

What Can You Learn From Bombaloo?

Using Picture Books to Help Young Students With Special Needs Regulate Their Emotions

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In the picture book *When Sophie gets Angry—Really, Really Angry . . .* by Molly Bang (1999), Sophie gets mad at her sister and loses control. "She kicks. She screams. She wants to smash the world to smithereens." Sophie's emotions are reflected in the text typeface and accompanying illustrations. Words like "roar," "explode," "smash," and "pabam" are written in hot colors and bold scripts that help the reader understand how angry Sophie feels. The illustrations in the book include a dragon's red fire coming out of Sophie's mouth and a volcano's molten lava surrounding Sophie as she explodes. Sophie's face and body express her anger with furrowed brow, frowning mouth, clenched fists, and kicking feet. But then, with a turn of the page, things change. Sophie begins to run and run and she begins to cry. Sophie is sad because her anger got the best of her and she realizes she needs to regain control.

Imagine a teacher using this book to help young students with disabilities understand their emotions and how to regulate them. The students could be encouraged to listen carefully to the story to understand how someone feels when they are really, really angry. They also could be encouraged to use their visual literacy, to look closely and carefully at the illustrations to interpret and label how the character feels. The story and illustrations in this book could be used to initiate conversations about similar emotional experiences, how they were handled, and their consequences. The teacher could model strategies to help students learn about emotional regulation, and students could set goals and plans for strategy use. From this scene it is easy to see how a well chosen picture book like *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry . . .* (Bang, 1999) could be a powerful learning tool (Hansen & Zambo, 2005; Zambo, 2005, 2006).

Emotional Regulation and Why It Matters

Emotions are the physiological and psychological feelings we have in response to events in our world. Emotions are important to help young children focus their attention, energize their bodies, and organize their thinking in ways that are adaptive to their needs (LeDoux, 1996). For example, happiness is an emotion with an adaptive function. Children's smiles are infectious, drawing adults nearer to share in their joy; these interactions form the basis of positive relationships and loving bonds (Diamond & Hobson, 1998). Likewise, when situations are stressful, children signal their fear to caregivers, who respond with soothing words and touches that help bring strong feelings under control (Thompson, 1994).

Emotional regulation is the ability to understand emotions and develop strategies to modulate them (LeDoux, 1996). Diamond and Hobson

note that emotional regulation is the most challenging aspect of development. Both positive and negative emotions must be regulated. For example, even though it is a positive emotion, happiness must be regulated. Exuberance is welcome on the playground but not in the classroom. Likewise, sadness is an appropriate emotion in unfortunate situations but not all the time. Regulating emotions is important for children because it enables them to focus their attention, approach and learn in new situations, and form lasting and sincere friendships. Emotional regulation contributes to success in the classroom, with one's peers, and in every aspect of life (Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994).

Emotional Regulation and Students With Disabilities

Unfortunately, not all children develop emotional regulation easily, and this is compounded for students with special needs. For example, children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have difficulty with behavioral inhibition, which in turn causes difficulty in self-regulation of emotion, or affect (Barkley, 1998). When they feel strong emotions, children with ADHD have trouble inhibiting their reactions and keeping themselves under control. Their display of excessive feelings leads to peer rejection and low social status in groups, and they often become outcasts and experience emotional distress (National Research Council, 2000). Armstrong (2000) suggests taking a psychoaffective perspective in the diagnosis of ADHD by looking at how much attention difficulties stem from emotional trauma or anxiety.

