



EMO-ACTIONS. How Doing Things Together Can Strengthen Emotional Competence

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Giving emotions a name is a fundamental step, and it is only one part of the process through which we learn to understand and regulate them. Think of a group of children rehearsing a play, a team engaged in a game, or adolescents making music together or collaborating on a project. In all these situations, people share more than actions. Enthusiasm, anticipation, embarrassment, frustration, trust, and fear of making mistakes all come into play. Group activities can therefore become opportunities for emotional learning. Simply being together, however, is not enough. Doing something together requires us to notice what is happening within ourselves while, at the same time, adjusting to others.

One key ingredient is the ability to synchronize. Moving, singing, or acting in the same rhythm means paying attention to others, anticipating their actions, and modifying our own. Research combining the results of 60 experiments found, overall, a positive effect of interpersonal synchrony on attitudes and behaviors directed toward others (Rennung & Göritz, 2016). A particularly intuitive experiment illustrates this well. Four-year-old children were invited to swing side by side on two swings, either in the same rhythm or in different rhythms. Afterwards, children who had moved in synchrony cooperated more effectively on joint tasks (Rabinowitch & Meltzoff, 2017). Moving together does not automatically produce emotional competence. Coordination can, however, create favorable conditions for attending to others, modulating one's own behavior, and building shared action.

Group activities also bring us into contact with real emotions. We may have to wait for our turn, tolerate a mistake, perform or speak in front of others, accept that a peer has a different idea, cope with losing, or repair a conflict without abandoning a shared goal. This is precisely where emotional competence can be practiced. Talking about emotions is useful, and learning to recognize and regulate them while something is actually happening adds a concrete dimension. In dramatic play, for example, emotion is expressed through voice, facial expression, gesture, and posture. In an experimental study with young children, dramatic pretend play activities carried out in small groups produced specific improvements in emotional self-control (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018). The experience can become even more formative when, after acting, there is time to stop and make sense of what happened. We can ask, for example, why we became frustrated, what helped us keep going, and how we resolved that moment of tension.

During adolescence, this dimension takes on particular significance. Peers become central partners, and emotions are increasingly experienced, expressed, and regulated within friendships and peer groups. A study that followed adolescents and close friends for two years showed that friends' ways of regulating their emotions are associated over time with adolescents' own emotion regulation (Borowski & Zeman, 2025). Groups are therefore



ambivalent. They can provide support, recognition, and security, but they can also amplify tension, exclusion, and fear of judgment. The educational value of group activities depends on the quality of relationships and on opportunities to cooperate in a sufficiently safe context, where mistakes do not become humiliation and conflict can be addressed without turning into exclusion.

In this sense, school can become a genuine emotional training ground. This does not require turning every experience into a “lesson about emotions.” Instead, it means creating activities in which children and adolescents can take on roles, collaborate, face difficulties, negotiate, and reflect on what happened. Adults still have an important role. Their task is not to remove every tension. It is to help the group recognize it, contain it, and turn it into an opportunity for learning. Evidence from structured school-based Social and Emotional Learning programs shows that, when these competencies are intentionally and systematically supported, students benefit in social and emotional skills, peer relationships, school climate and functioning, and academic achievement (Cipriano et al., 2023). This does not mean that every group activity produces the same effects. What matters is how the experience is designed, guided, and lived.

From this perspective, the “Seeker of Wonder” (Cercatore dell’Incanto) can be understood as someone who recognizes and names what they feel and brings that experience into encounters with others. When an emotion becomes a word, a gesture, a story, an image, or a shared action, what we feel can be viewed from new perspectives, shared, and transformed. It is in the movement from feeling to doing together that emotions can also become tools for knowing ourselves, connecting with others, and building more conscious relationships.

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