

Emotional education

Collin came home from school one day with an interesting handout in his folder detailing strategies kids can use to work themselves through challenging emotional situations. I asked him where he got it, and he said Mrs. Stotler, the school guidance counselor stopped by to talk to his kindergarten class about emotions.

It was yet another reminder of why I chose St. Joan of Arc for Collin. A Catholic education isn't just reading, math, social studies, and the arts; it's about nurturing a child's physical, mental, social, spiritual, and emotional needs, as well. I'm grateful for Collin's teachers and Mrs. Stotler for taking the time to address a subject that is all too often ignored in schools.

As parents, we want to (more like need to) talk to our kids about handling strong feelings, but we don't always know how. I asked Mrs. Stotler for her thoughts on the matter. Here's what she had to say:

Talking about emotions can be difficult. What are they? Are there good emotions and bad emotions? Should we use our emotions as a guide to make decisions? These questions can be difficult to answer as an adult; however, children struggle to a greater degree due to the fact that they do not have the language to express themselves. It is the role of the parent, caregiver, teacher, mentor and/or family member to model emotional expression to the next generation. For the most part we, as adults, were not formally taught about our emotions but we certainly were taught in an informal way.



As a school guidance counselor and a clinical social worker, one of my roles is to provide students with an emotional vocabulary in an effort to equip them for social and academic success. In the younger grades, it is not uncommon for the children to respond to videos such as Sesame Street or Calliou. On one occasion, in a kindergarten classroom I showed a video of Grover and Dave Matthews singing about how they are feeling. The children reacted to this in a positive way and verbalized the emotions of jealousy, pride, anger, sadness etc. Once the children were taught the emotion, the hope is that when confronted with a situation that

provoked a previously identified emotion, the student would be familiar with it and be able to accurately label how he/she is feeling.

In addition to videos, the children enjoy role playing difficult social interactions or demonstrating emotions on their faces in a mirror. It is helpful to educate them that all emotions are useful and that there aren't "good" emotions and "bad" emotions. Most children believe that being happy is "good" and being sad is "bad". It is necessary to let them know that emotions are merely trying to tell us something. For example: when a kindergartener is feeling angry about being left out of a game, the feeling of anger is secondary to feeling unwanted. Once students can recognize the primary emotion they are better able to address the problem. The use of storybooks is helpful as well in identifying emotion. The teacher can stop throughout a book and ask the children how the character is feeling in the story. Fictional characters assist in helping a young student talk about emotions in a non-threatening way.

Older students can also benefit from an emotional vocabulary lesson. Adolescents often feel many emotions all at once, creating internal tension. It is helpful to use an emotion chart where they can look at faces and labels to help to identify how they are feeling. Older children may enjoy writing in a journal, making a video diary or drawing to express their emotion. Using art as a tool is an effective strategy that clinicians use with students who have difficulty putting their feelings into words. As caregivers, ask your child/adolescent how their day was, using the feelings chart. You may even say "it sounds like you feel, _____". When children hear an adult mirroring their emotion back to them, it solidifies that emotion, helps them to feel understood and creates a bond between them.

While it is the role of the primary caregiver to teach about emotions in a healthy way, teachers, staff and guidance counselors can support that effort in the classroom. There are helpful books such as "How Are You Peeling, Foods with Moods", by Saxton Fraymann and Joost Jelfers, as well as internet sites such as www.pbskids.org and www.parenting.com which can assist in supporting caregivers with this task.

Laura Stotler is a licensed social worker and guidance counselor at St. Joan of Arc School in Aberdeen, Maryland. She is trained in PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support) and has an extensive background working with families and children in

various educational and clinical settings.