

Enhancing Emotional Vocabulary in Young Children

Gail E. Joseph, Ph.D. & Phillip S. Strain, Ph.D.
*Center on Evidence Based Practices
 for Early Learning
 University of Colorado at Denver*

Four-year-old Shantay is an avid builder with blocks. At free play he has busied himself with an elaborate tower construction. To complete his masterpiece he needs an elusive triangle piece. As he searches the room in vain for the last, crucial piece his initial calm hunt becomes more hurried and disorganized. He begins to whimper and disrupt other children's play. His teacher approaches and asks what the matter is. Shantay swiftly turns away to resume his now frantic search. This behavior persists for several minutes until the signal for cleanup is given, whereupon Shantay launches into a major, 15-minute tantrum.

Four-year-old Kelly is relatively new to preschool. She wants to play with her new classmates, but is too shy and frightened to approach and join in with the group. This day at free play she intently watches, as three other girls are absorbed in an elaborate tea party, complete with pandas and wolves. With a forlorn look, Kelly passively observes the ongoing play. Her teacher approaches and says, "Honey, is something wrong?" Kelly shrugs her shoulders. Her teacher persists, "Kelly are you frustrated?" Kelly says, "Yes." Her teacher then reminds her of the class rule; if you feel frustrated, ask a friend or teacher for help. Kelly and her teacher quickly discuss how she might get another

animal and ask her classmates if the zebra can come to the party.

In each of these cases, children experience some of the common, often-repeated challenges of life in preschool. Shantay, in the end, was overwhelmed by his feelings of frustration. Unable to label his legitimate feeling he acted-out—a sure recipe for not getting his needs met. Kelly, equally upset and, in this example, paralyzed temporarily by her social anxiety was able to achieve an outcome she deeply desired. She was able to do this by the good teaching that had previously occurred. She was able to communicate her need and access strategic help to get that need met. In contrast with Shantay, Kelly's experience demonstrates one of the ways that emotional literacy enables children to be socially competent. Consider two other case examples of emotional literacy at work.

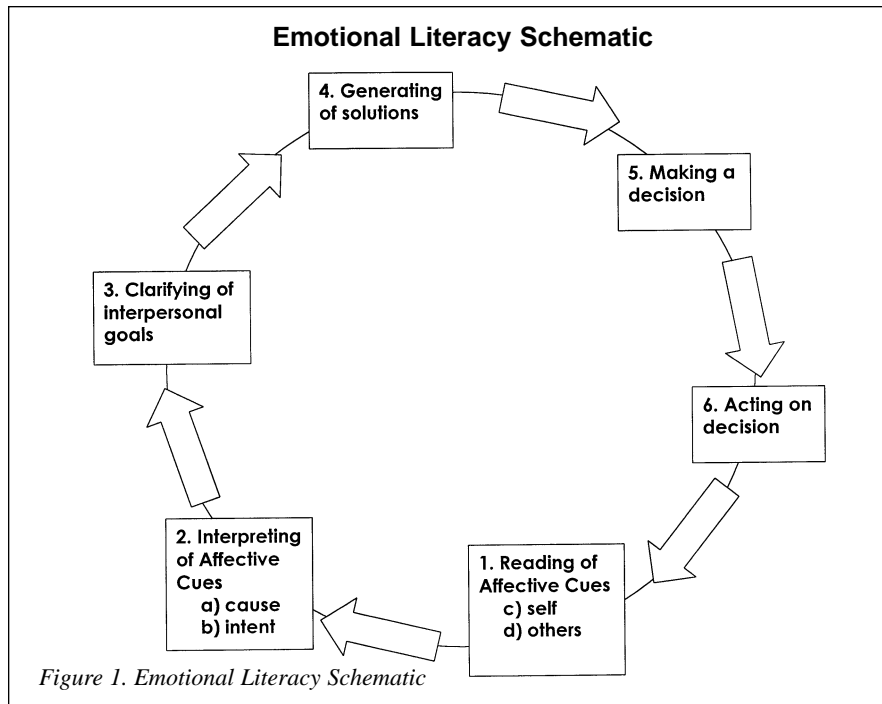
Tony is a master of rough and tumble play. As a game of superheroes commences, Tony runs headlong into other children. Two of his playmates happily reciprocate; smiling and giggling they continue their preschool version of "slam dancing." Tony, however, seeks out other partners as well. In particular, Eddie and Darrin want no part of this. They frown as he approaches and yell, "No." Tony seems to interpret their behavior as an invitation for more. Both Eddie and Darrin start to cry and quickly seek out their teacher who has Tony sit quietly for 2 minutes while play continues. This time-out angers Tony and he pouts alone for the remainder of free play.

