



UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S FEELINGS

THE IDEA

Children need good food and shelter but they have other different needs. These needs are to do with their feelings. Feelings may be hard to understand because we cannot see or hear them. Children may find it difficult to talk about feelings and adults may not find the time to listen to children. Adults need to recognise the importance of listening to children so that children know that what they think and feel is valued. If children can begin to understand some of their feelings, they can grow up well and help others to do the same.

Sadly, many children have very difficult lives as a result of illness, disability, domestic violence, war, poverty, famine, droughts or floods. Millions of children are now affected by HIV and AIDS. Children who have lost their parents to HIV and AIDS are one such vulnerable group. You can imagine how feelings of grief, loneliness and guilt, and the stigma attached to HIV and AIDS could overwhelm a child.

Some children seem to cope quite well with great difficulties while others are overwhelmed by them. A child's ability to cope has much to do with their resilience – that is their ability to 'bounce back' after a stressful event. We believe that children can become more resilient if they believe that they are able to take some control over their lives. Child-to-Child activities can help children to feel that they are able to take control over some areas of their lives. The activities can help to develop children's ability to express their feelings and ideas, to solve problems and understand other children's feelings better.

Children support each other

Children often know best what other children need when they are upset. Child-to-Child Uganda works in primary schools promoting the principle of children helping and supporting each other. Children have formed clubs where they share problems and work together to find solutions. They also learn to communicate their emotions and fears and to develop a deep understanding for each other's feelings. Child-to-Child gives children a sense of self-esteem because they are able to contribute to others' well-being. In some cases children are 'twinned', that is they are paired with another child, so that they can support each other (see below for more about twinning).

Understanding

Stories can help children to understand their own feelings and the feelings of other children.

A story about feelings

John woke up one morning crying. Mary heard him, woke up and ran to him. She picked him up and found he had wet himself. She changed his clothes and hugged him. He laughed and began to make happy noises.

After helping her mother, Mary went to school. After lessons she went out to play. One girl had a ball and they all played except Anne.

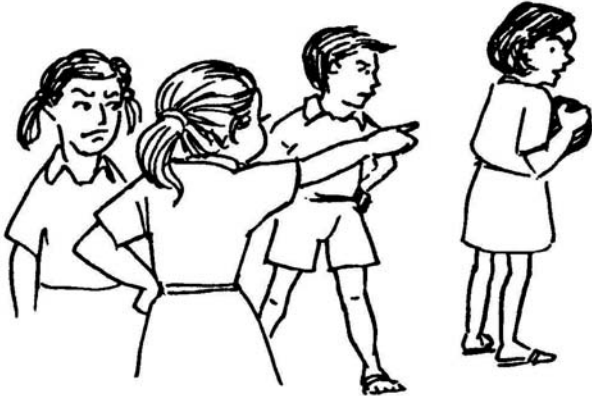


She refused to play and stood in a corner. Then she caught the ball and would not give it back. Some children began to punch and kick her so that she began to cry. The teacher came out. She sent the other children away

ACTIVITY SHEET 1.3

CHILD-TO-CHILD TRUST

and explained to Anne that she must give the ball back to the other children. Mary took Anne's hand to show she was her friend. Then Anne felt happier and played with the others. As the children were walking home they saw a dirty boy with uncut hair. The children called him names and laughed at him. An older boy



came along and saw that the little boy was hurt and crying. He took the little boy's hand and asked him where he came from. The poor boy said he had no parents. The people he lived with were cruel to him. The older boy said he would try to help him. The other children were ashamed because they had been cruel. Mary wanted to tell her mother about the dirty child when she got home. Her mother was tired and told her to go away. Mary began to cry. Her baby brother John came to her and put his arms around her, so Mary picked him



up and went outside. She forgot about herself and played with him.

Then Mary's mother called her. She left John and he ran after a butterfly. John saw that he was alone. He began to cry and call for his sister. Mary came back. She picked him up and showed him some chickens. John forgot his tears and chased the chickens away from the food pot.

A story like this shows feelings of children in everyday, natural situations. It helps to show:

- **Feelings themselves** like love, fear, and happiness.
- **Signs of feelings** like laughing (happiness), crying (fear), shouting (anger).
- **Causes of feelings**, like cruelty, love.
- How children can **understand and help**, and help other children to cope with fear or unhappiness.



