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## Emotional Regulation Strategies For 3 Year Olds

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**Emotional Regulation Strategies For 3 Year Olds**

Gloria Aguirre Torres

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

### **Introduction**

My capstone project focuses on teaching three year olds how to regulate their emotions. According to Parsafar and Davis, “emotional regulation refers to the set of processes involved in the way emotions are experienced and responded to” (2019, p 1935). There is a need for emotion regulation instruction for 3-year-olds because many 3-year-olds are having a difficult time regulating their emotions during a conflict with their peers. I have developed a set of lessons that will address this need by teaching 3 year olds different emotional faces, calming techniques, and ways to redirect their attention. The 3 year olds executive function skills are not fully developed which can cause lack of self control. It is vital to teach children from a young age to regulate their emotions because these skills will remain useful throughout their growth. For example, understanding how to regulate emotions can become very beneficial towards conflict resolutions with peers. The participants for this project will be three year olds who attend The Secret Garden Preschool located in La Selva, California. These children will be given three lessons with the goal in mind that these three year olds will be able to correctly identify three emotions using an emotional face chart, use one of the self calming techniques by demonstrating them during pretend scenarios, and they will be able to demonstrate how to redirect their attention after an angry conflict is solved. Each lesson will take place on separate days in order to allow the children to have enough time to do the activities that correlate to each lesson.

### **Needs Statement**

Three year olds have a difficult time regulating their emotions because they have not fully developed their executive function skills. When children are having a difficult time regulating their emotions, they can become distant from family and friends. It can also cause communication difficulties throughout their development. This capstone project focuses on teaching 3 year olds how to regulate their emotions. “Emotion regulation strategies are behaviors used to regulate emotional experience” (Grolnick, Bridges, Connell, 1996, p 929). When a young child is taught how to regulate their emotions, it can positively affect their social relationships with family and peers. It can also help minimize negative outcomes such as eating disorders, depression, and anxiety disorders (Smith, Persich, Chuning, et al., 2023).

We can define emotional regulation as skills that include handling our own emotions in positive ways, understanding and identifying our feelings, and adapting them to certain situations (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). The use of emotional regulation can start as soon as preschool age and is linked to the preschooler's social development as well as school readiness (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). While children are learning how to recognize and regulate their emotions they start using their executive function skills by demonstrating self control while they use emotional regulation techniques. Executive function skills involve the child’s social and cognitive development as well as self-regulation (Wang, Huang, & Liang, 2023). According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, executive function skills help children show self control, plan ahead, meet goals, and follow directions (What is Executive Function, n.d).

Emotion dysregulation happens when a child does not understand how to regulate their emotions. This can negatively impact the child’s life throughout their growth. Some negative

outcomes that can happen are eating disorders, depression, anxiety disorders, and attachment failures (Smith, Persich, Chuning, et al., 2023). The children who have emotional dysregulation have a difficult time obtaining their social development skills resulting in seclusion from their peers and families. Secluding themselves from their families and lacking healthy interactions with others can become a trigger to depression. However, when a child starts learning how to regulate their emotions, it can help them socially, academically, and with their mental health (Chen, Wu, & Wang, 2018). First, it can help them socially by acquiring social skills that can benefit them in creating healthy relationships and attachment styles with their families and peers. Second, children who learn how to regulate their emotions during preschool age can increase their academic skills when they start grade school. Third, the children's mental health can become healthier and maintain a healthy balance if the child can regulate their own emotions. This decreases the chance of the child falling into depression as well as triggering disorders.

As children grow, many of the emotions that they learn come from observational learning. These children learn emotions from watching their parents, families, teachers, and anyone they socialize with (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). Watching the adult's emotions unwind during different situations gives information to the children on the types of emotions they can have in certain situations (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). In order to help children express their emotions and understand their emotions, it is important for parents to communicate with their children about the various emotions. By talking to the children about emotions, parents are giving their children the necessary tools for their emotional development skills and can help children learn to regulate their emotions (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). Early childhood educators can also promote emotional competence by modeling positive emotions in front of the

children. Having both parents and teachers teach children about emotions can help promote children's emotional and social skills (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012).

