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The Effect of Songs on Social-Emotional Literacy in an Early Childhood Classroom

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Abstract

Children in an early childhood Montessori classroom were taught songs that included words to label emotions and phrases for solving social conflicts. The purpose of this research was to find out if children's emotional vocabulary and problem-solving strategies would be affected by learning words and phrases from songs about feelings and communication for six weeks. Data was collected through comparing words known to describe emotions on faces of an emotion chart, phrases known to communicate feelings, and records of children's behaviors and conflict resolution strategies both pre and post-intervention. The results showed an increase in both the amount of words and variety of words known, and an increase in independently attempting to problem solve, while non-verbal reactions to problems, such as crying and hitting, decreased. Songs were found to be an effective tool to use to teach children in early childhood about emotional literacy. Because songs are shown to be an effective way to communicate important messages, teachers could consider using them to teach about other sensitive information, such as about privacy and strangers.

Keywords: emotional literacy, language, early childhood, conflict resolution, songs

Learning how to communicate and verbalize big feelings is a crucial skill to acquire in early childhood. When children do not know how to communicate their emotions through language, they communicate out of frustration in ways that do not help them solve conflicts, such as crying or hitting, or by solely relying on an adult to make decisions and problem-solve. The need for a social-emotional learning curriculum that gives young children the tools they need for successful communication is necessary for their independence and for developing and maintaining healthy, life-long communication skills. Learning and developing social-emotional and self-regulation skills in early childhood is related to future school success, academic achievement, and lifelong well-being. When children are not taught how to self-regulate or use conflict resolution skills during early childhood, these skills are more difficult to learn later in life.

In an early childhood school setting or group environment, songs are a popular means for teaching a variety of facts and skills, such as numbers, letters and rhyming. Songs can also be a tool for teaching children about their emotions and giving them the language to describe them. Singing songs that give the words to express emotions during a conflict improves children's abilities to communicate and express themselves in a positive way, as well as create a language-rich environment. Songs can also provide children the opportunities to practice problem-solving and communication skills through role-playing with their peers. The benefits of using songs to teach social emotional skills is that children can explore and better understand their emotions and the emotions of others in a fun, engaging way. When children learn about feelings with their community through songs, they are collectively developing an understanding of others' feelings, which helps develop empathy.

During my research, I will introduce songs to the children in my early childhood Montessori classroom (ages 3-6) that focus on social-emotional learning to see if there is an effect on language skills to describe emotions and work through social conflicts. The songs will provide the words and labels for children's emotions as well as strategies to use to independently navigate and solve social conflicts.

Theoretical Framework

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the practice of managing and understanding emotions, the ability to feel and show empathy for others, and cognitive regulation (McClelland M. M., Tominey, Schmitt, & Duncan, 2017, p. 34). SEL has become a term that is regularly used when referring to character building, emotional learning, anger management, positive coping skills, and self-expression. Learning to recognize emotions and facial cues, being able to self-regulate, and having the ability to communicate feelings calmly is part of emotional literacy. Emotional literacy is an integral part of SEL.

Several theorists have contributed to the relevance of social-emotional learning. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory states that learning is a cognitive process and both positive and negative behaviors are learned through observation, imitation, modeling or direct instruction (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's theory is that social behaviors are learned in social contexts, they cannot be learned alone, and the images from observations of others are social models. These observations are remembered and stored and serve as a guide for action in future situations. This shapes children's behavior, allowing them to adapt to their environment (Bandura, 1977).

Emotional Intelligence (EI), similar to SEL, is the ability to recognize emotions and use these perceptions and understanding of others' emotions to think about how to best guide

behaviors and actions. EI includes cognition and the ability to learn and solve problems through studying ones' environment using intelligence, referring to a deeper, more abstract thought process (Caruso, Perkins, Mayer & Salovey, 2011).

The researcher observed students struggling to express themselves with words in social situations. Through understanding Bandura's Social Learning theory, the researcher will give students language tools through songs to determine if these songs have an effect on children's ability to express emotions and solve conflicts. The songs will include words for labeling emotions and provide short phrases and strategies to use during a social conflict. They will also serve children as a reminder of what they can say or do in different social situations, as well as assist with emotional vocabulary.

