

Fostering Emotional Well-Being^{in the} Classroom



RANDY M. PAGE • TANA S. PAGE

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Jones and Bartlett Publishers
Boston London

*Editorial, Sales, and Customer Service
Offices*

Jones and Bartlett Publishers
One Exeter Plaza
Boston, MA 02116
617-859-3900
1-800-832-0034

Jones and Bartlett Publishers
International
7 Melrose Terrace
London W6 7RL
England

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Publishers, Inc.

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Chapter-opening drawings were
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Chapter 10, Andrea Reese

All other illustrations were rendered by
PC&F, Inc., Hudson, New Hampshire.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Page, Randy M.

Fostering emotional well-being in the classroom/Randy M. Page,
Tana S. Page

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-86270-753-1

1. Students—Mental health. 2. Mental health promotion. 3. Self-
esteem in children. 4. Self-esteem in adolescence. 5. Classroom
environment. I. Page, Tana S. II. Title.

LB3430.P34 1992
371.7'13—dc20

92-31112
CIP

Printed in the United States of America
97 96 95 94 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Fostering
Emotional Well-Being
in the Classroom

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Preface

WRITTEN WITH CURRENT and prospective classroom teachers in mind, *Fostering Emotional Well-Being in the Classroom* provides insightful background, content, and strategies for improving the emotional well-being of students. In addition to being a “must have” resource for elementary and secondary classroom teachers of all disciplines, this is a useful text in college and university teacher preparation courses, including courses in school health, health education methods, child and adolescent health, emotional health and development, child and family development, youth at risk, and classroom management and discipline.

Readers will learn strategies and concepts for enhancing self-esteem and creating emotionally healthy classroom environments. A major feature of this book is the numerous activities that teachers can implement in their classrooms. Teaching activities are designed to assist students in developing skills necessary for emotional well-being, such as accurate self-evaluation, interpersonal relationships, communication, setting goals, and solving problems.

Fostering Emotional Well-Being in the Classroom provides up-to-date comprehensive coverage of the many issues concerning emotional well-being that today’s teachers must be prepared to handle. Entire chapters are devoted to such topics as self-esteem, stress, depression and suicide, death and dying, eating and weight problems, substance abuse, violence and abuse, and sexual activity. Other topics covered include developing classrooms that are sensitive and responsive to various cultures and differences; working with children with special conditions, such as AIDS, chronic handicaps, and learning disabilities; modeling a healthy personality; working with latchkey children; childhood death and bereavement; children of alcoholics; date rape and other forms of violence; and strategies for planning curriculums on sexuality and preventing substance abuse.

We use a number of pedagogical aids to enhance student learning. Each chapter opens with a focusing agent to promote thinking about particular topics and as an anticipatory set for the chapter. Special material is highlighted in boxes. Chapter summaries help pull together and summarize the key concepts. Review questions allow readers to check for understanding and to formulate critical thinking and applications. Resources for teachers, lists of annotated readings, resource organizations with current addresses, and references round out the end-of-chapter materials.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express heartfelt thanks

to Joseph E. Burns, our senior editor and vice president of Jones and Bartlett, who helped in the preparation of the manuscript;

to John A. Servideo for his care in attending to the details of the book's production;

to Paige Larkin for helping the book reach its intended audience;

to the following reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions:

Kathie C. Garbe, Youngstown State University;

Rose Ann Benson, George Mason University;

E.D. Wilkins, LeMoyne-Owen College;

Dorothy J. Downey, West Texas State University;

Scott E. Scobell, West Virginia State College;

Barbara P. Hamann, University of Wisconsin;

Danny J. Ballard, Texas A & M University;

to Dr. Cal Lathen of the University of Idaho for his support;

to the students at McDonald Elementary School, Moscow Idaho, for the chapter-opening drawings;

to our children, Michaelene, Nathan, Emily, and Christian, for their patience and understanding during the production of this book;

to our parents, Wallace, Barbara, and Dorothy, for their love and support and for their efforts in fostering our emotional well-being.

