

EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

CHAPTER 4

Navigating Emotions

Overview

In *Building Resilience from the Inside Out*, Linda Lantieri writes of children in the Kindergarten to 2nd grade age range: “Although children this age may not yet easily verbalize their understanding of consciousness, it is now clearer that young children do have the ability to separate out thoughts in the mind from people and things outside of themselves. Since children’s skills in this area are emerging, they may or may not be able to understand the theory of why they are doing this work, but will respond to the concrete practices, images, and play that these activities present, especially when practices are made regular as rituals and routines.”

Even at this young age, children’s emotional life is rich. They experience a full range of emotions and are able to see emotions in others. Yet they may not understand how to verbalize, name or identify their emotions or how to talk about them. They may not understand why certain emotions come up for them or why they come up for other people. And importantly, they may not know that there are things they can do to help understand and navigate their own emotions. Without this knowledge and these skills, one’s own and others’ emotions can even be scary or overwhelming.

What is an Emotion?

Emotions are evaluations we make of a situation, but they also are felt in the body. Both emotions and physical sensations can be considered “feelings.” One can say, “I feel heat in my right foot,” which is a sensation, and one can say, “I feel angry about this,” which is an emotion. Sensations, however, tend to be localized in a particular part of the body, whereas emotions tend to be felt generally. Also, emotions arise from an appraisal of a situation: for example, seeing what is happening as positive or negative. This means one can feel an emotion about a situation, but one does not tend to feel a sensation about a situation. Usually emotions, however, are also accompanied by physical sensations in the body.

Emotional Hygiene

Understanding emotions can be very empowering for young students. They experience emotions all the time, yet often may not understand what is happening inside themselves. Learning about emotions makes these experiences less unfamiliar and eventually easier to manage.

It is also important that students begin to recognize that strongly negative emotional states have the potential to lead to behaviors that harm their own well-being and that of others. When they recognize this, they will understand the value of cultivating good “emotional hygiene.” This does not mean suppressing uncomfortable emotions. Rather, it means developing a healthy way of dealing with one’s emotions. This requires a basic literacy about emotions, such as being able to identify and name them, as well as their characteristics, and being able to differentiate emotions

from other types of feelings, like physical sensations. It also means exploring the relationship between emotions and needs. This is because emotions—especially negative emotions—often arise from unmet needs. Seeing this clearly can help students to be more patient with themselves and others. The first three learning experiences therefore explore the idea of needs and what feelings (sensations and emotions) arise when a need is met or goes unmet.

The practice of good emotional hygiene also requires emotional discernment: the ability to recognize when an emotion can become unhelpful or unhealthy, such as extreme anger or jealousy. While all emotions are natural, some emotions can become risky if they get out of control, because they can lead to very strong impulses to behavior that could be destructive. It is important for students to decide for themselves which emotions may be risky for them. They will do so by asking questions and investigating the emotion closely: what impulses does it lead to? What would society or our school look like if people had more of this emotion? What if they had less of it? Students will then examine what strategies they have for dealing with those emotions they have identified as potentially risky.

Sometimes children are taught that it is “bad” to feel or to express a particular emotion, such as anger, frustration, or sadness. If students conclude that a certain emotion is bad, they may feel guilty when they experience or express that emotion, and they may even feel that they themselves are “bad” because of doing so. It is important therefore to help students recognize that emotions are natural. Developing a healthy heedfulness towards risky emotions does not mean that the emotions themselves are bad or that we are bad if we have them. Rather, it is like recognizing that a cooking fire can become dangerous if it gets out of hand, and that therefore it is good to develop caution and awareness regarding certain emotions.

This chapter therefore seeks to help students start to develop what can be called a “map of the mind,” meaning an understanding of different mental states, such as emotions, and their characteristics. This map of the mind is a kind of emotional literacy, contributing to emotional intelligence and helping students to better “navigate” their own emotional lives. Because strong emotions prompt behaviors, by learning to navigate their emotions, students are also learning how to “hold back” or exercise restraint from behaviors that harm themselves and others. As students grow older, their “map of the mind” can become increasingly sophisticated as they learn more emotion terms and learn to distinguish between emotions and mental states in increasingly subtle ways. The intention here is to introduce them to the idea of thinking about emotions and start them on that journey.

Student Personal Practice

Developing emotional literacy and emotional hygiene requires practice and skills, not just head knowledge. The reflective practices in this chapter are important for integrating students' growing conceptual understanding of emotions with their own personal experience and ability to recognize emotions in themselves. In this chapter, students will continue to practice the basic skills they have learned in the preceding chapters: how to balance and calm their nervous systems, how to focus their attention, and how to be aware of the thoughts and feelings that arise in each moment. When these practices become natural and embodied for students, they are practicing emotional hygiene on a daily basis.

Teacher Personal Practice

We tend to take emotions for granted, even though they play such a powerful role in our lives. While teaching this chapter, ask your friends, family members, and colleagues what they do to regulate or manage their emotions. Think about things you already do to navigate your own emotions. Doing this will make yourself more conscious of emotions in yourself and others, and this in turn will help you facilitate learning with your students.

Further Reading and Resources

Building Resilience from the Inside Out by Linda Lantieri. Introduction by Daniel Goleman.