

# Getting the Message:

## Learning to Read Facial Expressions

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**About the Author.....1**

### **Introduction:**

**How to Use Getting the Message.....2**

Why Teach About Facial Expressions?.....8

Where to Start—Assessing Skills.....9

Teaching Tips.....11

Independent Reinforcement Activities.....12

Using Reminder Stories.....12

What You'll Need and Additional Resources.....13

Resources Pages for Introduction.....14

Assess Data Sheets.....15

    Reading Facial Expressions.....16

    Using Facial Expressions.....17

    Understanding Emotions.....18

Scenarios—Other Emotions for Assessment.....19

Reminder Stories.....22

    Looking at People's Faces.....22

    When Someone Is Talking to Me.....23

    Smiling.....24

**UNIT I: Recognizing Facial Expressions.....25**

    Objectives.....25

    Teaching Activities.....27

Fun and Games: Additional Learning Activities.....	28
Cross Curricular Activities.....	29
Independent Reinforcement Activities.....	32
Resource Pages for Unit 1.....	32
Facial Expression Lotto.....	32
Facial Expression Word Cards.....	33
Flip Book Template.....	34
Activity Sheets for Unit 1.....	35

**UNIT 2: Understanding Emotions.....42**

Objectives.....	43
Teaching Activities.....	44
Fun and Games: Additional Learning Activities.....	46
Cross Curricular Activities.....	49
Independent Reinforcement Activities.....	52
Resource Pages for Unit 2.....	52
Scenarios & Role Plays.....	52
Show How You Feel Scenarios.....	52
Act and Pause Role Plays.....	54
Scenarios—Basic Emotions.....	56
Changing Emotions Face Sheets.....	57
Face Card—Front.....	58
Face Card—Back.....	59

Making a Changing Emotions Face.....	60
Eyes and Eyebrows Wheel.....	61
Mouth Wheel.....	62
<b>Activity Sheets—Unit 2.....</b>	<b>63</b>

<b>UNIT 3: Intensity and Basic Variations of Emotions.....</b>	<b>68</b>
Objectives.....	68
Teaching Activities.....	69
Fun and Games: Additional Learning Activities.....	76
Cross Curricular Activities.....	79
Independent Reinforcement Activities.....	82
<b>Resource Pages for Unit 3.....</b>	<b>83</b>
Intensity Scenarios.....	84
Happy.....	84
Sad.....	85
Angry.....	86
Scared.....	87
Feeling Words Lists.....	88
<b>Activity Sheets for Unit 3.....</b>	<b>89</b>

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<b>UNIT 4: Other Emotions.....</b>	<b>95</b>
Objectives.....	95
Teaching Activities.....	96
Fun and Games: Additional Learning Activities.....	97
Cross Curricular Activities.....	98
Independent Reinforcement Activities.....	99
Resource Pages for Unit 4.....	100
Scenarios & Role Plays.....	101
It's Your Turn Scripts.....	102
Scenarios—Other Emotions.....	103
Act It Out—Showing Concern.....	104
Activity Sheets for Unit 4.....	105

**Picture Cards (will send an outline for this section later)**

# Why Teach About Facial Expressions?

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*“Decades of research and clinical observation have led us to believe that...the ability to utilize nonverbal language effectively is the very basis of solid and satisfying social and vocational success throughout life; the absence of this ability is an identifiable and correctable cause of social difficulties.”*

Duke, Nowicki, & Martin, 1996

Most of us are aware of the importance of non-verbal communication. We feel embarrassed when we fail to pick up on a non-verbal cue or aggravated when others aren't aware of what we are trying to tell them with our face or body. Only 7% of emotional meaning is expressed with the use of words, while 55% is conveyed through facial expression, body language and gestures. (Mehrabian, 1987)

However some individuals are simply not getting the message or are unable to use their facial expressions to convey their feelings. In a study completed by Nowicki and Duke (Nowicki & Duke, 1989) on over a thousand six to ten-year-old children, seven to ten percent of the children exhibited significant difficulty in either reading or displaying specific emotional expressions. Only seven to ten percent were totally proficient in reading and sending emotions accurately using facial expressions. Another 80% were able to use facial expressions adequately, though greater proficiency would be desired.

