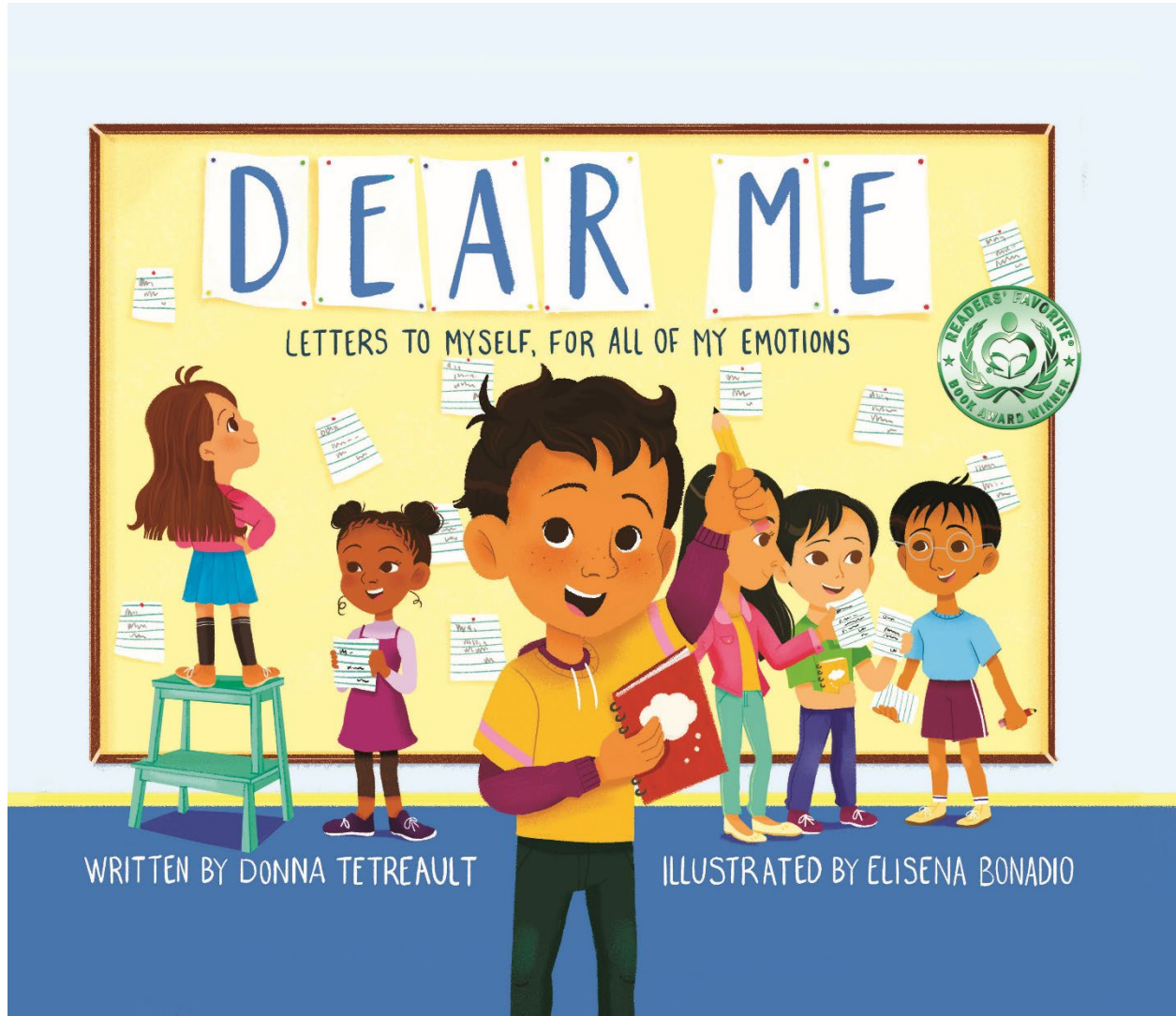


Dear Me Curriculum



“It’s vital that children learn to identify and express their feelings, and to do so without shame. This engaging, lovely book enables [teachers] and parents to guide their children in doing just that. It gives me hope that more children, rather than running away from feelings, will work to understand them and bring them into their relationships in healthy ways. I highly recommend this book.”

—Richard Weissbourd, Harvard educator and child and family psychologist

A Note for Teachers and Parents

Over the past few years, mental health problems have become increasingly common, even in young children. Although most mental health disorders are identified between the ages of 15 and 24,¹ the behaviors and thought patterns that exacerbate their effects are often learned much earlier in life. As such, if children are to learn and maintain healthy mental habits, parents and instructors must be *proactive*, not *reactive*, in teaching children necessary skills and vocabulary.

