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Clinical Exercises for Treating Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents

Practical Guidance and Ready-To-Use Resources



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CHAPTER 11

Emotional Vocabulary and Awareness

Before language develops, the way children regulate their emotions involves crying, sucking and averting their gaze. Crying is an attempt to modify the child's situation by recruiting help. Sucking is a means of response modulation. Shifting gaze helps to re-allocate attention away from a negative stimulus. As language develops, so does the child's ability to identify and label emotions and to use their vocabulary to express how they feel and to seek comfort and support from caregivers and others. This ability paves the way for new emotion regulation strategies that necessitate a greater awareness of emotions and an emotional vocabulary. For example, a child who recognises that she is feeling extremely sad may influence an existing situation by choosing to eat lunch with her friends rather than eat alone where she is liable to dwell on a recent loss. In addition, children may actively modify their emotion reactions to an affectively charged stimulus. For example, a child who recognises that she is feeling afraid may reappraise the situation in a way that changes the emotional significance of the context by implementing cognitive change (e.g., 'I've done this many times and there's no reason to be afraid') or modifying her behavioural reactions (e.g., laughing out loud). As children develop they become more adept at selecting and utilising cognitive and behavioural strategies to regulate their emotions.

Children in less nurturing environments may have a deficient emotional vocabulary and may develop less adaptive ways of regulating their emotion. For example, children in families where there is an abundance of stressors including aggressive or chaotic patterns of interaction have a heightened level of distress, which may also contribute to the development of emotion suppression, deficits in emotion understanding and less adaptive coping strategies. In these types of environments, caregivers may be too unavailable or ill equipped to provide their children with support and modelling of healthy coping – instead modelling reactive or unhelpful emotional responses.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide guidance on assessing a child's emotional awareness and vocabulary and ways of increasing awareness and enriching the child's emotional vocabulary. These skills are essential for fully engaging in the therapeutic exposure and for processing the emotional content of the trauma memory.

THE FUNCTION OF EMOTION

Goals

- To emphasise the functional importance of emotion.
- To increase the child's awareness of her emotions.

Procedure

1. Decide on appropriate visual aids for explaining emotion.
2. Explain why emotion is important – even unpleasant emotions.

Everyone has pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Sometimes we have them at the same time. Can you name some pleasant emotions? [Wait for response.] Good. Pleasant emotions tell us that we are doing well or that we are doing something right. Unpleasant emotions, such as sadness, anger, shame and fear, are unpleasant, but are also important. They tell us that something is wrong or needs our attention. Can you think of why that might be? [Wait for response.] For example, we might feel sad when we lose something or someone we care a lot about. When we express that we are sad it tells other people that we could use some support. If I saw someone crying I would feel the need to see what was the matter and possibly to help that person. Fear can tell us that there is possible danger. And even though anger can sometimes lead us to trouble, it can also help us to take action and to stand up for ourselves or other people when they are being wronged. Can you think of a time in the recent past when an unpleasant feeling was actually helpful to you because it made you aware of something that needed your attention? Take a minute to think about it. [Wait for response and discuss.]

3. Explain why avoiding unpleasant emotions is like ignoring important messages.

A lot of times people try hard to ignore or push away unpleasant emotions. That is understandable, but we can miss what they are trying to tell us if we do this. Unpleasant emotions can upset us, overwhelm us, and we can get stuck in them. It takes a lot of energy to try to ignore these emotions. It is actually better to pay attention to them than to try to ignore them. If we pay attention to the unpleasant emotion and try to figure out what it is trying to tell us, we can start to address the real problem. It can be painful to go into a negative emotion and to listen and learn from it, but it is important to remember that it is temporary.

4. Describe the *cleaning the wound* analogy. This is a common one used to explain the rationale of therapeutic exposure and is well understood by children and adolescents.

I want to give you an analogy. Pretend that an unpleasant emotion, such as sadness, is a cut on your skin or a wound. Let's say you fell off your bike and that your arm got cut up and that there is dirt and stuff in the cut. What would you want to do with the cut? [Let child respond.] Right, you would want to wash out the dirt so that it doesn't get infected. But that would hurt, wouldn't it? It would be much less painful if we put a

bandage on it rather than clean it out. What would happen though if we did that? [Wait for response.] Right, it would become infected and it would hurt a lot more in the long run. The same thing can be said about unpleasant emotions. If we ignore them rather than deal with them head on, they can get infected and cause more problems later on. That is why it is important to pay attention to them and to 'clean them out'. Does that make sense? [Wait for response.]

