

SKILLS

FOR

EMOTIONAL
LITERACY
AND
CHILDREN

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LIFE

PURPOSE

Youth workers can help youth ages 5-12 understand emotional literacy and develop strong emotional literacy by identifying feelings, building self-confidence, and developing friendships.

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If you tell a child that “this is bad,” the child will learn the rules, but the child will only learn it as a set of words. If you want to affect the child’s behavior, the child needs to have the rule linked to reading how (his) behavior impacts another person for good or bad. That’s where empathy comes in – it is a crucial element in learning moral behavior. The mind by itself “thinking” is not enough.

JOSEPH CAMPOS, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

EMOTIONAL LITERACY

It is a term first used by Claude Steiner, a prominent psycho-therapist in transactional analysis, who said, *“Emotional Literacy is made up of ‘the ability to understand your emotions, the ability to listen to others and empathize with their emotions, and the ability to express emotions productively. To be emotionally literate is to be able to handle emotions in a way that improves your personal power and improves the quality of life around you. Emotional literacy improves relationships, creates loving possibilities between people, makes co-operative work possible, and facilitates the feeling of community.” **

Steiner (1997) identifies emotional literacy as having five key elements:

- ①
- ②
- ③
- ④
- ⑤

This definition of emotional literacy is really about interactions among people and the healthy ability to interact and build relationships. According to Steiner, emotional literacy is about knowing and understanding your feelings and those of others so that relationships can be built, utilizing a number of tools that facilitate positive relationships. Emotional literacy is literally the ability to handle emotional situations in a skillful way.

Positive emotional literacy is an individual skillfully handling emotional situations. When we offer youth opportunities to learn about feelings—both their own and others—we provide an environment that helps them develop self-confidence. In addition, when we intentionally teach play and friendship skills, we provide a solid foundation from which emotional literacy can develop, and reduce the potential for bullying and antisocial behaviors.

*(Steiner, C. with Perry, P. (1997). *Achieving Emotional Literacy*. London: Bloomsbury).

Social and emotional skills can be learned. This video portrays how math can be taught as a social activity. In the video, the math teacher facilitates a process with students to identify classroom norms that reinforces social and emotional skill building. Those norms are then threaded through every activity in the classroom session.



This teacher offers an excellent model of providing an opportunity to build social-emotional skills through classroom activities. But what types of professional development are needed for youth workers to develop their skills even more?

HOW CAN ADULTS FOSTER EMOTIONAL LITERACY IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

Let's discuss some components of emotional literacy—feelings, self-confidence, and developing play and friendship skills. Addressing these components is essential to promote emotional literacy in children and youth.

FEELINGS

As adults we want to empower youth to understand and recognize feelings and how to handle the change in their emotions during different life events.

Using words and actions to acknowledge the youth's feeling may be the only thing needed to help the child regulate their emotions. If youth can regulate their emotions, they are better prepared to control their behavior. Youth who are able to label their emotions are better able to use words rather than challenging behavior.



How do young people learn to control and use emotions?

Youth learn about emotions by observing, processing, and analyzing what works for them. They learn by repeated trial and error. When youth are able to experience emotions with positive support, they are able to regulate themselves in the most heated moments. Understanding and managing feelings and emotions is critical in developing emotional literacy.

Adults can help by observing and then empowering youth by stepping in before a problem arises and giving suggestions and ideas about what could happen, and helping the youth make a decision. Adults have the power to help youth with problem-solving skills before an issue arises. The problem-solving skills need to encompass the use of emotional literacy.

In this blog article, Kate Walker, assistant extension professor and specialist for youth work practice at the University of Minnesota Extension, provides great tips for youth workers to help children learn to manage feelings in learning environments and as they work on projects and activities.



SELF-CONFIDENCE

What is self-confidence? And how does it connect to emotional literacy?

Self-confidence is what youth feel when they believe in their abilities and skills. When youth are self-confident, they act and react more positively to situations. Self-confidence might be defined as an “I can do it” attitude.

Adults can't give youth healthy self-confidence. Kids learn about themselves and begin to believe in themselves through positive relationships with others, learning and mastering new skills, and being encouraged and supported in their accomplishments.

