



## Review of Research for Emozi®

The Middle School Social Emotional Learning Program

### Introduction

Emozi®—the social emotional learning (SEL) program for middle schoolers—is informed by developmental, cognitive, and neurosciences experts.

The Emozi program is built on the foundation of existing best practices and decades of SEL research. Explicit SEL lessons and activities highlight principles of gratitude, self-regulation, reflection, and Socratic seminars, which utilize literacy to teach SEL. Emozi weaves together these essential skills using an approach to emotion and neuroscience known as *the theory of constructed emotion*. (Barrett, 2017a, 2017b)

The hallmarks of the theory of constructed emotion are essential additions to the traditional array of SEL offerings. These include attention to the predictive nature of the human nervous system, the rejection of essentialism, the idea that variability is the norm in human behavior and experience, the importance of the body budget, and the power of labeling emotions.

Emozi is a comprehensive SEL curriculum that utilizes SAFE principles (Structured, Active, Focused, and Explicit). The benefits of high-quality programs employing these principles have been well-documented, with meta-analyses of both short- and long-term outcomes showing their meaningful results. These programs benefit classroom environments by creating positive climates and facilitating learning conditions, which researchers describe as “caring, cooperative, culturally responsive, well-managed, participatory, and safe.” ([Osher & Berg, 2017](#); [Weissberg, 2019](#); [Zins, 2004](#)). Studies also show that they deliver measurable and significant benefits for individual students, including improvement in academic performance.

### The Theory of Constructed Emotion

The theory of constructed emotion originates in Lisa Feldman Barrett, Ph.D., and her colleagues. The theory is well-explained in books by Dr. Barrett like *How Emotions are Made* and *Seven and a Half Lessons about the Brain* and Dr. Barrett’s two TED talks.



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Dr. Barrett's works include worldwide research studies and synthesize all this research under a theory of emotion and behavior, which may differ from what many teachers and students learned in school.

One area where the theory of constructed emotion differs from the common understanding of the brain and behavior is whether or not emotions have an 'essence.' This is known as "essentialism"—the belief that things or experiences that we group under the same category are all similar in some profound way. Essentialist beliefs about emotions were widely held until recently.

#### **Essentialism and Locationism vs. Constructed Emotion**

When we have essentialist beliefs about emotion, we assume that each emotion category has a particular 'essence' or features shared by all or most instances of that emotion. If we hold essentialist beliefs about emotion, we also likely believe that each emotion's key characteristics distinguish the instances of that emotion category from instances of another emotion category. For example, we might believe that instances of anger involve an increase in blood pressure and are expressed with a scowling face. In contrast, instances of fear involve sweaty palms and are expressed with a wide-eyed gasping look.

We may also assume that certain traits about each emotion category are the same in every instance and that every circumstance in which we feel a certain emotion is the same. For example, every time we feel fear, it is because we are threatened or in danger.

By contrast, various lessons in the Emozi program allow students to recognize important differences in emotional moments they previously labeled with the same word, thus deepening their understanding of their emotional moments.

Essentialist beliefs in emotion have led researchers to try to find underlying biological sources for each emotion. But the hunt for "fear neurons" and "anger circuits" have come up short. The belief that we have particular brain areas for different emotions is



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called “locationism.” In actuality, researchers have found that “variability is the norm,” as Dr. Barrett says.

When researchers gather massive amounts of brain data together from many different studies and analyze them in the attempt to find out whether each emotion category has its own brain location, they find “little evidence that discrete emotion categories can be consistently and specifically localized to distinct brain regions.” (Lindquist et al., 2012)

Because the brain works as a system, it’s imperative to study the entire brain and how it works to understand how the brain produces a particular emotional experience. The theory of constructed emotion data shows us that there aren’t specific parts of the brain that perform single psychological functions. Our brains are much more complicated than that.

Emozi lessons don’t give students the false impression that different parts of their brain are “at war with each other” or that predetermined circuits in their brain are “triggered” by different experiences. Instead, the program provides students with the opportunity to learn about how their brains and bodies work more holistically and how these interactions impact their emotional responses.

Many essentialist beliefs about emotion also include the idea that emotions are our body and brain’s reactions to the world. However, emerging theories of human behavior center on prediction, as opposed to reaction. The theory of constructed emotion is one of those theories. While there is debate in the scientific literature about whether the human brain reacts to events in the world—or whether the brain runs an internal model that predicts what is going to happen next based on prior experiences—the best evidence we have from anatomy, evolutionary neuroscience, and psychology indicates that the most efficient way for the brain to regulate the body is through prediction.

Emozi lessons are designed to help students focus on how they feel and what their brains might predict about the future.



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Belief in emotion essentialism has also led researchers to work to associate particular facial movements with particular emotions. There is a preponderance of evidence indicating that movements are not easily mappable to meanings. When Dr. Barrett and her colleagues reviewed over a thousand research papers, they found that the “common view,” which states that a “person’s emotional state can be readily inferred from his or her facial movements,” was not supported by the evidence (Barrett et al., 2018).

Here, they found that “variability is the norm” as well, writing that “[w]hen facial movements do express emotional states, they are considerably more variable and dependent on context than the common view allows.” The research shows that we may move our faces in many different ways when angry, sad, or happy. Just because a smile may sometimes mean that we are happy or wish to communicate that we are happy, it does not always mean that we are happy when we are smiling.

The same is true when researchers analyze information about people’s bodies collected during psychology experiments. When it comes to the search for emotional “fingerprints” in the body’s different systems, once again, it turns out that “variability is the norm.” (Siegel et al., 2018)

The Emozi program does not teach students to try to recognize how someone is feeling based on their facial expressions or body language alone. Instead, lessons focus on offering students the opportunity to think about and predict the different ways people around them might be feeling, despite whatever they might initially assume based on stereotypes or preconceptions.

### **Labelling Emotions**

Students can benefit in multiple ways from learning to use words to label emotions. Researchers have described the usefulness of emotion-word labels as multifaceted, especially when people are feeling intense and negative feelings. One benefit in such a situation is that using an emotion word “conveys information about the situation and the possible courses of action” (Kashdan et al., 2015). Then, after using a word to label a



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strong negative emotion, it can “in turn become easier to regulate, and then either become irrelevant or facilitate a person’s personal strivings.” We can channel our negative emotions to help us achieve our goals, whether preparing for a test or remaining confident and assertive during a disagreement or confrontation.

Labeling our emotions with words also provides us with different ways to explain how we are feeling. Researchers have hypothesized that “infants and young children learn emotion categories in much the same way that they learn other abstract, conceptual categories whose instances differ in their features from situation to situation: with the help of relevant words.” (Hoemann et al., 2019) We can also learn new emotion words as we get older, which can help us understand our reactions to new situations or understand existing situations in a new way.

Emozi aligns with this research. It offers students the opportunity to find new and more precise words to label their emotions and even create entirely new emotion concepts that can help them effectively manage reactions to different situations.

### **Using the “Body Budget” to Help Develop Key Competencies**

The theory of constructed emotion focuses closely on a concept called “the body budget.” [An article by Dr. Barrett in the New York Times](#) explains this idea. In it, she writes that “Your brain runs your body using something like a budget.” She further explains that the brain constantly tracks “resources like water, salt, and glucose as you gain and lose them.” We spend resources by learning, working, and moving around, and we regain resources by eating, sleeping, and taking care of our bodies.

The idea of the body budget helps us understand that there is not a very real difference between things we might typically call “physical” and things we might call “mental.” Our thoughts are deeply affected by our bodies, and the workings of our bodies are intertwined closely with our thoughts. Dr. Barrett explains that often when we feel bad emotionally, it is caused by a physical debt. We can often relieve our psychological discomfort through healthy physical activities.



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Every lesson in the Emozi program pulls from the five CASEL social and emotional learning competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Our ability to employ these skills depends on our body budget being solvent. Successfully developing these competencies also helps a person navigate the world in a way that incurs fewer withdrawals from their body budget.

### **Overview of the Emozi® Program**

The Emozi program is organized in a highly modular fashion to allow for classroom implementation flexibility. Each grade level includes three thematic units of 12 lessons each. Each week, teachers teach the main concept in a simple 30-minute lesson. They can choose from four additional activities (Gratitude Challenge, Socratic Seminar, Self-Regulation Strategy, and/or Reflection) offered in a standalone or sequential fashion to extend, enrich, or reinforce students' learning on the main concept.

In addition, multiple opportunities are provided for educators to personalize the lessons for students who need additional support, English learners, or those who might benefit from other interdisciplinary enrichment opportunities on the topic.

Embedded professional development also supports educators, helping them model effective use of the SEL skills taught by the program while simultaneously building their set of skills.

Finally, a “Connect to Home” feature provides suggested activities to help students engage with family members on SEL-related topics in the home environment. Send-home letters supplied in English, French, and Spanish also help to enhance these home-school connections.

### **Self-Regulation & Problem-Solving**

Studies show that students who effectively self-regulate can manage their behavior more effectively, resulting in fewer disruptive occurrences in the classroom. The Emozi program incorporates a unified approach to self-regulation, problem-solving, and



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decision-making known as the SCOPE Strategy. Classroom materials reinforce the use and retention of this strategy, which asks classroom community members who find themselves in a conflict to:

- **Stop** (and engage in deep breathing)
- **Consider** feelings and their causes,
- evaluate **Options**,
- **Plan** next steps, and
- **Evaluate** the outcome of their actions.

### **The Power of Gratitude**

Gratitude is a powerful state and set of beliefs. The famous Roman statesman Cicero once called it not “only the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all of the others,” meaning that the cultivation of gratitude is a foundation upon which to build other virtues.

The work of many researchers has begun to bolster this piece of ancient wisdom. Researchers have shown that inducing gratitude can increase moral behavior above and beyond the induction of other potentially desirable emotional states, like happiness.

For example, one study found that gratitude reduced “cheating both in a controlled laboratory setting and a more anonymous online setting.” (DeSteno et al., 2019) Research has also shown that “people feeling grateful, compared to others feeling happy or no emotion at all, show enhanced self-control when it comes to making financial decisions requiring patience to obtain larger rewards.” (DeSteno et al., 2014, 2019, p. 4; Dickens & DeSteno, 2016) Simply put, these results indicate that gratitude and patience are linked above and beyond what happiness or neutrality might support.

Gratitude can help us act in many other positive ways. Studies have found that gratitude correlates with people increasing their efforts to pay others back for their help (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006) and to share with others fairly in economic decision-making tasks (DeSteno et al., 2010). Researchers have also found that



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gratitude, specifically—as opposed to other positive emotions—can help people act in sustainable ways and reduce the consumption of depleting resources. (Kates & DeSteno, 2020) Finally, a study found gratitude as a marker of well-adjusted students, including findings that correlate it with positive academic outcomes in young students. (Froh et al., 2011)

Emozi’s “Gratitude Challenge” activity offers students a weekly opportunity to practice gratitude in various modalities, fostering and deepening students’ familiarity with the feeling of gratitude and all the different ways they can evoke it in themselves and others. It is important that this practice is regular and repeated, given the wealth of wisdom and evidence which indicates that the induction of gratitude—both in a moment-to-moment and in a long-term way—can be a powerful source of prosocial behavior.

One study found that when precisely daily, regular induction of gratitude supports the benefit of patience which gratitude brings. (Dickens & DeSteno, 2016) As one of the authors of this study, Dr. DeSteno, once said, “daily gratitude boosters will function like a vaccine against impulsiveness and enhance self-control and future orientedness.” (Singer, 2016)

### **Socratic Seminars: Teaching SEL with Literature**

Researchers have long examined the power of centering and teaching young adult literature as “an effective strategy to address emotional issues in the lives of... teenagers” (Hébert & Kent, 2000), with some describing the literature as demonstrating a “natural affinity between ELA content and SEL objectives” (Storey, 2019).

The “Handbook of Research on Supporting Social and Emotional Development Through Literacy Education” contains a chapter specifically on “Young Adult Literature (YAL) as a Means for Developing and Supporting Socio-Emotional Learning.” (Savitz et al., 2021) The handbook “focuses on how three current in-service teachers use YAL to address SEL in their classrooms.”





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One recent special edition of the journal *School Psychology International* focused on the method of “bibliotherapy,” which is the use of “books and stories to support social emotional needs.” (Heath et al., 2017) Three authors from Brigham Young University, who introduced this volume, consider bibliotherapy not only to be “a professional’s therapeutic tool but also as a layman’s resource to address students’ basic social emotional needs.”

Emozi offers an ensemble of high-interest and age-appropriate literature with themes integrated into the lessons for each unit. Selected novels based on recommended reading lists and curricula surveys expose students to a wide array of cultural diversity. The weekly lesson’s text outlines teachable moments in the form of a student-led Socratic seminar discussion.

Each grade level of Emozi includes three age-appropriate books from the popular young adult literature genre, each featuring a diverse range of protagonists and settings. Every unit of the Emozi curriculum features one of these books. Every week of the curriculum links together the substantive topic of the main lesson and the events from the week’s novel readings. This integration allows teachers to use personal examples to bring lessons and skills to life and immerse students who may prefer literature and stories in the topics taught that week.

### **The Reflection Process**

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)), self-awareness is the ability to “understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.” The research in using reflection as a tool for learning and enhancing understanding has grown in recent decades. There is strong evidence that reflection positively connects to engagement, motivation, self-efficacy, and agency. (Kaplan et al., 2013) Within each Emozi lesson, the Reflection activity provides students with the opportunity to reflect on the topic personally. The activity encourages students to think introspectively about what they learned, additional questions they may have, and what can be applied to their situation.



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Just as students need time for reflection, so do educators. That's why Emozi also includes embedded professional development encouraging teachers to reflect on what they've learned and how it will impact their practice and life.

### **Program Assessment**

As with any program, the best way to measure whether or not the program is effective and impacts students' social and emotional learning skills is to collect data to monitor each student's progress. Emozi provides a tool for this using the well-known DESSA-mini assessment. This norm-referenced assessment is aligned to the CASEL framework and takes just one minute per student to complete. It is recommended that educators complete the assessment twice per year to gauge students' SEL development.

### **Conclusion**

The program was developed on a solid research foundation, building on the base of existing SEL best practices and woven throughout with the theory of constructed emotion. The core of the theory of constructed emotion is an essential addition to conventional SEL offerings.

Combined, Emozi helps middle school students build their self-awareness, use self-regulation strategies to cope with everyday challenges, build positive relationships, practice responsible decision-making, and demonstrate social awareness. The relevant and flexible lessons help equip students with the skills they need to succeed in and out of the classroom while providing educators with the resources to build their personal SEL skills.



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