

# Rational-Emotive Therapy: Classroom Applications

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On a daily basis, teachers and other school personnel are called upon to help children cope not only with normal developmental concerns, but also with more serious problems that can result in behavioral or emotional maladjustment. In recent years, it has become more apparent that preventative emotional health programs should be implemented in schools as a means of ensuring that all children will learn skills which foster socioemotional development and minimize or prevent disturbance (Vernon, 1983).

One of the emotional education programs which has proved effective with children is rational-emotive education. REE is directed from rational-emotive therapy (RET), a cognitive – emotive-behavioral system of therapy. According to RET theory (Ellis, 1962; Ellis & Dryden, 1987), emotional upset occurs when people attempt to fulfill their goals and encounter an activating event that blocks the goal. In turn, people have beliefs about this activating event which influence how they feel and act. Thus, the activating event does not create the feeling, but beliefs about the event contribute to the emotional consequence. These beliefs may be rational ones that result in moderate, healthy emotions, or irrational beliefs that lead to disturbed emotions and inhibit goal attainment and satisfaction. Irrational beliefs derive from a basic “must.” They represent demanding and unrealistic perceptions of how things should be, statements of blame directed at self and other, “awfulizing” statements that reflect an exaggeration of the event, and the inability to tolerate frustration (Vernon, 1983.) to eliminate these thinking patterns, a process known as “disputing” is initiated. Disputing involves challenging the irrational beliefs through rigorous questioning, with the goal being to achieve a more flexible, nonabsolutistic viewpoint.

For example, if a person felt angry because someone had treated her/him unfairly, disputes such as “why must people treat you fairly, why should people do what you want them to do all the time, and how does it help you to be angry over someone else’ behavior which you can’t control?” help challenge the irrational thinking and enable the person to deal more effectively with her/his upset. In addition to verbal disputes, behavioral assignments and use of imagery are also ways of eliminating irrational beliefs.

RET is designed as a self-help, educative therapy. Teaching people how to get better rather than simply feel better is a primary goal (Knaus, 1974). Because of its educative nature, RET readily lends itself to a preventative emotional health model: rational-emotive education. REE is based on the assumption that it is possible and desirable to teach children how to help themselves cope with life more effectively. The goal is to “help youngsters understand, at an

early age, the general principles of emotional health and to teach them to consistently apply these principles to and with self and others” (p. xiii).

In classroom use, rational-emotive education is typically implemented through a series of structural emotional education lessons that are experientially based, allowing for student involvement and group interaction. Several REE programs have been developed, and the lessons have been used extensively throughout the United States (Gerald & Eyman, 1981; Knaus, 1974; Vernon, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c). The content of these programs emphasizes the following rational concepts:

1. **FEELINGS:** Understanding the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors is a critical component. Developing a feeling vocabulary, dealing with emotional overreactions, assessing intensity of feelings, and developing appropriate ways to express feelings are important. REE stresses (a) the importance of recognizing that feelings change; (b) that the same events can result in different feelings depending on who experiences them and how they perceive them; and (c) that having feelings is natural.
2. **BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS:** Differentiating between rational and irrational beliefs, understanding the connection between beliefs and behaviors, and discriminating between facts and beliefs is emphasized. Teaching children to challenge irrational beliefs is key.
3. **SELF-ACCEPTANCE:** Major ideas integrated into emotional education lessons include developing an awareness of weaknesses as well as strengths, accepting imperfection, and learning that “who I am” is not to be equated with “what I do.”
4. **PROBLEM-SOLVING:** Teaching children to think objectively, tolerate frustration, examine the impact of beliefs on behaviors, give up immediate gratification; and to learn alternative ways of solving problems by challenging irrational thoughts, recognizing consequences, identifying alternative behaviors, and employing new behavioral strategies.

The lesson format includes a short stimulus activity such as bibliotherapy, stimulation games, writing rational stories, role-playing, art activities, or board games. The stimulus activity, designed to introduce the concept specified in the objective, lasts 15-25 minutes depending on the age of the children and the time allotment. Following the activity, students engage in a directed discussion about the content in the stimulus activity.

The discussion is the most important part of the lesson. It is organized around two types of questions: content questions, which emphasize the cognitive learnings from the activity, and personalization questions, which help the students apply the learnings to their own experiences. The discussion usually lasts 15-25 minutes, again taking into consideration the age of the children and the time period.

Children are encouraged to look at themselves and to share and learn from classmates with regard to emotional adjustment. Thus, in conducting emotional education lessons, an atmosphere of trust and group cohesion should be established. Because much of the content is presented through role playing, stimulations, or directed discussions, sensitivity can be exercised by listening carefully to children's responses, supporting their struggles to gain new insights, and encouraging their attempts to acquire REE concepts.

REE lessons can be readily developed by creating learning experiences based on the major REE components previously identified: feelings, beliefs and behaviors, self-acceptance, and problem solving. It is advisable to have a sequential progression, so that concepts can be introduced and expanded upon. For example, in a feeling unit, awareness that everyone has feelings and that it is all right to have them precedes the more difficult concept of where feelings come from. Likewise, when dealing with beliefs, a first level would be to distinguish facts from beliefs before moving on to the notion of rational and irrational beliefs.

The following is an example of a lesson based on the concept of feelings. The lesson is designed for children in the intermediate grades.

In a game similar to bingo, students in groups of four to six are given a board with nine blank squares and a set of cards with one of the following feelings words on each card:

Angry, worried, scared, jealous, sad, happy, hurt, excited

The players lay their cards face up at random on the boards. One person becomes the "caller" and he or she selects a feeling. The other players are asked to share an experience with that feeling and then to turn that card face down. For example, if worried was the feeling word, one player might say, "I was worried because I was late for school." Another might respond, "I was worried when my mother was sick." Although the object is not to win the game, the first person who turns over all the cards in a row is then out.

After the game is finished, discussion with the total class should focus on the different experiences that people have had with the same feelings, why it is important to realize that people can feel the same way about different experiences, and that having feelings and expressing them is normal. Follow-up lessons would focus on the connection between feelings and beliefs and how feelings change.

One of the advantages of emotional education programs is that the information learned from these lessons can be applied to current problems; and thus it can provide a foundation of knowledge and insight to use when future difficulties arise. To illustrate, Mike, a third grader, had participated in a simulation game aimed at helping children distinguish between facts and beliefs. Several weeks later, he told his teacher that a classmate has called him names. He said

he felt awful because he was dumb and stupid. By referring to the activity, the teacher helped Mike see that it was a fact that someone had called him a name, but it was not a fact that this meant that he was dumb. Mike felt better, and so did his teacher, because they had been able to draw on some previous information to work through the problem.

Once the basic REE concepts (feelings, beliefs and behaviors, self-acceptance, and problem solving) are understood, these basics can be expanded on. Specific lessons can be developed that are geared to topics pertinent to children at particular stages in their development. For example, adolescents can benefit from applying RET principles to boy-girl relationships or peer acceptance issues. One series of lessons designed for junior-high students focuses on coping with on-again, off-again relationships, a source of frustration and anxiety for many teens. A short vignette serves to stimulate discussion about peer relationships. When students express concern about rejection from friends, they are reminded that one's acceptance of oneself is not based on acceptance by others. Through questions that challenge their thinking, students begin to see that it is unnecessary to be critical of themselves if someone else doesn't accept them.

The concept of overgeneralizing and how it frequently results in conflict is also discussed. A game is played that enable the participants to realize that appearances can be deceptive. Thus, when someone doesn't wave or smile, it does not necessarily mean that the person does not like the other individual. Rather, it simply could mean that the person was preoccupied, didn't notice the other, etc. the point is that assuming something without checking out the facts results in negative feelings and behaviors.

In addition to the structured emotional educational lesson, REE concepts can be integrated into existing subject-matter curriculum.

When teaching literature, teachers could select and discuss stories that present characters solving problems rationally or expressing feelings in a healthy manner.

Topics for these could be related to self-acceptance topics such as making mistakes, strengths and weaknesses, and not equating self with performance.

Vocabulary and spelling lessons could include feeling-word vocabulary and definitions.

Social studies lessons could focus on a rational understanding of the concept of fairness as it applies to societal groups or to law and order, or on cultural beliefs and the way in which these affect feelings.

Students experiencing math anxiety could be helped to overcome it through disputing the irrational beliefs associated with the anxiety.

While integrating concepts into the curriculum is less direct than a structured lesson, it provides an excellent way of enhancing emotional development through actual application of REE concepts.

REE is a viable preventative emotional health program which can be implemented in the classroom in order to equip children with emotional/rational “tools” that they can use in coping with situations throughout life. For sequentially based lessons and other REE activities, the reader is referred to the following additional materials:

**Thinking, Feeling, Behaving: An Emotional Education Curriculum for Children** (Vernon, 1989b)

**Thinking, Feeling, Behaving: An Emotional Education Curriculum for Adolescents** (Vernon, 1989c)

**Help Yourself to a Healthier You** (Vernon, 1989a)

**Feeling Good About Yourself** (Pincus, 1990)

**Rational-Emotive Education: A Manual for Elementary School Teachers** (Knaus, 1974)

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