

# Exploring Empathy Through Physical Activity

## Overview

Empathy is the heart of a nurturing and supportive environment. Helping children identify their own feelings helps them to recognize and respect the feelings of others. This in turn supports better communication and conflict resolution and build relationships rooted in trust. Increased social awareness and self-regulation builds a sense of community and create a positive classroom culture. Get your students up and out of their seats for a fun physical activity break that also helps them strengthen their social emotional skills.

## Take Action

Circle time, no matter the age group, is an opportunity for children to socialize and further develop their social emotional learning skills. This practice create a space where students feel empowered to listen and share, build relationships with peers and identify how to appropriately express themselves and relate to others. Circle up and start the day or take a mid-day break with one of these activities and explore empathy through physical activity.

### In My Shoes

- Have everyone form a circle, facing the middle, and begin with one person (the teacher or a student) in the middle.
- Invite everyone to take their shoes off and place them in front of them. The person in the middle can place their shoes off to the side.



- The person in the middle of the circle will share something about themselves or about how they feel. Everyone who also shares in that feeling or similarity, including the person in the middle, will run and stand behind a different set of shoes - but not either pair next to them. Each time, one person will be left in the middle and will repeat the activity. Continue until all children have had an opportunity to share.
- You can create a list of prompts ahead of time or allow students to share their own based on a theme. Start out with some get know you prompts such as "I have siblings" or "My favorite fruit is mango" then begin to explore feelings or acts of kindness. Some examples:
  - *I feel happy today because I get to see all of my friends.*
  - *I feel nervous today because of an upcoming test.*
  - *I talked with a friend about how I was feeling.*

Talk with students about the similarities and differences they share with their fellow classmates. Discuss the importance of recognizing others experiences and emotions and explore ways to connect and build healthy conversations.

## Feelings Charades

- Have everyone form a circle and face the middle.
- Create a list of feelings or [use a feelings wheel](#) to explore the eight basic feelings and emotions or responses associated with them.
- Ask students not to share the feeling they select with the rest of their classmates.
- One by one, invite students to select a feeling and keep it a secret from the rest of their classmates.
- Have students model the feeling or emotion through body language that it might reflect. Encourage students to keep guessing, acknowledging that it may take a few tries or might not be guessed at all.
  - Remind students to keep an eye out of clues that might indicate what feeling is being acted out.
  - Reiterate that everyone shows emotions differently, in their own way, and sometimes it's harder to figure out how someone is feeling than

others. Our feelings may present differently on the outside than how it feels on the inside.

Dive deeper with a conversation around different situations associated with each feeling and strategies for managing ones that are more challenging.

Find more playful ideas for exploring empathy, social emotional skills and more in the free downloadable [Playworks Social Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Game Guide](#).

## Social Emotional Health Highlights

Activities such as these help children explore...

- **Self Awareness and Self Management:** Discussing emotions and feelings on a regular basis helps children to recognize their feelings, both positive and negative. Creating opportunities for children to recognize and understand the wide range of feelings supports them in managing and controlling how those feelings translate into positive behaviors.
- **Social Awareness and Responsible Decision Making:** Teaching interconnectedness helps children understand their impact on others and vice versa. When children are in tune with one another they are able to see multiple perspectives of the same experience and recognize how different feelings impact people differently. This supports them in becoming more aware of the relationships around them and make responsible decisions when managing conflict.

### Tips



Get in the routine of doing a daily check-in with students. Create a space where students feel safe to share their emotions as they need.



Be aware that children express emotions differently and some may not want to share how they are feeling and that is okay. [Offer opportunities in the classroom](#) for children to decompress or self-select activities that support

emotional regulation.



Engage parents in the social emotional learning. Share with them the activities or lessons happening in the classroom and offer tips for replicating or continuing the learning at home. Better yet - integrate mindful practices into parent teacher conferences or other events so everyone can participate together.



Connect with your community and explore opportunities for local instructors to teach a creative movement or yoga session. Take pictures of students learning different poses and create easy flash cards students can take home and practice with their families.

For more activities and ideas like this one, be sure to [sign up for our news and updates](#). And if you like what you see, please [donate to support our work](#) creating more ways to help build a healthier future for kids.

## Resources

[CASEL: Schools, Families and Social Emotional Learning - Ideas for Working with Parents and Families](#)

[The Teachers Guild: Empathy in Your Classroom](#)

[Action for Healthy Kids: Making the Connection - SEL and Physical Activity](#)

[CASEL: SEL for Parents Video \(English\)](#)

[CASEL: SEL for Parents Video \(Spanish\)](#)

## Related Activities

### **Yoga for Children**

It's often assumed that one must already be flexible and physically fit to participate in yoga. One of the many great aspects of yoga is that it can be modified to fit the age, goals and abilities of almost anyone.

### **Sensory Play**

Help kids get in touch with their senses by facilitating sensory play using interesting materials to create tactile and visual experiences.

### **Easy, On-the-Go Play Activities**

Turn travel time—whether on foot or in the car—into playtime using these fun, imaginative activities!

### **Active Sensory Spaces**

Use colorful and playful sensory hallways to turn a passive environment into an active one.