What adults can do to encourage strong self-confidence is provide a broad range of opportunities that:

- help youth learn about themselves and their capabilities,
- promote exploration and curiosity, and
- support learning new skills.

Additional opportunities 

All of these help enhance self-confidence.



FRIENDSHIP SKILLS

Developing friendship skills is a critical strategy in enhancing emotional literacy in children and youth.


Having friends helps youth build self-confidence and positive social skills. In making friends, youth can learn and express feelings in positive ways. In addition, having friends is fun, and most, if not all, youth want to have friends.

How can adult youth workers help children learn and practice friendship-making skills?

First, to get an idea of what might be “friendly” to youth, observe positive peer interactions where kids are well liked and responsive. What about their behavior makes it easier for them to make friends? Are they happy, fun-loving, and include others?

Social skills usually exhibited in positive peer interactions include:

- emotional control cooperation,
- responsibility,
- communication, and
- empathy.

In “Working with School-Age Children: Promoting Friendship,” Millie Ferrer and Anne Fugate of University of Florida IFAS Extension, emphasize how adult youth workers can help tremendously by simply having a warm, positive relationship with youth and being a good role model. Moreover, adults working with school-age children also can intentionally teach friendship skills. 



Ferrer and Fugate recommend:

- **“Set clear rules for appropriate behavior.”** It is important to involve youth in the rule setting and use language in the rules that is positive. Keep the rules to a minimum and discuss the meaning of each one. These things will help youth be successful in following the rules.
- **“Teach children how to resolve conflict.”** Ferrer and Fugate suggest giving children and youth the opportunity to work out the conflict on their own. When an adult does need to help, first listen to the youth explain their feelings, then gently coach them by identifying the situation and brainstorming solutions.
- **“Help children develop empathy.”** Ask youth to identify the feelings of others in a situation they might have been involved in or a situation they heard or know about.
- **“Give children opportunities to practice cooperation and problem solving.”** Providing situations—play, projects, etc. —that require teamwork is a great way to build understanding of cooperation and group problem-solving skills.
- **“Encourage children to show support and appreciation for others.”** The best way to facilitate this is to demonstrate it—model the behavior. Be encouraging and appreciative of the youth’s behavior and others. Help youth improve skills that are important to their peer group. As Ferrer and Fugate point out, when school-age children have skills that are important to their peer group—such as sports—they can be successful and increase their self-confidence.

The Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) provides teaching strategies for helping children ages 3-5 build friendship skills. Although CSEFEL provides evidence-based resources and tools to support the social and emotional development of younger children, some methods work very well with school-age youth as well.

Take a look! 

Good Everyday Tips

As adults committed to working with youth and children, we very much want to promote and support strong emotional literacy development. Sunny Im-Wang, doctor of psychology, is the author of the book, Happy, Sad, and Everything In Between: All About My Feelings, which provides ways to promote emotional literacy. More can be found in the article “6 Ways to Foster Emotional Literacy in Children.”

The following are a few tips Im-Wang recommends:

Illustrate the mind and body connection—

Show youth that emotions can be linked to physical sensations.

Teach self-management skills—Taking a deep breath or counting to 10 are simple self-management skills that can help to self-regulate feelings, such as anger.

Express your own emotions—Use words to describe your own feelings.

Practice sharing—Sharing and taking turns are crucial skills in making and keeping friends. Practicing these skills helps youth to understand them and utilize them readily.

Teach mindful awareness—Help youth “stay in the moment” by relaxing the mind through physical relaxation.

Use stories or photos to discuss emotions—

Story characters can help children identify feelings with actions. This leads to greater understanding, acceptance, and management of feelings.



A MILE IN MY SHOES

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Circle Game

This game is for a larger group but can be adapted for a one-on-one scenario.

Learning Objective:

Kids will identify the emotions manifested in others through an awareness of facial expression, tone of voice, pitch, and gesture. Kids will learn to understand the emotional state of others.

