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Create an EMOTION-RICH CLASSROOM

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EMOTION-RICH CLASSROOM

Helping Young Children Build Their Social Emotional Skills



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Create an Emotion-Rich Classroom: Helping Young Children Build Their Social Emotional Skills

Lindsay N. Giroux, M.Ed. with a foreword by Mary Louise Hemmeter

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Introduction

Emotions Matter

I remember when I started my first full-time preschool teaching job. After years of working as an assistant in early childhood classrooms on my college campus, I had moved across the country and taken a job where I'd have a classroom of my very own. I was excited to have my own space to try out ideas. I was anxious too; as I awaited the arrival of my first class of students, I had trouble envisioning how my year would go. But I felt I had done what I could to prepare. I'd set up my room, planned schedules and routines, organized materials, and started to build relationships with families before the children stepped foot into school on the first day.

That year was nothing like I had imagined. Some things were brilliant successes. My class responded well to puppet play and songs, and they loved books as much as I did. We had great sensory experiences together, painting with our feet and mixing up slime. Families were appreciative of the developmental notes and photos I shared, and they were great partners in brainstorming and planning for their children's growth. Other things were less successful. The children had a lot of big feelings. There were tantrums when spaghetti was served on pizza day. There were kicks and hits and thrown blocks when a toy was snatched away and when it was time to stop and clean up a favorite activity. I had big feelings too. Between moments of joy, I felt defeated, exhausted, ineffective, and worried.

I knew my class needed a lot of social and emotional support, and I didn't feel particularly well-equipped to provide it for them. I wasn't sure how to explicitly teach interaction skills, and I had never had so many children in one group who struggled with handling anger and disappointment. It felt impossible to meet the needs of my class without addressing their emotional needs. They needed skills and guidance for handling big feelings, self-regulating, expressing emotions in safe ways, and recognizing emotions in others. Emotions matter, and I *knew* this, but I didn't know what to *do* about it.

With support from my co-teachers and information gleaned from online resources, I muddled through the year. But I wanted to learn more, make changes, and offer better help to the young children in my care.

A couple years later, I decided to go back to school for a graduate degree, and I wanted to lean into those challenges I had felt so strongly. I studied early childhood special education and focused my research on social and emotional development. I honed my skills in explicit social and emotional instruction and became more confident in my ability to coach children when emotionally intense situations arose. I couldn't help but think how that first year would have gone differently, and what the benefits would have been for the children had I known these skills during that part of my teaching career.

For the last eight years, my focus has been on social and emotional learning (SEL), coaching early childhood teachers in both inclusive and self-contained classrooms. I have seen amazing, creative lessons on emotional literacy. I have seen children learn to answer, "How are you feeling?" with specific emotion vocabulary, and I've seen children select regulation strategies and joyfully announce that they are calm. I have also seen teachers experience many of the same feelings and frustrations I had. They want to meet the needs of their children, and they recognize that challenging behaviors are a result of children not yet having the skills to regulate and express themselves. These educators start to teach about emotions, but often aren't sure where to go next in building skills or being more intentional with instruction. Many curricula encourage reading about emotions, modeling emotions, and using visuals. But when it comes to moving beyond these steps, teachers often feel stuck. What do we do *after* those introductory lessons? What do we do when high-emotion situations arise in the classroom? How do we help children generalize their growing social and emotional skills to other settings, including home?

This book has grown out of my work coaching and training teachers. Within it, you'll find frameworks I've developed to help teachers answer the questions of "What comes after I've read a book and modeled the skill?" and "What do I do or say in the emotional moment to build children's capacity?" You'll notice guided reflections, the same kinds of conversations I have as I coach teachers. You'll read ideas for data collection and prompts for noticing what is working (and what isn't) so that you can make adjustments and keep the focus on the children and their outcomes. And you'll see encouragement to make choices that will work for you and your class—because in instruction, as in coaching, there are ample ways to build and reinforce skills. You get to choose your own adventure.

With *Create an Emotion-Rich Classroom*, I have aimed to write a book that would have helped me during that difficult first year—a book that would have given me the skills to understand how to be more effective at teaching about emotions, while encouraging me to choose activities and materials that would play to my strengths and create joyful moments in my class. I hope this book can do that for you and the children you teach.