In order to use emotional regulation we need to also understand the different types of emotions. Understanding the different emotional expressions becomes a skill that gets used consecutively as we navigate through life. Conscientious recognition of emotional expressions can become valuable to children in developing their social skills (Herba, Benson, Landau, et al., 2008). Three year olds learn about the different facial expressions by learning the expressions from their immediate family. The first facial expression that they learn is happiness then sadness followed by anger, surprise, and fear (Herba, Benson, Landau, et al., 2008). Emotional recognition aids in determining one's own emotions which then assists in identifying emotional regulation strategies. Emotional regulation can only be done after the person identifies their emotion. Once they identify their current emotion, they can then start using emotional regulation strategies to minimize the emotion (Smith, Persich, Chuning, et al., 2023). During their preschool years, children start to learn more language skills which helps them express their emotions with less difficulty (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon, & Cohen, 2009).

Preschool children tend to have many conflicts that can easily change their emotions throughout the day. Most of the conflicts between preschoolers are from the possession of a toy or item (Myrttil, Lin, Chen, et al., 2021). Other conflicts can arise based on "...intrusion of personal body space, course of escalating the terror, course of play conflict, violation of classroom rules and routines, and physical aggression" (Myrttil, Lin, Chen, et al., 2021, p 231). Emotional regulation can help in regulating emotions after conflicts with their peers. Some emotional regulation techniques such as support seeking, problem solving, and self distraction

have been used by preschoolers during or after conflicts (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon, & Cohen, 2009).

Support seeking allows the children to ask their teacher or parent for help on regulating their emotions. Both parents and teachers can help the child feel safe in their environment in order to regulate their emotions. This can be done by talking with the child about their emotions. Problem solving allows the child to fix their conflicts and regulate their emotions. This can be done by the child asking for ‘alone time’ and having access to a Cozy corner or by using the ‘blowing out candles’ technique. Both of these strategies can aid the child in regulating their emotions. Self distraction allows the child to redirect their attention into something else. This can be done by the child wanting to do a different activity or choosing to play with a different toy. Support seeking, problem solving, and self distraction are all emotion regulation techniques that the child can do in order for them to regulate their own emotions.

It can become difficult for children to understand their own emotions without the right set of tools. Many preschoolers experience new feelings throughout their development and have a difficult time regulating these emotions. Teaching children from a young age how to regulate their own emotions can become beneficial in both their social and cognitive development. In order to help children learn about their emotions and how to regulate them, I have developed 3 lessons to teach 3 year old preschoolers emotional regulation strategies. These 3 lessons were split in three different days in order to maintain the child’s focus. The three focal topics will target both the understanding of different emotions and emotional regulation strategies that can be done during or after a conflict.

### **Theory**

Albert Bandura was a psychologist who created the Social Learning Theory. Bandura believed that through observational learning and modeling, children from diverse communities could learn the same lesson (Ozer, 2022). Due to this theory, it has been recommended for early childhood educators to demonstrate positive behavior with others so that children can mimic the behavior (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012). Another thing that educators can do is provide children with tips on how to regulate their emotions by demonstrating different techniques. As Bandura's Social Learning Theory mentioned, it is important for children to observe positive behaviors from others such as parents or family which they can then mimic throughout their life.

The Social Learning theory can correlate with children who are 3 years old. Of course they are a bit young to learn the theory, however, educators can use this theory to their advantage when it comes to teaching young children. As young children grow, they tend to learn more by being observant to their surroundings. This theory can be beneficial to parents and family members as well if they are trying to teach their young children new skills. By being able to perform the skill in front of the child, it is more likely that the child will implement it into their life. During the three lessons that I had presented, I was able to model behaviors of emotional regulation and allowed children to mimic my behaviors. Understanding Bandura's theory allowed me to articulate the use of role playing during my lessons in order to facilitate the learning of the emotional regulation techniques. The children were able to mimic the emotional regulation techniques successfully.



