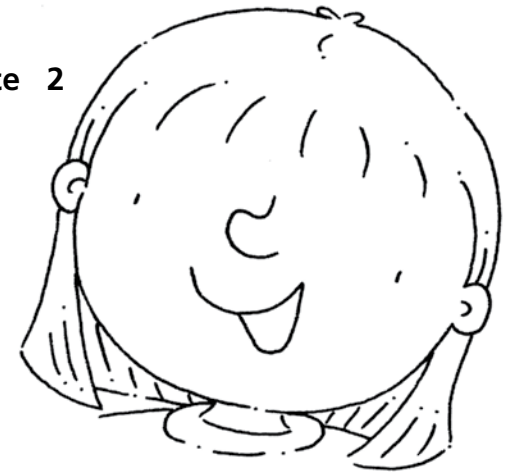
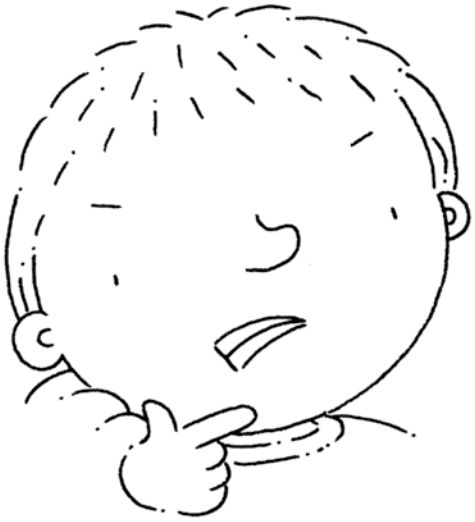
Practical Pre-School Books

Exploring Emotions

Ros Bayley





Published by Practical Pre-School Books, A Division of MA Education Ltd,
St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, Herne Hill, London, SE24 0PB

Tel: 020 7738 5454

www.practicalpreschoolbooks.com

Illustrations: Cathy Hughes

Exploring Emotions ISBN: 978-1-90243-884-9

Exploring emotions:
Feeling unhappy

We need to be in touch with all feelings and negative emotions, although more difficult to manage, are just as important as positive ones and a natural part of being human

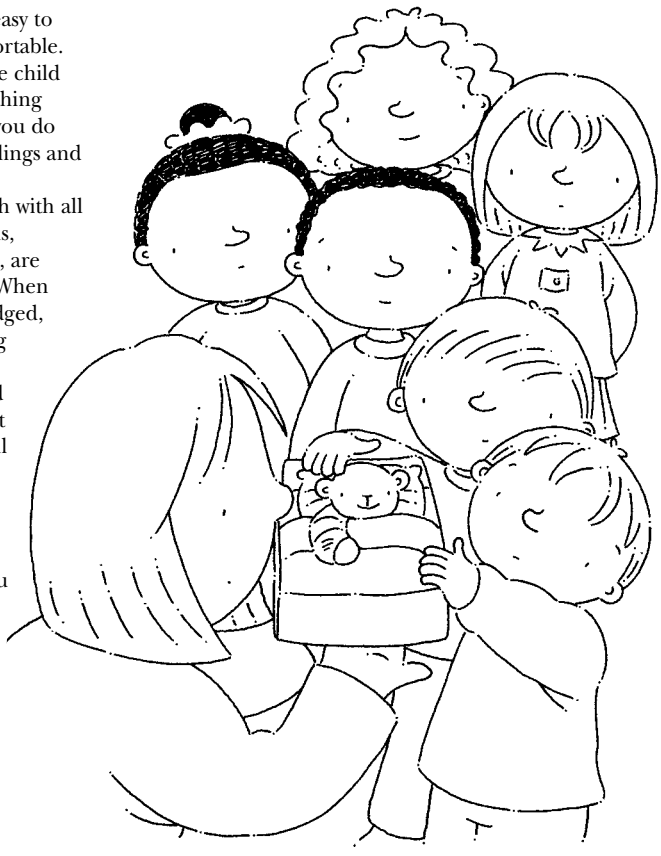
Scientists now understand enough about how the brain works to know that human behaviour is determined much more by the way we feel than by the way we think. The 'feeling brain' engages before the 'thinking brain,' and when feelings are running high it is not easy to think rationally.