Literature Review

Children in an early childhood school environment struggle with expressing and labeling their emotions and the emotions of others. When children do not have the language to define their feelings or the tools to effectively communicate and problem solve, they often get angry and hit or cry out of frustration. Learning the language to express emotions is crucial for children's well-being, mental health, and academic success (Denham, 2016). Emotional literacy refers to the ability to understand and express emotions. When children understand the meaning of feelings and begin to recognize emotion in facial cues, they are more successful at understanding themselves and the world around them (Figueora-Sanchez, 2008). Having difficulty expressing oneself affects children throughout the day. Children involved in conflict and negative experiences in school remain distressed long after their peers and are more likely to act on impulsive behaviors that bring further conflict (Williams, 2018).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and express feelings and is an essential part of children's social-emotional development. Mayer and Salovey described Emotional Intelligence as the ability to understand one's own emotions and other's and the ability to process and internalize how to allow those emotions to guide behavior. Teachers can assist children's capacity to regulate themselves when they become emotionally distressed (Mayer, 1997). When educators teach EI strategies in the classroom, they promote children's well-being and create environments for them to practice and develop these skills, which promotes later school success (Figueora-Sanchez, 2008). Teachers provide children the opportunities to practice problem-solving, negotiating, and communication skills with their peers through building their vocabulary (Figueora-Sanchez, 2008). Learning social-emotional skills is vital for children in early childhood to solve conflicts, but benefits go beyond making friends. When children learn about their emotions and the feelings of others, they are better prepared to follow directions and ask questions of teachers, which facilitates learning (Denham, Brown, Bassett, Way, & Steed, 2015).

Social and Emotional Learning in the Early Childhood Years

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is described as the process of understanding and recognizing emotions of self and others, including empathy and self-care, and having the ability to maintain positive relationships and make responsible choices (CASEL, 2005).

Social and emotional experiences begin in infancy. These first experiences are influential on how infants form perceptions of self and how they master their world (Wentzel, Zaslow, & Darling-Churchill, 2016). Children's overall healthy development in the early years of life has shown to have a direct relationship with the ability to problem-solve, maintain self-control, and

show empathy (Conti & Heckman, 2013). The first five years of life is a critical period for rapid brain development and for building the foundation of self-regulation, which is crucial for attention, behavior, and emotion management (Williams, 2018). Early differences between children who have the ability to self-regulate and those who struggle with self-regulation is a major contributing factor of gaps in school readiness and later academic achievement (Williams, 2018).

Expectations from parents and teachers regarding the importance of children's socio-emotional control in the home versus school differ. A survey was given to both preschool teachers and parents about behavior expectations of children in the classroom (Lane, Stanton-Chapman, Jamison, & Phillips, 2007). According to the survey, parents viewed assertion in social skills (helping where needed) as most important, where teachers said that responsibility social skills (ability to compromise during conflict resolution and ask for assistance) are most important (Lane et al., 2007). It was concluded that although both parents and teachers agree that self-regulation and children's ability to verbalize emotions is necessary, it is essential to have consistent expectations. When social-emotional expectations and self-control are inconsistent between school and home, it is challenging for children to meet the expectations and may result in weaker relationships with their teachers and peers (Lane et al., 2007). It is essential to determine what the shared expectations are to promote positive teacher-child relationships and for understanding what the different expectations are for social-emotional behaviors (Lane et al., 2007).

Emotional Literacy Teaching Strategies in the Classroom

A common challenge among early childhood teachers is the amount of time they spend solving conflicts in the classroom, and teachers often complain that children have poor social-

emotional skills and lack the competencies to solve social conflicts (Stormont, Lewis, & Smith, 2005). Educators can assist children and improve their capacity to regulate themselves when they become emotionally distressed (Mayer, 1997). The RULER approach includes Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions (RULER). It is used in schools to promote emotional literacy. The Mood Meter is one of RULER's tools used in schools to build an emotional vocabulary and to support strategies for regulating emotions (Tominey, O'Bryon, Rivers, & Shapes, 2017). The four main feelings that the Mood Meter chart recognizes are mad (red), brave (yellow), sad (blue) and calm (green), and gives more emotion defining vocabulary in each section (Tominey et al., 2017).

I can Problem Solve (ICPS) is an SEL preschool curriculum that provides teachers with lessons that teach children how to recognize emotions of themselves and others (McClelland, Tominey, Schmitt, & Duncan, 2017). The lessons include brainstorming ways to problem solve by viewing problems from different perspectives. The program's success is measured by monitoring children's interactions and recording an increase in children's abilities to solve prosocial and interpersonal problems (McClelland et al., 2017).

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is an intervention program designed for Kindergarten readiness and is used in low-income Head Start programs to improve children's social-emotional competence and reduce problem behaviors (McClelland et al., 2017). Teachers give 30 lessons throughout the school year, and data has shown that it positively affects children's cognitive regulation and emotional literacy (McClelland et al., 2017).

Any curriculum or tool that promotes the ability for young children to understand and talk about their emotions is setting them up for success in school. Teachers who encourage interactions, model proactive listening, and incorporate fun and engaging ways to use

cooperative language promote healthy development and respect in the early childhood classroom (Figueora-Sanchez, 2008).

