

Expressing Feelings

Helping children recognise and express their feelings plays a crucial role in learning how to manage them. And, by being in touch with their feelings, children are better able to guess how other people feel – which is a vital step towards empathising with them, says Márianna Csóti.

Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) emphasises five qualities and skills that underpin children's ability to manage life, learn effectively, get on with other people and help them become responsible citizens. Two of these are managing feelings and being able to empathise with others.

Children with Special Educational Needs are more likely to display withdrawn, depressive and frustrated behaviour than children without particular difficulties. Helping them to divulge their feelings will help prevent children internalising their difficulties and blaming themselves – or externalising their difficulties, becoming disruptive and confrontational.

Different types of feelings

Ask the children to brainstorm feelings words and write them on the board. Now ask them to divide them into emotional and physical feelings: emotional feelings

are to do with how you feel inside your mind, physical feelings are to do with how your body feels. Can they make up sentences using these words? Here are some suggestions:

Emotional feelings

- I felt *angry* when I found out Danny had lied to me.
- I felt *anxious* when Mum wasn't where she said she'd be.
- I felt *bereft* when my best friend moved away.
- I felt *bitter* when I saw the present I'd made him kicked carelessly under his bed.
- I felt *cheated* when my friend got all the praise for work we'd done together.

Other emotional feelings include:

cheerful, concerned, contented, disappointed, disbelieving, disgusted, distraught, eager, embarrassed, empty inside, exasperated, excited, flustered, frantic, frustrated, furious, glad, happy,

hard-hearted, hopeful, hurt, impatient, in control, in love, interested, irritated, jolly, let down, lonely, mad, numb, overwhelmed, protective, sad, satisfied, scared, shy, sorrowful, strange, sympathetic, tearful, thrilled, uncomfortable (this can also be used in a physical sense), understanding, unhappy, upset, weird, worried and wronged.

Physical feelings

- I felt suddenly *calm* when the moment for my exam came.
- I felt *cold* when I woke up without any covers over me.
- I felt *dizzy* when I got off the ride at the fair.
- I felt *feverish* - hot one moment and shivering the next.
- I felt *frozen* standing in the snow at the bus stop.

Other physical feelings include: hot, ill, jittery, numb, restless, sore, strong, tender, tense, tired, uncomfortable (this can also be used in a physical sense) and weak.

Describing feelings

Ask the children to think how they would feel in the following situations. This helps them think about their emotions and verbalise them.

- Your baby brother smashes your work of art with his wooden hammer and then laughs at you when he sees your face. How do you feel? (Angry, disappointed, frustrated, hurt.)
- You see a puppy being operated on while watching a programme about animal hospitals and they say he might die. (Hopeful, sad, scared, tense, worried and disgusted or interested - at the blood and the puppy's insides being shown.)
- You are being accused of taking a bar of chocolate out of a shop without paying for it – but you had. (Angry, bitter, frustrated, scared, wronged.)

Letting feelings out

Ask the children why it is sometimes good for them to let others know how they feel. (If someone hurts your feelings, the person should know that he's done wrong and be given the opportunity to apologise. Also, if you bottle up all your feelings you will have difficulty coping with the frustration.) Discuss how the children might express their feelings in the following situations using these questions: a. How would you feel? b. How would you show these

feelings? c. What might happen if you don't show these feelings?

1. You were told that you could go away on the school trip to an outdoor pursuits centre. At the last minute your parents changed their minds and said you couldn't go.

Suggestions

- a. I would feel angry, disappointed, disbelieving, cheated, let down.
 - b. I would show these feelings by crying, shouting, 'It's not fair!', demanding an explanation, stamping my foot or walking out and slamming the door. (Parents might accept this behaviour as they would know they shouldn't have let my hopes be dashed. But they probably won't accept any name-calling.)
 - c. If I don't show these feelings, my parents will think that I wasn't that bothered about going anyway and so will not rethink what they've done for now or for the future.
2. Your best friend is emigrating to another country and you don't know whether you'll ever see her again. The moment comes when you say goodbye.

Suggestions

- a. I would feel bereft, distraught, sad, tearful, unhappy.
 - b. I would show these feelings by crying and hugging her tight or kissing her, making promises about keeping in touch, exchanging special gifts to remind us of each other and taking her photo.
 - c. If I do not show these feelings, my friend will think I don't care about her. She might also wonder whether I valued our friendship.
3. You've recently met a very funny boy. The jokes he tells makes you want to double up with laughter. Think about when you are with him.

Suggestions

- a. I would feel very happy and jolly.
- b. I would show these feelings by laughing openly, telling him he's very funny, showing I enjoy being with him by asking him about his plans for his free time and suggesting we spend some of it together.
- c. By showing these feelings I am rewarding him for his behaviour – I am telling him that he makes me feel good and that makes him feel good. Trying to hide my enjoyment of his

company is likely to make him want to steer clear of mine.