**Consideration of Diversity**

The project on teaching three year olds how to regulate their emotions has been conducted at The Secret Garden Preschool in La Selva, California. According to Kids Data, in 2021 California had 50.8% of children ages 3-5 years old attend preschool before reaching Kindergarten. At The Secret Garden Preschool, the majority of the children that attend are Middle class and White. About 30% of the children that attend The Secret Garden Preschool are mixed. The students in the classroom that the project has been conducted consists of 3 year olds who are 75% Caucasian with the exception of 25% being Mexican-American. Majority of the students in this 3 year old classroom are female however there is one male. The children in this class have parents who are in the middle socioeconomic status and have siblings.

This project is targeted specifically for a group of three year old preschool students. Preschool students have an easier time understanding a concept when you incorporate demonstration and images to the curriculum. Taking into account that the students in the class have a mixed blend of cultures, I incorporated a curriculum that would be understandable for any culturally diverse group. The curriculum was aimed to teach three year olds emotional regulation techniques with the inclusion of diversity. This was achievable by adding materials that incorporated all genders and skin tones in order to include diversity into the curriculum. Other materials that were included were toys that had no gender specific use which allowed children to feel more included and relate to the lessons that were being presented.

### **Learning Outcomes**

This project is focused on teaching 3 year olds techniques on how to regulate their emotions. In order to conduct this project, there will be 3 lessons given to 3 year olds who attend The Secret Garden Preschool located in La Selva, California.

By the end of the project, the participating 3 year olds will:

1. Correctly identify three emotions using an emotional face chart.
2. Use one of the self calming techniques after being sad such as teddy bears, “blowing out candles”, or asking for alone time.
3. Children will demonstrate emotional regulation strategies after or during a peer conflict.

### **Methods**

#### **Location and Participants**

This capstone project was conducted at The Secret Garden Preschool which is located in La Selva, California. During this capstone project, I focused on 3 year olds but the number of participants fluctuated depending on the three days that each lesson was presented. Three lessons were conducted on three different days. On Monday, Lesson 1 was conducted and there were a total of 5 children, 1 boy and 4 girls. Lesson 2 was conducted on Wednesday where there were 6 children, 1 boy and 5 girls. Lesson 3 was conducted on Friday and only 4 children attended, 1 boy and 3 girls. In this class, the participants come from Middle class families who have both parents under the same house. Most of these children are Caucasian and English speakers. However, there is one child who is Mexican-American and understands both languages.

**Procedures and Materials**

Before the project was conducted, I started to volunteer at The Secret Garden Preschool, located in La Selva, California. By being able to interact with the children at this preschool, it allowed me to get to know the children and build rapport. I helped the Lead Teacher of the 3 year old group throughout the day with anything she needed help with. Most of the time the children started to have breakfast, lunch, and PM snack with me. The Lead Teacher of the three year olds conducted circle time with the children but allowed me to pitch in during circle time so that the children started to focus on me. All this was done in order to build trust between the children and me in advance before the lessons I was going to teach them. I conducted three lessons each on different days throughout a week in order to give time to the children to do the activities that correlated to the lessons.

In the First Learning Outcome, I focused on teaching the 3 year olds the different emotions and the facial expressions that are associated with each emotion. I used a facial expression chart (see Appendix A) and talked about each emotion. Starting off, I demonstrated the facial expression chart and asked the children to identify the emotions that they already knew. Once they correctly identified the emotions, I asked the children to mimic the facial expressions of the different emotions such as sadness, happiness, scared, hungry, tired, etc. After the children showed me each emotion, I started to assess the children by asking each child to point to the emotion that they were currently feeling on the chart. Three of the children chose 'happy' while two of the children pointed out that they were 'hungry', to which I reminded them that they were going to have breakfast soon. Once I reminded the children that they were going to have breakfast soon, they changed their choice from 'hungry' to 'happy'.

