

# **[social] Emotional Teaching & Learning in Early Childhood**

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Children's emotions are an integral part of early childhood classrooms

# The Big Picture

Teachers'  
emotion-focused  
teaching



**Children's  
emotional  
competence**



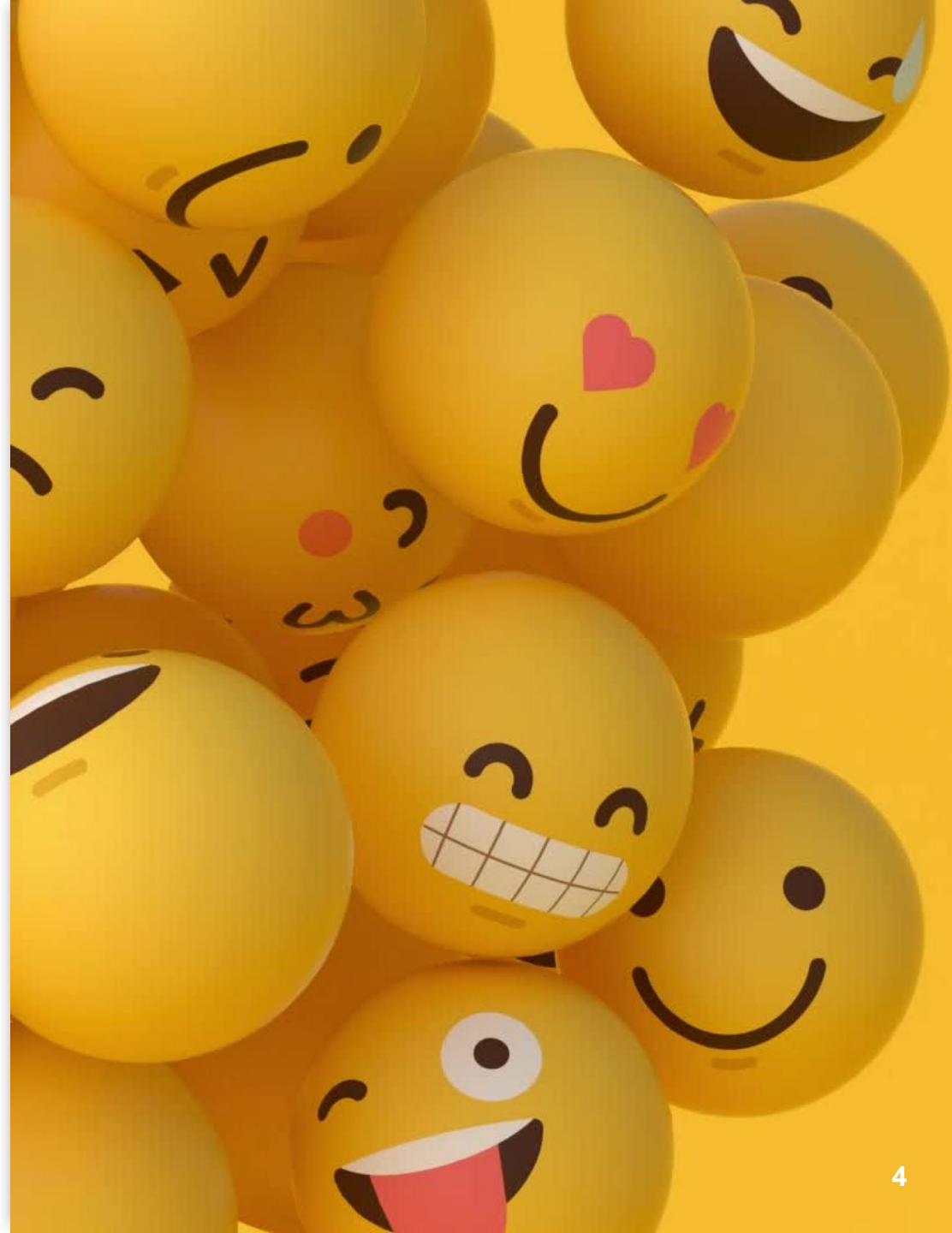
Social  
relationships &  
learning





# Emotions

- Emotions are not “good” or “bad” they are **unavoidable**
  - We all feel emotions, but we may not always express them
  - In others, we only see their outward expressions.
- Emotions are **critical to learning & relationships**



