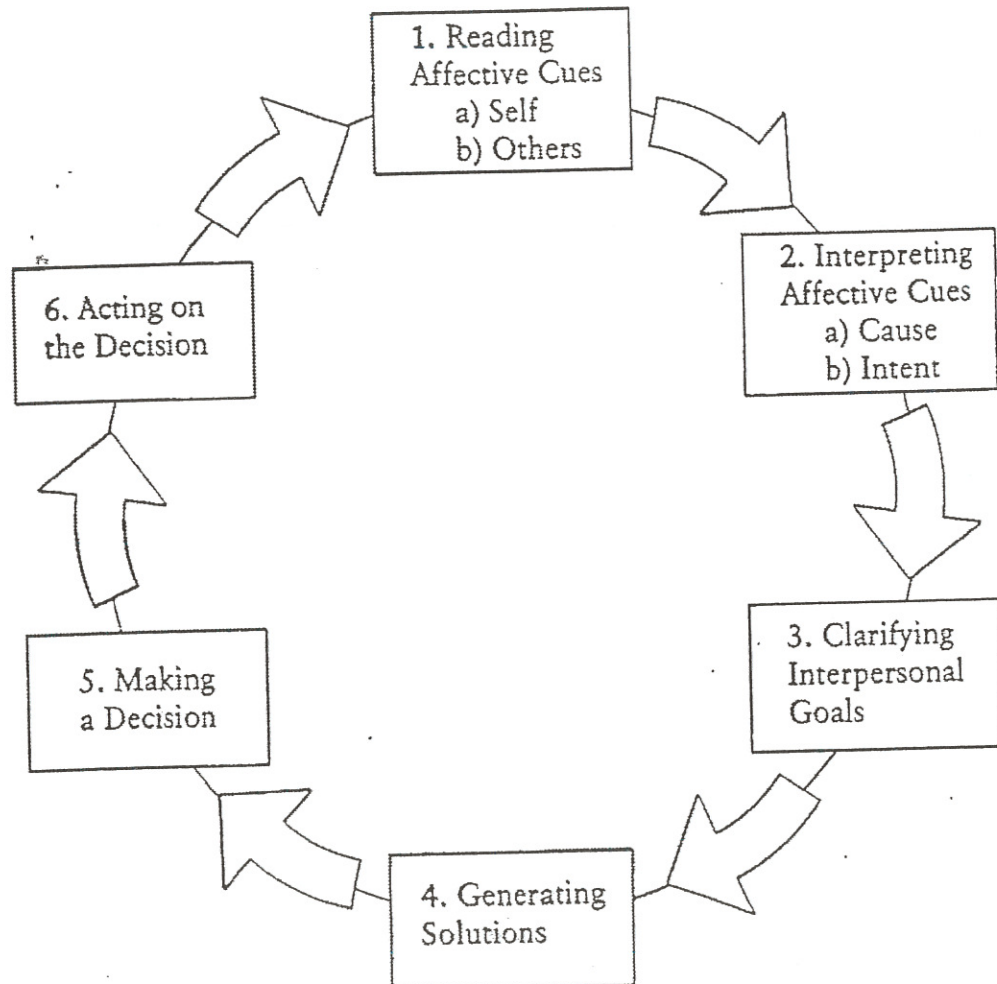# Feeling Words

Characteristics of Classrooms that Foster Emotional Vocabulary	
Photos of people with various emotional expressions are displayed around the room	
Books about feelings are available in the book corner	
Teachers label their own feelings	
Teachers notice and label children's feelings	
Teachers draw attention to how a child's peer is feeling	
Activities are planned to teach and reinforce emotional literacy	
Children are reinforced for using feeling words	
Efforts to promote emotional vocabulary occur daily and across all times of the day	

Figure 1
Emotional Literacy Schematic

1. Reading Affective Cues
   a) Self
   b) Others

2. Interpreting Affective Cues
   a) Cause
   b) Intent

3. Clarifying Interpersonal Goals

4. Generating Solutions

5. Making a Decision

6. Acting on the Decision

Young Exceptional Children

Enhancing Emotional Vocabulary in Young Children
Gail E. Joseph and Phillip S. Strain

Additional services and information for *Young Exceptional Children* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://yec.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://yec.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Jul 1, 2003

What is This?

Gail E. Joseph, Ph.D., and Phillip S. Strain, Ph.D.,
University of Colorado at Denver

Enhancing Emotional Vocabulary in Young Children

I feel ....

