



Emotional Literacy

Alderwood House School's emotional literacy curriculum

What is emotional literacy?

Social interactions are full of conflicts and social interactions that involve diverse perspectives and values are often emotionally charged. In an early learning environment, which for many children is their first independent social experience, children become a part of a community made up of individuals with diverse values, beliefs, experiences and norms.

Navigating this environment successfully requires a constant integration of emotional information - it requires emotional literacy. Emotional literacy refers to the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills used to identify, interpret, regulate and modify physiological, cognitive and behavioural responses accompanying emotional experiences.

Benefits of emotional literacy

Research has found that social-emotional learning programs increase pro-social behaviours, and reduce conduct problems as well as improving academic performance. Positive outcomes from social-emotional learning programs include improving achievement test scores, increasing school engagement, and deepening subject matter understanding. Children with strong emotional literacy experience more positive emotions, have good social skills, strong friendships, are highly regarded by their peers and teachers, and feel secure in their friendships. Compared to children with lower emotional literacy, they are less likely to experience anxiety, hyperactivity, or aggression. Children with strong emotional literacy skills are better at recognizing and understanding emotional expressions in others, leading to increased ease in gaining group entrance, managing complex social interactions, and maintaining more positive peer relationships. Children with high emotional literacy are also more likely to express appropriate emotions in various contexts and use adaptive strategies to deal with negative or upsetting emotions.

Our emotional literacy program

Our emotional literacy program involves two key learning areas: Mindfulness and our Mood Wheel.

Mood Wheel

A feeling words curriculum

Children who have the ability to recognize, label and understand their feelings are then able to better able to regulate their feelings. After all, how can children possibly regulate something they don't recognize or understand?

Emotional recognition. Emotional recognition includes the ability to recognize specific emotional states as they are expressed in self and others. This includes recognizing facial expressions, body language, and verbal expressions.

Emotional labelling. The ability to accurately label a feeling refers to a feeling word vocabulary. A rich feeling-word vocabulary enables children to better differentiate between emotional states and to improve communication about emotions

Emotional understanding is the link between emotion, context, and action. It is the ability to identify a social situation and select an appropriate emotional response.

How do children learn a feeling words vocabulary?

While it is a complex topic, feeling words are much like any other words. We systematically teach feeling word families, helping children identify a wide range of feeling states.

Using our mood wheel, we first teach the idea of unpleasant / pleasant moods and high energy / low energy moods. As children are able to identify these moods in themselves and others, we then begin to teach the corresponding feeling words.



As categorization of emotions emerges in a linear, developmental process, we begin teaching our infant-toddlers the feeling families that are understood in infancy

(happy-cheerful-ecstatic; pensive-sad-grief; annoyed-angry-rage; apprehensive-afraid-terrified), and are taught with infant-friendly language. As children age, our program introduces more complexity to cause-and-effect for emotional states and a more complex feeling word vocabulary.

Mindfulness

What is it, why are we doing it, what does it look like, and how you can help

There are three parts to the brain that we are helping children learn about: the prefrontal cortex (the thinking part), which helps us focus, decide, compute, analyze and reason and helps to moderate social behaviour. It only receives information when the amygdala is calm.

The Amygdala, which is the fight, flight and freeze part of the brain (the impulsive part), blocks information from going to the prefrontal cortex so that we can react

instantly. It can not differentiate between stress and emergency, so can cause reactions that are impulsive.

The Hippocampus (the library), which creates, stores and processes the facts and memories that the prefrontal cortex passes on.

When we are calm, we are able to access the prefrontal cortex, but when we are stressed or feel negative, the amygdala inhibits our ability to think and learn.

The repeated action of focusing attention such as what occurs during mindfulness activities creates and strengthens neuron connections, particularly within the prefrontal cortex. Essentially, mindfulness makes the “thinking” part of your brain grow.

What is mindfulness in the classroom?

In the classroom, we do a variety of mindfulness activities. This includes:

Mindful Moment - using our chime, the children completely still their bodies, and listen intently to the chime as it rings and fades, remaining still and listening until the chime is no longer audible.