The first and most important thing to remember is that all feelings are real for the person who is experiencing them. You may think that someone should or should not feel a certain way, but for the person concerned the feeling is a reality, and unless it is acknowledged it will only intensify. Acknowledging someone's feelings is a powerful way of helping them to return to a state of equilibrium. They feel listened to and experience our empathy, and this is important when children are feeling unhappy.

Faced with an unhappy child it is easy to feel slightly panicked and uncomfortable. You may feel an urge to distract the child and direct their attention to something more happy and enjoyable, but if you do this too quickly, you deny their feelings and rob them of a powerful learning experience. We need to be in touch with all our feelings, and negative emotions, although more difficult to manage, are just as important as positive ones. When negative emotions go unacknowledged, children begin to think that feeling that way is unacceptable, whereas what you need them to understand is that all feelings are real, and that experiencing negative feelings is all part of being human.

For very young children, learning about feelings happens most effectively in a real-life context. You can help unhappy children by acknowledging and labelling their feelings, by simply saying something like, 'You seem very unhappy today,' and offering comfort. If you get it wrong they'll soon tell you! This process enables them to identify what they are feeling and builds up their feelings vocabulary. It also puts them in a place where they can listen. Listening is almost impossible when you are flooded with feeling, so by taking children through this process and allowing them time to experience and come to terms with their unhappy feelings, you make it much easier for them to move on and begin to engage with the learning process. If not, their unhappy feelings may persist for much longer. Your sensitive acknowledgement helps them to begin to understand the power of their own emotions, and supports them to be able to read the feelings of others. This is the basis of emotional literacy.

You can develop this understanding further through building interesting and exciting activities into your weekly planning as well as providing them in response to issues that arise.



Stories and scenarios

One of the most powerful ways of helping children to explore feelings is through story, and if you want to really understand this power look no further than the massive popularity of soap operas. As adults observe the lives of the characters in these stories, they explore and validate their own emotions. So why not create soap operas for three- to five-year-olds?

All you need are some central characters, and these can be dolls, puppets or soft toys. Add to these a simple storyline and you have created a powerful context for learning. The soft toy characters will instantly engage the children at an emotional level, and when the emotions are engaged the learning is always deeper. You might like to try the following:

- Find a small soft toy or teddy bear and using a red felt pen make a mark on a piece of bandage (to look like blood) and bandage the toy's arm or leg. Put it in a box or a basket and cover it with a blanket (use a flannel or other small piece of material). Carry it into the room very, very carefully, explaining how you have found the little dog or teddy in the garden or playground and that it had fallen over. The children will identify with this scenario as most of them have experienced what it feels like for themselves. You can then discuss how your character may be feeling and generate ideas for how to help him begin to feel better. To give your storyline extra credibility, take a photograph of your toy in the place where you found him. This builds on the magic and enhances the emotional engagement. Encourage the children to share their own experiences of being upset. Older children could draw pictures of themselves and write sentences beginning with: 'I feel unhappy when…'

■ Look through magazines for pictures of people who look unhappy and talk about what you think is making them unhappy. Where appropriate, share your own experiences with them. When children spend time with emotionally literate adults they benefit hugely from such role modelling.

■ Develop further scenarios with your toy, for example bring him in holding something he is very pleased with, such as a toy or a balloon. On another occasion he can return looking unhappy because his balloon has burst or his toy has been lost. Here again, you will have created another valuable opportunity to talk about feeling unhappy. You will also be building the children's empathy skills and this is extremely important, for without empathy we cannot engage in moral reasoning.

■ When children are unhappy it is often a consequence of disputes with their peers, so if you have any large puppets in your setting, create a storyline that involves the interaction of two characters. (You could use dolls or teddy bears.) Create a scenario where one character won't share a toy with another or goes off to play with someone else, leaving the other one by themselves. You don't need to be a fantastic storyteller and your story does not need to be complicated. Once you have established the reason for your character's unhappiness the children can suggest ways in which the situation might be addressed.

■ Make the fullest possible use of published stories. There are some excellent ones about feeling unhappy, the most famous of which is possibly *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes. Dave, the central character, is inconsolable when Dogger, his much loved toy, goes missing, and when you share this story with children it provides a myriad of opportunities for discussing unhappiness and a wide range of associated feelings. Throughout the story Dave moves through feelings of sadness, anxiety, disappointment, frustration, excitement, relief and gratitude. With older children, make a picture map of the parts of the story when he is feeling these things.

