

Emotional Literacy in the early years

by Sue Allingham

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What is 'Emotional Literacy'?

Play to man, especially in childhood, is a mirror both of thoughts and feelings, and of surroundings. In childhood it is emphatically a mirror of the innate need for life and occupation. (Froebel, 1897)

How are you in the world?

It is important to make clear from the outset that feeling positive socially and emotionally, and knowing that you are cared about and respected is crucial for all humans throughout their lives. From birth to seven years of age, is the key time to develop and underpin this security as the brain is developing.

A complex range of factors have an impact on social and emotional development. Knowledge of these factors may help encourage investment at a population level in early interventions to support

health and wellbeing. This would ensure children (and families) who are most likely to experience the poorest outcomes get the help they need early on in their lives. Knowledge of these factors, aside, practitioners' experience and expertise will be paramount in assessing the needs and risks of individual children and their families. (NICE 2012)

It is right and proper that there is a focus on children and families who may 'experience the poorest outcomes' – the word 'vulnerable' is often used – but the aim of this book is to unpick the social and emotional development for all involved in Early Childhood Education and how vital it is to promote 'emotional literacy'.

Social and emotional wellbeing is important in its own right, but it also provides the basis for future health and life chances. (NICE 2012)

Each chapter of this book will contain case studies to prompt discussion and encourage reflection. These have been taken from my own experiences, or have been shared with me by colleagues and friends.

Getting it right from the start

Throughout this book the aim is to examine how we actually understand, reflect, underpin and support the variety of emotions shown daily in our settings by adults and children alike. What do we need to enable us to be 'emotionally literate' and encourage it in others?

We live in a world where there is an increasing recognition of emotional health and the impact it has on quality of life. We must view this recognition through two lenses, which will be referred to throughout the book:

- Our core documents, both statutory and for guidance, as they consistently remind us of this with references to personal, social and emotional development
- Our own feelings and understandings, as they will determine how we understand and interpret what we read.

Let's look at some examples from the statutory documents of the different countries of the United Kingdom.

Note

As you read, note down all the words that reflect **emotions, feelings, wellbeing and happiness**. Keep this list and refer to it as you read this book. You will find that you add more words and reflect on what they mean to you and those around you.

England

Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS 2017).

Although the word 'emotion' is mentioned only a handful of times, there is a constant thread of the welfare of the child underpinning the document. For example:

1. Every child deserves the best possible start in life and the support that enables them to fulfil their potential. Children develop quickly in the early years and a child's experiences between birth and age five have a major impact on their future life chances. A secure, safe and happy childhood is important in its own right. Good parenting and high quality early learning together provide the foundation children need to make the most of their abilities and talents as they grow up. (DFE 2017)

The Statutory Framework is built on four 'principles':

- every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured
- children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships
- children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers
- children develop and learn in different ways (see "the characteristics of effective teaching and learning" at paragraph 1.9) and at different rates. The framework covers the education and care of all children in early years provision, including children with special educational needs and disabilities. (DFE 2017)

These are demonstrated through Personal, Social and Emotional Development as an 'area of learning', which is given core importance as a 'Prime Area'.

Personal, social and emotional development involves helping children to develop a positive sense of themselves, and others; to form positive relationships and develop respect for others; to develop social skills and learn how to manage their feelings; to understand appropriate behaviour in groups; and to have confidence in their own abilities (DFE 2017)

This core theme of personal, social and emotional development as a curriculum requirement is reflected in the key documents across the UK. This Statutory Framework also contains what is meant by the 'Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning' and how these must give shape to our work. We will be returning to the



Nurturing emotional literacy in the early years

To-day we hold the pupils in school, restricted by those instruments so degrading to body and spirit, the desk—and material prizes and punishments. Our aim in all this is to reduce them to the discipline of immobility and silence,—to lead them,—where? Far too often toward no definite end. (Montessori 1912)

The importance of balancing body and mind at an early age

The aim of this chapter is to begin to unpick the detail that we need in order to develop an understanding of 'emotional literacy', and what this requires of us in practice.

In order to do this we need to look at both the mind and the body as they are intrinsically linked in the way they affect emotions and how they are manifested.