Non-verbal communication is similar to a language, a highly complex and often subtle language. While verbal and written language is directly taught, children are expected to learn non-verbal communication by observing others. For some children this is a daunting and frustrating task and failure to master it leads directly to difficulties with interpersonal relationships. However, while some children have difficulty mastering the nuances of non-verbal communication on their own, all can make progress when the skills are directly and systematically taught.

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# Where to Start— Assessing Skills

A child's ability to understand and use appropriate facial expressions can often be determined through informal observational assessments. Often those who live with or work with a child recognize the child's limited skills through everyday observations of the child.

However, to gather more specific information, which could be helpful in determining how to use this curriculum, some systematic informal assessment may be necessary. Such an assessment may help pinpoint specific needs. For example, some students may read facial expressions, but have difficulty displaying appropriate facial expressions. Some students may not understand what constitutes feeling sad or angry or scared. Often students will understand and use appropriate facial expressions for the most basic emotions, such as happy, sad, scared and angry, but have difficulty reading gradations in emotions or more subtle emotions, such as annoyed, worried, and embarrassed. Using the following assessment will help you key in on the specific areas that are difficult for the student and enable you to determine which parts of the curriculum are appropriate for a specific child.

The assessment provided is informal, with the purpose of giving the teacher, parent or therapist valuable information. It is not a standardized formal assessment. If more information is needed, a speech language pathologist can evaluate the child using a formal assessment of nonverbal communication skills.

Facial expression cards (pages xx-xx) and written scenarios (pages xx-xx) have been provided to use both for assessment as well as in teaching activities. In addition, a set of scenarios (pages xx-xx) have been included that were written specifically for assessment. However, these scenarios can be used in the teaching activities if they are not needed as part of the assessment. To measure progress, repeat the assessment using facial expression cards and scenarios that have been set aside and not used in teaching or use other pictures of faces you have collected and scenarios that you have written.

## Areas to Assess

**There are five main questions that this assessment is designed to answer.**

- ▶ Is the child able to “read” facial expressions? Can he discriminate different expressions and identify which expressions match which emotions?
- ▶ Does the child display appropriate facial expressions to match the situation?
- ▶ Does the child understand the emotions that go with the facial expression? Can he recognize those emotions in himself and determine which events prompt which emotions?
- ▶ Is the child able to read, understand and display basic emotions – happy, sad, angry, scared and neutral?
- ▶ Is the child able to read, understand and display more subtle emotions?

## Surprised

Choose 2 of the following scenarios, or more if needed.

You never expected to win the contest, but you did.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling surprised, confused or bored?

You didn't know that your grandparents were coming for a visit, but when you got home, there they were.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling jealous, disgusted or surprised?

Your teacher suddenly chose you to be the lead in a play.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling sad, surprised, or ashamed?

Your friend got up in front of everyone and sang a song. You never thought he would do that.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling surprised, scared or confused?

When you got home you found out that you were going to an amusement park.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling doubtful, concerned or surprised?

You received a present even though it wasn't your birthday or anything.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling concerned, surprised or disgusted?

## Concerned

Choose 2 of the following scenarios, or more if needed.

Your friend is upset, but you don't know why.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling disgusted, embarrassed or concerned?

Your mother is really sick.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling angry, concerned or ashamed?

Someone has been sending mean notes to your best friend.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling concerned, jealous or embarrassed?

Your friend has to give a report in front of the class and he's really nervous. He looks at you before he starts his report.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling sick, confused or concerned?

Your pet is really sick.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling concerned, ashamed, embarrassed?

You see dog get hit by a car.

- ▶ Show how your face would look.
- ▶ Would you be feeling confused, scared or concerned?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# Which face is different?

Circle the face in each row that shows a different emotion than the other two.

