

# Developing Emotional Literacy in Schools

## Contents

<b>Part One: The Value of Emotional Literacy</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. What is this book all about?	2
2. What is Emotional Literacy?	4
3. What are the characteristic signs of an Emotionally Literate school?	11
4. Why bother with Emotional Literacy	18
5. The benefits of developing Emotional Literacy	21
6. Involving parents	26
7. What the children say about Emotional Literacy	27
8. Where do we start?	28

## **Part Two: Activities to Develop Emotional Literacy**

9. Putting Emotional Literacy into practice	31
Activity 1 How do you feel today?	32
Activity 2 Learning about myself	34
Activity 3 Building a feelings vocabulary	36
Activity 4 How do I learn?	37
Activity 5 Building a safe environment – Trust	39
Activity 6 `I` statements	41
Activity 7 Optimism	43
Activity 8 Target setting	44
Activity 9 Self Esteem	46
Activity 10 Friendship words	47
Activity 11 Responding to facial expressions	49
Activity 12 Listening	50
Activity 13 The compliments game	51
Activity 14 Self talk	53
Activity 15 Choices	55

Appendix i How to go about introducing Emotional Literacy

Appendix ii Feelings words

To take you further

# Part One: The Value of Emotional Literacy

## 1. What is this book all about?

*'People in positions of influence seem to have forgotten that the best things in education are often those that cannot be measured.'*

*Peter Johnson,  
Head of Millfield School*

This book is about emotions and their role in creating a school environment where young people are happy, eager to learn and enthusiastic about coming each day and where the teachers, too, feel positive about their work. It's about putting children in touch with their feelings, recognizing them and learning what an important part they play in their lives, and showing them ways to manage those feelings constructively.

The book is based on the experiences of one school which set about developing an understanding of how important our emotions are and making emotions central to the philosophy of education and personal growth. We started this by considering our own personal emotional growth as adults and teachers, and then by devoting one lesson with each class every week to exploring emotions, sharing emotions and nurturing the understanding that our feelings can help us grow as individuals - or sabotage our progress in life if we allow them to. We made a conscious effort to raise awareness of emotions and emotional responses to everyday situations in school and encouraged the children to take increasing responsibility for their own emotional reactions and responses.

The book is in two parts; the first part explains what emotional literacy is and the benefits it brings. The second part contains some practical activities for you to use in your classroom as a taster to show you a little of the value for yourself. The activities can be used with students of different ages although the way the subject matter is introduced may need to be adapted according to the maturity level of your group. There are a number of excellent resources to take emotional literacy further, some of which are listed at the back of the book.

Time spent developing emotional literacy in school might be considered a luxury because it is not a curriculum subject in its own right; however, the PSHE curriculum includes many areas which are directly related to emotional growth. There are also many important indirect benefits from spending time nurturing emotions, namely an improvement in relationships with a growth in empathy and compassion, a reduction in bullying, an understanding and acceptance of individual differences, and raised levels of motivation and achievement. A better understanding of emotions can also help young people deal with those anxieties and worries which can ultimately lead to such problems as eating disorders and depression.

Introducing emotional literacy will not bring immediate change and it is not a 'cure all'. Our emotions give rise to patterns of behaviour which we learn in our formative years and which we repeat over and over again as we grow. Recognizing our emotional responses and then bringing about changes in responses which have not worked for us takes thought and practice, until eventually these new responses become automatic. Emotional lessons need to be learned gradually, in the same way as any other subject in school.

In the longer term we found the effort to focus on emotional growth to be very worthwhile. Emotional literacy can be introduced with very little expenditure; an understanding of the importance of our emotions, a willingness to give children the chance to reflect and talk about how they feel and some good lesson ideas are the key ingredients.

As emotional literacy grows it is truly inspiring to hear even the youngest children putting into words the way they feel about their experiences with others. It is hugely rewarding to see young people growing in confidence as they begin to understand just how much choice and control they have in their own lives and watching them begin to really believe in themselves.

## 2. What is Emotional Literacy?

*'The first priority in education – if by education we mean learning to be human – is learning to live in personal relation to other people..... I call this the first priority because failure in this is fundamental failure, which cannot be compensated for by success in other fields'.*

*John Macmurray.*

*Learning to be Human, 1958*

The way we feel has a major impact on what we think, say and do, and our feelings ebb and flow like the tide, all day and every day. In his book, *'Emotional Intelligence'*, Daniel Goleman explains that our emotional intelligence, how we recognize and respond to our own feelings and those of other people, can be more important as a guide to the success of our lives than intellectual ability. Thus, if we are to be successful in the workplace as well as in our personal life, we need to have a good understanding of how our emotions influence us.

