

Using Emotion Cards to Explore Feelings and Promote Social and Emotional Development

“Our emotions are the keyboard we play in tuning our brains.” – Daniel Goleman

Learning is associated with feelings. A major goal in the implementation of preschool curricula is the positive development of children’s social and emotional competencies. Emotional literacy is crucial for a child’s success in life. The resources developed by the Private Industry Council, Inc. (PIC) of Greensburg, PA can help Head Start staff support these competencies.

PIC was one of the Centers of Excellence funded by the Office of Head Start (OHS) in 2010. During their five-year grant, they modified concepts and strategies from the Incredible Years Curriculum. They were then adapted into a PIC-administered Head Start program.

This brief orientation guide offers context for the Emotion Cards and adult-child conversation prompts. The cards include photos of young preschoolers whose facial expressions capture emotions or feelings within their everyday activities and experiences. Although there are 12 emotions and feelings identified in the photos on the cards, you may choose to use only those that are appropriate for the developmental levels of children you serve.

These cards are designed to help parents, teachers, and other adults engage in conversations with young children about their feelings. Some of the emotions identified in the cards may be more appropriate for older children. For example, *proud, annoyed, embarrassed, and frustrated* may be feelings that young preschoolers don’t quite understand without context. You also may decide that *bashful* and *shy* are synonymous and choose the simpler word label to describe the emotion represented. As children’s vocabularies grow, continue to introduce more complex feeling words and ideas.

Consider using a camera to customize a set of cards that reflect the emotions and feelings you see in your group of children. It can help staff capture and share with children the feelings and emotions they display in everyday activities. It also prompts meaningful discussion. Developing your own set of Emotion Cards can help children relate to their specific feelings, like scared or angry.


Use the Spanish Emotion Cards to support children who are learning both English and Spanish. Translate the labels into other languages reflected in the children and families in your group. Parents and staff who speak a language other than English may be able to assist with these translations. Reflect the diverse language backgrounds in your classroom and encourage language learning and vocabulary development.

Introduce the relevant emotion-feeling cards when a situation arises in the classroom. Parents and staff also can use children’s books to match cards to the feelings of characters. Choose several kinds of stories to read and display in your classroom.

Teachers and caregivers can use the open-ended questions below to explore with children each of the 12 Emotion Cards and the feelings reflected in the photos. Begin with these questions and feel free to come up with your based on the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children in your classroom.

The Emotion Cards also may be used to help children communicate their emotions “in the moment.” A child could point to one of the photos that indicates how she feels, helping her identify the feeling and link it to her words. Learning to “use their words” helps others understand children’s emotional states, desires, and needs.

Emotion Cards

What Is the Face Saying?	Adult-Child Conversation Prompts
<p>Bashful</p> 	<p>What do you think this face is saying? What do you think “bashful” means? What would make you feel this way? Can you tell me how you would feel?</p>
 <p>Sleepy</p>	<p>When do you feel this way? What would make you feel this way? Can you tell me how you would feel?</p>
<p>Sad</p> 	<p>What would make you feel this way? Can you tell me how you would feel? When are you sad? Why?</p>
 <p>Frustrated</p>	<p>What do you think this face is saying? What do you think “frustrated” means? What would make you feel this way? Can you tell me how you would feel?</p>
<p>Surprised</p> 	<p>What makes you surprised? Show me what you look like when you’re surprised. How would you surprise someone?</p>
 <p>Curious</p>	<p>When you are interested in something, we might say that you are “curious.” Have you looked at something interesting lately? What are you curious about? What did you do about being curious? Why were you curious?</p>

What Is the Face Saying?	Adult-Child Conversation Prompts
	<p>How did you feel? How did you find out what interested you?</p>
 <p>Embarrassed</p>	<p>How do you think she feels? Have you felt this way before? What made you feel that way? Can you describe how someone feels when they are embarrassed?</p>
<p>Annoyed</p> 	<p>When are you annoyed? How do you feel? What makes you feel annoyed? Is it an unhappy or happy feeling? Do you think you could annoy someone or something? How? Why would you?</p>
 <p>Determined</p>	<p>What does “determined” mean to you? What makes you feel determined? Can you tell me about the last time you felt this way? Do you think this girl looks determined? What makes you think this?</p>
<p>Happy</p> 	<p>When are you happy? When did you make someone else happy? How did you do that? What does your face look like when you feel happy?</p>
 <p>Proud</p>	<p>What are you proud of? Are you proud of something you have done? What is that? What do you feel like when you are proud? Who are you proud of?</p>
<p>Shy</p> 	<p>Do you know what it means to be “shy?” What does your face look like when you feel shy? What about other parts of you? Where do your eyes look when you’re shy?</p>