4.4 Emotion Builders

This 2-hour STEAM program for 2nd-grade students uses building materials to turn abstract feelings into visible, physical structures. Through sketching and construction, children learn basic engineering principles like balance and symmetry to represent different moods. The project develops emotional awareness and empathy as students share personal stories and listen to their peers' experiences. Working in small groups strengthens flexibility and problem-solving, as teams must adapt their designs to work with recycled materials. The activity concludes with presentations and reflection, helping students build confidence in communicating complex emotions through art and design.

Basic Information Sheet

Age group	Student number	Duration	Number of stages	Subjects connection and relevance
2nd grade students	Whole class Groups of 3–4 students	minimum 2 hours	7 stages	Science, Art, Engineering

STEAM Event Summary

This session fosters a safe and accepting classroom environment, empowering children to translate feelings that are hard to describe with words into visual shapes and colours. Educators guide students through a design thinking process, taking them from identifying emotions and sketching to the actual physical construction. This project is highly recommended for teachers because the creative process allows even those students who struggle with verbal communication to express themselves confidently and without anxiety. Meanwhile, as children test their resilience by working with imperfect, recycled materials, they naturally learn to listen without judgment and accept the diverse emotional experiences of their peers.

SPIRIT Skill Focus

- Flexibility
- Creativity
- Emotional awareness, regulation and communication
- Empathy

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National curriculum Link and Objectives

- Learn basic engineering principles (balance, symmetry, design).
- Practice observation and problem-solving while building

Real-world STEAM Connection and Problem definition

In everyday life, emotions are expressed not only through words but also through gestures, objects, colours, and forms. For example, children often struggle to express their feelings verbally, but they might build a messy room when feeling chaotic, or a tall tower when excited. This activity transforms that intuitive language into a shared, conscious process. The challenge: “Can we build something that represents how we feel?” arises from their lived experience and gives them the tools to make emotions visible and discussable.

Materials at a Glance

- Wooden blocks, LEGO, magnetic tiles, or recycled materials (cardboard, tubes, bottle caps)
- Colourful paper or fabric strips
- Basic drawing tools (markers, crayons)
- Emotion cards or face icons
- Tape and glue

Indoor/Outdoor and Classroom layout

Indoor Setting: preferably a large room or classroom corner where children can move around freely and access building materials.
Layout: Organize the room with clearly defined areas:

- A building zone with all construction materials sorted in boxes or trays.
- A display area where finished emotional structures can be observed and discussed.

A reflection corner with cushions or chairs and emotion cards to help children identify feelings before building.

The layout should promote autonomy and collaboration, with free access to materials and enough room to create without constraints.

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Notes on Research-based approach and integration

This activity encourages children to approach the task like young researchers. As they build their emotional structures, they are invited to observe and reflect on the connections between colours, shapes, and emotions they encounter in everyday life. Through guided questions, they formulate hypotheses such as "What shape might represent anger?" or "Does yellow always mean happiness?" and test them through the design process. The activity integrates emotional reflection with design thinking, inviting children to connect emotional experiences from home, school, or their environment with their creative construction choices.

Lesson Flow Overview (linked to details below)

Stage	Title	Brief Description	SPIRIT Skills	Duration	Link to Details
1st	**Emotion Circle Warm-up**	The activity begins with a group circle to introduce the core emotional vocabulary and to start building a safe and expressive group climate. Children sit in a circle with the teacher. An illustrated chart shows 5–6 basic emotions (e.g., happy, sad, scared, angry, calm, excited). The teacher points to each and says: “Can you think of a time when you felt…?” Students share short stories or examples	• Emotional awareness and communication • Empathy	15 minutes	**STAGE 1 – Emotion Circle Warm-up**
2nd	**Group formation + Emotion Card assignment**	Students are divided into small groups, and each group is given a card with a randomly assigned emotion. This step sets the structure for collaborative work throughout the activity. The teacher divides the class into small groups (3–5 students each), ensuring a mix of personalities. Each group receives a card showing an emotion from the warm-up circle.	• Emotional awareness and communication • Empathy	10 minutes	**STAGE 2 – Group formation + Emotion Card assignment**

