

BUILDING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: STRATEGIES FOR A SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: *This article explores the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in the primary school setting and examines effective strategies teachers can use to develop EI in young learners. Emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one’s own emotions and those of others—is closely linked to academic achievement, classroom behavior, and social relationships. The paper outlines the core components of EI, including self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation, and presents practical, age-appropriate techniques for fostering these skills. It also emphasizes the teacher’s role in modeling emotional competence and creating a safe, inclusive classroom environment where students can thrive emotionally and academically.*

Keywords: *Emotional intelligence, primary education, emotional regulation, self-awareness, empathy, SEL (social-emotional learning), student well-being.*

While academic knowledge remains a key focus of primary education, there is growing recognition of the role that emotional development plays in student success. Emotional intelligence (EI)—the capacity to understand and manage emotions in oneself and others—has emerged as a crucial skill that underpins learning, relationships, and overall well-being.

For primary school children, who are still developing social and emotional awareness, the classroom can be a powerful place to build emotional intelligence. Students who are emotionally intelligent tend to show greater resilience, collaborate better with peers, and are more likely to succeed academically. In contrast, those with low emotional awareness may struggle with frustration, conflict, or self-regulation, which can disrupt both learning and behavior.

Developing EI at an early age sets the foundation for future success in school and life. Fortunately, emotional intelligence is not fixed—it can be taught, practiced, and nurtured over time. This article explores how educators can intentionally develop emotional intelligence in primary school students by embedding social-emotional learning (SEL) into everyday classroom practice. It also examines the role of teacher modeling, classroom routines, and targeted interventions in creating emotionally supportive environments.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in a child’s academic success and personal development. In primary education, where students are in the early stages of emotional and social growth, intentionally fostering emotional intelligence can lead to significant benefits both inside and outside the classroom. EI encompasses key components such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills. Teaching these abilities during the foundational years of schooling helps children build strong

interpersonal relationships, cope with challenges, and engage more positively in learning activities.

One of the fundamental aspects of emotional intelligence is self-awareness—the ability to recognize one’s emotions and understand their impact. In primary classrooms, this can be nurtured through simple reflective practices. For instance, using daily check-ins where students describe how they are feeling using emotion charts or mood meters allows them to build vocabulary around emotions and begin to identify patterns in their emotional responses. Teachers can facilitate this by modeling their own feelings using age-appropriate language: “I’m feeling a bit nervous because we’re trying something new today, but I’m also excited.” This kind of transparency helps normalize emotions and encourages students to share their own.

Closely linked to self-awareness is self-regulation—the ability to manage and respond to emotions in constructive ways. Young children often struggle with frustration, anger, or anxiety, and teaching them strategies for emotional control is essential. Breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, and quiet corners for calming down can be integrated into daily classroom routines. For example, when a student becomes upset, the teacher can guide them through a short breathing exercise before discussing the situation. Over time, students learn to use these tools independently, which supports both behavior management and emotional maturity.

Empathy, or the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is another core component of EI that can be cultivated through structured interactions. Literature discussions, role-playing activities, and “perspective-taking” games help students put themselves in others’ shoes. Books that explore characters’ emotional journeys are particularly effective, as they prompt students to reflect on how characters feel and why they act as they do. Teachers can ask open-ended questions such as, “How do you think she felt when that happened?” or “What would you do in that situation?” These conversations build emotional vocabulary and promote compassionate thinking.

Social skills, including active listening, cooperation, and conflict resolution, are crucial for developing healthy relationships. Primary school is a key time to teach these skills explicitly. Group projects, partner work, and cooperative games provide opportunities for students to practice working together. Teachers play a central role in guiding these interactions, setting norms for respectful communication, and helping students navigate disagreements. When conflicts arise, using restorative conversations rather than punishment helps students learn from the experience. Phrases like “How did your actions affect your classmate?” or “What can we do to make things better?” turn disciplinary moments into learning opportunities.

An emotionally intelligent classroom depends greatly on the teacher’s own emotional competence. Teachers who model emotional awareness, patience, and positive communication create a safe environment where students feel respected and valued. When a teacher manages stress calmly, reacts empathetically to students’ needs, and maintains consistent routines, children are more likely to mirror those behaviors. Professional

development programs that focus on educators' own emotional well-being can therefore have a direct impact on student outcomes.

Creating a supportive learning environment also involves establishing classroom norms that prioritize kindness, inclusion, and emotional safety. Simple practices such as classroom agreements, morning meetings, and "kindness boards" where students acknowledge each other's positive actions contribute to a sense of belonging. Students who feel emotionally safe are more likely to take risks, ask questions, and engage deeply with learning.

Incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum does not require separate lessons. It can be seamlessly integrated into academic subjects. For example, during a science lesson on ecosystems, students can discuss how human actions affect animals and the environment, fostering empathy and ethical thinking. In mathematics, teachers can encourage perseverance and self-talk when students encounter difficult problems. Language and writing tasks can invite personal reflection, such as journal entries about feelings or narratives that explore emotional experiences.

Parents and caregivers also play an important role in reinforcing emotional intelligence outside the classroom. Schools can involve families by sharing strategies for emotional development at home, such as using feeling charts, modeling calm responses, or encouraging children to talk about their day. Parent-teacher communication that includes not only academic progress but also emotional growth reinforces the importance of EI as a shared goal.

Technology, when used mindfully, can also support the development of emotional intelligence. Educational apps that teach emotional recognition, regulate breathing, or simulate social scenarios offer engaging ways for students to practice SEL skills. However, screen time must be balanced with real-life social interaction, as face-to-face communication is essential for emotional development.

Despite the many benefits, challenges to implementing emotional intelligence instruction persist. Teachers often face pressure to focus on test scores and curriculum coverage, leaving little time for emotional education. There may also be a lack of training, resources, or institutional support. However, integrating EI into classroom routines need not be time-consuming—it can be embedded in simple daily practices, language, and interactions. With support from school leadership and a whole-school commitment to SEL, these barriers can be overcome.

Developing emotional intelligence is not a one-time lesson—it is a continuous process that requires reinforcement and reflection. Students need time to absorb emotional concepts, practice them in a variety of contexts, and receive feedback in a safe and supportive setting. By integrating emotional learning throughout the school experience, educators can equip students with the emotional tools they need to succeed in all areas of life.

In essence, emotional intelligence forms the heart of a well-rounded education. When children learn to recognize their emotions, manage their behavior, and relate to others with empathy, they become more resilient, focused, and engaged learners. Primary school

classrooms that prioritize EI not only improve individual student outcomes but also contribute to a more respectful, cooperative, and compassionate learning community.

Emotional intelligence is an essential life skill that lays the foundation for students' academic performance, social development, and mental well-being. In the primary school years, when children are forming their identities and learning how to navigate the world, emotional intelligence must be developed alongside cognitive abilities. By integrating social-emotional learning into everyday classroom practices, educators can help students build self-awareness, regulate emotions, develop empathy, and form healthy relationships.

The role of the teacher is critical in this process. By modeling emotional competence, creating a safe and inclusive environment, and using intentional strategies, teachers can support students in becoming more emotionally intelligent. Schools that prioritize emotional learning contribute to more respectful, resilient, and engaged learners—skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

Investing in emotional intelligence is not only an investment in student behavior or classroom management—it is an investment in the future emotional health and success of the next generation.

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