

Helping Children to Balance Their Emotions

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Philippians 4:8, NIV

Paul wrote Philippians when he was on death row. Yet it is one of the most positive and joyful books in the Bible! Philippians 4 is a potted handbook of emotional wellbeing. The principles he listed there are being shown as important to our emotional wellbeing through research being done today. Read the chapter yourself when you have time and list at least 8 principles that support positive emotional health.

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About emotions

- We will all experience negative emotions and positive emotions – that is a normal and inevitable part of our life on earth.
- Negative emotions are not bad or evil – they are the emotions that drain us. Positive emotions fill us up again.
- Jesus experienced a wide range of negative and positive emotions during His life on earth.
- Emotions are invitations to connect – meaning that when we have an emotion, we need to find someone to share it with – if I am sad, I need to find someone to comfort me (Romans 12:15 – mourn with those who mourn). If I am stressed, I need to find someone to help me (Galatians 6:2 Bear one another’s burdens). If I have a moment of awe, it is much more fulfilling if that is shared with another person.
- Emotions are also information signals from our body to our brain to move us to important actions.
- When we learn how to balance our emotions it helps to protect us from stress. We need to experience at least 3:1 positive to negative emotions for a healthy baseline – 4:1 and 5:1 are even better – then we are more likely to flourish.
- Negative emotions are useful. Anger can help us to fight injustice. Fear of danger can help to keep us safe, some stress is energizing, as long as it is not overwhelming. It is natural and healthy to mourn our losses.
- We can choose our emotions more than we think. We can choose to focus on experiencing positive emotions and do things that will foster these emotions.

Emotions in the classroom

- We can make a difference by helping children to manage their negative emotions in healthy ways.
- We can also do our best to nurture their healthy, happy and positive emotions, which will help them to become more resilient when they face life’s challenges.
- We can teach students healthy emotional management as a vital life-skill that will enhance their emotional, mental, relational, physical and spiritual well-being and help them to flourish.

Taking care of our own emotional health is a vital part of taking care of students' emotional health.

Negative emotions (draining emotions)

Anger

Feeling hot hostility towards something or someone, often because your goals have been blocked, you have been misunderstood, or you sense injustice.

Contempt

Feeling superior and disrespectful towards others, looking down on others.

Disgust

Feeling repulsed by how something or someone looks, tastes, feels, smells or sounds.

Embarrassment

Feeling ashamed and distressed when your mistakes or guilt are publicly exposed.

Fear

Feeling anxious and apprehensive about a situation that feels too big for you to handle well, or that you don't have the skills to complete. Or feeling threatened by danger.

Frustration

Feeling annoyed things take longer or are more complicated than you expected, or when people criticise you and you are doing the best you can in the circumstances.

Guilt

A feeling of painful responsibility when you have done something badly or wrong, or when you have hurt somebody.

Sadness

Feeling distress at losing something or someone, being disappointed, or feeling disadvantaged.

Shame

Feeling inadequate, exposed, humiliated or guilty.

Stress

Feeling overwhelmed by the things you have to do and being afraid that if you don't do them you will get into trouble or be seen as a failure.

Healthy and happy emotions (refreshing and energising emotions)

Laughter and amusement

What: Laughing and smiling at something unexpected, positive, unusual and safe. Not at someone else's expense.

A cheerful heart is good medicine. Proverbs 17:22 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...a time to laugh. Ecclesiastes 3:1,4

Why: Children learn well through play, and their minds are more open to learn when they are enjoying themselves. Playfulness helps them to learn and relax.

How: Enjoy having fun with children. Nurture positive humour. Have a humour board in the class where you share clean jokes and cartoons with the children. Let the children take it in turns to choose something funny from your selection to go on the board. www.reverendfun.com has some great cartoons, often based on Bible stories, for older children. Get children laughing before you teach them something new – laughter helps their brain to absorb new information better. Tell each other the funniest thing you saw, heard or did during the day. Visit a zoo, or bring in some amusing pets, and watch the funny antics of the animals. Do unusual, surprising and funny things. Wear your clothes backwards for an hour; arrange slices of fruit to make a funny face; and hide funny things in the classroom for the children to find. These little things make special memories that will bring a smile to their face.

