



The TOOLBOX

TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE WITH THEIR EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL NEEDS



HOW CAN WE HELP CHILDREN IDENTIFY THEIR EMOTIONS?

TOOL: Prevention | Intervention

TARGET AUDIENCE: Preschool and elementary school children

TOOL INTENDED FOR: Professionals | Parents

DESIGN

Line Massé
Claudia Verret



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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 recognizing their emotions or those of others.

SPECIFIC GOALS

– To help parents and professionals support the development of emotion identification in children.

DESIGN

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HOW CAN WE HELP CHILDREN IDENTIFY THEIR EMOTIONS?

Several simple strategies can be used on a daily basis to help children identify their emotions. Depending on the goal, these strategies include:

Developing an emotional vocabulary

In order to be able to name what children experience, we must first ensure that they have an emotional vocabulary. With preschool children, the focus should be on basic emotions (joy, anger, sadness, fear or worry) rather than subtle variations of these emotions. At first, the vocabulary doesn't have to be sophisticated ("I feel good" or "I feel bad"). Then, little by little, we can develop a more extensive vocabulary so that they can distinguish the intensity of emotions. For example, you can search with the children for all the words associated with sadness (discouraged, overwhelmed, disappointed, depressed, desperate, etc.) and then try to categorize them from the least intense (e.g. disappointed) to the most intense (e.g. desperate).

Distinguishing the main emotions based on verbal and non-verbal cues

There are eight basic emotions: joy, interest, anger, surprise, sadness, disgust, fear and shame. All the other emotions are considered to be a combination of these eight basic emotions. For example, jealousy may be a mixture of interest, fear and anger. Adults can help children distinguish each of the basic emotions based on verbal and non-verbal cues, first in others (characters from a story book or film, parent, teacher, etc.), and then in themselves. We can help them distinguish bodily signals (hands, faces, movements, attitudes, gestures, postures), verbal signals (words used, tones, pace or speed, etc.), and signals related to thoughts, actions or reactions associated with each of the basic emotions. The following is an example for anger.

ON MY FACE

I clench my lips and teeth; I raise my eyebrows; my forehead is wrinkled.

IN MY BODY

I clench my fists; I'm tense; my heart beats faster and I also breathe faster.

IN MY VOICE

I speak louder and faster.

MY REACTIONS

I refuse to talk or I have a tantrum.

With young children, these cues are more often physical (e.g. stomach aches) or behavioural (e.g. irritability, opposition, aggression or withdrawal). Adults can help children assess their level of well-being (comfort level) and their level of energy (empty, calm, moderate, intense) associated with each of these emotions.



The following are some strategies to develop emotion recognition on a daily basis:

- Play the emotions detective: using mimes, film clips or photos, ask the children to guess the emotion felt by the person or character by specifying the clues observed;
- Provide the children with a drawing of a person and ask them to colour the body parts where that emotion is felt;
- Make collages of images for each of the basic emotions and observe similarities and differences in the expression of emotions;
- Help the children become aware of the variety of emotions expressed by people (e.g. "How does your sister express how angry she is? Is it similar or different from you?");
- Pay particular attention to the emotions that put the children in a vulnerable state and help the children become aware of them ("You seem angry when..."); also help them become aware of the clues related to this emotion.

Ask the children to do one of the following activities: *The Emotions Detective, My Emotions Dictionary, Clues to Recognize How I'm Feeling.*

Being aware of your emotional states and the incidents or contexts that contributed to them

Adults can also help children become aware of their emotional states and the incidents or contexts that contributed to them. The context may include external factors (e.g. in the presence of a group of friends) or internal factors (e.g. fatigue, hunger, medication). A variety of strategies can be used:

- Invite the children to share their current experience (e.g. "How do you feel today?");
- Encourage them to name the emotion felt in a particular context (e.g. "How did you feel when..." "Name a situation where you felt joyful this week.");
- Invite them to observe another person's experience (e.g. "How do you think Charlotte felt when...");
- Share your observations with them (e.g. "When you..., I feel like you're angry. Is that the case?"); If the children disagree with your interpretation, discuss the perception differences with the children.
- Normalize the experience of negative emotions (e.g. "It's normal for you to feel angry when...") or when their feelings are mixed, i.e. when a situation elicits both positive and negative emotions (e.g. the children are sad that their parents are separating, but happy that there are no more daily arguments in the home).

Ask the children to do the following activity: *Situations that Make Me Feel Good or Bad.*



Recognizing triggers or situations that lead to a loss of self-control

By recognizing the factors that trigger a loss of self-control, children can anticipate and prevent problems. The following is a list of the main factors that may lead to a loss of self-control:

- Frustrated needs;
- Feeling of decreased control (loss of personal power, sense of injustice, etc.);
- Threats to personality (injury to self-esteem, sense of failure, fear of being ridiculed, etc.);
- Unpredictability (a situation that catches the children off guard, e.g. cancellation of an expected event);
- Novelty of a situation (a situation the children have never faced before).

It is well known that factors such as the accumulation of stress, fatigue, lack of sleep, hunger, lack of exercise or a particularly high level of excitation are a breeding ground for a loss of self-control, as the threshold of tolerance to frustration is at its lowest. After a situation where the children have lost control and have then regained their composure, review the situation with them in order to make them aware of the triggers.

Ask the children to do the following activity: My Emotions Diary.

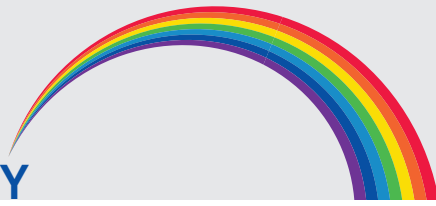
Understanding how thoughts can influence emotions

In some cases, the negative inner monologue about problems may increase negative emotions, especially when they are based on misinterpretations of the situation (e.g. "Everyone is always on my back," "He deliberately annoys me," "I suck"). If this is the case, we can help the children become aware of how their thoughts can influence their emotions. At an appropriate time when the children are not experiencing any particular problems, adults can take a moment with them to explain the connections between their negative or positive emotions and their thoughts. We can start with a positive situation, for example, the fact that they decided to play a sports match with other children at recess. For children with introspection problems, it's best to do this activity as soon as possible after the situation (ideally, at the same moment). The children may be asked to say how they feel and then name the thoughts that went through their heads (e.g. "I'm popular."). Subsequently, adults can help them remember a situation where they didn't feel good (e.g. when the children were not chosen on a team) and help them determine the thought that was related to that emotion (e.g. "Nobody likes me"). Adults can then make the connections with the children between positive thoughts and positive emotions, and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

Identifying emotions is an important step in emotional regulation. At the same time, it's a difficult step, as it calls for a time-out and reflection on our emotional cues. It's normal for this process to be difficult for children, particularly younger children. Adults can play a key role in helping the children recognize their emotions and understand the context that triggered them. By questioning, demonstrating and naming the emotions observed, we can help children expand their repertoire. By identifying, modulating and appropriately expressing their emotions, the children will be able to calm down.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



Massé, L. & Verret, C. (Sous presse). Aider les jeunes à mieux gérer leurs émotions difficiles. Dans N. Gaudreau (dir.), *Les conduites agressives à l'école*. Presses de l'Université du Québec.