Songs in the Classroom and the Effect on Emotional Literacy

When songs are used in the classroom to label emotions, children begin to understand their own feelings, which helps them better understand others' feelings (Kim, 2017). The words that are being learned are helping to build an emotionally literate vocabulary, which will help to build emotional maturity. Nursery rhymes introduce children to words, actions and rules to follow, which involve cooperation. They are also a tool to teach children about feelings and to gain knowledge about the world around them (Mullen, 2017). Children who regularly participate in group songs, especially ones that promote emotional literacy, are better able to self-regulate and use positive self-talk (Williams, 2018). Songs and rhymes based on emotions and experiences support children's cognitive skills, phonological development and social-emotional skills (Figueora-Sanchez, 2008).

In a research study, circle time activities and behaviors in Head Start classrooms were examined. Several typical routine activities such as discussing the calendar, weather, reading stories, and singing songs were observed. In a survey of children's favorite circle time activities, singing songs was identified as the favorite, and teachers reported that children were the most engaged while singing songs. The survey showed that the song topics were mostly academic, teaching children about colors, letters, numbers and body parts, and were sung because teachers reported that children learned these concepts and the vocabulary best when singing together and engaged. Data on behavior problems and social-emotional learning was also collected and showed that challenging behavior and difficulties with friends occurred less when the children

were actively engaged in the songs and occurred most frequently during roll call and counting children present (Zaghlawan & Ostrosky, 2011).

When teachers incorporate music that includes lyrics, they help create a real teaching opportunity and a language-rich environment for children to learn how to express themselves. Songs that incorporate emotional literacy and allow children to understand and make sense of their experiences lay the groundwork for early learning (Kim, 2017).

Methodology

This study used observations of classroom and playground behaviors, documented discussions, and a pre- and post-intervention inquiry, which documented children's known emotional vocabulary. Tally logs were also studied to record the frequency in which certain behaviors were shown pre-and post-intervention.

The population for this action research study was children ages 3-6 who were enrolled in a Montessori public charter school in South Carolina. The sample was 23 children in the fall semester. The sample featured 11 females and 12 males. The sample was representative of a typical Montessori early childhood classroom.

Before the intervention, an emotions chart was verbally labeled by the children and recorded by the teacher to document words known to label emotions (Appendix A). An informal discussion about feelings, the words to describe them, and simple phrases to use took place and a verbal questionnaire was filled out by the teacher (Appendix B). Observations of children's behaviors for one week pre-and post-intervention during emotional conflicts were recorded to document the amount and type of language used during conflict (Appendix D). A tally log was

used to document the frequency of other behaviors, such as crying, hitting, or telling a teacher (Appendix C).

Children in an early childhood Montessori classroom learned and sang songs for six weeks during morning group time that focused on social and emotional learning (see Appendices E-J). The songs included words for labeling emotions and provided short phrases and strategies to use during a social conflict. They served as a reminder for the children of what they can say or do in different social situations, as well as assisted with emotional vocabulary. When children went to the teacher for problems that arose with a friend during a conflict, the teacher assisted in recalling some of the songs as a reminder of what the children could say or do.

During the post-intervention assessment, the emotions chart was verbally labeled by the children and responses were recorded. An informal discussion about feelings and the verbal questionnaire was filled out by the teacher post-intervention. Children's behaviors were observed, and tallies were logged to document behaviors and discussions during conflict.

Analysis of Data

When children do not have the language to define their feelings or the tools to effectively communicate and problem solve, they often get angry and hit or cry out of frustration. The purpose of this study was to teach children songs that include the words to label emotions and strategies to use during a social conflict.

The subjects of this study were children ages 3-6 who were enrolled in a Montessori public charter school in South Carolina. The sample was 23 children in the fall semester of the 2019-2020 school year. The sample featured 11 females and 12 males. The sample was representative of a typical Montessori early childhood classroom.

Labeling Emotions

The research studied whether teaching songs that include the words for emotions have an effect on children’s ability to label them. To answer the question the researcher asked the children to identify the different facial emotions of other children on a chart (see Figure 1). The researcher pointed to pictures of different children on the chart and asked, “how do you think this child feels?” The responses by the children were recorded both pre-and post-intervention and the amount and variety of words used to describe emotions were studied.

