

Emotional literacy in churches

As churches begin to meet in person and groups relaunch, people are feeling increasingly anxious about this. It is important that we help people to express how they are feeling and acknowledge those.

As children's activities continue to open up, we need to consider the feelings of parents and children who may be extremely anxious about the additional contact in their lives after so long avoiding contact.



Try and be clear in the information you are sharing (e.g. sharing what will be happening in the group via a visual timetable, explaining how you will monitor contacts and what happens if someone becomes COVID positive.)

Consider how all this can affect the parents, children and young people in their emotional response, especially if they feel vulnerable and unsafe. Reassure them that your group is a safe place by making your safety measures explicit and also offering emotional support for parents and carers to talk to you about their concerns.

Active listening

Active listening is a good way to improve your communication with children and adults. It lets them know that you are interested in what they have to say.

To practise active listening:

- *Get down on the child's level or sit next to the adult*
- *Give your full attention to the person speaking*
- *Make eye contact and stop other things you are doing*
- *Do not be afraid of times of silence, allow them space to think and speak*
- *Reflect or repeat back what they are saying and what they may be feeling to make sure you understand.*

It can be tempting to brush off children's problems, especially if we are busy, but it is important that the children in our groups know that we are available to listen to them and are interested in what they have to say. If it's worrying them, then it IS important.

Have an emotional check in at the beginning of sessions or meeting, maybe even in church. This can be done in a variety of ways:

- *Emotional Check-in – thinking and feeling. Check-in boards and visual timetables really help children to know what is happening and to acknowledge how they feel.*
- *Explore what the different feelings are, and how they would describe them.*
- *Talk – take time to build relationships up and talk about how they may be feeling, especially over an activity or doing a job together side by side if they feel more comfortable that way.*

Emotional literacy with the under 5s

From the time of birth, babies are getting used to the world around them and are learning to bond with and trust their main carers. Young babies smile, cry, grasp, cling, suck, make eye contact and sucking movements with their mouth, and reach out to let you know they need care and loving. They feel secure and cry less when held and cuddled. They will tell you when they need quiet time and calming by turning or looking away or when they are restless in your arms.

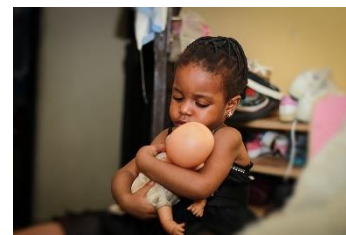


Image: Louis Osakwe [CC Share-alike 4.0]

As a baby grows and develops, they can make connections between the look on a person's face and the tone of their voice e.g. happy face and soft tone, anxious face and sharp tone. They begin to manage their feelings by soothing themselves with thumb-sucking and other habits as well as distraction through play, as they learn their main carers may not always be instantly available. When main care givers respond quickly, consistently and sensitively, older babies learn more quickly about their feelings and how to manage them.



Image: Arctic Warrior
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Toddlers can show extremes of behaviour, from independent to dependent, aggressive to calm, helpful to stubborn. These changes can happen quickly. Tantrums and other reactions to anger and frustration are common in toddlers but most respond well to comfort shown by cuddles, holding, stroking, patting, calming and gentle tones, and to being in a quiet, comforting place. Toddlers express their feelings and are learning to manage their feelings through play. They are beginning to name feelings, e.g. happy, sad, angry, scared and to show interest in others' feelings.

Big emotions like frustration, anger and embarrassment can be overwhelming for very young children, they need to be reassured that it is ok to have these feelings.

Here are some ideas to help:

- *Help young child explore emotions through play, for example puppet play, singing, reading and messy play. Songs, games, stories and imaginative play help toddlers to know more about feelings and the feelings of others.*
- *Talking with toddlers before difficult events such as changes or separations helps them to manage their feelings and to feel secure and comforted.*
- *When you see a child showing a particular emotion, label it for them and talk about it. For example, 'You have a big smile on your face. You must be happy to see me' or 'You're crying. I think you're frustrated because you can't play with the toy'.*
- *Use the feeling shapes to help younger children to explore emotions and what they might look like or what colour they may be.*
- *Use a feelings book and explore what these feelings are and why we feel them. This might be a book of colours which helps you to reflect what emotion is represented in each colour*
- *Use emotional flash cards to explore opposite feelings.*

Emotional literacy with the 5 to 11s

A child's emotional development continues to progress once they begin school. In the primary age range, children start to understand that other people's feelings matter too.

They will be making and choosing their own friends. It takes time for them to learn how to cooperate with each other and this can make friendships tricky. You can help them think about how they feel, and how their friend might feel too.

Being a good friend and having good friends are important life skills to learn.

Primary aged children are starting to get better at managing their own emotions. They can talk more easily about how they are feeling and they are more able to take on board advice and techniques to help them.

From around age seven, memory and concentration grows. Children can think more quickly and can remember more than one thing at a time. They are enthusiastic learners and usually enjoy doing things with you. They will be developing strong opinions and will 'argue back' and want to do things their way !

Children in this age group can talk about how to recognise emotions in themselves and others. For example, 'When I broke that glass, I yelled really loudly. Does that happen to you when you make a mistake and feel angry?'

