

5 Tools to Help Children Access Their Emotions

by HighScope | September 14, 2020



It is the beginning of the school year and, in addition to the excitement and anxiety that a new school year brings, many children are experiencing a range of emotions as they adapt to preschool during the pandemic.

This is a very stressful time for adults and children, even more so for those experiencing structural racism and socioeconomic disparities. Young children respond to and process emotional experiences in ways that are very different from adults and older children and often do not have the ability to understand or communicate their feelings. Giving children the tools to access their emotions and engage in conflict resolution helps their brains develop in a way that lays the foundation for academic learning.

Try these tools to help children understand and regulate their emotions:

1. Calm Down Kit

This kit can include a feelings check-in chart, glitter jars, play dough, and similar items that help the child to focus on being present with one item and easing into a more learning-ready state. Before introducing this kit and its contents, discuss with the child the changes they feel in their body when they get angry or frustrated. Empower them by displaying the contents and explaining the purpose of each component of the kit. Let the

child know that it is okay if they try something and it doesn't work, or that it may take time for their body to learn how to calm down (Ethington, 2018).

2. Cozy Cove

A “cozy cove” can be used as a place of comfort for a child to regain control or remove themselves from a triggering situation. This space should include comforting, calming, and soothing items that will add to serenity of the “cove.” It should be introduced to all the children in the classroom, and the teacher should demonstrate how to use the space (Grogan, 2012).

3. Brain Breaks

“Brain Breaks” are small and simple activities, only 2–3 minutes long, that get children moving to release energy during the day and teach them to gain control of their actions. To help children cope in the classroom, plan time in the daily routine for “Brain Breaks” before behavior gets out of control (Young, 2018).

4. Visual Schedules

Children dealing with stress often need concrete visual tools to bring them back to the present. What they see and feel can be more powerful than the words spoken to them, and giving them tactile, visual tools to cope can help them succeed. Regular routines in the classroom and support of the child during transitions will help the child develop a sense of internal structure. [HighScope's Daily Routine Cards](#) are an example of a visual schedule.

5. Emotional Literacy Charts

Putting feelings into words activates the higher-level functioning of the brain. It allows us to make meaning of experience and gain a sense of control. These charts give children a concrete feeling to point to, which helps them not only feel a sense of control over their emotions, but helps the adult discern how to talk with them about their feelings.



Disruptions to daily routines can impair a child's capacities for learning. In extreme cases, a child in your classroom who is inattentive, hyperactive, or impulsive may be exhibiting the effects of stress or trauma. As teachers and caregivers, we need to be reasonable with our expectations. Your classroom may be the only place a child gets to experience emotional stability and safety. By providing a nurturing and supportive learning environment, educators can actually buffer young children from the adverse effects of stress and trauma.

Adapted from “Managing Conflict Resolution With Children of Trauma” by Carly Li, which appeared in [The Active Learner Fall 2018](#). For the complete list of references, tap the link to read [The Active Learner](#).