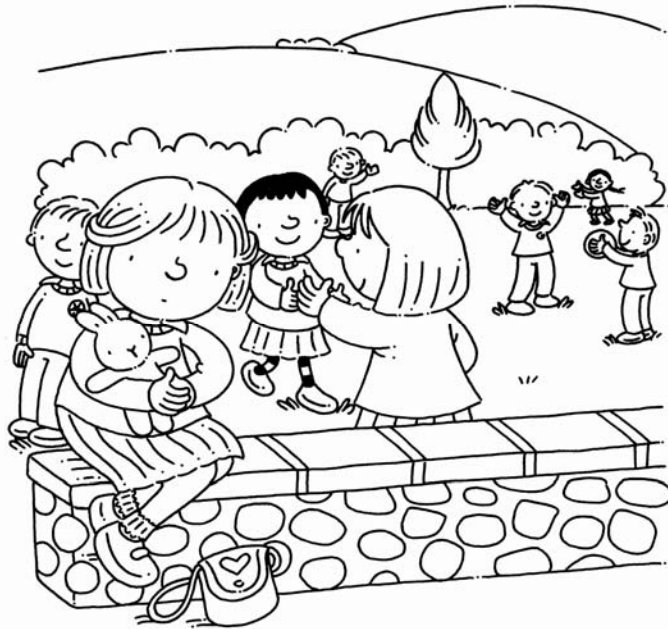
- Be prepared to spend time with a child when they are sad, angry or fearful, and try not to become impatient with the emotion.
- Respect a child's emotions and try not to make light of their negative feelings.
- Do not feel that you have to sort out every problem for a child.

Managing emotions

- Try to avoid telling children how you think they should feel.
- Listen with attention and empathise with how children are feeling.
- Offer guidance on how to regulate emotions, set limits, and help children to learn how to express emotions in a way that does not hurt others.
- Encourage children to think reflectively and learn from their mistakes.
- Provide a safe place where children can go when things get too much.

Self-motivation

- Give children choices, encourage them to take on appropriate responsibilities and show confidence in their ability to succeed.
- Recognise and celebrate children's achievements.
- Make learning activities fun, varied and relevant.
- Help children to set targets for themselves. Discuss their aspirations with them and encourage them to aim high.
- Offer support when things go wrong, and help children to see that making mistakes offers a valuable opportunity for learning.
- Consult with children about how things should happen and encourage them to offer their ideas. Help them to see that they can influence how things turn out.
- Create a culture where it is acceptable to take risks.



'When we have emotional competence we are better able to cope with life's circumstances.'

Understanding emotions in others

- Describe feelings when children are unkind or hurtful and make the most of disagreements, fights and conflicts as a vehicle for exploring emotions.
- Talk about the feelings of the characters you read about in stories or see on television or on DVDs.
- Encourage children to help others who are emotionally distressed.
- Teach children how to resolve conflicts, and help them to understand that we can disagree with someone and still like and respect them.
- Model emotionally competent behaviour.

Learning about relationships

- Play cooperative games and provide opportunities for children to work cooperatively.
- Help children to understand that when they are working as part of a group they have a personal responsibility to that group.
- Encourage children to understand that people who work well together are able to achieve more than people who do not.
- Model emotionally competent behaviour in your relationships with children.
- Model emotionally competent behaviour in your relationships with other adults.

Skills for modern living

There is no real mystique to emotional competence — it's only what thoughtful parents and carers have always tried to develop in their children. However, it is perhaps more important today than it has ever been.

We live in a society that is changing at an unprecedented rate. The days of 'a job for life' are long gone. During someone's lifetime they may have to retrain several times, and this will call for adaptability and the ability to learn quickly and effectively.

In a densely populated world where life is lived in the fast lane, it is more difficult than ever before to feel a sense of identity and belonging, without which our lives will never feel fulfilled. Emotional understanding and skills will make the crucial difference.

When we have emotional competence, we have the resilience to better cope with whatever life throws at us. We face challenges proactively and focus on the positive. We believe in ourselves and in our ability to succeed, and in an age of uncertainty, what could be more important than that?