Awe and wonder

What: Encountering God. A sense of wonder about something beautiful in nature or in another person. An incredible sense of being part of something greater than ourselves, such as the universe, or mankind.

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. Psalm 139:13, 14

Why: Wonder inspires children and it helps them to appreciate God's creation. Wonder also encourages them to learn and discover.

How: Set up a nature table with sturdy natural objects that children can explore. Include a magnifying glass and some books with beautiful pictures of nature. Look at a shell, a flower, a picture in a book and ask children what they think is the most beautiful part of it. Ask children to tell the class about the most beautiful thing they saw in the past week, or during the weekend. Visit art galleries or go for walks in nature. Encourage children to slow down and notice beautiful things. Send them on a wonder hunt to find three amazing and natural things in the playground, garden, the forest, or the park, etc. Older students can bring in photos or videos they have taken of "wonderful" things.

Thankfulness

What: Sincere appreciation of God, someone, or something that makes our life better, more comfortable or more enjoyable. (See www.gratefulness.org for plenty of ideas and watch A Good Day video by David Steindl-Rast)

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Why: Encourages appreciation, good manners, and an unselfish attitude. Reduces a sense of entitlement.

How: Give children diaries with a small space for each day. Ask them to think of three things they're thankful for each day and to write or draw them in their diary.

Make attractive thank you cards to send to people in your community. Encourage children to send thank you cards for the smallest gift or kindness. Create a gratitude wall where children can write down what they're thankful for, or a table where they can place objects that represent their gratitude. Do a quick mood reset in the classroom by going through the alphabet and inviting the children to suggest things they are thankful for beginning with each letter. They can suggest more than one item per letter. They can also create their own gratitude alphabets each week or month.

Hopefulness and Optimism

What: The belief that things can and will change and improve. Always having something to look forward to.

For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jeremiah 29:11

Why: Hope counteracts despair and develops a child's faith. Optimism helps them to believe they can make a difference and overcome their obstacles.

How: Talk about your own hopes and why you are hopeful about your own life; talk about your hopes for the child in open-ended ways ('I hope you'll find a job that fills you with joy,' rather than: 'I hope you'll be a teacher like me.') Encourage the child to write down their hopes in a place where they will see them often. Talk about your hopes for each day at the beginning of the day and reflect on how they have been fulfilled on a daily basis. Plan regular "treats" that the children can look forward to daily or weekly, such as game times, an intriguing chapter story, and other celebrations and events.

Inspiration

What: Being inspired by God and the wonder of His works. Recognising excellence in another person's character, actions or creations. Being inspired to pursue excellence in oneself, too. Psalm 104 (inspired by God's works)

Why: Encourages them to strive for the best they can accomplish, nurtures their character, etc.

How: Help them to develop a plan for working towards their goals. Encourage, support and pray for them as they strive towards their goals. Take them to see inspiring events and read true stories of inspiring people. Ask what inspires them most about a Bible story you are reading together, or a mission report you have heard or seen.

Joy

What: A feeling of pure and happy delight, playfulness and freedom.

A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit. Proverbs 15:13

Why: Joy counteracts sadness and depression, lifts their mood, helps them to delight in their lives.

How: Help them look for the happy moments in each day and to reflect on them or note them down so that the positive and healthy emotions aren't lost in the pile of negative experiences. Discover what makes them feel happy and help them to

experience joy and playfulness as often as you can. Help them to find the joy in simple pleasures of life and in being kind and generous to others.

Interest/flow

What: Being intrigued, fascinated or challenged by something new. Being so happily involved in an activity or hobby that you lose all sense of time.

Proverbs 31:10-31 The wife of noble character pursues many interests and develops her skills.

Why: Fresh experiences and challenges keep inspiring them to learn new things. It is very healthy for children to know how to become totally absorbed in something good that interests them; helps them develop new skills and gives them ability to persist at a challenge, etc. They can also distract themselves from negative thought patterns by being absorbed in an activity they enjoy.

How: Visit art galleries, museums, farms, forest centres, libraries, craft classes for children etc., and support them in following up their interests. Invite family and friends with different hobbies and skills to come into schools and provide taster sessions. Pathfinders and Adventurers can also help children to develop new hobbies and interests.