5. Draw a connection to the unpleasant emotions felt when thinking about the trauma memory.

Unpleasant emotions can come up when we think about a trauma memory. If we pay attention to these emotions then we can learn about why we have them and start to heal the pain caused by the trauma. If we ignore them, however, they fester and can get worse.

6. Explain the role of positive emotions.

Sometimes people who have experienced a traumatic event have a harder time enjoying positive emotions. Negative emotions may be too strong and they might not be giving the positive emotions a chance to thrive. Sometimes we have to 'jump-start' the positive emotions so that they get stronger and get up and running again. Positive emotions can also quiet down the negative emotions or give us a break from them. What are some things you can do to increase positive emotions? [Let the child respond.] That's right. One important thing we can do is to surround ourselves with positive people. Sometimes when we are having a hard time, being around friends that make us laugh can give us a well-needed break from the problem. We can also make sure that we do things that we enjoy – even if the negative emotions are making us less interested in those things. Sometimes just starting to do them will remind us how much we enjoy them and the positive emotion will take over.

Creative applications

- Collect a series of short video clips that elicit certain emotions. Play each of them with instructions for the child to pay attention to how she feels and to try to identify the emotion or emotions. Then work with the child to try to determine what these emotions are *telling* the child about what is happening in the video clip. Video clips are easily obtained online (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo).
- Collect cartoon clippings from a newspaper or magazine that present a character feeling an unpleasant emotion. Talk about what the emotion is *telling* the character. Perhaps have the child draw her own cartoon or a series of cartoons related to this.

BUILDING AN EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY

Goals

- To assess the child's current emotional vocabulary.
- To enrich the child's emotional vocabulary.

Procedure

1. Using words from Table 11.1 and/or others you generate, compile a list of emotion words and put them in a format suitable for the child.

TABLE 11.1 EMOTION WORDS

Happy	Love	Defeated	Anxious	Outraged
Surprised	Helpless	Tenderness	Worried	Rage
Joyful	Powerless	Sympathy	Bored	Hostile
Cheerful	Dreading	Adoration	Rejected	Bitter
Content	Distrusting	Fondness	Disillusioned	Hateful
Proud	Suspicious	Receptive	Inferior	Scornful
Satisfied	Cautious	Interested	Grief-stricken	Spiteful
Excited	Disturbed	Shocked	Helpless	Vengeful
Amused	Overwhelmed	Exhilarated	Isolated	Disliked
Elated	Uncomfortable	Dismayed	Numb	Resentful
Optimistic	Guilty	Amazed	Regretful	Trusting
Enthusiastic	Hurt	Confused	Ambivalent	Distrusting
Delighted	Lonely	Stunned	Exhausted	Alienated
Calm	Melancholy	Interested	Fatigued	Insulted
Relaxed	Depressed	Intrigued	Insecure	Indifferent
Relieved	Hopeless	Absorbed	Disgusted	Captivated
Hopeful	Sad	Selfish	Pity	Shocked
Pleased	Guilty	Curious	Revulsion	Uncomfortable
Confident	Hurt	Anticipation	Contempt	Mindful
Brave	Lonely	Eager	Loathing	Peaceful
Comfortable	Regretful	Hesitant	Angry	Horrorified
Safe	Sorrowful	Fearful	Jealous	Attentive

2. Explain why having an emotional vocabulary helps people to identify their emotions and to communicate to others how they feel.

Why do you think we have words for emotions? [Wait for child to respond.] That's right, being able to label how we feel and how other people feel helps us to communicate with each other. It's the same reason we have words for other things – such as colours. Even though you and I may not see the colour red in quite the same way, I can say, 'Hey, look at that red car over there', and you will know what I am talking about. In the same way, you and I may not feel 'angry', 'happy', or 'sad' in the same way, but you know what I mean if I say, 'I'm feeling a little sad today.'

3. Assess the child's current emotion vocabulary by engaging the child in generating as many emotion words as she can think of. Let the child generate more of the words and fill in from your list as you see fit.

Let's try something. Let's try to come up with as many words for feelings that we can come up with. We can make a list of them. Ready? Go. [Make a list on a piece of paper, poster board or on index cards.]