Body-Freeze and multi-modal reading - activities that require translating over different parts of the brain (for example, reading a card and physically posing what the card says; hearing a sound and drawing the image of what makes the sound) improves the functioning of the prefrontal cortex

Deep breathing - deep and slow ‘belly breathing’

Labelling brain parts and connected behaviours - research suggests that as children are able to verbally label emotions and parts of the brain, they begin to feel more in-control of their emotions, essentially, emotions become less mysterious!

Literature connections - using books that allow us to discuss impulsive and thoughtful actions and optimistic and pessimistic thought patterns

Gratitude Journal - reflecting on personal gratitude up to three times a day helps to reduce impulsive actions, reduce stress and anxiety and consequently, improve focused and thoughtful actions

Focusing senses - activities that require intensely using one sense



Calming Breaths

Alderwood House School's emotional literacy curriculum

Calming Breaths are an important part of mindfulness - the more children practice calming breaths, the better prepared they are to do so when in an emotionally charged state.

Our bodies, in many ways, are governed by two different systems: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system.

The parasympathetic nervous system regulates normal metabolic functions. When it is dominant, our bodies function in a healthy way. The sympathetic nervous

system is what is considered “fight, flight or freeze” responding. When the sympathetic system is in charge, our normal metabolic processes are put on hold and our body floods with adrenaline and cortisol.

Different parts of our brain have developed to support us in different situations. Our prefrontal cortex is used for thinking, reasoning and decision making. Our amygdala is used to activate the “fight, flight or freeze” responding. The prefrontal cortex can not properly function when the amygdala is activated.

The prefrontal cortex begins development in early childhood, but isn’t fully mature until an individual reaches their mid twenties!

Using the prefrontal cortex and the parasympathetic system

In order to support the development of the prefrontal cortex, children can develop skills to calm the amygdala and the sympathetic system. One of these skills is learning how to take calming breaths when under stress. Stress may be physical, emotional or cognitive - but supporting children in taking control of how their bodies respond to big emotions is an important part of supporting emotional literacy.

The following are different types of calming breaths you can help teach your child. The more children practice, the more competent they are at taking calming breaths, and the more likely they will be able to take calming breaths when faced with emotional and stressful situations.

Balloon Breath

Imagine that your body is a balloon, and with each breath you are filling yourself completely with air. As you breathe in, arch your back, stretch and raise your arms back behind you, and arch your back.

As you breathe out, pull your belly button in, round your back, and look down towards your belly. Bring your arms in around you in a hug.

Repeat several times.

Heart and Belly Breath

This can be done sitting or lying down. Put one hand on your belly and one hand over your heart. Breathe in through your nose, and as you breathe in, take a slow, deep breath that fills the tummy and then raises your chest. When you exhale, let the air out from your heart first, then from your tummy. You can guide this by saying: *breathe into your belly one two into your heart three four exhale out of your heart one two, out of your belly three four.* Repeat several times.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Bring your hand to your nose, and close your right nostril. Breathe in. Move your finger to now close your left nostril and breathe out. Breathe in and then move your finger to close your right nostril and breathe out. Repeat several times.

Langhana Breath

In a seated position, with eyes closed, take several breaths that count to three. *In one two three out one two three.* Once you are breathing a steady pace, make the exhale longer than the inhale. *In one two three, out one two three four.* Repeat several times.

Brahmana Breath

In a seated position, with eyes closed, take several breaths that count to three. *In one two three out one two three.* Once you are breathing a steady pace, make the inhale longer than the exhale. *In one two three four, out one two three.* Repeat several times.

Arms Together Breath

In a seated or standing position, take a deep breath in, while raising your hands and arms up over your head (like a sun salutation). When your hands meet at the top of your head, bring them down, together (palm to palm) as you exhale. Repeat several times.

Blow Out the Candles Breath

Hold your finger out in front of you as if it is a candle. (or in front of your child, if you are helping your child breathe). Take a deep breath and then breath out as hard as you can, as if you are blowing out a candle. Repeat several times.