

From Anxious & Angry to More Confident & Empowered: Emotional Wellbeing in Education

by Anna Machura

“Overwhelming”, “Crushing”, “Heavy” – these are a few adjectives that came to a boy’s mind when he was asked to describe a moment of anxiety/anger he had experienced. “I have to shout”, “I want to run away from the place”, “I am so scared”, he said after an episode, which was more of an inner cry of his anxious and angry mind. “It’s coming and I can’t control it. It’s very strong!”, he added with visible signs of resignation. You could tell there was an emotional battle going on in the boy’s mind. A very tough one.

Indeed, managing powerful emotions, such as anger or anxiety, is always challenging. For a child who is not familiar with a sense of losing control in a difficult situation, especially when suddenly confronted with a perceived threat, this feeling might be truly crippling. The worry and fear - commonly known as anxiety - are often linked to anger, which, in turn, is coupled with a sense of annoyance. Even though most of adults would probably be able to sense and react to danger in time, a child needs a lot more guidance here. The inner mental “shield” to be put on requires both strength and courage to face the situation, before fear takes over and the amygdala in the brain sends out an impulse to “fight, flight or freeze”. Sometimes, the fight-flight-freeze response is overactive. This happens when non-threatening situations trigger the reaction. Surely, most teachers have had to deal with these issues in the classroom. Below, we can see the most common examples of behaviours often exhibited by a child who feels threatened.

The acronym of FEAR is “*False Expectations Appearing Real*”. (J. B. Taylor)



Fight-Flight-Freeze response in the classroom

Source: camhsprofessionals.co.uk (2022)

In fact, if we imagine something vividly, our body is going to react to the image. Real or false – it does not really matter. It's the power of imagination, the subconscious mind. Our **thoughts** produce physiological responses while **actions** just follow our thoughts. Therefore, it is beneficial to plant a lot of helpful, constructive thoughts in our heads. Dr Joseph Murphy in his well-known book “*The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*” (2011) reaffirms that all our experiences, events, conditions and acts are the reactions of our subconscious mind to our thoughts.

When it comes to emotional outbursts, can we talk about single episodes only or is it a more complex issue? What we normally observe in case of anxiety is a gradual build-up of disruptive impulses, emotions or feelings such as dissatisfaction, resentment, rejection, sadness, worry, guilt, fear or hurt. Then, this pulsating negative energy gets trapped in the body, and once accumulated for a prolonged period of time, it's ready to explode. It can be triggered by even the smallest of incidents, seemingly unrelated. For instance, when a learner accumulates all this negative energy and hears a simple “no” from their teacher, they may become extremely aggressive - start shouting, kicking or even damaging things.

Bottling up emotions, i.e. frustration, fear or suppressing an emotional conflict, while being unable to cope with stressors, lowers the child's self-esteem and often leads to passive aggression or even depression. Although it might seem that sudden outbursts of anger are rather uncontrollable, there are effective ways children can use to manage the emotions, at the conscious level. Applying such techniques regularly reinforces positive changes and teaches a young mind how to take control over one's individual reactions. Consequently, it boosts the child's self-esteem and increases overall self-confidence and trust in one's abilities.

Eliminating negative emotions is neither possible nor recommended. Instead, the focus here should be on empowering the child to be able to act, rather than react. We all need to work out an action plan in advance to avoid so called “*amygdala hijack*”. Teaching emotional intelligence brings amazing results. It often turns out that the real problem is not just anger or anxiety as such, but communication. When a child is unable to express what they feel, it exacerbates the whole situation making it more complicated than it really is. **Communication is the key.** “*You don't understand!*” – a statement like that heard from a child can be a masked projection of their own feelings of confusion and powerlessness. In fact, “*you*” can be replaced with “*I*”. What the child is actually trying to say is: “*I don't understand what is going on now. Help me, please!*”

I can recall multiple classroom situations (while working with primary school pupils, often neurodivergent learners) where I successfully put my professional therapeutic skills into action by applying certain strategies that helped a child open up in a safe

unhurried way... "I can see you are thinking of something very important now. I do not know what it is. I would love to feel what you are feeling so I can understand it better. Could you take a deep breath, close your eyes for a few seconds and describe the things for me, please? I'll draw a picture". While doing so, I was acknowledging every step the child made, creating a big mental picture to identify the trigger(s) and address the issue appropriately. "You know, our thoughts are like clouds – they come and go – you can let them go or keep the images and emotions they bring for longer", I continued. "You can control them whenever you need to. Let me show you how...one, two, three...this thought goes away and disappears like a cloud in the sky. It's gone. Now your mind is clear". I showed the technique to the whole class; now we often start a lesson with a question: "What's on your mind today?"