Tamika loves to play dress-up. This day at free play she asks Seth to join her, but he says, "Later," and goes about his computer play. Tamika then

gets a big hat and takes it to April. April just frowns and goes about tending to the hamster cage. Tamika next takes the hat to Bo. "Bo," she says, "let's go play." Again she is rebuffed. Finally Tamika finds a play partner in Darrin; who is walking from one activity area to the next.

In these two scenarios great variation can be noted in children's ability to read social cues. Tony's choice of rough and tumble partners is ubiquitous. His inability to read social cues ultimately resulted in a poor outcome. Tamika, on the other hand, was readily able to read social cues and, as a result of good teaching, she had a strategy (try again with another friend) to achieve her desired outcome.

Figure 1 below provides an overall schematic of children's emotional literacy (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Note first that the foundational element, the necessary context, for emotional literacy development is a supportive, caring relationship (see Joseph & Strain, 2002). In order to act upon the social environment in ways that are collectively supportive and rewarding it is first necessary for children to read the affective cues of others and of themselves. Discriminating among affective states such as anger, sadness, frustration, and happiness requires a vocabulary of feeling words. Like other forms of literacy the richer the vocabulary, the more rewarding the experiences. In this article we will concentrate on how to build a meaningful lexicon of feeling words. This instructional emphasis bears, not coincidentally, a close resemblance to cognitive behavior modification (Meichelbaum, 1976).



Once children are reading and correctly labeling affective cues from words, internal stimuli, and body language they then proceed to make crucial judgments about both the cause and the intent of other's affect (e.g., Tamika has, appropriately, a neutral judgment about peers' lack of interest in her play and she simply proceeds to look until she finds a willing partner). Many children, however, make crucial errors at this point. Partly because of an absence of feeling words they often interpret the behavior of others as intentionally hurtful and eventually act out in ways that invariably lead to social isolation and stigmatization (Kazdin, 1989).

Once children make a judgment about cause and intent they proceed, in this model, to clarify their interpersonal goals. In earlier examples, Tony wanted to play rough and tumble, Tamika wanted to play dress-up, Kelly wanted to join in the tea party, and Shantay just wanted that final block.

The clarification of goals then allows children to generate solutions to achieve their goals. Solutions might include a self-regulation notion such as, "I need to calm down." Solutions might be trying again, finding someone to help, trying a different way, and so on. Solution generation, however, must be followed by a contingent decision-making paradigm. For example, children might be taught to consider if the solution is fair, if it has worked before, if it is a safe, if it would result in positive feelings, and so on. Finally, children act in accordance with their decision. While we will focus only on establishing a vocabulary of feeling words that permit accurate reading of affective cues and accurate interpretation of cause and intent, teachers needs to be aware that many children will require careful step-by-step instruction from reading affective cues to acting on decisions.

Emotional literacy is the ability to recognize, label, and understand feelings in one's self and others. It is a

prerequisite skill to emotional regulation and successful interpersonal interactions and problem solving and is one of the most important skills a child is taught in the early years (Denham, 1986; Webster-Stratton, 1999). Limited emotional literacy, on the other hand, can result in misperceptions of feeling in one's self and others.