The Second Learning Outcome focused on children being able to use one of three calming techniques that were shown to regulate their sadness. The first question that was asked to children was: what makes you sad? Based on this question, all 6 participants stated at least one reason for why they become sad. The first most common answer was getting a toy taken away from them. The second most common answer was Mom dropping them off at school. See Figure 1 for more reasons of what makes the children sad. After talking about what makes them sad, I told them what makes me sad and how I regulate my sadness by using self calming techniques such as teddy bears, “blowing out candles” or asking for alone time. The three calming techniques that were taught were: teddy bear cuddles, ‘blowing out candles’, alone time. I explained to the children that during the times we feel sad we could use a teddy bear for comfort. Each child was allowed to grab a teddy bear and cuddle with it for 3 minutes. After they cuddled with it I asked them how they were feeling and they all said they were feeling happy after cuddling with a teddy bear. I showed them the Blowing Out Candles technique which can be used for either sadness or anger. The Blowing Out Candles technique uses five fingers to represent the candles and you blow on each finger. After one finger was blown out they had to put that finger down and continue blowing out the rest of their ‘candles’. Each one of the children were able to show me how they were blowing out their candles. The last technique shown was ‘alone time’; for this technique the child was able to have their own space that allowed them to be separated from their friends in order to assess their own feelings and use calming techniques. During the demonstration of this last technique, I noticed that the children understood this last technique very well and continued to use it throughout the day. The assessment for this learning outcome consisted of asking the children to demonstrate one of the three self calming techniques that were shown.

The Third Learning Outcome was focused on teaching 3 year olds how to redirect their attention after an angry conflict with another student. On the day of the last lesson only 4 students attended class. When the lesson started, I asked children to raise their hand if they have ever felt angry before. I showed them the facial expression chart (See Appendix A) and pointed out the angry face. I asked the children what made them angry and what they wanted out of the situation. Most of the children stated that they would become angry at friends when they had a toy that they wanted. I proceeded with telling the children that their teacher and I were going to act out a scene of a common conflict that we notice at school. I told them to pay close attention to what we do during this conflict. The scenario that the teacher and I acted out involved a toy truck being taken away from my hands. During this role play, I showed different facial expressions such as anger and sadness. I became very angry at the teacher for taking my toy and instead of screaming and pulling, I moved my body from the conflict and used the Blowing Out Candles technique. I then went to find a similar toy or a different toy to play with. After we finished role playing, I proceeded to ask the children what they noticed about my actions towards the problem. The assessment for this learning outcome was done by asking children what steps I took in order to regulate my emotions and what I did to redirect my attention from the conflict.

## **Results**

### **Learning Outcome #1**

Learning Outcome #1 focused on teaching children how to correctly identify three emotions using an emotional face chart (see Appendix A). On Day 1 of a 3 day curriculum, only 5 students attended class, 1 boy and 4 girls. While conducting this activity I noticed that these children knew more emotions than what I had originally thought they knew. Many of these

students knew other emotions such as “worried” and “frustrated”. I assessed the success of Learning Outcome number 1 by asking the children what emotion they were feeling at the time. The children were able to use the facial expression chart to pick which emotion they were feeling. While conducting the assessment, five out of seven of the children chose ‘happy’ while two of the children pointed out that they were ‘hungry’, to which I reminded them that they were going to have breakfast soon. Once I reminded the children that they were going to have breakfast soon, they changed their choice from ‘hungry’ to ‘happy’. Originally I was going to settle with a 3 out of 5 (60%) as a passing score for this Learning Outcome however, to my surprise they were all able to conduct the activity masterfully. On Day 1 of the curriculum planning 100% of the participants correctly identified and demonstrated the facial expressions that were shown on the chart. Making this, Learning Outcome #1 fully met.

### **Learning Outcome #2**

Learning Outcome #2 focused on teaching children how to use one of the self calming techniques after being sad such as the use of teddy bears, “blowing out candles”, or asking for alone time. On Day 2 out of a 3 day curriculum 6 students attended class. I asked the children if they could demonstrate one technique that they could use when they feel sad. I had a set goal of at least 3 participants out of the 6 correctly demonstrating the use of one self calming technique. When the assessment was concluded, 4 (67%) children correctly demonstrated the use of a self calming technique. The most demonstrated calming technique was “blowing out candles” followed by the use of a teddy bear. Learning Outcome #2 was partially met due to some complications during the lesson.

