

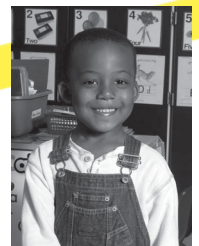
# Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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## **Fostering Emotional Literacy in Young Children: Labeling Emotions**

G. Joseph • P. Strain • M. M. Ostrosky



# 21

**SERIES**

## **WHAT WORKS BRIEFS**

# Fostering Emotional Literacy in Young Children: Labeling Emotions

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed for in-service providers and others who conduct staff development activities. Those who are responsible for professional development should find them useful in sharing information with professionals and parents to help teachers and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. The

Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments. The strategies described in the Briefs are most successful when used in the context of ongoing positive relationships and supportive environments. The strategies are most successful for an individual child when developed based on observation and assessment of the child including information from the family, teacher, and other caregivers.

*Four-year-old Gregory is an avid block builder. At free play, he has busied himself with an elaborate construction of a zoo. To complete his masterpiece, he needs an elusive Y-shaped block. As he searches the room in vain for the last, crucial piece, his initial calm hunt becomes more hurried and disorganized. He begins to yell and disrupt other children’s play. Gregory sees that his classmate Malik has the piece he wants. Gregory aggressively approaches Malik, who looks frightened. His teacher approaches in the nick of time and asks, “What’s the matter?” Gregory screams that Malik has his block and then swiftly turns away to go after the piece. Gregory’s teacher stops him from grabbing the block, whereupon Gregory launches into a major tantrum. The tantrum persists even though his teacher repeatedly tells him to “calm down.”*

*Keisha is 4 years old and loves to play at the computer. The computer area is her first choice at center time, just about every day. Today, Keisha is getting nervous because her teacher has called upon most of the boys and girls to decide where they would like to play first and Keisha notices that there is just one space left at the computers. She starts to bounce a little with her hand extended in the air and tries her best not to call out to the teacher, “Me next!” When Keisha finally gets called on to make her choice, she sees that the computer area is full. Keisha crosses her arms across her chest and frowns. Her teacher asks, “Keisha, what is the matter?” Keisha says, “I wanted to play on the computer.” Her teacher replies, “Hmmm... they look full.” Keisha replies, “Yeah, I’m frustrated and a little mad.” Her teacher responds, “You feel frustrated and a little mad, huh? Well, that is a problem.” Keisha begins to take some deep breaths and then proclaims, “I will go play at the block corner until Bahta is done. Can you come tell me when he is finished?” Her teacher replies, “I am so proud of you for staying so calm and figuring out a solution to your problem. Why don’t you ask Bahta to let you know when it is your turn?” Keisha smiles at the suggestion and skips off to make the request of Bahta.*

## What Is Emotional Literacy?

Emotional literacy is the ability to identify, understand, and respond to emotions in oneself and others in a healthy manner. Children who have a strong foundation in emotional literacy tolerate frustration better, get into fewer fights, and engage in less self-destructive behavior than children who do not have a strong foundation. These children are also healthier, less lonely, less impulsive, more focused, and they have greater academic achievement. The focus of this *What Works Brief* is on building an emotional vocabulary. The development of a feeling word vocabulary is considered to be of critical importance in a child’s emotional development because it makes it possible for children to better understand their emotional experiences. The ability to name a feeling allows children to discuss and reflect with others about their personal experience of the world. The larger a child’s emotional vocabulary, the finer discriminations they can make between feelings and the better they can communicate with others about their feelings.

Children who are able to label their emotions are on their way to becoming emotionally competent. In the above two scenarios, great variation can be noted in the children’s skills in labeling emotions. Gregory is unable to label his feeling of frustration, and at the same time, he is unable to read his peer’s frightened expression and calm himself down. Keisha, on the other hand, is able to correctly identify her feelings, control her impulses to yell out, regulate her disappointment in a healthy way, and solve an interpersonal problem with some support from her teacher.

## What Accounts for Variations in Children’s Abilities to Label Emotions?

The ability to label emotions is a developmental skill that is not present at birth—it must be learned. And just as there is wide variation in the point at which children start to demonstrate appropriate use of books, begin writing, and recognize letters, some children’s ability to identify, understand, and label their emotions develops at a slower rate than others. Three variables

can underlie a child's growing ability to label emotions: (1) the child's temperament and developmental status, (2) parental socialization and environmental support, and (3) the teacher and child care providers' emphasis on emotional literacy. Indeed, differences in the way adults talk to and teach children about feelings and problem solving are related to children's abilities to label emotions.

### **What Can Adults Do?**

Adults can play a major role in children's ability to identify, understand, and express emotions in a healthy way. The following strategies are key in fostering emotional literacy in young children:

**Express Your Own Feelings.** One way to help children learn to label their emotions is to have healthy emotional expression modeled for them by the adults in their lives. For example, a teacher who knocked over all the glitter can say, "Oh boy, is that frustrating. Oh well, I'd better take a deep breath and figure out how to clean it up." Or a parent who just got word that she got a promotion at work can say, "Wow! I am so excited about this! I feel proud of myself for working so hard." Parents, teachers, and child care providers can make a point to talk out loud about their feelings as they experience them throughout the day.

