

Nurturing Children and Youth Social and Emotional Learning

Activities for Educators and Parents

Children consistently learn and develop new and increasingly complex cognitive skills throughout early childhood. During this period, it is not practical to use a one-and-done approach to learning and skill building. Like an athlete or artist, when it comes to social and emotional learning, children need to practice and fine-tune these skills inside and outside of school to gain mastery. It is important to remember that some children understand a skill or concept quickly while others may need additional practice before gaining mastery of those same skills or concepts.

In her book *Play Therapy Activities*, Melissa LaVigne, LCSW, offers 101 social and emotional learning activities for children between the ages of three and nine. The activities provided below are examples from the book that can be used in individual or group sessions. They can also serve as great suggestions to educators to use within the classroom and for family members to use at home with children.

Worry Jar

This activity is used to address feelings of anxiety or uncertainty a child may have.

- **Materials needed:** jar with lid, post-its, and a pen/pencil
- **Directions:** When a child has a worry, concern, or anxious feeling, invite the child to write it down on a

post-it and place it in the jar. Explain they do not need to share it, confirm that everyone worries at times, and also talk about other ways to manage the feelings of being worried. For younger kids who do not yet write or spell, offer to write down the worry for them if they want. Once written, hand the paper back to them so they can put it in the jar.

Felt Feeling Faces

An emotional intelligence activity, this helps children think about and understand how feelings present on someone's face.

- **Materials needed:** oval-shaped felt paper to represent faces, felt paper in an array of colors, and scissors (optional: glue stick to make permanent feeling faces)
- **Directions:** Instruct children to cut out the shapes of eyes and mouths expressing emotions such as happy, sad, mad, etc. If needed, have children use a hand mirror to see the shapes their own faces make with different facial expressions. Once cut, have the children use the oval-shaped pieces of felt with the eyes and mouth to create "feeling faces". Have the children guess what feeling each face is making and discuss what they can do when they see someone feeling that way. Note: Pre-cut out these shapes for children too young to safely use scissors.

Feelings Play List

This activity draws on the emotional connection of music to help children identify feelings or remember fond memories.

- **Materials needed:** access to a music streaming device or an audio search device (e.g., Alexa)
- **Directions:** Begin a group discussion by asking the children to name feelings they want to talk about. If possible, encourage a balance between positive and

negative feelings. Ask the children if they can think of songs they like that match a feeling. If possible, listen to the song or look up the words in the song. Ask the children why the song matches a certain feeling for them. For an added activity, make a playlist of songs that match positive feelings such as happy or calm. The song names can be written down and shared so families can make their own playlists.

Bubble Tag

This breathing and impulse control activity can be modified to accommodate individual or group work.

- **Materials needed:** bubble wand and bubble solution
- **Directions:** Introduce this activity by explaining how breath control can be used to create a sense of calm and discuss how deep and steady breathing makes good bubbles. Use a bubble wand to take turns blowing bubbles while the child tries to pop the bubbles before they hit the ground. For group sessions, have one member blow the bubble while another pops it, or consider splitting the group into teams. During the bubble-blowing exercise, ask the child (or group) to think about what will make more or bigger bubbles and ask them to experiment with their breath to find out. Use positive praise when the child uses good breath control, model breath control if needed, and talk about how breathing can help manage feelings.

Enjoying the Classics

Games like red light green light, freeze dance, musical chairs, and duck-duck-goose provide children an opportunity to connect their mind to their body by listening and then acting on what they heard. This can help with building better self-regulation skills as well as their overall emotional intelligence.

References: LaVigne, M. (2020). Play therapy activities: 101 Play-Based exercises to improve behavior and strengthen the Parent-Child connection. Rockridge Press.