

# insights

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## Promoting Emotional Awareness to Prevent Anxiety and Depression in Youth

**A growing body of research supports the link between deficits in emotion regulation and a number of mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. One aspect of emotion regulation is emotional awareness, that is, the ability to recognize, label, and express one's own internal experiences. Given the role that low emotional awareness appears to play in the development of mental health disorders, it may be useful to specifically target this skill to promote the mental well-being and academic success of children and adolescents.**

A group of psychologists at Rutgers University designed a longitudinal study to determine if low emotional awareness could predict the development of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents. Two hundred and four New Jersey students, ages 7-16, completed an Emotional Expression Scale (EESC) at the beginning of the study, as well as anxiety and depression inventories every three months for one year thereafter. The researchers found that low emotional awareness in students predicted both depression and anxiety symptoms that held steady across the 1-year measurement period. Based on these results, they concluded that emotional awareness training may be a beneficial component of both treatment and prevention-oriented programs to reduce the negative outcomes associated with childhood depression and anxiety.

Principle 15 of the American Psychological Association's Top 20 Principles from Psychology for PreK-12 Teaching and Learning is that "emotional well-being influences educational performance, learning, and development." With some relatively simple interventions, teachers can play a key role in fostering emotional awareness, and thus provide students with the skills that can make them less vulnerable to mental health symptoms. Even students from the most disorganized and unsupportive home and/or community environments can thrive within a classroom climate where they feel accepted, valued, and respected, and experience positive social relationships with both adults and peers.

APA's "Top 20" document provides a variety of suggestions for teachers who want to facilitate emotional awareness in their students:

- Use emotional vocabulary—for example, facilitate student labeling of emotions (e.g., happy, sad, fearful, angry) throughout the day. "Feeling Wheels" that provide an extensive emotional vocabulary are readily available on the internet and can be prominently displayed in the classroom. The most popular feeling wheel was developed by Dr. Gloria Willcox.
- Model appropriate emotional expression by labeling and sharing one's own emotional reactions to events and situations. Emphasize that most situations tend to trigger multiple feelings, even seemingly opposite ones ("I am sad and disappointed that our team lost the game, and I am happy that I hit a home run").
- Teach emotion regulation strategies, such as paced breathing (inhale for 5 seconds, exhale for 7 seconds; repeat for 5 or 6 breaths).
- Promote emotional understanding of others by encouraging students to identify how another person might be feeling in response to an event or situation. ■

### Reference:

Kranzler, A., Young, J. F., Hankin, B. L., Abela, J. R. Z., Elias, M., & Selby, E. A. (2015). Emotional Awareness: A Transdiagnostic Predictor of Depression and Anxiety for Children and Adolescents, *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*.

American Psychological Association, Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education. (2015). *Top 20 principles from psychology or preK-12 teaching and learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ed/schools/cpse/top-twenty-principles.pdf>.

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