



CREATIVE SKILLS
ONLINE

The Creative Skills Podcast

Series 2, Episode 1: How do I... support emotional literacy and wellbeing in early years children?

Transcript

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- This podcast episode: www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode-wellbeing
- Wee Inspirations: www.starcatchers.org.uk/wee-inspirations

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Transcript

Heather Armstrong (00:09):

Hello, and welcome to the Creative Skills podcast, I'm Heather Armstrong. This February, from the 7th to the 13th, it's Children's Mental Health Week, and this year's theme is "Growing Together".

The theme makes me think about the wee ones we work with and their experiences growing up in the last couple of years through this pandemic. It also makes me think about us as adults and how we've all had to change and grow too. When you're in a caring role, it can be really easy to put your own wellbeing on the back burner and all that chat about, "put on your own oxygen mask first" can be really frustrating if you feel that you never have enough hours in a day, and if you're constantly firefighting.

So, this year, I want to think about the ways we can support emotional literacy and wellbeing for wee ones, without adding anything extra to your to-do list. How can we offer opportunities to build the skills that support good mental health through the things we do every day? First off, we sat down with Charlotte Allan who leads creative skill sessions in drama and puppetry, to talk about how drama and imaginative play could offer opportunities for children to explore and learn about emotions.

Charlotte Allan (01:18):

My name's Charlotte Allan and I'm a theatre-maker with my theatre company, Ipdip Theatre, and I'm also a post-graduate researcher. I'm particularly interested in the adult child relationship in the context of performing arts for the very young.

For a start I think that story and character are really useful when we're thinking about emotional literacy in terms of naming emotions, recognising emotions, enacting them, and seeing what it looks like in somebody else and ourselves - which is part of communication isn't it? Recognising what somebody else might be feeling or trying to communicate how we are feeling because it makes a difference.

So, I think the way that story and character come into this is that's where we really get those models of what sort of people do - what characters do - and how people respond. And that's absolutely something that we can play through. So, if you're playing with a story, you can ask "how does baby bear feel with the empty bowl of porridge?" or "how would you feel if you had your breakfast there, you went out the room, you came back and it was gone - how would you react?" So we get to play with those ideas of "what would it be like" - that's a huge thing in drama, isn't it?

It's like, "what would I do if" and "what would happen if". I think that consciously thinking about it in terms of the emotional learning can be really interesting way to approach [drama and imaginative play].

Heather Armstrong (03:03):

The nice thing about those questions as well, is that there's no right answer. So it could be that you've got a bowl of porridge, you leave the room and you come back, it's gone, but you're delighted because you hate porridge!

Charlotte Allan (03:21):

And that can take you somewhere else! I think any emotion is always the opportunity to start a story or continue a story in another direction as well, you know?

I was with a friend recently and his toddler, he's a trained actor, and he was saying to her: "show me your happy face", "show me your sad face". It was a little game - but what I pointed out to him was that she wasn't like just showing her sad face, she was doing her entire body. Her entire body was engaged with each of these different things - it's not just an emoji face that goes on and off - the whole body becomes part of this!

The more we're able to key into that is important - because emotions happen all over the place in our bodies, before we try and label them in our heads. That can be a really interesting way to help again with this idea of interoception¹ [*laughs*] and recognising your own experiences internally - that helps you understand why you might react or respond in different ways.

Heather Armstrong (04:35):

Yeah. I wonder with people wearing masks more in times of COVID - I wondered about the communication of feelings with our bodies and with our eyes. I dunno if anyone's done this but it feels like a bit of a fun drama game as well to be like, if someone does have a mask on then can we still tell how they're feeling?

Charlotte Allan (04:59):

Maybe we're all having to be much more express over that bodies in a deliberate way. I'll thank you for my coffee through the medium of dance [*laughs*]

Heather Armstrong (05:09):

I would love that [*laughs*]

¹ For more information on interoception, listen to our podcast with Skye Reynolds on development patterns. The full episode and its transcript are available on our website: <https://www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode7>

Heather Armstrong (05:15):

I love Charlotte's analysis of drama as an inherently emotional experience. To engage with imaginative play, we're naturally supporting playing with emotions, reactions, and empathy.

The way she spoke about emotions being a whole body experience really resonated with me too, both in terms of the way we express ourselves to others, but also in how we recognise how we are feeling ourselves.

