

## ***From Head to Heart* Educator Resource**

### **Prologue**

*From Head to Heart* was originally written to help children of all ages but is of primary importance to school-aged children. Knowing how important social-emotional learning (SEL) is to children, *From Head to Heart* is a great tool for educators. How do you teach social-emotional learning in your classroom? This resource is to support educators using *From Head to Heart* in the classroom.

### **Curriculum Connections**

*From Head to Heart* could be used for discussion in many different types of lessons, including any that involve mental health or bullying. Actual curriculum connections may be in Health and Physical Education documents (depending on your jurisdiction) but this book could also be used for Language or The Arts. The book has been written using language for children aged 7 to 9 years old but could be used for any age group with modifications to the discussion.

### **Social-Emotional Learning**

A lot has been written about the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) and I will not include a full reference list here as you can look up specific documents in your own school area. The five core competencies of SEL are self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Teachers can work with students to build their skill set of competencies in addition to increasing their self-awareness of their nervous system's stress responses. For students to become problem solvers and skill builders with a growth mindset, it takes a caring adult-student relationship along with collaboration and support. Much has also been said about using a trauma-informed approach so that students feel safe, supported and nurtured. Using these types of learning in the classroom leads to increased chances of academic success.

Although there may not be specific social-emotional related expectations in the curriculum, creating opportunities within the school day supports students in developing positive behaviours, cultivating relationships and showing empathy. Positive benefits also include improved sense of self and others, reduced behaviour problems and emotional conflicts.

### **Bullying**

There are also a lot of resources about anti-bullying initiatives, bullying prevention and intervention. What anti-bullying initiatives do you have in your school?

*From Head to Heart* could be used in conjunction with any teachings about bullying. Often children who are bullied may respond reactively by becoming bullies themselves or respond repressively by withdrawing into themselves. Gwen, in *From Head to Heart*, withdraws from the world emotionally behind her wall. Although Gwen's wall is

imaginary, she has walled off the emotions and experiences from feeling hurt. This blockage of emotional energy creates a separateness from her real and whole self which would require reintegration for holistic health in mind, body and spirit. Part of Gwen's healing came from supporting someone else who was bullied. Classroom activities that focus on anti-bullying initiatives could include students creating an anti-bullying poster or role-play.

### **Discussions about Feelings**

Related to the SEL competencies, children need to feel comfortable talking about their feelings to others with the ability to express what they are feeling. Teachers can be a safe, caring adult in a child's life. Children may not always feel comfortable speaking to their parents, whether that is because they are looking to please their parents or not appear weak or whether their parent is abusive. *From Head to Heart* provides excellent opportunities to open the discussion about feelings. And this is needed in the world today. How would this work in your classroom? What activities do you use with your students?

Children need to know that discussing feelings is normal. Building a good understanding of emotions when young will help children relate to others and have improved mental health as they get older. Recognising and understanding different emotions helps a child be more mentally strong and have improved well-being. Encouraging children (and teens and adults) to talk about their feelings helps validate their feelings, helps them manage and regulate their emotions and allows them to respond to their emotions. It is a psychological relief to not bury feelings and get them out into the open. Learning how to actively express feelings through discussion, play, imagination or role-play will improve mental health.

*From Head to Heart* is a great story to open discussions that help children communicate their feelings. Learning how to manage emotions is an ongoing life lesson. The story of Gwen's wall is an example of not managing emotions well and shows how it can affect your life for a long time. If this story prevents another child from hiding behind their wall, it has been a success. This story also shows how asking for help is a step in the right direction. When emotions become overwhelming, children need to know they can seek assistance. Not being able to manage emotions may lead to a mindset with negative thoughts such as thinking no one likes them and not being good enough. A child may try to control the situation in a way that negatively impacts them. In *From Head to Heart*, Gwen uses her mind to be in control by "being smart" and shutting away her emotions. People may also be living through their mind if they constantly worry, have anxiety and fears and may think about things over and over. Over time Gwen recognizes being in her mind is not a good strategy and learns to open her heart to feeling again. How would you use *From Head to Heart* in your classroom? In my author visits to classrooms different activities involving feelings help engage the students.