Contents

Preface x

Acknowledgments xi

Chapter 1	Enhancing Self-Esteem:	
	Curbing the Epidemic of Inferiority	1
	Self-Esteem: Foundation of Emotional Well-Being	5
	Determinants of Self-Esteem	6
	Physical Attractiveness	7
	Intelligence	10
	Enhancing Self-Esteem	10
	Accurate Self-Evaluation	10
	Increasing Self-Worth	12
	Chapter Summary	21
	Review Questions	21
	Resources for Teachers	22
	References	23
Chapter 2	Creating an Emotionally Healthy Classroom	25
	Expectations—The Pygmalion Effect	27
	Modeling a Healthy Personality	29
	Discipline	32
	Classroom Rules	32
	Teeter-Totter Syndrome	35
	Sensitivity to Multicultural Diversity	35
	Working with Special Children	41
	Children with Handicaps	41
	Children with Learning Disabilities	43
	Children with AIDS	45
	Chapter Summary	46
	Review Questions	46
	Resources for Teachers	47
	References	48

Chapter 3	Fostering Skills for Emotional Well-Being	51
	Interpersonal Relationship Skills	54
	Communication Skills	59
	Communication through Artwork	62
	Recognizing and Dealing with Emotions	66
	Setting Goals	72
	Solving Problems	75
	Chapter Summary	78
	Review Questions	78
	Resources for Teachers	79
	References	80
 Chapter 4	 Dealing with Stress	 81
	Stress in Children and Youth	84
	Stress and the Home Environment	85
	Marital Conflict between Parents	86
	Parental Separation and Divorce	86
	Latchkey Children	87
	Death of a Parent	87
	Dysfunctional Families	88
	Stress and the School Environment	89
	Managing Stress	90
	Exercise	92
	Rest and Sleep	93
	Relaxation	93
	Effective Coping	94
	Chapter Summary	94
	Review Questions	96
	Resources for Teachers	96
	References	97
 Chapter 5	 Understanding Eating and Weight Problems	 99
	Obesity	101
	Preschool Children	101
	School-Age Children	102
	Adolescents	103
	Eating Disorders	105
	Anorexia Nervosa	109
	Bulimia	110
	Hyperactivity	112
	School Performance	112
	School Lunch Program	113
	Promoting Healthy Eating and Body Image	
	in School Settings	116
	Chapter Summary	117

Review Questions	118
Resources for Teachers	118
References	121

Chapter 6	Dealing with Sexually Active Youth	123
	Sexual Activity of Teenagers	125
	Teen Pregnancy	126
	Consequences of Teenage Pregnancy	128
	Possible Solutions	128
	Preventing Sexual Activity	128
	Promoting Contraceptive Use	129
	School-Based Health Clinics	130
	Teen Parenthood Programs	131
	Sexually Transmitted Diseases	132
	AIDS	133
	AIDS Education	133
	Chlamydia	136
	Gonorrhea	136
	Syphilis	137
	Herpes	138
	Genital Warts	138
	Other Common Sexually Transmitted Diseases	139
	Sexuality Education	139
	Status of Sex Education in the United States	141
	Chapter Summary	142
	Review Questions	143
	Resources for Teachers	143
	References	146

Chapter 7	Dealing with Substance Abuse	149
	Effects of Substances on Youth	151
	Substance Abuse Prevention Education	152
	Information-Based Strategies	153
	Alternatives to Drugs	158
	Peer Pressure Resistance Strategies	158
	Personal and Social Skills Training Approaches	158
	Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring and Counseling Approaches	159
	Student Assistance Programs	159
	Parent Programs	160
	The Substance Abuse Curriculum	160
	Early Childhood Education	161
	Upper Elementary School	163
	Middle School and Junior High School	165
	High School	168
	Reaching the Entire Student Population	170