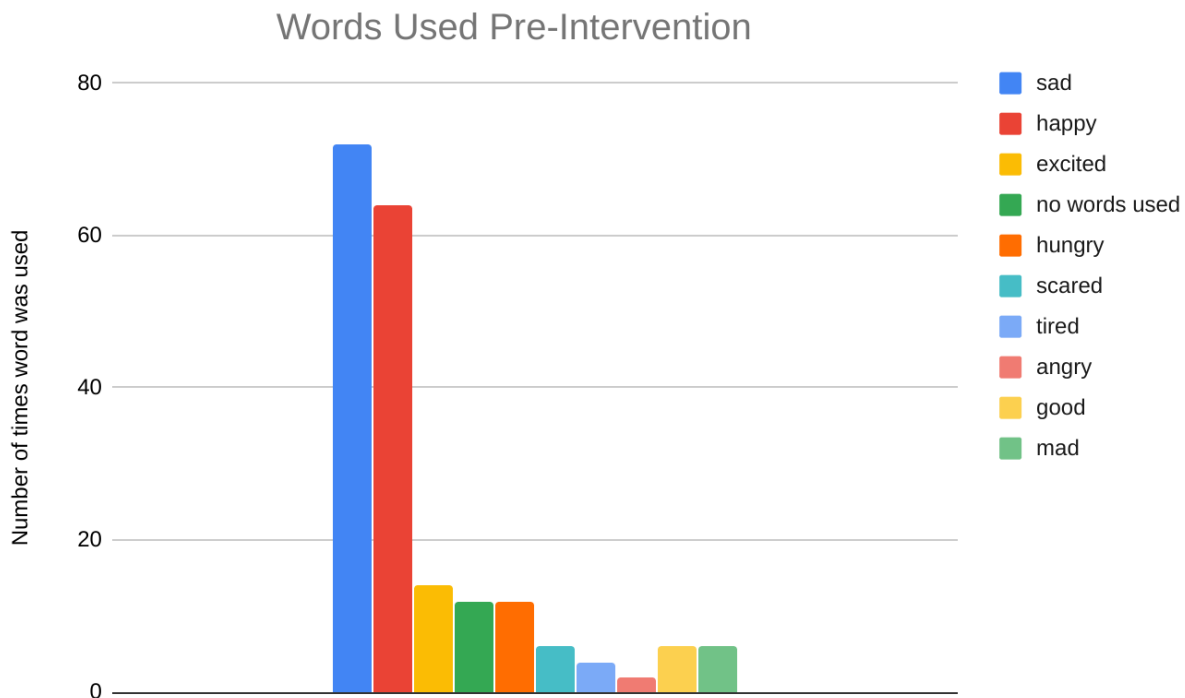


Figure 1: Words Documented on Emotion Chart Pre-Intervention

Children used the same words to describe multiple pictures. They also gave descriptions of what they thought the children were doing, such as “hiding” and “playing peek-a-boo.” Words that did not give a direct name for an emotion, such as “not good” were also said.

