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Foundations for Wellbeing

Reception/Year R, activity plan 5: Feeling tense, feeling calm



Feelings tense, feeling calm

This is the last of five activity plans on self-regulation, mental health and wellbeing, for children aged 4-5 in Reception/year R. This activity plan focuses on supporting children to recognise and manage feeling tense. Each activity plan has been developed to support learning in the prime area of personal, social and emotional development (PSED) as part of the [Early years foundation stage \(EYFS\) statutory framework](#). These plans provide early learning experiences to support children's future Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, and are precursory to the Foundations for Wellbeing lessons for key stage 1.

The activities are designed to be taught in order but should be used flexibly according to your timetable. For example, they may be taught in one session, or taught in several sessions across the week. The teacher-led activities can be used either with the whole class or in small groups, and timings will depend on the size of your group. The activities are easy to set up, with little reliance on resources, other than those to be found in most Reception classrooms. Where story books are suggested, versions are also available online.

To encourage children to use the self-regulation strategies taught in these lessons more automatically, autonomously and effectively, it is important to revisit and reinforce them regularly, as part of a whole-school approach to promoting mental health and wellbeing. The extension activities are designed to support this (for more information, see the [Teacher Handbook](#)). To learn more, please visit our [self-guided online courses](#), which are available to all School Plus members.

Learning objective and outcomes

To learn about feeling calm and feeling tense.

Children will be able to:

- identify what 'calm' and 'tense' feel like
- describe how feeling calm and feeling tense can affect how someone acts
- describe ways someone might begin to feel calm when they have been feeling tense

Resources required

- Audio examples of [calming](#) and [energetic](#) music
- *Red Red Red* by Polly Dunbar – print or [online](#) version
- Three sorting rings or similar
- Animated guide to flower-bubble breathing

Climate for learning

Make sure you have read the accompanying teacher guidance notes before teaching this lesson. They include guidance on establishing a safe learning environment, supporting children with additional vulnerabilities, using assessment and personal reflection effectively, and embedding the learning. They also outline useful subject knowledge on the theory and evidence informing these lessons, self-regulation strategies and relevant neuroscience.

The activity plans should be used flexibly, and you are encouraged to adapt them to meet the specific needs and abilities of your children. It is also important to consider sensitivities and prior knowledge about specific children's circumstances. If safeguarding concerns arise during this lesson, these should be reported to the Designated Safeguarding Lead, in line with your school policy.

Baseline assessment

Introduction

Explain that sometimes people can feel calm and sometimes they can feel tense. These activities focus on how we can begin to feel calm again, if we have been feeling tense.

Baseline assessment activity

Play calming music, giving children enough listening time to be able to react naturally to the music. They may wish to sit or lay down or sway gently to the music. Ask children to identify how the music made them feel in their bodies (*sleepy, calm, slow, relaxed, tired, 'floppy', 'floaty'*). Then, ask, where do these feelings begin? *In the brain (point to brain)*.

Give some examples of how you saw them act in response to the music and tell children that these responses helped you notice that they felt calm.

Next play some tense/energetic music, again giving children listening time and allowing them to react naturally to the music. This time they may choose to stand up, march, dance or jump. Ask how the music makes them feel in their bodies (*jittery, excited, nervous, hot, tense, 'speedy', 'jerky'*). Then, ask where do these feelings begin? *In the brain (point to brain)*.

Tell children that their responses to the music helped you notice that it made them feel tense, giving examples of their actions.

Next, ask children to imagine a child around their age, who is:

- running late for school
- stroking a pet
- playing Jenga

Ask how this child might feel in each situation – calm or tense? Then ask, how might someone notice that the child felt calm or tense in each situation?

Core activities

Activity 1: Looking inside the story

Read or show *Red Red Red* by Polly Dunbar. To familiarise children with the book, ask:

- What does Little One want? *A biscuit from the jar*
- Does Little One get a biscuit? *No, Little One falls and hurts themselves*
- How does Little One react? *They cry and get upset*
- What happens in the end? *Little One gets a biscuit*

Read again, stopping to ask children to identify how Little One is feeling at different points in the story and how strong their feelings are. For example:

- pages 1-2 – *Little One is feeling calm, hungry, determined*
- pages 3-4 – *Little One is feeling hurt, tearful*
- pages 4-5 – *Little One is feeling frustrated, fidgety, their clothes are annoying them*
- pages 5-6 – *Little One is feeling tense, annoyed, doesn't want to be touched*

- pages 7-8 – *Little One is feeling annoyed, tense and frustrated and these feelings are getting stronger*

Show children three sorting rings (or similar) with the titles: 1. Calm Zone, 2. In-between Zone, and 3. Tense Zone. Tell them they will be identifying which of Little One's feelings fits best in each zone. Explain that the calm and relaxed feelings will go in the Calm Zone, and that the angry and frustrated feelings will go in the Tense Zone. Identify that between the Calm and Tense Zones sits the In-between Zone. This is where feelings are in-between calm and tense, where feelings are beginning to get bigger and stronger than the Calm Zone, but not as strong as in the Tense Zone.