	Substance Abuse Problems	172
	Cigarette Smoking	172
	Smokeless Tobacco Use	175
	Alcohol	177
	Other Drugs of Concern	184
	Chapter Summary	195
	Review Questions	196
	Resources for Teachers	197
	References	200
Chapter 8	Dealing with Violence	205
	Factors Contributing to Violence	207
	Family Factors	207
	Substance Use	208
	Access to Weapons	208
	Personal and Peer Characteristics	209
	Preventing Violence	209
	Violence Prevention Project	209
	Other Violence Prevention Projects in Schools	210
	Child Abuse	213
	Child Sexual Abuse	214
	Rape	220
	Date Rape	227
	Chapter Summary	228
	Review Questions	229
	Resources for Teachers	229
	References	231
Chapter 9	Dealing with Depression and Suicidal Behavior	235
	Depression	237
	Depression in Children and Adolescents	237
	Assisting Young People Who Are Depressed	238
	Suicide	243
	Causes of Youth Suicide	245
	Warning Signs of Suicide	249
	Prevention and Intervention	251
	Chapter Summary	255
	Review Questions	256
	Resources for Teachers	256
	References	258
Chapter 10	Dealing with Death and Dying	261
	Children's Understanding about Death and Dying	265
	Preschool-Age Children	266
	Middle Childhood	266
	Adolescence	267

Childhood and Adolescent Bereavement	267
Death of a Parent	268
Death of a Sibling	270
Death of a Schoolmate	270
Death of a Pet	279
The Dying Child	279
Death Education	280
Chapter Summary	281
Review Questions	284
Resources for Teachers	284
References	286

Index	287
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Box 1-1

The following is a true story. It was written by J. E. Mizer (1964) and reprinted with permission. A movie of this story also exists and has the same title.

Cipher in the Snow

It started with tragedy on a biting cold February morning. I was driving behind the Milford Corners Bus as I did most snowy mornings on my way to school. It veered and stopped short at the hotel, which it had no business doing, and I was annoyed as I had to come to an unexpected stop. A boy lurched out of the bus, reeled, stumbled, and collapsed on the snowbank at the curb. The bus driver and I reached him at the same moment. His thin, hollow face was white, even against the snow.

"He's dead," the driver whispered.

It didn't register for a minute. I glanced quickly at the scared young faces staring down at us from the school bus. "A doctor! Quick! I'll phone from the hotel . . ."

"No use. I tell you he's dead." The driver looked down at the boy's still form. "He never even said he felt bad," he muttered, "just tapped me on the shoulder and said, real quiet, 'I'm sorry, I have to get off at the hotel.' That's all. Polite and apologizing like."

At school, the giggling, shuffling morning noise quieted as the news went down the halls. I passed a huddle of girls. "Who was it? Who dropped dead on the way to school?" I heard one of them half-whisper.

"Don't know his name; some kid from Milford Corners," was the reply.

It was like that in the faculty room and the principal's office. "I'd appreciate your going out to tell the parents," the principal told me. "They haven't a phone and, anyway, somebody from school should go there in person. I'll cover your classes."

"Why me?" I asked. "Wouldn't it be better if you did it?"

"I didn't know the boy," the principal admitted levelly. "And in last year's sophomore personalities column I note that you were listed as his favorite teacher."

I drove through the snow and cold down the bad canyon road to the Evans place and thought about the boy, Cliff Evans. *His favorite teacher!* I thought. *He hasn't spoken two words to me in two years!* I could see him in my mind's eye all right, sitting back there in the last seat in my afternoon literature class. He came in the room by himself and left by himself. "Cliff Evans," I muttered to myself, "a boy who never

talked." I thought a minute. "A boy who never smiled. I never saw him smile once."

The big ranch kitchen was clean and warm. I blurted out my news somehow. Mrs. Evans reached blindly toward a chair. "He never said anything about bein' ailin'."

His step-father snorted. "He ain't said nothin' about anything since I moved in here."

Mrs. Evans pushed a pan to the back of the stove and began to untie her apron. "Now hold on," her husband snapped. "I got to have breakfast before I go to town. Nothin' we can do now anyway. If Cliff hadn't been so dumb he'd have told us he didn't feel good."

After school I sat in the office and stared bleakly at the records spread out before me. I was to close the file and write the obituary for the school paper. The almost bare sheets mocked the effort. Cliff Evans, white, never legally adopted by step-father, five young half-brothers and sisters. These meager strands of information and the list of D grades were all the records had to offer.