## **Heart Opening**

Heart-opening healing is something that everybody can practice in their lives. Having an open heart includes being honest with yourself and others, allowance of emotions, not trying to be in control and to be living in the moment. The result is the ability to love oneself, others and life in general. The opposite of living in the heart may result in trying to control life, living with conditioned beliefs from others, taking on the projections of others, and not being your authentic self. Living through the heart results in a loving, kind, generous, benevolent person. This person also is empowered and inspired. Thus, teaching children these lessons will result in empowered adults. Making decisions with an open heart are empowered decisions. The biggest lesson is the ability to feel emotions without shutting them down. Having strategies to manage emotions and stress are necessary.

## **Building Emotional Walls**

We often create an emotional wall when in times of stress and feel like we can't deal with something in the moment or feel the need for protection, but usually we are able to deal with the situation before too long. However, in the story, Gwen built her wall to last and purposefully turned off her feelings so that she would no longer feel hurt. She thought she was controlling the situation, but, the situation was controlling her. Over time things became dull and lifeless. Gwen eventually sought the help she needed to take down the wall.

## **Strategies for Managing Emotions**

Children need to learn that is okay to feel big emotions, whether that is happiness, sadness, fear, frustration or hurt.

1. **Breath**  
Painful emotions are often easier to deal with by using the breath. Deep breaths when feeling difficult emotions helps ease them. Students can participate in meditations to learn how to calm/soothe themselves.
2. **Safety**  
An environment that feels safe needs to be created in the classroom so that trust may be established for students with a caring adult and peers.
3. **Questions**  
Students are encouraged to ask questions about what they see/hear and what they are feeling. Teachers can model good inclusive questions during a story.
4. **Feelings Charts**  
Teacher can refer to feelings charts to support students in expressing what feeling they are feeling.
5. **Sharing**  
Students are emboldened to share their thoughts and feelings during an activity. It may take time for a student to feel safe to share.
6. **Role Play**

## Experiential Role Play

### 7. Reflection

Teachers can model reflection.

For a SEL program to be effective, the SAFER model's 5 elements (Duriak et al. 2010) may be incorporated into the lesson. Steps to include are: Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit, Reflection.

A Trauma-informed Approach is important to follow so that trauma is recognized, to know how to respond to those with trauma and to resist re-traumatizing the person. Again, the need to create a safe environment is important so that the student can trust others, has choice and is able to collaborate with others.

### Questions

Here are some questions that may be asked before, during, after reading the story, *From Head to Heart*.

Before and After: What does the title of the story mean to you?

Where do you like to spend time? How does it make you feel?

How does being outside in nature make you feel?

Has anyone ever made fun of you? How did that make you feel?

Have you ever been bullied? What happened? Why do you think you were bullied?

When have you felt like you did belong?

Have you ever felt misunderstood? Tell us about that.

Have you ever not told your parents about something that happened to you? Why?

Can you tell us about a time when you felt like no one liked you?

Have you ever made a wall like Gwen did in the story? Why did you build it? Is it time to take it down?

Tell me about a time when you had really hurt feelings.

Have you ever tried to control things? In what ways?

How do you feel when you are alone with no one to play with?

Have you ever seen someone being bullied? What did you do? Is there anything else that you would do now?

Tell me about a time when you asked an adult for help.

What do you do if you feel hurt?

How can you live from your heart? What does that mean for you?

## **The Breath**

There are so many different resources about working with the breath on the internet. Taking some deep breaths are the first thing someone can do if they are upset, or emotions are overwhelming. Focused breathing brings one back into their body and out of their mind. Practice focused breathing often. The HeartMath Institute (<https://www.heartmath.org/>) has great resources for self-regulation and managing stress.

## **What To Do When You Feel Upset**

Ask the students what they do when they feel upset. Once everyone has shared their idea discuss any from the following list that may be appropriate for the age.