- Think of several different emotions appropriate for his/her age group.
- Have kids stand in a circle with an adult in the middle.
- The adult points directly in front of him/her, closes his/her eyes, and spins around a few times.
- When the adult decides to stop, he/she will be pointing at a child.
- The adult walks up to the child he/she is pointing to. That person (the one being pointed at), must shake the adult's hand and ask, "How are you?"
- The adult must act out an emotion. The adult can use words (but doesn't have to), but cannot explain the emotion they are feeling. They can only use words to show the tone and pitch of their voice. For example if the emotion is worried, the adult can't say, "I'm very nervous about my grandmother being sick." The adult can say (in a quivering, quiet voice), "I don't know what to do."
- The selected kid must guess the adult's emotion by stating, "You are feeling _____."
- If the selected kid guesses the correct emotion, he/she gets one letter of the word SHOES. If the selected kid makes an incorrect guess, the adult spins again and selects a new kid to take a guess.
- The kids must keep track of the letters they have.
- Kids continue playing until time is up or until someone spells SHOES.
- Once time is up, discuss why it is important to recognize how others feel and step into their shoes.

SILENT DYNAMITE

RESPONSIBLE DECISION MAKING

Circle Game

Learning Objective:

Kids will learn what peer pressure looks and feels like. Kids will also learn how to say no.

- A soft ball is needed and the kids stand in a circle.
- The adult is the "caller."
- The caller gives a special command to the group and can change the command at any time. Examples of commands are: catch with elbows, catch with thumbs, throw with your opposite hand, spin around three times before throwing, etc.
- The kids are spread out around the room, then toss and catch the ball to one and another, silently (hence the name **Silent** Dynamite) until the caller yells, "Boom."
- When the caller yells "boom" whoever has the ball pauses.
- The adult gives the child with the ball a scenario involving peer pressure. That child has to give an appropriate way to say no or avoid that situation.
- If the child doesn't give a proper response to the scenario, that child has to go in the middle and sit. Be sure to talk with the group about what an appropriate response would be.
- If a child cannot complete the given command or drops the ball, he/she sits in the middle.
- The kids in the middle try to swat down or catch the ball as it is tossed around the room. If a child in the middle successfully catches the ball he/she gets back into the game. The game is over when there is only one person left standing from the original circle.

TRUST TELEPHONE


SOCIAL AWARENESS

Learning Objective:

Kids will identify the components of a trusting relationship. They will experience sharing confidences and maintaining confidentiality in building a safe and trusting environment.

- Divide the group of kids in half and have each group make a circle.
- Remind the group that they are working on trusting each other and being able to share things.
- For the first few rounds, the adult thinks of a few kid-appropriate secrets that he/she has (for example: "I still sleep with a stuffed animal" or "I am afraid of flying" or "When I was in third grade I cheated on a test", etc.).
- The adult selects one child from each group and quietly tells them both his/her secret, making sure both kids heard it.
- On "go," both kids return to their groups and pass the adult's secret around the circle by whispering into each other's ears as quickly as possible.
- The secret can only be stated twice so kids must listen to each other.
- Once the secret makes it to the end of the circle, the last child runs to the adult and repeats what they heard as the secret. If it is correct, that group gets a T. If it is wrong, they are told no and the first kid must start the secret again.
- This continues for a few rounds as groups try to spell the word TRUST.
- Throughout the game, the adult should remind kids of the points talked about during the discussion and how to use the letters of TRUST:
- After a few rounds, if the adult thinks their group can handle it, the kids can be allowed to come up with the secrets to pass around the circles.

- In order to keep kids from being embarrassed to share, adults should have kids write down their secrets without names on the paper and then have the adult randomly pick which secrets to pass around.
- Remind the group that sharing secrets is an important way to build trust.

For more activities, visit the WINGS website. 

*Wings for Kids granted permission to the authors to include these activities in this interactive guide.

Conclusion

Helping youth develop emotional literacy—the ability to understand and express feelings, develop self-confidence, and make friends—is ultimately laying the foundation for future success and happiness. Who doesn't want happy, healthy, and successful youth and communities? So, as we adults go about teaching, interacting with, and playing with school- aged youth, let's think about and act upon ways we can encourage and support social emotional skills to help kids be happy and successful.

Tell the truth.
Respect each other.
Understand and accept others.
Share thoughts and things.
Treat others how you want to be treated.