4. Make a distinction between emotion words and thoughts. Often children get the two confused.

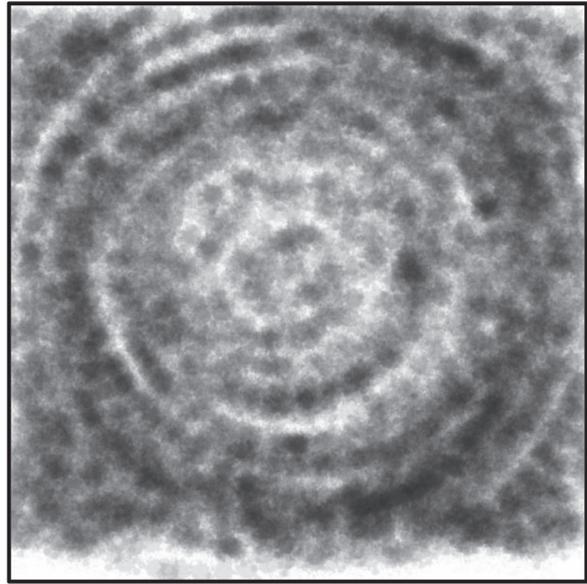
Is that an emotion word or is that a thought? Emotions can lead to thoughts and thoughts can lead to emotions, but they are a bit different. Emotions come from that emotion centre in our brains and thoughts come from the thinking centre.

Creative applications

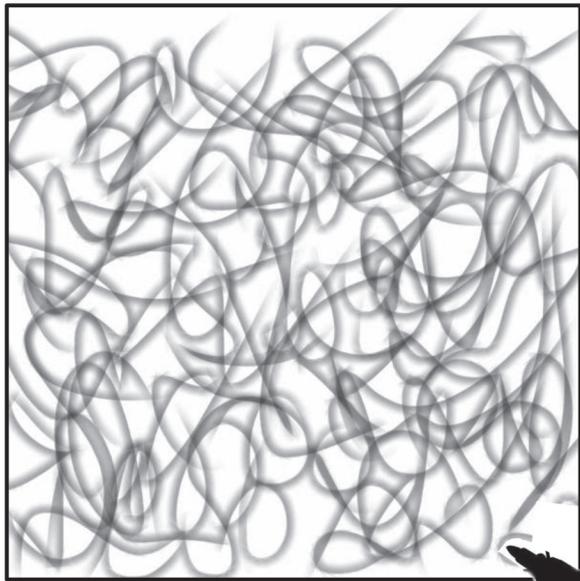
- Put the words on the backs of sticky notes and stick them to the wall or on a desk so that the word is concealed. After generating several emotion words, take turns choosing a sticky note and thinking about a specific time when you felt that emotion.
- Make a personalised emotion chart. Either have the child draw pictures of facial expressions with corresponding emotion labels or get the caregiver's permission for the child to use the camera feature on a computer to take several pictures of her making different facial expressions. Arrange the pictures and label them with emotion words. Encourage the child to keep the chart and to share it with her caregiver. This can also be something that the child and caregiver do as a conjoint activity.
- Make an emotion colour or texture wheel. Have the child match colour or texture (e.g., lines, patterns) to each emotion word. A number of well-known visual artists have used colour and texture to represent emotion and other abstractions such as music (e.g., Roy De Maistre, Wassily Kandinsky). These artists' works are easily found online and you might explore these with the child. See Figure 11.1 as an example of the use of texture to represent emotion.



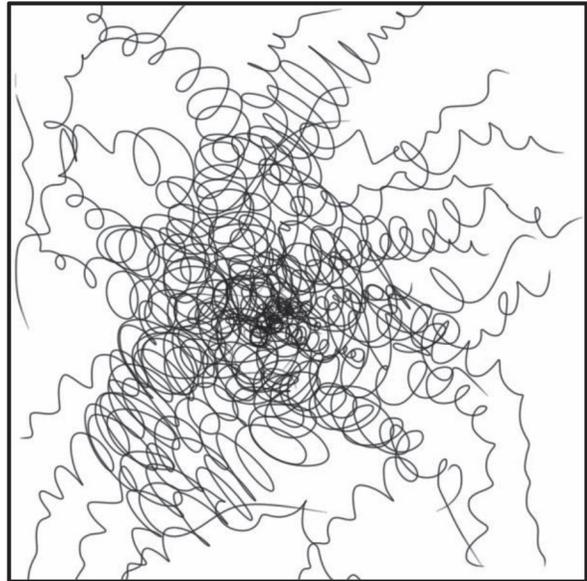
Angry



Relaxed



Playful



Nervous

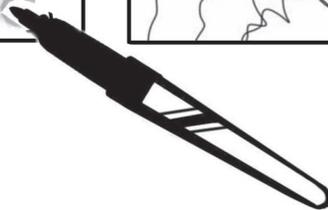


FIGURE 11.1 EXAMPLES OF USING TEXTURE TO REPRESENT EMOTION WORDS