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3rd	**Sharing personal experiences and brainstorming emotional expressions**	Each group discusses the emotion they received. Students are invited to share personal stories connected to that emotion, using drawing or sentence starters to support expression and inclusion. Students sit in small groups and talk about a time when they felt the assigned emotion. They can: • Share short personal stories using sentence starters like "I felt ___ when ___" • Draw the moment they are remembering • Use simple emotion vocabulary or emojis as prompts if needed	• Emotional awareness and communication • Empathy	20 minutes	**STAGE 3 – Sharing personal experiences and brainstorming emotional expressions**
4th	**Sketching and planning an emotional structure**	Each group begins designing their "Emotion Tower." They reflect on how to visually represent the assigned emotion using shapes, colours, height, and balance. This stage supports the transition from abstract feeling to concrete form. Groups sit together with paper and markers to: • Brainstorm how their tower will visually represent their emotion • ketch their design ideas • Discuss features like height (tall/low), shape (sharp/round), balance (stable/unstable), colour (bright/dark) • Make simple choices about materials and structure.	• Emotional awareness and communication • Empathy • Creativity	15 minutes	**STAGE 4 – Sketching and planning an emotional structure**
5th	**Emotion Tower construction**	Students use recyclable materials to bring their group's "Emotion Tower" design to life. They collaborate, adapt their plans, and reflect together during the building process. • Students gather around a workspace with their materials • They start constructing the structure based on their sketch • Some students build, while others support or guide based on the group plan • Adults circulate to observe, ask questions, and support discussions on emotions and teamwork.	• Emotional awareness and communication • Empathy • Creativity • Flexibility	30 minutes	**STAGE 5 – Emotion Tower construction**

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6th	**Group presentations of Emotion Towers**	Each group presents their Emotion Tower to the class, explaining which emotion they represented, how they expressed it through the structure, and sharing some stories or thoughts discussed during the design process. • Groups stand by their towers and take turns presenting • Each member may speak about a different aspect: the emotion, the design choices, or the personal stories • The class listens and may ask questions or give feedback.	• Emotional awareness and communication • Empathy	15-20 minutes	**STAGE 6 – Group presentations of Emotion Towers**
7th	**Final reflection circle**	Children gather in a circle to reflect on the activity. They are invited to share what they discovered about their own emotions and how listening to others helped them better understand their classmates. • Students sit in a circle, possibly with the emotion towers around them • Each child is invited to share a thought, feeling, or learning from the experience • A soft object (e.g., talking stick) can be used to take turns.	• Emotional awareness and communication • Empathy	10-15 minutes	**STAGE 7 – Final reflection circle**

Tips and Tricks for dealing with challenges (for the whole STEAM program)

To support the children throughout the lesson, it's helpful to:

- Create a calm, welcoming atmosphere so everyone feels safe to share their thoughts.
- Use emotion cards or a visual chart to help children identify and name their feelings.
- Offer a short demonstration to inspire those unsure where to start building.
- Ask open-ended questions such as, "What does this shape remind you of?" to spark curiosity and reflection.
- Let students pair-share before whole group discussions to lower anxiety and support communication.
- Be flexible - if energy drops, introduce a quick movement break or switch to drawing to keep engagement high.

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Difficulty level tailoring notes

- **Beginner learners:** Provide a set of pictures/situations that represent emotions to help with identification. Allow building first, then storytelling.
- **Advanced learners:** Invite children to explore emotional intensity (e.g., how would a “very angry” tower differ from a “slightly annoyed” one?). Let them build more abstract representations
- **Expert learners:** use more subtle and sophisticated emotions (e.g. jealousy). Think together about situations where multiple towers can coexist.

STEAM Program Debriefing and Reflection Questions

- How did it feel to build something that showed how you feel?
- What part of your tower best expresses your group’s emotion?
- What did you discover about your teammates’ feelings?
- What can we do to better understand others’ emotions in class?

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4.4.2. Stage details and Activities Flow

STAGE 1 – Emotion Circle Warm-up

How does this develop particular SPIRIT skills

- Promotes emotional awareness by prompting children to recall and name personal emotional experiences
- Encourages attentive listening and mutual respect
- Fosters a safe emotional environment that supports later teamwork and creativity.

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

- Students become more confident expressing emotions in front of peers
- Students begin to recognize emotions in others by listening to shared examples
- The group begins to build trust and emotional openness.

Academic/Curriculum Objective connection

- Language: practicing oral expression and storytelling
- Citizenship: learning respectful listening and empathy in group settings.

