

3.5.2 Sadness Eater

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

The Sadness Eater is a decorated box that “swallows” or “devours” problems and worries. Children write down their troubles (whether real or perceived grievances) on a piece of paper and anonymously place it into the mouth of the Sadness Eater, thereby helping to reduce emotional burdens. The box is emptied regularly, and the class attempts to find solutions to the written problems. It is recommended to do this either at the end of each school day or on the last day of the week. This activity is not subject-specific and is designed to support group cohesion.

Skill focus

- **Primary Skill Focus**
 - Resilience
- **Complementary/Secondary Skill Focus**
 - Emotional awareness (emotional regulation and communication)
 - Empathy
 - Flexibility
 - Connectedness

Age group	Student number	Duration
9 + years old	class size	variable

Proposed step by step implementation of the learning activity

1. A non-decorated box (the Sadness Eater) is introduced to the group before its first use, with an explanation of its purpose and function. It is then decorated together with the children.
2. In the case of regular use:
3. Children are invited to write down their worries, concerns, or perceived problems on a piece of paper.
4. The written notes are placed into the Sadness Eater through its opening, symbolically representing the act of releasing emotional burdens.
5. At predetermined intervals, the Sadness Eater is opened, and the collected notes are read aloud to the group.
6. The teacher reads the notes anonymously and asks the children to try to imagine how the owner of each worry might feel (emotion cards can be used to support this process).
7. A few children are invited to share what they thought or felt during this activity.
8. After empathizing with the anonymous owner of the worries, the children discuss the identified problems and, where appropriate, jointly explore possible solutions or coping strategies.
9. The activity is repeated regularly, either at the end of each school day or on a weekly basis, depending on the needs of the group.

10. If the teacher considers a worry to be serious, an individual meeting with the concerned student can take place at the end of the activity.

Indoor/Outdoor Classroom layout notes

- The collection and processing of information can take place either indoors or outdoors.
- The Sadness Eater box is located in the classroom.
- The activity does not require any rearrangement of the classroom.

How does this learning activity develop this particular skill?

This activity develops students' resilience by:

- supporting the recognition and expression of emotions,
- providing a safe and anonymous way to express tensions and grievances,
- offering relief through writing down and releasing problems,
- creating regular opportunities for emotional release - emotional regulation and communication; self-control
- strengthen the children's belief that they are not alone with their problems and that it is possible to ask for and receive help,
- encouraging community support and the development of empathy,
- promoting collective reflection and problem-solving, planning the alternative ways of recover from difficulties.
- contributes to the development of emotional security, self-confidence, self-belief, and optimism.

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

As the result of completing this task, students will:

- be able to recognize and put into words their own emotions and difficulties,
- understand that problems do not have to be kept inside and can be shared, and help can be asked for and received
- recognise that they are not alone with their feelings and that others face similar situations,
- be able to gain experience in finding solutions to problems,
- be able to use of positive coping strategies,
- become more empathetic toward their peers' problems, thereby strengthening the sense of community.

Suggested use, and practical subject-related examples

- The activity can be used at any time, if necessary (e.g., in stressful school situations, in cases of emotional stress/conflict between groups or individuals), based on the teacher's decision, or in higher grades, based on the children's request.
- In addition, the notes placed in the box must be checked regularly (e.g., weekly).
- In the event of a specific problem, when a child turns directly to the teacher for help, the child should be asked during the discussion whether they want us to use the Sadness Eater box.

Materials and tools needed for implementation

Paper, a collaboratively decorated box, and writing tools.

The box should resemble a funny monster that can “devour” worries. It should have a slot where papers can be inserted, and a lid or opening that can be unlocked by the teacher to remove the papers.