Another group that has difficulty with emotional regulation is children with emotional disorders (ED). These children comprise the fourth largest group receiving special education services; more boys than girls are diagnosed with ED (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2002). Children with ED have extreme difficulty regulating how they feel; they are either overly emotional or not emotional enough. In other words, children with ED may exhibit externalizing behaviors in the form of aggression and

noncompliance, or they may internalize their feelings and show flat affect (Lambrose, Ward, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 1998). For both externalizers and internalizers, emotions become detrimental and cause difficulty in relationships. Young children with ED have a hard time sharing toys, making friends, and cooperating with adults. Situations that produce strong feelings are very uncomfortable for them because they misunderstand their emotions and display them in the wrong manner, with the wrong intensity, and at the wrong time (Hardman et al.). Fortunately, research shows that directly teaching skills can help children with ED understand their feelings and develop friends (Theodore, Bray, Kehle, & Jensen, 2001). Children with ED who learn to manage their emotions have an easier time with frustrations, disappointments, and hurt feelings. They relate better to others and are happier all around (National Research Council, 2000).

Everyone experiences emotions, and the ability to label emotions is an important skill that comes from interactions with caregivers. Caregivers help children learn words for their feelings, and these words help children develop a more accurate and elaborate understanding of how they feel. Conversations between caregivers and children are especially important for children with developmental disabilities like Down syndrome. Beeghley and Cicchetti (1997) investigated conversations between caregivers and children and found that caregivers of children with Down syndrome were significantly less likely to refer to inner states (feelings) than caregivers of normally developing children. This means that children with Down syndrome are less likely to gain a vocabulary for their emotions and, in turn, talk about their feelings less—even though they have just as many, varied, and intense emotions as anyone else (Wallis, 2006).

It is important for teachers to realize that emotional regulation is necessary for all children, children in special education and children not labeled with special needs. In the world today many children are experiencing emotional dis-

tress. More children than ever are being exposed to environmental stressors like divorce, drugs, violence, and absence of loving care. Stressors cause strong feelings, and without adults to model how to modulate these feelings they can become detrimental to their mental health. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry notes that the number of children and adolescents with problems like depression, panic attacks, phobias, and somatic symptoms is rising and will likely continue to rise (National Research Council, 2000). Being able to manage arousal and affect influences the ability to function in personal and social spheres for both children without and with special needs. Identifying emotions and intervening when help is needed is important because when emotions are not regulated they can become extreme (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003). Temper tantrums, excessive or prolonged sadness, unjustified fear, and anxiety are a few examples of what can happen when emotions are not regulated.

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Emotional regulation is the most challenging aspect of development, and many children do not understand emotions or easily develop emotional regulation (Diamond & Hobson, 1998). Answers as to why some children develop regulation with ease whereas others face a long and difficult journey are complex and in reality may stem from a constellation of factors including nature, nurture, or both (Bronson, 2000). Teachers and caregivers need to find constructive ways to coach and support children with emotional needs. Achieving content standards and being successful in school depends on emotional regulation (LeDoux, 1996). Fortunately, positive and structured experiences

using picture books can play a key role (Zambo, 2006).

Why Picture Books?

Picture books are easily accessible, cognitively stimulating and motivating, and have affective value—and they are therefore a reasonable medium to use with students with disabilities or when teaching students emotional regulation strategies. Many children and adults are familiar with picture books, and their characters often become friends and teachers. Favorite characters help children, especially those with disabilities, understand that they are not alone in their emotional challenges and concerns (Ouzts, 1991). Riordan and Wilson (1989) found bibliotherapy (using books for therapeutic purposes) to be a successful adjunct to counseling, social skills training, and behavioral support. For young children with disabilities picture books can be used, in conjunction with a social skills program like Skillstreaming (McGinnis & Goldstein, 2003) to reinforce skills being learned. Characters in picture books can help students make connections between the desired skills and themselves. When students identify with a character they can relate the character's feelings to themselves, talk more openly about their feelings, and discuss their feelings in a constructive way. Students are more willing to listen to alternate solutions and ideas when they are placed in the context of a character's life (Hansen & Zambo, 2005; Ouzts; Zambo, 2006).

