

Strengthen Children’s Emotional Intelligence through Reading Books



make literacy meaningful

Michelle Moore

The National College of Ireland, Dublin Ireland

Introduction

Emotional intelligence and its effects on children’s lives has become a mainstream topic of conversation for not only educators but parents as well. In recent years, a mounting body of research has supported the value of teaching emotional intelligence to young children (Dowling, 2014; Lantieri, 2008; Hyson, 2004). Government bodies and leading world organisations are also recognising the importance of introducing emotional intelligence abilities from an early age and see the development of these abilities as crucial for a child’s health and wellbeing (European Union, 2018; UNICEF, 2007). This learning paper is underpinned by theorists such as Salovey, Mayer and Goleman who paved the way in recognising the importance of developing emotional intelligence, their research highlights that school going children need support in social and emotional development with the improvement of these skills essential for maintaining positive relationships (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1990). This paper aims to enable readers to use practical examples of using books to encourage conversations in relation to emotions and feelings.

Emotional literacy, Pro-social Skills and Emotional Intelligence

Emotional literacy and pro-social skills are often discussed as necessities for all human beings to form successful relationships. Emotional literacy is described as, having the ability to understand, identify and express feelings and emotions (Nikolajeva, 2013; Schiller, 2009). While Batson states that prosocial skills include "a broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself—behaviours such as helping, comforting, sharing and cooperation" (1998, p.228). These socio-emotional components are part of what encompasses emotional intelligence.

Using Picture Books to Promote Emotional Intelligence

Emotions affect our experiences and influence our behaviours. They impact our daily life, our mood, our actions and our relationships. It is widely known that we learn from the world around us, from our social circles, family and friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1962). Pro-social skills are recognised as a key factor for a healthy social development and children who demonstrate these skills are more likely to have positive relations, higher self-esteem, greater academic achievement and career success. High quality adult interactions and a challenging and stimulating learning environment are central to young children's learning (Early Learning Initiative, 2012). In addition, parental involvement and engagement with reading activities in the home environment has important positive outcomes on a child's language, literacy skills and educational success (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich, and Welsh, 2004; Bus, van IJzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995).

According to Harper, "Picture books can provide the framework for building empathy, tolerance, and friendships and reinforce social-emotional, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills in young children" (2016, p. 81). Reading books and discussing illustrations with children can enhance their awareness of emotions. It can also encourage empathy by providing language to express, recognise and label emotions in themselves and others. Adults can encourage children to build on their emotional intelligence abilities by actively listening the child and specifically naming, describing and explaining emotions and how emotions feel to the child and to others around them.

Putting Theory into Practice

Choosing high quality books can seem to be a minefield! It just takes a little investigation on behalf of the person sourcing the books. Fictional, illustrated and real-life picture books can spark the imagination and give children real-life examples of different emotions and feelings. Below are some practical tips to encourage children to build on and understand feelings and emotions through the medium of books.

Before Reading

1. Allow the child to choose the books that they are interested in.
2. Find a time that suits everyone, that's quiet and of little distraction.
3. Sit close together and allow the child to turn the page.
4. For younger children, don't worry about reading the text word for word. Make up stories from the pictures.
5. Use your voice, the tone, pitch and volume. It makes the reading come alive.
6. Use the tips below to encourage and model the art of conversation.
7. Enjoy yourself and have fun!

Label and Explain What the Emotion Looks Like

Label actions, facial expressions, body language that links in the emotion you are describing. Point to the features in the book to further explain what an emotion looks like to others.

- You are happy, sad, frustrated or annoyed.
- The boy looks lonely, mad, glad or tired.

Describe Why

Bringing in the child's experiences encourages children to think about how they feel about the people and places that are important to them.

- You are happy because Grandad is coming to stay with us.
- You are frustrated because you cannot tie your shoes laces yet.
- You are sad because your friends went home.

Empathise and Explain

Explaining to a child why they feel a certain way can often help them understand their emotions better.

- You are happy because Grandad is coming to stay with us. I am too, I am looking forward to seeing him, I miss him.
- I know you are frustrated because you cannot tie your shoes laces yet. It is really difficult. Let's try tying them together.
- You look sad. Is it because your friends are gone home? It's very late, they have to go to bed soon, but they'll be back to play in the morning. Why don't we snuggle up and read a bed time story together.

Use Open Ended Questions and Statements

Using open-ended questions give the child the opportunity to explain what they want to say in detail. While actively listening and allowing the child time to answer the questions shows that you are interested in what they have to say. This builds trust, which is needed in healthy relationships.

- I wonder why the girl is feeling sad, happy, annoyed?
- Why do you think she is excited, sad, mad or thankful?
- I was so angry, happy, anxious when I
- Do you remember when.....

Conclusion

In conclusion, emotions play a significant part in our lives; they affect our relationships, our learning, our memories, as well as our mental health (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

In the present climate where children's influences are coming from video games or social media the need for human interaction is now more significant for their developmental process (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011) than ever. Developing emotional intelligence abilities are critical for children's future success in not only their careers but also their social lives (Fan & Chen, 2001). With children, these abilities can be nurtured through the medium of books and adults can foster these skills by helping children to learn the emotional language needed to describe and understand feelings. Children are never too young to start learning; all knowledge will build on their foundations of future successes and help them form, maintain and strengthen relationships throughout their lives.

Lastly, to leave you with a Judith Colbert quote;

"When you give children skills and strategies for controlling their emotions, solving problems and relating to others in positive ways, you give them tools that will serve them well for the rest of their lives."

(Early Childhood News, 2007, p.4)

Resources

List of quality early years' books centred on emotions and feelings.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/earlyedu-emotions-using-books.pdf>

Activities

- Using playdoh and blank face templates (link below) to incite imagination and promote discussions around feelings and emotions. The adult can model and encourage conversation by pointing to the different aspects of the face, eyes, ears, nose and mouth while labelling the emotions created. <https://www.twinkl.ie/resource/t-t-5988-blank-face-templates-with-face-features>
- Allow the child to use a camera to take photos of the people in their lives. Develop the photos and make a scrap book of their real-life family and friends. This can be a wonderful way of building their feelings vocabulary and can give children a sense of identity and belonging through real-life experiences.
- Using a mirror can be a fun experience that shows children what their emotions look like on their face. This activity can foster the understanding of not only their own facial features and the emotions associated with them but also others peoples.
- Encourage the child to make a story sack centred on feelings and emotions. These sacks can include books and puppets to match characters in the stories. Children can get involved in the stories and can think about how the characters feel, think and act. This can help them understand a range of emotions and build on their emotional intelligence.

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