



Emotions Rooms: a safe place for children to express their emotions freely within a school setting

*Written by Charles Lefebvre and Eva de Gosztonyi – December 2021
Translated from the French by Nathalie Malo*

Contextualization

Emotions are rather a tough concept to describe and comprehend. What are their purpose? In which manners do they arise? How do they come into effect by means of our behaviours? How can we understand their meaning, their functions and mainly, how can we handle them?

These questions raise even more issues in a school environment where thousands of children and adults interact daily through human relationships that are tainted with vulnerability, and specifically, in an educational setting where the learning of cognitive, socio-emotional and affective skills is at stake in the midst of major ministerial directions (educate, qualify and socialize). It is generally understood that a school is an environment where emotional outbursts do occur regularly and where emotions sometimes exude themselves so intensely that they can disrupt the school atmosphere as well as disturb the learning conditions of its recipients. Furthermore, the comprehension of behavioural and emotional difficulties, the interventions framework selected with respect to incivilities and the intervention approaches that are advocated (which may contrast tremendously, from reparative, supportive and educational, to sometimes coercitives measures) will differ in accordance with the school involved.

Given the significant experience we have accumulated over the years of working with students in vulnerable settings due to their recurrent emotional outbursts, and as observers of the excessive use of certain interventions that did not seem to help them with their distress, we decided to consider a different way of “understanding” their behaviour and of addressing their distinct needs. Hence, this how the Emotions Room came to life.

Comprehending in order to better intervene: a touch of theory

We have based ourselves on the developmental theoretical paradigm of Dr. Gordon Neufeld ¹, a prominent developmental psychologist, whose theory is supported by more than 40 years of research and practice, including several disciplines that comprise neuroscience, developmental and depth psychology as well as attachment science, so as to obtain a better understanding of the emotions and their mechanisms. According to his developmental model, emotions represent an irrational energy that sets us in motion, that emerges, and whose function is to “move us towards what will help us” in order to enable us to survive. In reality, an emotion aims to be an action potential that must be expressed, and which is orchestrated by the brain’s limbic system. Alike, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio ² reveals that it is crucial to reconsider our way of conceiving the human being and his emotions. In his book, *Descartes’ Error*, he explicitly describes the primary role of emotions in regards to reflection, decision

making, citizenship and human relations. Similarly, Dr. Catherine Gueguen ³, pediatrician, author and internationally known speaker, equally demonstrates the relevance of the role of emotions in her book, “*Heureux d’apprendre à l’école*”, by discussing, among other things, the fact that the areas assigned to emotions and affectivity are in continuous relationship with the cognitive regions devoted to intellectual functions.

Dr. Neufeld’s emotional model ⁴

As stated in Dr. Neufeld’s developmental model, there are significant emotional stages within the human development that are essential for allowing the brain to evolve and mature to its fullest. It is important to mention that these stages are concurrent, i.e. one step will not be realized if the step that precedes it has not been developed beforehand (see Figure 1).



The first step involves being able to “**express**” our emotions during childhood, within a context of a secure and supportive attachment, which enables us to make the transition from “physical” to “verbal” expression once language has been acquired. When children are at least 2 years old, they may be led to “**name**” their emotion (e.g., say they are “frustrated” rather than throwing everything). Once the emotion is verbalized, the caring adult encourages the child to “**feel**” it whilst consciously experiencing it, namely by identifying the physiological manifestations and by associating the physical experience with a word, and that, even when this experience is vulnerable. As an example, we can witness a child who names being “frustrated” without feeling any frustration while naming it. For an emotion to become a conscious, we must give it space to grow into a feeling.

The developmental theory also states that the human brain gains maturity by feeling emotions. Indeed, a child that is aged between 5 to 7 years old, while the prefrontal cortex is developing, is able to feel two emotions simultaneously. As a result, the emotions can “**mix**” and they can become progressively tempered, and therefore, the integrative process ⁵ will occur later. Eventually, the human being can resort to his advanced prefrontal skills so as to “**think**” about his emotions and by being able to take a step back.

Figure 1. The Five Steps to Emotional Health and Maturity

From theory to practice

The Emotions Room is a space, usually small in size, that helps lead the child to express, name, feel and mix their emotions, no matter what they are. As expressing emotions in the presence of many people can be a vulnerable experience (whether in

the classroom, hallways, schoolyard, etc.), the Emotions Room allows the child to cultivate a relationship with their emotions in a safe place with an accompanying adult to help them throughout the emotional process. However, before using such a room in a school, some essential requirements must be established. Here are some of the recommendations before using it:

- 1- The principal must be actively involved in its development.
- 2- The school staff must have been coached on the use of this room and must adhere to its intended purpose.
- 3- The caregivers who will accompany the students in the room must have received appropriate training related to the emotional and developmental approach. It is advisable to proceed with the sensitization of the overall school personnel as well around the philosophy and the use of the space.
- 4- A budget for the development of the room must be established.
- 5- Access to the room must be easy while remaining separate from the classrooms, in order to preserve the dignity of its user.

How to use the room

It is important to specify that the room must be utilized by only one student at a time. Prior to its use, the equipment and the manner in which it is to be used must be modelled in conjunction with the student's emotional readiness. As well, an adult is constantly present with the child during the intervention, which will vary depending on the student's emotional intensity. While each child is different, it must be taken into account that their natural disposition will also be different. Thus, the nature of the adult's role is to find the expressive medium(s) that match the student's particular needs. The goal of the Emotions Room is not to teach the child to calm down or control their emotions, but rather to help them build a relationship with their emotions so that they will eventually be able to express them in a way that is more socially acceptable. In order to do this, there are crucial steps to consider.