The key words here are 'balancing body and mind'. This is because in order to understand a child emotionally it is vital that we understand how physically comfortable and confident they are alongside how they feel emotionally. We have to balance our thinking between reading emotional signs and physical signs.

How many situations are manifested emotionally, but are actually based in a physical cause? And vice versa. Understanding and supporting emotions means that we must inevitably be involved with working with **sensory** and **physical awareness**.

An example can be drawn from my personal experience as a child, when I was about six years old and I had to have several teeth removed as my mouth was overcrowded. This was a precursor to having a brace fitted. I do not have a fear of dentists, but to this day I do not like walking into car maintenance or bicycle

Chapter Two: Nurturing emotional literacy in the early years

shops, or anywhere that tyres are fitted, because of the smell of rubber. I had my teeth removed under general anaesthetic and a rubber mask was put over my face.

Songs, smells, tastes, and some things that we touch can bring back memories and emotions both good and bad. Reflect on the sensory things that affect you. How often do you have to deal with them? How do they affect you? Do you have coping strategies? If so, what are they? Do you know what things affect your colleagues, families, children in your care?

Think about...

Is 'emotional literacy' the same as 'emotional intelligence'? As you work through each chapter record your thinking on this.

As you read, keep adding to the list of words that you started to create in Chapter One. Here we will examine how different emotions affect the whole body, making a physical, mental and sensory impact. With children starting settings and schools at very early ages this linking is important to understand. With this in mind this chapter falls into two sections: understanding the body and how this is inextricably linked to understanding the mind. In Chapter Three we will look at how 'emotional literacy' enables us to help children develop self-confidence and wellbeing.

Case studies

Below are two case studies for comparison and discussion. As you read, reflect on how both physical and emotional aspects are manifested, and what would you do in both situations.

Case study: Geoffrey

Geoffrey found it very difficult to settle into his Reception Class. He was the youngest child of older parents. He had two grown up brothers. Geoffrey had never been to a setting before.

Physically, Geoffrey was smaller than his class mates. His speech was immature and he always spoke of himself in the third person. For example, 'Geoffrey wants to go to the toilet'. Everyday his Mum brought him to school and took him home again in a pushchair, holding his teddy bear which he brought into class with him.

Once he was in the school environment the other children either took no notice of him, or 'babied' him. He enjoyed the attention he received when he was in the role play area. The teaching staff found it difficult to engage him in learning opportunities because he struggled to focus or become engaged for any length of time. He found sitting or standing still hard, and was constantly moving, or lying on the floor.

Geoffrey was physically uncoordinated meaning that he did not enjoy or engage in physically active and

challenging activity inside or out. He found getting dressed and undressed very hard, so when the whole class needed to get changed for PE sessions, he would take off all his clothes and stand naked until an adult helped him. This did not upset him, even when the other children laughed.

At snack and lunch times Geoffrey found feeding himself difficult. He wouldn't eat unless his food was mashed and fed to him from a spoon, and would only drink from a bottle or trainer cup. The lunch time staff were not happy about the situation and they often became annoyed. As a result Geoffrey could often be seen sitting by himself struggling with his lunch while all the other children sat together happily eating and socialising.

His Key Person had a conversation with Geoffrey's Mum about concerns and observations. Mum was not concerned and thought that, because he was much younger than his brothers, he was the 'baby of the family' and he acted accordingly. She felt that he would soon 'grow out of it'. The teacher accepted this, and Geoffrey remained the same.

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What do you notice here? What do you feel? There are several emotions shown in this story. What are they and who shows them? What would you do? How happy do you think Geoffrey actually was? What thinking from Chapter One can you apply here?

Use this next case study to reflect on your thinking and the conclusions you came to after reading about Geoffrey.

Case study: Scarlett

Scarlett was also the youngest child in her family, and she had grown up sisters. She was very quiet, always smiling and could often be found creating things in the workshop area. She had an eye for colour and liked to use lots of it in her work. She also had an eye for detail in her drawings. Although she was quiet, she was popular and was often to be seen engaged with the other children.

Part of the daily routine in this Reception Class was to take Teddy Edward home with his diary and overnight bag. The next morning everyone was excited to hear about his adventures. One day it was Scarlett's turn to take Teddy Edward home and she was delighted and ran out to her Mum clutching the overnight bag.