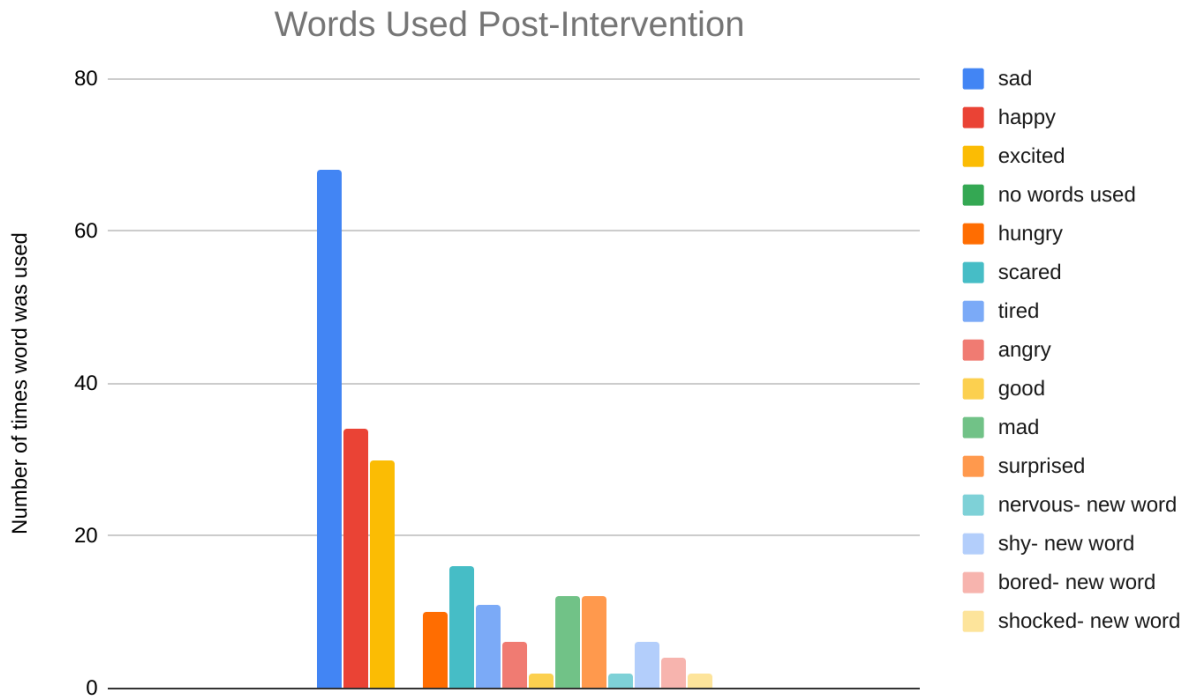


Figure 2: Words Documented on Emotion Chart After Six Weeks of Intervention

The data showed there was an increase in both the amount and variety of words used to describe emotions. During the pre-intervention, several children did not know, or did not say any words to describe the emotions on the chart. During the post-intervention all children responded and gave a descriptive word for all pictures. There was a forty percent increase of words known.

Communication Strategies

The question this study addressed was whether teaching songs that give phrases and suggestions to use with friends affects children's communication with their peers. To answer this question the researcher asked the children a series of questions (Appendix B). The first question was "How do you feel today?" The questions that followed were, "how can you tell a friend that you are sad," "how can you tell a friend that you are angry," "what can you say if a friend is bothering you," "what can you say if you do not want to play," and "what can you say if you

need a friend to play with.” The majority of children answered “good” or “fine” when asked how they were feeling. When asked how they could tell a friend that they are sad or angry, many children said, “tell them that I am sad,” and “tell them that I am angry.” One reason for those responses may be that the questions were not specific enough. Other responses were recorded and key phrases from the songs were documented (Figure 3).

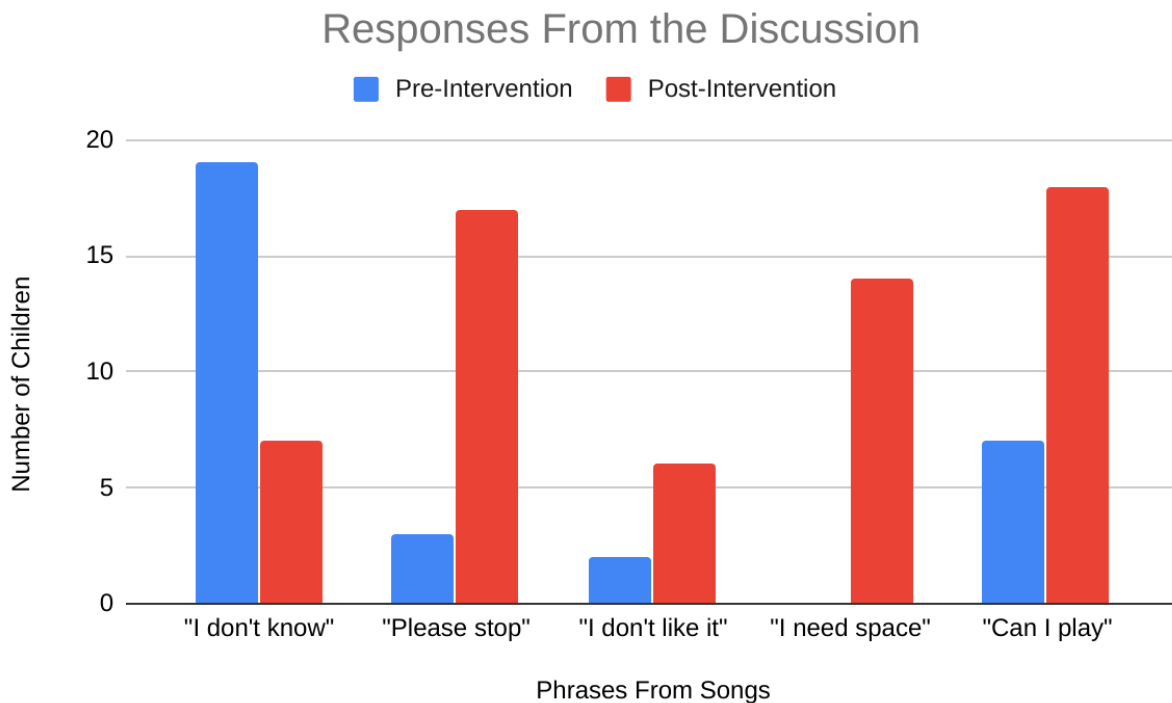


Figure 3: Key phrases from songs

The phrases “please stop” and “I don’t like it” were responses to the same question, “What can you say if someone is bothering you,” and were lyrics from different songs. “Please stop” is loud and uses a hand gesture in the song (Appendix G). “I need space” was in response to the question, “What can you say if you do not want to play.” Some of the lines in the songs were direct instructions. In the song written by the researcher, “If You’re Feeling and You Know it,”

one of the lines is, “if you need a friend to play with, say can I play” (Appendix I). This was to inform and give children easy and direct responses to everyday issues.

