

Learning to Live Together: Happy Video Games



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This paper presents the Happy video games, a gamified emotional education program in video-game format that focuses on peer conflict resolution based on emotion regulation.

Introduction

Why train in emotional competences to resolve conflicts positively?

Living together with others entails conflicts, but we cannot live without living together. Conflict resolution can be constructive, helping us grow and mature, or destructive, depending on how it is done. As Boqué (2002) states, conflicts are a natural fact of life. They are neither positive nor negative, but rather depend on how we respond to them.

Along the same lines, Ortega (2008) says that over the course of our lives and in interaction with others, human beings develop skills that allow us to live in harmony with others in community. However, just because we master certain skills that allow us to live and coexist peacefully does not mean we do so in a healthy, autonomous way. Depending on the nature of these skills, and the use we make of them, our personal development and coexistence will differ.

In fact, many conflicts, whether arising at work, home, school or elsewhere, fester and balloon into extreme situations, which are then difficult to end and solve, as in the cases of bullying, mobbing, or family breakups.

Neuroscience research supports the idea that emotions play a key role in our lives (Díaz-Lopez, Rubio Hernández, & Carbonell Bernal, 2019; García-Lastra, Fernández-Rouco, González-Cabrera & España Chico, 2019; Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000; Martin & Ochsner, 2016; Noteborn, Bohle Carbonell, Daily-Hebert, & Gijsselaers, 2012; Ochsner and Gross, 2008) when it comes to deciding how to act and, thus, also to resolving any conflicts we encounter. The specialized literature and extensive evidence of serious and recurring conflicts in society, such as bullying, mobbing, burnout, serious mental health problems,

etc., suggest that we are not yet able to adequately manage our emotions. We must learn how to properly manage our emotions in order to be more emotionally intelligent; teaching people how to resolve conflicts satisfactorily strengthens personal development.

Over the last 20 years, many emotional education programs have been implemented and evaluated, with highly encouraging results for educators, teachers, and parents. Emotional education is a good preventive measure for multiple outcomes, such as a decreased presence of violence, decreased substance abuse, and lower rates of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Bisquerra, 2000, 2009).

Why a video game as a tool for emotional education?

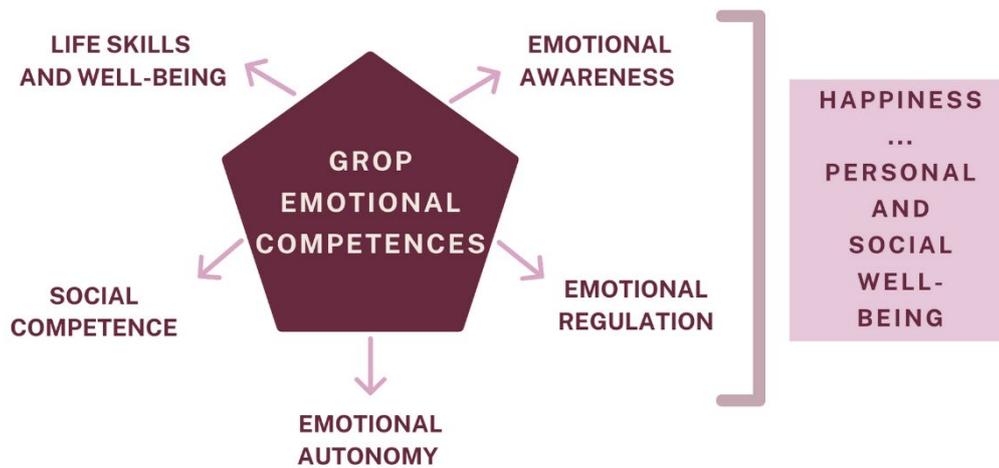
Because we agree with Jane McGonigal (2011) that games and video games are a powerful platform for change and for making a better world. Numerous studies have noted the benefits of video games in educational and health interventions, as they are a medium that facilitates the work of teachers and parents, while also motivating children (Kowal, Conroy, Ramsbottom, Smithies, Toth, & Campbell, 2021; Papastergiou, 2009).

Theoretical framework

What do we mean by emotional competences?