Guiding questions

- How did it feel to write down what was bothering you?
- Do you think others might feel the same way?
- What can be done in situations like this?
- Who could you talk to if something similar happened to you?
- What advice would you give to someone who wrote the same thing in the Sadness Eater?
- What do you think makes a situation like this better?
- What has helped you before in similar situations?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with challenges

- **Challenge:** Children do not always fully understand the purpose of the Sadness Eater box.
Tip: Before using it, it is important to clearly explain the goal of the activity, and if possible, involve the children in making the box so they feel more ownership of it.
- **Challenge:** Due to initial enthusiasm, small, everyday problems may also be placed in the box (e.g., “I’m upset with X.Y. because they ate at my desk”).
Tip: It is acceptable for minor concerns to appear at first; over time, children will learn what truly belongs in the Sadness Eater.
- **Challenge:** The Sadness Eater only works well in groups where there are sufficient trust and familiarity among the children.
Tip: It is recommended to use it only with groups that are well known and where time is dedicated to building trust.
- **Challenge:** Placing the box can be challenging if it is not put in a suitable location.
Tip: Choose a place where children can easily access it, but the teacher can also monitor it to prevent unauthorized opening.
- **Challenge:** Some problems may be too serious for the teacher to handle alone.
Tip: It is important to have a clear protocol in place for when and how to involve professional support.

Difficulty level tailoring

The activity can be adapted flexibly according to the age, maturity, and emotional security of the student group. For younger or less verbal children, expressing the problem through drawing or a single word may be sufficient, while students with more developed emotional expression skills can articulate their feelings and thoughts in greater detail.

The teacher can also decide whether the discussion of problems happens openly or rather in a feedback-supportive manner—for example, by formulating general suggestions for solutions. The guiding questions and the way of processing can be simplified or deepened according to the group’s needs.

It is important that children feel safe and that no one feels forced to self-disclose—this is especially crucial for developing resilience.

Beginners (6-7 years old): – Learners with low resilience

The aim of the activity: to help children safely express their feelings, recognize simple worries, and reduce emotional tension.

- The teacher provides simple, concrete examples of what kinds of problems can be written in short sentences.
- Pre-prepared sheets with pictures can be used, which children only need to select or minimally complete.
- The teacher supports participation with encouraging feedback, without evaluating the content of the problems immediately.
- Children place the sheets anonymously into the Sadness Eater, and the problems are only addressed at the end of the designated period.
- The activity helps children recognize their emotions, reduces internal tension, and strengthens their sense of safety, which is a foundation for emotional resilience.

Advanced learners (8-9 years old): – Learners with moderate resilience

The aim of the activity: to practice independent emotion recognition and problem expression, and to strengthen safe participation in the group and problem-solving skills.

- Children write about their feelings and problems based on their own experiences, with the teacher offering encouraging questions only when needed (“What made today difficult?”).
- Sheets are placed independently into the Sadness Eater, learning that there is a safe place for their emotions.
- The teacher gives feedback supporting participation and the process (“It’s good that you shared what’s on your mind.”).
- Processing occurs at the end of the period, when the group can reflect together on the problems and possible solutions.
- The activity helps children independently recognize their emotions, practice emotional self-regulation, and develop a flexible, constructive approach to problems.

Experts (9–10 years old): – Learners with high resilience

The aim of the activity: to develop conscious emotional awareness, independent problem recognition, social support skills, and constructive problem-solving.

- Children can write about more complex or longer-term problems and reflect on possible solutions.
- Sheets are placed completely independently into the Sadness Eater, and if needed, children can support their peers in participating and expressing themselves.
- The teacher provides feedback that highlights awareness of participation and supports the process (“It’s valuable that you pay attention to your feelings and share them with others.”).
- Processing occurs at the end of the period, when the group explores solutions and reflects on the experiences.
- The activity develops children’s conscious self-regulation, emotional awareness, problem-solving skills, and strengthens their capacity to provide social support.

Debriefing and Reflection questions

- How did you find this activity?
- What was the easiest part? What was the hardest part?
- How did it feel to hear others' thoughts?
- Did you learn anything new about yourself or others?
- How did your mood change by the end of the activity?
- What will you take away from this session?
- What would you do differently next time?
- Did the person who wrote the problem receive helpful advice?

Once the children are familiar with and regularly use the tool, the following questions can be asked:

- Has anyone followed the advice given? Were they able to solve the problem?
- Have you been able to help someone else with an issue you previously needed help with?