Steps to: Emotional intelligence

Steps to emotional wellbeing success

Emotions are complex psychological and physiological responses that help us adapt to and navigate our environment. We need to acknowledge that emotions (expression, awareness and understanding) are fundamental aspects of children's and adolescents' development. Emotions help people navigate challenges, make decisions, and build social connections. As teachers and parents, understanding the significance of emotions is crucial in supporting children's emotional growth. Supporting young people to build emotional intelligence is possibly one of the most important things we can do to support long term wellbeing outcomes and socio-emotional development.

What is the purpose of emotions?

Emotions are at the heart of human experience and interaction; they help us make sense of the world around us and inform our thoughts and behaviours. They contribute to multiple areas, from relationships to survival. Emotions provide us with information about situations, indicating feelings of fear or worry in moments of danger, excitement and elation in moments of joy, or a sense of motivation when achieving our goals. Emotions also provide understanding of our needs and values, which informs our responses or directional path when making decisions or engaging in activities. They aid us to convey our feelings and intentions to others, acting as a facet of communication. Lastly, Emotions contribute to creating meaningful connections with humans, building relationships and strengthening bonds with people who are important to us. Without emotion, life would feel devoid of meaning, motivation, and connection.

"Good" and "bad" emotions

It is important not to label emotions as "good" or "bad", emotions are just emotions. All emotions (even the ones we may label as "negative") serve valuable purposes in our lives -they give us information and have a functional role. By avoiding judgment, we can create a safe space for young people to express their emotions openly and develop emotional intelligence. Understanding the function of emotion helps us support their emotional growth and reduces shame, embarrassment or guilt about feeling certain emotions. Encouraging open communication about feelings fosters a healthy emotional environment in the classroom, allowing children to process their emotions constructively.

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Emotional intelligence (EI) is the sophisticated capacity to be aware of and understand both your own and other people's emotions. It involves the vital ability to differentiate between various emotions and strategically use this knowledge to guide your thoughts and actions. Individuals with strong EI skills are not only better equipped to regulate their own internal world but also to support and help others regulate theirs.

Emotional intelligence is traditionally built upon five interconnected components:

- Self-Awareness: The conscious recognition of your own emotions and how they physically and mentally impact your thoughts and behaviors.
- Self-Regulation: The capacity to manage and balance your emotions by integrating emotional experience with rational thought (emotion and logic).
- Motivation: The drive to reach personal, value-based goals by maintaining emotional balance and persistence.
- Empathy: The deep awareness and ability to share in or understand the emotional experiences of others.
- Social Skills: The relational tools built and maintained through effective communication, collaborative problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

Why Emotional Intelligence Matters for Children and Adolescents

The foundation of EI, self-awareness, empowers children and adolescents to identify and process their emotional states. When they can successfully label and reflect on their feelings, this activates the prefrontal cortex –the brain's executive control center–allowing for more effective emotion regulation instead of an immediate, distress-fuelled reaction. This internal stability directly translates to enhanced academic performance: regulated students are better able to manage study stress, persist through challenging content , and engage in the calm, critical thinking necessary for informed decision-making and problem-solving Furthermore, the cultivation of empathy actively strengthens social skills and engages the mirror neuron system. This neurobiological and social process fosters a powerful sense of belonging and facilitates positive peer and teacher relationships, which are scientifically proven to enhance motivation, resilience, and overall emotional well-being–the essential components of a thriving, psychologically safe learning environment.

As students strengthen their EI, they become increasingly equipped to navigate the personal and social complexities both within the school and the wider community.

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Encouraging Emotional Intelligence (EI) requires intentional effort on both the environmental (classroom culture) and individual (relational interaction) levels. These strategies help build a supportive environment where emotional growth is valued

1. Validation and Co-Regulation: Encourage open communication and active listening, where students can feel safe and express their emotions without judgment. Utilise validation skills to promote discussion of all feelings. Listen first, seek to understand the emotion, and put a pause on immediate problem-solving.

2. Model Emotional Transparency: Teachers are in the prime position to demonstrate skills for students to observe and learn from. Demonstrate emotional awareness and intelligence actively and openly, communicating and describing emotions experienced in the moment. Utilise teaching tools such as personal stories where emotions were felt, behaviors were displayed, and problem-solving was done.

3. Integrate Affective Learning: Teach students about different emotions, how these may feel in the body and be demonstrated in behaviors, and effective communication strategies. This can be done through the introduction of an emotion wheel or emotion check ins –play "emotion bingo" or "emotion charades" to build awareness of what emotions look and feel like personally and in others.

4. Encourage Self-Reflection: Use an emotion wheel or list to encourage students to identify which emotion they are feeling. Use open-ended questions to increase emotional communication such as, “how am/was I feeling,” “how can I describe this feeling,” and “what can I do to help myself right now.” These can be used in general practice or for reflection following a distressing situation.

5. Utilize Multi-Modal Formats: Some students learn best by listening, some by doing, and some by seeing. Utilize different resources for students to gain understanding of emotion regulation and practice it daily, such as visual posters, videos, and worksheets. Also, encourage students to use platforms like Komodo to communicate when they need support

Emotions check-in

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How am I feeling?


Happy


Sad


Tired


Calm


Frustrated


Proud


Worried


Excited

What do I need?


Listen to me


High-five


Problem solve

Calm breathing


Calm zone


Move my body


Do an activity


Get some water

Emotion wheel

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What emotion are you experiencing?

We all feel a range of emotions. Emotions are not “good” or “bad.” We experience these in different intensities and the first step is to name the emotion we are feeling.