Cliff Evans had silently come in the school door in the mornings and gone out the school door in the evenings, and that was all. He had never belonged to a club. He had never played on a team. He had never held an office. As far as I could tell he had never done one happy, noisy kid thing. He had never been anybody at all.

How do you go about making a boy into a zero? The grade school records showed me. The first- and second-grade teachers' annotations read "sweet, shy child", "timid but eager." Then the third-grade note had opened the attack. Some teacher had written in a good, firm hand, "Cliff won't talk. Uncooperative. Slow learner." The other academic sheep had followed with "dull"; "slow-witted"; "low I.Q." They became correct. The boy's I.Q. score in the ninth grade was listed at 83. But his I.Q. in the third grade had been 106. The score didn't go under 100 until the seventh grade. Even shy, timid, sweet children have resilience. It takes time to break them.

I stomped to the typewriter and wrote a savage report pointing out what education had done to Cliff Evans. I slapped a copy on the principal's desk and another in the sad, dog-eared file. I banged the typewriter and slammed the file and crashed the door shut, but I didn't feel much better. A little boy kept walking after me, a little boy with a peaked, pale face; a skinny body in faded jeans; and big eyes that had looked and searched for a long time and then had become veiled.

I could guess how many times he'd been chosen last to play sides in a game, how many whispered child conversations had excluded him, how many times he hadn't been asked. I could see and hear the faces and voices that said over and over, "You're dumb. You're a nothing, Cliff Evans."

A child is a believing creature. Cliff undoubtedly believed them. Suddenly it seemed clear to me: When finally there was nothing left at all for Cliff Evans, he collapsed on a snowbank and went away. The doctor might list "heart failure" as the cause of death, but that wouldn't change my mind.

We couldn't find ten students in the school who had known Cliff well enough to attend the funeral as his friends. So the student body officers and a committee from the junior class went as a group to the church, being politely sad. I attended the services with them, and sat through it with a lump of cold lead in my chest and a big resolve growing through me.

I've never forgotten Cliff Evans nor that resolve. He has been my challenge year after year, class after class. I look up and down the rows carefully each September at the unfamiliar faces. I look for veiled eyes or bodies scrounged into a seat in an alien world. "Look, kids," I say silently. "I may not do anything else for you this year, but not one of you is going to come out of here a nobody. I'll work or fight to the bitter end doing battle with society and the school board, but I won't have one of you coming out of here thinking himself into a zero."

Most of the time—not always, but most of the time—I've succeeded.

THE TEACHING PROFESSION is associated with many rewarding opportunities and challenges. Working with young people provides teachers numerous opportunities to positively influence the self-esteem of their students. In fact, between the ages of 6 and 17, children spend more time with their teachers than with their parents. The potential for positively influencing students is great, and so is the need.

Elementary- and secondary-level teachers are increasingly asked to provide training and assistance to children in an overwhelmingly wide variety of areas. In the past, teaching responsibilities were devoted primarily to the development of academic skills. Currently, however, the role of teachers is expanding. Now included on the "educational menu" are many personal, family, and societal problems facing children today. Thus, educators are being asked to assume greater responsibility and competency in promoting and maintaining the emotional well-being of the children in their classrooms.

Certainly, it is an unrealistic expectation to succeed in helping every "Cliff Evans" (see "Cipher in the Snow") that you encounter to feel better about herself or himself. However, there are countless young people who have been, and are yet to be, touched by a special teacher who makes a big difference in their lives. It has been our experience that most college students who major in education do so because they desire to be one of those special

teachers. The purpose of this book is to arm you with numerous strategies to enhance the self-esteem and emotional well-being of your students. Many of these strategies can be applied as teaching activities. In addition, there are many suggestions to assist you in creating school and classroom environments that foster self-esteem and emotional well-being. You will also learn critical information about a variety of specific conditions that you are likely to encounter as a teacher, conditions that threaten children's emotional well-being (e.g., eating disorders, substance abuse, depression, sexual abuse).