The Happy video game gamified program is based on the model proposed by the Research Group in Psychopedagogical Orientation (GROP from the Catalan), which encompasses five blocks of competences: emotional awareness, emotion regulation, emotional autonomy, social competence, and life skills and well-being (Bisquerra & Pérez, 2007). Specifically, the emotion regulation strategies used in the video games adhere to the model proposed by Gross & Thompson (2007), which identifies three regulation strategies (attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and situation modification).

All of these strategies contribute to the development of both personal and social well-being. We need to be well with ourselves in order to be well with others and, therefore, be happy. A person who is happy and fulfilled does not generate conflict.



How can we teach emotional competences oriented toward conflict resolution?

People can be trained in emotional competences unsystematically or systematically by means of emotional education programs designed to teach them to master these competences. A person who has mastered emotional competences can be considered emotionally intelligent. It is a matter of teaching people to insert intelligence between emotion and action or behavior. Emotion management is justified by ethics, which is the umbrella that legitimates teaching people to regulate emotions so that we behave in accordance with moral values (Filella, 2014).

Social and emotional education programs have been used in the U.S. and various European countries for a little over a decade. The expression “social and emotional learning” (SEL) was popularized by the American association Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), headquartered at the University of Chicago, the foremost institutional advocate of emotional education at the international level. The SEL concept is defined as the process whereby we learn to recognize and modulate emotions, make good decisions, share ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Cohen, 2006).

The literature offers ample empirical evidence of the benefits of emotional education programs. These types of programs have yielded conclusive results in terms of their effectiveness at preventing conflicts at schools. Specifically, improvements in prosocial behavior and decreases in negative and disruptive behaviors have been observed

(Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). Social and emotional learning has even been scientifically proven to be an excellent emotion regulation strategy that ends up positively shaping important adaptations and changes in the brain (Davidson, 2012).

Other studies involving interventions based on emotional competences have found that these competences can prevent more serious consequences for victims of bullying and violent behavior, making them a decisive factor for eradicating such behaviors (González-Cabrera, Montiel, Ortega-Barón, Calvete, Orue, & Machimbarrena, 2021; Díaz-Lopez et al., 2019). Contrary to popular belief, bullying, aggression and other forms of violence are the response to a lack of strategies, skills, and competences to resolve conflict situations effectively (Bisquerra, 2008, 2011; Filella, Cabello, Pérez-Escoda, & Ros-Morente, 2016). Therefore, undertaking interventions aimed at assessing, training students in and developing their emotional competences will improve the school climate and prevent possible violent behaviors (Alvarado, Jiménez-Blanco, Artola, Sastre, & Azañedo, 2020; Duncan et al., 2007; Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2003; Pérez-Escoda, Filella, Alegre, & Bisquerra, 2012).

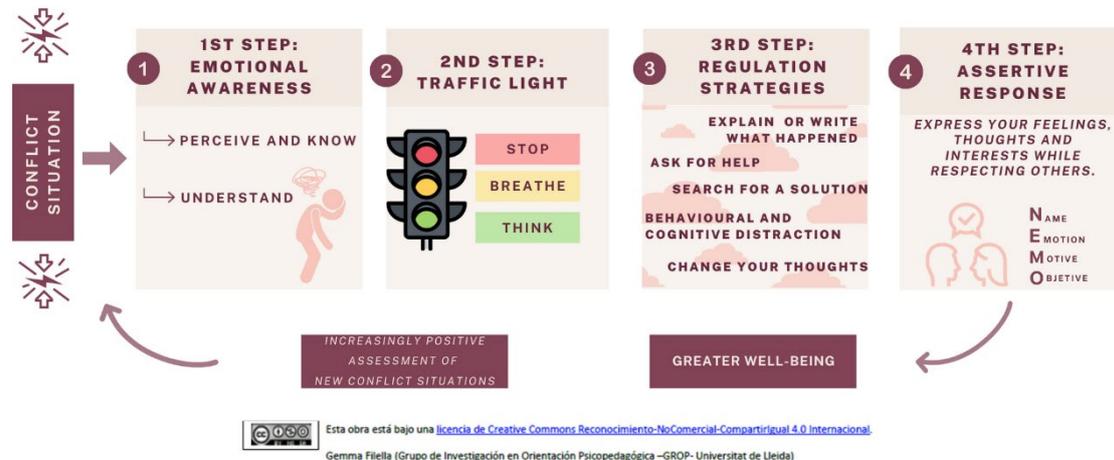
For this reason, emotional interventions play an important role in prevention, helping to reduce all the negative effects of violence in the short and long term, while also delivering immediate results in terms of improved academic behavior and individual development. It is in this sense that the Happy video game presented below was designed.