Feeling valued/healthy satisfaction in a job well done

What: Having your skills and achievements noticed and valued by others. Finding healthy satisfaction and delight in doing a job well.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. Ecclesiastes 9:10

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. Colossians. 3:2

Why: Encourages them towards excellence and skill-development; helps them to have a healthy self-image as a valuable and valued human being.

How: Take photos of them and their achievements; celebrate their achievements in simple ways; notice what they do well and appreciate and encourage their efforts. "Reward" effort rather than achievement as this encourages them to develop their skills.

Serenity

What: A feeling of peacefulness, stillness, calmness and contentment. Feeling free from fear, worries or stress.

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.

Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment. 1 John 4:18

Why: Lives are over busy and too rushed for most children; peaceful moments help them to recover from the stresses of life; time and space to think and pray, etc.

How: Invite children to let you know when they are worried and anxious about something, or about their learning. If they are worried and anxious it is much harder for them to learn. Create a quiet space in the class or school where children can go when they feel overwhelmed, or where they can find peace on a busy school day. This is vital for some children's wellbeing. Help to calm children by giving them bubble mixture and blowing bubbles as the breathing pattern for bubble blowing is

naturally calming. Give a drink of cool water as this is calming too. Smelling lavender and citrus fragrances helps to calm the body. Or let them listen to calming nature sounds and music.

Love

What: A blend of many of the other positive emotions, experienced within a warm, close, safe and caring relationship.

Romans 12. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Why: Children understand more about God's love by the way they experience love and care from adults. Whenever they feel valued and valuable, safe and secure, and experience moments of closeness, happy and healthy hormones are released into their body.

How: Discover each child's key love language (time, touch, helpful support, loving words, thoughtful gifts, etc); use their love language and find as many creative and fun and appropriate ways as possible to let them know you care for them – don't leave them to guess (www.5lovelanguages.com). Search the internet for fun ways to show care in the classroom. Avoid doing the things that you know would hurt or upset a child.

Why it is vital to nurture positive emotions in children and ourselves?

When we actively help children experience positive emotions they are:

- more likely to think that they are valuable, that God loves them, that their lives are meaningful and worthwhile, and that it is worth persisting when faced with a challenge.
- more open to concentrate, learn new things, and be creative.
- more likely to feel loved, hopeful, valuable, safe, confident and grateful.
- more likely to develop healthy and positive relationships with those around them, to be generous and kind, and to pursue excellence in all areas of their lives.
- More likely to have a healthy view of self, healthy close relationships, a maturing personality, and a healthy view of God.

When we don't actively help children to manage their negative emotions they are:

- More likely to think there's something 'wrong' with them, life is hopeless, God can't love and forgive them, they don't really matter, and it's not worth trying. Or they may try super-hard and develop an unhealthy striving for unattainable perfection.
- More likely to feel depressed, ashamed, afraid, bitter, angry, hurt, 'never good enough', hopeless and anxious.
- More likely to develop unhealthy behaviours such as bullying others, tantrums, 'acting out', self-harm, addictions and compulsions.
- More likely to lead to unhealthy relationships and choices of friends and partners, mental illness, problems studying and working, difficulty accepting God's love, etc.

How to help children experience a healthy emotional balance

(The following section is taken directly from www.handsonscotland.co.uk)

Helping children to manage their negative emotions

- Children learn about emotions and how to express them appropriately by watching others. Show children that you have feelings and that you are able to say how you feel and manage them appropriately. For example, you could say that you are angry about a child's behaviour and calmly talk about what the consequences would be, instead of just shouting at them. Or you could say you are sad about something that's happened and talk about why it was so important to you, instead of becoming moody and uncommunicative.
- Help young children to name negative feelings – sadness, disappointment, frustration, etc. Learning to name feelings helps children to express them without having to act them out. For example, they could say that they are feeling disappointed that their friend can't come to play, instead of sulking.
- Talk and genuinely listen to children about how they are feeling. Try to see things from their point of view and accept how they feel. For example, you might say "You seem really disappointed that you didn't make the football team. I understand that it must be hard for you."
- Don't try to fix a problem for children or ignore how they are feeling. You could say things like "You look worried, is something bothering you?" and then take the time to listen.
- When children feel genuinely understood it is easier for them to learn to think through their feelings and work out effective ways of dealing with them. For example, if a child is feeling frustrated about trying to learn something new and sees that you understand their frustration, they may be more confident to keep practising, instead of getting into a bad mood.
- Acknowledge children's efforts to manage their feelings. This helps motivate them to use these helpful strategies in other situations. You might say something like "You were very brave to do that when you felt so scared" or "Well done for being so patient with your brother – I know you were angry with him."
- Be supportive, but set limits, when you are helping children to manage their feelings. Acknowledge their feelings but make it clear when they are behaving inappropriately. For example, you might say "I know you're upset that we can't go swimming but that does not make it ok to yell at me."

