

How Can We Support Young Children Emotionally While Maintaining Social Distancing?

When I was a preschool teacher, the thing I enjoyed most were the hugs I would get from the children. There were hugs when I walked in the classroom, hugs when a child was feeling sad and just needed someone to hold them, and hugs when my little friends were leaving for the day. It was one of the many reasons I loved working with children and still one of my top 5 reasons.

What will welcoming children and families back into our programs look like among all the health and safety requirements? We need to put on our thinking caps to find new and creative ways to support children emotionally. It may feel challenging as a teacher to think of ways to give a child emotional support during these uncertain times but we have the creativity to make it happen!

So let's think about what emotional support may look like in our classrooms. We need to keep in mind that now we are wearing masks, so children won't be able to see our facial expressions. Consider using words to express what facial expression is under the mask, saying things like, "you made me smile", or "my face is sad", may be ways to identify feelings. Our eyes reveal a lot so let's use our eyes to be expressive. As early childhood educators we are often dramatic in our expressions to help children pick up on nonverbal cues, this is a great time to use our eyes. And our tone of voice could help us too! Consider having a picture of the teachers without the mask if possible, and/or having feeling faces on a stick that teachers can hold up to show what their expression may be.

We can look at this time as an opportunity to build children's feeling vocabulary! It also gives us an added advantage of introducing feeling words more frequently and adding to the feeling vocabulary of the children. By identifying the feelings under the masks we wear, we can open up dialogue for children around what they may be feeling. Using pictures of children feeling sad, angry or happy and showing children those when saying how you are feeling, for example "I'm excited you are here today, this is how my face looks under my mask". Then introduce a picture of an excited child or adult so they can see what excitement looks like. These can be great opportunities for teachable moments.

And what about those amazing hugs that may not be as safe right now? What can we do to make those needed connections? Children need that comfort and security that hugs often give, but what about when they arrive in the morning offering an air hug, air high five or even hugging yourself and saying "I'm giving you a great big hug, can you feel it, hug yourself like I'm doing". Or maybe creating a welcome dance or do an elbow or hip bump?

Many of these ideas can also provide the emotional support throughout the day as well. When a child is sad or just needs that support you can offer them the air hug then as well. Remembering to keep yourself safe as well. Not quite the same as a good old fashioned hug, but we are creative, problem solving, innovative teachers, and we can come up with ways to connect with the children and still build strong relationships.

Predictability, security and safety, are all key things that provide children with emotional support and help build relationships. Trying our best to provide those things for the children in our care instead of focusing on what has temporarily changed is the key to continuing to socially and emotionally support children.

Submitted by: Shari Konn, MS
Child and Family Guidance Center