Four-year old Shantay is an avid builder with blocks. At free play he busies himself with an elaborate tower construction. To complete his masterpiece, he needs an elusive triangle piece. As he searches the room in vain for the last, crucial piece, his initial calm hunt becomes more hurried and disorganized. He begins to whimper and disrupt other children's play. His teacher approaches and asks what is the matter. Shantay swiftly turns away to resume his now frantic search. This behavior persists for several minutes until the signal for clean-up is given, whereupon Shantay launches into a major, 15-minute tantrum.

Four-year old Kelly is relatively new to preschool. She wants to play with her new classmates, but is too shy and fearful about approaching and joining the group. One day during free play she watches intently three other girls absorbed in an elaborate tea party complete with pandas and wolves. Kelly passively observes the ongoing play. Her teacher approaches and says, "Honey, is something wrong?" Kelly shrugs her shoulders. Her teacher persists, "Kelly, are you frustrated?" Kelly nods yes. Her teacher then reminds Kelly of the class rule, "If you feel frustrated, ask a friend or teacher for help." Kelly and her teacher quickly discuss how she might get another stuffed animal and ask her classmates if the zebra can come to the party.

In each vignette, the children experienced some of the common, often-repeated challenges of life in preschool. Shantay, in the end, was overwhelmed by his feelings of frustration. Unable to label his legitimate feeling, he acted out, which is a sure recipe for not getting his needs met. Kelly, also upset and in this example temporarily paralyzed by her social anxiety, was able to achieve an outcome she deeply desired. She was able to do so because of the good teaching she encountered. She was able to communicate her need and access strategic help to get that need met. In contrast with Shantay, Kelly's experience demonstrates one of the ways that emotional literacy enables children to be socially competent. Consider two other examples of emotional literacy at work.

Four-year old Tony is a master of rough and tumble play. As a game of super-heroes commences, Tony runs headlong into other children. Two of his play-mates happily reciprocate, smiling and giggling as they continue their preschool version of "slam dancing." Tony, however, seeks out other partners as well. In particular, Eddie and Darrin want no part of this game. They frown as Tony approaches and yell, "No." Tony seems to interpret their behavior as an invitation for more. Both Eddie and Darrin start to cry and quickly seek out their teacher, who has Tony sit quietly for two minutes while free play continues. This time-out angers Tony and he pouts alone for the remainder of free play.

Tamika, age four, loves to play dress-up. One day during free play she asks Seth to join her, but he says, "Later," and goes about his computer play. Tamika then gets a big hat and takes it to April. April just frowns and continues tending to the hamster cage. Tamika next takes the hat to Bo. "Bo," she says, "let's go play." Again she is rebuffed. Finally, Tamika finds a play partner in Darrin who is walking from one activity area to the next.

In these two vignettes real differences can be noted in the children's ability to read social cues. Tony's choice of rough and tumble partners is pervasive. His inability to read social cues ultimately resulted in a poor outcome. Tamika, on the other hand, was readily able to read social cues and had a strategy (try again with another friend) to achieve her desired outcome.
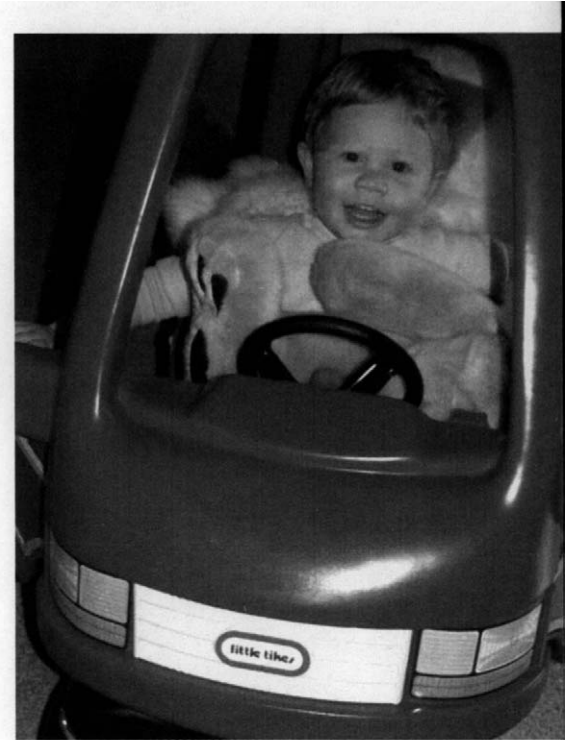
What Is Emotional Literacy?

