

3.8 EMPATHY

3.8.1 Empathy Circle of Stories

Brief description, and rules of the implementation of the learning activity

This activity is designed to help children explore emotions through storytelling and practice empathy by listening and responding with care. Children sit in a circle and share real or imagined stories about times they felt certain emotions, while the rest of the group practices listening and responding empathetically. This activity develops empathy through shared storytelling in a respectful listening environment. Children take turns sharing short personal stories related to an emotional prompt, while others listen attentively and then reflect on the feelings involved.

Skill focus

- **Primary Skill Focus**
 - Empathy
- **Complementary/Secondary Skill Focus**
 - Emotional awareness, regulation and communication
 - Curiosity, sense of wonder and openness
 - Valuing people and nature

Age group	Student number	Duration
6-10 years old	8-20	30-40 minutes

Proposed step by step implementation of the learning activity

This activity is designed to help children explore emotions through storytelling and practice empathy by listening and responding with care.

1. **Preparation by the teacher:** The teacher chooses one core emotion to focus on for the session — for example: fear, joy, sadness, anger, or pride. This emotion will guide the stories shared and the responses practiced. The teacher introduces the session by saying something like:

“Today we’re going to focus on one emotion and tell real stories about when we felt that way. After each story, we’ll practice listening with care and showing that we understand and support each other.”
2. **Setting the tone:** To create a safe and respectful atmosphere, the teacher reminds the class of a few key rules:
 - One person speaks at a time.
 - We listen with full attention.
 - No teasing or judgment.
 - It’s okay to pass if someone doesn’t want to share.

3. **Sharing stories (individual turn):** One child volunteers (or is gently invited) to tell a short true story about a time they felt the chosen emotion. For example: “I felt scared when I got lost in the supermarket for a moment and couldn’t find my dad.” The teacher or another child can help by gently prompting: “What happened next?” “Where did you feel the emotion in your body?” “What did you do about it?”

4. **Practicing empathetic responses (group activity)**

After the story, the group practices empathetic reactions by responding with:

- A caring question, like: “How did that make you feel?”
- A supportive comment, like: “That must have been really hard. I would’ve felt scared too.”
- A personal connection, like: “Something similar happened to me when...”

The teacher models these types of responses if needed and encourages others to try.

5. **Rotating speakers:** The activity continues with 2–4 more children, depending on the time and group size. Each child shares a story, and the group responds empathetically. If some children prefer not to speak, they can still participate in the response part.
6. **Group reflection and wrap-up:** At the end, the class reflects together:
 - “What did it feel like to share something personal?”
 - “What helped you feel understood?”
 - “How can we use this kind of listening in other parts of our day?”

Indoor/Outdoor Classroom layout notes

Indoor: children sit in a circle on the carpet or on chairs arranged equidistantly to encourage a sense of equality and attention.

Outdoor: gather under a tree or in a quiet garden corner; sit in a circle on blankets or mats. Make sure the environment is calm and distraction-free to support deep listening.

How does this learning activity develop this particular skill?

This activity develops empathy through shared storytelling in a respectful listening environment. Children take turns sharing short personal stories related to an emotional prompt, while others listen attentively and then reflect on the feelings involved.

The activity supports:

- Deep listening without judgment or interruption,
- Recognition of shared emotional experiences,
- Emotional resonance and perspective-taking.

The circle format emphasizes equity and belonging. Each voice matters, and each emotion is welcomed. This builds group trust and nurtures the ability to imagine others’ internal experiences.

What do we want to achieve regarding primary skill development (student understanding and/or behaviour)?

As a result of this activity, students will:

- have developed emotional vocabulary
- be able to actively listen and understand their classmates
- have better empathy by connecting personal experiences with others' feelings
- be able to use emotional expression in a safe space

Suggested use, and practical subject-related examples

This activity works best during quiet moments of the day, such as after break or at the end of the morning, when children are more open to reflection. It can be used weekly to build emotional vocabulary and peer connection, or more occasionally to explore a theme (e.g., “feeling left out”, “celebrating others”, “handling frustration”).

For example, a teacher might open with:

“Today we’re talking about times when we felt really proud. Who has a story to share?”

A child may say: *“I felt proud when I helped my brother tie his shoes.”*

Another may add: *“I felt proud when I read aloud even though I was nervous.”*

This invites empathy and recognition of everyday courage.

Over time, students begin to listen more attentively, ask thoughtful questions (“How did that make you feel?”), and relate their experiences to others. The activity creates a safe emotional culture where children learn that emotions are shared, and that listening is a powerful way to care.

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Emotion cards to select the focus emotion
- Optional talking object (like a soft ball) to pass around

Guiding questions

- How did it feel to tell your story?
- How did it feel to hear someone else’s story?
- What does it mean to really listen with empathy?
- How can we show our friends we care?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with challenges

- **Challenge:** Some children might feel shy or uncomfortable sharing personal stories, especially if they’re not used to talking about emotions.

Tip: To encourage participation, the teacher should model the process first by telling a simple, honest story of their own — showing vulnerability, using clear language to describe feelings, and even admitting uncertainty or fear. This sets the tone and shows that it’s safe to open up.

- **Challenge:** Other children might react impulsively or dismissively, especially if they don't yet have strong listening skills.

Tip: That's why it's important to establish clear group norms at the start: all stories are valid, there are no right or wrong emotions, and everyone deserves to be listened to with attention and care. The teacher can remind children what active listening looks like (facing the speaker, not interrupting, reacting kindly) and gently intervene when necessary to redirect unhelpful behaviour.

- **Challenge:** In some cases, children might not know how to respond empathetically.

Tip: The teacher can offer sentence starters such as:

- "That sounds really..."
- "I can imagine feeling..."
- "Thanks for sharing that..."

This scaffolding helps children develop emotional vocabulary and respectful ways of connecting with others. Finally, allowing opt-out options (like "you can just listen today") ensures that children feel in control of how much they share, while still benefiting from hearing others.

Difficulty level tailoring

Teachers can adapt the activity to three difficulty levels based on students' ability and learning needs:

- **Beginner learner (6-7 years old):** the teacher can invite students to draw the emotion instead of just telling a story.
- **Advanced learners (8-9 years old):** students can describe not only how they felt but what someone else did to help them.
- **Experts (9-10 years old):** you can introduce partner story exchanges before sharing with the whole group.

Debriefing and Reflection questions

- What helped you feel safe when sharing your story?
- What did you notice in your body while listening to someone else?
- Did you feel connected to someone else's experience today?
- How did it feel when someone showed they understood you?
- What makes a good listener in your opinion?