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Edition Editor	Pam Linke
Series Editor	Sue Wales
Publications Assistant	Rebecca Meston
Graphic Design	Claire Connelly
Cover Photograph	Andrew Sikorski
Interior Photos/ Illustrations	R. Barry C. Connelly A. Sikorski R. Sorin

RIPS Reviewers during 2004:
Lyn Bower, Heather Conroy, Anne Glover, Kari Winer, Margaret Young

Membership, subscription & advertising inquiries:

Early Childhood Australia Inc.
PO Box 7105 Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (02) 6242 1800
Fax: (02) 6242 1818
Sales line (toll free): 1800 356 900
Email: eca@earlychildhood.org.au

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About the author:

Reesa Sorin was an early childhood teacher and an art teacher in Winnipeg, Canada, before coming to Australia in 1988. Since then she has taught in early childhood centres, preschools, primary schools, TAFE and university. She is currently Coordinator of Early Childhood Education and Coordinator of Arts Education at James Cook University in Cairns.

Her combined interest in early childhood and in art drew her to the research area of emotion education in early childhood, which she believes is best taught through the arts. She has published widely about children's fears, emotion education, conceptualisations of childhood, and student mobility.

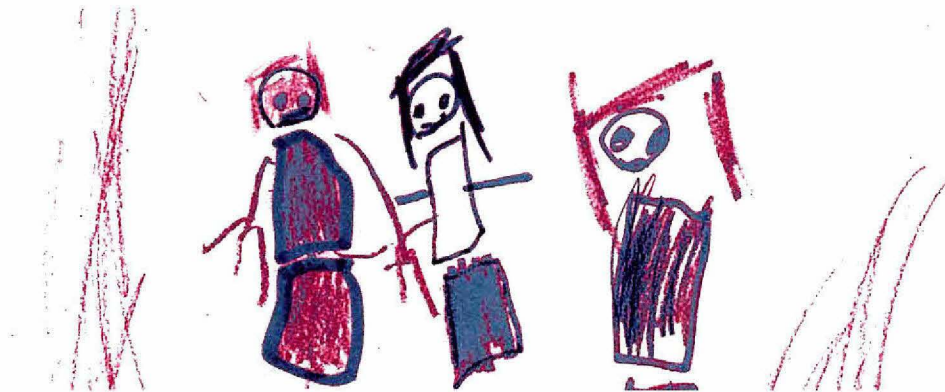
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Chapter 1: Feelings and early childhood

We all experience a myriad of feelings. News of a new baby, a promotion at work, or an old friend arriving for a visit might cause us to feel happy and excited. Rising interest rates or work pressures might cause us to feel anxious or apprehensive. The death of a loved one or loss of a cherished possession might cause us to feel sad or even angry. Feelings play an important part in the way we experience and come to understand our lives. Yet we often deny feeling anything but 'good' and may encourage children in our care to do the same, or at least not to express their 'other' feelings. Educational practices that focus largely on the development of thinking skills such as reading, writing and number skills at the expense of developing understandings of feelings may do the same. To teach to the whole child, we must teach to the heart as well as the mind.

Since the early 1980s, with the publication of Gardner's multiple intelligences (Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2003), the ability to understand feelings and motives has been recognised as important. Goleman (1995) defined emotional intelligence as the ability to understand and manage feelings, motivate yourself in the face of discord, and recognise feelings and feeling displays in other people. Since then, emotional intelligence or emotional literacy has been defined as the ability to recognise, appraise, express, understand and regulate feelings (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, in Weare, 2000). It is 'a way of managing your interactions with others so that you can build an understanding of your own emotions and those of others, then find a way of allowing this understanding to inform your actions' (Antidote, 2003, p. 3).

Children who manage their feelings well are said to be emotionally literate. They recognise and respond well to other people's feelings, and are at an advantage in all areas of life. On the other hand, unresolved feelings can negatively affect memory, judgement, and general learning skills (Cornelius & Faire, 1989; Lewis & Lewis, 1996; McKnight & Sutton, 1994). As early as the preschool years, children who have trouble regulating their negative feelings are more prone to displays of anger, frustration and irritation towards others and to poor relationships with both adults and other children (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1995).

At times, young children are expected to learn to recognise and express their feelings without adult help. Yet lack of adult teaching about feelings and how to express them can put children at risk of developing behavioural, emotional, academic and social problems (Novick, 2004). Learning about feelings from the early childhood years and continuing throughout the school years and beyond can be greatly helpful to overall learning, development and socialisation.

In programs that teach about feelings, children learn to recognise, name and take ownership of their feelings and behaviour; to recognise and empathise with others' feelings; and to express feelings in ways that lead to satisfactory outcomes for all. Feelings are accepted as a natural part of life (Antidote, 2003). As Weare (2000) notes: 'All the emotions, including the negative ones, are not only a fact of life, but are at root healthy and useful, even if we need to be able to limit some of their manifestations in some circumstances' (p. 71). Children need to be able to find effective and non-destructive ways to express negative as well as positive feelings, and the best time to start this is in early childhood.