



THE EMOTIONS ROOM

A safe place for a child to express his/her emotions

Prepared by: *Eva de Gosztonyi, Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management* edegosztonyi@rsb.qc.ca and *Martine Demers, Behavior Consultant, Riverside School Board* martine.demers@rsb.qc.ca

RATIONALE:

March 2018

Life in schools is hectic and demanding. Children and adults are filled with a wide range of emotions. For some children handling all the demands in school day, both academic and behavioural, can become overwhelming. Managing peer relationships, responding to academic challenges, coping with the expectations of a variety of the adults, and dealing with family issues can evoke a range of emotions. And these emotions require a warm invitation to be expressed and a safe place to be heard. This applies to preschool, elementary, and high school alike.

Initially this was called the “Calm down room”, but in coming to a better understanding of the needs of children, especially the immature, it is clear that when emotions are particularly strong that they must find a way to find expression.¹ The first step to emotional development is the experience of living and feeling each primary emotion without having to temper it.²

The intent is that the students will come to see this room as a safe place in which to express their emotions and in which to express them in their pure form, however “ugly”, including foul frustration, which is usually expressed by the impulse to attack verbally or physically. The items in the room are meant to provide the child with a safe way to do so.

The purpose of permitting this expression is to provide the conditions that will then allow the child to move on to finding their sadness and tears about all that is not working in their lives.

For this reason, students must always be accompanied by an adult. The role of the adult is to reassure the child that s/he is not alone, that the intensity and the expression of his/her emotions will not drive the adult away, and that it is OK to have every kind of emotion. And, of course, the adult is there to keep the child safe.

Ultimately, the child, in the safety and security of the adult relationship, can come to terms with all that they cannot change in their lives through the process of grieving which allows for adaptation and builds resilience and resourcefulness.

Then the child can move on, with adult guidance, to find other ways to express what is happening in their emotional world. This starts with naming the emotion, identifying how it manifests itself in the child’s body, and finding other ways to get it out and let others know what is going on that respects the needs of the other person.

Staff who are with the child in the Emotions Room must be trained in how to accompany a child in emotional distress.

1. Neufeld, Gordon – “Heart Matters: the Science of Emotion” – DVD – 2015 – Neufeld Institute.

2. Neufeld, Gordon – “Making Sense of Preschoolers” – DVD – 2011 – Neufeld Institute.

EMOTIONS ROOM

THE PURPOSE IS:

- ✓ To provide a safe place to expend excess emotional energy without repercussion
- ✓ To help students take up a relationship with their emotions - encourage them to notice how these feel in their body
- ✓ Prevention – having scheduled times for specific students
- ✓ To pre-empt full crisis – divert attention
- ✓ To help with Crisis Management

EMOTIONS Room : A safe place for expression



HOW THE ROOM IS TO BE USED:

- ✓ One student at a time
- ✓ Accompanied by an adult throughout their visit
- ✓ Use of the materials are explained and demonstrated with each student when they are calm in order to prime proper use
- ✓ The use of the Emotions Room is one step of intervention in a continuum of interventions with a student

KEY ELEMENTS WHEN INTRODUCING THE EMOTIONS ROOM:

- ✓ Introduce the Emotions Room at the beginning of the school year. Please take the time to do individual visits. You will be modeling that only one child visits at a time. Take care to name that when they come to the Emotions Room they are always accompanied by an adult.
- ✓ State that this is a good place to come and being here is not a consequence. This room is helpful when we have big emotions to let out. They can be expressed with everyone being safe.
- ✓ Explain and demonstrate to the child how the room is used, why the different items in the room have been chosen (e.g. These balls are great to kick against the wall, they're also great to roll on or punch when we have a lot of frustration energy to get out).
- ✓ Give permission for the full expression of emotions like throwing stuffed animals, kicking balls, screaming, swearing, and punching bean bags.
- ✓ Explain that we come to express and will stay as long as is needed.

FACILITATING SAFE ERUPTIONS

- ✓ It important for adults to get to know the signs of a 'potential' eruption with their students.
- ✓ Intervene as early as possible - encourage the child to go with adult to the Emotions Room as soon as there are signs of agitation or a potential eruption.
- ✓ Maintain dignity at all times.
- ✓ It is important to observe the child's natural inclination and allow him/her to express in this manner. Some will do so by kicking, punching, throwing, rolling, building, jumping, summersaulting, ripping cardboard, stomping on bubble wrap and/or screaming.
- ✓ Each child needs to be supported to find what are the ways that help him/her find release of his/her intense emotions, because this will pave the way for him/her to find sadness and tears for all that was not working for him/her.
- ✓ it is important to not over intervene, **the use of silence** is often very helpful to bring down the level of intensity
- ✓ Tag teaming/relay team - when eruptions are long in duration, or a student is upset with one adult, switching adults can be a good intervention. The removal of this adult can help reduce the 'pressure' and frustration level that is being felt. When the duration of the eruption is over a long period of time, changing adult helps the adults to remain patient, calm, open and comforting. It is important to not thwart a child's thrust of expression.
- ✓ Name the child's courage and effort with working through emotions.
- ✓ Safeguard their return, ensure they will not be exposed (fragility, vulnerability, protect from judging context). Explain that 'student' was expressing/working through his/her big emotions
- ✓ Sometimes not returning to the class on a given afternoon is a good intervention to provide more time for the child to regain control of him/herself. The child may need to be kept in a 'protected/supervised' environment.

