

# EMOTIONAL LITERACY

A brief introduction by



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Child Mental Health

# WHAT IS EMOTIONAL LITERACY?

Emotional Literacy is the ability to understand and express feelings. Emotional Literacy involves having self-awareness and recognition of one's own feelings, what the triggers are for those feelings and knowing how to manage them. Importantly, it also includes the ability to recognise other people's feelings, what the triggers for those feelings may be and how they react to those feelings.

'We can put a lot of expectations on children, but it takes a long time to wire the neural pathways in the 'emotional Centre' of the brain. Evidence tells us this doesn't mature until around the age of 25.



# WHAT IS EMOTIONAL LITERACY?

Being  
aware of the  
emotions you are  
experiencing

Understanding  
why you might be  
feeling an emotion



EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Knowing  
the most effective  
way to express  
feelings and being able  
to put it into action

UNDERSTANDING  
AND TAKING INTO ACCOUNT  
THE FEELINGS OF OTHERS AND  
ADJUSTING YOUR RESPONSES  
ACCORDINGLY

# WHY SHOULD WE TEACH EMOTIONAL LITERACY SKILLS?

Just as we teach children to read, learn about science and math's, it is important for them to learn about their emotions.

Emotional development is one of the three prime areas of learning and development, alongside communication and language and physical. These prime areas are the foundations on which we build and the stronger these foundations are the better for long-term outcomes and mental health.

Emotional Literacy supports this development.

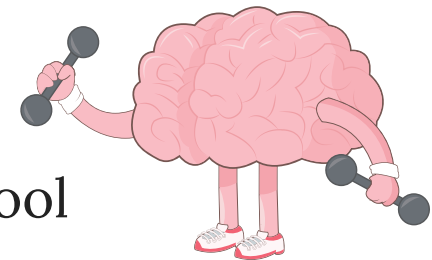




Over the last 20 years, thanks to advances in science, we now know more about brain development than ever before; Emotional Literacy can be nurtured from birth. There are so many different emotions so it is understandable that children (and adults) will feel overwhelmed and frightened as they experience them for the first time, and to differing degrees of intensity.

For many years parents have been advised on how to help children learn to talk, walk, eat solid food and reach other physical milestones; emotional development has had little focus, but supporting emotional development and wellbeing in children is more important than ever before. There has been a large increase in children with diagnosable mental health disorders and illnesses in the last 25 years.

Emotional Literacy is now valued as an important tool in supporting child development.



As an adult we can name many different emotions, but we still find them overwhelming at times – and difficult to name! So often we are feeling more than one emotion at a time. Many of us find it easier to notice 'louder' emotions such as sadness, anxiety, anger and happiness over more primary emotions such as unsure, rejected and content. The more we understand and listen to primary emotions the better we get at noticing early on when we need to problem solve, or use coping strategies, to support our wellbeing and mental health.

How we respond to our child's emotions, even when they are showing them to us in ways we find challenging, is an important part of Emotional Literacy.



Crying is a baby's way of expressing emotion.

Tantrums are one of the ways a toddler expresses emotion.

As adults, and especially as parents, it is our job to try to understand a child's emotions and their triggers. As the child grows, it is up to us to help children learn and understand their emotions so they begin to recognise how they feel physically, and can attribute it to a feeling. Over time we can help them to be able to express those feelings and build a toolbox of strategies to deal with them.

Using emotional literacy strategies helps to nurture this development and support your child's long-term wellbeing and mental health.



