

Ideas Into Practice

Segment 6: Helping Children Identify and Express Emotions

Option A: Pointing out Emotions

Conduct a short experiment to find out the impact of pointing out emotions in the classroom.

- Step 1: Begin at group time by showing children photos or illustrations of people exhibiting different kinds of emotions—sad, happy, surprised, excited, angry, afraid, etc. These may be found in books listed on the bibliography provided in this segment or can be downloaded and printed out from the internet. An alternative is simply to photograph yourself making these expressions. Ask children to name the feelings they see in the photos or illustrations. Make notes on how accurate they are in naming these.
- Step 2: In a separate group time, read one of the books from the feelings bibliography presented in this segment. Then give children hand mirrors and ask them to try to make expressions to show some of the feelings addressed in the story.
- Step 3: Then, for the next few days, point out emotions to children throughout the school day. Note when a child is smiling and happy, crying and upset, or laughing and happy. Name the emotion loudly enough so many children can hear. Use new words children may not be as familiar with—*upset, irritated, frustrated*, etc. As you point out feelings, try to describe the physical features that show these emotions: “Look at Anna’s face. I think she’s very excited.” Or: “Look at Manny’s tears; he’s very upset.”
- Step 4: After several days, show children the same photos at another group time and ask them to name feelings again. Take careful notes on their responses.
- Step 5: Study the notes you took before and after your feelings naming experiment. Write a brief report, guided by the following questions:
- In what ways did children’s responses to feelings photos differ after the experiment? Could they name more feelings? Did they use more specific terms for various emotions? Could they describe these feelings better?
 - Discuss your overall experience in describing feelings. Did it feel comfortable to do this? How did children respond to your strategy?
 - Will you point out feelings more frequently in your classroom, based on this experience? Why or why not?

Option B: Helping a Child Manage Strong Emotions

- Step 1: Select a child in your classroom who is having difficulty managing anger, frustration, or sadness. You might choose a child who strikes out at their peers, throws tantrums, withdraws from classroom activities when upset, or engages in other undesirable methods of expressing feelings.

Step 2: For a few days, study each of this child's emotional "meltdowns," recording in a notebook what happens before, during, and after each incident. Write what occurs in as much detail as you can. Discuss the child's difficulties with parents and other family members. Ask them to observe what causes strong negative emotions in the child at home. Ask how they respond to undesirable expressions of emotion. Take careful notes.

Step 3: After several days write a summary of your findings, guided by the following questions:

- Are there specific incidents, times of day, peers, or activities that seem to lead this child to have strong emotional reactions? Are there other patterns you see in your notes that suggest something else is triggering the child's negative expression of feelings?
- What are the specific ways that the child expresses feelings that you consider undesirable? Are there examples in your notes of times when the child uses more positive methods to address feelings?
- What happens directly after the child has had an emotional outburst? How do teachers respond? Peers? Are there things that others do that seem to encourage the child's undesirable expression of feelings? Are there things others do that seem to soothe or help the child to use positive methods to manage feelings?

Step 4: At the end of your report, write an action plan for the child, based on your summary. The plan might include some of the following steps:

- A staff member will be assigned to move close to the child during the activities, times of day, or interactions with specific peers that have been found to lead to undesirable behaviors. The staff member will try to "head off" potential negative interactions that may cause upset or anger.
- When the child does exhibit aggressive or other inappropriate outbursts, all caregivers in the center will try redirecting the child toward more appropriate methods of expression (e.g., "Use words when you're angry. Say, 'I don't like that!'")
- All caregivers will avoid any responses to the child's outburst that encourage such behavior.
- Caregivers will discuss the action plan with parents and other family members and encourage them to try these strategies at home.

Option C: Using Children's Literature to Help Children Express Feelings

Step 1: Select one of the books on the expression of feelings listed in the bibliography provided in this segment. In your classroom, set up a video camera on a tri-pod (or ask a colleague to videotape you) and record yourself reading the book to a group of children. Read the book in a way that encourages children to think about, identify, and express feelings, as discussed in this segment.

Step 2: Now study the videotape and write a brief analysis of your reading, guided by the following questions:

- To what degree did you prepare children for the book, prior to reading it? Did you discuss the cover, ask children to predict what might happen in the story, or conduct a brief introductory conversation about feelings?
- What kinds of questions did you ask while you were reading the book? Were they open-ended questions that encouraged children to talk about feelings? Did you ask questions that led children to relate parts of the book to their own lives? Did you avoid simple “yes/no” or unison questions?
- How did you help children learn new feelings words through your questions, comments, or reading?
- Did you point to print in the book or in other ways help children learn about how books work?
- What questions did you ask at the end of the reading? Did you engage children in a discussion about what happened in the story? Did you help them relate the events in the story to their own lives? Did you engage them in discussions about different kinds of feelings and how to express them?

Step 3: If you can, read another book from the bibliography to a group of children, recording your reading once again.

Step 4: Write a second report that addresses the question: How was this second reading different than the first? Discuss your reading performance, guided by the questions above.