The Happy video game

Both versions of the Happy video game (Happy 8-12 and Happy 12-16) provide training in an emotion management process consisting of the following four steps:

1. Emotional awareness.
2. STOP (to lower the emotional intensity).
3. Various regulation strategies.
4. Assertive response.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION PROCESS



1. Emotional awareness refers to the need to know what emotions we are feeling in order to be able to manage them and know what we want to do with them. Being aware of our own emotions means giving them names, turning them into feelings. According to Damásio (2010), feelings can be classified as conscious emotions.
2. Once we are aware of the emotions we are feeling, we can regulate them. While there are many definitions of emotion regulation, the gist of many of them is that emotion regulation can be considered the ability to manage, increase, maintain or decrease any aspect of an emotional response, including the experience thereof and expressive behavior (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004; Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003).
3. The different regulation strategies offered as options are:
 - Behavioral and cognitive distraction.
 - Talking with a trusted person or writing about what happened and how you feel.
 - Asking for help.
 - Changing the way you think about the situation: positive thinking, empathy, accepting responsibility in the conflict.
 - Finding a solution.

4. Once we have managed our emotions, we can interact appropriately/assertively. One possible formula is the NEMO (Name, Emotion, Motive, Objective) technique.

Goals

The general goal of the video game is to enable players to improve their emotional competences in order to resolve conflicts assertively. This goal can be broken down into the following components:

- Learning the process that conflict resolution follows.
- Being aware of the emotions felt after a conflict and after responding appropriately to it.
- Learning strategies for regulating one's own and others' emotions.
- Using assertive communication to resolve conflicts.

Methodology

The video game should be used by the whole class together. An appropriate moment would be the weekly one-hour session with the tutor. The conflict situations presented in the video game are designed to reflect students' real-life context and give them the chance to intervene interactively, putting the knowledge and skills they are learning to use.

Teachers are free to use the video game as they see fit. The only requirement is for students to learn the emotion management process in order to be able to apply it in real-life situations.

The video game:

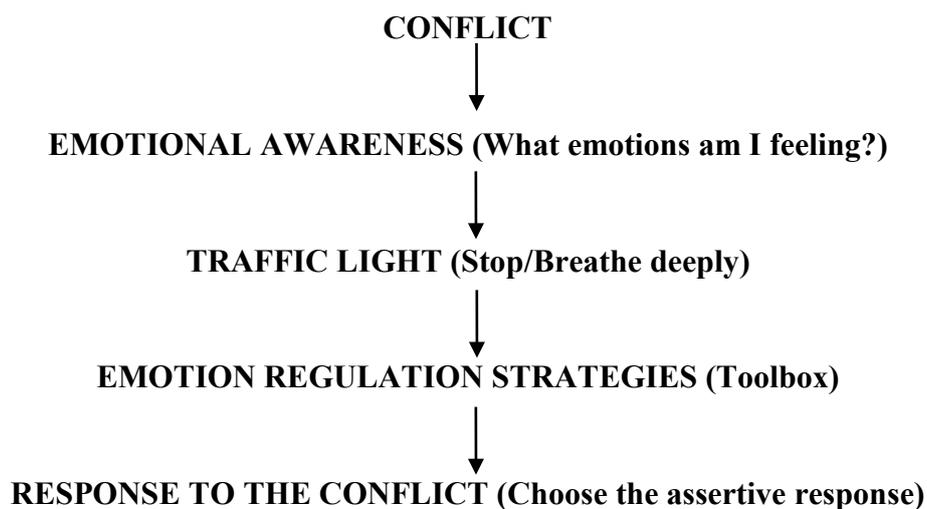
- It is an opportunity to address all the issues that come up in the video game and to practice dealing with the kinds of real-life conflicts that can arise at school in an interactive way.
- It advances the moral development of the group as a whole, reduces conflicts, and prevents bullying.

