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Building Anger Management Skills in Preschoolers

Manuelita Valdez Aceves

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science

## Building Anger Management Skills in Preschoolers

### **Introduction**

Many young kids have not yet developed social-emotional skills, which prevents them from controlling their feelings and emotions. When children do not learn to regulate their emotions, anger, frustration, and aggression issues are more likely to arise. However, when they do develop these skills, children can build self-awareness and confidence, increase empathy for others, and build positive relationships. Therefore, to support young children in developing self-regulation skills and dealing with feelings, I created a three-day lesson for teaching anger management skills to preschool children at Migrant Seasonal Head Start in Gonzales, California.

### **Needs Assessment**

Since many children at a young age have not developed social-emotional skills, they may lack the ability to manage their feelings and emotions. Children who do not learn to control their emotions can experience anger, which can develop into frustration and physical aggression. These issues triggered by anger may increase the possibility that children may have difficulty socializing, affecting their academic performance and increasing the likelihood of mental health problems (Kahle et al., 2016). For preschool children to learn anger management skills, they first must be able to identify situations that make them feel angry, learn to describe some facial characteristics during anger triggers, and finally identify self-regulation techniques when anger arises.

Helping young children identify situations that make them angry is essential when learning how to manage anger. When children can identify events that make them angry, they can recognize and remember the emotions associated with those events. Then, they can create clues to anticipate future emotional consequences for themselves or others and plan their

behavior accordingly to each situation (Denham et al., 2002). Dennis and Kelemen (2009) created scenarios using puppets to help preschool children identify emotions such as anger and rage triggered after specific actions and demonstrated that children begin to have a notion of emotions and how they can affect their behavior from the age of two. When preschoolers identify situations that might trigger anger, children can better understand their emotions and then learn to name them (Denham et al., 2002).

Detecting angry facial expressions is another essential skill for learning anger management abilities. Emotions are commonly communicated verbally, but it is also possible for preschool children to express emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger through facial expressions, which can assist them in identifying emotions faster. Research among preschool children by LoBue and Larson (2010) found that facial anger expressions may be perceived as dangerous and are more quickly visually detected than happy faces. Widen and Russell (2010) suggested that even a child, as a baby, can recognize others' emotions through facial expressions. “More recent research has suggested that specific features of angry faces (such as the downward-pointing “V” shaped brow) are the effective stimulus in their rapid detection” (LoBue & Larson, 2010, p.1165). Understanding facial characteristics may make it easier for children to identify and describe their angry facial expressions so that they can be aware of the facial characteristics associated with anger.

Learning strategies to manage anger will support preschool children in developing social-emotional skills. The preschool years are a crucial time for noticeable growth in children's emotion regulation, increasing their ability to recognize, develop, and enforce effective strategies (Kahle et al., 2016). When children learn strategies for self-regulation, they can engage in activities, concentrate and keep attention, reduce emotional impulse reactions, and engage in

positive social interactions. Music activities in preschool classrooms are developmentally appropriate and can be implemented to support self-regulation in children (Williams, 2018). Also, evidence shows that beat synchronization skills are an essential neurodevelopment indicator, and practicing rhythmic movement could support the development of self-regulation skills (Williams, 2018). Zachariou and Whitebread (2017) found that children registered in music classes showed better self-regulation skills than their peers who did not participate. Another relevant intervention when teaching self-regulation to young children is mindfulness meditation, which consists of maintaining attention on a target activity that disengages from distractors (Savina, 2020). Research from Savina (2020) found that breathing is considered a way of meditating that can have a calming effect on children and support the learning of self-regulation skills. When children can identify and use at least one self-regulation technique during anger-provoked situations, they begin to develop self-regulation awareness that prepares them to control themselves when certain emotions arise.

Given that learning to understand and manage emotions and self-regulation is essential for developing social-emotional skills and that many children during preschool have not yet developed these skills, children may find it challenging to manage and control emotions. Therefore, in order to support children in developing self-regulation skills, I intend a three-day lesson for teaching anger management skills to preschool children at Migrant Seasonal Head Start in Gonzales, California.