One preventative measure parents and teachers may take is to teach children emotional literacy. Teaching emotional literacy early in children's development will help them build life skills such as communication, empathy, self-esteem, self-love, and social literacy.

I wrote *Dear Me: Letters to Myself for All of My Emotions* to help parents and teachers do just that. It is a research-based social-emotional learning tool designed to better children's long-term mental health by helping them to identify, understand, and manage *all* their emotions.

Learning outcomes for each lesson were taken from the Common Core State Standards Initiative (among others)² for grade 2, though they can easily be adapted for pre-K and grade 1. While the Dear Me curriculum is primarily designed for instructors to use in the classroom, parents are encouraged to use it at home, modifying it as appropriate for their family and circumstances. There are also many additional resources for parents and instructors available online.³

As a parenting journalist and former teacher, I am committed to helping children be the best they can be. I am confident that as you use *Dear Me* in your classrooms (and homes), your children and students will be better prepared to face whatever emotional challenges come their way. My hope is that in times of difficulty, children can recall and recite, "Dear Me," and know they have the power to manage their emotions.

Warmly,

Donna Tetreault

¹ "Warning Signs of Mental Illness," American Psychiatric Association, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/warning-signs-of-mental-illness>.

² See "English Language Arts Standards > Reading: Literature > Grade 2 > 3," Common Core State Standards Initiative, <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/2/3/>; "English Language Arts Standards > Reading: Literature > Grade 2 > 5," Common Core State Standards Initiative, <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/2/5/>; "English Language Arts Standards > Reading: Literature > Grade 2 > 7," Common Core State Standards Initiative, <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/2/7/>; California State Board of Education, *California Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 2013), <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/finalelaccsstandards.pdf>; National Core Arts Standards, <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>.

³ See, for example, Donna Tetreault, "The Way We Think about Kids' Mental Health is Dead Wrong," Thrive Global, July 28, 2021, <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/the-way-we-think-about-kids-mental-health/>; "How to Use Stories to Help Kids Develop Empathy," Making Caring Common Project, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/develop-empathy>.

Curriculum Outline

1. Beginning Survey

This survey measures children’s emotional literacy both before and after going through the Dear Me curriculum, in part to assess the unit’s effectiveness. The questions cover children’s emotional habits, skills, self-esteem, and self-love asking them to rank statements on a scale of “Most of the time” to “Not at all.”

Each individual child should complete the survey separately. For younger children, parents or instructors may read the questions aloud and record the answers. The children will take the survey again at the conclusion of the unit.

2. **Initial Reading**

Teachers should read *Dear Me: Letters to Myself for All My Emotions* aloud to the class to introduce the children to the unit. Teachers will then reread portions of the book and discuss their meaning and application in the weekly lessons.

3. Weekly Lessons

There are 8 standard lessons (~30–60 min. each), 4 of which contain optional bonus content. The lessons are designed to be given once weekly, but frequency may be adapted to fit existing schedules. Lesson outlines include teacher instructions (in italics) and selected scripts (indented) to help guide discussions and activities about the lesson topic. Teachers should feel free to expand beyond the written scripts and adapt length, frequency, or placement as needed to fit a given class and its student characteristics.

Each lesson consists of 5 sections (see the lesson outlines for more detail):

- a. Opening (2–5 min.)
- b. Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.)
- c. Read (5–8 min.)
- d. Write (5–8 min. This section can be skipped if students haven’t yet learned to write independently.)
- e. Art (15–20 min.)

One of the intended goals of the Dear Me curriculum is to teach children vocabulary to describe both their emotions and their mental health, so each lesson also includes 2–4 vocabulary words that children will be introduced to during that lesson. The intention is for children to be familiar enough with these words that they can recognize and use the words in talking about their own mental health and well-being. Children do not need to memorize definitions or spellings, and the vocabulary words are not assessed in the survey.

4. **Author Visit (optional)**

If desired, I am happy to visit the classroom (either in person or via Zoom) the week after the final lesson to provide a conclusion to the unit. During that visit, I will read and discuss portions of *Dear Me* and lead a final activation lesson. I will also bring and hand out Dear Me bookmarks to help children remember to continue practicing the emotional literacy skills they have learned during the unit. (A [digital version](#) of the bookmark is provided at the end of this document for reference or for classroom or parental use—if you are unable to or don’t wish to arrange the author visit.)

