



# The TOOLBOX

TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE WITH THEIR EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS



## HOW CAN WE HELP CHILDREN EXPRESS THEIR EMOTIONS?

**TOOL:** Prevention | Intervention

**TARGET AUDIENCE:** Preschool and elementary school children

**TOOL INTENDED FOR:** Professional | Parents

### DESIGN

Line Massé  
Claudia Verret



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– Details: Teachers, psychoeducators, special education technicians, psychologists, educational consultants, parents.

**TARGET AUDIENCE:**

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– Preschool and elementary school children who have difficulty managing their emotions, particularly children who are stressed, impulsive, inattentive, hyperactive, oppositional, aggressive, anxious, depressed or those with autism spectrum disorder.

**NEEDS AND BEHAVIOURAL MANIFESTATIONS**

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– Difficulty appropriately expressing negative emotions.

**SPECIFIC GOALS**

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– To help the people around the children (parents, professionals, teachers, etc.) promote the expression of their emotions.

**DESIGN**

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## HOW CAN WE HELP CHILDREN EXPRESS THEIR EMOTIONS?

Sharing emotional experiences is a fundamental aspect of human relationships. When we share our emotions, we allow others to understand us better. If the people around us don't know how we feel in a particular situation, they have more difficulty reacting to it. Many children find it difficult to appropriately express their intense or negative emotions. For some, publicly acknowledging their fears, sadness, anger or joy may be perceived as a risk. Others are not afraid to express them but do so in such a way that others don't want to listen to them. Finally, some close up or isolate themselves, while others tend to react with inappropriate behaviours (slamming a door, having a tantrum, moving more, etc.). Appropriately expressing emotions is therefore an important aspect to work on. The following are some suggestions to help children appropriately express their emotions.

### Practise active listening

To facilitate the expression of these emotions, adults should approach children and implement conditions that foster trust. The children will be more trusting if the discussion occurs in a place that is conducive to confiding and at an appropriate time when the adults and children are available to express themselves and listen to each other. If the children do not spontaneously confide, we can encourage them to express themselves by opening up avenues for discussion ("Something seems to be wrong. Would you like to talk about it?").

To show the children that the adults are listening carefully and are really trying to understand them, the adults can reflect the emotion expressed ("You look sad that your friend didn't come and play at home") or reflect the content ("You think he doesn't want to come and play with you because he prefers to go play with another child?"). When the children's emotions don't seem clear or they don't understand why they feel so, adults can help them by rephrasing what the children said in their own words ("If I understand correctly, you're afraid that he's no longer your best friend"). Rephrasing ensures that the message is properly received and understood. If the children feel understood, even if you don't share their viewpoint, they will be more inclined to listen to others' viewpoints. Conversely, when someone feels misunderstood, they go on the offensive, harden their position and may become aggressive. From that moment on, the dialogue may go round in circles.

**So that children truly feel heard, the following are some behaviours and attitudes to avoid:**

- Doing something else at the same time;
- Being more interested in telling the children than listening to what the children are saying;
- Reading the other person's thoughts, irrespective of their own reality;
- Judging what the children are saying and making comments without giving the children time to finish their ideas;
- Giving advice or suggesting solutions too quickly without giving the children time to find their own solutions;
- Interrupting the children;
- Not taking the children's concerns seriously and telling them that it's not serious or not important.



### Avoid the pitfalls of expressing emotions

Emotions are often expressed indirectly. In doing so, communication may be blurred. To clearly express your emotions, you should avoid various pitfalls:

- Shouting names (labelling or insulting): "You're deaf" instead of "I feel like you're not listening to me. This is frustrating me.";
- Dictating or giving orders: "Shut up!" instead of "What you just said hurts me";
- Asking: "What are you doing with Marc?" instead of "I'm worried about seeing you with a guy who always has problems in class";
- Accusing: "You're always on my back" instead of "I don't like it when you accuse me without taking the time to listen to my point of view."
- Being sarcastic: "I'm glad you're on time!" instead of "I'm angry you're late. So, we haven't started working yet and we're going to fall behind."

When the opportunity arises, make the children aware of the mistakes they make when expressing their emotions.

### Use "I" messages

Encourage the children to use "I" messages to express their emotions. There are various ways to do this. This is the way we recommend with children:

CLUES	EXPLANATIONS	EXAMPLES
<b>When...</b>	Describe the situation or context that causes your emotions. Be careful not to blame people.	"When my game's not chosen at recess..."
<b>I feel...</b>	Name the emotion experienced using "I."	"...I feel frustrated..."
<b>Because...</b>	Explain why you feel like this.	"...because I have to play sports I'm not as good at..."
<b>I'd like...</b>	Specify what you'd like in order to feel better.	"...I'd like us to play soccer at least once a week."

When the opportunity arises, use "I" messages to explain to your children how you feel about a situation.

## Use other ways to express what you feel

It's not always possible to verbally express emotions. Sometimes they are so confused, you really don't know how to express them. Other times, they can be so painful (for example, during a tragic event) that you prefer to keep them quiet. Provide children with creative activities to promote self-expression, such as drawing, writing, singing, music, visual arts and role-playing.

## Schedule time for expressing emotions

Whether at school or at home, schedule time when family or class members can express how they feel in a communication-friendly environment, for example, a family council (at home) or a cooperation council (at school).

The family council is an ideal time to take stock of family life or what happened outside the home. It's a special moment for family members to discuss their sorrows and joys, to congratulate themselves, to express their wishes and to solve problems. Depending on the children's age, the council can last between 15 and 45 minutes. The council may be held once a week at an appropriate time when all family members are present or, as needed, depending on the problems. It should be a time to promote healthy communication within the family where all people are free from daily concerns (television, homework, etc.). While improving communication within the family and strengthening relationships, the council facilitates the resolution of family problems. The family council usually has three phases:

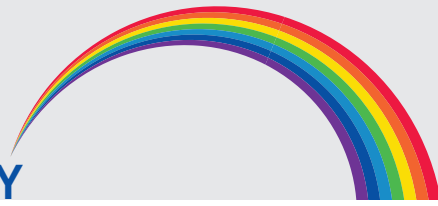
- 1) Congratulations: Family members who wish to congratulate another for something they have done well during the week;
- 2) "Critical" follow-ups: These are essential for good relationships among family members and provide an opportunity to discuss family problems in order to prevent conflict;
- 3) Suggestions: This last step allows family members to make suggestions for family life.

The **Cooperation Council** allows students to practise their personal and social problem-solving skills, formulate clear messages to other group members, and recognize their feelings. In these meetings, students exchange ideas, discuss, share feelings on a particular topic or event, acknowledge group members, or address issues that have arisen in the classroom or at school in personal, social and organizational terms. During the week, students suggest items to put on the agenda. To help them identify topics for discussion, categories can be proposed ("I congratulate," "I criticize," "I thank," "I suggest," etc.). The teacher can act as a facilitator or a student may take on this role.

## CONCLUSION

It's more difficult to properly express emotions when they are intense, particularly when they are negative emotions such as frustration or anger. Sometimes it's best to encourage the children to first reduce the physical and psychological tension associated with negative emotions before verbally expressing what they feel.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY



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Verret, C. & Massé, L. (2017). *Gérer ses émotions et s'affirmer positivement*. Chenelière Éducation.