### **Development**

The social-emotional domain is crucial in preschool-aged children's development. Preschool teachers and parents are primary influencers in promoting social-emotional development in children from a young age so that children can learn about emotions. In addition,

since preschoolers can experience an arousing of different emotions throughout the day, it is necessary that children learn to identify, name them and learn how to cope with them. According to Caulfield (1996), noticeable changes occur in children's socio-emotional development during the first two years. By looking at faces and listening to voices, children should be able to communicate emotions through crying and yelling and notice the expressions of emotions of others (Caulfield, 1996). Still, they are not yet able to identify, name, and cope with some emotions. However, by age two, children can begin demonstrating a sense of independence exploring the environment by themselves; they go from being dependent on their parents or caregivers to being more independent and wanting to do things by themselves, such as feed and dress (Caulfield 1996). Since children are becoming more independent at age two, when they enter preschool age, they should start using words to express their desires, likes, and dislikes and learn to communicate emotions using words, not yelling or hitting (Widen & Russell, 2008).

Widen and Russell (2008) stated that during the first stage of preschool development, children start to talk about their own and others' emotions. For instance, children should be able to recognize when a child gets angry because someone else snatched a toy. On the other hand, children can find it challenging to manage and tolerate their feelings and emotions during preschool and have poor self-regulation (Bailey, 2011). Bailey (2011) defines self-regulation as having the ability to control and manage thoughts, emotions, and actions. However, with the appropriate support and guidance of adults, children should be able to demonstrate that emotions are a link between problems and solutions, decreasing the probability of impulsive reactions such as tantrums and hitting; then, children can build abilities to express and regulate (Incorporated & Bailey, 2011). Therefore, when learning to manage emotions, children should be able to indicate the situation that triggered the emotion, describe and name it, and find a self-regulation strategy

to cope with it. Since preschoolers have not developed abilities to regulate emotions, my project focuses on social-emotional development, teaching children anger management skills by identifying situations that trigger anger. In addition, I intend to provide children with self-regulation strategies that they still need to develop, and they can help them manage anger.

### **Consideration of Diversity**

My project will be conducted at La Paz Migrant and Seasonal Head Start in Gonzales, California. According to the program's eligibility criteria, at least one of each enrolled child's parents must have an income from agricultural labor which are considered migrant families, and the children's age range is 3 to 5 years old. Family service advocate shared that depending on income level and family size, this program offers no-cost preschool services to qualifying families based on the California State Subsidized Program (V. Rodriguez, personal communication, October 10, 2022). While at the La Paz center, I recognized that the 30 children enrolled in the program appeared to be ethnic Latino but just 6 of 30 children were able to participate in the project. Also, as I met the parents and talked with a teacher in the center, I realized that 80% of the 30 children are of Mexican parents, and the rest 20% are children of Salvadoran parents (P. Trujillo, personal communication, October 27, 2022). Since all the children enrolled in the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start are Latino, they might be less ethnically diverse than other children attending other preschool centers because the program primarily offers services to migrant families' children. 28 out of 30 children in the center have a high Spanish proficiency level. However, during a home visit to a family, I discovered that two children of Mexican parents enrolled in the program had higher proficiency in a Mixtec dialect than the Spanish language (M. Sanchez, personal communication, October 10, 2022).

For children to participate and understand the content of my curriculum, children with more proficiency in Mixtec dialect than in English or Spanish will need some English proficiency to participate because my project must follow the language approach (50/50) established by the MSHS. This approach involves speaking Spanish and English simultaneously during activities and transitions (B. Uribe, personal communication, October 3, 2022). Another diversity issue in my project is that the content is specific to the level of understanding of preschoolers. Therefore, to make the content more inclusive, it would need to be more complex for older aged children and more simplified for younger children. Since my project only focuses on a specific bigger emotion, that is, anger, and not on other emotions, this might be a limitation of the content of my curriculum. I could include other emotions, such as happy or sad, to make understanding my content about social-emotional skills and anger management easier.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Upon the completion of the project, participants will be able to:

1. Indicate three situations that make them feel angry.
2. Distinguish three characteristics of how their face looks when angry.
3. Identify three different strategies for self-regulation to manage anger.