# Emotion skills are critical for social and academic success

## Children without age-appropriate emotional skills:

- Participate less in class
- Are less accepted by classmates/teachers
- Get fewer instructions/positive feedback from teachers
- Like school less and less



# What is emotional competence?



## Emotion Knowledge

Knowledge of their own & others' emotions



## Emotional Expression

The ability to express emotions in a socially appropriate way



## Emotion Regulation

The ability to manage their experience of emotions





# Emotion knowledge

## **Most preschool-aged children can talk about:**

- What makes them feel happy
- What makes their parents angry
- How their parents express emotion (“my mom slams the door”)
- And what parents would do when a child was afraid (“get a night light”).

## **Many still struggle to:**

- Interpret complex indicators of emotions (e.g., guilt)
- Understand ambiguous emotions
- Know what emotions should be expressed when





# Emotional expression

## Basic emotions

- Happy, sad, angry, afraid, etc.

## “Social” emotions

- Having a sense of self, relative to others
- Guilt, empathy, etc.

## Blended emotions

- Feeling sad + mad + guilty







# Little Emotion Regulation Scientists

- We change how we express emotions to accomplish goals:
  - Down-regulation: suppresses the experience and expression of emotion
  - Up-regulation: intensifies the experience and expression of emotion
  
- Learning *how & when* to do this takes **experimentation!**
  - *Last time I screamed, mom got upset*
  - *When I laughed at Sarah, she didn't want to play anymore*



**Children  
are still  
learning  
to manage  
their  
feelings**



# Reflection question:

- What is your favorite emotion to help children learn about?
- How do you think emotions help children learn?

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# A child's behavior...

- is a form of **communication**
- the observable result of **underlying emotions**
  - Excitement, Anger, Desire, Embarrassment
- can be a **challenge for others** to witness/experience
  - inconvenient, disruptive, dangerous, unwanted
  - 20-30% of children will engage in “challenging behaviors”\*
- **depends on:**
  - Biology
  - Age/development
  - Prior experiences (e.g. trauma, stress)
  - Context
  - What they've learned from adults



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# Children learn social-emotional skills...

- From their caring adults.
- Through **observation** and **experimentation**
- Through interactions with parents & **teachers!**



## Instructing

Information about the nature of emotions or social norms and expectations

## Responding

Adults' reactions to children's emotions & behaviors

## Modeling

Adult expressions of emotions and displays of regulation strategies

# Emotion-focused teaching supports children's social-emotional development





# Emotion-focused teaching supports children's **learning behaviors**



# Big Takeaways

- Teachers play a significant role in helping children develop the emotional skills they will need for life.
- There are three big domains of emotion-focused teaching:
  - Modeling
  - Responding
  - Instructing
- You are already doing these things during your interactions with children every day, so let's explore how to make the most of these opportunities

# Modeling

# What is modeling?



- **Adult expressions** of emotions and displays of regulation strategies
- Can be verbal or nonverbal
- Not necessarily done intentionally



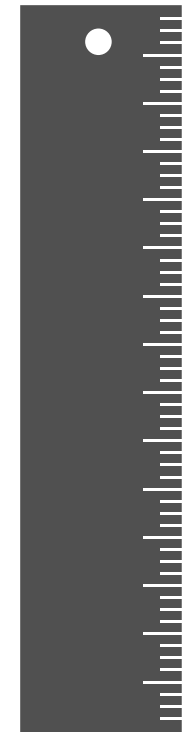
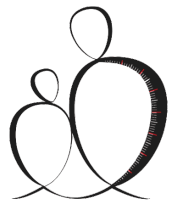
# Children learn about emotions from Modeling

## Children observe:

- What teachers say about how they're feeling
- What teachers do with their emotions
  - Non-verbal (clapping, frowning)
  - Teacher's own regulation (sighing, taking a break)
- What happens before and after teachers' emotional expressions
- Which emotions happen when & where