See pages 46–8 for links with the *Early Years Learning Framework* for Australia.

Feeling happy

Happy is a lovely emotion to explore, and as you do so, you will inevitably talk about many other emotions and help to build an essential 'feelings vocabulary'.

If children are to become emotionally competent adults, able to understand and have mastery over their feelings, it is essential that this important work begins in the early years. It is a fundamental part of enabling children to be sensitive to the feelings of others, and a key element of all other emotional skills.

However, this awareness will not simply develop by chance. If children are to be aware of, and able to talk about feelings, we must provide them with appropriate experiences. Children should be supported to recognise, name and acknowledge their feelings, and there are many ways in which this can be done.

Teaching the vocabulary

To talk about feelings you need the necessary vocabulary, and because feelings are essentially abstract, one of the best times to develop this vocabulary with young children is when they are actually experiencing the feeling. If you can label feelings as they are happening, you build a bridge between the word and the feeling and make these abstract concepts much more easily understood.

So when you see children with big smiles on their faces, take a moment to comment on this and acknowledge what you have noticed with a 'You look happy today!' When children fall out over toys or friends, you might say something like 'You both look very cross.' When everyone does this on a consistent basis, children soon build up an emotional vocabulary and will be able to tell you if you attach the incorrect label to what they are feeling. You can then enhance their understanding through a range of planned activities.

Family snapshots

Happy is perhaps one of the easiest of all the feelings to explore, and children are quick to realise that happiness can mean different things to different people. They are also able to see that there are some things that make us all happy, and this activity is helpful in exploring similarities and differences.

Ask children to bring a photograph from home that shows them doing something that has made them feel happy. Once they have shown their pictures to each other and talked about them, make a 'happy' display. Talk about how they would like to caption their pictures and encourage them to look for similarities and differences.

A 'happy' collage

Provide children with a variety of newspapers and magazines and get them searching for pictures of people who look happy. Talk with them about why they think the people look happy then let them cut the picture out and add it to a collection of pictures to make a 'happy' collage.



Go on a happy walk

Walk around your local area and see if you can see anyone looking really happy. Encourage children to talk about why they think they are happy, and keep a tally of how many happy people they can spot.

Make a happy diary

As children are playing, take some photographs of them when they are looking really happy. Print the photographs and show them to the children. Encourage them to talk about what they were doing at the time the photograph was taken and then collect the photographs in a diary. Let children decide how they should be captioned. Take photographs of adults as well and add these to the happy diary.

Carry out a survey

Ask children to name one thing that, if they could do it right now, would make them feel really happy. With younger children, give them the choice of several things and let them choose the one that would make them happiest. Use picture cards to help them decide. Once everyone has chosen, compare the results. Older children could graph the results on a chart.

Sing some happy songs

Encourage children to think of songs or pieces of music that make them feel happy. Once you have compiled a list, have a 'happy' concert. If the children find this difficult, make some suggestions of your own or present them with some alternatives to choose from.

Circle games

Make a circle of chairs for children to sit on and then pass around a 'talking object' such as a teddy. As each child gets the object, encourage them to say 'I feel happy when ...' Start by using this tag line yourself so that you can model how to do it. Once everyone has had a go, ask children if they can remember who said what.



Play 'Change seats'. For example, say to the children, 'If eating spaghetti makes you happy, change seats', 'If riding on a bicycle makes you happy, change seats', 'If painting a picture makes you happy, change seats' and so on.

Using stories

Make a collection of stories that have really happy endings and play games with stories. For example, describe something that happened at the end of one of your stories and see if the children can guess which character or story you are referring to. You might say something like 'This person was very happy because she would no longer have to do lots of horrible jobs or live with people who were not very nice to her. She wouldn't have to wear rags. She would live in a castle and have pretty clothes.'

Name a character and ask the children to name something that made the character feel happy, for example 'The Billy Goats Gruff felt happy when ...' or 'Little Bear felt happy when ...'

If you can label feelings as they are happening, you build a bridge between the word and the feeling and make these abstract concepts much more easily understood.

