

Regulating children's excitement: Strategies that support emotional development

Ms. Smith and her children are in the school parking lot discussing the parts of a car.

"Is that your car?" asks Lindsey.

Smiling and nodding, Ms. Smith says, "This is my car."

Juan, pointing at a cheerleading pom-pom hanging off the antenna, says, "Hook 'em, Horns. Hook 'em, Horns."

"Yes," says Ms. Smith. "I decorated my car with University of Texas colors because I like the university—orange and white."

A cheer goes up among the children: "Yeah, you got 'Hook 'em, Horns.'"

Ms. Smith smiles and nods and then tries to redirect their attention: "All right, remember we've talked about keys? Let me show you. This key can work two ways. I can put the key in the lock right here and unlock the door, or I can push this button that says 'Unlock.' And if you sit very quietly, you can hear it make an unlock sound. Let's see if we can hear it."

"I heard it," says Hannah.

Looking at one particular child, Ms. Smith says, "Did you hear it? I'm going to try locking it. Listen."

All the children clap and say, "I heard it."

Ms. Smith points to the car door: "OK, now this is the door of the car. My car only has two doors. It has one on the driver's side, where I sit, and one on the passenger's side. What is this glass part called?"

"The window!" the children cry out.

"Yes, it's a window. Why do you think I need a window in the car?" The children offer up ideas. Ms. Smith continues: "Now this is something that's a little bit different. This is a special car called a convertible, and that means the top will move down."

Several children stand up and say excitedly, "Open!"

"Yes," Ms. Smith's voice is calm. "That's what

we're going to do."

Henry shouts, "Hey, hey, my dad has two!" Liam claims his dad has three.

"He has three doors?" asks Ms. Smith. Liam nods his head in confirmation.

"This car has two doors," says Ms. Smith.

"Oh," Liam says. "Actually my dad has four doors."

Ms. Smith smiles and refocuses the children's attention. "OK, this is what I need to do. To make this top move, I have to start the engine. So I want you to make sure you're sitting on your bottoms so that everyone stays safe. I'm not going to let the car move. I'm just going to turn it on." She turns the key in the ignition and the car starts.

Giving the thumbs-up sign, Micky says, "Cool!"

Other children clap their hands and say, "Awesome." "Way to go!"

"So when we have beautiful weather like we do today," says Ms. Smith, "I can put the top down and



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let the wind blow in my face and my hair and let the sun shine on me. Oh, it feels so good.”

“My mother’s car looks like that,” says Molly.

Ms. Smith nods, “She does have a convertible car. Can you say ‘convertible?’” The children repeat the word. “Convertible means changeable; a convertible car has a top that goes down.”

HOW TEACHERS RESPOND TO CHILDREN’S EXCITEMENT CAN AFFECT THEIR ENGAGEMENT.

“It’s called a sunroof,” says Corin.

“What does a sunroof look like?” Ms. Smith asks, but Corin does not respond. “Now Corin said something about a sunroof. A sunroof is a little bit the same and a little bit different. The top stays up but a small part opens up, doesn’t it? So it’s a little bit the same and a little bit different.”

They continue to explore the car but now they compare it to the assistant teacher’s van.



In this vignette, we see a preschool teacher striking a balance between excitement and engagement by either increasing or decreasing children’s excitement levels. Excitement—that highly activated, pleasant emotion—is, for any teacher, a double-edged sword: it can promote or thwart children’s engagement (Linnenbrink 2007). This is particularly true in early childhood settings where children’s behaviors are influenced by their emotional states (Blair 2002). Moreover, with young children prone to emulating one another, these emotions spread quickly through a class.

How teachers respond to children’s excitement can affect their engagement. If aware of this dynamic, teachers can find more opportunities for both engagement and excitement—in balance. Indeed, teachers of young children have the opportunity to tap into their potential to become more focused learners. Promoting children’s excitement about and engagement in learning is an essential component of

school readiness and successful learning experiences (Hyson 2008).

How do early childhood educators effectively support children’s engagement in learning while regulating constructive levels of excitement? Many teachers seek strategies that engage all children while avoiding over-stimulating children for whom excitement can quickly devolve into challenging behaviors. This article will help us understand how teachers can support, in a developmentally appropriate way, children’s excitement levels to sustain their engagement.

Defining engagement

Regardless of how researchers define types of emotion in the classroom, most agree that the desired outcome is *engagement*. Engagement has an observable effect on learning and the classroom environment and thus is an important topic in early childhood research. In early childhood education, engagement is a key component of school readiness assessments that measure how long a child can maintain focus on one topic (Hyson 2008).

