

## Mummy is having a 'yellow day', thanks for asking

Anna Tyzack feels the benefits of her son's connection to his emotions – all courtesy of a pioneering American programme



In the mood: classmates share their feelings at Willow Nursery Photo: Andrew Crowley



By [Anna Tyzack](#)

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Moments after I had given birth to my third child, my husband handed me my mobile phone. Our eldest son, Hector, three, was calling. “How are you, Mummy?” he asked. “How are you feeling?”

He wasn't being polite. He was genuinely interested in my emotional state. “Happy,” I replied. “I'm excited about introducing you to your new brother.”

It's his nursery's fault. His teachers are encouraging children as young as two-and-a-half to talk openly about their moods and emotions. As a result, Hector is constantly asking me if I'm happy or sad. He tells me if something or someone upsets him (often with tear-jerking honesty) and when his younger brother, Alfie, two, steals his Lego, he will admit that he wants to “smash and bash” him. I take this as my cue to intervene.

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This is all exactly as it should be, according to Marc Brackett, a psychologist at Yale University who devised the Ruler programme for teaching emotional intelligence,

which is being pioneered in Hector's nursery and a handful of primary schools in London.

The acronym stands for Recognising your emotions; Understanding them; Labelling them and Expressing them in a Regulated way.

Every morning Hector is asked to plot his mood on a "mood meter" (red = angry, blue = sad, green = calm and yellow = happy). He is encouraged to articulate why he might be angry or sad and is being shown how to cheer up his classmates (holding hands works best, he tells me).

It all sounds incredibly touchy-feely, but Brackett, who is director of the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence, is convinced that emotional intelligence can be learnt. If youngsters are shown how to label their emotions and articulate them, parents and teachers are in a better position to support them.



Britain has a bad record when it comes to children's satisfaction Photo: Getty Images

The result, according to Brackett, is happier, healthier, higher achieving students who make better decisions in their lives and relationships. "Being emotionally literate and able to recognise how you are feeling is an incredible skill," he says. "Emotions are the drivers of attention, decision making, relationships and our health."

We Brits need to get better at talking about our feelings, as the [Duchess of Cambridge observed](#) in a blog on the Huffington Post last week.

In the article, which was part of the Huffington Post's Young Minds Matter series to encourage children to open up about mental and emotional health, she highlighted the need to teach children resilience and the language to discuss their feelings.

"We hope to encourage George and Charlotte to speak about their feelings, and to give them the tools and sensitivity to be supportive peers to their friends as they get

older,” she wrote. “We know there is no shame in a young child struggling with their emotions or suffering from a mental illness.”

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Marc Brackett

Britain has a notoriously **bad mental health record**: in a recent survey by the University of York, England ranked 13th out of 16 countries when it came to **children’s life satisfaction** – with body image and school topping the list of their troubles.

The Ruler approach, which focuses on four “anchor” tools to give students and their teachers the skills to use their emotions wisely, has proved to be a huge success in the United States, where about one in five adolescents experiences problems with anxiety or depression.

Brackett, who was bullied at school and suffered anxiety as a child, believes the programme could transform the lives of thousands of students in Britain, too.

So far, more than a thousand US schools have adopted it and early results show an improved emotional climate in the classroom, greater warmth between students and teachers, less bullying and better academic results. It takes just four days’ training at the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence to become a Ruler trainer.

Hector’s teacher at the Willow Nursery, Lulu Luckcock, completed the course last summer and has spent the year training staff at a number of London primary schools.

“The children latch on to the concept of the mood meter very quickly,” she says. “It alerts the teacher to any problems they might have and ensures that together they can come up with a strategy to manage them.”



Anthony Seldon pioneered happiness classes at Wellington Photo: Graham Jepson

Along with the mood meter, Ruler's other "anchor" tools include a class charter, a document put together by the whole school or by individual classes, that outlines how children and teachers want to feel when they are there.

"Research in the States shows that at high school level kids are feeling three emotions 80 per cent of the time in school: tired, bored and stressed," Brackett says. "But they've told us they want to feel excited, energised and inspired."

Unlike the "[\*\*happiness classes\*\*](#)" pioneered by [\*\*Anthony Seldon\*\*](#) at Wellington College, which take up a lesson each week, Ruler is intended to be absorbed into the curriculum, the staffroom and the playground. "It becomes part of the immune system of the school," Brackett says. "Teachers use it when interacting with students, students use them when interacting with their friends."

Even parents are encouraged to adopt Ruler principles: at a recent parent workshop run by Lulu, we were asked to create our own family charters and to plot our own emotions on a Mood Meter app devised by Yale.

"Ideally Ruler is adopted by the whole school and at home," she says. "Often parents don't have patience for this kind of thing, but if they're prepared to make an effort, they will notice a happier environment at home."

Lulu admits that she has made the course more "British", leaving out Americanisms that would be confusing for children, but claims the feedback so far has been wholly positive, even from the most sceptical of parents and staff.

Brackett believes that Britain urgently needs to embrace this new, more emotional, way of being. "When I asked a class of British children if anyone was prepared to tell me how they're feeling, every kid in the room raised their hand," he says. "At the end of the class I asked them what was different about my lesson. One boy said: 'I was involved.'"

When Hector returned from nursery on the first day back after half-term, I asked him how he was feeling. "Yellow," he said, grinning. "And what should I do next time you get red?" He thought for a moment. "Sing me a song," he said.

I'm looking forward to seeing how this plays out.