### **Method**

#### **Day 1**

When I first arrived, during circle time, I told preschool children my name and purpose for being there. Then, I used a bunny puppet to read to children the book titled *When I Feel Angry* (Spelman, 2000). During the reading incorporating English and Spanish, I described and imitated the bunny's sounds and gestures when angry. After approximately five minutes of reading, I told the children that it is normal that there are things that we do not like that make us



feel angry, just as happened to the bunny. Next, I approached each child using the puppet, changing my voice and pretending that I was the bunny I asked for their names. Then, using a chart titled “I feel angry when/Me siento enojado cuando” with a picture of the bunny’s angry face, I told the children I would like each to say something that makes them angry. See Appendix A for the picture of the chart “I feel angry when.” First, I started saying something that made me angry; taking turns, I would ask each child to come to the front of the circle with me. Then, I asked them for something that made them feel angry and wrote the child’s name, and in front of their name, I wrote their answers.

## **Day 2**

On the second day, during circle time, for about 2 minutes, I presented them with the video of the song “If you are happy” from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4WNrvVjiTw>. I encouraged the children to get up from their seats and started following the movements in the music video. Once the video ended, some children started to express how they reacted when they experienced some of the emotions mentioned in the video. First, I asked the preschoolers a few questions from the reading “When I feel angry” (Spelman, 2000) read the previous day. Next, I went over the chart from the previous day, where I wrote what made us angry, and I read the names of each child and what each one said. Then, I introduced the children to the angry and happy feeling buddies (soft little dolls created by the Conscious Discipline curriculum as a self-regulation tool). Once introduced to them, I invited the children to observe them and try to imitate the feeling buddies’ faces together. Next, I asked the children which of the two feeling buddies looks more like the face of the bunny when it is angry. Then, I told the children they would go to the table and draw the bunny’s face when it looked angry. Once every child took a seat, I gave each child a blank bunny face shape template. See Appendix B for the picture of the

blank bunny face shape template. Then, each child was able to draw facial characteristics such as eyes, mouth, and nose on the coloring sheet of the blank bunny template. Once they finished drawing the bunny's face, I asked each child: How does the bunny's face look? I wrote the answer and the child's name on the template sheet.

### **Day 3**

On the third day with the preschool children, I let them know that that was our last activity together, and I briefly reviewed our previous activities: what makes them feel angry and what an angry face looks like. Next, I told them that I would discuss ways to help them feel better when they enter situations that make them feel angry, and I would tell the children that I would show them three different ways of breathing to help them feel better during moments make them feel angry. See Appendix C for pictures of self-regulation breathing techniques. First, I showed them a pretzel picture and told the children they would do the pretzel breathing I asked the children to pay attention to what I was going to do, I would do the pretzel breathing technique, and then they would do it with me. Then, I showed a balloon picture and told the children they would do balloon breathing I asked the children to pay attention because I would do the balloon breathing exercise and then ask them to repeat it. Finally, I presented a breathing tool called "Smell the flower blow the pinwheel." I showed them how to do it, and then I gave each child a turn to use it. I ended the activity by explaining to the children that anytime they feel angry, they can try these breathing exercises to cope with anger, self-regulate, and feel better. To conclude the project activities, I thanked the children for participating. I gave each child the breathing tool "Smell the flower blow the pinwheel," explaining that they would take it home and use it to calm themselves when angry.

## Results

Learning outcome 1 was that the participants would indicate three situations that make them angry. I think this learning outcome was met since, even though individually, they did not name three different anger management strategies, as a group, they were able to identify more than three situations that make them feel angry. Figure 1 for the participants' responses recorded on the chart "I feel angry when"/ "Me siento enojado cuando." Table 1 depicts their responses. Each of the six participants named one situation that caused anger, and every response was written on the chart. As a group, they indicated six situations meeting the outcome.

Learning outcome 2 was that participants would distinguish three characteristics of how their face looks when angry. Once I introduced the children to happy and angry feeling buddies, they could distinguish some characteristics of an angry face and identify between the two feeling buddies, specifically which one was the angry feeling buddy. Children participated enthusiastically, imitating the faces of the feeling buddies, such as the shape of the mouth, eyebrows, and eyes. When I asked each child, after they finished making their drawings, how the bunny looked, they all distinguished what an angry face looked like by saying that the bunny looked angry. Based on participants' drawings, 5 out of 6 children could draw an angry face on the blank bunny template with accuracy and easy to distinguish, partially meeting the outcome. See Figure 2 for what the children drew.

Learning outcome 3 was that participants would identify three different strategies for self-regulation to manage anger. Three different breathing strategies were presented during group time that can be used to self-regulate when children are angry. See Table 2, which represents three different self-regulation techniques used by the group of participants. All children imitated

as I was doing every technique, and then they repeated by themselves, showing enjoyment and engagement in the activity. I believe that this learning outcome was generally met since all participants as a group were able to identify and practice three breathing techniques for self regulate during anger situations. See Figure 3 for children practicing breathing strategies.