Figure 1 provides a schematic of children's emotional literacy (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Note that the foundational element, the necessary context, for emotional literacy development is a supportive, caring relationship. In order to act upon the social environment in ways that are collectively supportive and rewarding it is first necessary for children to read the affective cues of others and of themselves. Discriminating among affective states such as anger, sadness, frustration, and happiness requires a vocabulary of feeling words. Like other forms of literacy, the richer the vocabulary the more rewarding the experiences. In this article we concentrate on how to build a meaningful lexicon of feeling words. This instructional emphasis bears, not coincidentally, a close resemblance to cognitive behavior modification (Meichenbaum & Tirk, 1976).

Discriminating among affective states such as anger, sadness, frustration, and happiness requires a vocabulary of feeling words.

Figure 1
Emotional Literacy Schematic
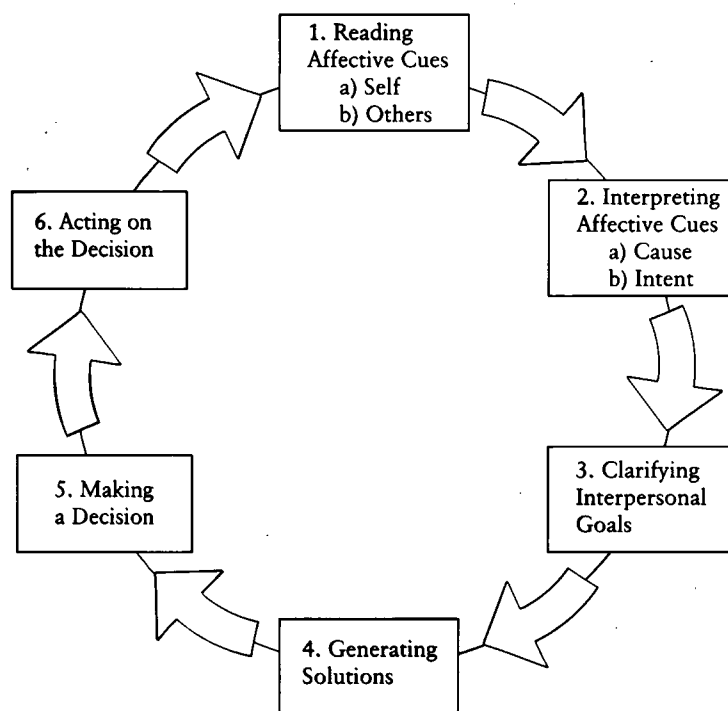
Once children are reading and correctly labeling affective cues from words, internal stimuli, and body language, they then proceed to make crucial judgments about both the cause and the intent of another's affect. For example, Tamika has an appropriately neutral judgment about her peers' lack of interest in her play and she simply continues to search until she finds a willing partner. Many children, however, make crucial errors at this point. Partly because of an absence of feeling words, they often interpret the behavior of others as intentionally hurtful and eventually act out in ways that invariably lead to social isolation and stigmatization (Kazdin, 1993).

In this model, once children make a judgment about cause and intent, they proceed to clarify their interpersonal goals. In the vignettes, Tony wanted to play rough and tumble, Tamika wanted to play dress-up, Kelly wanted to join in the tea party, and Shantay just wanted that final block. The clarification of goals then allows children to generate solutions to achieve their goals. Solutions might include a self-regulation notion such as, "I need to calm down." Solutions might be trying again, finding someone to help, trying a different way, and so on. Solution generation, however, must be followed by a contingent decision-making paradigm. For example, children might be taught

to consider if the solution is fair, if it has worked before, if it is safe, if it would result in positive feelings, etc. Finally, children act in accordance with their decision. While this article focuses only on establishing a vocabulary of feeling words that permit accurate reading of affective cues and accurate interpretation of cause and intent, teachers need to be aware that many children will require careful step-by-step instruction in reading affective cues to acting on decisions.

Emotional literacy is the ability to recognize, label, and understand feelings in one's self and others. It is a prerequisite skill to emotional regulation, successful interpersonal interactions, and problem solving, and is one of the most important skills a child is taught in the early years (Denham, 1986; Webster-Stratton, 1999). Limited emotional literacy, on the other hand, can result in misperceptions of feeling in one's self and others.