### **Self-confidence**

Ask groups of parents and teachers what they most want for their children and the most frequently quoted response is self-confidence. Self-confidence comes partly from being told we're doing well but, more importantly, from somewhere inside ourselves, from an understanding of our abilities, academic or otherwise, that we all have a contribution to make and that we are able to manage our lives and overcome difficulties. To reach this understanding we need to know ourselves and what drives us forward or, on the other hand, what holds us back. Self-confidence is a foundation stone for effective learning and effective relationships.

Confident, emotionally literate young people can recognize emotions in themselves, express these emotions respectfully to others whenever necessary and understand that emotions change; they understand that we all have choices and that making good emotional choices helps us succeed and grow in confidence.

### **Stress, Laughter and Learning**

Research in the field of neuroscience in the past decade has shown us how emotional stress shuts down the brain, impeding effective learning, and this has become a key strategy in the development of accelerated learning. If we enjoy our learning experience the memories created are positive and this helps understanding and retention. In addition, if we are to be open to intuition and creativity, both of which are valuable qualities in the modern world, it is necessary to be happy within ourselves.

Laughter helps learning because it produces body chemicals, endorphins, which make us feel good, and the physical act of laughing pumps extra oxygen around our body and brain. Norman Cousins, the author of *'Anatomy of an Illness'*, calls the act of laughter 'internal jogging' and, quite apart from doing us good, it has the added bonus of connecting us to other people in a very positive way. Being connected, feeling that we are accepted as part of a group, raises comfort levels, allowing us to stretch ourselves and learn by taking risks.

Because we are all human, it is unrealistic to expect us to be happy all the time. But when we do have those low days, emotional literacy helps us understand that it will not always be this way and

that by, being optimistic and hopeful, things will feel better before too long. And when we become frustrated or angry, being emotionally literate helps us know how to express our feelings in ways that avoid hurting others, and know that positive self-talk will set us back on the road to balance and progress.

## **The Key Elements of Emotional Literacy**

Traditionally education has focused on success in the three R's, Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, all of them areas of intellectual development. Emotional literacy expands our approach to education by developing four more R's: Respect, Responsibility, Resilience and Resourcefulness. These qualities are crucial to success because they guide us in the management of our lives; personal fulfillment depends on our attitude and it is all too easy to sabotage our own happiness by not recognizing this.

### **1. Respect**

First and foremost we need to learn to respect ourselves, to know what is right and what is not, and to follow our beliefs about this with integrity. Self respect is about being honest with ourselves so that the decisions we make are ones we feel comfortable about inside; this can mean standing up to peer pressure and perhaps even losing people we considered to be friends. Being true to ourselves in this way may lead us into uncomfortable and difficult situations, but knowing that we have followed the path we consider to be right brings us peace of mind.

Once we have learnt to respect ourselves we can begin to learn respect for other people, to understand that they have feelings just like our own and that they may make their decisions for very different reasons from ours. Empathy is a powerful emotional quality to have. We learn that we need to be careful about judging others and we should always try to treat them the way we would like them to treat us.

We also need to show respect for our environment, whatever that may be, and, in particular, the natural environment. We live in a beautiful world and too often we rush around burdened by the cares of life without stopping to appreciate the marvels of nature. Children are fascinated by the wonders of the natural world and we should encourage this and join in with their enthusiasm. Being in harmony with the natural world, 'mother earth', is an essential component in the lives of many so-called 'simple societies', societies relatively untouched still by the technologies of the twenty-first century, and with good reason. We all know the emotional effect of watching the sun set in a glowing sky, or gazing with wonder at the moon and stars on a clear night. Teach children to value and respect this great gift by enjoying it without disturbing and spoiling it. 'Leave nothing but footsteps, take nothing but photographs' is sound advice indeed.

Developing respect in all its aspects can have a powerful impact. In fact, the word 'Respect' could be the only school rule we ever need.

### **2. Responsibility**

We need to learn that our choices are made by no-one but ourselves and that each choice we make brings with it a consequence. If we choose responsibly, those consequences will probably benefit ourselves and others and will make us feel good. Irresponsible choices bring with them consequences which we may not like because they make us feel bad about ourselves and uncomfortable inside.