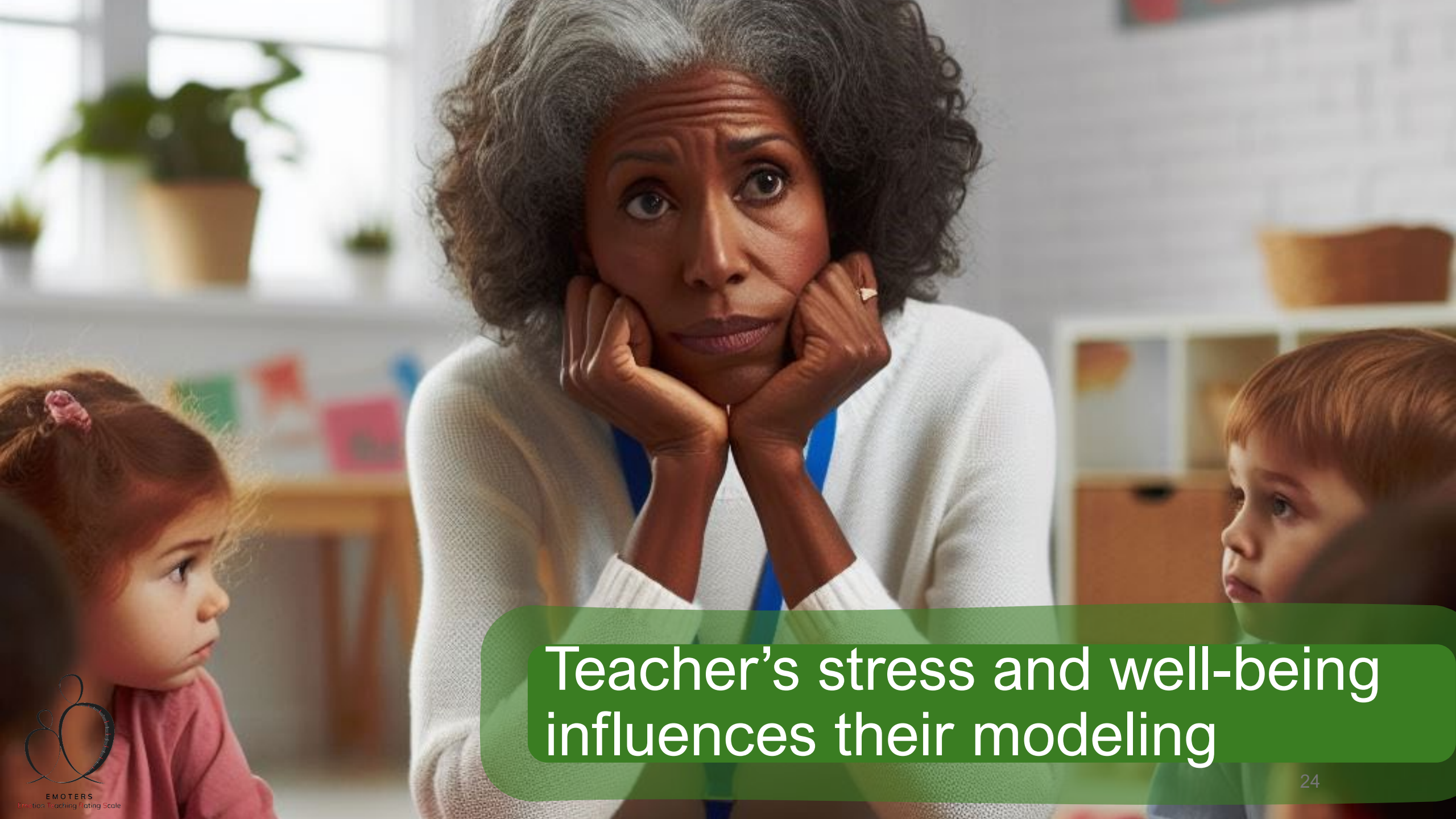
# High quality modeling

Depending on what  
(and how) emotions  
are **modeled**,  
teachers can either  
give a lot of  
information about  
emotions, or just a  
little