OVER TIME THE FORM OF EXPRESSION CHANGES & EMOTIONAL GROWTH UNFOLDS:

- ✓ Emotional expression can be a daunting task for some children. It is important to provide support and a warm invitation for them to express their most vulnerable and raw emotions in our presence.
- ✓ Normalizing the need and benefit of expression helps to de-dramatize the experience itself. Many students feel shame and embarrassment in the face of such expression.
- ✓ Modeling can sometimes help open-up this door with children. Sharing personal examples can also help normalize that everyone faces different levels and kinds of emotion on a daily basis.
- ✓ Help children identify their triggers...what gets them frustrated.
- ✓ The frequency of visits, duration of the visits and intensity of expression differs with each child. As children become comfortable with expressing themselves without consequences, they become empowered with the knowledge that they are growing and managing their emotions instead of being engulfed or overwhelmed by them.
- ✓ **Make it easy for the students in your care to depend upon you. Your support and warmth should be unconditional.**

SETTING UP AN EMOTIONS ROOM

1. A room with a number of sensory items (must be unbreakable)
2. Special dim lighting (must be unbreakable)
3. Foam tiles or a thick floor mat
4. Soft seating area, such as a bean bag chair, for providing comfort
5. Small foam pillows or foam objects
6. Stuffed animals and/or soft hand puppets

7. Pool noodles
8. Large rubber exercise ball
9. Bubble wrap for popping – small and large
10. Paper for ripping
11. White Board for scribbling and writing.
12. To and Fro Ball



MOVING BEYOND THE EMOTIONS ROOM: OTHER INTERVENTIONS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EMOTIONAL GROWTH



- ✓ It is key that emotional expression be ongoing, there is no predetermined timeline of how much time or how frequently it needs to unfold in order to see emotional growth in children. Each is a treasure to be discovered and the adults must be patient and maintain their warm invitation to expression. If a child senses that it is not safe or not permitted to express, his/her defenses will prevent him/her from continuing. Then physical and explosive expression will most likely resurface as a result of this shift.
- ✓ Provide materials which will prime expression, provide in quantity and variety. (e.g. Pencils, pencil crayons, pastels, paints, sketchbooks (100 pages), large banner paper, Bristol Board, Play Doh).
- ✓ Provide a big space where these materials can be used. Keep them accessible throughout the year. Do not put attention on form, leave room for expression. It goes to say, this may get very messy at times!
- ✓ Have a safe place where the artwork and creations can be kept. Put on display only if the child is comfortable and in agreement. Sometimes this is too vulnerable. At times the child may destroy what he/she has made, this is also a form of expression.
- ✓ Provide support in the process. Do not over talk. Background music can sometimes be an asset but for some this is aggravating and distracting. Know your students and which elements set the context to prime expression.



- ✓ Reading children's literature and discussing how the characters might have felt, have they felt this way at some time, sharing personal experiences to help the child make links. Name emotions. Provide a context for thought, reflection and questions. Having the child in close proximity to the adult is key in establishing a secure context in which to share thoughts and emotions.
- ✓ Providing breaks and quiet options (both in the classroom and at home) to help children, as they become more aware of the emotions which rise in them. Empower them to shift to a different space. Puzzles, Lego, reading corners with comfortable seating options can be quite helpful e.g. Bean bags, hammock or rocking chairs.

**THE EMOTIONS ROOM IN ACTION:
(also known as The Safe Eruption Room)**

SAFE ERUPTION ROOM:

Jackie Hann, teacher, Stephe Woima Elementary School, Chinooks Edge School Division #73, Sylvan Lake, Alberta

We have attempted to follow Dr. Neufeld's recommendations for handling the incident and facilitating safe eruptions. We have had a safe eruption room in our school for the past three and half years. Prior to creating this space we had students who were tearing offices apart or turning classroom upside down. Dealing with a student's foul frustration in this safe space has allowed for the expression of the frustration without the need to impose consequences after the fact.

It can sometimes mean a child bursting through the door and into the safe space followed by slamming doors, screams, a run of language, throwing (safe) items or hitting soft chairs.

We join the child in their eruption. We have scripted, modeled, come alongside and made room for student's frustration while attempting to preserve their dignity and reduce the need for social consequences.

We have worked very hard to help our students find their way to the safe space when they feel or their teachers see their frustration growing. Most students are now accessing this space independently and they are finding an outlet for their frustration.

For many students we have seen a significant reduction in the frequency and severity of their eruptions. I can't thank Dr. Neufeld enough for the insight and foundational understanding around foul frustration and aggression and the importance of caring adults willing to walk the maze.

For many students the safe eruption room has now become a safe place to have their tears.

For more information about the EMOTIONS ROOM, please contact:

Eva de Gosztanyi, Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management
edegosztanyi@rsb.qc.ca

For more information about Neufeld Developmental Approach and to purchase Dr. Neufeld's DVDs visit:

www.neufeldinstitute.org