Play & Emotional Regulation

Adapting Activities

Activity 1:
Evolutions (10 mins)

This game uses play to naturally boost positive emotions and social connections.

Step by step:

1. Invite participants to stand up and find a space in the room.

2. Levels and Actions: Teach participants the following levels and actions. They should continuously repeat the phrase for their current level out loud as they move:

   Level 1: "I'm an egg": Hold hands together in a ball.
   Level 2: "I'm a chicken": Flap wings with elbows out.
   Level 3: "I'm a dinosaur": Make claw hands and do a dinosaur walk.
   Level 4: "I'm a superhero": Hold a Superhero pose (one arm raised, one hand on hip).

3. How to Play:

   - Everyone starts as an Egg and aims to evolve to Superhero status.

   - To evolve, players pair up with someone at the same level and play one round of Rock, Paper, Scissors. The winner advances to the next level, while the loser remains at their current level and seeks another partner.

   - Upon reaching Superhero level, a player "zooms" around the room once saying "I'm a superhero!", then steps out to form a circle around the edge of the playing area.

   - As the central game shrinks and the surrounding circle grows, any remaining players at the end who have not reached Superhero status are "supercharged" by the circle (the group chants "supercharge!" while aiming "fire-ball" hands at them) to instantly become superheroes.

4. Once complete, ask participants: ***How did you feel during the game?***

Considerations & Adaptations:

Physical impairments: You could change the actions of this activity to suit the needs in the room, for example if you have a participant in a wheelchair, the superhero instruction could simply be to raise one arm in the air and put one hand on their hip and call out 'I'm a Superhero!'. When adapting an action, wherever possible make this the action for the whole group, not just the individual, so that no one feels singled out or 'othered'.

Supporting children with regulation or sensory processing challenges: loud, busy, social, or 'up-on-you-feet games' aren't fun for everyone! The purpose of this game is to release positive endorphins and enjoy taking part in play as a way to naturally regulate emotions. Consider your participants and what might be 'fun' for them. You may wish to adapt the game by:

- Controlling noise: challenge participants to complete the game in whispers. Set up a visual volume control: when your hand is high in the air, that means they have reached max volume; as your hand lowers, they must match their volume to reduce with you.
- Controlling movement: set up movement controls like 'when I clap my hands everyone freeze!'. Set up the game as a speed dating style rotation to regulate movement in the space.
- Controlling numbers: smaller group sizes can reduce stimulation levels. This activity could be done in smaller focus groups or by splitting a larger group in half and giving each group a chance to take part while the other watches.

Competition: competition can be challenging for young people who struggle with emotional regulation. The competition element of this game could be changed so that the group are racing to evolve against a timer as opposed to racing against each other.

Activity 2:
Sculptor & Clay (15 mins)

This game uses play to safely explore experiences and emotions.

Step by step:

Part 1: Mindful Mirror

1. Ask participants to find a partner, stand facing each other, and designate themselves as 'A' and 'B'.

2. 'A' moves their body and face slowly and carefully, while 'B' copies them as if looking in a mirror. Allow time for them to explore this.

3. Next, as 'A' to imagine an emotion or experience *leaders choice of specification depending on session objectives* and to show this in their face and body for 'B' to mirror.

4. Pause the game and ask participants:
   - ***'B's, what emotions or feelings did you notice in your partner?***
   - ***'A's, how did it feel to be observed and copied?***

5. Repeat with swapped over roles so that all young people have a chance to experience both.

Part 2: Sculptor and Clay

1. Next, invite participants to form small groups of 4 or 5.

2. Ask them to allocate one person in the group to be the 'clay' whilst the others will be the 'sculptors'.

3. Explain that the sculptors are going to work together to turn the 'clay' into a sculpture called '**leader's choice - relating to emotion or experience**' - choosing a significant feeling or state which they feel represents a key moment.

4. The 'sculptors' can use the mirroring activity or verbal direction to manipulate the 'clay' as opposed to physical touch.

5. Give the groups 2-3 minutes to create their sculptures, before inviting all the sculptors to move around the room and observe the 'emotions museum' full of statues around them.

6. End the activity and ask participants: ***What emotions and feelings did you notice in the sculptures?***

Considerations & Adaptations:

Choice can be overwhelming: Asking the young people to choose an experience and emotion to work with can be too big an instruction for some and it can help to be more specific about direction e.g. give a specific scenario like 'Imagine you are waking up in the morning on the day of your birthday. How do you feel?'.

Layering of activities: What do participants need to do or know BEFORE this activity to have the tools to achieve it? Consider the needs of your group and the scaffolding they will need to take part. Do they need to tune into their bodies first? Try a fun dance-off or calm yoga sequence to prepare them. Do they need to build language and literacy surrounding emotions? Try creating an emotions mind map or playing an emotion based word association game beforehand. Do they need more team building before they can work together on this activity? Try a low pressure team challenge activity like 'form a line in….height order… age order… hair length order… (etc)'.

Emotion and trauma triggers: Emotions and experiences can differ, and thinking about past memories can be triggering for some individuals. You could choose to frame this as a storytelling activity detached from personal experiences, e.g. 'create a statue of someone on their birthday' instead of 'create a statue of you on your birthday'. You could lean on fictional characters or invite participants to create their own to explore experiences from a safer distance.