It reminded me the work Starcatchers is doing in a family centre in Midlothian. "Wee People, Big Feelings" is a project we're running with Scot's Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre in Penicuik. The staff and children have spent time with dance artist Skye Reynolds to explore how moving and tuning into our bodies can support these emotional literacy and wellbeing skills.

We'll be diving into the project more in a future episode. So, if you haven't already subscribed to this podcast now is a great time to do it. When you subscribe to the podcast using any podcast app, you'll get a notification each time a new episode is released.

As part of the project, Scot's Corner spent some time with Amy Hall-Gibson, a drama artist who explores emotions through stories and books. I sat down with Amy so she could share her process of exploring emotions through any book.

Amy Hall-Gibson (06:30):

My name is Amy Hall-Gibson, and I am a creative freelancer. And I also work for Education Scotland as their Development Officer of Creativity.

Heather Armstrong (06:41):

Now Amy, you ran some training for us recently for our wee people big feelings project. So we've been working with Scott's corner to explore, uh, emotional literacy and wee ones. And you did some lovely things with stories and, and as part of that training - would you mind talking us do some of the stuff that you did there?

Amy Hall-Gibson (07:04):

Yeah. So, it's about using the book as the wonderful resource that they are and tapping into emotional literacy. I know myself, I've been caught up in that idea of "I need to find a book that talks about grief," "I need to find a book that talks about becoming a big sister". When you type that into google, you get loads of American

ones, but actually they're not necessarily appropriate or they're not what you want or you see them and you think, it's just not inspiring me.

Actually when that happened to me, I then thought, you know what? Let's look at the books that I do love - that children love - and just read them through that, reading them through with that aspect of - is there any grief in this? Is there any upset or loss or any of those emotions? And there absolutely is. Obviously, I can't say that for every single book, cause I've not read every single picture book [*laughs*]. However I would say in most of them, there is an aspect of that.

One of the examples I used was *The Gruffalo* because it's such a popular story. Most practitioners have read it - they're probably sick of it, because they've read it year after year after year! So, this was a new way for practitioners to look at it as well. A refreshed way. What we did was, is looked at the illustrations because they gave us the biggest clues. And in the illustration, you know, the little, the mouse is scared when he bumps into the characters - he is petrified! So, there's fear in there. And then what we did was, is took the emotion. So - the little mouse is, is scared, how do we put that into context? And what I mean by that is just by saying "he's scared", it doesn't mean that we know what it means. So, we can look at the picture and that gives us a visual, but it doesn't mean we know how it *feels*.

So, there's a wonderful activity - I used to call it Face Masks, but then COVID happened, and I thought, no, not appropriate! [*laughs*] So we call it the Magic Mask. And basically, it's about, giving children the freedom to explore that emotion, whatever it be.

So, if it was fear, you take two hands and you cover your face so it's like a mask on your face and then you say, okay, "I want you to show me little mouse's scared face!" And then you just do a "one two three" revealing everyone - including practitioners - take away their hands and they show that scared face.

So, what that's doing is it's letting the children acknowledge what it feels like - facial expression wise. So, they're feeling that, but they're also seeing everyone else. And so, it's really pointing out that although we call an emotion, a generic one - fear, sadness, etc. - but actually we do feel them in different ways, and we also display them in different ways.

It creates this context for having those emotional literacy conversations. It makes it a more meaningful conversation when they come in in the morning, that type of thing, or as an intervention. And we say how are you feeling? And there's these lots of wonderful techniques that you can use. You know, they've got like visuals and

things like that, but this is another one to add to that toolbox. Relating it to character, so that the children portray it onto the character, [lets] them feel almost removed, but in the same instance, they're directly telling you how they're feeling as well.

So, an example of that would be, "how do you think the little mouse is feeling today" and then they can show, do the magic mask. Then asking "oh, is that the same as you?" It opens up that dialogue or you could then offer "that's how the little mouse is feeling today - well, this is how I'm feeling today" or vice versa. It just creates that whole opportunity to explore it. And the beautiful thing is it can be done with any book - just any book you've got - have a look at the illustrations, have a look through and sort of think of it from that emotional perspective character feeling, and then explore that with your children!