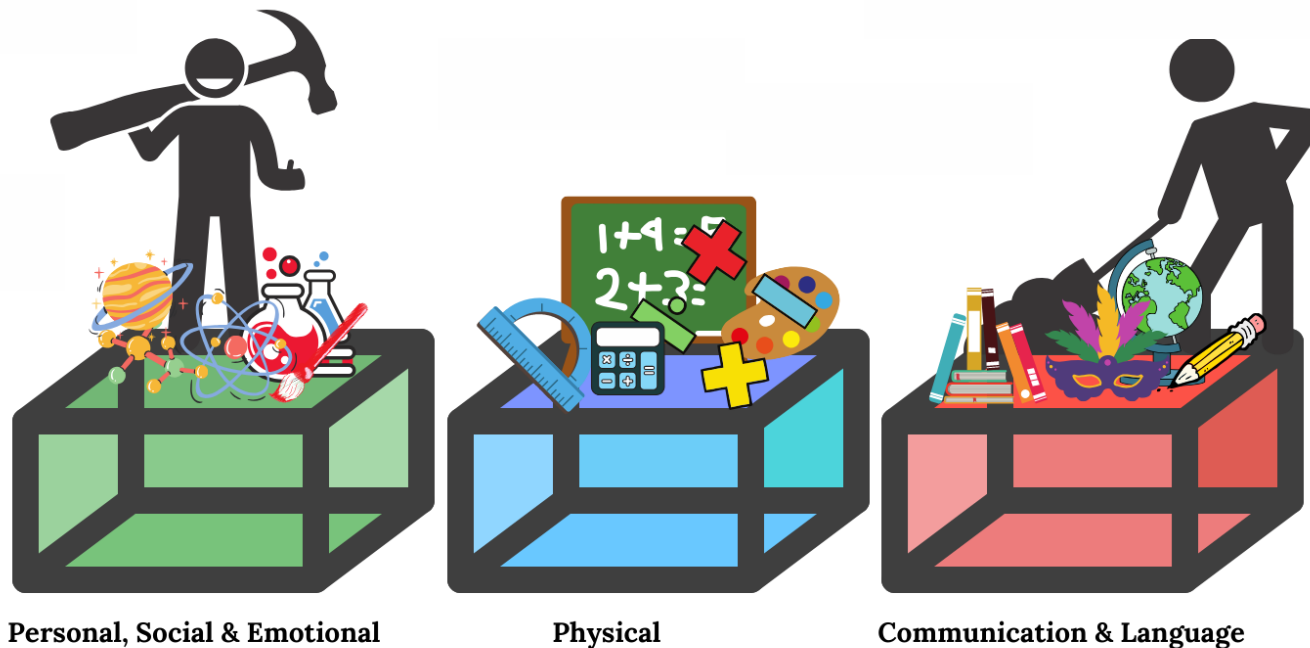
The current education system in the UK has children start as young as four, where we begin to teach them to read and write. Evidence shows us that it's better to wait until children are older (around the age of seven) before introducing more formal education. This is because of physical as well as cognitive development - there is a free download on our website explaining more about this. European 'league tables' show us that any advantage gained by children who learn to read early washes away later in childhood.

This is because Literacy, Understanding the World, Expressive Art and Design and Mathematics are 'specific' areas of learning that we build on top of the prime areas. The more time we spend focusing on the prime areas in early childhood the stronger the foundations for lifelong learning.



# WHAT ARE PRIME AREAS?

Prime areas of learning and development are the foundations on which we learn, grow and develop.



There are more specific areas than prime so it is vital that the prime areas are solid and strong. Just like any 'building work', the structure is only as strong as its foundations.

Even as adults we need to continue to strengthen our foundations. We are holistic beings, 'what happens to us matters to us', so when we have things going on in our personal or work lives, we need to focus on our prime areas, we need to do the same for children.

Have you been through a break-up and then tried to focus on work? It's hard isn't it. Maybe your sleep gets interrupted, you distract yourself with T.V. or social media, stop exercising or withdraw from friends. These are all signs that we need to shift our attention to our foundations.

Even with a strong start, transitions, puberty and trauma can lead to those cracks forming.





We can use Emotional Literacy and relationship focused strategies to help with this underpinning. Embedding this ethos within the home environment and using activities for a more targeted intervention when appropriate can make a big difference to the wellbeing of children.

It's easy to assume that children are okay, as they haven't got the language or development to articulate or even understand all their emotions. so by using these strategies in a proactive way we can help to protect children's long-term mental health.



# HOW DO WE INTRODUCE EMOTIONAL LITERACY?

## Supporting GLAD feelings.

The way we feel is often reflected in our body language and facial expressions, this is particularly true for children, who do not hide their feelings as skillfully as adults.

Babies and toddlers may not have the language to tell us when they are happy or excited, but they are able to show us with their wide smiles and excited movements. When children are feeling **GLAD** about something it is usually easy to tell. This may involve them feeling happy, excited, proud, cheerful or a range of other emotions.



Whatever the emotions, caring adults can increase the child's Emotional Literacy skills by making some links for them.

For example, if you notice a big smile on a child's face you could say something like, “You’ve got a really big smile on your face. You look very happy today!”

Try taking photos of special moments and sharing them in a scrapbook with your child. Look at them together and discuss the glad feelings felt on that day and why they were feeling happy, excited etc.



You can make a **GLAD** feelings picture collage and discuss with your child what **GLAD** emotion they think the person in the photo is feeling.

For example, a girl playing football may look happy. You could say “Yes, I think she is happy and enthusiastic because they enjoy playing football”

Try and link these emotions to a physical feeling as well. Model this yourself. “I am so excited about our holiday I have a funny feeling in my tummy”.

You might feel uncomfortable voicing how you feel in this way, but the more you do it the more natural it becomes. It creates a lot of permission for your child to hear this from you and also helps you to pay attention to your own emotions.