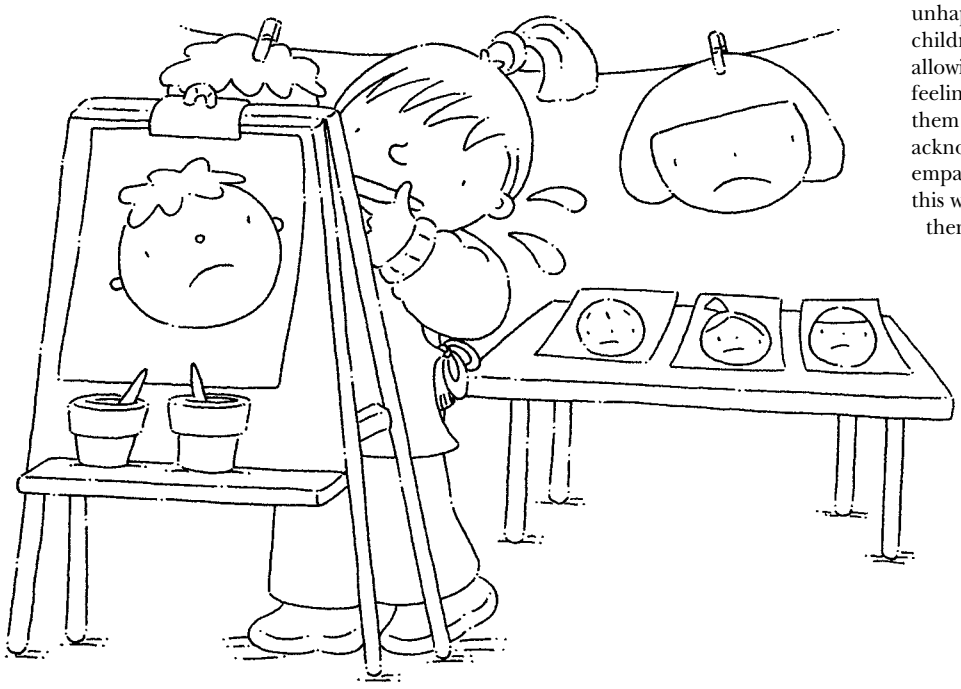
■ Other excellent stories are *Billy's Sunflower* by Nicola Moon and *Danny's Duck* by Jane Crebbin, both of which are associated with unhappiness caused through the loss of something important. An added bonus of these two texts are the excellent illustrations, which depict the feelings of the characters with great power and sensitivity.

When discussing these stories with children, ask questions like:

'Can you think of some words that would describe how … is feeling?'

'Can you think of a time when you were unhappy because you lost something?'

(These questions can be applied to most stories when you are focusing on feelings.)



Useful resources

Storylines by Ros Bayley and Lynn Broadbent (Lawrence Educational Publications Tel: 01922 643833).

Ring of Confidence: A Quality Circle Time Programme to Support Personal Safety for the Foundation Stage by Penny Vine and Teresa Todd (Positive Press Tel: 01225 719204)

■ Create a feelings thermometer so that children can indicate in a concrete way how they are feeling on the continuum from unhappy to happy. This helps them to understand that feelings are not always totally polarised into happy and unhappy.

■ Talk about body language and what happens to our bodies when we are unhappy. Play some different kinds of music to the children and discuss how the music makes them feel. Once they have identified some music that makes them feel unhappy or sad, move around the room using sad body language. Then contrast with some happy music and movement.

■ Paint faces that are unhappy, and some that are happy. Talk about the ways in which they are different.

■ Use Persona dolls. These come without clothes or faces so that you can dress them yourself and give them any expressions you want.

Remember that feeling unhappy is a natural part of being human. We all feel unhappy some of the time, and we owe it to children to help them to understand this by allowing them to experience their unhappy feelings. The biggest favour we can do them is to be there with them, acknowledging their feelings and empathising with them. When we can do this we not only help them, but we also give them a model for helping others.