**Label Children's Feelings.** As adults provide feeling names for children's emotional expressions, a child's feeling vocabulary grows. Throughout the day, adults can attend to children's emotional moments and label feelings for the children. For example, as a child runs for a swing, another child reaches it and gets on. The first child begins to frown. The teacher approaches her and says, "You look a little disappointed about that swing." Or a boy's grandmother surprises him by picking him up at child care. The boy screams, "Grandma!" and runs up to hug her. The child care provider says, "Oh boy, you look so happy and surprised that your grandma is here!" As children's feeling vocabulary develops, their ability to correctly identify feelings in themselves and others also progresses.

**Play Games, Sing Songs, and Read Stories with New Feeling Words.** Adults can enhance children's feeling vocabularies by introducing games, songs, and storybooks featuring new feeling words. Teachers and other caregivers can adapt songs such as "If you're happy and you know it" with verses such as "If you're frustrated and you know it, take a breath"; "If you're disappointed and you know it, tell a friend"; or "If you're proud and you know it, say 'I did it!'" The following are some examples of games young children can play.

- ✓ Adults can cut out pictures that represent various feeling faces and place them in a container that is passed around the circle as music plays. When the music stops, the child holding the container can select a picture designating an emotion and identify it, show how they look when they feel that way, or describe a time when he or she felt that way. To extend this fun activity, give the children handheld mirrors that they can use to look at their own feeling faces.

- ✓ Children can look through magazines to find various feeling faces. They can cut them out and make a feeling face collage. Adults can help the children label the different feeling faces.
- ✓ Children and adults can play "feeling face charades" by freezing a certain emotional expression and then letting others guess what the feeling is. To extend this activity, ask the children to think of a time that they felt that way.
- ✓ In the mornings, have children "check in" by selecting a feeling face that best represents their morning mood. At the end of the day, have children select again, and then talk about why their feeling changed or stayed the same.
- ✓ Finally, the teacher can put feeling face pictures around the room. Children can be given child-size magnifying glasses and told to walk around looking for different feeling faces. When they find one, they can label it and tell about a time they felt that way. With a little creativity, teachers and other caregivers can play, adapt, or develop new games, songs, and stories to teach feeling words.

*Gregory's teacher, Miss Antoinette, realized that Gregory and some of his classmates needed help to develop skills in labeling emotions. She started making a conscious effort to label her feelings, as well as the feelings of children in her class throughout the day—every day. She encouraged the other adults in the room to do the same. She also planned at least one feeling game, song, or story a day to introduce new and more complex feeling words. She also taught the children some strategies for regulating their emotions such as taking deep breaths, relaxing their muscles, and thinking of "happy places." When she saw Gregory get upset, she would move in to ask him how he was feeling and help him use some of the strategies for calming down. Over time, Miss Antoinette noticed a significant difference in Gregory and his peers' behavior. The children would tell each other how they felt instead of fighting and would help each other when in distress. Miss Antoinette noticed that the children no longer needed her to intervene to solve problems as often—but instead would solve them on their own. She noticed that even for children like Keisha, who had a strong foundation in labeling emotions, positive changes were occurring. Miss Antoinette felt a sense of calm in her room and was happy that she would be sending her children onto kindergarten with a strong foundation in emotional literacy.*

### **Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in This Intervention?**

The children who have participated in research on emotional literacy include preschoolers who exhibit a range of disabilities including ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, speech and language delays, challenging behavior, and deafness and hard of hearing. Studies have included preschoolers from low-income families. The importance of keeping in mind the cultural backgrounds and beliefs of the children and families in a teacher's care cannot be overstated when teaching young children to identify, understand, and respond to emotions.



We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.



### Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

Practical information on helping children develop emotional literacy can be found in journals such as *Young Children* and *Young Exceptional Children*. See the following resources for ideas on how to teach young children to identify, understand, and express emotions in a healthy way:

- Joseph, G. E., & Strain, P. S. (2003). Enhancing emotional vocabulary in young children. *Young Exceptional Children*, 6(4), 18-26.
- Joseph, G. E., & Strain, P. S. (2003). Helping young children control anger and handle disappointment. *Young Exceptional Children*, 7(1), 21-29.
- Kusché, C. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (1994) *The PATHS curriculum*. Seattle, WA: Developmental Research and Programs.
- Shure, M. B. (2000). *I can problem solve: An interpersonal cognitive problem-solving program*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- 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.



### What is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following researchers have documented the effects of enhancing emotional literacy in early childhood settings:

- Denham, S. A., & Burton, R. (1996). A social-emotional intervention for at-risk 4-year-olds. *Journal of School Psychology*, 34(3), 225-245.
- Domitrovich, C. E., Cortes, R., & Greenberg, M. T. (2002, June). *Preschool PATHS: Promoting social and emotional competence in young children*. Paper presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> National Head Start Research Conference, Washington, DC.
- Greenberg, M. T., & Kusché, C. A. (1998). Preventive interventions for school-age deaf children: The PATHS curriculum. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 3(1), 49-63.
- Moore, B., & Beland, K. (1992). *Evaluation of Second Step, preschool-kindergarten: A violence prevention curriculum kit. Summary report*. Seattle, WA: Committee for Children.
- Webster-Stratton, C., & Hammond, M. (1997). Treating children with early-onset conduct problems: A comparison of child and parent training interventions. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 65(1), 93-109.

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