Despite these considerations, don't be afraid to explore emotions. This is important work with our young people and there are lots of ways to adapt to suit their needs.

Validating emotions. There are no right or wrong answers when it comes to emotions and experiences.

Touch: Some individuals, particularly younger groups, can find it difficult not to touch the 'sculpture' during this activity, even when it has been set up as a 'hands off' interaction. They may need more reminders or practice to achieve this task.

Activity 3:
Wish Pebbles (10 mins)

A creative mindfulness journey using play for personal growth.

Step by step:

1. Invite participants to move a chair to a space in the room where they are a comfortable distance from others and take a seat.
2. Read aloud the 'Wish Pebbles' script:

Sitting at your desks, place your hands face down on the table and sit with your feet flat on the floor. Take three deep breaths in and out. See if you can allow yourself to relax as much as possible.

Imagine you have a bubble around you so you're in your own special space.

You're going to hear a short story, but before we start, just have a moment to wriggle or fidget…
We get good at things when we practice and relaxing being still takes lots of practice, but the more you do it the easier it gets.

If you are able to, see if you can close your eyes, and let the pictures come into your mind like a dream.

Imagine you are standing by a wide lake of still water. You can see the shapes of the clouds reflected on the surface. Around the lake are tall trees growing and some birds are singing in the branches. You watch a bushy tailed squirrel run up the trunk of a tree near you with a nut in its mouth.

You put your hand in your pocket where there are some smooth pebbles. You take one out and hold it over the water. You make a wish for yourself: May I be happy, may I be safe, may I be well.

You drop the pebble and watch the ripples as they circle out across the lake, your wish going out into the world.

You reach into your pocket and take out another smooth pebble and hold it over the water.

You make a wish for someone else in your life: May you be happy, may you be safe, may you be well.
For the last time, you reach into your pocket and take out another smooth pebble and hold it over the water.

You make a wish for the whole world: May we all be happy, may we all be safe, may we all be well.
May all your wishes spread through the world like ripples on the water.

Deepen your breath, stretch your fingers, stretch your toes. Put your hands over your eyes and gently spread your finger wide as you slowly open your eyes.

3. Once completed, ask participants: ***How did this activity make you feel? What did you notice in your body?***

Considerations & Adaptations:

Stillness can be challenging: Some individuals find it hard or even stressful to stay still for lengths of time. You could try this as a mindful walking activity, or by encouraging them to act out the actions of dropping the pebble in the pool.

Closing eyes: some individuals find closing their eyes too challenging. Always offer the suggestion to simply soften the gaze or focus on one spot as an alternative.

Group sizes: this activity is perfect for a one on one activity or in small groups, as well as whole class or even assembly settings. Consider the needs of your individual/s and decide how to host this.

Note on metaphors: metaphors can be perfect for some people's brains, but difficult to understand and relate to for others. In supporting children's brain development, metaphors can be great for building connections in the brain, and there is certainly value in using them, but it is important to be mindful that this type of visualisation can be challenging for some individuals. If you feel this might be a challenge for your young person or you notice them disengaging or fidgeting during the activity, you could adapt it by inviting them to throw a beanbag into a bucket to help them visualise the pebble dropping into the pond, or better yet, take the activity outside and allow them to drop real stones into a puddle!

Activity 4:
Campfire Moment & Word Scramble(10 mins)

This activity uses playfulness to encourage safe sharing and reflection.

Step by step:

1. Introduce the campfire moment and ask participants to place their hands out in front of them and feel the warmth from the fire in the middle of the circle.

2. Share that this campfire connects us all and our learning today, and we will bring it's warmth into our contributions to our final sharing moment.

3. Explain that the focus of this closing circle will be: [leaders choice]

4. Within the circle, group participants into 2's and 3's and hand each group a 'word scramble' envelope. Explain that in the envelopes are letters which make up a word or phrase which represents one key area of discussion relevant to your subject matter.

5. Invite groups to open their envelopes and work together to unscramble the word.

6. Once complete, go round the circle and invite each group to read their word aloud.

7. For each word, discuss as a whole group: ***How does this word/phrase relate to [today's subject matter]?***

8. Lastly, go round the circle inviting each participant to place a 'learning log' on the fire and share one thing they have learned today.

Considerations & Adaptations:

Sharing can be intimidating: some individuals find it hard to verbally share their thoughts in front of others. You could choose to invite them to share a movement, a drawing, or just one word to represent what they have learned. You could also change the instruction to ask a simple question which could be responded to physically, e.g. 'show me a number of fingers to share how much you enjoyed X activity today'.

Follow ups: Sometimes big questions or thoughts can come up in this closing circle. Even if time doesn't allow for immediate follow up, always try to come back to individuals who raised something which feels important to them. These thoughts could even inform the direction of future sessions with the group or individuals. For example, if online experiences are raised during circle time, the next session could focus on online relationships or online safety.

Build the routine: adding a closing circle (or 'campfire moment') into your sessions as a routine element can take time to establish, and you may find that young people become more confident and willing to share as time goes on.