Building Emotional Vocabulary

To correctly perceive feelings in yourself and others, you first have to have words for those feelings. Many children are either "happy" or "angry" and miss all the subtle gradations of feelings in between because they do not have labels and definitions for those emotions. A large and more complex feeling vocabulary allows children to: (1) to make finer discriminations between feelings, (2) better communicate with others about their internal affective states, and (3)

engage in discussions about their personal experiences with the world. Children with disabilities (Feldman, McGee, Mann, & Strain, 1993; Walker, 1981) and children from low income families (Eisenberg, 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995; Lewis & Michalson, 1993) have more limited feeling vocabularies than their typically developing and middle income peers. Families and early educators can foster emotional vocabulary by teaching feeling words and their emotional definitions. Adults can increase children's feeling words by teaching different feeling words and definitions directly, incidentally in the context of conversation and play, or through special activities.

Teaching Directly

Adults can teach feeling words directly by pairing a picture or photo of the feeling face with the appropriate affective label. Preschoolers find it easier to recognize feelings with drawings of facial expression rather than photographs in which the expression may be more subtle (MacDonald, Kirkpatrick, & Sullivan, 1996). Children's books can be an excellent way to label feeling faces with children. Many books are written explicitly about feelings and contain numerous feeling words. A list of children's book titles that we have found to be particularly useful for this purpose are provided in Box 1 (see following page).

Emotional literacy is the ability to recognize, label, and understand feelings in one's self and others.

Box 1

Children's Books Featuring Feelings
Feelings (Reading Rainbow Book) by Aliki *Glad Monster, Sad Monster: A Book About Feelings* by Anne Miranda & Ed Emberley (Illustrator) *I'm Frustrated (Dealing With Feelings)* by Elizabeth Crary & Jean Whitney (Illustrator) *I'm Mad (Dealing With Feelings)* by Elizabeth Crary & Jean Whitney (Illustrator) *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss, Steve Johnson (Illustrator), & Lou Fancher (Illustrator) *On Monday When It Rained* by Cheryl Kachenmeister *When I Feel Angry* by Cornelia Maude Spelman & Nancy Cote (Illustrator) *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry ...* by Molly Garrett Bang

Teaching Incidentally

Adults also can teach children new feeling words incidentally in the context of conversation and play. That is, as the occasion arises the adult provides labels as children experience various affective states. For example, Kelly's teacher noticed her aroused state and labeled it "frustrated." Labeling children's affective states allows them to begin to identify their internal states. This is an important step in learning to regulate emotions (Lochman & Dunn, 1993; Webster-Stratton, 1999). Children and adults need to recognize (and this happens most effectively when there is a label) their affective state, for example,

"angry," before they can proceed with steps to regulate or calm down. A first step would be for a child to vocalize this negative feeling (e.g., "I'm mad"). Using varied and complex feeling words will develop powerful feeling vocabularies for children. A list of complex feeling words that are age-appropriate for three- to five-year old children (Ridgeway, Waters, & Kuczaj, 1985) is provided in Box 2.

Special Activities

Adults also can plan special activities to teach and reinforce the acquisition of feeling words. For example, a teacher might have

children "check in" each morning by picking "feeling face" pictures that best depict their affective states and sticking them next to their names. The children are then encouraged to change their feeling face pictures throughout the day as their feelings change. Another approach might be to make feeling "dice" by covering small milk cartons with paper and drawing a different feeling face on each side. Children can toss the dice, label the feeling faces, and describe times when they felt that way. Several more fun feeling activities for teachers to implement in their classrooms are provided in Table 1 (see following page).

Box 2

Complex Feeling Words

Affectionate, Agreeable, Annoyed, Awful

Bored, Brave

Calm, Capable, Caring, Cheerful, Clumsy, Confused, Cooperative, Creative, Cruel, Curious

Depressed, Disappointed, Disgusted

Ecstatic, Embarrassed, Enjoying, Excited

Fantastic, Fearful, Fed-Up, Free, Friendly, Frustrated

Gentle, Generous, Gloomy, Guilty

Ignored, Impatient, Important, Interested

Jealous, Joyful

Lonely, Lost, Loving

Overwhelmed

Peaceful, Pleasant, Proud

Relaxed, Relieved

Safe, Satisfied, Sensitive, Serious, Shy, Stressed, Strong, Stubborn

Tense, Thoughtful, Thrilled, Troubled

Unafraid, Uncomfortable

Weary, Worried

Teaching Children to Recognize Feelings in Others

Children can be taught explicitly how to identify feelings in other people. Identifying feelings in others involves the specific skills of noticing facial expressions and body language, listening to the tone of voice, and considering the situational context. Preschool teachers can address each of these three skills directly through activities or indirectly by embedding opportunities to practice the skills throughout the routines of the day as they naturally occur.