Building emotional vocabulary

In order to correctly perceive feelings in yourself and others, you first have to have words for those feelings, a feeling lexicon. Many children are either "happy" or "mad" and miss all the subtle gradations of feelings in-between because they do not have labels and definitions for those emotions. A large and more complex feeling vocabulary allows children to make finer discriminations between feelings; to better communicate with others about their internal affective states; and to engage in discussions about their personal experiences with the world. Children with disabilities (Feldman, McGee, Mann & Strain, 1993; Walker, 1981) and children from low income families (Eisneberg, 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995; Lewis & Michalson, 1993) have more limited feeling vocabularies than their typically developing and middle income peers. Parents and teachers can foster emotional vocabulary by teaching feeling words and their emotional definitions. Adults can increase children's feelings words by teaching different feeling words and definitions directly; incidentally in the context of conversation and play; and through special activities.

Adults can teach feeling words directly by pairing a picture or photo of a feeling face with the appropriate affective label. Preschoolers are better at recognizing feelings with drawn

pictures at first then progressing to photographs. Children’s books are an excellent way to label feeling faces with children. Many books are written explicitly about feelings and contain numerous feeling words. *See Box 1 for some of our favorites.*

Children’s Books featuring feeling faces and words

- *On Monday when it rained* by Cheryl Kachenmeister,
- *Glad Monster, Sad Monster: A Book About Feelings* by Anne Miranda & Ed Emberley (Illustrator)
- *My Many Colored Days* by Seuss, Steve Johnson (Illustrator), Lou Fancher (Illustrator)
- *When Sophie Gets Angry- Really, Really Angry...* by Molly Garrett Bang
- **Feelings** (Reading Rainbow Book) by Alikei
- *I’m Mad* (Dealing With Feelings) by Elizabeth Crary, Jean Whitney (Illustrator)
- *I’m Frustrated* (Dealing With Feelings) by Elizabeth Crary, Jean Whitney (Illustrator)
- *When I Feel Angry* by Cornelia Maude Spelman, Nancy Cote (Illustrator)

Box 1

Adults can also teach children new feeling words by explicitly providing emotion labels as children experience various affective states. For example, an infant smiles brightly and the parent says, “Oh, you are happy.” Similarly, Kelly’s teacher noticed her aroused state and labeled it “frustrated.” Labeling a child’s affective state allows them to begin to identify their own internal states. This is an important step in learning to regulate emotions (Joseph, 2001; Lochman & Dunn, 1993; Webster-Stratton, 1999). For example, one needs to recognize (this happens most effectively when there is a label) their affective state, say, “angry” before they can proceed

with steps to regulate or calm down. A first step would be to vocalize this negative feeling (“I’m mad”) versus acting out. Using varied and complex feeling words will develop powerful feeling vocabularies for children. Box 2 provides a list of more complex feeling words that 3-5 year olds who are developing language normally know (Joseph, 2001; Ridgeway, Waters & Kuczaj, 1985).

Feeling Words

Affectionate	Gloomy
Agreeable	Guilty
Annoyed	Ignored
Awful	Impatient
Bored	Important
Brave	Interested
Calm	Jealous
Capable	Joyful
Caring	Lonely
Cheerful	Lost
Clumsy	Loving
Confused	Overwhelmed
Comfortable	Peaceful
Cooperative	Pleasant
Creative	Proud
Cruel	Relaxed
Curious	Relieved
Depressed	Safe Satisfied
Disappointed	Sensitive
Disgusted	Serious
Ecstatic	Shy Stressed
Embarrassed	Strong
Enjoying	Stubborn
Excited	Tense
Fantastic	Thoughtful
Fearful	Thrilled
Fed-up	Troubled
Free	Unafraid
Friendly	Uncomfortable
Frustrated	Uncomfortable
Gentle	Weary
Generous	Worried

Box 2

Adults can also plan special activities to teach and reinforce the acquisition of feeling words. Children can “check in” each morning by picking a feeling face picture that best depicts their affective state and sticking it next to their name. Children can be encouraged to change their feeling face

throughout the day as their feelings change. Teachers can make feeling dice by covering small milk cartons with paper and drawing a different feeling face on each side. Children can toss the dice; label the feeling face and describe a time they felt that way. Box 3 lists some other fun feeling activities.

INSERT BOX 3 ABOUT HERE

Feeling Activities

Pass the hat: The teacher cuts out pictures that represent various feeling faces and places them in a hat (or large envelope) that is passed around the circle as music plays. When the music stops, the child holding the hat picks out a picture designating an emotion and is asked to identify it, express how they look when they feel that way, or describe a time when he or she felt that way.