**Learning Outcome #3**

Learning Outcome #3 focused on teaching children to demonstrate emotional regulation strategies after or during a peer conflict. After the role play, many of the children pointed out that my facial expressions changed from anger to sadness. The children also proceeded to tell me how I solved the problem by “blowing out candles” and finding a different toy to use. I originally expected 2 out of the 4 children to state something that they noticed me do during the role play, however most of the children were very engaged. During the assessment portion of the lesson, many of the children gave their own findings by addressing what I did during and after the conflict. They then proceeded to give problem solving solutions by saying that I could have asked to take turns on using the toy, or asked a teacher to intervene. After the children addressed my actions towards the problem, I noticed that many of the children remembered some of the teachings from the previous lessons. They also showed that even at such a young age, they are able to come up with their own problem solving solutions. The assessment showed that 75% of the participants successfully understand how to redirect their attention after a conflict. They also showed that they understand how to regulate their emotions and give problem solving solutions on their own, making Learning Outcome #3 fully met.

**Discussion**

This Capstone project was focused on teaching 3 year olds emotional regulation strategies. When I was planning the three day lesson plans, I reminded myself of Bandura’s Social Learning Theory. I wanted to apply Albert Banduar’s concepts of observational learning and modeling into my curriculum planning. Going into this project my goals were not set very high, however I was wrong. To my surprise, during most of the 3 day lesson plans, the children

were very attentive and demonstrated that they understood the lessons. By demonstrating the use of self calming techniques and emotional regulation techniques, the participants were able to mimic my actions. Learning outcomes 1 and 3 were fully met with the exception of Learning outcome 2 being partially met. The participants were very engaged during the lesson plans and teaching them a new topic was helpful in keeping their attention as well as using materials such as the facial expressions chart and role playing. The self calming technique called Blowing Out Candles, became very popular with the participants and was the self calming technique that was used the most.

During some of the lesson plans there were some complications. When I was delivering the lesson plan for Learning Outcome #2, there was a tour which distracted the children. The parents and the child that were touring the school came into the classroom while I was teaching the lesson which disrupted the children's attention. Another complication that occurred was that some children were dropped off during the time I was teaching the lesson. Most of the days that I was teaching a lesson I had to repeat the lesson in order to include the children that were dropped off during the lesson. Having to repeat the lesson made it complicated in keeping the attention from the other students, hence some of the students would drift away unless I called them back. The consistency of the children that were present on the three days that I conducted my lessons were limited. Each day there were only 1 or 2 children who were there for the previous lessons making it difficult in obtaining complete data.

Since having these complications, I reassessed what I could have done differently in this project. If given the chance of redoing this project I would find another preschool location that had consistency in the children's attendance and without disruptions from tours. By having consistency in the children's attendance, it would be easier to teach all the children the lessons in



a period of three days. I would teach the lessons Monday through Wednesday instead of skipping days in between the lessons. It would also be helpful in obtaining accurate data in order to better understand if the children are understanding the lessons. In order to make this project inclusive for parents and other age groups, the lesson plans could be longer with more activities added such as games that involved emotional expressions, calming techniques, and emotional regulation strategies. Parents could be paired with their child and role play scenarios with them. The lessons would continue to be based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory; which can help everyone learn from observational learning and modeling.