Exploring emotions:
Feeling jealous

Feelings of jealousy can be powerful and difficult to deal with. The challenge lies in helping children to see that it's okay to be jealous, and that what is important is learning to deal with and express such feelings in ways that do not hurt others

Children as young as three and four are still developing their sense of self. They are affected by the things that happen to them and the ways in which adults respond to these experiences. When young children are feeling jealous, their sense of self, and their security, can be threatened, so it is crucial to think carefully about how you will help them with these strong feelings. They may not even be able to put a name to what they are feeling, and this may make the feelings even more distressing.

If you want to help children explore feeling jealous, you must think about your own feelings about jealousy first. Jealousy is usually seen as a negative emotion, and many of us have been brought up to believe that it is bad to feel jealous. Consequently, many adults try to deny such feelings. When you are looking at jealousy with children, you need to be able to see it as a perfectly normal human emotion that we all experience to varying degrees throughout our lives. The challenge lies in helping children to see that it's okay to be jealous, and that what is important is learning to deal with and express such feelings in ways that do not hurt others.

Jealousy, when it's not properly acknowledged, can turn to anger, resentment or hurt. It will not simply go away, but will stay within us to be triggered at a later date. Unacknowledged jealousy can impair personal development, so if you can help children to acknowledge and deal with their jealous feelings you are doing them a great service.

Using puppets and toys

Most settings have some large puppets, and they can be put to good use when exploring feelings. If you don't have any puppets you can always use teddy bears or soft toys instead. Create simple scenarios within which your characters experience feelings of jealousy. These work best when they are simple everyday events with which the children can identify. The following scenario generally works well as it is one that most young children have experienced.

The new boy

I will call my characters Jake and Mina, but you can substitute the names of your own puppets or toys.

A new boy called Imran has joined Jake and Mina's class. Jake and Mina have been friends for a long time. They play together at home and they play together at nursery/school, but today, something happened that really upset Jake. Mrs Metcalf, their teacher/key worker found him huddled in the book corner in tears.

At first, he was so upset that he could not tell her what was the matter, but after a while he explained that on the way to nursery/school, he and Mina had planned to work together in the construction area to build a robot, but when the time came, Mina said that she didn't want to do that any more. When Jake asked her why she replied that she 'just didn't'. Nothing that Jake said could persuade Mina to work with him on the robot. She told him that she just wanted to go and play outside on the bikes. Jake said that he would go outside too, but Mina said that she wanted to go on her own, so Jake went to the construction area to start work on the robot by himself.
A little later on, he looked out of the window and noticed that Mina was playing on a bike with Imran. He was very, very upset and thought that Mina was not his friend anymore.

Once you have presented the scenario you can use it as a basis for discussion. Ask questions like:

- Can you think of some words that would describe how Jake is feeling?
- Is there anything that Mina and Imran could do that might make Jake feel better?

Encourage the children to relate the story to their own experience and, where appropriate, to share their own experiences of feeling jealous. It also helps, where possible, to share your own experiences. When they realise that the adults they like and respect also feel jealous, it really helps them to see that this is a perfectly normal human condition!

A new baby

Perhaps one of the most powerful feelings of jealousy young children experience is after the birth of a baby brother or sister,

and this theme can be meaningfully explored through story. One story that I have found particularly useful is *The Very Worst Monster* by Pat Hutchins.

This is a story about a family of monsters and what happens when Billy the baby monster is born. Everyone in the family is convinced that Billy will be the worst monster in the whole world. The only person who disagrees is Billy's big sister, Hazel. As far as she is concerned *she* is the worst monster and she is prepared to go to any lengths to prove it, including trying to get rid of her baby brother! Young children love Hazel's antics and the story provides a useful springboard for an exploration of this issue.

Other useful stories are *Tom and Sam*, also by Pat Hutchins and *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat*, by Jenny Wagner. Many traditional and folk and fairy tales provide rich examples for work about jealousy, for example 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', 'Cinderella' and 'Aladdin'.