Showing gentle feelings

Some children find it very hard to show the gentler side to their nature, particularly boys - they might have been brought up 'to be a man'. Society expects men and boys not to show weakness and to be strong and in control. However, all children need help in expressing themselves and in giving sympathy and love to others - showing the more vulnerable inner part of themselves allows deeper feelings of connectedness and empathy to develop. Ask the children what they would do in the following situations to express their gentler feelings.

1. Your friend is diabetic. One day, at the end of a lesson, you notice your friend standing by the window looking out onto the playground. You ask him if he's going to join you but he makes no reply. Going closer, you realise there's something wrong. When you touch his arm you find it stiff and unyielding. You shout to the teacher for help and with others, you lower your friend onto some desks. He is unconscious. You wait with

him while the teacher phones for an ambulance. How would you feel and how would you express these feelings?

Suggestions

- I would feel worried and concerned. I would feel hurt for him and would feel the need to comfort him, although I know he might not know anything about it.
- I would express these feelings by touching him, holding his hand, stroking his brow, running my fingers through his hair, talking softly and encouragingly to him, telling him not to worry and that help was on its way. I would cover his body with my coat to keep him warm. I would cushion his head with my jumper.

2. Your best friend has school phobia. You know that he finds the first hour of school horrendous. His body shakes, he feels ill, he's sometimes sick and he finds it hard to concentrate. How would you feel and how would you express these feelings? *Suggestions*

- I would feel brotherly/sisterly/fatherly/motherly

towards him, concerned, protective, sorry for him, sympathetic and understanding.

- I would express these feelings by meeting him when he arrives in school and looking after him: being close by and being friendly towards him, expecting nothing in return by way of response and looking after him when he's being sick - getting him water to drink afterwards. When he's not in a panic, I would ask him what he's thinking and why he finds coming to school so awful. I would stop others from making fun, I would make the lessons as easy as possible by patiently explaining what we need to do and I would help him find his PE kit etc so that he has as little to worry about as possible. I would be kind to him and share my sweets.

Ask the children to spend some time thinking about how they could show gentler feelings to people they know.

Being specific about how you feel

Compare these two sentences: 'I hate bowling, can't we do something else?' and 'I hate bowling as I can never get the ball to hit the skittles and I feel really embarrassed and incompetent.' When

you divulge how you feel, it is good to be specific. The first sentence does not explain what the problem is so the problem can't be solved. Whereas the second sentence gives more detail allowing the other person to understand and either make no fuss about going somewhere else or to offer to help improve the person's bowling skill. Being specific enhances your feelings message to allow you to communicate on a much deeper level.

Ask the children to make up pairs of sentences with at least one feeling word in each. The first sentence is a simple one and the second sentence is to refer to the same thing but in much more detail as shown in the example above.

Suggestions:

- 'I don't like her... as she laughed at my trainers and I feel embarrassed every time she sees me in them and I imagine her laughing at me behind my back.'
- I feel really good today... my uncle from Korea is coming and I can't wait to see him as it's been two years since he came last.'
- Leave me alone... I'm in a bad mood as I had a huge row with my mum

before school and I feel terribly
ashamed about what I called her.’

Ask the children to try to guess how
other people might be feeling and find
out if they were correct: ‘Are you feeling
sad today? Is that because you miss
Imran?’ This exercise has the added
bonus of raising empathy.

Sharing thoughts and feelings gives
children the opportunity to access
friendly support and to listen to other
perspectives – so that things they
perceive as problems don’t grow
unchecked, skewing reality. Helping
children express their emotions is
essential for positive mental health and
satisfying relationships.

Why it is good to have a large feelings vocabulary?

- To describe precisely how you are feeling.
- To use interesting language.
- To avoid using offensive language.
- To help you get in touch with your emotions.
- To become emotionally close to others by inviting them in to your inner world - they might recognise similar feelings which builds empathy and rapport.
- Being articulate and expressive enhances your social experience and increases skilful handling of your relationships – for example, if someone does something to upset you, you can explain how you feel and why so that they stop doing it in the future.

Why do some people find it hard to talk about their feelings?

- They don’t have someone at home who talks about their feelings so they don’t know it’s OK to open up to other people.
- They were mocked when they did talk about their feelings which stopped them from opening up again.
- They are afraid of being thought strange or weak.
- They are out of touch with themselves and don’t know how they feel.
- They are in the habit of reacting impulsively with aggressive behaviour rather than taking time to examine how they feel and why – and what they can do to improve things.

Márianna Csóti is the author of, *Developing Children's Social, Emotional and Behavioural Skills* (Continuum £16.99) and *Social Awareness Skills for Children* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers £19.95) from which this article has been adapted. Her website can be viewed at www.mariannacsoti.co.uk