Children who are orphaned as a result of HIV and AIDS

Some children are taken in by their extended families when their parents die but they may not be treated well by their relatives, like the little boy in the story. Some orphans are isolated from the other family members because it is believed, often wrongly, that they are infectious. Even if the children are living with HIV, they can live safely with their family and friends without passing on the virus. As HIV and AIDS affects more and more families children are often found living on their own or with elderly grandparents, or looking after younger brothers and sisters. Households headed by children have become common in many parts of Africa, putting these children at even higher risk of exploitation and increasing poverty. There is an urgent need to find ways to support these children and rescue their childhoods.

Our feelings

There are **many different feelings**. All children experience feelings. Even when they are very young children have many different feelings. These feelings grow and change as the child grows. At first a child feels content and secure close to their mother. She feeds them, keeps them warm and protects them. Sometimes they are happy, content and trusting. At other times they are unhappy, afraid or angry. As they grow older their feelings are shared with other people. They can learn to recognise and understand feelings that they and other children experience.

Children can experience **different feelings in different situations**. For example, when a child is alone they may be afraid or could just be curious. Children also experience feelings when they are with **other people**. When a mother is annoyed with her children for breaking something she has told them not to touch, they can be afraid, unhappy, guilty or resentful.

Different children can have **different feelings**. The same event can make one child happy and another child fearful. For example, some children love to play with animals while others run away in fear. Some children take no notice because they have no interest in animals.

Signs of feelings

Often young children cannot tell us what they feel. We can try to understand their feelings from the signs they show. The way a child behaves can give us clues to what they are feeling. For example, a child who seems selfish, angry and unfriendly may be unhappy because they do not get enough attention or because they need affection.



Sometimes one sign can mean many things. For example, a child who laughs may be happy. Or they may be embarrassed or nervous or surprised. A child who cries may be angry, or afraid or frustrated.

Children can be helped to notice signs of feelings in themselves and other children. By understanding feelings they can help themselves and are better able to comfort their brothers and sisters and friends.

What causes feelings?

Everything in everyday life causes some feeling. Sometimes children can tell what causes their feelings. For example, a child can say they are happy because they have been given something tasty to eat.



But very often children do not know what makes them have their feelings. The causes of feelings can be many and not very clear. For example, if you ask children why they are crying, sometimes they will tell you that it is because another child has taken their toy or because their mother has scolded them. But children are often not sure why they feel the way they do. Children can be destructive, for example breaking plants, throwing stones or killing small animals. If you ask them why, they will not be able to tell you. Perhaps it is because they are unhappy because their father has sent them out of the house. Perhaps they are hurting something because someone has hurt them. Perhaps they are afraid because their parents are sick. Activities such as putting together a Memory Box with their parents who are dying may help children to better understand and deal with their feelings.

Understanding and helping

If children begin to notice feelings and take an interest in them, they may learn about them in themselves and other people. This

will help them to develop as individuals and as members of their community. Children learn to understand themselves and others through living in their own homes with their own families. They imitate and copy people around them before they even know what they are doing. For example, a girl is more likely to shout at her brother if her parents often shout at her or each other.

Giving comfort

In some situations children help one another even better than grown-ups. If the

child understands that another child who seems 'naughty' or 'bad' may have feelings of fear and pain, or may need affection or company, they can sympathise or understand the child's feelings. They can give the child comfort and friendship.

Children often pick up their brother or sister, or come close to them and put their arms around them to carry and talk to them.

These are different ways of comforting, of showing understanding and of helping. Comfort can also be given with words of kindness, praise and affection. Another way

Understanding the feelings of children with disabilities

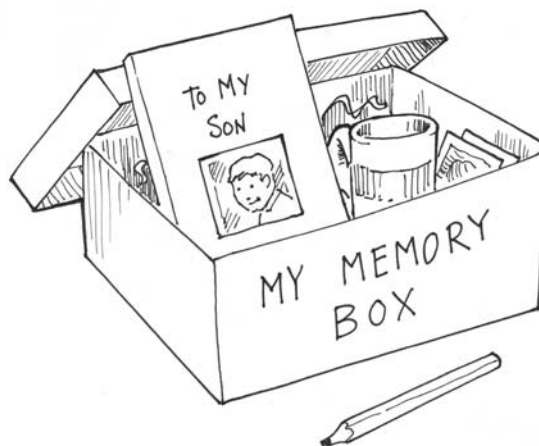
In many cultures children with disabilities are shunned and excluded from everyday experiences such as going to school or joining in local festivals or events such as weddings. A Child-to-Child programme in Zambia is working to include these children in every aspect of community life. The biggest barriers to overcome are prejudice and negative attitudes. Much of the programme's work is to change negative attitudes. Experience shows children are often more caring and sensitive to feelings than some adults. For example, children were annoyed at teachers who visited their school to witness inclusive education in practice. 'We were very upset during the lesson because some of the teachers were laughing at our friend. We don't want them to visit again. We know that he sometimes makes mistakes but we all make mistakes, don't we?'

