

# Supporting children's emotional learning in early childhood



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The development of emotional competence is a process that begins in infancy and continues into adolescence, with children gradually gaining capacities for identifying and regulating their own emotions, as well as for responding to the emotions of others. In early childhood, the areas of the brain responsible for self-regulation and self-management are at an early stage of development, making adult support necessary. Regular practice and use encourage the development of these neural areas, while a lack of opportunity to practice self-regulatory behaviours may mean that these areas do not develop well. Children's emotional competencies can vary from day to day before they are able to consistently regulate their own feelings and behaviour, and may worsen as a result of fatigue, stress or distress.

Daily events and routines can offer multiple opportunities for emotional learning. Teachers need to both make the most of natural and spontaneous opportunities for teaching emotional skills, as well as offering relevant and meaningful occasions for practising these skills. Two important areas of learning are emotion knowledge (or emotional literacy) and emotional regulation skills.

## Coaching children in emotion knowledge

Emotion knowledge involves the ability to perceive and label emotions, which is a crucial foundation for more complex skills such as empathy. Young children often experience intense emotions, such as sadness, joy, anxiety, and anger, and they first reflect on and come to understand their own emotions, according to the meaning attributed to them within their social and cultural contexts, before generalising these understandings to the emotions of others.

Improved levels of emotion knowledge support children to better understand their emotional experiences, and communicate, discuss and reflect on feelings, as well as to better understand the causes and consequences of particular feelings. Emotion knowledge helps children to develop skills in self-regulation with increased awareness of their own emotions, and engage in more successful interactions with peers, inhibit aggression and increase prosocial behaviours and empathy.

A child's developmental level, temperament and verbal ability can affect their ability to label and understand their emotions, but parents and teachers also have influence in terms of how they talk about and teach children about emotions. Emotion knowledge coaching involves:

- **Acknowledging, affirming and empathising** with all emotions as natural. Be available to help children to notice and understand their emotions as they occur, and use emotions as learning opportunities to discuss feelings, intentions, and the impact that behaviours have on peers, which is associated with children's understanding of emotion and ability to imagine how other people are thinking and feeling.
- **Deliberately using and encouraging emotion-related language** to label and explain feelings. Offer prompts such as "It looked like you were feeling disappointed", and talk about your own feelings and responses - for example, "That is frustrating. Hmm, I'll have to take a deep breath and figure out what to try next". Learn words for emotions in children's home languages. Teachers and caregivers' use of emotion language is found to predict children's emotional regulatory competence.

- **Intentional, well-informed teaching about emotion.** Create a list of the emotion words you want children to learn. Teach children how their brains and bodies react to particular emotions, such as increased heart rate or a fluttery feeling in the stomach. Use resources such as visuals and picture cards that show emotions. Sing songs (try using a range of emotion words in 'If you're happy and you know it...') or play musical emotions (demonstrating a specific emotion when the music stops) and emotion charades.
- **Encouraging children to try to read the emotions of their peers,** and think about what they could do to support their peer when they are sad or lonely, for example.
- **Using stories,** particularly fairy stories (which have particularly exaggerated emotions) to discuss how characters may be feeling and what they may be thinking. Puppets or small figures can be useful to explore the stories and reflect on the feelings of the characters without actually taking on the emotions.

### Coaching children in emotional regulation skills

Emotional regulation involves children learning how to manage their own feelings, but also their reactivity to the emotions of others in line with the expectations of their cultural community. Inhibiting an emotional response and adopting an entirely different one is a challenging task, and young children take time to develop skills in self-regulation because the relevant areas of the brain have a relatively slow maturation. Researchers suggest that the **executive function skills** required for appropriate responses to social and emotional events develop somewhere between 3 and 9 years old, and some children experience more intense feelings than others due to temperament. This means that young children do not immediately have strategies for managing intense feelings and can be impulsive, distractible, prone to emotional outbursts and behaviourally disorganised, as unregulated emotions impair thinking and interfere with important skills such as attention and decision-making.

You can scaffold children's self-regulation skills in the same way that you might scaffold a child learning to count: by modelling self-regulation, providing hints and cues, and encouraging children to be more independent of your support over time. This involves observing children to assess their current skills in regulation to provide the right level of support, and withdrawing support as children become more capable. All children will develop differing strategies to control their emotions and require different responses from teachers.