### **Discussion**

In my opinion, the project was successful, even though one of the learning outcomes was not fully met. Participants enjoyed the reading time using the bunny puppet, they were engaged and had fun when I pretended the voice of a bunny, and I asked their names. Also, they showed engagement when practicing the three different breathing regulation techniques, especially when I presented them with the tool “smell the flower blow the pinwheel.” They seemed excited to practice this breathing technique and watched closely as the pinwheel spun around. Since the children in preschool age are still working to develop the ability to express their emotions, using the chart “I feel angry when/ Me siento enojado cuando” supported building their abilities to communicate their emotions using their words to express what made them feel angry. On the other hand, I believe that watching the video, singing, and following the movements of the song "If You're Happy" allowed all the children to get engaged on the topic and participate actively in the activity.

During my project, I think I was able to include every participant. Even though most children were primarily Spanish fluently and just one child was mostly English fluently, the curriculum activities were designed for Spanish and English speakers. During the activities, I repeated most phrases and questions in both languages, allowing every child to engage in every activity. However, I found an issue since one child had some limitations with fine motor skills and struggled to draw an angry face accurately. Had I been aware of this, I would have modified

the activity for him. Since the content of my curriculum was created for preschool children between the age range of 3 to 5 years old, in the future, I would like to create more complex activities for older children to support their social-emotional skills as well as incorporate other emotions, not just anger.

If I could do this project again, I would like to share my curriculum with a bigger group of children, including children with disabilities. Since during the execution of my project, the Migrant Seasonal Head Start program was just starting its seasonal preschool, the enrollment levels were low, so the participants were not as many as I expected. Having a bigger group of participants and some with physical or cognitive limitations would make my project more inclusive. Also, I would introduce and discuss more emotions, allowing children to learn how to control other emotions. However, overall I felt my project allowed children to learn anger management skills by indicating situations that can cause them anger, distinguishing what an angry face looks like, and learning to identify breathing techniques that can support them in controlling their emotions and reducing frustration.

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*Table 1*

Children's responses as a group

GROUP RESPONSES	
Mateo	When I leave the park
Kianna	When Mateo and Hugo take away my food.
Adaya	When I stop playing.
Juan D.	When taking away my toys.
Eligah	When lunchtime ends.
Hugo	When Mateo destroys my blocks.



*Table 2*

Self-regulation breathing techniques used by the group of participants

<b>Self-Regulation Breathing Techniques Used</b>
Smell the flower blow the pinwheel
Balloon breathing
Pretzel breathing