(See Activity Sheets 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3 for more information and ideas about children with disabilities.) For more information on inclusive education and Child-to-Child, contact the Child-to-Child Trust.

Making a Memory Box

A Memory Box holds special items put together by a parent to leave behind for the children after his or her death. Parents and children can collect items for the box together. The box can be any box – a shoe box, for example – what is important is what goes inside it. A Memory Box (or book) helps children to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. Helping to put the box together strengthens the children's resilience - their ability to cope with loss. The children can go to the box and read a letter over and over again. They can look at photographs and think about the message that was left behind.

It shows the children that their parent loved them very much and cared enough to leave something precious and valuable for the child. Knowing about the family history helps the child to identify with her roots and helps to make her feel that she belongs.



to comfort is to make younger children forget their anxiety (unhappiness, worry) by showing them something different. In this way the younger child will think of something else. If a child is crying, the older child can say, 'Look at that bird over there.' or 'Come with me and I'll show you a new game.'

Understanding differences in



feelings

Children can also try to understand differences in people's feelings. People and children are not all the same and do not all have the same feelings. Each person, each child, is different.

If a child has a different feeling, it does not mean that he or she is wrong or bad but only that they are different. Children should be encouraged to understand and accept differences. For example, if a little girl is afraid of the dark, an older child who is not must not laugh at her or tease her or make her more frightened. **He must try to understand and to help her to understand why she does not need to be afraid.**

Finding out more

With sensitive adult support children can find out more about other children in their community who may be having a difficult time. For example, some children with disabilities may not have the same opportunities, such as going to school, as

other children. Some children may be orphaned or looking after a sick parent. Increasingly in parts of Africa, for example, older children have the sole responsibility for bringing up their younger brothers and sisters. Other children may be living and working on the street.

Planning and doing

Children and adults can discuss what they have found out. If they have visited children who do not go to school, for example, they can discuss how to communicate in a positive and helpful way.

Role-play can help children to practise how to communicate with others and share their ideas. They can **make up stories** like the one at the beginning of this Activity Sheet to explain feelings, possible causes and the signs of different feelings. Children can **talk about feelings**. Teachers or community workers can help by asking questions such as, 'What makes you laugh? Why do you cry? What makes you most angry?' Children can compare their responses and understand that they may have different feelings about different situations.

Children can play games that help them to **guess about feelings**. Children could use a sentence like, 'What are you doing?' Each child, or the teacher or community worker, could say the sentence in different ways. The others have to guess what different feelings (anger, fear or surprise, for example) are shown in the way the sentence is said.

Children can **make pictures** of situations where different feelings are shown in the picture.

Pictures could show, for example, a dog running away from a stone (fear); a child taking something from another who is crying (anger); a child with a glove puppet laughing (fun, joy); a chicken running and flapping its wings with a child chasing it. Can the children talk about the difference between the feelings themselves and the causes of those feelings?



Drawing pictures or writing about the thing that scares them most can help some children to face what they fear. By doing this they gain some control over the fear – they externalise the frightening event.

Children can **make a Memory Box** as part of a class project. Items of interest, poems and stories the children have found or written and pictures drawn by them could all be included and updated as time goes by. Memory boxes can promote resourcefulness in all children, not just children affected by HIV and AIDS.

All of the above activities can help children be more aware of their own and others' feelings. Children can use this awareness to play an important role in supporting children who do not go to school (see Activity Sheet 1.4 **Helping Children Who Do Not Go To School**). They can be welcoming to children who may be excluded, such as children with disabilities and children affected by HIV and AIDS. They can support children in their own school who are experiencing difficulties.