Write a word label for each feeling that Little One experiences – children will use your labels for sorting into the zones. Ensure that the following feelings are included: anger, relaxation, calmness, frustration, feeling okay, determination, restlessness, upset, tension. If an explanation of feeling fidgety is needed, explain that because Little One is feeling increasingly tense and annoyed, they are getting bothered about little things that they would usually ignore, like their socks falling down which is adding to their feelings of frustration and anger and is making them fidgety.

Give children the feelings labels that you have written, and ask them to sort into the zones, for example:

1. Calm Zone: relaxation, determination, feeling okay, calmness
2. In-between Zone: restlessness
3. Tense Zone: anger, upset, frustration, tension

Remind children that these feelings start in the brain and can be felt in the body and can also affect how someone acts and behaves.



Challenge: Ask children to suggest colours for each zone and explain their decisions to the class.

Activity 2: Feelings can show

Remind children of pages 9-12, and ask, what happens when Little One's feelings get too strong? How do they act? Take feedback. *Children might suggest: Little One is getting really upset - they scream, roar, hit the floor and bang their head¹.*

Focusing initially on the Tense Zone, ask children to describe or show how someone might behave or act/react in this zone. Here they may replicate what they see in the story or choose their own ways of expressing behaviour. *Suggested responses may include breathing fast, clenching teeth, red face, quiet etc.* Repeat for the Calm and In-between Zones.

Explain that within each zone, someone's feelings might be more, or less, strong, and this can affect how they behave. For example, Little One's feelings were very strong, and they struggled to control their behaviour. However, if their feelings were less strong, they might have acted differently.

Guide the children to see that being in the zones can be temporary. Little One started in the Calm Zone, moved into the In-between Zone, and then into the Tense Zone – but this means that Little One can also move back through the zones – from tense to calm.

¹ Tell children that doing this is not useful and could lead to Little One being injured or hurt

Activity 3: This can help

Read pages 10-17 again and ask:

- After Little One screamed and hit their head, what does Mum suggest Little One does? *Count to 10 and take a deep breath*
- How might counting to 10 and taking a deep breath help Little One? *It might help them to calm down; gives them something else to think about; gives them time to think about what to do next*

Look at the pictures of Little One on pages 10-17 and ask:

- What is happening to Little One's body? *It is becoming calmer/relaxed; they are not tense, they are sitting down*
- Where do the changes start? *In their brain*
- How does Little One feel now? *They feel better/calm/relaxed; they feel happy again*
- What else does Mum say Little One should do? *Breathe*
- What zone is Little One in? *The Calm Zone*

Explain that Little One's mum helped them to calm down by suggesting they count to 10 and breathe. Ask for suggestions of other strategies that could help Little One move from the Tense Zone to the Calm Zone.

Children may need reminding of strategies learnt in other sessions, but answers may include: think about their favourite things; focus on a colour; look at a tree, a flower, or the clouds in the sky; stroke their hands or tummy; speak to an adult about how they are feeling.

Next, introduce the flower-bubble breathing technique as a way of calming down before someone gets to the Tense Zone. Explain that it can be helpful to take a few slow breathes rather than one big deep breath. Show the [video](#) and practise together.



Support: Ask children to imagine that Little One used this strategy after they become upset- how might they feel afterwards?



Challenge: Ask children to identify some times when they think this strategy might be useful. *Children might suggest when finding something difficult, when someone can't find something they want, when someone is in, or near, the Tense Zone.*

Reflection and endpoint assessment

Ask children to think about which relaxation strategy - pausing, counting to ten, taking a deep breath, or several slow breaths - they'd most like to use. Ask them to think about times when they will use it. How will they remind themselves to use it? There is no requirement for children to share their personal reflections.

Ask children to talk to a partner and come up with their own suggestions for when someone might feel calm and for when someone might feel tense. Encourage them to describe how someone's body may feel and act in each situation. They can act this out if they wish. Then, ask them to discuss what someone who is feeling tense could do to start feeling calm.

Signposting support

Remind children that if they need to talk to someone about what they have been learning about during this session, or anything else that is concerning them, they can talk to you or another adult in school or to someone at home who they like talking to and who listens to them.

Activities to extend and embed the learning

- Identify different situations in the day when children might be heading towards the Tense Zone and ask them to choose a strategy to calm down. Praise examples of this.
- Practise the flower-bubble breathing or other techniques after times of busyness, over-excitement or tension, such as transitions to/from playtime; getting changed for PE, clearing away after free-play.
- Have the Calm, In-Between and Tense Zones displayed in the classroom as a visual reminder/interactive way of supporting children to recognise which zone they are in and that they can move zones. The zones could be coloured green, amber and red, respectively. Encourage children to recognise when they are in the Tense Zone and use ways to move themselves into the In-Between Zone, and eventually into the Calm Zone.
- When reading stories, encourage children to identify which zone the characters are in and which techniques they could use to move from the Tense to the In-Between Zones.