The next morning when the teacher welcomed all the children in, she noticed that Scarlett was in tears. Her friend Connor was comforting her. Connor explained to the teacher that, although she had taken the

overnight bag home, Scarlett had actually forgotten Teddy Edward. The teacher felt really bad at this point as she had not noticed that the bear was still sitting on his special chair in the classroom.

Once all the children had gathered indoors the teacher told all the children what had happened and how both Scarlett and Teddy Edward were very upset. What could they all do to make it better? Connor leapt up and said they must have a party! Both adults in the room thought this was a great idea and the rest of the day was spent in preparation for the party that was held at the end of the afternoon. All the children made cakes, biscuits, hats, decorations, sandwiches, drinks, cards and invitations. Some went shopping with one of the teachers. Scarlett and Teddy Edward were the centre of attention, music played and everybody was engaged and enjoying themselves throughout the day and the party. The day ended with Scarlett delightedly making sure she had Teddy Edward with her this time.

Compare Scarlett's story to that of Geoffrey. What are the similarities? What are the differences? What do you notice about how the children respond in each one? Also what do you notice about how the adults respond? What would you do?

Of all the people in the two case studies, which do you think demonstrated the most understanding of 'emotional literacy'? Why? How do you know?

Is 'emotional literacy' the same as 'emotional intelligence'?

If either of these two children joined your setting, what are the things that you would need to reflect on as a team in order not to be judgmental?

After reading the case studies above, imagine that either of these two children joined your setting. What are the things that you would need to reflect on as a team in order not to be judgmental?

These two case studies illustrate how emotions affect the body and the mind. Those affected do not always make it obvious. Geoffrey appeared to show no emotion when the dinner ladies made him sit alone until he fed himself and finished eating. We can't know what he was actually feeling, but we know he should not have been treated differently.

Remember...

We live in a world where there is an increasing recognition of emotional health and the impact it has on quality of life. We must view this recognition through two lenses;

- Our core documents, both statutory and for guidance as they consistently remind us of this with references to personal, social and emotional development
- Our own feelings and understandings as they will determine how we understand and interpret what we read.

Understanding the body – are you sitting comfortably?

It is no coincidence that physical development is high on the agenda of most, if not all, Early Years curricula. One of the three Prime Areas of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage in England is personal, social and emotional development. (DfE 2017) states:

Physical development involves providing opportunities for young children to be active and interactive; and to develop their co-ordination, control, and movement. Children must also be helped to understand the importance of physical activity (6), and to make healthy choices in relation to food.

(6) The Chief Medical Office has published guidance on physical activity that providers may wish to refer to, which is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-physical-activity-guidelines. (DfE 2017 p8)

However, despite being a core area of the EYFS (a Prime Area of Learning), the depth and extent of knowledge required to promote 'physical development' is not always understood. This is exemplified by the fact that the Chief Medical Officers guidelines are relegated to a footnote and clearly have not been used to inform the programme of study or the Early Learning Goal.

Understanding physical development means knowing more than the importance of gross motor skills, fine motor skills, healthy eating and exercise.

Whilst all of these are included in our various curricula they become distilled into little more than a simple tick list of skills, as, for example, can happen with those known as the 'Fundamental Motor Skills':

- Locomotor skills – such as running, jumping, hopping, galloping, skipping and leaping.
- Balance skills – movements where the body remains in place, but moves around its horizontal and vertical axes.
- Ball skills – such as catching, throwing, kicking, striking, underarm roll and striking.

Creating a list like this is of limited value as definitions using labels immediately narrows expectations and informed understanding.

Understanding how the body and mind, thus the emotions, are integral to each other, a wider definition of 'Physical Development' is required. This can be found on the website of the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA) (www.physical-literacy.org.uk).

The definition given is:

"Physical literacy can be described as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life." (IPLA, 2017)

Reflect on the words from the definition above:

- **motivation**
- **confidence**
- **physical competence**
- **understanding.**

What do they mean to you?

We are beginning to make the link between mind and body and how they need to be balanced, otherwise negative feelings and emotions may be evoked.