Another reason to use picture books with students with disabilities is because of the stories and illustrations they contain (Evans, 1998; Sadoski & Paivio, 2001). The stories in picture books promote all aspects of literacy development from automaticity in decoding to vocabulary and comprehension skills. Stories help children develop skills and learn important concepts in a natural, nonthreatening way (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003). Adults in every culture tell stories to pass on important information to future generations, and children typically enjoy listening to these narrative tales. Story is a powerful way to learn and has been used as long as humans have had lan-

guage (Leu & Kinzer, 2003; Schank, 1995). When teachers place ideas they want students to learn in the context of a story they can challenge current ideas, advance students' reasoning skills, and make a point without lecturing (Koc & Buzzelli, 2004). When teachers ask open-ended questions, value all replies, and involve students through various activities, they nurture emotional regulation in a nonauthoritarian way (Damon, 1988). Stories help students feel how characters feel; this gains their attention, evokes their emotions, and encourages deeper processing. Students are more likely to internalize the material and make connections to what they know. Using stories to help students understand emotions can result in more empathetic and educated human beings (Leu & Kinzer).

In addition to the value of story, picture books also provide a visual representation of a character's emotions and experience. The illustrations in picture books depict a character's facial expressions, emotional reactions, and body posture, and these visuals help children learn. Young children look at the faces and body language of their caregivers to learn about emotions and understand how they should feel (Walden & Baxter, 1989). In one experiment conducted by Boccia and Campos (1989), young children were noticeably friendlier toward a stranger when their mothers exhibited friendly facial expressions in the stranger's presence. Young children learn by looking at real faces, and as they develop they gain the ability to learn from symbols in the form of signs and images (Piaget, 1963). This *visual literacy* is a vital skill but one in which some students with disabilities lag behind (Falk, 2005; Greenspan, 1998). Fortunately, the illustrations in picture books can be used to help students develop their visual literacy; the books can be used to show students representative emotions on faces and in body language.

Children who cannot read intentionality from faces and body language are likely to interpret behaviors as negative even when they are not (National Research Council, 2000). Using pictures and text simultaneously, or coding

information visually and verbally, helps children better understand and retain information. Dual-coding information increases the likelihood of recall because students can use both visual and verbal cues (Sadoski & Paivio, 2001).

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Picture books are a valuable teaching tool. Their illustrations provide a visual of emotions, and their stories help place emotions in context. Picture books also connect to reading standards and recommendations made by groups such as the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). In *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read* (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001), CIERA suggests that reading to children and engaging children in conversations builds new words and concepts. CIERA also recommends the use of visual imagery to help children form mental pictures of what is being read. These ideas are promoted, extended, and supported with the suggestions offered here, which align with good reading practice and with the spirit of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004). IDEA promotes the use of positive behavioral support for students with special needs; the use of picture books can help scaffold learning of prosocial skills (Zambo, 2005).

Collecting Data and Developing a Plan

For a variety of reasons, some children with special needs may not understand emotions nor develop strategies to regulate the emotions that they feel. Fortunately, there is much teachers can do to help all their students develop this

