

Touch what I feel

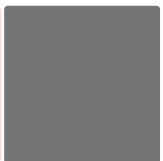
Support for the mental health of blind children

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What promotes emotional growth, health and positive identity?

- What do we all need?
- What do children need in particular?
- What do blind children need in particular?

The main concern of this presentation will be
emotions and communication:

how to deal with each other's *emotions* and *emotional expressions*

First, some assumptions about our basic human emotional needs

What we all need

- **Self esteem**

The basic experience that I am good enough as I am (E.Becker)

- **Bodily confirmation**

Physical touch

- **Symbolic confirmation**

- A large and solid repertoire of actions («coping abilities»)

More of what we all need

- A positive identity
- Attachment and to be part of a group of people
- A feeling of security, of being safe in the world

(a vulnerable area for blind children)

Sufficient amount of *structure*

predictability

control of the environment

The ability and opportunities to communicate

to understand and be understood

to influence and be influenced

- Wide and clear limits of behaviour

What we all need when it comes to emotions, especially painful ones or emotions that are hard to deal with

Another person

- with whom I can share a feeling or an experience
- who is able and willing to think and wonder with me
- who can acknowledge my feelings and reactions as true and valid
- who has time for me
- who is genuinely interested in me and willing to follow me where I need to go in my emotional landscape
- whose primary goal is to be with me, to be present, not to «heal» me, fix me or change me

What behaviours and attitudes like these may lead to

- a better understanding of myself, my feelings and reactions
- an increased amount of self reflection
- emotional **relief**

We can very rarely

- solve each other's problems
- «fix» each other's feelings or take the pain away
- heal each other

Three basic assumptions about emotions

- What is most important is not what emotions you have, but how you handle them
- Emotions are always true (for the one who has them)
«Feelings are facts»
- Joys can be doubled and griefs halved when we get the chance to share them with another person
provided that we are listened to, taken seriously and acknowledged

And a fourth assumption

If we have trouble recognizing our own feelings and/or lack a language in which to describe them there is a risk that we will easily

- be overwhelmed and overloaded by them
- lose control
- be carried away with them: «it just happened, I could not help it»

Four very common «inhibitors» for sharing and talking together

1. «Yes, but.....»

If we believe that feelings are always true, we should meet them and acknowledge them as such

- Tell me why you are sad.....tell me more...
- What did Peter do to make you so angry?
- What scared you the most?
- If I had been in your shoes, I think I would have felt it very tough, too.

If I do not believe that they are true because I do not understand them or I am unable to recognize them, I will easily respond as if I know better than you about your feelings, about what is «correct». But I don't.

2. «Yes, and I.....»

When the other one takes over the show and starts talking about his children, her mother, his experiences in hospital, or her neighbour's sad fate

The opposite position of Søren Kierkegaard's in «The Art of Helping»

A common variation when we work with children:
We have our plans and «projects» which we think would be helpful for the child and try to pull the child into our field, where are. We can easily lose the child on the way, particularly if the child is blind.

3. « I think you should.....» « Why don't you.....?»

- The bad habit of throwing out good advice without being asked for one

In many cases long before we know by far enough to have a sound basis for giving advice

«Do not answer before the question has been asked, for in the question, the answer lies buried» (Vigdís Garbæk)

4. «You have to be positive, no matter what»

Talking with blind children about emotions

- Project: «Touch what I feel»
- Counselling four teachers who were regularly having talks with blind children about feelings
- What we learned is being written down in a guidebook
- Will be published (in Norwegian) early next year

Goals of the project

To develop a tactile way of working together that could help children with a visual impairment to

- recognize, handle and communicate feelings
- to get more awareness about the connection between thoughts, feelings, reactions and situations

Successful practises

- Find objects, preferably in cooperation with the child, to represent the child's most common feelings
Angry, happy, sad, scared. Confused, irritated, missing Mom
- Have regular talks with the child about feelings
- When strong feelings appear in other situations:
Acknowledge and deal with them then and there, if possible.
If not: reassure the child that she will have a chance to talk about it in the next «feeling lesson»
- Give the child the proper object when the feeling appears or when you talk together about the feeling

Why use objects?

- Feelings tend to be elusive. They can be hard
to recognize
to hold on to long enough to work with
to communicate in accepted ways
to distinguish from other feelings
to grade: how angry was I?
- We need to have our feelings acknowledged
- An object can support these needs for a blind child:
«I can hear that you are really mad now. Here is the anger
object».

A way to start a «feeling lesson»

- Ask the child if he wants to talk about one of the feelings
- Give him a box with the feeling objects and let him choose one or you may select one yourself to talk about
- Ask him if he wants to talk about an event that you know has aroused feelings in him
- Read or tell a true story about something resembling what the child has experienced, as much as possible from the child's point of view

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- Read or tell a made up story about another child who in some important way resembles the child (like being blind) and something she has experienced.
 - Tell something about your own emotional reactions when you once experienced something similar to the child. What did I feel when I was pushed down the stairs or when I was rejected from a play group as a child?

Support for a positive identity

- Give the blind child the possibility to develop a double identity
First of all as a child like all other children. Similar in just about all ways.
With one exception: does not see with his eyes.
- Needs regular contact with and opportunities to make friends in both groups
- Blind children in mainstream education in Norway
attending once-a-year national grade courses:
«one of the highlights of the year»
- A wish: that all blind children in mainstream education had
regular contact with at least one other child with a visual
impairment

The special case of positive identity and «feeling lessons»

To have somebody who can listen to me and talk with me about my visual impairment and what it leads to

What it feels like to

- be different from most others in this respect
- be rejected from or unable to perform some socially important activities
- feel observed and pointed out in many social settings, without knowing if actually happens or not

What we can do

- Read for the child from a book about a child with VI
- Talk about other children you have heard of who has a VI
- Invite to talk about this topic, particularly if you have seen some emotional reaction in the child

What we can do

- Try to make «openings» or invitations which the child can respond to or not respond to.

No pressure.

At any rate, she will know that you are ready to share with her, if or when she wants to.

Has to do with sharing our thoughts or wonderings with the child and find out if she is there or not

- Catch «test balloons» from the child
- Talk about and prepare the child for strange or very direct questions from others

Summary

- See, acknowledge, confirm the child's feelings
- Avoid the four inhibitors

Yes, but....

Yes, and I....

I think you should.....

You always have to be positive....

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- Let the child share with you
 - Listen and wonder along with the child
 - Ask «opening» questions more than give «closing» answers
 - Give the child time, your time
 - Follow the child to where she needs to go in her mind
 - Do not start out to fix, solve the problem or heal in matters of feelings

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- If possible, give the child a chance to have regular talks with an empathic and interested adult about feelings, including those connected to the VI
 - Try to find out if a «feeling object» may be helpful for this child
 - Try to give the child the possibility to have regular contact with both sighted and blind children