Emotional regulation skills increasingly enable children to calm down when upset, angry or overexcited, and to use language to communicate feelings and avoid emotional outbursts. These skills also promote children's self-efficacy beliefs about their abilities to cope with diverse situations: when children believe that a stressful situation is manageable they are more likely to attempt to use problem-solving and coping strategies, but when they perceive a situation as out of their control they are more likely to use emotional strategies such as crying. Emotional regulation skills also allow children to better persist at and focus on tasks, engage in problem-solving, control impulses and delay gratification. Emotional regulation can be supported through:

- **Modelling and role-playing** ways in which you regulate your own thinking, attention, emotions and behaviours in front of children, which offers children ways of thinking and acting to imitate in order to manage difficult feelings such as disappointment or frustration.
- **Intentionally teaching strategies** that can support children to manage their emotions more appropriately, such as asking for help, moving into a calmer physical space, deep breathing, or replacing negative thoughts ("I'm no good at this") with **growth mindset** thoughts ("This is difficult but I just need more practice"). Use visual tools such as a 'feelings thermometer' to show feelings

and develop awareness of how emotions escalate, as well as visual reminders of strategies to try when this occurs.

- **Developing spaces, activities and resources for calming down**, such as quiet retreat spaces with soothing music, pillows, cushions and favourite storybooks. Alternatively, children might prefer more active approaches such as dancing, singing, sand or water play to soothe themselves. Offer channels for emotional expression such as music, dance, arts and other creative activities.
- **Extending sociodramatic play to give children opportunities to set and follow rules for play** and to practise self-regulation in processing and regulating (often intense levels of) emotions to suit the play. Children who have the ability to regulate emotion in pretend play also are found to have better regulatory capacities in everyday life.
- **Preparing children** for upcoming events that are likely to create stress for the child or trigger strong emotional responses.

There are also specific strategies that are appropriate to use during moments of heightened emotion:

- **Communicate acceptance of emotions** alongside a confidence that the child can manage them and not get overwhelmed, while empathising with how difficult and tiring the experience of strong emotions can be. It is important to be comfortable with children's intense emotional expressions, as any aversion you have to emotional expression can be unconsciously communicated to children. Never ignore a crying child, or any display of negative emotion, which is likely to create a lack of trust (for children who are observing as well as the child who is upset) and is associated with negative social and emotional outcomes, including extended emotional outbursts and negative social behaviours.
- **Co-regulating infants' and toddlers' distress** or helping them to regulate emotion, which helps to establish patterns of emotional regulation in children's neural circuits. Research suggests infants can be supported to regulate distress when parents or caregivers use expression and tone of voice to mirror the infant's distressed state then calmly slow down and quieten their voice to lead the infant back to a calmer state.
- **Encourage children to communicate** their need for help when feelings become overwhelming, and helping children to express and verbalise emotions rather than acting them out physically. The expression of emotions is a first step in regulation.
- **Give physical comfort** such as hugging, holding, patting or rubbing on the back and offer gestures and simple directions to help children to regulate their emotions and behaviour. Gently touching a child's back can cue them to relax while soothing touch and soft voices cue infants into self-calming skills. Avoid trying to teach or reason with children when they are upset or experiencing intense emotion as when the limbic system, the part of the brain connected to emotions, is activated, it competes with the areas of the brain responsible for cognition, making it hard to think effectively.
- Once the child is calm, **discuss strategies** for managing their emotions to use next time, making positive suggestions and expectations for how the child will handle another similar situation in the future. Remind children 'it's okay to be angry, but not okay to hit. You can try walking away, or taking a few breaths. After that we can work together to help you to solve the problem that makes you angry. Acknowledge children for making decisions that avoid lengthy or intense emotional reactions, appreciating that this is very difficult for them.

It is important to take note of the different types of coping patterns children use. Passive coping strategies (avoiding or denying problems), as opposed to constructive coping (problem-solving)

or emotional venting (releasing emotions), can lead to problem behaviours such as explosive and aggressive outbursts. It is important that children are encouraged to confront problems, even if not always in a constructive or calm way, as this enables them to express feelings and gives them opportunities to learn better strategies for managing emotions.

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## Further reading

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