Table 1 Basic Emotions, Outward Signs, and Picture Book Connections

Emotion	Outward Signs	Picture Books About Emotions
Anger	Downturned mouth and angry expression. Body is tense and fists clenched; accelerated heart rate and rapid breathing.	<i>When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry</i> (Bang, 1999) <i>Sometimes I'm Bombaloo</i> (Wall, 2003) <i>Franklin's Bad Day</i> (Boice, 2001)
Anxiety	Worried expression. Hand-wringing and pacing.	<i>Parts</i> (Arnold, 1997) <i>Owen</i> (Henkes, 1993) <i>Wemberly Worries</i> (Henkes, 2003) <i>Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale</i> (Ward, 2002)
Disgust	Pursed lips, wrinkled nose, remarks such as "yuck." Moves away from source.	<i>Everyone Poops</i> (Cronin, 1999) <i>Walter the Farting Dog</i> (Barnes, 2001) <i>That's Disgusting!</i> (Hart, 2002)
Fear	Eyes and mouth wide open. Rapid heart rate, sweating, tremors, and weak knees.	<i>There's a Nightmare in My Closet</i> (Lester, 1992) <i>Shiela Rae the Brave</i> (Lester, 1993) <i>Hooway for Woofsey</i> (Lester, 1993)
Curiosity	Self-conscious expression—looks around, lack of eye contact.	<i>Jamaica Tag-Along</i> (Cassell, 1990) <i>Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse</i> (Holt, 1993) <i>It Wasn't My Fault</i> (Lester, 1993)
Amusement	Face sparkles, eyes bright and alert, smiling. Overall sense of lightheartedness and play.	<i>ABC I Like Me!</i> (Gallison, 1997) <i>Chrysanthemum</i> (Henkes, 1991) <i>Skippyjon Jones</i> (Schachner, 2003)
Confidence	Head held high, chest stuck out. Overall look of happiness with self.	<i>Stand Tall, Molly Lionheart</i> (Crowell, 1991) <i>The Rainbow Fish</i> (Pister, 1992) <i>Quick as a Cricket</i> (Wood, 1982)
Grief	Bowling eyes looking down; may be crying. Chin is upset and withdrawn.	<i>Koala Lou</i> (Fox, 1988) <i>Tough Boris</i> (Fox, 2000) <i>Two Cool Coyotes</i> (Linn, 1999)
Shame	Blushing, embarrassment, and withdrawal. Lack of eye contact; eyes diverted, looking down or away.	<i>The Sissy Duckling</i> (Gale, 2002) <i>Leo the Late Bloomer</i> (Kurtis, 1997) <i>No, David!</i> (Shannon, 1992)

important skill (Diamond & Hobson, 1998). To understand how this can be achieved, let's step into a fictitious second-grade classroom. There are 26 students in this newly formed inclusive classroom. Nineteen students have no special needs; seven are students with special needs and include one child with a learning disability, two children with an emotional disability, one child with Down syndrome, and three children with ADHD. To facilitate inclusion of the children with special needs, the classroom teacher is collaborating with the special education teacher. Together they have been collecting observational and interview data from students about

their experiences, using a checklist of basic emotions and their outward signs, which they developed based on the work of Paul Ekman (2003; see Table 1).

In addition to their observations, the teachers conduct interviews to understand if the students with special needs are fitting in and how students not classified with special needs are interacting with their classmates. The teachers have noticed several interesting things from data collected. Students not classified with special needs say that they want to include their new classmates but that it is difficult; they say that their classmates do not gracefully join groups and interrupt and get pushy instead of

being patient and tactful. Likewise, the students with special needs say that they want to be part of the group. They actively seek to be included, but from interview data it is evident they do not know how to join groups diplomatically. When groups reject their attempts, these students display outward signs of anger and anxiety—and when these emotions occur they have difficulty regulating how they feel. This has become a major problem because when the students display these emotions they say cruel things and when a teacher hears them they are placed in time-out. Being in time-out typically calms the students down but instead of rejoining the class

they typically withdraw to the back of the classroom, put down their heads, and resist talking constructively about how they feel. As a result students with special needs are missing valuable social and instructional time.

With insight from these data and requirements for positive behavioral support from IDEA, the teachers decide to focus on helping students with special needs to learn the prosocial skills presented in *Skillstreaming in Early Childhood* (McGinnis & Goldstein, 2003). Specifically, they will focus on making friendships, dealing with feelings, identifying alternatives to aggression, and dealing with stress. The teachers decide to use picture books to introduce and reinforce these ideas (see Table 1), and Pressley and Woloshyn's (1995) work to help keep lessons focused and applicable for students with various needs. The teachers decided to:

- ✓ Focus on a few strategies at a time.
- ✓ Model and explain new strategies with picture books and in classroom contexts.
- ✓ Re-model and re-explain as necessary with picture books and in classroom contexts.
- ✓ Explain where and when to use the strategy, with picture books and in the classroom.
- ✓ Provide opportunities for practice and ways to monitor progress.