Using puppets and toys

Find an appealing soft toy and hide it in a bag or a box to add to the suspense. Explain to the children that you have a little friend who is feeling very unhappy. Slowly reveal your character to the children and encourage them to come up with reasons why they think it is unhappy. Once they have done this, they can make suggestions for things they could do to make the character feel happy. With older children you could use this scenario as a basis for a modelled or shared writing activity. They could make lists of things that might make the character happy, or plan a party or write a story for it.

If you have any large puppets, create some scenarios where they are feeling really happy about something, or perhaps one where they enable someone else to feel happy. The 'Lost handbag' scenario with two puppets is one of many that could be used. You can substitute the names of your own puppets.

Once you have shared this story with the children you can use it as a basis for discussion. Encourage them to think about how George and Gloria might have felt as a result of finding and returning the lady's handbag. Ask them if they can think of any occasions when something they have done has helped someone else to feel happy. Talk about the ways in which doing something for somebody else can make us happy.

Happy is a lovely emotion to explore, and as you do, you will inevitably talk about many other emotions and help to build that essential feelings vocabulary.

The lost handbag scenario

Optional resources/props: a handbag containing a scarf, a lipstick, a notebook with a shopping list in it, a purse and a key ring with a key on it

George has had a new dragon kite and he insists on taking it out to fly it, even though there is not much wind. He and his mother go to call for Gloria and they drive to a place where there is a high hill. They really hope there will be enough wind to fly the kite, but unfortunately there isn't, so they decide to play on the grassy bank instead. They climb down a little way until they come to a flat part where there is some long grass.

While they are playing in the grass, Gloria finds a handbag. They look inside and find a variety of things. Wondering what to do, they take it back to George's mother, who is waiting by the car at the top of the hill. She looks in the bag but there is no name and address anywhere. Then she notices a photograph of a black cat on a key ring. The cat looks like one that belongs to a lady that she knows, so they all get in the car and drive to the house where the lady lives. When they show the bag to the lady she is very, very happy. She had lost it when she was out walking her friend's dog.

Feeling unhappy

We need to be in touch with all feelings. Negative emotions, although more difficult to manage, are just as important as positive ones and a natural part of being human.

Scientists now understand enough about how the brain works to know that human behaviour is determined much more by the way we feel than by the way we think. The 'feeling brain' engages before the 'thinking brain', and when feelings are running high it is not easy to think rationally.

The first and most important thing to remember is that all feelings are real for the person who is experiencing them. You may think that someone should or should not feel a certain way, but for the person concerned the feeling is a reality, and unless it is acknowledged it will only intensify. Acknowledging someone's feelings is a powerful way of helping them to return to a state of equilibrium. They feel listened to and experience our empathy, and this is important when children are feeling unhappy.

Faced with an unhappy child, it is easy to feel slightly panicked and uncomfortable. You may feel an urge to distract the child and direct their attention to something more happy and enjoyable, but if you do this too quickly, you deny their feelings and rob them of a powerful learning experience. We need to be in touch with all our feelings, and negative emotions, although more difficult to manage, are just as important as positive ones. When negative emotions go unacknowledged, children begin to think that feeling that way is unacceptable, whereas what you need them to understand is that all feelings are real, and that experiencing negative feelings is part of being human.

For very young children, learning about feelings happens most effectively in a real-life context. You can help unhappy children



by acknowledging and labelling their feelings, by simply saying something like, 'You seem very unhappy today,' and offering comfort. If you get it wrong they'll soon tell you! This process enables them to identify what they are feeling and builds up their 'feelings vocabulary'. It also puts them in a place where they can listen. Listening is almost impossible when you are flooded with feeling, so by taking children through this process and allowing them time to experience and come to terms with their unhappy feelings, you make it much easier for them to move on and begin to engage with the learning process. If not, their unhappy feelings may persist for much longer. Your sensitive acknowledgement helps them to begin to understand the power of their own emotions, and supports them to be able to read the feelings of others. This is the basis of emotional competence.