

Emotions and children

Dr Margaret Carter



Margaret works in private practice as a behaviour change specialist, based in Brisbane. She works with families, children's service staff, kindergartens, care and education systems, government departments, community organizations, mental health practitioners and therapists. Margaret's work is always contemporary and relevant, designed in response to needs, circumstances and specific situations. Margaret is a qualified teacher and has worked as a preschool teacher, special education consultant and guidance counsellor. She works as a consultant, mentor, teacher, social coach, program designer, facilitator, presenter and mediator, and is the author of seven books. Margaret is a passionate advocate of inclusion and inclusive education. She has co-authored two social understanding curriculum texts for children 3 – 10 years of age and is the co-author of *The Five Faces of Parenting* program, a dynamic and unique program designed to make a positive difference in the lives of families.

Emotions are universal. Children experience hundreds of different emotions each day. Emotions, and the thinking associated with these emotions, are what trigger children to be affected by the people and events around them.

Children initially rely on facial clues to tell them what someone else is feeling. The core emotions joy, anger, sadness, fear (Campos and Barrett 1984) – are easier for children to identify as they concentrate their attention on how the person looks rather than on the context of the situation. As children grow and develop, they more accurately recognize a wider range of emotional expressions. They progress from relying on facial clues alone to considering situational clues that could elicit certain emotional responses. As children mature, they develop an understanding of the source of the emotion – how and why emotions occur.

Once children can understand emotions – their own and other people's – they are in a stronger position to solve social conflicts. Throughout this process, they develop their competencies to establish and maintain positive social relationships with others. The cornerstone of these relationships is mutual respect.

Many social problems with which communities struggle have strong emotional undercurrents. Often mental health difficulties are centered around deficits or unusual patterns of emotional expressiveness, understanding, and regulation (Denham 1998 p. 15).

Children need to let their emotions drive them but not take control of them. Unexpressed emotions and feelings get stored up inside, causing hurt, anger, depression, anxiety, and poor self image. Children often lash out at others when they feel sad, upset, frustrated, embarrassed, humiliated or excluded. Angry outbursts and overreacting are often the result of not expressing underlying emotions and feelings. It is important to get to the root of the child's emotions, what may be driving the emotions in the first place. For example, the emotional roots of anger are guilt, fear, hurt and helplessness (Leaman 2006 p. 30).

Children need to learn to recognize their personal body signals as their emotions are escalating so that they can take charge, neutralize and calm. This way they are developing emotional strength, flexibility and resilience. They are staying engaged and connected under pressure.

Children do not start out knowing the names of emotions any more than they do the names of animals or toys. They benefit from developing an emotions vocabulary so that they can use the right words to describe how they are feeling.

Children are not born knowing how to manage their emotions. As a result, they often rely on inappropriate strategies. Young children require extensive practice and a supportive learning environment to enhance their affective development. Within this environment, the



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adult's role is to accept children's emotions, assist children in understanding their emotions, in conjunction with providing safe outlets for children to express their emotions.

Use everyday life situations complemented with direct teaching as the medium for teaching emotional understanding. Teach, coach and support children as they learn to name, understand, express and respond to their own and others' emotions safely and constructively. When teaching children, focus on the fact that, as individuals, we are responsible for our own behaviours. Feelings are one aspect of how and why we behave the way we do.

Children's Emotional Fitness

Children who have developed emotional competence and resilience are developing emotional fitness and the ability to experience and understand the causes, consequences and expressions of emotions. During this process, they are learning to interpret the emotion signals of others as well as regulate and respond to their own emotions.

Children need a certain amount of emotional fitness to deal with the ups and downs of life. They need to learn how to cope with life's disappointments and troubles; to bounce back from stressful experiences; recover from misfortune and be ready to try again another time. This capacity for emotion fitness empowers the child to develop coping behaviours, to persist in the face of failure, to bounce back confidently from setbacks with their self esteem intact. Children who have developed these competencies possess personal power and positive self esteem.

Positive self esteem is the signal most important psychological skill we can develop in order to thrive in society. (Kaufman, Raphael and Espeland 1999).

Take the time to make a difference in the emotional life of a child – teach her emotional fitness competencies so she can develop emotion fitness capabilities. To me, this is one of the more important challenges we have as early years professional practitioners.

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