Feeling hunt: The teacher puts “feeling face” pictures up all around the room (and around the building if possible). Children can be given child-size magnifying glasses, and they walk around looking for different feeling faces. When they find one, they label it and tell a time they felt that way. An expansion of this activity is to provide each child with a “Feeling Face BINGO Board” and they can cross out faces on their boards as they find them around the room.

Mirrors: Children are given small hand held mirrors at circle time or small group. As the teacher reads a story with many feeling words in it – the children make the face to the corresponding affective expression while looking at themselves in their mirrors. Then, the children put their mirrors down and show their peer their “feeling face.”

Changing faces: During small group time, children make paper plate faces. The teacher attaches the “mouth” and “eyebrows” to the paper plate with brads. This allows

Box 3

(continued)

Feeling Activities

(continued)

the child to change facial expressions on their plate by changing the mouth from a smile to a frown, and the eyebrows from facing in (angry, frustrated, etc.) to out (worried, scared, surprised, etc.). Children can color the rest of the faces. The teacher can then read a story and pause after key incidents and ask the children to show how they would feel by changing their paper plate face appropriately.

Singing, “If you’re happy and you know it...”: Teachers can add new verses to “If you are happy and you know it” as they introduce new feeling words to the class.

- If you’re happy and you know it, hug a friend
- If you’re sad and you know it, cry a tear – “boo-hoo”
- If you’re mad and you know it, use your words “I’m mad”
- If you’re scared and you know it, get some help, “HEEELLLLPPP!”
- If you’re silly and you know it, make a face, “BBBLLLLUUUUHHHH!”

For more feeling activities see *Dinosaur School* (Joseph, Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2002; Webster-Stratton, 1990), *PATHS* (Kusche & Greenberg, 1994), or *Second Step* (Committee for Children, 2002)

Box 3

Teaching children to recognize feelings in others

Children can be taught explicitly how to identify feelings in other people. Identifying feelings in others involves noticing facial expressions and body language, listening to the tone of voice and, considering the situational context.

Young children can be taught how to detect the cues of how someone is feeling by having their attention drawn to the salient physical features of

someone’s affective state. Teachers can model detecting how someone is feeling by looking at their face (noticing their eyebrows, their eyes, and their mouth). This can be accomplished directly and more incidentally throughout the day. Children can then be provided with practice activities and opportunities to notice facial expressions and body language to determine how someone is feeling.

Teachers can model for children how they can tell how someone is feeling by listening to the tone of the person’s voice. Teachers can close their eyes and a puppet or another adult can make a statement such as, “UGGGHH, I can’t get my shoes tied!” and then guess that the person is feeling frustrated. The children can practice by closing their eyes and listening to the teacher make statements using varying tones, then guess how the teacher is feeling.

Teachers can also teach children to think about how someone might feel in certain situations. Children’s literature is a very effective for teaching and practicing this skill. Read a story aloud, pick a situation in the story and ask the children to consider the character’s reactions and feelings. This question invites further conversation. Continue discussing situations for as long as you have the children’s interest. The children’s books in Box 1 can be used very effectively in this matter.

What do you do with a feeling?

Adults can model emotional regulation skills for children by verbalizing the course of action they will take in order to calm down or cope with certain feelings. For example, a teacher doesn’t notice a loose lid on the glitter bottle and consequently spills the contents all over the table and floor. In front of the children she says, “Oh no! Boy, do I feel frustrated. I better take some deep breaths to calm down.” Kelly’s teacher developed a classroom

rule that when you feel frustrated you ask a teacher or peer for help. In this case, when the teacher labels a child’s affective state as “frustrated” the child is primed to ask for help. Eventually the child will be able to label the feeling themselves and seek out an appropriate solution. Adults can proactively teach young children coping strategies for many emotions (taking a deep breath when mad; requesting a break when annoyed; talking to someone when sad, etc.) through modeling and role plays. Positive emotions sometimes need to be regulated as well.