A whole LOT of  
information

Just a LITTLE  
information

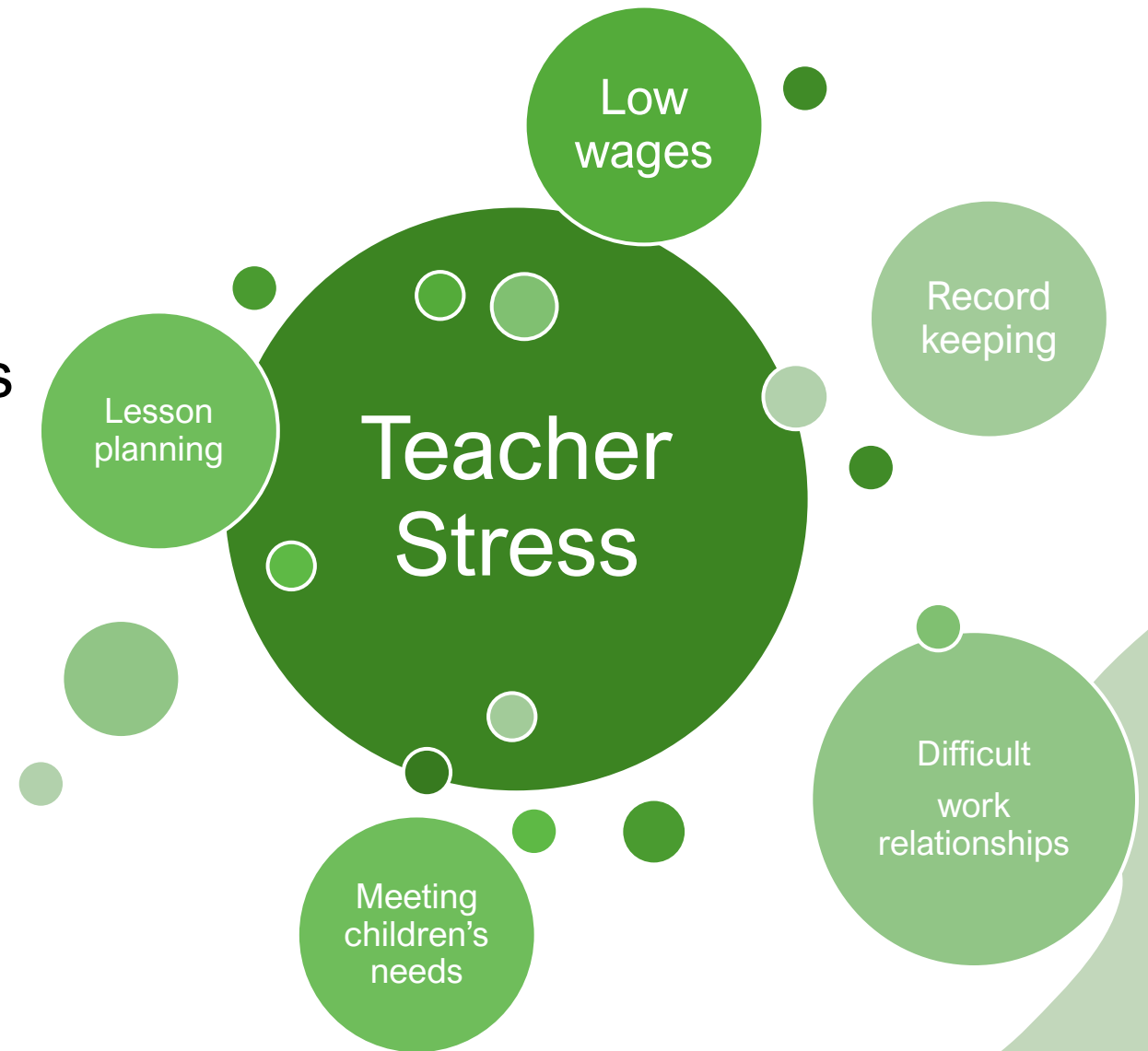


Teacher's stress and well-being  
influences their modeling



## Stressed teachers:

- Model more negative emotions
- Respond more negatively to children's behavior
- Detract from the classroom climate
- Are powerful examples of unmanaged feelings





# It's important for children to see adults experience *regulated* negative feelings

- When parents mask negative emotions, children may believe that their own negative feelings are inappropriate
- Emotion-focused teaching does not mean pretending not to feel
- Intentionality matters: children learn when teachers choose how to model their emotions

# Reflection Question...

- What part of your school day is most stressful?
- What strategies do you use to *regulate the* negative emotions that come up during the school day?