About This Book

This book's goal is to give you frameworks for planning and implementing a variety of strategies to support the emotional development of young children in your care. It serves as a blueprint to design and build an emotion-rich classroom. Unlike a formal curriculum, which might have a pacing guide of skills and plans for each day, this book provides flexible, adaptable strategies and activity ideas. You can intentionally plan and modify these for your classroom to support the competencies young children are developing during their preschool years. While the content is presented in an order that will allow skills to be built on top of one another, there is not a suggested timetable for how long to focus on one area or skill. Rather, observing children in their interactions and play will support you in knowing whether to teach a new skill or continue practicing and reinforcing the first.

You'll probably notice that there's not a weekly lesson for "Social and Emotional Day." There's not a specific daily lesson for a social and emotional time block either, nor is there an Emotions Unit for the beginning of the school year. These omissions are intentional. Effective social and emotional instruction is woven into the fabric of every school day. It's about teaching explicit lessons, but it's also about responding when a child is upset, modeling when you are frustrated, discussing emotions in storybooks, and asking children to share examples of emotions from their own lives. Just as a print-rich environment intentionally immerses children in literacy experiences, an emotion-rich classroom intentionally surrounds children with social and emotional instruction and supportive interactions.

Social and emotional learning is much more than emotional skills and competencies. Other skill sets, such as social interaction skills, decision making, problem solving, and self-management, are also components of SEL and, like emotions, they can be taught and are part of lifelong learning. However, I chose to focus this book on emotional skills because of the interrelatedness of emotions and these other skill sets, and how this plays out in the early childhood classroom.

For example, a child I worked with struggled to handle disappointment. We had taught and practiced asking for a turn with a toy in our classroom, and he was able to use his words and gestures to ask. However, those positive interactions quickly took a turn if a peer told him he couldn't have the toy or said he had to wait for a turn. Without the skills to handle this disappointment, he would kick and shout at others. Classmates learned to move away and avoid him when he was in this state, which in turn limited the likelihood of interactions with his peers even when he was more emotionally regulated. Similarly, he struggled with self-management such as persistence to meet a goal, because frustration became overwhelming when he met a roadblock during a task. He needed the emotional competencies to allow him to bring a regulated self into social interactions and problem-solving with others.

As you explore this book, you'll notice that social and emotional skills overlap in many areas. For instance, responding to others' emotions lies at the intersection of emotions and

friendship skills. Listening to others talk about their emotions and recognizing that they differ from yours is connected to empathy and social awareness. While this book focuses on skills tied to emotions, I hope you get to see and appreciate the growth in children's overall social and emotional development as you create an emotion-rich classroom.

Focusing on emotions as a distinct piece of social and emotional instruction has benefits too. First, it makes instruction specific and measurable, as we home in on very specific individual skills. Second, it allows both teachers and children to gain and strengthen the foundational skills that support other interactions, such as understanding how we feel and knowing how to read others' feelings. Third, emotions influence every choice and decision that we make; they color our perceptions and drive us into action. And fourth, emotions tend to be a topic that teachers are wishing to dive into, but the whole of social and emotional learning, with its vast importance and wide range of skills, can feel unmanageable. Looking at one distinct strand of skills, and using that strand as a mechanism to practice new frameworks, gives us valuable practice in taking instruction piece-by-piece.

The emotional competencies featured in this book are:

- building children's emotional vocabulary (chapter 3)
- learning to read ourselves and others to recognize emotions (chapter 4)
- understanding and articulating the causes of emotions (chapter 5)
- expressing and regulating emotions (chapters 6 and 7)
- understanding others' emotions and perspectives—a key part of empathy (chapter 8)

These competencies are aligned with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence's skills needed to be an "emotion scientist."

The teacher strategies described in this book are based around the Pyramid Model, a framework for promoting social-emotional competence in early childhood. The Pyramid Model provides evidence-based strategies to promote social and emotional development and prevent challenging behavior. These strategies, important for effective social-emotional teaching and Pyramid Model implementation, are woven into the structure of each chapter. They include teachers modeling their own emotions or ways to appropriately express emotions (Describe and Demonstrate) and using a variety of different teaching strategies to reinforce skills in both small and large group settings (Describe and Demonstrate, Practice, Planned Opportunities). The Pyramid Model also encourages both giving positive descriptive feedback to children about their use of skills and asking children to reflect on their use of these skills (Reinforce and Reflect). Of course, even with robust instruction, teachers will need to individualize some approaches for specific children, changing instructional procedures or materials to make concepts more salient for those students (Differentiation & Advancement).

You might not be in a program that uses the Pyramid Model for social-emotional development, and that's okay too. You'll recognize that these instructional strategies, such

as modeling, practicing, and planning intentional lessons, are fundamentally best practices for early childhood. The structure embedded in the chapters will support you with robust instruction to meet a variety of needs and will provide you with the vocabulary to talk about your instructional practices. You'll also find strategies for connecting with families, along with data collection tools to support children with emerging skills. These will benefit you and your class regardless of curriculum or approach.

