

Building Awareness of Feelings in the Classroom

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Guiding principles

We can't expect students to identify, express or manage feelings if they don't have a basic understanding of what feelings and coping skills are. When talking about feelings and coping skills with students, it is helpful to keep the following guiding principles in mind.

All feelings are normal and valid. Feelings are not good or bad, they just are. It is also very normal to feel more than one feeling at a time. Let students know their feelings are normal and that you understand by repeating back what you hear, without judging or interpreting—even if you don't agree with them. When students feel heard and validated, they are more likely to share in the future.

It's never too early or too late to learn how to express and manage feelings. There is no correlation between a student's age or grade and their knowledge of feelings and coping skills. Students only know what they have been taught or exposed to, so we can anticipate that different students will have different skill levels—and that's OK.

Follow the students' lead. If students are uncomfortable sharing feelings, let them know that is OK and that you, or another trusted adult, are always available if they want to share later. Similarly, if a student does not feel comfortable practicing a specific coping skill, encourage them to find another option they do feel comfortable practicing.

Be curious. Sometimes students need help identifying, expressing and managing what they're feeling. Getting curious allows the student to explore their own feelings.

"I wonder" statements are a helpful tool for encouraging students to explore their feelings:

“I noticed you threw your paper on the floor. **I wonder** if you are feeling frustrated about this assignment.”

“**I wonder** if it's too hard to focus on deep breathing right now. Why don't we go for a short walk instead?”

Classroom activities for building awareness of feelings

There are lots of opportunities to build awareness of feelings in the classroom throughout the day, and here are some ideas to get you started:

Use a feelings chart. There are many more feelings than what are listed on the feelings chart poster, and there are many ways to use this with students:

- Ask students to point to a face or word that best represents how they feel. Everyone expresses feelings differently; it is OK if the feelings kids identify do not match the face or word listed on the poster.
- Use “I wonder” statements to help students if they’re struggling to identify how they are feeling. For example:

For younger students:

“I wonder if you’re feeling frustrated that we can’t go outside because it’s raining. Is that right?”

For older students:

“I wonder if you’re feeling nervous about the test this afternoon. What do you think?”

Use books and literature. When engaging students in reading exercises, try incorporating feelings. For example, when reading to younger students, take a moment to discuss how the characters in the book are feeling. This builds their awareness and helps them understand that everyone has feelings and that feelings can change moment to moment. Engaging the class in a discussion about feelings can also help them build empathy for others and develop their awareness that everyone may interpret feelings differently.

Use music and songs. Using music or songs that talk about feelings or how to manage them can be helpful for students of all ages.

For younger students:

Songs that teach lots of feeling words can help build their awareness and vocabulary.

For older students:

You can use music as a method to develop their insight and self-expression. Encourage them to listen to a song and then reflect on how the singer might be feeling or how the song makes them feel.

Use expressive exercises. Journaling, writing and drawing can be helpful ways for students of all ages to explore their feelings. Incorporate feelings into a structured writing prompt, allow for free journaling or have them draw how they feel. Never force students to share their drawings or writing with others unless they want to; otherwise, they may not feel safe enough to openly reflect and be honest about their feelings.