Young children can be taught how to detect the facial expressions and body language that serve as cues to how someone is feeling. A teacher can draw the children's attention to the salient physical features of someone's facial expression and body language that are communicating information about the person's affective state. For example, the teacher could point out to the children through a book character's face how the eyebrows, the eyes, and mouth are providing cues that the character is feeling startled or surprised. The teacher could model through his or her facial expression and body language these same cues to reinforce the children's understanding of how they actually appear. Children can then be provided with practice activities and opportunities to notice facial expressions and body language to determine how someone is feeling throughout the day as they naturally occur.

Table 1

Feeling Activities

Changing Faces	During small group time, children make paper plate faces. The teacher attaches the "mouths" and "eyebrows" to the paper plates with brads. This allows children to change facial expressions on their plates by changing the mouth from a smile to a frown, and the eyebrows from facing in (angry, frustrated, etc.) to out (worried, scared, surprised, etc.). Children color the rest of their faces. The teacher then reads a story and pauses after key incidents, asking the children to show how they would feel by changing their paper plate face appropriately.
Feeling Hunt	The teacher puts "feeling face" pictures up all around the room (and around the building, if possible). Children are given child-size magnifying glasses, and they walk around looking for different feeling faces. When they find one, they label the feeling and tell about a time when they felt that way. An expansion of this activity is to provide each child with a "Feeling Face BINGO Board." Children cross out faces on their boards as they find them around the room.
Mirrors	Children are given small hand held mirrors at circle time or small group. As the teacher reads a story with many feeling words in it, the children make a face to correspond with the affective expression while looking at themselves in their mirrors. Then, the children put their mirrors down and show a peer their "feeling face."
Pass the Hat	The teacher cuts out pictures that represent various feeling faces and puts them in a hat (or large envelope) that is passed around the circle as music plays. When the music stops, the child holding the hat selects a picture designating an emotion and identifies it, demonstrates how he or she looks when he or she feels that way, or describes a time when he or she felt that way.
Singing, "If You're Happy and You Know It … "	Teachers add new verses to "If You're Happy and You Know It … " as they introduce new feeling words to their classes. For example: • If you're happy and you know it, hug a friend • If you're sad and you know it, cry a tear–"boo-hoo" • If you're mad and you know it, use your words–"I'm mad" • If you're scared and you know it, get some help–"HEEELLLLPPP!" • If you're silly and you know it, make a face–"BBBBLLLUUUUHHHH!"

Note: For more feeling activities see Webster-Stratton (1990), Kusche & Greenberg (1994), and Committee for Children (2002).

Children also can be taught how to listen to the tone of voice to aid them in identifying the feeling of the speaker. Teachers can model the skill by using a puppet or another adult. That is, a teacher can close his or her eyes and the teacher (using a puppet) or another adult can make a statement such as, "UGGGHH, I can't get my shoes tied!" The teacher then tells the children that he or she thinks the person or puppet is feeling frustrated. The children can then take their turn by closing their eyes and listening to the person or puppet make statements using varying tones, calling out their guesses of how the person or puppet is feeling after each statement.

Teachers also can teach children to consider the situational context by having them think about how someone might feel in certain situations. Children's literature can be an effective strategy for teaching and practicing this skill. For example, an adult reads a story aloud and, after completing the story, selects a situation in the story and asks the children to consider the character's reactions and feelings. This question can invite further conversation, and the adult should continue discussing story situations for as long as the children's interest is held. (We have found the children's books identified in Box 1 to be very appropriate for this purpose.)

What Do You Do With A Feeling?

Adults can model emotional regulation skills for children by verbalizing the course of action they will take in order to calm down or cope with certain feelings. For example, a teacher doesn't notice the loose lid on the glitter bottle and consequently spills the contents all over the table and floor. In front of the children she says, "Oh no! Boy, do I feel frustrated. I better take some deep breaths to calm down." Kelly's teacher developed a classroom rule that when you feel frustrated you ask a teacher or peer for help. In this case, when the teacher labels a child's affective state as "frustrated" the child is primed to ask for help. Eventually the children will be able to label the feeling themselves and seek an appropriate solution. Adults can proactively teach young children coping strategies for many emotions (e.g., taking a deep breath when mad, requesting a break when annoyed, talking to someone when sad, etc.) through modeling and role plays. Sometimes positive emotions need to be regulated as well.