Lewis, Sugai, and Colvin (1998) note that all students can benefit from strategies and instruction in social skills, and these teachers decide to present the strategies to all the students in the class. Students who do not have special needs will receive the same training and be asked to model the strategies, provide feedback, and be patient with classmates when mistakes are made. Taking varied goals and ability differences into consideration, the teachers develop a lesson plan (see Figure 1), which incorporates ideas from Tomlinson's (2005) book *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*.

Putting the Plan Into Action

Data collected indicate an immediate need to help students understand each other, and a need to help students with special needs regulate the strong emotions they feel. The teachers decide that the anger the students with special needs are feeling occurs when they do not feel included. To address this important issue they decide that they will take turns reading and discussing picture books, and decide to start with *Sometimes I'm Bombaloo* by Patricia Vail (2002), whose main character experiences a challenge with emotional regulation. The special education teacher begins by holding up the book and asking students to predict what it might be about. After a few responses, she begins to read. The book begins with Katie Honors explaining how she is a happy, compliant, and cooperative little girl.

My name is Katie Honors and I'm a really good kid. I smile a lot because usually I'm happy, and I give excellent hugs.

The illustrations show Katie smiling and contently interacting with others. The colors are bright and light: Katie is wearing a soft orange dress and is pictured against a background of soft pink, white, green, and yellow. The teacher focuses the students' attention on these facts and the students are asked to share their own memories of happy feelings. All responses are valued, and the teachers provide constant feedback and praise. After adequate sharing the teacher goes on to read how things begin to change for Katie: her brother knocks over her castle of bricks and even though she tries with all her might to remain composed, Katie loses control of her emotions and becomes, in her own words, *Bombaloo*. When this happens Katie starts to growl, her face scrunches like a monster's, and she uses her fists and feet instead of her words. The illustrations depict a large, angry Katie shouting; the backgrounds have sharp edges and dark muted colors. The pages turn to black and there is a small Katie sitting in darkness talking about

how difficult it is for her to regulate how she feels.

But when I'm Bombaloo, I don't want to think about it. I want to smash stuff.

While the students study these pages, the teacher talks about a time she lost control. She uses her face and body to model and exaggerate the emotions: She scrunches her face into a frown, stomps her feet, and tightens her hands into fists. Students are then asked to share a time they lost control, and several mention how they sometimes end up in time-out. The teacher asks the students to use their bodies and faces to express how they sound, look, and feel when this happens. After this sharing, the teacher continues to read the story; Katie is in time-out in her bedroom.

I have to go take time for myself and think about it.

This makes Katie's anger flare and she demolishes her room. Fortunately, for Katie a pair of underpants lands on her head, which makes her laugh.

When I laugh I'm Katie Honors again.

The teachers discuss ways to deal with angry feelings, and encourage the students to talk about how they feel when they get angry. Students talk about how scary it is to be Bombaloo and how hard it is to regain control. After this sharing the teacher goes on to finish the story. Katie gains control, apologizes for her behavior, and builds a new castle with her brother. The teachers ask students to discuss the positive things Katie did to rejoin her family and strategies they could use to join groups or rejoin them after embarrassing situations when they get angry and lose control; this also enables the teachers to foster connections to Skillstreaming (McGinnis & Goldstein,