### **Ideas to Do When Feeling Upset**

- Have some alone time
- Take 10 deep breaths
- Give someone a hug
- Pet your animal
- Go outside
- Sing a song
- Build something
- Use a weighted blanket
- Do a puzzle
- Do exercises or yoga
- Paint
- Draw how you feel
- Dance
- Play with a fidget toy or watch a glitter toy
- Listen to relaxing music
- Visualize a peaceful place
- Play with play dough
- Write in a journal
- Read a book
- Have a warm bath
- Place an ice pack on back of neck

## **Meditation/Visualization**

Spending time in meditation helps self-regulation and management of emotions since the more that you practice being relaxed and calm, the easier it is to regain that state when you become agitated and stressed. There are many different types of meditation, but a guided meditation is great for beginners.

The following is a short, guided meditation you can do with others with some quiet, calming music being played. Keep your voice soft and calming. This meditation can be repeated often.

### **The Garden Meditation**

Let's all take a deep breath. Breathe in, Breathe out. And again. Breathing all the way into your belly. And breathing all the way out. Sit comfortably in your chair and if you wish you can put your head down on your desk or table in front of you.

Now close your eyes. Connect with your inner world of feelings and thoughts. Try to keep your mind focused on what I am saying and let all your other worries fade away.

Become aware of your body. Be aware of where your body touches a surface, the floor, the chair, whatever you are sitting or lying on. Make your body as comfortable as possible.

Allow your body to relax in this safe place. Relaxing. Breathing slowly. Feel yourself relaxing. With each breath you take your thoughts become lighter. There is more space opening up inside you.

Now you are ready to enjoy this guided meditation. It's time to take an inner journey. As I speak just allow images to come to your mind. If you have difficulty seeing imagined pictures in your mind, just try to sense what might be around you.

I want you to imagine coming to a tall wooden gate in a fence. This is a special place that you have come to. This is your special garden. The gate to your garden will only open for you, so walk up slowly. The gate will slowly swing open allowing you to pass through. Just beyond the gate is a stone path and you decide to follow this stone path.

You take a moment to look at this wonderful garden that you have entered. There are all sorts of plants, trees, shrubs, and flowers of all sizes all around you. So many different colours of green. Take a deep breath. The air smells so pure and clean. You can see birds and butterflies in the air. You can hear the birds singing. On one side of you is a beautiful flower garden. Look at all the colours of flowers, red, orange, yellow, purple, pink and white. Reach out and touch one of the flower petals. It feels so soft and smooth. Then bend over to smell the flower. It smells lovely.

Continue to walk along the stone path. Hear the gravel crunch under your shoes. Enjoy the nature all around you. Eventually you come to a little spot with a bench, and you decide to sit down on the bench beside a small pond under a graceful tree. Continue to take in all the colours of the garden, the sounds of the animals, and the trickle of the water in the pond. You can even see some goldfish in the pond looking back at you. The garden has welcomed your quiet presence. Really take a look around you knowing that you can come back to this safe spot any time that you wish.

When you are ready, stand up and continue to walk along the stone path. Enjoy the trees and plants alongside the path. Reach out and touch any that look like they will be enjoyable to touch. The grasses are so soft. Keep breathing in the energizing scents of the garden.

You notice that the stone path is curving back to the gate through which you entered the garden. Feel free to turn around and take another look at this beautiful garden. When you are ready, walk back towards the gate and it swings open. Say good-bye to the garden and promise that you will come back again.

Start to breathe a little bit more deeply. Start to wiggle your fingers and toes. When you are ready, it is time to open your eyes and come fully back to the room.

### **Getting Help**

Educators are front line workers in schools and may be the ones to note when a student has difficulty expressing feelings or has experienced past trauma. It may be to their teacher that a student opens up about fears, anxieties and worries. There may be students that need the extra help to explore these areas and are referred to social workers and psychologists within the school system. However, it is the responsibility of the teacher to identify a student as a possibility of requiring further help to their school team.

### **Using From Head to Heart in the Classroom**

I would love to hear how you have used this book in your classroom, or ideas and suggestions for what you have planned.

Please respond to this Google Form: <https://forms.gle/KrhdXLFzDdYxBv3f8>

### **Author Visits**

Author visits are available in person and virtually. Think about what this might look like for your classroom, library, or school. Contact Wanda at [wanda@wandadavis.ca](mailto:wanda@wandadavis.ca).

### **References**

<https://www.panoramaed.com/blog/guide-to-core-sel-competencies>

<https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/cross-curricular-and-integrated-learning/social-emotional-learning-skills>