Heather Armstrong (12:01):

It's a really safe way to do it, isn't it? I think I was gonna say some young children, or maybe all of us - you don't know exactly how you're feeling. It's only afterwards that you can try and kinda pick it apart a little bit.

Amy Hall-Gibson (12:15):

Yes!

Heather Armstrong (12:16):

So to be able to have these conversations about characters and about books that they're already familiar with - I think it feels really lovely and supportive and safe.

It's also that thing of like - if the conversation is going and then a wee one decides that actually "this is too much, I'm not in a place to about this," it's easy to close the book. It's easy to transfer into something else and it's not this big kind of "well, we need to stop playing now because the whole point of playing together was to explore emotions".

It's a really, it's a really nice way, I think, to value the voice of the child and really listen to what they're ready to explore. I have to say one of the nicest bits of feedback, we got as well was from the practitioners that took part in that training, saying "it is just so freeing that we can use any book". We don't need to, you know, be like "there's wee one who's displaying a lot of anger, do we have a book about being angry?" - which can sometimes feel a little bit too on the nose, can't it?

Amy Hall-Gibson (13:19):

Yeah.

Heather Armstrong (13:19):

And I think wee ones can sometimes realise that and go - “you’re trying to talk to me about being angry, but I don’t wanna talk about being angry”. So, it’s really, really effective. So, thank you so much for sharing that!

Heather Armstrong (13:38):

In the run up to Christmas, Scot’s Corner explored the story of the Gingerbread Man. We worked with them to create a gorgeous video, which celebrates the different ways the staff and children brought the story to life.

And if you read the Wee Inspiration resources that go along with the video, you can see how they were exploring emotional literacy at the *same time* as they enjoyed music, movement, sensory activities, and imaginative play – and I think this is the key! It’s not about creating more work for yourself, it’s about bringing in awareness of child’s mental health and emotional literacy into what you’re already doing and finding real opportunities throughout the day to explore these things.

If you want to get ideas for adapting your own story, the link for Wee People, Big Feelings will be in the show notes. While Scot’s Corner did a Christmas story, you could do this at any time of year.

We’ve spoken a lot about stories and books and characters, but puppets are also a great tool for thinking about emotions. Here’s Charlotte Allan, again, talking about how they can aid communication about topics that might otherwise feel daunting.

Charlotte Allan (14:39):

Big feelings as well can be explored very productively with puppets - which is something that people coming from the the wellbeing or mental health side in terms of their experience and training - find puppetry is a really common tool that is used because it’s so effective. One of the most powerful things about a puppet is it’s a character. So, it’s like it has feelings and intentions and an inner life [*laughs*] but it’s also an object. So, it’s inherently safe because it can be put in a box or it can be taken off the hand or it can be squashed [*laughs*].

You can really explore difficult feelings and difficult characters that characters that in that inspire difficult feelings. So, it’s sort of like almost setting up the scenario for the thing that would make you react in that way, but you’re doing it in such a way that it can be stopped at any point.

That means that a story can be stopped at any point, or an exploration of a

challenging feeling can be stopped because - like with a lot of things, say working with something that frightens - you have to go bit by a bit, because if you get past the point and tip over into panic, then you stop learning. You've lost the ability to control what you're doing. So, whatever the strong feeling is we're working with, we need to be able to go: "oh, we're at the edge, we're at the edge, and now we pull back". And when you're working with a puppet - you've got instantaneous control of that edge because the puppet can vanish, the character can disappear immediately, you've got the control to change, change things.

Heather Armstrong (16:42):

And if wee ones are struggling with the, and big feelings in that moment can puppet sometimes be useful?

Charlotte Allan (16:49):

Yeah. So, the other wonderful thing about puppets - there's so many wonderful things about puppets! - but another thing that puppets are often great at is being this middle point of communication between an adult and a wee one, especially when direct communication is maybe a bit too much.

So, eye contact is a, is a good way of sort of gaging that. So, you can have a communication with somebody who won't or can't do direct eye contact, but through the puppet, you can have quite a bit of interaction and then that can support building their confidence. I've spoken a lot with practitioners about how puppets can really support language for children with elective mutism. It's often sort of one of the roots through.

Heather Armstrong (17:43):

Oh lovely. I, because I guess there's two aspects to emotional literacy, isn't there? There's the everyday opportunities to build up that verbal language, but also non-verbal understanding what these different words mean when it comes to feelings and how they feel and how we express them.