## Feeling GLAD for themselves.

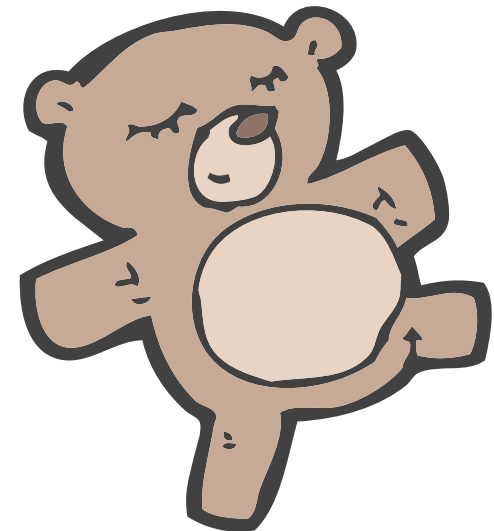
When children have done something that has made them feel very pleased, proud or happy, take time to celebrate their successes with them. Be cautious of using rewards too easily; we want children to have good intrinsic motivation, celebrating together as a family is a lovely way to help a child gain recognition from others, without it becoming their only motivator.

Try to be descriptive rather than evaluative, instead of saying something like “That’s beautiful” or “Wow. That’s fantastic” try just being excited and describe what you see. For example, “**You have used a lot of blocks to make that model. Look how tall it is!**” “**How do you feel about what you have made?**” this helps to build children’s sense of pride in their achievements and boosts their self-confidence and esteem.

## Supporting SAD feelings Using Toys and Puppets

It is often said that one of the best ways to learn about something is to teach it to someone else. Why not try putting a soft toy or puppet into a situation that makes them feel **SAD** and let your child generate ideas for making them feel better?

For example, you could have a teddy that is **SAD** because he has fallen over or has nobody to play with. Talk with your child about how teddy might be feeling and encourage them to think of ways to help him. When appropriate, encourage your child to share their own experiences of feeling **SAD** or upset.





Puppet shows are great for being able to create your own stories to fit a situation your child may be facing. For example, your character is looking forward to a trip out – maybe to the seaside, but the trip has to be cancelled due to bad weather.

## **Using Picture Books**

There are many books that will help you to explore **SAD** feelings. Look for books where the pictures are used to good effect.

Ask your child questions about the character “**I wonder how he’s feeling?**” and give plenty of time for your child to respond, comment and ask questions.

Ensure your child knows that it's really normal to feel different emotions, it's our bodies way of telling us what we need – a hug for example.

In younger children take time to make observations around characters feelings and point out a 'sad face' and 'He's crying and looks sad', 'He looks like he may be cross'. Use sentences appropriate in length so that your child can understand. Ask them if they can mimic those faces.

## **Working with Images**

Make a collection of pictures/photographs showing feelings of sadness. Visual images can be powerful, and most children really enjoy talking about and exploring them.

You can also draw your own images and encourage your children to draw how they feel as well, the pictures do not need to be art gallery worthy; it's about expressing yourself in a safe way!

There's lots more ideas on our website and Facebook groups.



## Supporting MAD Feelings

Young children need help to understand that **MAD** feelings are felt by everybody sometimes. Children need to accept reasonable limits and boundaries, but they also need to know that it is okay to feel angry.

There is always a reason for anger, in order for children to work out what that might be, we need to have restorative conversations after the anger has passed; if we respond to their anger in a way that adds shame, they can then find it difficult to talk about their thoughts, feelings, behaviours.

When we become angry, the 'reasoning' part of the brain switches off; we call this an amygdala hijack. It takes between 20 minutes to 2 hours for that adrenaline to leave the body, don't try and reason and problem solve until after that time.



**1. Approach calmly:** Observe as you approach, be aware of your body language, it says a lot about your intentions and feelings. Be aware of how you feel, if you feel unable to stay neutral take some time to breathe, capture your thoughts and see if you can change the lens of which you are viewing their anger through.

We want to be able to teach children how to cope with anger so our own response needs some attention first whenever possible.  
Children learn more from what we do than what we say.

**2. Acknowledge feelings:** Give recognition to the feelings the children/child are expressing by using simple descriptive words (“you seem angry/sad/upset”). This will help the child to ‘let go’ of their feelings, although they may briefly increase in intensity before they subside. This ‘emptying out’ is an important step that must occur before children are able to think clearly about solutions.

"It's always hardest to remember to acknowledge a child in the heat of a difficult moment, but if a child can hear anything during a temper tantrum, it reassures him to hear our recognition of his point-of-view. "You wanted an ice cream cone and I said 'no'. It's upsetting not to get what you want." When a child feels understood, he senses the empathy behind our limits and corrections. He still resists, cries, and complains, but at the end of the day, he knows we are with him, always in his corner. These first years will define our relationship for many years to come."