Firstly, it is necessary to consider the use of the Emotions Room as an intervention process and not as an educational intervention. For this reason, on one hand, the Emotions Room is used to express the child's frustrations and on the other hand, it allows the child to elaborate ideas as well as intentions of emotional eruptions that are non-violent. However, it is not simply a place where the child can externalize their emotions, but also a space where the adult accompanies the child to feel them, name them and eventually tone them down.

Secondly, this process must move from the "I evacuate my emotions" phase to the next phase where the adult inspires the student to feel the sadness that overwhelms them. But sometimes, in the field of intervention, we try to rationalize the emotional process (why did you do that?) or we attempt to look for "solutions" too prematurely. Among other things, sadness must be felt since it is what leads towards resilience and allows the child to see the components of a situation differently. As such, the Emotions Room enables the child to "tolerate" the vulnerability of emotions rather than "resist" them. The Emotions Room then invites the child to express their emotions while the adult accompanies the child in their expression, identification, normalization and listening, in order to finally encourage the child to create an enriched emotional landscape that will in

turn allow them to acquire civility, a capacity for empathy and an adaptive self-control to the various problematic situations they will be confronted with throughout their human experience. Nevertheless, this process can be tedious and time consuming because the more vulnerable an emotion is, the more difficult it will be for the brain to temper it.

Conclusion

In recent years, some schools in Quebec and also across Canada have experimented with the Emotions Room, as discussed in this article. You will find below a few testimonials regarding its use:

"The establishment of the Emotions Room in our schools has resulted in a noticeable decrease in disorganized episodes involving damage of property and/or hitting peers, as well as a rare use of extraordinary measures such as "physical restraint". Furthermore, most students now have acquired the habit of walking out of their classrooms by themselves and heading towards these rooms. It is much easier, safer and effective to intervene with the student within this environmental and clinical structure that encourages emotional discharge, before endangering their self-image with their peers and their adult attachment figures." (Anne-Marie Lefrançois, Psychoeducator, Centre de Service Scolaire du Pays-des-Bleuets).

"We are currently in our third year of using the Emotions Room, which we call the Bubble, and our experience is most beneficial. The room allows caregivers to take preventive action and it provides them with a safe place to properly guide children through the development of emotional expression by means of individualized interventions. The Bubble serves as a reference point for children experiencing emotional difficulties." (Claudia Simard, Psychoeducator, Centre de Service Scolaire du Pays-des-Bleuets).

"We have had a safe eruption room (Emotions Room) in our school for the past three and a half years. Prior to creating this space, we had students knocking over desks or destroying a classroom. Dealing with a student's unhealthy frustration in this safe space has allowed for the expression of frustration without the need to impose consequences after the fact... We have worked very hard to help our students find their way to the safe space when they feel, or when their teachers see, their frustration building. Most students now access this space autonomously and they find which outlet to use for their frustration. For numerous students, we have noticed a significant decrease in the frequency and severity of their eruptions." (Jackie Hann, Teacher, Stephe Woima Elementary School, Chinooks Edge School Division #73, Sylvan Lake, Alberta)

In light of the 30% of children who exhibit relationship traumas and the 20% who are polytraumatized in our schools ⁶, the use of interventions whose goal is to "correct" the behaviour in a coercive manner has the effect of rendering the child insensitive, stiffening their behaviour, diminishing their capacity for empathy, and catapulting them towards a trajectory of antisocial conducts (aggression, drug use, and thefts ⁷). In the same vein, trying to get the child to "calm down" too quickly alters the primary role and nature of the emotions in development. Consequently, welcoming and accompanying the child to be able to express, name and feel their emotions within a "quiet place", referred to as the "Emotions Room", appears to be a promising path.

For more information, visit this website: <https://www.cebm.ca/emotions-room>

Key words: room, emotion, developmental, implementation, school

References

- 1- Neufeld, G., Maté, G. (2004). *Hold On To Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers*. Random House Publishing Group.
- 2- Damasio, R. A. (2010). *Descartes' Error*. Fourth Edition. Penguin Books.
- 3- Gueguen, K. (2018). *Heureux d'apprendre à l'école. Comment les neurosciences affectives et sociales peuvent changer l'éducation*. Les arènes . Robert Laffont.
- 4- Neufeld, G. Heart Matters: The Science of Emotion, on-line course (Neufeld Institute 2013: <https://neufeldinstitute.org/course/science-of-emotion/>).
- 5- White, Sheldon. « Evidence for a hierarchical arrangement of learning processes ». *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, vol.2, 1965, p.187-220.
- 6- Collin-Vézina, D., Milot, T., Godbout, N. (2018). *Trauma Complexe – Comprendre, évaluer et intervenir*. Presse de l'Université du Québec.
- 7- Waller, R. et al. (2013). *What are the associations between parenting, callous-unemotional traits, and antisocial behavior in youth? A systematic review of evidence*". *Clinical Psychology Review*, vol.33, #4, p.593-608.

Authors: Charles Lefebvre, M.Sc. – Psychoeducator – Services Régionaux de Soutien et d'Expertise pour les élèves en trouble du comportement, Lac St-Jean Region / Eva de Gosztanyi, Psychologist, Coordinator of the Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management, all Quebec English School Boards.

The original article was published in « Coup de cœur des régions » of the FOUCAD magazine Vol. 22, no 1, December 2021, an annual publication of the CQJDC.