5. Ending Survey

Children will repeat the survey they completed at the beginning of the unit. Again, parents and instructors may read questions aloud and record answers. Teachers should plan to collect the results of both the initial and ending surveys and give them to their principal, who will pass the results along to me. Teachers are also encouraged to review the data themselves. If concerning data is received from a given child (e.g., EXAMPLES), teachers should take action such as discussing their findings with their principal and (if possible) the school psychologist/counselor and/or arranging a meeting with the child's parents to discuss further action.

6. **Parent Education Seminar (optional)**

If desired, I can also schedule and lead a parent-education seminar at the conclusion of the unit to help parents better understand the importance of mental-health awareness early on in life. I will discuss the research about children's mental health and talk about what their children have learned via the Dear Me curriculum. At the close of the seminar, parents will understand the significance of learning about emotions and how to model healthy emotional behavior for their children at home.

Lesson 1

Vocabulary: emotions, feelings, expressions

Opening (2–5 min.):

The name of the book is *Dear Me: Letters to Myself for All of My Emotions*. What do you think this book is going to be about?

Think about the word **emotions**. Emotions are also called **feelings**.⁴

Why do you think the author named the book *Dear Me*?

Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.):

What are some emotions?

Chart the emotions that the students name. If desired, consider using the [feelings chart](#) provided at the end of this document as a reference/visual aid.

What kind of document do you start with “Dear”? [a letter] What does that tell you? [we will be writing letters]

Read (5–8 min.):

Read pages 1–3.

The author named a lot of emotions. Do they match what we came up with? Are there more that we need to include?

Sometimes we can know how we are feeling or how someone else is feeling by their facial **expressions**. Let’s try making a facial expression for each of the emotions that the author listed.

Read pages 4–5.

One way we can understand our emotions is by recording them through writing or drawing. This method is grounded in scientific research. Do you think you can feel and understand your emotions by writing them down? Why or why not?

Write (5–8 min.):

Let’s start by thinking of five things that make us happy. Then we’ll write them down.

“I feel happy when . . .”

“ . . . makes me happy.”

Art (15–20 min.):

Complete the Abstract Self-Portrait Paintings activity at <http://www.artwithmrsfilmore.com/2nd-grade-art-lessons/>.

⁴ If you wish to explore nuances of emotions further with your students, consider using the information provided in this helpful article: Alan Cowen, “How Many Different Kinds of Emotions Are There?” *Frontiers for Young Minds* 6, no. 15 (2018), <https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2018.00015>.

Lesson 2

Vocabulary: physical health, mental health, nutrition, fitness

Opening (2–5 min.):

*Have a conversation about **physical health** and **mental health**:*

Just like we take care of our bodies, we also have to take care of our brains. How do we take care of our bodies?

*Using students' answers, introduce the terms **nutrition** and **fitness**.*

How can we take care of our brains? One of the reasons mental health is important is so that we can understand the feelings we have deep inside of us.

To have good mental health, we will practice learning how to understand and manage our emotions. Managing our emotions is a skill that has to be practiced, just like basketball players have to practice dribbling and shooting.

Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.):

We all have uncomfortable or difficult emotions, like anger or sadness. This is completely natural. Let's list the uncomfortable emotions we feel.

Sometimes it's hard to remember that uncomfortable emotions are natural and normal. It can help to practice talking about times we've felt uncomfortable emotions. I'll go first.

Share an experience of a time you felt an uncomfortable emotion. (Sharing stories encourages active listening and teaches empathy.)

Would anyone else like to share a story with us?

You can also divide the students into small groups and have them share with each other. If children express a concerning emotion, such as feeling like they want to die or otherwise harm themselves or others, alert their parents and contact a mental health professional, such as the school psychologist if available.

Read (5–8 min.):

Re-read pages 4–5.

We talked about recording your emotions in the last lesson. Now we are going to practice doing this with the uncomfortable emotions that we feel.

Write (5–8 min.):

Think of a time when you felt an uncomfortable emotion. Tell that story in writing.

Art (15–20 min.):

You are an artist expressing your uncomfortable emotion. What does it look like?

If needed, show students pages from the book that contain examples of uncomfortable emotions or have them make facial expressions at each other.

Lesson 3

Vocabulary: label, name, manage

Opening (2–5 min.):

We have talked about different kinds of emotions and how all of them matter. Today, we are going to learn how to **label**, or **name**, our emotions, feel those emotions, understand why we are feeling a certain emotion, and, if we need to, move on from that emotion to a more positive emotion. Doing this is called **managing** our emotions, and it helps difficult emotions to not feel so scary.

Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.):

Let's start with how to name our emotions. It's easy to recognize when we are happy. For example, I am happy when I eat chocolate cake (*or replace with your favorite food*). I know I am happy because it tastes so good, and it smells so good when it comes out of the oven. Emotions can also include physical reactions, like sweaty palms when we're nervous or racing hearts when we're excited.

Explain that when we are feeling difficult emotions, we don't always know exactly why we are feeling them or how to express ourselves in a healthy way, so we have to learn to manage our emotions.

When you manage something, you are in charge. How might a grocery store manager manage the store when there are long lines at the checkout or when there isn't enough food on the shelves?

Read (5–8 min.):

Read pages 6–15. For each emotion, guide the children through the management steps: naming, feeling, and understanding the emotion, and then moving on to a more positive emotion.

Name the emotion: What emotion is the boy feeling? [scared]

Feel the emotion: Is it okay for him to feel scared? [yes] What does scared feel like to you?

Understand the emotion: Why is he feeling scared? [He's scared that he won't make any friends.]

Move on to a more positive emotion: What does he do to feel better? [He tells himself that he will make friends and feel comfortable soon.]

Write (5–8 min.):

Have the children write letters to themselves in the style of Dear Me.

On page 1, name the emotion you feel. On page 2, write about how you feel and why you feel that way. Then focus on finding a new emotion if you need to. This is you managing your emotions.

Art (15–20 min.):

Have the children illustrate their letters as if they were illustrating a book.

Bonus Activity (5–10 min.):

Walk that Emotion (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k32x-aYI4>)

Lesson 4

Vocabulary: strategy, mindful breathing

Opening (2–5 min.):

We have learned a lot about our emotions, both the good ones and the uncomfortable ones. We have learned how important it is to understand why we are feeling certain emotions. We have learned that one way to practice managing our emotions is by writing them down or drawing about them. Today we will learn another **strategy** to manage our emotions: **mindful breathing**.

Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.):

What do you feel worried about? [starting a new school year with a new teacher, helping a family member who is struggling, or playing in your soccer game]

When you feel worried, how do you help yourself? Do you have a strategy? It's okay if you don't, because after you learn mindful breathing, you will have a strategy you can use in the moment whenever you are feeling any uncomfortable emotion, including worry.

Read (5–8 min.):

Read pages 12–13 again. Tell students that worry is a natural emotion that can be managed.

You can move on from worry and other difficult emotions by taking deep breaths, just like in the book. Mindful breathing is a real strategy that researchers and teachers have developed to help people manage their emotions. Adults use this strategy, and so can kids.

Write (5–8 min.):

(Mindful Meditation Practice replaces the Write and Art sections in this lesson.)

Lead the children in a mindful meditation. Consider using the DreamyKid meditation app (<https://dreamykid.com/>), which offers meditation, guided visualization, and affirmations curated specifically for children and teens. Explain to the children that they can use this meditation app at home. (They can ask their parents to download it on their phones.)

Art (15–20 min.):

(Mindful Meditation Practice replaces the Write and Art sections in this lesson.)

Bonus Activity (5–10 min.):

Go Noodle Mindful Breathing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O29e4rRMrV4>)

Lesson 5

Vocabulary: empathy, compassion, kindness, diversity

Opening (2–5 min.):

We are learning so much about how to be kind and loving to ourselves by understanding our emotions and how important our mental health is. Being kind to ourselves also teaches us to be kind to others. **Empathy** is the ability to understand what someone else is feeling, even when you haven't been in the same situation. **Compassion** means caring about others, treating them with kindness, and wanting to help people in need. Empathy and compassion are skills we can learn and grow. Science says so. We often call using these skills **kindness**, or being **kind**.

Give some age-relevant examples of being compassionate, such as making a card, saying something kind, or hugging a friend or family member who is feeling sad or upset.

Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.):

How does it make you feel when someone is kind to you?

Divide students into groups of two.

Share with your partner (1) a time when someone you didn't know well was kind to you, (2) a time when a family member was kind to you, and (3) a time when a friend was kind to you.

Read (5–8 min.):

Read pages 16–17. Talk about how being kind to others is a choice we can make. Discuss how the boy helps his friend who is feeling sad and list ways we can be kind in our daily lives, on our own, without help from parents or anyone else.