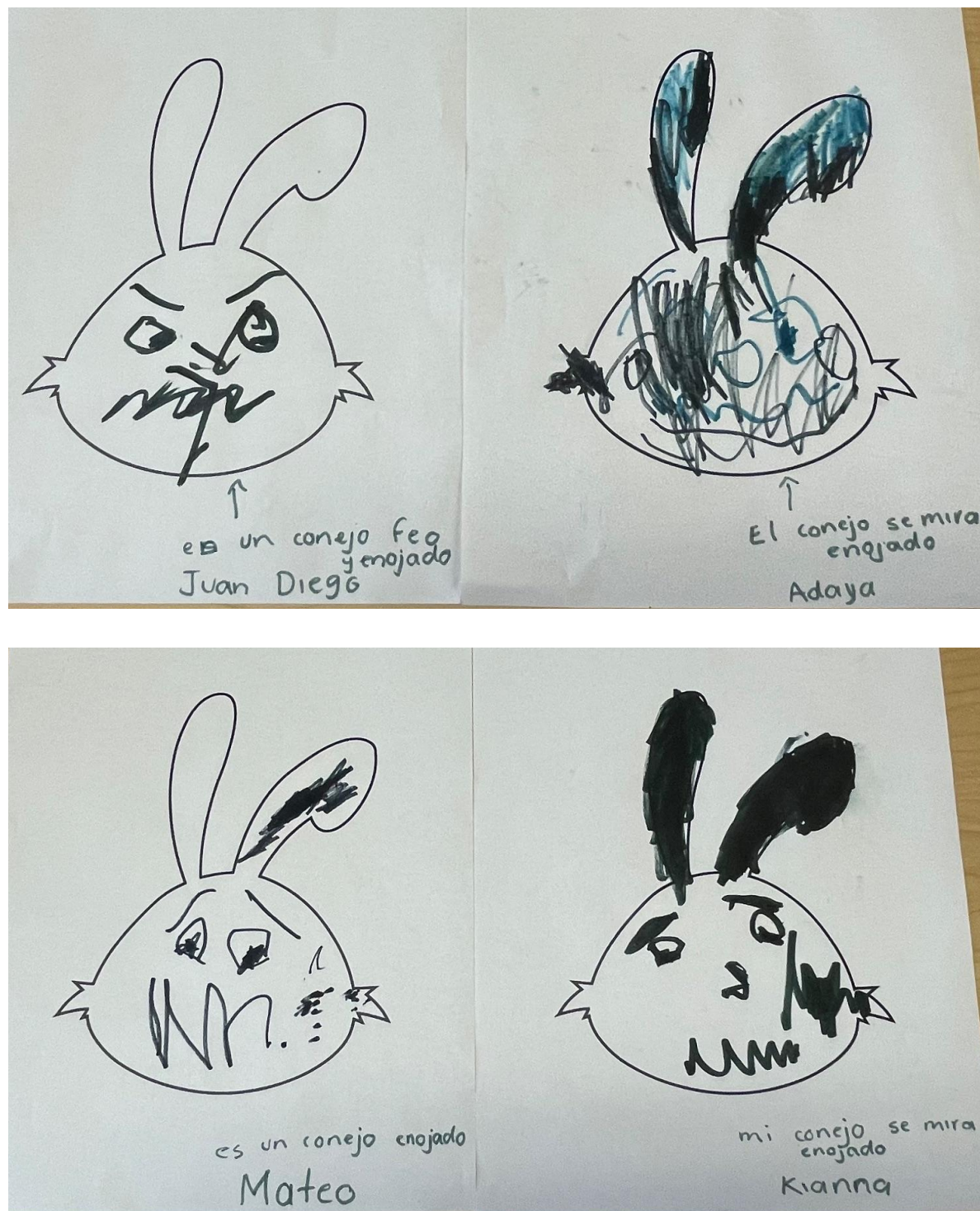
*Figure 1*

Results of children's responses about situations that make them feel angry

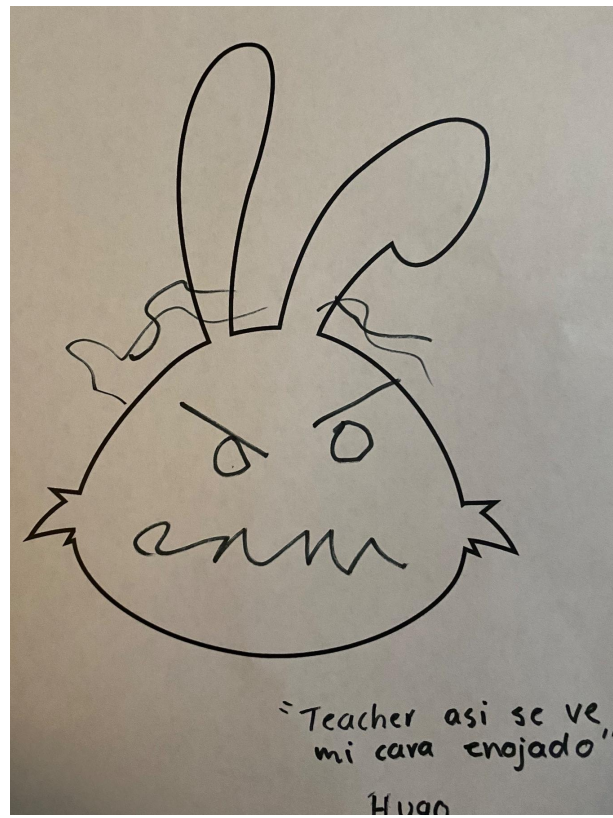
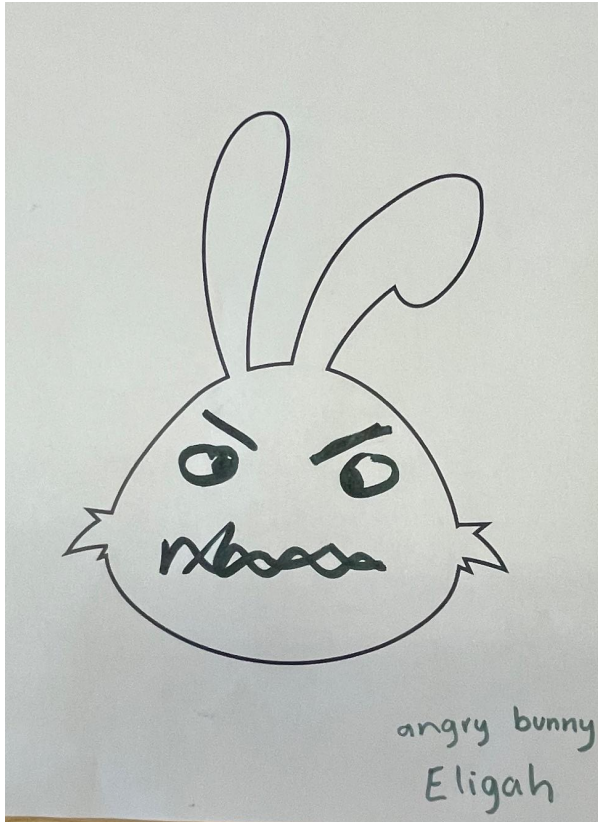
Name Nombre	I feel <sup>angry</sup> when... Me siento <sup>enojado</sup> cuando...
Mateo	Se lo lleven del parque.
Kianna	Cuando me quitan <del>da</del> comida Hugo y Mateo
Adaya	Parar de jugar.
Juan Diego	Que me quiten los juguetes
Eligah	When lunch time ends.
Hugo	Mateo destruye mis bloques