From the researcher’s observations and field notes, “please stop” was the most used phrase (Figure 3). Another frequent phrase heard was “I can have a choice.” This was from a song written by the researcher called “Talk it Out.” The line to the song is, “When my friends tell me what to do, I can use my voice, I can say that I don’t like it I can have a choice” (Appendix E).

Behaviors and Independent Problem-Solving

Another question that this study addressed was whether teaching songs that give phrases and suggestions to use in social situations influence children’s nonverbal behaviors and their ability to independently problem-solve. On the tally log of behaviors, the number of children who cried, hit, or just walked away during a conflict was recorded (Figure 4).

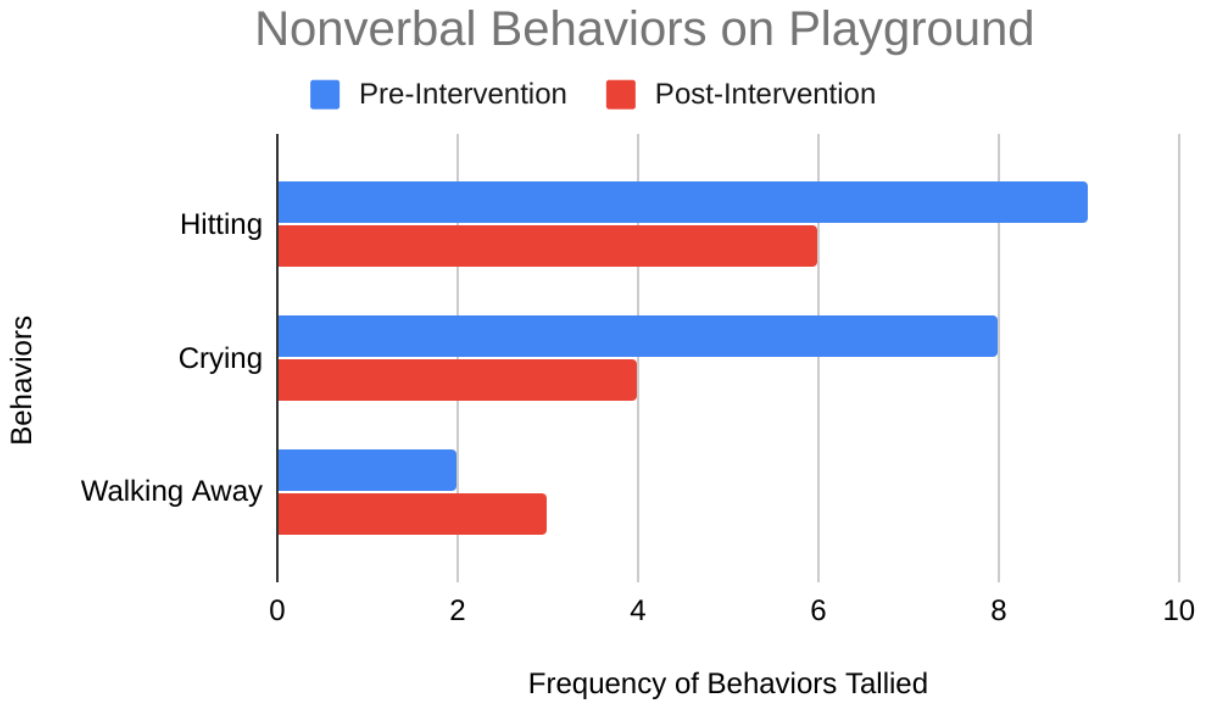


Figure 4: Non-Verbal behaviors tallied after 6 weeks of intervention.

Children's behaviors and reactions to social conflict post-intervention may have a correlation to learning communication strategies, but it may also have been related to their acclimation to school and increase in total time spent playing with their classmates on the playground.

During week long observations of conflicts on the playground pre-and post-intervention, the number of children using language to problem were tallied under the two headings *Telling a Teacher* and *Use of Language to Solve Conflicts Without a Teacher's Help* (Figure 4).