In each chapter, there are several suggestions on how to communicate with families about the new skills you are teaching. There are also ideas for soliciting family feedback about the emotions work you are doing at school; this gives families a chance to articulate what is important to them, what their concerns might be, and what emotional strengths their children are bringing into the classroom. Rather than only sending home information about what you are teaching, allowing families to share their thoughts and beliefs about emotions can make your emotion teaching more effective. Having examples and strategies from children's home lives makes your instruction more meaningful and connected.

You'll also notice a heavy focus on adult reflection. These reflection prompts are included to encourage you to think about your experiences with emotions in your own life, knowing how interrelated your use of these skills are with your teaching. There are also reflection prompts woven throughout that ask you to consider different aspects of your teaching and your class's responses. Encouraging reflection during classroom coaching is one of my favorite components of my job. Rather than telling teachers what to do, or why a skill is important, reflection allows each of us to identify why a skill matters in our lives and the lives of the children in our classes. Reflection shines clarity on our personal *why*, and ties together our actions with the results we see in the classroom. Practicing reflection as you plan and teach will also enhance your ability to support children reflect on their own emotional competencies.

How to Use This Book

There are many ways to use this book, independently or with others. The way I recommend using this book is in whichever way will motivate you to read, reflect, and then implement strategies in the classroom. For some readers, this might mean reading it individually, at your own pace, and taking time to reflect internally without the pressure of a due date or the expectation of sharing your reflections aloud. For others, this might mean creating a book study group to have an accountability framework to encourage you to read, implement, and bring ideas to the table. Consider what structures typically motivate you or allow you the space and energy to try new things.

If you opt to read this book on your own, you might find that recording thoughts and ideas in a notebook as you read can help you revisit and reflect on what you have learned and what you have brought with you into the classroom. Similarly, I recommend that you do take the time to stop and reflect when prompted, as it will encourage you to not only think about *what* you are implementing but also *why* you are working toward an emotion-rich classroom. Documenting your reflections and instructional decisions can also serve as a

record of your professional growth or may become helpful notes to reference if you are working towards Pyramid Model fidelity. And having your thoughts, choices, and plans written or typed out will make creating next year's emotion-rich classroom much easier.

You might choose to read this book with a group, such as a group of adults who work in your classroom or a group of teachers at a school. Reading together creates the opportunity for shared study. While you might divide and conquer the content of some books (for example, I read chapter 3 and summarize for the group, and you read chapter 4 and summarize), this particular book does not lend itself to this book study format. Because each chapter contains reflections and instructional decisions that you'll want to make with your own teaching style and your own class's needs in mind, it is hard to reap those benefits without diving into each chapter yourself.

However, other book study formats might work better with the structure of this book. For instance, one such structure would be for all participants to read a chapter and complete a DAPPER planning sheet for their classroom. Then you can hold a book study meeting where everyone shares elements of their DAPPER plans and gives feedback prior to implementing these plans in the classroom. Another successful structure could be to have everyone read and begin to implement a chapter's strategies, and then come back to discuss successes and challenges, review child data, and brainstorm next steps to strengthen instruction.

One other thing to note as you get ready to begin reading: the first time through this book, I recommend working through the chapters in chronological order. You'll find that the skills are set to build on each other, with chapters intentionally referencing skills, visuals, and activities from previous chapters to build on children's prior knowledge. After you work through the chapters, planning and implementing their suggestions for the first time, you might opt to revisit specific chapters as you plan for a new school year. After your initial implementation, this book becomes more of a resource to revisit, reflect again, and revise plans to meet new needs.

Wrap-Up

As you embark on the journey to an emotion-rich classroom, I encourage you to envision what you want to create. How would your classroom look if children had the skills to understand emotions, discuss them, and regulate them? What would your classroom sound like? How would your classroom feel if you and the children had these skills?

Most of all, I challenge you to bring an open mind. Exploring your own emotions, reflecting on your experiences with emotions, and working to build new habits of implementation are hard work. Continuing to strive toward creating an emotion-rich classroom requires giving yourself grace. It's normal to feel like you didn't handle an emotionally-charged situation well enough, or to feel frustrated when your strategies aren't meeting the needs of your class. A little grace for yourself, alongside reminding yourself of the classroom you have envisioned, will help you move the work forward.

Lindsay N. Giroux