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Emotion chart with images/icons (can include weather/colour metaphors)
- A soft item (e.g., plush ball) to pass around when speaking.

Preparation notes

- Prepare a visible and clear emotion chart
- Arrange the space in a circle
- Practice a few examples in advance to model sharing

Guided Questions

- When did you last feel this emotion?
- What did your face or body feel like at that moment?
- What helped you feel better (or stay with) that feeling?

Stage Debriefing Questions (Optional)

- How does it feel to talk about emotions in a group?
- Did you learn something new about a classmate today?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with stage challenges

- Some children may feel shy – let them pass or give the option to just point to an emotion
- Model vulnerability with a personal example to open the space
- Keep the rhythm going by using a soft object to signal who speaks next.

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STAGE 2 – Group formation + Emotion Card assignment

How does this develop particular SPIRIT skills

- Students will collaborate on understanding one emotional concept deeply
- They will begin to recognize that emotions can be experienced in different ways
- They start sharing roles and responsibilities in a respectful and inclusive way.

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

As a result of this activity,

- Students will collaborate on understanding one emotional concept deeply
- They will begin to recognize that emotions can be experienced in different ways
- They start sharing roles and responsibilities in a respectful and inclusive way.

Academic/Curriculum Objective connection

- SEL: Identifying and exploring core emotions
- Citizenship: Practicing inclusive group work
- Language/Art: Preparing for expressive tasks based on shared content.

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Emotion cards (with name, icon, and possibly colour cues)
- Pre-made list or chart for assigning students to groups.

Preparation notes

- Print and laminate emotion cards
- Consider student dynamics when forming groups
- Optionally let students draw cards for added engagement.

Guided Questions

- Have you ever felt this emotion?
- What do you already know about it?
- How might this emotion look different for different people?

Stage Debriefing Questions (Optional)

- How did your group start talking about the emotion?
- Did you all have similar experiences, or were they different?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with stage challenges

- If students struggle to engage, offer optional sentence starters
- Ensure all students have a voice - consider assigning rotating mini-roles if helpful
- Choose simple, relatable emotions for younger groups.

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STAGE 3 – Sharing personal experiences and brainstorming emotional expressions

How does this develop particular SPIRIT skills

- Develops empathy through peer listening
- Supports emotional awareness by making private feelings visible and shareable
- Strengthens collaboration through respectful storytelling.

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

As a result of this activity,

- Students learn to recognize and name their own emotional experiences
- They practice expressing feelings clearly and listening to others without judgment
- They explore how one emotion can feel different to different people.

Academic/Curriculum Objective connection

- Language: Using personal narrative and sentence structures
- Visual arts: Expressing feelings through symbolic drawing.

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Emotion sentence starters on cards
- Blank paper and coloured pencils
- Emoji/emotion posters for extra support.

Preparation notes

- Prepare differentiated supports for younger students or multilingual learners
- Offer the option of storytelling, drawing, or both
- Ensure psychological safety by reinforcing norms of respectful listening.

Guided Questions

- What does this emotion feel like in your body?
- What kind of situations usually make you feel this way?
- How would you describe this emotion to a robot or alien who doesn't understand feelings?

Stage Debriefing Questions (Optional)

- Did your group find similar stories or very different ones?
- Was it easy or hard to share a story about this emotion?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with stage challenges

- Allow students to pass if they don't feel ready to share
- Validate all stories as important, no matter how big or small
- Give examples or model your own short story if needed.

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STAGE 4 – Sketching and planning an emotional structure

How does this develop particular SPIRIT skills

- Enhances emotional awareness by thinking deeply about how feelings can be represented physically
- Builds communication and decision-making skills through group planning
- Encourages creative thinking and symbolic reasoning.

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

As a result of this activity,

- Students understand that emotions can be expressed in non-verbal, creative ways
- They explore how shapes, balance, and colours reflect inner states
- They learn to work as a team to plan and agree on a shared goal.

Academic/Curriculum Objective connection

- Visual arts: Exploring elements of design (line, shape, colour, texture)
- Language: Describing intentions and choices.

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Large paper for sketching
- Coloured pencils or markers
- Emotion cards as visual reference.

Preparation notes

- Encourage all group members to contribute ideas
- Offer visual prompts (e.g., sample towers, colour/emotion charts)
- Support students who may struggle with visual imagination through discussion or gesture.

Guided Questions

- What shape best fits this emotion?
- Would this emotion be a tall or short structure?
- What colours match how it feels?
- How can you show balance or imbalance?