Self-Esteem: Foundation of Emotional Well-Being

Emotional well-being is one's ability to relate to other people, feel comfortable with self, cope with disappointments and stress, solve problems, celebrate successes, and make decisions. The foundation of emotional well-being is positive self-esteem (Pope, McHale, & Craighead 1988). Table 1-1 shows other characteristics of emotional well-being.

The literature on emotional well-being deals extensively with the terms *self-concept*, *self-image*, and *self-esteem*. Some authors use the three terms as synonyms, while others differentiate slightly among them. Generally, **self-image** and **self-concept** refer to the mental picture people have of themselves, including perceptions of physical and psychological traits, talents, shortcomings, roles, and labels. **Self-esteem** is the evaluative component of self-image, or the positive or negative manner in which a person judges herself or himself (Marshall 1989). The degree to which one evaluates oneself as competent, belonging, and worthwhile determines self-esteem.

The foundation of positive emotional well-being is self-esteem. This is supported by Branden (1988), who emphasizes the prominent role of self-esteem in emotional well-being:

Apart from problems that are biological in origin, I cannot think of a single psychological difficulty—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to underachievement at school or at work, to spouse battering or child molestation, to sexual dysfunctions or emotional immaturity, to suicide or crimes of violence—that is not traceable to poor self-esteem. Of all the judgments we pass, none is as important as the one we pass on ourselves. Positive self-esteem is a cardinal requirement of a fulfilling life. (P. 5)

Figure 1-1 illustrates the interrelationship between self-esteem and other characteristics of emotional well-being. Self-esteem forms the core of emotional well-being. Improving self-esteem enhances a child's sense of security and ability to solve problems. Conversely, a threatened sense of security (e.g., as a result of separation from parents) can lower a child's self-esteem. Also, children who have not developed appropriate problem-solving skills are likely to exhibit lowered self-esteem when confronted with difficulties. Table 1-2 lists behaviors associated with students who have high and low self-concepts.

Table 1-1 Characteristics of Emotional Well-Being

1. I feel comfortable with myself.
2. I am not overwhelmed by my emotions (fear, anger, love, jealousy, guilt, or worry.)
3. I can take life's disappointments.
4. I have a tolerant, easygoing attitude toward myself and others; I can laugh at myself.
5. I neither underestimate nor overestimate my abilities.
6. I can accept my shortcomings.
7. I have self-respect.
8. I feel able to deal with most situations that come my way.
9. I get satisfaction from simple, everyday pleasures.
10. I feel good about my relationships with other people.
11. I am able to give love and to consider the interests of others.
12. I have personal relationships that are satisfying and lasting.
13. I like and trust others and expect that others will like and trust me.
14. I respect differences I find in people.
15. I do not push people around or allow myself to be pushed around.
16. I feel that I am part of a group.
17. I feel a sense of responsibility to my neighbors and other persons with whom I come in contact.
18. I am able to meet the demands of my life.
19. I do something about my problems as they arise.
20. I accept my responsibilities.
21. I shape my environment whenever possible; I adjust to it whenever necessary.
22. I plan ahead but do not fear the future.
23. I welcome new experiences and new ideas.
24. I make use of my natural capacities.
25. I set realistic goals for myself.
26. I am able to think for myself and make my own decisions.
27. I put my best effort into what I do and get satisfaction out of doing it.

Source: National Mental Health Association. Revised 1988. *Mental health is 1, 2, 3*. Washington, DC.

Determinants of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a product of what we perceive ourselves to be (**self-image**), how we want to be (**ideal-self**), and the expectations that we perceive others have for us (**pygmalion-self**). Our senses of **competency**, **worthiness**, and **belonging** are formed by the combination of these three "selves."

The foundations of self-esteem are established in early childhood, primarily through interactions with parents and other family members. Positive comments such as, "Brittany, you are so smart!" and recognition of achievements, such as learning to tie one's shoes, contribute to a child's sense of competency and worth. The combination of such comments, interactions, and achievements positively shape a child's self-perception (Harter 1983).