However, when someone we love is feeling upset or angry, it can be hard or even scary to be around them. Being kind is important, but you can always ask an adult you trust for help to deal with others' emotions.

Write (5–8 min.):

Have the students make cards for seniors at a local senior citizens' home. Advise them to write kind words and encouragement with phrases like "Have a happy day!" and "You are special!" They can also write funny jokes to help someone smile or laugh.

Art (15–20 min.):

Have the students decorate their cards.

Decorate your cards with beautiful images of kindness. What does kindness look like to you?

Bonus Activity (10–15 min.):

*Go back to the book and have the children find all of the different children in the book. Explain that **diversity** means differences between people.⁵*

The author made all the children different for a reason. Why? Because all people matter, and all people's emotions matter. Look for the different ethnicities/races, the differently abled kids, and the ways that they are all the same.

⁵ For more help on teaching children to embrace differences and find commonalities, see "How to Help Kids Develop Empathy," Making Caring Common Project, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-families/develop-empathy-2>.

Lesson 6

Vocabulary: multiple, temporary

Opening (2–5 min.):

We can have **multiple** emotions during a single day or even a single moment. Emotions are **temporary**, meaning they don't last forever. They change all the time. This is good for us to know because if we learn to look for more positive emotions, we can feel them more often.

Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.):

Think of a time when you had multiple emotions.

Ask volunteers to practice identifying their emotions. Have them name the multiple emotions they have felt during the day or during a moment in time.

Read (5–8 min.):

Read pages 18–19.

Embarrassment and surprise are very different emotions.

Discuss how the boy can recognize the positive emotion as well as the negative emotion, but he chooses to focus on the more positive emotion.

Write (5–8 min.):

At this point in the unit, the students have learned about many emotions. Have them list as many as they can think of, both positive and negative.

Art (15–20 min.):

Self-portrait in pencil.

Draw a picture of yourself feeling your most positive emotion.

Lesson 7

Vocabulary: aware, positive mental health

Opening (2–5 min.):

Naming positive emotions is just as important as naming negative emotions. It gives us practice and helps us be **aware** of our emotions. Two other important skills for having **positive mental health** are recognizing what you can and can't control and focusing on the positive emotions. When we learn to be aware of our positive emotions, we can more easily move toward those more positive emotions in the times when we feel more challenging emotions.

Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.):

When have you been frustrated? When have you been joyful? When have you been peaceful? Are you able to move to more positive emotions easily, or can it be hard sometimes? What do you do in each case? (No answer is wrong.)

Read (5–8 min.):

Read pages 20–25, then take a deep dive into pages 24–25.

What does the boy do first? [count the raindrops] How does he change course—that is, what does he do instead—when things don't go exactly as he thought they would go? [just listen and collect his letters]

Write (5–8 min.):

Explain to the children that they can manage emotions/feelings by looking often for the positive ones and being aware of when they feel those positive emotions.

To help kids find the positives and focus on them, have the children write a positive “I AM” affirmation poem based on the following prompt: “Who are you when you are at your best? Who are you when you are feeling your best?”

Example poem:

I AM
I AM KIND
I AM HELPFUL
I AM LOVING
I AM JOYFUL
I AM EXCITED
[etc.]

Art (15–20 min.):

Have the students add artwork of any kind to the poem to bring excitement and more self-love to the assignment (e.g. bright colors, glitter, big shapes/lines).

Lesson 8

Vocabulary: self-pride, self-love, self-respect

Opening (2–5 min.):

*Explain to the children that being proud of themselves is very important. Of course children want their parents and other adults that they love to be proud of them, but **self-pride** is most important. Self-pride is a combination of **self-respect** (feeling good about ourselves and our actions) and **self-love** (loving ourselves just as we are).*

Activate Prior Knowledge (5–7 min.):

Think about a time when your parents (or other adults) were very proud of you. How did it make you feel? Were you also proud of yourself? How you feel about yourself matters. Why do you think it is important for you to be proud of yourself? Why is it so important for you to love you?

Read (5–8 min.):

Read pages 26–28.

How does it feel when you are proud of yourself? Does it feel different from when your parents (or other adults) are proud of you? What power do you have when you feel self-pride?

Write (5–8 min.):

Write a love letter to yourself. Begin with “Dear Me” and end with “Love, Me.”