Stage Debriefing Questions (Optional)

- Was it easy to agree on a design?
- Did anyone in the group have a different idea of what the emotion should look like?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with stage challenges

- Remind students that there are no “wrong” designs – all ideas are valid
- Step in to help groups that are stuck by prompting with “What if…” ideas
- Use emojis or emotion posters to support fewer verbal students

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STAGE 5 – Emotion Tower construction

How does this develop particular SPIRIT skills

- Strengthens teamwork, communication, and compromise
- Encourages creativity and emotional expression in a hands-on context
- Promotes perseverance and flexibility in adapting the design to real-world materials.

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

As a result of this activity,

- Students demonstrate their understanding of emotions through symbolic building
- They listen and collaborate to create a shared product
- They develop patience, resilience, and problem-solving while working with imperfect or limited resources.

Academic/Curriculum Objective connection

- Art and Design: Constructing 3D models using various materials
- Science/Engineering: Applying basic design and stability principles

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Recycled materials (boxes, tubes, string, paper, plastic containers)
- Tape, glue, scissors
- Markers, paint, stickers (optional for decoration)

Preparation notes

- Ensure enough materials for all groups
- Define a clear area for construction
- Have cleanup materials ready for the end of the session.

Guided Questions

- How does your tower show the emotion you were assigned?
- What part of the building process is hardest so far?
- Are you staying close to your design, or making changes as you build?
- How are you helping each other stay focused?

Stage Debriefing Questions (Optional)

- Did anything unexpected happen while building?
- Did your emotion change as you worked?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with stage challenges

- Remind students to refer back to their sketches if they get stuck
- Offer gentle guidance to groups that are struggling with teamwork
- Celebrate effort and process, not just the final product.

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STAGE 6 – Group presentations of Emotion Towers

How does this develop particular SPIRIT skills

- Enhances emotional vocabulary and communication
- Encourages empathy by hearing classmates' emotional experiences
- Builds presentation and public speaking skills in a safe, supported context.

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

As a result of this activity,

- Students articulate emotional understanding through symbolic language and design
- They show appreciation and curiosity for others' emotional experiences
- They become more confident in expressing their own ideas and emotions in public.

Academic/Curriculum Objective connection

- Oral communication and presentation skills (language arts)
- Art: Interpreting and presenting creative choices

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Emotion Towers
- Emotion card used by each group (if available)

Preparation notes

- Provide a calm, focused space for presentations
- Remind students to listen respectfully and applaud after each group.

Guided Questions

- What emotion does your tower represent?
- What story or feeling inspired your design?
- Which part of your tower best shows the emotion?
- Did you learn something about this emotion during the process?

Stage Debriefing Questions (Optional)

- Was it easy or hard to talk about this emotion? Why?
- What did you notice about other groups' towers and emotions.

Tips and Tricks for dealing with stage challenges

- Support shy students with sentence starters or team support
- Encourage positive peer feedback after each presentation
- Remind students that all emotions are valid and valuable.

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STAGE 7 – Final reflection circle

How does this develop particular SPIRIT skills

- Encourages self-awareness by reflecting on emotional experiences
- Develops empathy through sharing and listening to others
- Promotes positive group identity and emotional expression.

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

As a result of this activity,

- Students learn to express what they feel and reflect on the meaning of the experience
- They recognize the diversity of emotional responses and how they are expressed
- They become more comfortable talking about emotions in a group setting.

Academic/Curriculum Objective connection

- Language Arts: Speaking and listening
- Ethics/Education for citizenship: Respect and appreciation of others' perspectives.

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Emotion Towers (visual anchor)
- Talking object (optional)
- Visual emotion chart (optional).

Preparation notes

- Create a calm, respectful atmosphere
- Encourage voluntary sharing, without pressure
- Have prompts ready in case students need help to start.

Guided Questions

- What did you learn about your emotion during this activity?
- How did it feel to build something together as a group?
- What surprised you about the other towers or emotions?
- How did your feelings change during the activity?

Stage Debriefing Questions (Optional)

- What will you remember most from this experience?
- Is there something new you discovered about a classmate today?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with stage challenges

- Accept all types of reflections – short, long, serious, funny
- Acknowledge each contribution with a nod or smile
- If a child doesn’t want to speak, allow them to draw or gesture their answer

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