Twining is a key strategy for children's action

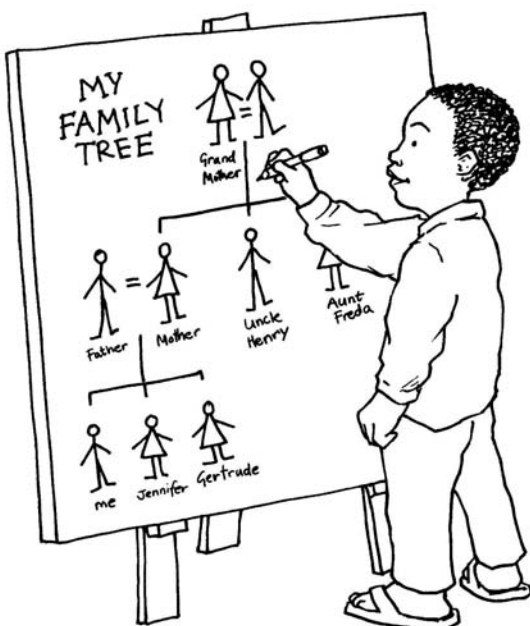
Twining is linking one child with another child or several other children. It is the cornerstone of many Child-to-Child activities. For example, older children are linked with younger children or a child without a disability is linked to one with. Close and mutually beneficial friendships are formed.



Circles of friends

A similar idea to twining is to create a circle of friends. In schools that are including children with disabilities for the first time, teachers help other children to form 'circles of friends' to make the new child feel welcome. Sometimes, as part of this process, the circle children discuss their nightmares and dreams for the future. This knowledge helps all the children plan for a more positive future.

In some schools in Zambia, teachers involved children in gathering information about families and the wider community through creating family trees.



This led on to a community survey of why some children did not go to school and, eventually, to Child-to-Child activities that helped to bring many previously excluded children into the life of the community. Children thought deeply about what it meant to belong to a family and a community and how difficult life can be for a child who loses a parent, or is discriminated against because of illness, poverty or as the result of a disability.

What children have said about twinning

'My legs hurt because I use metal crutches to help me walk and they cause me pain. I have three friends at school. They help me by bringing me to school and taking me back home.'

'I had a good time at school because I was busy helping my friend. I am helping her with her writing.'

'Twinning has helped me to pay extra attention to what the teacher is teaching us because afterwards I share it with my friend. My friend says she is reading better now that we are twinned.'

'My parents passed away in 2000 and now I stay with my grandmother. I play and work with another boy who I am twinned with. He is the first person I share my problems with, including my problems with school fees.'

Circles of friends

In Vietnam circle friends supported children both at school and in their neighbourhood. Classmates brought Kien to school in a wheelchair and helped him with his writing. They read schoolwork and stories to Anh who could not see. The circles of friends brought all the children in the circle closer together.

Discussing the results of activities

Children can discuss:

- How effective are activities?
- Are we more aware of our own, and others' feelings?
- What would we do if we saw another child who was angry or crying or quiet and alone?
- Did we support our friend who is having a difficult time?

This is what a boy whose hearing is impaired said after being twinned with hearing children. *'Other children no longer call me names. We learn and play together – football, netball, athletics – and no one notices the differences between us.'*

Doing it better

There may be activities that the responsible adult feels need repeating or emphasising in order to improve children's understanding and skills. Other issues, problems or anxieties may have come up that the adults need to explore further with the children. New topics can be discussed and selected with children at this stage.

USING THIS SHEET

Although teachers, youth leaders, scout and guide leaders or playgroups can practise these activities successfully, children learn the most important things about their feelings **at home**.

However, the increasing number of children affected by HIV and AIDS is challenging some of our ideas about childcare. The needs of these vulnerable children for security, love and support must be of concern to all community members. This challenging situation has shown that youth groups, schools and, above, all children themselves can play a big part in supporting children by helping them to understand their own and others' feelings. This Activity Sheet, as well as sheets 8.1 to 8.4 on **Children in Difficult Circumstances**, is especially relevant in situations where many young children (often in camps) have been exposed to violence that has affected their behaviour. These sheets have been used in Lebanon, Yemen, Thailand and Pakistan (refugee camps), for example, and with children who live and work on the streets in Vietnam, Brazil and the Philippines.

A special set of pictures and questions on this theme has been produced for Ethiopia but the ideas, text and pictures can be used elsewhere. Contact the Child-to-Child Trust for details.

For further information on strategies for building children's resilience contact Catholic AIDS Action
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