Conclusion

In classrooms that devote planned attention to helping children acquire a rich and varied feeling vocabulary, one may expect fewer challenging behaviors and more developmentally sophisticated

Adults can model emotional regulation skills for children by verbalizing the course of action they will take in order to calm down or cope with certain feelings.

and enjoyable peer social relations (Denham, 1986). Emotional vocabulary is, however, only part of this picture. For emotional vocabulary teaching to be effective, adults also must spend the time necessary to build positive relationships with children (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, in press). Within this foundational context of a warm and responsive relationship with children, teachers can maximize their influence to enhance emotional vocabulary.

As the emotional literacy schematic (see Figure 1) suggests, having feeling words and being able to recognize emotions in others and in oneself is a necessary but insufficient step toward helping children achieve social and emotional competence. Adults also need to assist children in developing and becoming fluent with the skills of emotional regulation (e.g., calming down, controlling anger and impulse) and problem solving (e.g., generating solutions to interpersonal problems that are safe, equitable, and result in positive feelings). Key characteristics of classrooms that support the development of emotional literacy in preschool children are summarized in Box 3.

Note

You can reach Gail E. Joseph by e-mail at gail_joseph@ceo.cudenver.edu

References

Committee for Children. (2002). *Second step for preschoolers: Third Edition.* Seattle, WA: Author.

Box 3

> ## Characteristics of Classrooms That Foster Emotional Vocabulary
>
> - Photos of people with various emotional expressions are displayed around the room.
> - Books about feelings are available in the book corner.
> - Teachers label their own feelings.
> - Teachers notice and label children's feelings.
> - Teachers draw attention to how a child's peer is feeling.
> - Activities are planned to teach and reinforce emotional literacy.
> - Children are reinforced for using feeling words.
> - Efforts to promote emotional vocabulary occur daily and across all times of the day.

Crick, N. R., & Dodge, K. A. (1994). A review and reformulation of social information-processing mechanisms in children's social adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin, 115,* 74-101.

Denham, S. A. (1986). Social cognition, prosocial behavior, and emotion in preschoolers: Contextual validation. *Child Development, 57,* 194-201.

Eisenberg, A. R. (1999). Emotion talk among Mexican-American and Anglo American mothers and children from two social classes. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 45,* 267-284.

Feldman, R. S., McGee, G., Mann, L., & Strain, P. S. (1993). Nonverbal affective decoding ability in children with autism and in typical preschoolers. *Journal of Early Intervention, 17,* 341-350.

Fox, L., Dunlap, G., Hemmeter, M. L., Joseph, G. E., & Strain, P. S. (2003). The teaching pyramid: A model for supporting social competence and preventing challenging behavior in young children. *Young Children, 58*(4), 48-52.

Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Kazdin, A. (1993). Treatment of conduct disorder. *Development of Psychopathology, 5,* 277-310.

Kusche, C. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (1994). *The PATHS Curriculum.* Seattle, WA: Developmental Research and Programs.

Lemerise, A. A., & Arsenio, W. F. (2000). An integrated model of emotional processes and cognition in social information processing. *Child Development, 71,* 107-118.

Lewis, M., & Michalson, L. (1993). *Children's emotions and moods: Developmental theory and measurement.* New York: Plenum Press.

Lochman, J. E., & Dunn, S. E. (1993). An intervention and consultation model from a social cognitive perspective: A description of the anger coping program. *School Psychology Review, 22,* 458-471.

MacDonald, P., Kirkpatrick, S., & Sullivan, L. (1996). Schematic drawings of facial expressions for emotional recognition and interpretations by preschool-aged children. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs, 122,* 375-404.

Meichenbaum, D., & Tirk, D. (1976). The cognitive-behavioral management of anxiety, anger, and pain. In P. Davidson (Ed.), *Behavioral management of anxiety, depression, and pain* (pp. 1-29). New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Ridgeway, D., Waters, E., & Kuczaj, S. A. (1985). Acquisition of emotion-descriptive language: Receptive and productive vocabulary norms for ages 18 months to 6 years. *Developmental Psychology, 21,* 901-908.

Walker, E. (1981). Emotion recognition in disturbed and normal children: A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, 22,* 263-268.

Webster-Stratton, C. (1990). *The teachers and children videotape series: Dina dinosaur school.* Seattle, WA: The Incredible Years.

Webster-Stratton, C. (1999). *How to promote children's social and emotional competence.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing.