

MAKE YOUR OWN EMOTIONS GARDEN!

Being able to identify and understand emotions can be really hard, especially when you can't see them. Being able to turn understanding of emotions into something more, like being able to safely experience them and having the tools to help create a safe environment in which to do so can be much harder. For younger kids and especially those with developmental diagnoses, being able to understand and connect with their emotions can be much harder due to the added challenges of understanding abstract concepts while having a mind that does best when it has solid, actually visible things to aid in understanding. Today we will be talking about how creating your own emotions garden with you child can hopefully provide a concrete visual aid to help them learn more about their emotions and how they can care for them.

A brief note before we continue. THIS ACTIVITY IS 100% ABOUT SOUL AND 0% ABOUT LOGIC! Growing an emotions garden is designed to be a nurturing and supportive activity for the whole family so for it to work, parents and kids need to be able to connect with what speaks to them. Use plants you like and that you find meaningful when you think about your feelings. Get creative and focus on the process not the end result; metaphors never work if you cannot connect the idea to the visible thing in a way that your child will understand. Our goal is to help create conscious awareness of ourselves!

If you read my earlier post about creating a sensory garden, then you probably have an idea about the benefits of gardening. Gardening can serve multiple purposes, especially around helping to reduce stress and worry. For kids with developmental diagnoses, gardening can not only provide an outlet to address sensory and motor skills challenges, it provides an excellent opportunity to learn about caring for others.

Gardening requires a person to take care of an other living object, which will rely on them for its survival. Kids who have very concrete patterns of thinking and understanding will have the opportunity to visibly see their plants grow and thrive with their care. In other words, taking care of plants is an excellent metaphor for importance of creating empathic connections with others as well as for taking care of oneself. Whether you are using plants as a metaphor for nurturing relationships or for understanding your feelings so you know how to care for them, taking care of them will provide you with a visible reward for your efforts, which you can connect to concepts your child is learning about in their social skills or therapy sessions. Lastly, allowing your child to create and maintain their own emotions garden can be, whether your child has a developmental diagnosis or not, a very insightful tool for assessing their abilities to take care of something with more needs in the future such as a pet.

Ok, so how do we turn a garden into an emotions garden? What about this weather? After all, we're in the high summer months and it's brutal outside. To solve this challenge we will be focusing on plants that you and your child can grow indoors or in a simple window box that you can access from your home. These plants are also being suggested for the wide range of colors they provide, which will be a critical component to creating our emotions garden. There are many more types of equally useful plants to do this project so make sure you pick ones that speak out to you and your child.

First, you will need to find the plants you want to grow. Here is a list of some very colorful plants that thrive indoors or in planters that are very colorful.

African Violets-Easy to maintain and come in various shades of purples and pinks

Begonias-Makes many lovely, small flowers that come in purples, pinks, reds, yellows, whites

Bromeliads-Not flowers, these jungle plants are easy to care for and come in vivid reds, oranges, yellows, purples, and pinks; they also have a deep green body and leaves.

Christmas Cactus-Thrives on neglect so maybe use this one to illustrate the concept that you do need to be aware of your feelings, but that you can safely leave them alone for a while and still be ok! Green fronds and bloom in bright magentas and fuscias during the winter

Chenille-A really fuzzy sensory plant with long fuzzy flowers, these come in reds and oranges

Kaffir Lilly-Thrives when placed in total dark for the night. This plant can be an excellent metaphor for the triumph of the self during really hard times. With its bright oranges, yellows, fuscias, and reds, it bursts out of the darkness that consumes it every night and still thriving.

Amaryllis- related to Kaffir Lillys and makes very bright blooms, especially when well looked after. Comes in oranges, yellows, fuscias, and reds, and some other colors I can't remember.

Peace Lillies-Low maintenance, calming deep green leaves and stem with a bright white and yellow bloom. These plants can serve as a metaphor for when we are well-regulated, calm, and at peace.

The more energy put into care of this plant results in a brighter bloom, which happens when we take care of ourselves.

Pansies-These are more suitable for planter boxes and come in a wide range of colors: pinks, oranges, blues, yellows, purples, whites, darks, and so on

Fireplants-More frequently sold as CELOSIA, these feathery flowering plants come in many colors: pinks, oranges, blues, yellows, purples, whites, darks, and so on. Like pansies, they are best suited for window boxes outdoors. I have used these to symbolize anger and the need to still take care of my anger even if I do not like experiencing this emotion; it is still real and cannot be ignored.

Now, a note about the importance of colors. A critical component of making an emotions garden is being able to make abstract concepts like emotions, visible. This is where color comes in because the color will be the visual representation of the emotions. For example, you may pick a red celosia because the red symbolizes embarrassment. A blue pansie may symbolize sadness.

For those of us who are not sure which types of plants we want to use for our emotions, the following may help.

Cool Colors Vs. Warm Colors

Cool colors are considered to be calmer, more subdued colors which when visualized have a more calming psychological impact on emotion and visual perception. Traditionally these colors have been viewed as soothing and an apotheosis to warm colors. The cool colors include:

Blues
Purples
Greens

Pinks
Whites
Blacks

Warm Colors are considered to be more vivid and attention getting. Traditionally they have been associated with intense action, danger, more highly visible. The warm colors include:

Reds
Yellows
Oranges
Fuscias
Any bright version of cool color

Traditionally, when making associations between colors and emotions for the purpose of labeling and identifying feelings, warm colors are used for more intense positive AND negative feelings such as anger, excitement, terror, fear, rage, panic, danger, and so on.

Cool colors, and the deeper shades of them, on the other hand, have been used to represent more calm, heavy, and deep emotions. Examples include sadness, depression, calm, peaceful, relaxed, bored, apathy, and so on

REMEMBER!! It does not matter what color you use to represent your feelings as long as it makes sense to YOU!!

Once you have picked your emotions together with your child, take a moment to pick several of them that you want to focus more on. For example: rage, depression, and calm. Now pick the flowering plants and colors represent those feelings best for you.

Per our example: Rage-Bright red fire plant colosia
Depression-deep purple african violet
Calm-yellow peace lilly

In the interests of building emotional fluency and expanding knowledge beyond mad, happy, sad, you can use different colored flowers in different shades of the same color to create an association. This can also really help for teaching your child about different emotions by giving them more vocabulary to use for when they experience a feeling that doesn't fit mad, sad, happy. Here's an example:

You can use fireplants to represent different feelings in the anger family by picking ones that start out more muted and then become more intense as the intensity of the color grows.

Annoyed Fire Plant, Frustrated Fire Plant, Fed Up Fire Plant, Angry Fire Plant, Furious Fire Plant, Enraged Fire Plant

Plant your plants! This is not something I am good at describing so watch this video ! Watch this one if you are planting indoors!

Now, remember to follow the care instructions that come with your plant. This is the part where you are going to be tying in the work your child is doing in their therapies to caring for their plants. Have conversations about the feeling they are experiencing when they care for each plant. You can also try and identify the feeling for them if they don't seem to have a recallable

emotion to use when you discuss them. For example, if you are taking care of the peace lily, you might talk about what helps you stay calm or when you get overwhelmed how do you get to a place of peace. Another example, may be talking about what its like to experience anger and how to deal with it when caring for the fire plant or whatever plant you choose. Be creative in your discussions and most of all, DO SHARE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES of those feelings. You are modeling healthy coping!!!!

GOOD LUCK AND HAVE FUN!!!!!!