Janet Lansbury

**3. Gather information:** Tell your child you want to hear from them. Ask open ended questions that help them describe the details of the situation, moving from

**“Why did you do this?”**

**towards**

**“Tell me about what’s happened”.**

Listen to your child for the details, they are key to finding the solution.

**4. Restate the problem:** using the details the child has described repeat it back to them, clarifying any issues by asking for more details. For example, **“You can’t play cos I hate you”** can be reframed, **“You are angry, and you want to play alone?”** Check with the child/children to see that they agree that you have identified the problem.



**5. Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together:** Respect and explore all the children's ideas, even if they seem unrealistic, consider how each might work. Try to facilitate the problem solving process for them. There are lots of free resources exploring different strategies for doing this on our website.

**6. Be prepared to give follow up support:** Children may need help implementing the solution, or difficulties may arise if there are two children involved and one is still carrying angry feelings that need further acknowledgement.



Make sure your child understands that there is **NO negative emotion**. All emotions serve a purpose and we want to be able to use these 'gut feelings' to keep us safe. If a child feels uncomfortable you want them to have the confidence to recognise and act accordingly in response. The more we talk about all emotions and feelings then the more natural this will become.

It's very easy as parents to want to protect our children from big and difficult emotions, but we need them to gain experience of dealing with all emotions.

They need to have a childhood of practice to make this easier. A childhood of knowing that you will respond and listen to everything they consider to be important, without judgment.

We don't have to 'fix' these emotions for them but support them to move through them.

Never tell a child that they shouldn't feel a way about a certain situation - we all have different perspectives, it's important that we recognise our child's perspective as their truth. If we don't validate how they feel, they will be more closed off to explore it as they might think, "you just don't get it!".

We all need empathy and acknowledgement to help us process and feel better again. If you are unsure how to respond to a child when they are telling you something that you don't quite understand, then please remember this quote from the amazing Brené Brown -

'I don't even know what to say  
right now, I'm just so glad you  
told me'



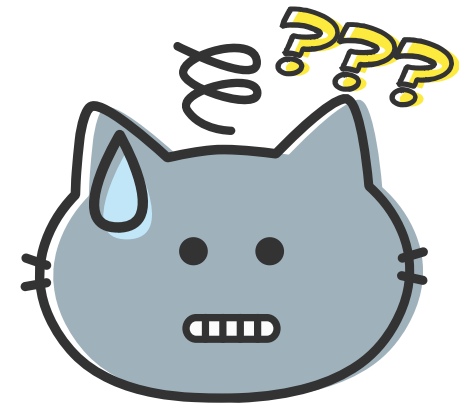
# SHARE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES

Don't be afraid to share your own feelings and challenges, both as a child and as an adult, just be careful not to say it in way that could be misinterpreted as dismissive of their own experience.

Actively listen without interruption. Talk with your children about things that make you feel cross or angry, and encourage other adults in the child's life to do the same. This helps children to understand that there are things that can make us all angry and we all respond differently. It can help to take away the shame they might feel for feeling angry.

'Emotions are real and something we feel, what matters the most is the way that we deal'

Pocket full of Feelings



# BOUNDARIES

Children need **consistent** boundaries to help them to feel safe.

Think of being at the top of the Eiffel tower and trying to enjoy the view without an appropriate boundary. Would you be able to enjoy the view in the same way?

It's important that our boundaries are developmentally realistic, if children aren't adhering to a particular boundary, stop, reflect and ask why that might be. When possible take time to explain the boundaries in an age appropriate way, ask them how they feel about it.

Being listened to is a powerful and enabling process, don't under estimate its significance.





# USEFUL RESOURCES

## My Mood Stars

[wendywoo.uk/mymoodstars](http://wendywoo.uk/mymoodstars)



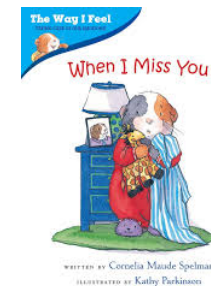
## Large Egg Timers - Amazon

How many times do we say, "You have 1 minute!" then proceed to give them 5 or 10 minutes. Giving children a true representation of time can help them to feel safe and know what to expect.



Make your own puppets and characters using lolly sticks or rocks

Board Games - let your child experience losing



## 'When I Feel' Books - Amazon

## My Feelings Notebook

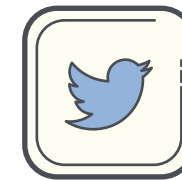
[orkidideas.com/product/my-tomtag-feelings-notebook](http://orkidideas.com/product/my-tomtag-feelings-notebook)





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