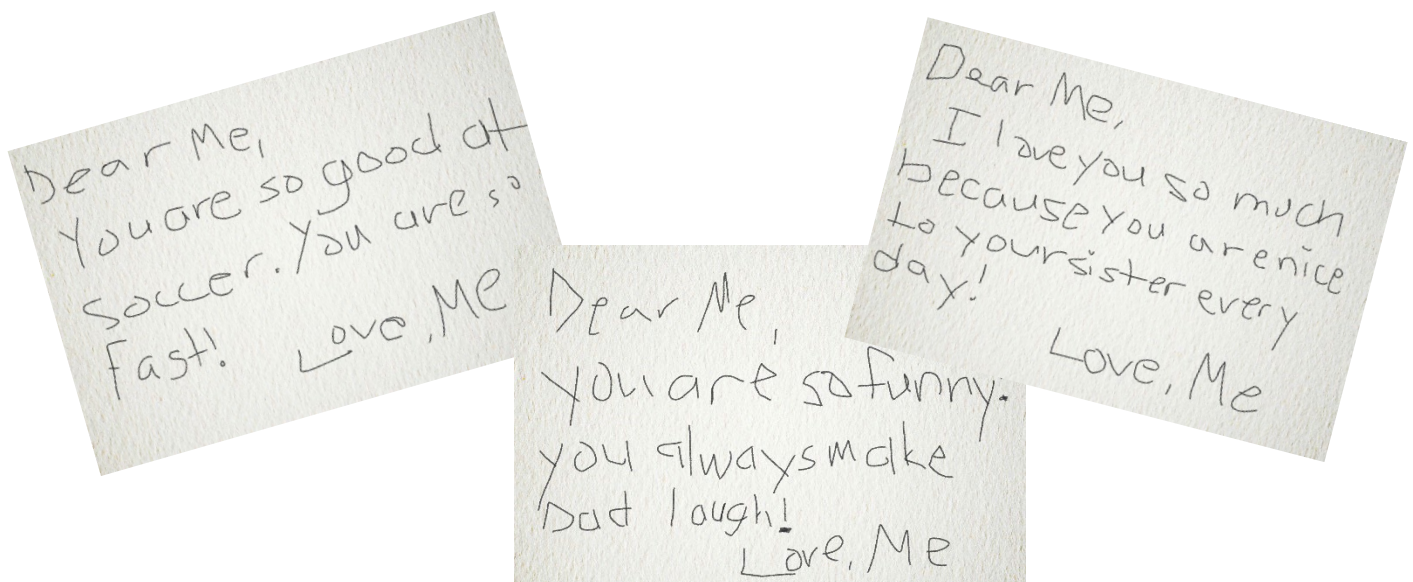
Be prepared to help children define and/or describe aspects of themselves that they love. They can write about talents they have (art, music, sports), qualities they are proud of (love, hard work, patience), or good acts they have done (helping a friend or sibling, doing what their parents/teachers ask). Children who struggle with low self-esteem may need individual support.

Art (15–20 min.):

Make a heart out of paper-mache and glue the love letter onto the heart.

Bonus Activity (~30 min.):

Self-Love in Action: Have each child decorate a “Dear Me” glass jar. Each day the children will use what they learned about self-love, kindness, compassion, and empathy by writing down on a (colorful) piece of paper one way they will be kind to themselves that day.



Dear Me Curriculum Survey

Name: _____

Date/Course Week: _____

Circle the answer that best describes you.

I talk about my emotions with my parents.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
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I talk about my emotions with my friends.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
--	------------------	-----------	------------

I talk about my emotions with my teachers.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
---	------------------	-----------	------------

I know all my emotions are okay to feel, even the uncomfortable ones.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
--	------------------	-----------	------------

I know how to name my emotions.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
--	------------------	-----------	------------

I know what to do when I have uncomfortable emotions.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
--	------------------	-----------	------------

I know I can have many emotions at one time.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
---	------------------	-----------	------------

I know my emotions can change.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
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I know I can write about my emotions to feel better.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
---	------------------	-----------	------------

I know I can take deep breaths to feel better.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
---	------------------	-----------	------------

I know how important it is to love myself.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
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I am proud of myself.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
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I know what mental health means.	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
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DEAR ME

Letters to Myself, For All of My Emotions



How are you feeling today?

A vertical column of ten horizontal white lines on a blue background, intended for writing a response to the question above.

Choose A Feeling



HAPPY



SAD



ANGRY



SURPRISED



SCARED



NERVOUS



AFRAID



EMBARRASSED



BORED



TIRED



DISGUSTED



SICK



WORRIED



THINKING



RELAXED



PLAYFUL



FRUSTRATED



EXCITED