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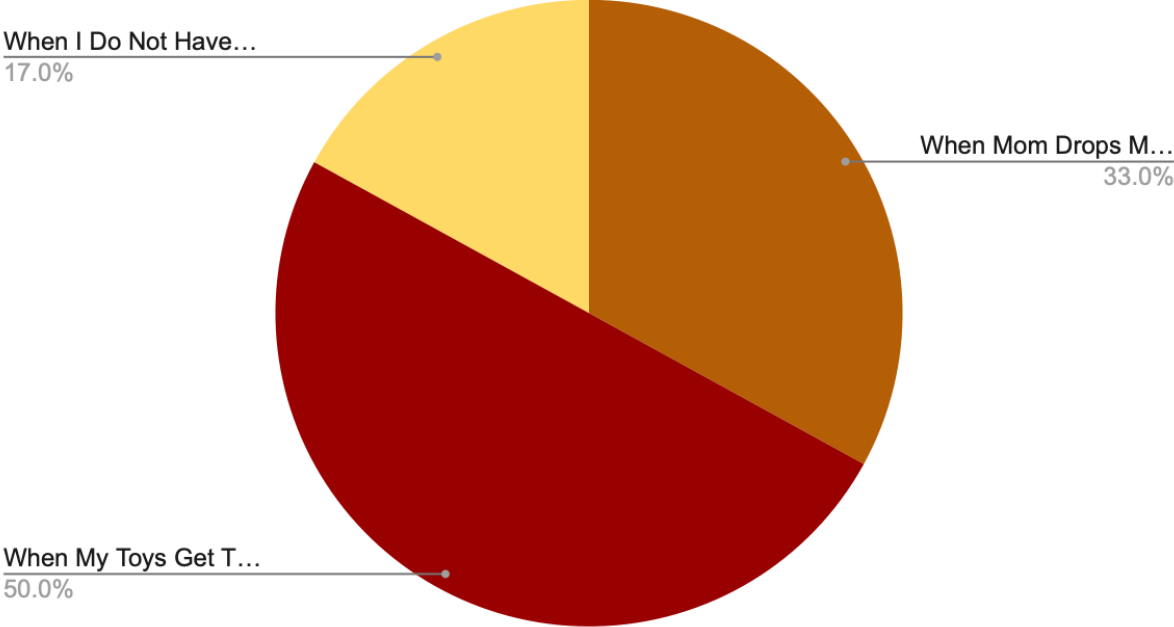
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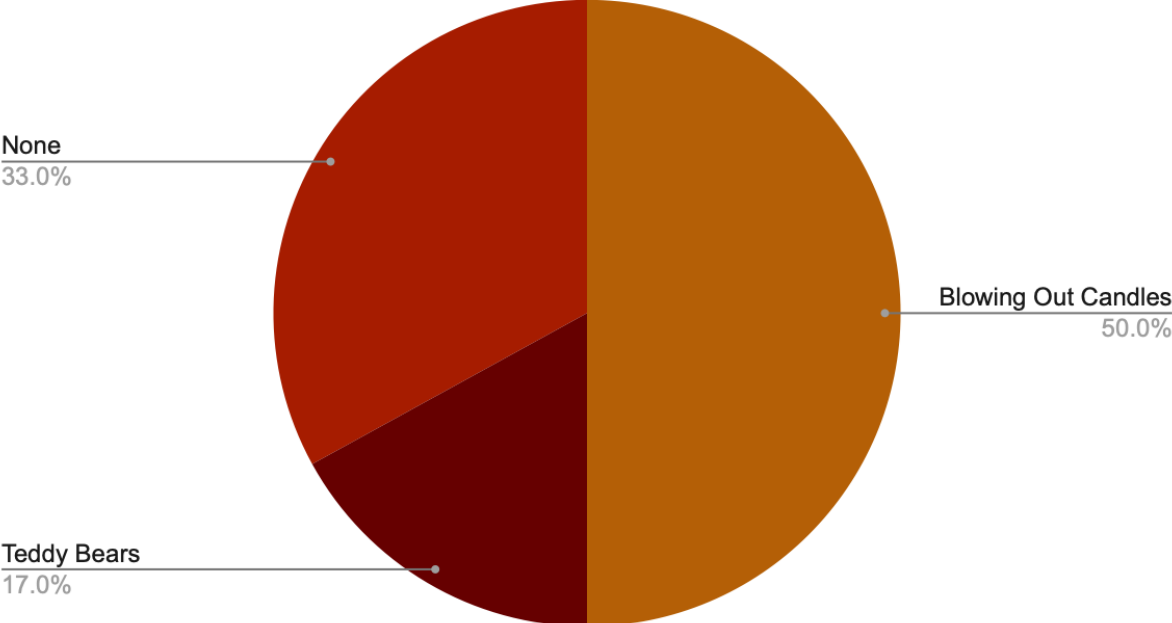
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LO #2-Figure 1

