

Emotion Continuum

Research proves that self-regulation and empathy are teachable skills essential to success in the classroom and in the 21st century workforce. While activities that build social-emotional skills are traditionally relegated solely to the younger years, people of all ages benefit from an environment that supports their emotional needs and development. Through this challenge, students build their vocabularies and build productive strategies for communicating feelings and needs to adults and to one another.

What you will need:

Time estimate: 80 minutes total, with 20 minutes to plan and 60 minutes to teach over time

Materials: activity directions, 1-2 sheets of chart paper, ½ sheets of construction paper (80), markers, clothespins, clothesline/ tape/staples

Directions:

1. *Set up:* Post 1-2 sheets of chart paper in a visible spot. Clear enough space for students to place up to 80 half-sheets in a line.
2. Use the attached lead sheet to create an emotion continuum with your students. After you have hung the continuum up in your classroom, have a discussion. (You can process the activity right away and/ or throughout the year.) You might ask questions like:
 - How did you decide what order to put the emotions in?
 - What discoveries did you make during this activity?
 - What questions did you find yourself wrestling with?
 - What skills did you have to use to complete this activity?
 - Why might it be useful to know a lot of different words to express how you are feeling?
 - How will understanding your peers' emotions change your behavior?
3. Keep the emotion continuum up and use it throughout the school year. Establish a habit of inviting students to move their clothespins at the beginning of the day and after lunch. During or after an activity that is particularly challenging or exciting or frustrating, consider inviting students to move their clothespins. Remember to move your clothespin, too.
4. Let students know that each person is welcome to take her/his clothespin off the continuum if she/he doesn't want to share how she/he is feeling at a particular moment. Consider putting a jar or box next to the continuum for this purpose.

Resources

- [Read](#) Inspired Teaching's Founder Aleta Margolis' original description of the Emotion Continuum from her third grade classroom
- Watch Inspired Teacher Athena's use of the tool, starting at 3:35 of [this video](#).

Emotion Continuum Activity Directions

Part I: Generate a list of emotions.

You can either use the quick activity below (approximately 10 minutes), or you can embed emotions vocabulary into your lessons over the course of several days. The goal is to fill 1-2 sheets of chart paper with emotion words generated by your students.

Quick activity: ABC Emotions

- Invite your students to stand in a circle and say, "Let's go around the circle and each say a letter of the alphabet, as fast as we can. Go!"
- After getting to Z, give the next set of instructions: "Now we are going to go around the circle, still just saying the letters of the alphabet, but we are going to also add an emotion. So, if the emotion is fear, I'll say my letter as if I'm afraid. Also, the emotion will get stronger and stronger as we go along. So we will say 'A' as if we're just a little tiny bit afraid, 'B' will be a bit more afraid, and so on, and Z is the most afraid you can possibly be. Let's do it first, altogether."
- After you join your students in one example, invite someone to call out a new emotion. Then say, "Great! [Repeat the emotion.] Now, let's go around the circle again."
- Repeat this activity with multiple emotions. Then, let them sit down.
- Ask your students to generate a list of emotions by calling them out loud. Write them down on the 1-2 sheets of chart paper posted in your room.

Ongoing: Ideas for Building Emotions Vocabulary

Post 1-2 sheets of chart paper somewhere visible in the classroom. Tell your students you'll be capturing emotions words on the paper, and pause every so often over the next several days to write down new words that come up in your lessons. For example:

- Analyze the feelings of characters in a novel, or for younger children, a picture book, including looking up new "emotion words" in the dictionary (i.e., "Alexander felt forlorn...").
- Imagine what historical figures may have been feeling as they were deciding to wage war, traveling to a new land, gaining or losing power, etc.
- Discuss students' own feelings about the first day of school, the climate in the lunchroom or playground, the upcoming presidential election.
- Play community-building games that evoke emotions. (Go to www.spolin.com for ideas.)

An option for older students

- Post a sheet of chart paper.
- Begin by brainstorming emotions, as many as possible. Students call them out as a student (or the teacher) scribes. Cross out duplicates and change all words to adjectives. Keep the list going until people really start slowing down.

Part II: Illustrate and Post the Emotions

Once you have one or two sheets chart paper filled with emotion words, set aside 50 minutes to lead your students through the following activity:

- Invite your students to choose two-three emotions each to illustrate on paper, drawing faces that express the emotions, making thoughtful use of color, writing style, etc. Emphasize that drawing is for everyone, not just students who identify as artists. (“You are never wrong when you create!”)
- Another option (or additional option) is to take polaroids of students posing to represent each emotion with their faces. You can also use pictures from children’s books that will resonate with your students.
- Make sure that the drawings, photos, or pictures are vertical.
- Once all of the emotions have been created, challenge your students to put them in order. You can leave it open (“Figure out a logical way of putting these emotions in order”) or you can make it more specific (“Put these emotions in order from ‘best to worst’ or ‘happiest to saddest.’”)
- Prompt students to discuss and debate the definition of emotions: Are there ‘best’ and ‘worst’ emotions? Should we avoid feeling angry or is anger a natural and necessary part of engaging with others?
- If time permits, you can offer students several days to ponder the question of ordering emotions.
- You can encourage students to find a compromise if the discussion does not seem to be nearing resolution: Some groups may decide simply to alphabetize the emotions; some may come up with an order that makes sense of them.
- Once the students have decided on an order for the emotions, affix them in that order to your wall (via string, tape, or staples).
- Give each student a clothespin to write his or her name on. Write your name on one too.
- Invite students to put their clothespin on the emotion they are feeling, and do the same (it turns out teachers also have feelings!).
- Tell your students that you will use the emotion continuum throughout the school year, moving clothespins to share how each of you are feeling.