Using pictures and photographs

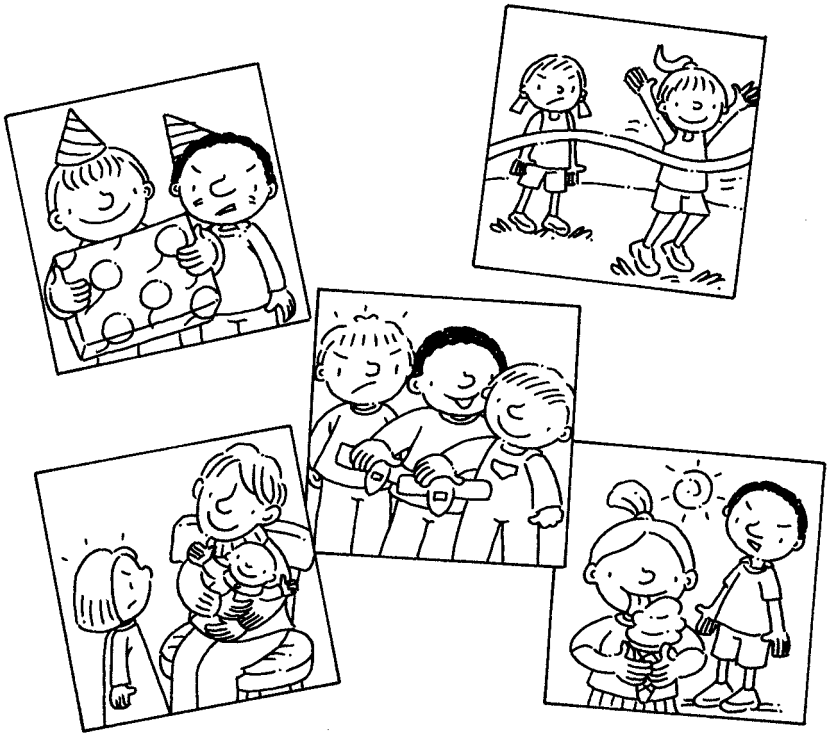
Make a collection of pictures which show children in situations where they may feel jealous. There are several ways of doing this, and once you have made your collection you can use it again and again with different groups of children.

If you or any colleagues are good at drawing, depict a range of scenarios, for example one child receiving a present and other children looking on; someone winning a race with other children coming in behind; a small child looking on as their parents look adoringly at their new baby; two children enjoying a game together with a third child looking on; children in a queue at the ice-cream van and a small child being pulled past it by an adult.

Alternatively, search for pictures in magazines or pose some situations to photograph. With older children, encourage them to see that everyone experiences jealousy differently, and that what makes one person feel jealous may not evoke the same response in their friend.

Making books

With younger children, make a 'We feel jealous when.....' book. Talk with them about the sort of things that cause them to feel jealous and then represent them in a book which can be illustrated with drawings or photographs. If the children pose for the photographs themselves the activity will be much more meaningful to them.



Encourage them to practise facial expressions and think about how their faces and bodies might look when they are feeling jealous.

With older children, support them to make up a story about someone feeling jealous, and help them to role play the story. At intervals in the story 'freeze frame' the action and take photographs. Use the photographs as a basis for a book. The children can dictate the text as a modelled or shared writing experience.

Playing circle games

Sit the children in a circle and pass round a teddy or some other kind of 'talking object.' Explain to the children that only the person holding the talking object can speak and that if they don't want to speak they can 'pass'. Start a tag line, for example 'I feel jealous when ...'

Make a collection of 'desirable' objects and toys and put them in a feely bag. Play some music as you pass a teddy or similar object around the circle. When the music stops, the child with the teddy pulls an item out of the feely bag. The children then imagine that this item is going to be given to their best friend and they will not get one. Would this make them feel jealous or not? This activity helps them to see that we all feel jealous about different things, and that how jealous we feel about something is directly related to how much we would like that thing for ourselves!

Acknowledge children's feelings

All of these activities will help children to begin to understand what can sometimes be confusing and distressing feelings, but it is important to remember that, for very young children, the most powerful learning takes place within the context of their own experience. Therefore, when you notice that someone in your group is experiencing jealousy, pick the right moment and encourage them to talk about the way they are feeling. This will help them to understand that it's okay to feel that way, and once they have done that you may well be able to support them to find ways of dealing with what they are feeling.

In their book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Piccadilly Press) suggest giving a child his or her wishes in fantasy. For example, when they really, really, want something that you cannot give them, say something like, 'I wish I had the magic power to give you that remote control car.'

Faber and Mazlish explain: 'When children want something they can't have, adults usually respond with logical explanations of why they can't have it. Often the harder we explain, the harder they protest. Sometimes just having someone understand how much you want something makes reality easier to bear.'

This makes such a lot of sense, and over the years I have found this strategy very helpful.