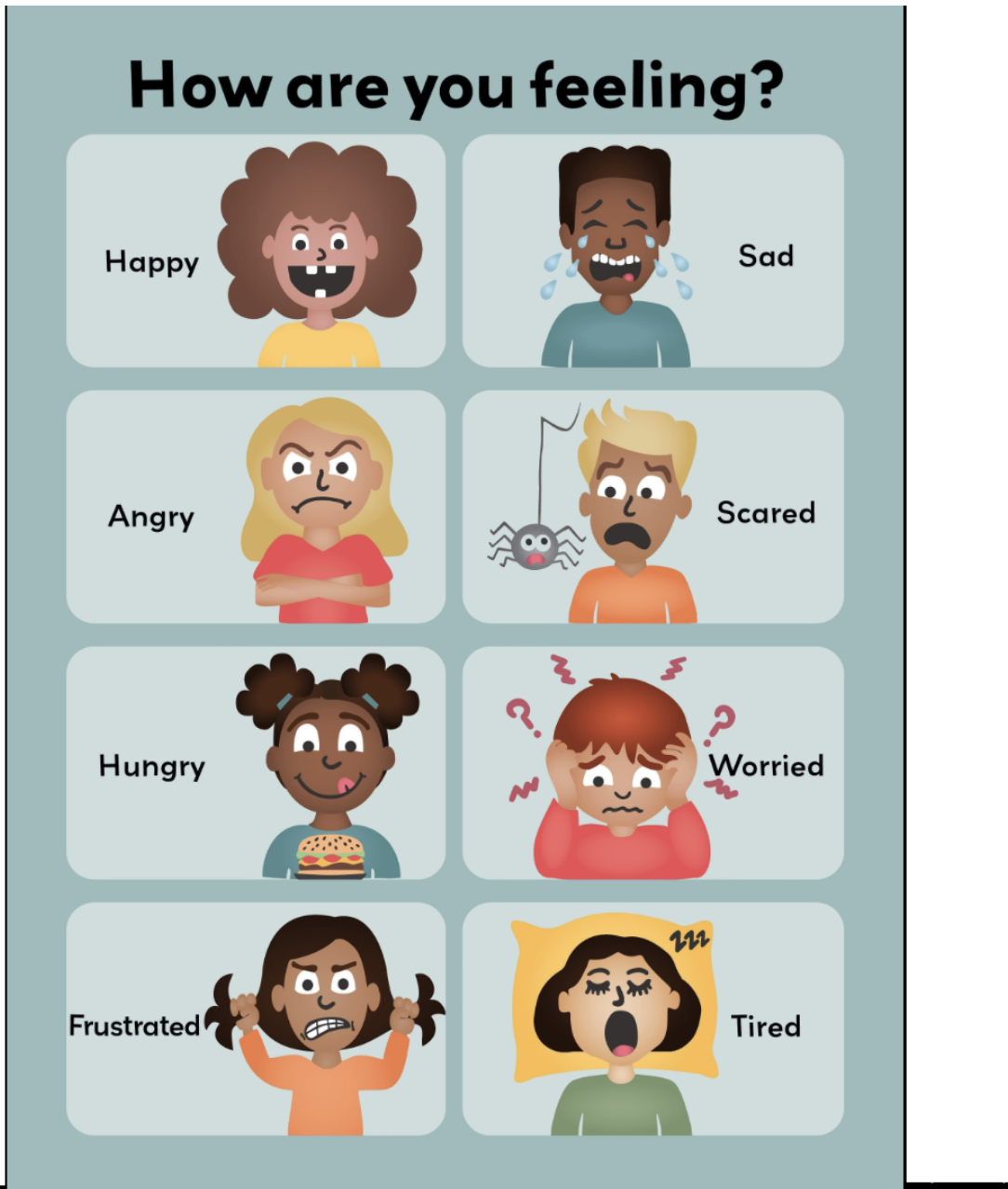


LO #2- Figure 2



*Appendix A*

*Facial Emotional Chart*





# Emotional Regulation Strategies For 3 Year Olds

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## Introduction

- This Capstone project focuses on teaching 3 year olds techniques on how to regulate their emotions
- I've been a preschool teacher for 4 years and noticed 3 year old struggles with emotional regulation

## Needs Statement

### The Problem

- Three year olds have a difficult time regulating their emotions because they have not fully developed their executive function skills.

### Executive Function

- Executive Function skills help children show self control, plan ahead, meet goals, and follow directions.

### The Need

- There is a need for emotion regulation instruction for 3 year olds because many 3 year olds are having difficulty regulating their emotions during a conflict with their peers.

## Theory

### ALBERT BANDURA



**Social Learning Theory**- suggests that social behavior is learned by observing and imitating the behavior of others.

**Bandura** believed that through observational learning and modeling, children from diverse communities could learn the same lessons (Ozer, 2022).