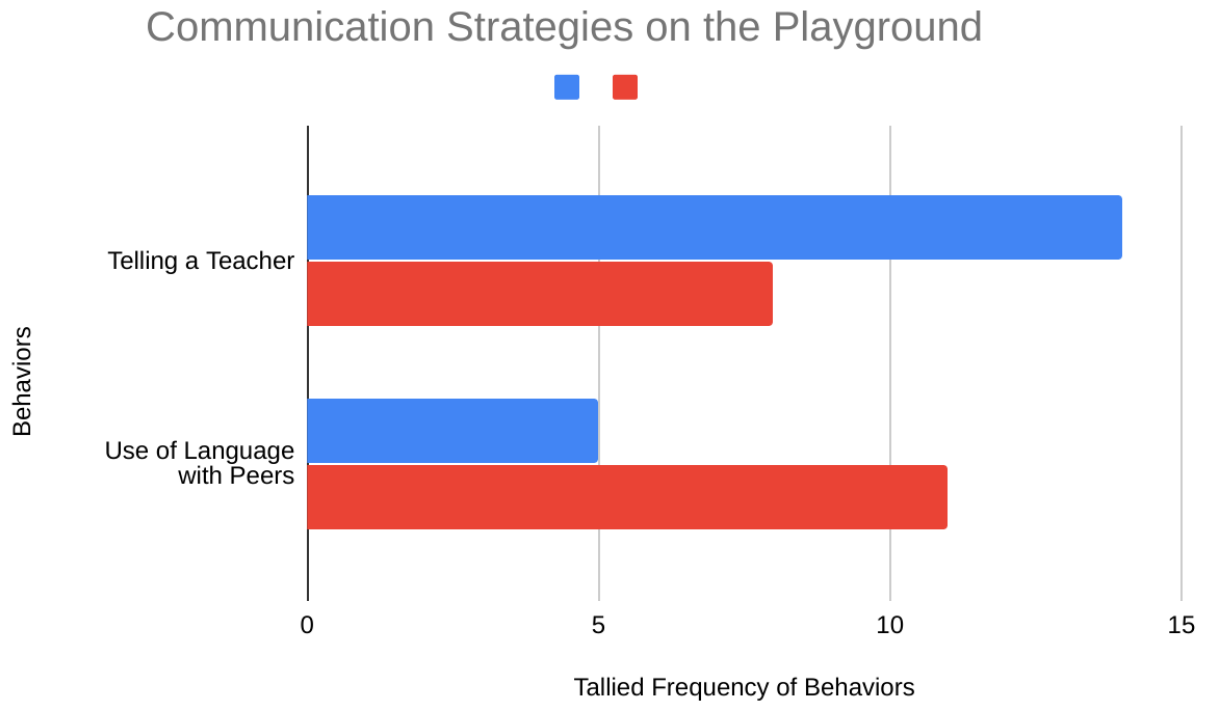


Figure 5: Communication Strategies

An increase in attempted independent problem solving was observed as there was a decrease in relying on a teacher. There were reminders given by the teacher at times when children chose to tell a teacher before communicating with peers or when they didn't remember what to do.

Reminders to children by the teacher included singing phrases from the songs such as “I can say that I don't like it, I can have a choice,” and “When my friends are not being fair, I feel kind of mad, I can tell them it's not okay, we can make a plan” (Appendix E). The teacher would also give children the words for their emotions when they were upset or sad and not using words to describe their feelings. The teacher would say, “you seem angry” or “you seem sad,” to remind them of the words.

Action Plan

When children in this study repeated words learned from the songs they learned, it showed that singing is an effective way for children in an early childhood classroom to retain information. Additionally, teaching through songs is an engaging way to deliver a variety of information to children. Songs that involve hand or body motions engage children and invite more participation.

This study's research and findings concluded that teaching songs in an early childhood classroom is an effective tool to increase children's emotional vocabulary and emotional awareness of themselves and others. Phrases learned through singing songs can positively impact children's ability to problem solve and independently communicate with peers. This study showed that when children increase their emotional vocabulary and independence, behaviors such as crying and hitting decrease.

Songs in early childhood can be utilized to teach children anything in a fun, engaging way. Several of the words and phrases in songs can be changed to accommodate specific problems or needs within the classroom. Using familiar tunes, like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," or "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and changing the lyrics make the songs easy to adjust to the classroom's needs, while still making them familiar to the children.

Social emotional learning plays a significant role in early childhood programs. While there are several strategies to teach about emotions and conflict resolution, such as the use of books or puppets, songs have proven to be an effective teaching tool. Children increase their vocabulary and retention of words when singing songs, which is why teachers in early childhood use them to teach a variety of facts, such as numbers, letters, and body parts. Because it has been shown that through songs children can learn about emotions and how to navigate

social conflict with peers, they may also be an impactful way to teach children necessary and sensitive information. Songs can be used to teach children about privacy, in relation to their bodies. Information about privacy, and short phrases to use when they are in an uncomfortable situation may be taught and stored as a reminder. Another sensitive topic to teach young children is safety, relating to strangers. Words and short phrases to use may serve as reminders when children feel unsafe, and about what to do if they are in an unsafe situation.

Future research in effective ways to teach important and sensitive information to children is needed to harness the attention and engagement that circle time brings to children in early childhood classrooms.

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Appendix A

Emotion Chart

Name's Emotion Chart



Appendix B

Emotional Literacy Discussions/ Questionnaire

Emotional Literacy Discussion

Name:

Date:

1.How do you feel today?

