



The TOOLBOX

TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE WITH THEIR EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS



HOW CAN WE HELP CHILDREN BETTER MANAGE THEIR EMOTIONS?

TOOL: Prevention | Intervention

TARGET AUDIENCE: Preschool | Elementary school

TOOL INTENDED FOR: Professionals | Parents

DESIGN

Claudia Verret
Line Massé



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

TARGET AUDIENCE:

– 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

– Difficulty managing emotional states that can lead to emotional escalation.
– Difficulty regaining a state of calm and well-being after experiencing an intense emotion.

SPECIFIC GOALS

– To help people around children (parents, professionals, teachers, etc.) recognize their emotional regulation difficulties.

DESIGN

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HOW CAN WE HELP CHILDREN BETTER MANAGE THEIR EMOTIONS?

There are a variety of strategies that allow children to regulate the intensity of their emotions and regain their comfort zone. In order for this to be effective, they must first be able to recognize their emotions, assess their degree of discomfort and assess perceived changes (body, thoughts, movements, etc.) before choosing the appropriate strategy to calm the negative emotion. Some children prefer strategies that activate them, while others instead turn to strategies that calm them down. It's important to know that the choice of strategies may vary depending on the emotion experienced, its intensity and the context in which it is expressed. In addition, some strategies are used by both secondary and elementary school students, while others are mainly used by younger students. In this regard, it's recommended to experiment with various strategies, since there isn't only one right way to calm down. Depending on the aim, the following are some strategies.

Assess the intensity of emotions experienced

Ask the children to use an emotional thermometer to help them assess the intensity of emotions experienced. Each of the intensity levels may be associated with words that describe the emotion (for example, for the anger thermometer: 1) calm; 2) irritated; 3) annoyed; 4) frustrated; 5) furious) or verbal or non-verbal cues, e.g. facial expression. When the children experience a difficult situation, encourage them to assess the intensity of the emotion experienced, observe their level of well-being, and choose a way to feel better depending on the intensity of the emotion.

Reduce factors that trigger loss of control

Observe the factors that trigger loss of self-control (e.g. hunger) and find ways with the children to prevent them (for example, providing a snack for the children as soon as they get home).

Set up a space to calm down

Whether at home or at school, set up a space where the children can retreat to calm down when the excitement is too great or the negative emotions are too intense. These places consist in relaxation spaces that allow children to temporarily withdraw (in the classroom or in a room outside the classroom, in the home) that foster calm and provide tools or activities that promote calm. They can be decorated with soft colours and dim lights. Play calm music and include sensory modulation tools (stress ball, heavy stuffed animals, etc.) to reduce the individuals' stress level. It's important that the use of this space not be associated with a punitive withdrawal or time-out, but rather as a way to calm down or help them regain a level of well-being.

Use breath control

These techniques can ease physical tension associated with intense emotions. Breathing is the easiest way to calm down and the children can do it in any situation or context. To be effective, breathing must be deep and slow. We recommend the abdominal breathing technique, which aims to use the belly muscle (diaphragm) to take deep breaths (see, among others, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z49SyKYwu58> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9jCFQSRB9g>). The cardiac coherence technique is also a very effective and easy-to-use technique with children (see, among others, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwRjwDLuA30>).



Use muscle relaxation techniques

Muscle relaxation can help children reduce the level of agitation or tension associated with intense emotion. There are three main types of techniques:

- 1) Stretch/release: Stretch a body part as far as possible, hold the position for a few seconds, then gently release and balance the part;
- 2) Dropping: Lift a body part and then drop it gently without momentum;
- 3) Contraction/release: Contract muscle groups for a few seconds from head to toe (e.g. for the head: forehead, eyebrow, nose, chin) while focusing on the physical sensations of tension that contraction causes, then releasing, this time focusing on the feelings of muscle relaxation.

Stretching/releasing, dropping or contraction/releasing techniques can be done in various environments. For younger children, it's recommended that relaxation be guided and supervised by adults in order to demonstrate and reinforce expected behaviours. There are books with prepared activities that are easy to duplicate in the classroom or at home. In addition, various online digital applications and video clips provide interesting tutorials for practising guided breathing and muscle relaxation activities.

Practise acceptance and mindfulness

When children experience a painful emotion, invite them to accept the emotional state and react differently by getting in touch with what they are experiencing, feeling negative emotions, objectifying their sensations (intensity, form, physical reactions) and noting where they feel them in their bodies.

Practise yoga or meditation

The practice of yoga and meditation are associated with emotional regulation benefits. In addition to various strategies, many books and websites are full of interesting suggestions for practising yoga with children.



Use attention-diversion techniques

The use of these strategies is intended to enable children to change or modulate their emotion and redirect their conduct during the situation. The children try to find a way to experience rather than repress the emotion.

Attention-diversion strategies aim to promote well-being, reduce the level of agitation or alertness and regain control of the emotions. They include mental imagery activities (positive visualization) and daily activities such as counting backwards, singing, doing mental exercises, making block constructions, retreating to a quiet corner, drawing or making a mandala. They promote psychological or physical distance from the situation that causes intense emotion.



Use grounding strategies

Grounding strategies are used to help children manage their emotional states. They consist in giving children tasks or objects to handle with various sensory properties in order to stimulate proprioception and help them to channel their thoughts and sensations. In keeping with the mindfulness trend, three grounding strategies are usually suggested: sound, breathing and body sensations. This trend advocates the use of deep pressure tools (heavy stuffed animal or cushion, self-massage, etc.), those that foster tactile relaxation by handling (stress ball, dough, drawing, rice bag, soft fabric, feather, etc.) and those that promote auditive relaxation (listening to falling rain, wave sounds, etc.).

Do intense physical activity

Physical activity, especially if it's intense (e.g. running, jumping rope, jumping on a trampoline, stationary bike), can help reduce physical tension associated with intense emotions. When children show signs of tension, encourage them to practise an activity. To meet this need at school, active breaks, recess and physical education classes can be added for students who need them more.

Set up a motor release routine

Motor release routines combine some short, intense movements and physical activities. They allow a release of controlled emotions and not a chaotic overactivation. To counteract the use of aggressive gestures such as hitting, alternative movements are preferred (pushing on a wall, throwing a ball or jumping on the spot). These routines should be supervised by adults, who can regulate the necessary activation level, and should be accompanied by breathing and relaxation strategies. A possible routine for children over the age of 9:

- 1) I jump on the spot or with a skipping rope (30-60 repetitions);
- 2) With an adult, I throw and catch a heavy ball (3.2 kg) (2 x 10 throws);
- 3) I push against the wall (2 x 15 seconds);
- 4) I do a relaxation technique of my choice (5 minutes);
- 5) I determine whether I'm back in my comfort zone.

CONCLUSION

It's important to teach children various relaxation strategies, since if they don't like the same strategies, they won't be effective for everyone or in all situations. Physical strategies (breathing techniques, physical activities, muscle relaxation techniques, etc.) are particularly effective in reducing physiological and muscle tension associated with negative emotions. Strategies related to attention-raising and mindfulness are particularly helpful when negative emotions are fuelled by children's unhelpful thoughts. In addition, it's recommended that their use be supervised by adults, especially when beginning to use them or during very intense emotions. Adults should encourage the children to express their emotions and observe themselves before, during and after using strategies so that they become autonomous and adopt appropriate strategies for themselves in various situations where they lose control.

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