# Responding

# Children feel and show their emotions in the classroom

- Children may get upset over issues that arise when playing with peers
- Children may be sad when their parents drop them off in the morning
- Children may be happy or excited about certain activities or going outside to play



Teachers have ample opportunities to respond to children's feelings

# Responding affects children

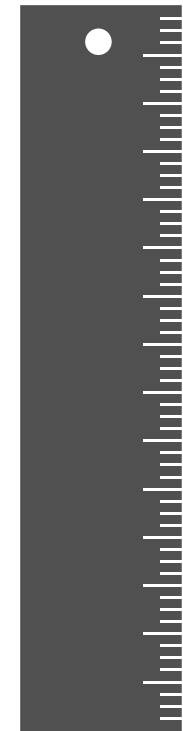


- Based on the responses, children can be **encouraged** or **discouraged** in both their current and future expression of the emotion
- Can also give children information about emotions in general, such as which emotions are **valid** or **acceptable** to express in certain situations



# High quality responding

Depending on what **responses** a teacher has to children's emotions, they can either validate or invalidate a child's emotions.



Validating

Invalidating



# Validating emotions versus behavior

- Validating responses validate the emotion. They do not need to validate the behavior that comes from that emotion.
- You can validate a child's anger without validating his knocking over of a chair.



**Our beliefs  
about  
emotions  
shape our  
responding**





# We all have beliefs about emotions

- Emotion beliefs are *socialized* by:
  - Families
  - Friends
  - Experiences
  - Cultures
  - Communities
- Which expressions of emotions are appropriate?
- Which are inappropriate?

# Reflection Question:

Which child emotion is the hardest for you to validate? Why?



# Instructing

# Instructing about emotions is...

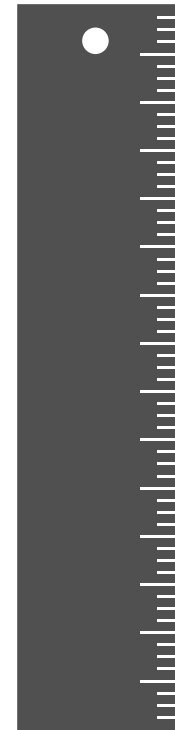
- Doing planned activities about emotions (including curricula)
- Using a situation to discuss emotional content
- Teaching about regulation strategies
- Talking about how to address future emotional situations
- Making connections between actions and feelings
- Pointing out verbal and nonverbal emotional cues (e.g. smiling vs. frowning)



# High quality instructing

Different instructing practices can give children different amounts of information about emotions

A whole LOT of information



Just a little information



# Reflection Questions:

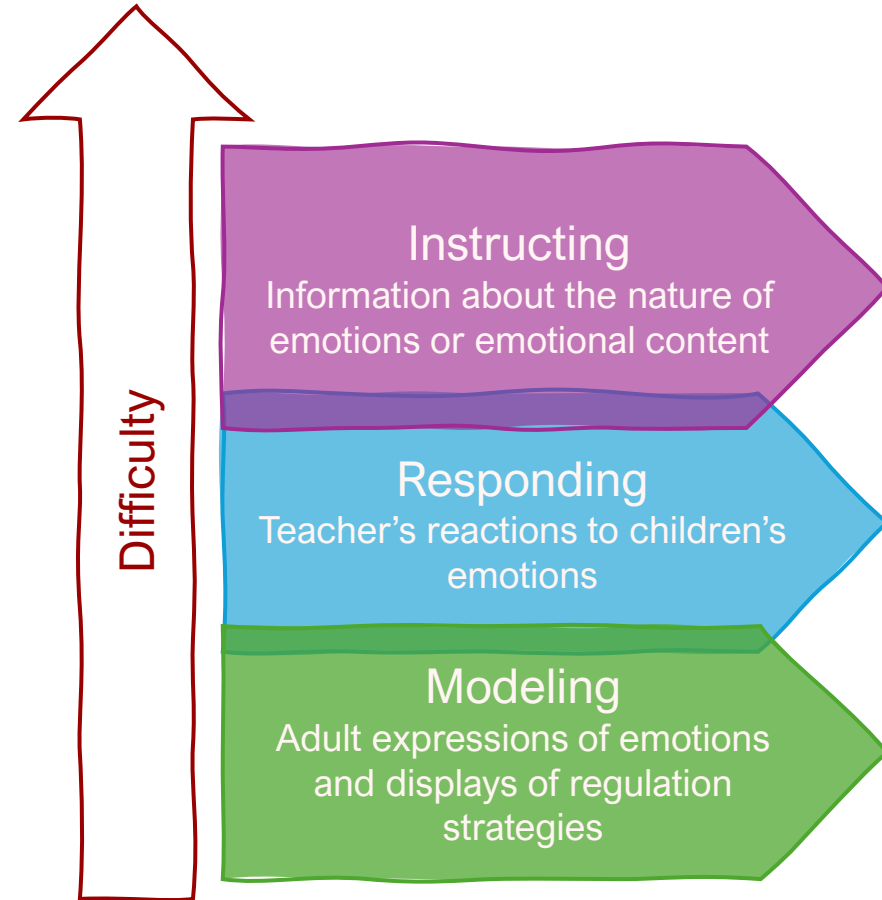
- During which activities do you find it easiest to instruct about emotions?
- When in the coming week can you try to incorporate more instruction about emotions?