But then there's also that kind of in that moment - big feelings. If we're struggling to self-regulate then it's about saying, "well, actually, are there things that we can put in place?" And sometimes it isn't always about the expressive arts, but I really like that idea that in difficult moments we can use puppets to kind of take away that pressure. I think sometimes to say "sit down, tell me how you feel" - it's too much pressure, too much pressure for adults never mind wee ones, but there might be a kind of more playful, imaginative way that we can have those conversations.

Charlotte Allan (18:44):

Yeah. I mean, certainly - "tell me how you feel" is, uh, it's a much more difficult

question than perhaps we acknowledge [*laughs*] because it's asking a lot in terms of understanding your own feelings, understanding your own feelings in the exact moment, being able to communicate that in a verbal way.

So, I think any kind of offers that are not “I need to know how you're feeling” - actually perhaps what you need is to know how you're feeling yourself and I can give you tools to help you understand that without the pressure that you actually need to communicate that to anyone else, but you need space to explore and understand your own feeling first.

I we need to remember how valuable stories are, in whatever way we experience them, in terms of the power they have to show these are, this is an experience that has occurred. Every story is something that links us to others.

Heather Armstrong (20:12):

I think sometimes even something simple as kind of sharing a story: “when I was wee I remember X happened and I felt Y” - so often you'd see there be face like up and go “oh, that's what happened to me! That's how I feel!”

Charlotte Allan (20:29):

Yes! I just remember my little boy when he was very young - and it was young so that I was surprised and how he identified - I think when we were watching like a YouTube video of elephants and there was an elephant, a baby elephant, that had been in a hole and people helped it out and he was crying because he was so happy that the elephant was okay. And then he, um, he saw the elephant go back to its Mum and then there was like a slightly smaller elephant. And he was like, oh and there's [his sister's name]. So it was like, there was a Mummy elephant, there was a big sister elephant, but he actually used his sister's name, which I'm not saying, cause this is like a public podcast!

Heather Armstrong (21:11):

Yeah, of course!

Charlotte Allan (21:11):

But, [*laughs*] the thing that made that it made me realise was that he was that elephant in the hole, do you know what I mean? Like he a hundred percent identified with that character, and that's why this experience was so emotional for him. And I remember when he used to refer to characters in books as “the [his name]” - he was absolutely saying, this is the me [*laughs*] in the book.

If we think of it in those terms, if we think that it's not just listening to a story and

thinking about these other people, but we are sort of actually placing the kid in there and they're experiencing these things - and actually how powerful that is!

Heather Armstrong (21:54):

Yeah, it actually makes me think about diversity and stories as well, both in terms of, you know, pictures, being able to see characters that look like you, but also be able to see characters who are in situations that you're in.

It's probably really important for wee ones to look at say, family makeup – it could be about having two Mums, or living with your grandparents - but being able to have that recognition of, for me, “there's the Heather in that story who has a family who looks like mine” - in whatever form that may take.

Charlotte Allan (22:38):

And I think that's, like you say, that family makeup thing is a huge thing because part of his identity was very much as the little brother. That's like a huge part of who he was, particularly when he was younger, that's what he was born into.

Heather Armstrong (22:56):

One last thought about the power of stories. During the first lockdown Starcatchers shared a Wee Inspiration called “The Story of You” - we'll link it to the show notes. But the basic idea is that you tell a wee one all about themselves, focusing on their successes and how they've triumphed over adversity.

We have all faced adversity over the past couple of years. So much of mental health is about the stories we tell ourselves that we voice inside us that frames events and our actions in a certain way. So be that voice in their heads that tells them life can be tough sometimes, but you are amazing.

Catherine Wilson Garry (23:44):

Thank you so much for listening. The Creative Skills podcast was hosted by Heather Armstrong. Thank you to our guests, Charlotte Allan and Amy Hall-Gibson. You can find links to their work in the show notes.

To find this podcast accompanying resources and all of the resources mentioned in this episode, head to www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode-wellbeing

If you've enjoyed this podcast or any of our other resources, tell your friends or colleagues,

it really helps us out.

Music in this episode, came from Starcatchers productions: “Little Light”, “Hup”, “Baby Chill” and the YouTube Audio Library. Full credits are in the show notes.

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