Figure 1. Lesson Plan Template Linking Social Skills Training With Picture Books

Lesson Title: Learning emotional regulation
Books to Be Used: <i>Reference: Skillstreaming in Early Childhood</i> <i>Picture book: Sometimes I'm Bombaloo</i>
Social/Affective Skills Link (mark all that apply) <input type="checkbox"/> friendship-making <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> alternatives to aggression <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> dealing with feelings <input type="checkbox"/> dealing with stress
Standards/Link to IDEA: Vocabulary, verbal expression, concept development, and prosocial skills
Lesson Delivery: Whole group moving into smaller workgroups.
Insight From Data: Students with special needs want to be included but they do not know how to join groups. When this happens they get angry, do not regulate their emotions, and end up in time-out. When they get out they pout and lose social and instructional time. Students in general education want to let students with special needs join their groups but they do not know what to do.
Learner Outcome: Students will learn about emotions, strategies to develop emotional regulation, and set goals to control their emotions.
Lesson Description: <i>Prereading:</i> Have students guess what book will be about by looking at the cover. <i>While reading:</i> Read pages 1-8 in the story, then ask students to share good times when they felt happy—and why. <i>Read pages 9-15</i> (Bombaloo behaviors), point out illustrations while reading to help students see emotions being expressed in facial expressions and body language. Also note colors used to express emotions. Model a time when you lost control (what it looked like, sounded like, felt like). Ask students to do the same. Have them show and discuss what they look, sound, feel like when they get angry. Finish reading the book. End with a discussion on alternatives to acting out. Connect to Skillstreaming activity. Demonstrate steps. <i>After reading:</i> Break into small work groups. Students work in pairs to set 1-2 goals. After goals are set students meet with a teacher to develop ways to monitor them and rewards for success. In addition to setting goals, students in general education are required to model strategies and give feedback and praise to their classmates with special needs.
Differentiation/Accommodations for Learning Profiles: <i>Group orientation:</i> Large group to small. <i>Cognitive style:</i> Auditory, visual, kinesthetic, interpersonal/introspective, easily distracted/long attention span, and cognitive processing styles. <i>Learning environment:</i> Lesson begins quiet then moves to noise. <i>Intelligence preference:</i> Focus on bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal.
Assessment Learner Outcomes: Goals will be tracked for 2 weeks. Students will consult with the teacher on progress. Observations and interviews will also be gathered again.
Additional Adaptations: Preferential seating/alternative positions for students with special needs.

2003). Students are instructed that when they want to join groups they should move closer to the activity and the children, watch and wait for a pause, then at the opportune moment should politely ask if they can join in. The teachers then go on to discuss what to do when attempts are not successful and strong emotions arise, suggesting strategies like counting to 10 to calm down, looking for another group, and thinking of a solitary activity. After ample time to discuss their ideas, students break into small groups to work together to set goals for using the skills they have learned. Each child sets one or two goals; the teachers determine ways to track progress and rewards that can be gained for success.

Fortunately, the students have an opportunity to try out their new goals because it is recess time and several children have decided to form a team to play kickball. One child with a disability decides that he wants to join in and he tries his strategy so he can meet his goal. He moves closer to the group, looks them in the eyes, and at an opportune moment he asks if he can play. His attempt results in acceptance and happy feelings all around.

To date, the teachers in our fictitious scenario can expect to see this type of positive change in their classroom. The students in general education become more aware of their emotions, and there are fewer discipline referrals overall. At the same time, they are learning about their classmates' struggles to fit in and how emotional and upset they can feel when they are left out. This insight helps the students in general education develop a sense of empathy and care. Likewise, students with special needs gain insight into joining groups gracefully, learn how to recognize and label the emotions that they feel, and also acquire some strategies to use to regulate themselves. In addition, they set personal goals to implement those strategies.

Students can master emotional regulation when taught strategies in a structured format and when these ideas are reflected in the context of a picture book. Well-chosen picture books give students a behind-the-scenes glimpse

into the lives of characters who also face challenges regulating their emotions. Picture books can be used to help students understand what Katie and Sophie also learn: that emotions may seem overwhelming, sometimes to the point of exploding or becoming Bombaloo. Students can learn to manage, control, and effectively mobilize their emotions when provided with insight into their own feelings and with strategies to regulate them. This is a valuable lesson that will help students get along in the classroom and throughout their lives.

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