- Help children to learn to distract themselves when something is really bothering them. For example, you could suggest to a young child that you read a story with them if they're frustrated and angry about waiting for something they want. Or you could suggest a short walk in the fresh air to an older child. Or you could put an upbeat song on your music player to help diffuse a bad temper.
- Don't dismiss children's emotions, e.g. "Don't be scared" or even worse, shame them for their feelings, e.g. "Don't be a scaredy-cat." This can lead them to believe that negative emotions are wrong.
- Acknowledge and respect a child's emotions first, then you may be able to talk it through and help them find facts which will help them argue with their negative thoughts. For example, if they are scared of going away from home for a few days, say something like "It's ok to be scared. Now let's think of the last time you went away from home and how well you coped."
- Don't lie to children about situations to avoid negative emotional reactions. For example, saying that an injection "won't hurt a bit" when you know it will hurt, can actually increase the negative emotion when it does hurt and can teach the child not to trust the person who has lied.

Encouraging positive emotions

- Be a good role model for positive emotions. Show children that you can appreciate the things around you and enjoy the good things in your life. Show them that you can smile and engage with the people around you and be kind to yourself and to others. Find the things that you are interested in and the things that bring you joy and build them into your life as much as you can.
- All children are different. Allow children to be themselves, to explore their world and their place in it. Give them freedom and opportunities to find the things that truly inspire them and bring them joy. Try not to impose your expectations by saying what you think they should enjoy or what activities are 'good' for them.
- Teach children that being kind to others will not only help the other person and make the other person feel good, but it will make them feel good too. Get them to think about ways they can be kind to others – at home, at school and in their community.
- Try to get children smiling before you try to teach them something new or do something challenging. There are lots of ways of doing this (e.g. playing a silly game or watching a short funny film) - you will know what suits your child or group of children best. The positive feelings they gain from the fun activity should open their minds and help them be more creative and better at problem-solving, making them more responsive to the new or challenging task.

- Encourage children to ask themselves positive questions like "What have I got to be happy about today?" or "What went well today?" or "What made me feel proud of myself today?" You can do this by making it a mealtime routine or something that you do at the end of a classroom day or group activity.
- Help children to relive positive experiences by drawing a picture of a pleasant memory or by looking at photos together.
- Help children to develop serenity by allowing them space and quiet time for themselves to reflect, be calm and at peace.
- Help children to develop gratitude by talking to them about all the things they have in their lives, e.g. food, books, beaches, parks, clothes, friends, school, mobile phones, toys, computers, trees, animals, etc.
- Inspire children by taking them to events where they will see excellence in their area of interest, for example, a concert, play, dance show, sports event or art exhibition. Or encourage them to watch TV documentaries showing inspiring human behaviour.
- Once you have found the things that truly make a child feel good, find time to fit them into the child's life as much as possible and encourage them to savour their good feelings. Having positive emotions will help them become creative in other aspects of their lives and it will help them build resources so that they can bounce back when times are hard.

Reflecting positively on what you are doing

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up,
just as in fact you are doing. 1 Thess. 5:11, NIV.

Think of three things you are already doing well to help the children around you experience healthy happiness.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Think of three new things you would like to do to help promote healthy emotional balance in the children in your care and circle of influence.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

One practical idea that you can apply easily in your relationships with children during the next week is...

- 1.

References

www.handsonscotland.co.uk Useful, simple and practical information for encouraging children to flourish and for helping them to managing their troubling behaviours.

Fredrickson, Barbara (2009). **Positivity**. New York, Crown Publishers (research and lots of practical ideas to help nurture your own happy and healthy emotions). This is not a Christian book so just take from it what you find useful.

Material prepared by Karen Holford

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