- Understanding Bandura's Theory allowed me to articulate vicarious learning into my lesson plans.



## Learning Outcomes

I designed a three lesson plan that was spaced out into three different days: Monday, Wednesday, Friday. It focused on the following outcomes:

1. Correctly identify three emotions using an emotional face chart
2. Use one of the self calming techniques after being sad such as teddy bears, "blowing out candles", or asking for alone time
3. Children will demonstrate emotional regulation strategies after or during a peer conflict.

## Method:



**Location:** The Secret Garden Preschool

**Address:** 26 Florido Ave, La Selva, Ca

I choose this site because it is a Preschool that I have been volunteering at and I was able to build rapport with the children that attend this preschool. This is a play based preschool that includes ages 2-5.

### Participants

- Age: 3 year olds
- Number of participants fluctuate based on the child's schedule
- Majority female, one boy
- Middle class
- Majority Caucasian and one Mexican American

## Method:

### Procedures:

- Create rapport with the children that attend that preschool
- **Lesson 1:** First- showed children an emotion face chart. Second-identified the emotions. Third-had them mimic the facial expressions

○ **Materials:** Emotion Face Chart

- **Lesson 2:** First- Demonstrated how to use calming techniques (teddy bears, "blowing out candles", alone time). Second- allowed children to show me one of three techniques.

○ **Materials:** Teddy bears, fingers, cozy corner

- **Lesson 3:** First- Role play with the Lead Teacher a scene where she took my toy away. Second-Demonstrated how to regulate emotions, problem solve and redirect my attention. Third-Asked the children what they saw me demonstrate.

○ **Materials:** truck

## Assessment Results

**LO 1:** Correctly Identifies three emotions using an emotional face chart

### Assessment Process:

- Demonstrated the facial expression chart
- Identified each expression
- Asked children to make the facial expression that correlates to the emotion that was picked.

### Results:

- 5/5 (100%) Participants correctly identified and demonstrated the facial expressions

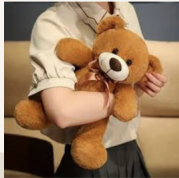
**LO 1 was fully met**

### How are you feeling?



## Assessment Results

**LO 2:** Use one of the self calming techniques after being sad such as teddy bears, "blowing out candles", or asking for alone time



### Assessment Process:

- Asked the children what makes them sad
- Asked children to demonstrate how to use one calming techniques
  - Teddy bears
  - Blowing Out Candles
  - Alone time



### Results:

- 4/6 (66%) participants demonstrated how to use one calming technique correctly

**LO 2 was partially met**



## Assessment Results

**LO 3:** Children will demonstrate emotional regulation strategies after or during a peer conflict

### Assessment Process:

- Asked children to tell me what emotional regulation technique I used during the role play.
- Asked children what I did to solve the problem
- Children gave their own problem solving solutions

### Results:

- 3/4 (75%) participants successfully showed how to regulate their emotions and showed problem solving skills

**LO 3 was fully met**



## Success/Positives

### LO 1: Fully met

- Children already had an understanding of certain emotions like happiness, sadness, angry.
- Demonstrating the facial expressions that correlated to the emotions helped children mimic the action with less difficulty

### LO 2: Partially met

- Children have experience using teddy bears and asking for alone time
- “Blowing out candles” was entertaining for them

### LO 3: Partially met

- Children were able to explain what I did after and during the conflict
- They used their own problem solving skills

## Discussion

### Limitations and Challenges

- During lesson 2, there was a tour and the children became distracted
- Some children were dropped off during circle time and I had to explain the lessons more than once.
- On each lesson day there were different children attending.

## Discussion

### Making It Better

**I would make it better by** conducting the project at a preschool that had students who were consistent Monday-Friday. This way I would have complete data.

### Future Directions

Teaching children from a young age to regulate their emotions will become very useful during conflict situations. Early Childhood Educators should **implement curriculum once or twice a week where children check in with themselves about how they are feeling and demonstrate different emotional regulation techniques they could use.**

## Thank you!

*“ Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling from others*

**- Albert Bandura**