Help them to work out how their body feels when they're experiencing an emotion. For example, 'You look nervous. Have you got butterflies in your tummy?'

Children need some simple strategies to manage their emotions. For example: ways to calm down from strong emotions like counting to 10 or taking five deep breaths.

Suggest ways to react to strong emotions – for example, clap your hands when you're excited, ask for a hug when you're sad, or squeeze your cushion really hard when you're angry.

It can be hard for a child to use strategies like these when they're very upset. They might shout, hit things or behave in other inappropriate ways instead. So you might need to help them to calm down. When they're calm, you can help them understand that strong emotions are OK, but bad behaviour isn't.

- *Do an emotions activity such as choosing an emotion like 'excited' and acting it out. You can turn this activity into a simple guessing game.*
- *Do some story play work to create stories and explore the feelings in them.*
- *Use Duplo or Lego or even Emotiblocks to explore all our feelings.*
- *Use emotions dice to mark how we are feeling today.*
- *Use Lego as a way of talking to children and giving them space to just play. You can use other creative items such as play dough or collage making. Be aware of the conversations during activities you are doing as part of the session and alert to anything that may need following up. Use this time to really explore the feeling a child may be experiencing.*
- *Use an emotions check-in board so they can begin to recognise and share how they are feeling.*



Emotional literacy with 11+

Puberty is a time when young people move through a series of significant and healthy changes and usually begins to take effect from the ages of 10/11 years. During this transition from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, physical, emotional and social changes take place. It is normal for young people to experience intense and overwhelming emotions at this time. Moods can become extreme and unpredictable as young people attempt to navigate their world and work out their own identity and place within it.

It is important to have a basic understanding of the development of the adolescent brain.

Although teenagers are likely to look like adults, physically the teenage brain is not as developed as an adult brain. This continued brain development combined with the hormonal changes that teenagers experience at this stage means that adolescents may have trouble with controlling and expressing their emotions. In fact, research shows that the part of the brain responsible for managing emotions and making rational decisions continues to develop until way into the mid-20s! This can help explain why young people at times seem to act without thinking (they aren't!).



- *Ask them how they are feeling on a scale of 1-10*
- *Use conversations cubes which will initiate a discussion based on the feeling or the scenario on the cube.*
- *Using Lego or something else to fiddle with, just give the young people space to just be. This gives you an opportunity to build relationships and explore how they are doing. You can use any creative activity which requires time and concentration to make that time and space to just be.*
- *Maybe write some feelings on Jenga blocks and, as they are pulled out of a tower, explore what that feeling might look like for the young people.*
- *Provide outlets for young people to relieve stress. Examples include exercising (hiking, kickboxing, etc), cooking and baking. Encouraging new hobbies such as journal writing, scrapbooking or pursuing an interest can help to clear the mind and offer a new challenge to engage with.*
- *One to one conversations. The best conversations often happen in the most unexpected and natural ways. For example doing a job together like tidying, putting chairs and tables away, making tea and coffee. It can be helpful to ask open-ended but specific questions to start a conversation, such as 'what have you enjoyed about the session/service/our time together today?' or even 'what have you not enjoyed about it?' This way you are asking for a personal response but you are not putting the young person in a vulnerable position by simply asking 'how are you feeling?' which they may not know anyway!*
- *Recognising something more serious. When a young person's emotions or mood is consistently affecting their ability to engage in daily life this could be a sign of a mental health illness. Seek further advice at this stage.*
- *Use Table talk – Wellbeing Questions within a group or just as a conversation starter <https://table-talk.org/Wellbeing.html>*

Intergenerational day

Spend a morning as a whole church exploring emotions over a brunch or breakfast.

Scrapbook these conversations or put together a collage of images about the different feelings. You could use this to work through and discuss the emotions, asking questions like 'What does happy feel like? What does confused feel like?'

Make and use a Blob tree to explore where you feel you are in the group and what emotions that brings up for you. Or have some table talk cards out for people to talk about over a meal or coffee
Table talk for wellbeing <https://uglyducklingresources.org/collections/table-talk/products/table-talk-for-wellbeing>



Follow up this day by having emotional check-in as people come to church, so that that whole congregation are recognising their feelings as they come into the church building. This could be something as simple as putting a removable sticker at a particular feeling on a check-in board. Don't be afraid to ask people about how they're feeling – this way the whole church can know that it's OK to share your true feelings with others.

Resources you could use

- *The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside
- *In My Heart: A Book of Feelings* by Jo Witek
- *Find Out About: Feelings: A lift-the-flap board book of emotions* by Louise Forshaw
- *Emotiblocks* <https://minilandgroup.com/educational/usa/emotiblocks/>
- *Table talk for wellbeing* <https://uglyducklingresources.org/collections/table-talk/products/table-talk-for-wellbeing>
- *The Resilience Doughnut* website is based on research into what makes some people more resilient than others. Follow their guidance for building the emotional resilience and wellbeing of children, adolescents and adults.
- *The SPACE programme* provides information about children's and adult's emotional behaviour using trauma awareness: [Supporting parents and children emotionally](#)
- *Action for Children - The Blues Programme* gives young people the tools to look after their emotional wellbeing. For young people aged 13-19