Engagement can be defined according to its theoretical approaches and to a teacher’s assessment of a child’s developmental skills across all domains—cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and language, for example.

To understand how children’s emotions affect their engagement in learning, we can draw on the work of Marilou Hyson (2008). She sees classroom engagement as a blend of behavioral and emotional dimensions. It is behavior that is contextually appropriate. She links engagement with *positive approaches to learning* in which a teacher cultivates engagement by eliciting interest, enjoyment, and motivation to learn. A teacher who strikes a balance between excitement and engagement is likely to produce many of the same positive outcomes.

The role of emotion in the learning process

Many studies report that emotions play a pivotal regulatory role that contributes to academic performance (Hyson 2008; Linnenbrink 2007; Pekrun et al. 2002). In particular, a child’s emotions can play a positive or a negative role in the learning process. For example, Pekrun and colleagues (2002) find that positive emotional states (defined variously as interested,

calm, or excited) motivate children's attentiveness, create incentives to stay on task, shine a positive light on learning, and help initiate self-regulation in learning. Negative emotional states (bored, sad, or frustrated, for example) lead to self-protective disengagement, avoidance, and off-task behaviors.

These findings are important because they help us understand how emotions can support or disrupt learning engagement. When teachers support and encourage the emotions necessary for engagement, children are more likely to succeed now and later in school. Teachers can leverage emotions to elicit optimal engagement.

TEACHERS CAN LEVERAGE EMOTIONS TO ELICIT OPTIMAL ENGAGEMENT.

Linnenbrink (2007) adds a layer of complexity to the analysis of positive and negative emotions in learning. She suggests a "multi-dimensional model of affect" that would take into account not only the valence of the emotion (positive or negative) but its level of activation, or its strength. Thus, a positive emotion such as excitement differs in activation level from a positive emotion such as calmness (as do the negative emotions of anger and sadness).

Linnenbrink emphasizes the need to look at context when assessing emotion, proposing that teachers may wish, depending on the complexity of the task, to facilitate a more neutral state of emotion with low activation. This allows children to engage in complex cognitive processes without the distraction of processing strongly positive or negative emotions, states that can hinder working memory. Because most studies do not assess emotion according to activation, Linnenbrink could not reach a conclusion about her hypothesis. Nevertheless, this model expands our awareness when assessing how emotions work in the classroom.

Rosiek (2003) attempts to move beyond simple categorizations of emotions as positive or negative. He argues that traditional perceived-as-negative emotions—sadness, frustration, or anger—can be used

constructively. The process, of course, depends on context including the subject matter and composition of the group. He re-conceptualizes how we categorize emotions, arguing that we should assess emotions based on how constructive they are to children's learning. The literature, with the exception of Linnenbrink's provocative review and Rosiek's work, generally proposes that positive emotions assist engagement, while negative emotions hinder it. Linnenbrink and Rosiek both call for a more contextualized understanding of emotion's function in the classroom, asking us to be aware of a wider variety of functions for emotion in enhancing engagement.

Balancing children's excitement and engagement

How well a teacher understands the role of excitement in learning can influence children's engagement levels. The strategies described here are ones that Ms. Smith used in the opening vignette when she perceived that the general level of children's excitement was either too low or too high.

In the vignette, Ms. Smith saw children's engagement as analogous to a hot air balloon: too much emotion would carry off engagement, taking the learning out of the children's reach. So like the pilot of a hot air balloon, she tried to regulate children's excitement levels to keep them at an optimal level of engagement. She wanted the children to be excited but not to the point of distraction.



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Strategies for fostering children's excitement levels

Specific instructional strategies can optimize engagement and modulate excitement. These include using tangible objects, personal stories, demonstration, careful observation, and calibrated questions.

Use tangible objects. Many ordinary objects will appeal to and captivate children. Carefully select materials that elicit excitement for nearly *all* children. Real-world objects that resonate with children's lives lay the groundwork for exciting and engaging learning experiences. Ms. Smith's own car fostered the children's excitement. They eagerly spoke up about their connections to cars and used car vocabulary (convertible, for example). Ms. Smith wanted the children to connect the lesson with their life experiences. Doing so made them enjoy learning and see its relevance. When their senses were engaged, children became eager to learn. By making the interaction hands-on, Ms. Smith made the vocabulary, particularly for the second language learners, concrete.