*Figure 2*

Children's drawings on blank bunny templates







*Figure 3*

Children practicing breathing strategies





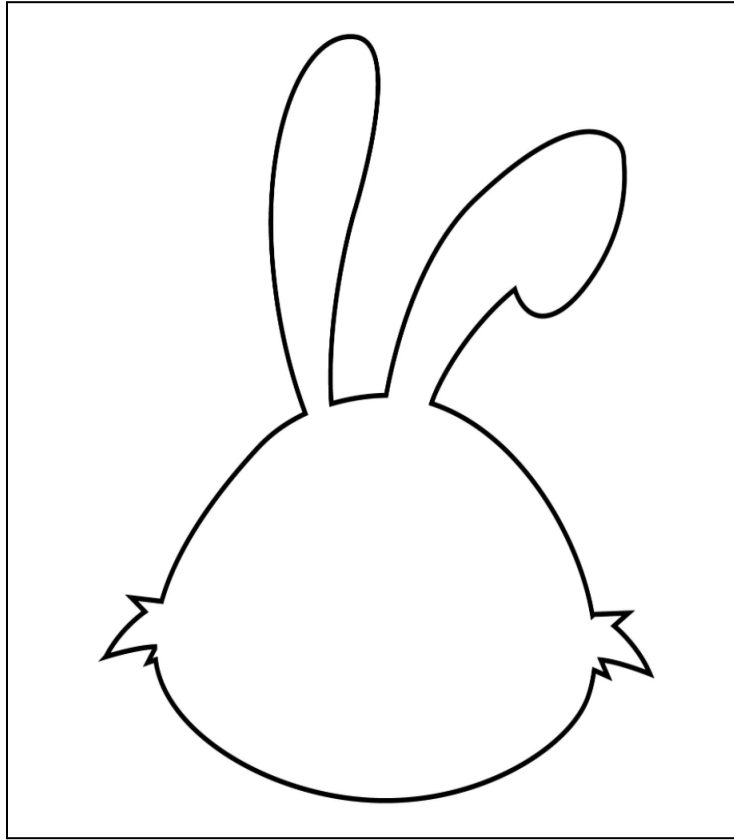


Picture of the chart “I feel angry when.”

[illegible]

*Appendix B*

Picture of the blank bunny face shape template given to children.





*Appendix C*

Self-regulation breathing techniques



# Balloon Breath

I can put my hands on my head.

I can take a deep breath  
and fill up my balloon.

I can let the air out slowly.



# Pretzel Breath

I can cross my legs.

I can cross my arms.

I can put my tongue  
on the roof of my mouth.

I can breathe.



*Appendix D*

Presentation from Capstone Festival