2. How can you tell a friend that you're sad?

3.How can you tell a friend that you're angry?

4. What can you say if a friend is bothering you?

5. What can you say if you do not want to play?

6. What can you say if you need a friend to play with?

Appendix D

Observation Form

Observation Notes:

<p>Date: _____</p> <p>Time: _____</p> <p>Place: _____</p> <p>No. of children: _____</p> <hr/> <p>Type of weather: _____</p> <p>Other External Factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> Visitor<input type="radio"/> Distractions<input type="radio"/> Other	<p>External Factors Notes:</p>
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General Observation Notes:

Appendix E

Song: "Talk it Out"

Sung to the tune of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"

Talk, talk, talk it out, talk through it with your friends

Talk about how you feel, it's better in the end.

When my friends tell me what to do, I can use my voice

I can say that I don't like it, I can use my voice.

When my friends don't want to play, I can ask them why

Or I can choose another friend, I don't need to cry.

When my friends are not being fair, I feel kind of mad,

I can tell them it's not okay, we can make a plan.

Talk, talk, talk it out, talk through it with your friends

Talk about how you feel, it's better in the end.

Appendix F

Song: "Feelings"

Sung to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star"

I have feelings, so do you,

Let's all sing about a few.

We get happy, we get sad,

We get scared, we get mad.

I am proud of being me

That's a feeling, too, you see.

I have feelings, so do you.

We just sang about a few.

Appendix G

Song: "If You're Bothered and You Know it"

Sung to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know it"

If you're bothered and you know it say, "please stop!" (with hand out in front)

If you're bothered and you know it say, "please stop!"

If you're bothered and you know it and you really want to say it,

If you're bothered and you know it say, "please stop!"

If you're bothered and you know it say, "I don't like it"

If you're bothered and you know it say, "I don't like it."

If you're bothered and you know it and you really want to say it,

If you're bothered and you know it say, "I don't like it."

If you're bothered and you know it say, "no thank you"

If you're bothered and you know it say, "no thank you."

If you're bothered and you know it and you really want to say it, if you're bothered and you know it say, "no thank you."

Appendix H

“Sometimes I Feel Happy”

By Jean Warren

Sung to the tune of “I’m a Little Teapot”

Sometimes I feel happy,

Sometimes I feel sad,

Sometimes I feel curious,

Sometimes I feel mad.

Sometimes I feel silly,

Sometimes I feel surprised.

How many feelings,

Do I have inside?

Appendix I

Song: "If You're Feeling and you Know It"

Feelings, feelings, what can you say today?

If you're happy and you know it, say, "I feel good."

If you're sad and you know it say, "I'm sad."

If you don't want to play say, "I need space."

If your friend is being bossy say, "I want a choice."

If you need a friend to play with ask, "Can I play?"

If you're confused and you know it say, "I need help."

Appendix: J

Song: "If You're Happy and You Know it"

If you're happy and you know it clap your hands. *Clap, Clap.*

If you're happy and you know it clap your hands. *Clap, Clap.*

If you're happy and you know it and you really want to show it

If you're happy and you know it clap your hands. *Clap, Clap.*

If you're angry and you know it stomp your feet. *Stomp, Stomp.*

If you're angry and you know it stomp your feet. *Stomp, Stomp.*

If you're angry and you know it and you really want to show it

If you're angry and you know it stomp your feet. *Stomp, Stomp.*

If you're sad and you know it say, "*I'm sad.*"

If you're sad and you know it, say "*I'm sad.*"

If you're sad and you know it and you really want to show it

If you're sad and you know it. Say "*I'm sad.*"

If you're scared and you know it cover your face,

If you're scared and you know it cover your face.

If you're scared and you know it and you really want to show it,

If you're scared and you know it cover your face.

If you're silly and you know it laugh out loud. *Laughter*

If you're silly and you know it laugh out loud. *Laughter*

If you're silly and you know it and you really want to show it,

If you're silly and you know it laugh out loud. *Laughter*

If you're friendly and you know it wave hello "*Hi, there!*"

If you're friendly and you know it wave hello "*Hi, there!*"

If you're friendly and you know it and you really want to show it

If you're friendly and you know it wave hello "*Hi, there!*"

If you're sleepy and you know it give a yawn. *Yawn*

If you're sleepy and you know it give a yawn. *Yawn*

If you're sleepy and you know it and you really want to show it

If you're sleepy and you know it give a yawn. *Yawn*

If you're excited and you know it shout hurray "*hurray!*"

If you're excited and you know it shout hurray "*hurray!*"

If you're excited and you know it and you really want to show it

If you're excited and you know it shout hurray "*hurray!*"