Use anecdotes. Children enjoy—and learn from—stories. Personal anecdotes are effective at eliciting excitement. By simply acknowledging her love of UT, its colors, and its motto (“Hook ‘em, Horns”), Ms. Smith generated some excitement. Sharing a personal story enhanced children's memory of a lesson, strengthened their relationship, and made learning more personal and fun. When Ms. Smith gave children a glimpse into her personal history, she seized a moment that supported their excitement.

Demonstrate. Demonstration teaching can spark excitement and heighten engagement, directing learning through all the senses. This strategy is especially effective with English language learners. From the vignette, we see the ease with which Ms. Smith incorporated *door, window, top down, convertible, and ignition* into the exploration of a car. Her demonstration prompted not just applause but verbal responses that extended the conversation and strengthened the learning. The demonstration elicited excitement while maintaining engagement with the learning task.

Observe. Observe children constantly to seize teachable moments in which children can express excitement about a topic. Ms. Smith supported children's excitement about the pom-pom by explaining her love for the university. Observing and keeping

attuned to children's reactions enabled her to support their excitement. Later, Ms. Smith asked the children if they heard the locking and unlocking sound made by the key. After several children said they heard it, Ms. Smith continued to observe and, by continually turning the key, ensured that all the children got in on the activity. “Did you hear it?” she asked. “I’m going to try locking it. Listen.” More children said they heard it. A teacher's careful observation of children's reactions to instruction is the cornerstone of supporting their excitement to learn. In addition, being well-prepared for class allowed her the mental space for her ongoing assessments.

PERSONAL ANECDOTES ARE EFFECTIVE AT ELICITING EXCITEMENT.

Use calibrated questions. Ms. Smith often asked calibrated questions; that is, she determined different levels of understanding and tailored questions to fit individual learning levels. For example, she aimed questions at particular children rather than to the whole class. As another example, Corin, one of only two native English-speaking children in the class, called the convertible top a sunroof. She calibrated a question to maintain his excitement but still help the rest of the class profit from his language proficiency. She asked Corin to describe what a sunroof looked like and, when he demonstrated a lack of understanding, provided additional examples and information to scaffold learning. “Now a sunroof is a little bit the same and a little bit different. The top stays up but a small part opens up, doesn't it?” Considering children's individual learning differences, Ms. Smith adjusted her feedback to motivate them and sustain their engagement. The goal was to provide all children with feelings of success.

Strategies for dampening children's excitement levels

When children were overly exuberant, Ms. Smith tried regulating these levels downward. By deliberately controlling her tone of voice, expressing her expectation in positive words, and validating chil-

dren's emotions, she created a space in which children could get a handle on their emotional states and re-engage with the lesson—all without reprimands and corrections.

Stay calm—in voice and body language.

Children's excitement can lead them away from the point of a lesson. When the excitement about the pom-pom didn't abate, Ms. Smith used a gentle tone when saying, "All right, remember we've talked about keys? Let me show you..." Calmness is an important pedagogical tool to redirect children's energy while not derailing their focus from the topic. Rather than having school spirit derail the lesson, Ms. Smith gently returned children's attention to the learning objectives.

Provide clear expectations. Communicate specific expectations with clarity. Work to respect children's excitement, not overrule it. Avoid overcontrolling language and demands and recall basic guidance techniques. In the vignette, Ms. Smith established herself as a safe presence delivering her expectations in a gentle tone of voice. Her focus was on vocabulary, but she didn't miss a chance to strengthen the teacher-child relationship. The children wanted to talk about their parents' having convertibles, and Ms. Smith supported that desire: "She does have a convertible car. Can you say convertible?" She kept her objective in focus, maintained the flow of the lesson, and sustained engagement.

Validate children's excitement. Acknowledge and validate children's excitement to optimize engagement. Use both verbal and nonverbal expressions. When some children repeatedly expressed that their parents also had convertibles, Ms. Smith accepted their excitement positively ("He does." "She does!"). She lingered briefly on the excitement and then moved on to talking *with* the children about unfamiliar words. When Corin mistook the convertible top for a sunroof, she worked the mistake into the lesson.

Each of these strategies can strengthen children's engagement while attending to and sustaining constructive levels of excitement. These tools are not fixed to one goal (either eliciting or dampening excitement) but rather are deployed to keep children engaged and to support developmental skills.

In the current era of academic accountability, early childhood teachers have the opportunity and responsibility to promote children's engagement

with learning. Teachers are more accountable when aware of the role of excitement and when they strive to manage it to enhance learning outcomes. Using these engagement strategies can help establish critical foundations of knowledge and the skills necessary for continued success in school.

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