# Putting It All Together



# All three domains of emotion-focused teaching work together

- **Instructing** is the most difficult as it requires the highest level of intentionality
- **Responding** is harder, requires intentional shifts
- **Modeling** is the easiest practice, comes the most naturally
- But practices **don't happen in isolation!**



Zinsser, Curby, Gordon & Moberg (2023)  
Gordon, Peng, Curby & Zinsser (2021)



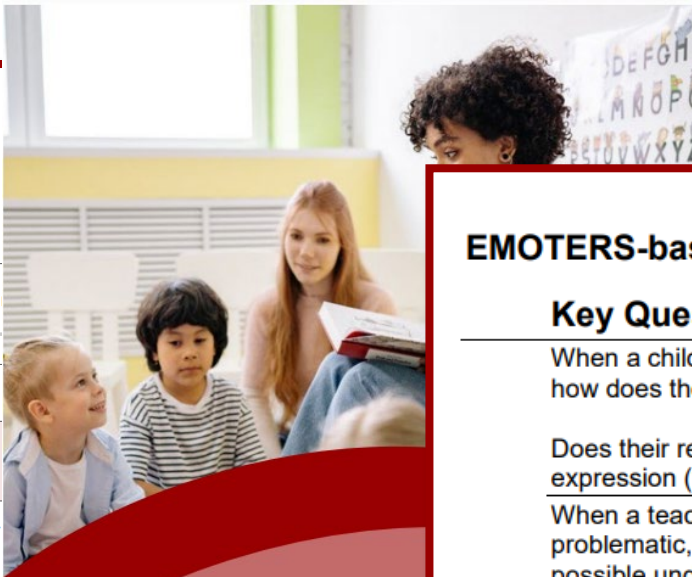


Children thrive on predictability—and this includes emotion-focused teaching



# Resources for learning more!

- + Interactive online asynchronous training
- + Downloadable companion material for reflection
- + Research-based tools for observing classrooms and coaching



EST FORM TRAININGS DEVELOPERS More

The Emotion-Focused Teaching

- ① Overview
- About this training 2/3 steps
- Emotional Development in Early 4/8 steps
- The Modeling of Emotions & Em 0/8 steps
- Responding to Children's Emoti 0/9 steps
- Instructing 0/11 steps
- Becoming an Emotion-Focused 0/9 steps

**Emotion Focused Teaching in Early Childhood Education**  
An interactive workbook grounded in the EMOTERS measure

**EMOTERS-based Guided Observation Tool**

Key Questions	Observations
When a child expresses a <b>negative</b> emotion, how does the teacher respond?	
Does their response acknowledge or allow its expression ( <b>validating</b> )?	
When a teacher perceives any <b>behavior</b> as problematic, does the teacher address a possible underlying emotion (e.g., "Are you throwing things because you're frustrated?")?	
Does the teacher help a child <b>regulate</b> an emotion with comfort, distractions, or guidance (e.g., "Let's take 3 deep breaths")?	
When a child expresses a <b>positive</b> emotion, how does the teacher respond?	
Does their response acknowledge or allow its expression ( <b>validating</b> )?	

**Responding**

All free to use, adapt, and distribute.

# Thanks! Let's Stay in Touch

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