

Recognizing different emotions

When teaching children to recognize different emotions there are several things you can do.

When working with very young children it's important to model and verbalize your own and their emotions.

I see you are smiling. I think you are happy because you're playing with your favorite toy.

I feel excited because I got a present and I don't know what's in there.

Furthermore you could use Social Stories (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Stories) as an example.

Use drawing, crafts or toys (like lego's, blocks, pipe cleaners, etc.) to create faces expressing different emotions.

For young children you might want to start with only 'Happy' and 'Unhappy'. For older children you could change 'Unhappy' with 'Mad', 'Sad' and 'Anxious'.

Use pictures, pictos, smileys, etc. to relate to these faces. Have the children describe the emotion of the people in the picture and why they are expressing this emotion.

The boy in the picture is smiling, so he is happy. I think he is happy because it is his birthday party and he gets to blow out the candles.

Play an 'Emotion game'. For example: have all the emotions spread out on the floor and take one as a starting point. Take turns and throw a dice to move to a next emotion. When at an emotion, tell about an experience that made you feel like this.

I was sad when my grandmother died.

Traffic light model

The traffic light model can be used to help children recognize their own level of arousal. It's a good tool for young children with aggression problems or acting out behavior.

First, discuss the different colors of the traffic light with the child. Most children will be able to relate this to behavior, without much explaining.

Second, relate alarm-signals to the different colors of the traffic light. Of course, for the color "green" this isn't very relevant.


Alarm-signals could be thoughts, feelings, or body signals. If a child doesn't know what a body signal is, have it run around as fast as it can for a few minutes.

Discuss things like: sweating, heat, sore muscles, etc. An alarm-signal could also come from another person: like a parent mentioning that they think the child is "in" either orange or red.

Third, have the child make suggestions of what actions can be taken when they are in orange or red. Most of the times children will come up with great ideas!

In my experience, children are very happy to have a tool helping them to express their state of mind. This normally works after a few days already!

Make sure that the child is open to involvement from teachers or parents, in guiding them to recognize their own "color".

	Alarm-signals	Actions
		

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By Karlijn de Hoon and Hans Hogewind.

Thermometer

The thermometer is a slightly more advanced version of the traffic light model. It is especially useful for children that experience problems in specific situations. You can work with only “Body signals” as an alarm-signal, another option is to add columns for “Thoughts” and “Feelings”. The advantage with only working in body signals is that these are easy to recognize and don’t need much cognition. The child will be able to respond to “rising temperature” very fast.

First, you’ll discuss the workings of a thermometer with the child. It’s like heating water: when the temperature is rising the water starts moving wilder and wilder. This could be used as a metaphor for the control a child has over its own behavior, when the child’s “temperature” is going up. Of course, it’s possible to work with more levels (for example, levels of 10 degrees each).

Relate several situations to each temperature, this could be experiences that the child had in the past, but also things that didn’t happen yet. Again, relate body signals to give the child a tool to recognize different levels and discuss action strategies.

°C	Situations	Body signals	Action strategies
75 – 100			
50 – 75			
25 – 50			
0 – 25			

Emotional intensity continuum

This is the most advanced tool. It is especially useful for children that have difficulties recognizing any behavior. They can use this scheme at the end of the day and fill it in for different situations that happened.

There are no pictures in the top row. Think, together with the child, of a good metaphor for five different stages of arousal. This could be a pan with boiling water, the weather, smileys, a bomb with a burning fuse, etc.

Situation					
Emotions					
Body signals					
Thoughts					
Filters					
Action urges					
Behavior					