Conclusion

In classrooms that devote planned attention to helping children acquire a rich and varied feeling vocabulary we may expect fewer challenging behaviors and more developmentally sophisticated and enjoyable peer social relations (Denham, 1986). Emotional vocabulary is, however, only part of this picture. For emotional vocabulary teaching to be effective adults must first spend the time necessary to build positive relationships with children (Joseph & Strain, 2002). Within this foundational context of a warm and responsive relationship with children, teachers can maximize their influence to enhance emotional vocabulary.

As the emotional literacy schematic (Figure 1) suggests, having feeling words and being able to recognize emotions in others and in oneself is a necessary but insufficient step toward helping children achieve social and emotional competence. Adults also need to assist children in developing and becoming fluent with the skills of emotional regulation (e.g., calming down; controlling anger and impulse) and problem-solving (e.g., generating solutions to interpersonal problems that are safe, equitable, and result in positive feelings).

In the Box 4 we provide teachers with a brief checklist of classroom

characteristics known to promote emotional literacy.

Characteristics of Classrooms that Foster Emotional Vocabulary

- Photos of people with various emotional expressions are displayed around the room
- Books about feelings are available in the book corner
- Teachers label their own feelings
- Teachers notice and label children's feelings
- Teachers draw attention to how a child's peer is feeling
- Activities are planned to teach and reinforce emotional literacy
- Children are reinforced for using feeling words
- Efforts to promote emotional vocabulary occur daily and across all times of the day

Box 4

References

- Committee for children (2002). *Second step for preschoolers. Third Edition.* Seattle, WA: Committee for Children
- Crick, N. R. & Dodge, K. A. (1994). A review and reformulation of social information-processing mechanisms in children's social adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin*, 115, 74-101.
- Denham, S. A. (1986). Social cognition, prosocial behavior and emotion in preschoolers: Contextual validation. *Child Development*, 57, 194-201.
- Eisneberg, A. R. (1999). Emotion talk among Mexican-American and Anglo American mothers and children from two social classes. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 45(2), 267-284.
- Feldman, R. S., McGee, G., Mann, L. & Strain, P. S. (1993). Nonverbal affective decoding ability in children with autism and in typical preschoolers. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 17(4), 341-350.
- Hart, B. & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brooks.
- Joseph, G. E. (in preparation). If you're happy and you know it: examining the emotional and social information processing scripts of young children.
- Joseph, G. E. & Strain, P.S. (2002). Building positive relationships with young children. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Joseph, G. E., Webster-Stratton, C. & Reid, M. J. (2002). Promoting young children's social and emotional competence. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Kazdin, A. (1993). Treatment of conduct disorder. *Development of Psychopathology*, 5, 277-310.
- Kusche, C. A. & Greenberg, M. T. (1994) *The PATHS Curriculum.* Seattle: Developmental Research and Programs.
- Lemerise, A.A. & Arsenio, W. F. (2000). An integrated model of emotional processes and cognition in social information processing. *Child Development*, 71, 107-118.
- Lewis, M. & Michalson, L. (1993). Children's emotions and moods: developmental theory and measurement. New York: Plenum Press.
- Lochman, J.E. & Dunn, S. E. (1993). An intervention and consultation model from a social cognitive perspective: a description of the anger coping program, *School Psychology Review*, 22, 458-71.
- Meichenbaum, D. & Tirk, D. (1976). The cognitive-behavioral management of anxiety, anger, and pain. In P. Davidson (Ed.), *Behavioral management of anxiety, depression, and pain.* New York: Brunner/Mazel
- Ridgeway, D., Waters, E., & Kuczaj, S. A. (1985). Acquisition of emotion-descriptive language: Receptive and productive vocabulary norms for ages 18 months to 6 years. *Developmental Psychology*, 21(5), 901-908.
- Walker, E. (1981). Emotion recognition in disturbed and normal children: A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 22(3), 263-268.
- Webster-Stratton, C. (1990). *The teachers and children videotape series: Dina dinosaur school.* Seattle, WA: The Incredible Years.
- Webster-Stratton, C. (1999). *How to promote children's social and emotional competence.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.