Moments like these are absolutely priceless, truly empowering, and can change a child's life. Therefore, I think emotional intelligence is more important than any other school subject. Teaching children empathy, kindness and the ability to self-regulate should be embedded in the process. Thought and feeling are inseparable brain processes; hence, I use and strongly recommend brain-friendly techniques, multisensory approaches, creating associations or patterns. Additionally, using memory-improving techniques (with colours, rhymes, songs, story-telling), lots of awareness-based activities (e.g. mindfulness) as well as projects that enhance creativity and allow for personal expression.

Realising what is happening in the moment is the first step before taking action.

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Anxiety does not appear overnight; anger is often a secondary emotion. These two are frequently preceded by a period of a low depressive mood, withdrawal from social interaction with peers or total avoidance. Therefore, the approach should be aimed at gradual transformation. Not only is it therapeutic in nature but also very constructive in the long term. This way, we can break unwanted patterns and start developing the right mindset; steering away from "anxious" towards "more confident and empowered". There are a lot of fantastic books worth recommending that cover the topic in more detail, for example: "Don't feed the monkey mind. How to stop the cycle of anxiety, fear and worry" by J. Shannon or "Mind Power. Change your thinking, change your life" by J. Borg.

It's crucial to teach children about different emotions and feelings. Anxiety and anger are somewhat natural responses of the mind - they often signal the "true" hidden subconscious reactions. When anxiety is unacknowledged or unexpressed, it often leads to frustration, which in turn can lead to anger. Therefore, every effort should be made to recognise and calm an anxious & angry mind as early as possible. Strong emotions can be managed and controlled up to a certain level; however, they should generally be prevented. Experiencing frequent stressors puts the mind and body in the "survival mode", which is neither healthy nor needed in a safe environment. Undoubtedly, comforting a child, normalising their feelings and validating their experience can strengthen the relationship with them, build rapport, and facilitate them to exercise so called "psychic muscle" – the ability to cope with heavier mental load (childmind.org).

Please remember that everyone is different, and so are our triggers. Children need to be told clearly what is happening to them and how they can process their emotions themselves. Being overprotective - by trying to remove the root cause of a negative reaction every single time - might lead to creating (and reinforcement) of a false belief that negativity can be eliminated from the environment in an instant. Instead, it's much better to identify certain events or situations that can be the triggers for the young mind, for example feeling ignored, rejected, unappreciated, undervalued or humiliated. It's worth mentioning that feeling rejected does not mean the same as not being accepted. For instance, a child might feel really *disappointed* that they didn't get chosen for the school play. As they wanted it so badly, and I tried so hard, they felt *left out* because their friends made it and they didn't (kidshealth.org). On another occasion, a child might just be jealous that another pupil got a better mark or upset – when someone else finished a task faster again. Yes, children constantly compare themselves to their peers, tend to measure their self-worth based on single, often unsuccessful, situations and process the aftermath much longer than us, adults. What is more, they usually shape their vision of the world / future through some negative core beliefs.



Source: Byrne and Fenn (2013)

As we know quite well, it is not possible to control everything around us, and we cannot guarantee that only pleasant "bearable" experiences are going to happen in the child's future. The duality of our existence - good days versus bad days, positive feelings blended with negative ones - forces us to acknowledge the fact that happiness is not a lack of uncomfortable moments, but the

state of a balance between our experiences. Similarly, keeping the balance between "happy" and "not-so-happy" moments is the right approach when dealing with emotions and feelings. Thus, teaching children how to deal with complex emotions, encouraging them to use effective techniques, such as deep breathing, to appreciate the power of the mind and think about their thinking process ("metacognition") seem to be the well-sought after elements in the post-pandemic classroom.

Children usually experience more than we think – that's why they need a supportive environment and great care. It is our responsibility, as educators, to create the right conditions and opportunities for the learners, which will help them thrive and blossom. It is a never-ending process of setting smart goals (Byrne and Fenn 2013), developing a growth mindset and dreaming big. As Harry Edwards put it: "We must teach our children to dream with their eyes open."

Let's continue to support them on their journey to becoming independent individuals!

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