- It helps students learn the conflict resolution process through repetition.
- It helps students learn to respond assertively, although, unfortunately, in real life, responding aggressively is still effective.
- If the students make mistakes, it is not a problem; it is a learning process, and it can be quite challenging to master.

Overview of the video game

The video game presents a total of 25 conflicts intended to meet the aforementioned goals, while at the same time working on the different emotional competences. In both versions, 15 of the conflicts take place in a school context and 10 between siblings in a family context. For example, school conflicts include “Nuria is a girl who tells lies to make friends,” while family conflicts include “You are playing chess with your brother; when he loses, he accuses you of cheating.” Once the conflict has been presented, the player must choose from several possible responses, with only one (the assertive one) being correct.

In interacting with the video game, players (students) experience different roles in the conflict, such as that of the aggressor, the victim, or a bystander, thereby reflecting the different possibilities for action they might encounter in a conflict situation. The game accounts for the possibility that the conflict may be minor and one-off (arising sporadically), major and one-off (arising sporadically, but quite serious), and/or recurring (ongoing conflicts that become serious). The resolution process is as follows:



How is it played?

Character

Before beginning, students choose a character to play with, which they can change in each conflict.



Emergence of the conflict

The conflicts appear on the mini-map. There are two ways to access a conflict.

- You can walk around, following the mini-map, until you come to the thought bubble.
- You can click on the “pause” symbol on the mini-map, select the conflict on the chalkboard, and then click on the image of the feet.



The conflict then begins with a brief statement of the problem. In some conflicts, the players will be the victim; in others, they will be the aggressor or a bystander.



Once the players have read the statement, they have to ask themselves: “What emotions do I feel when I read about the conflict?” They can choose from 9 possible emotions. (All are valid, players may choose as many as they like, and none of the emotions give points. This is because, in accordance with the theoretical bases of neuroscience, we all feel what we feel, i.e., all emotions are legitimate.)



Players also have the option of practicing emotional understanding, and the emotions are legitimated (“What you are feeling is normal”).

Next, the players are shown a traffic light. (STOP AND TAKE A DEEP BREATH. THINK about what problem you have.)

The traffic light is used to make players stop and to give them time, that is, to enable what is known as temporal distancing. This time is essential for the emotional intensity to lessen. In addition to proper breathing, some people use relaxation, visualization, or mindfulness techniques. Needless to say, different people need different amounts of time for the emotional intensity to abate.

How does the traffic light technique work? Each color has a function:

- **Red:** Stop! Don't shout or insult anyone!
- **Orange:** Breathe! In this stage, you should breathe deeply until you can think clearly.
- **Green:** Act! Once you have managed to calm down, you will be able to respond appropriately.



Players are then asked which regulation strategies can be used to resolve the conflict. They are shown five options. They can choose a maximum of 4, and all are assigned a given score (adding up to a total of 1,000 points). Some can be used immediately; others must be used at a later time.

The regulation strategies and the general scores assigned to them by the video game are as follows:

TOOLS	RATIONALE	SCORE	
		Minor one-off conflict	Major one-off or recurring conflict
Assigning the right importance to the conflict and distracting yourself with	This is an effective tool for one-off conflicts that cannot be resolved at the moment. It is thus preferable to distract ourselves with other	100	0

other things (e.g., playing sports, drawing, listening to music).	activities rather than dwelling on the conflict and intensifying it.		
Telling a friend/an adult what happened or writing about it in your journal.	<p>This tool is used to seek social support. Expressing what we feel helps us be aware of the emotional situation, thereby facilitating its regulation. This tool is prioritized when the conflict can be resolved without the help of an adult.</p> <p>The social support of a person close to us, such as a friend, is valued. With the journal, internal language is strengthened, enabling us to develop the ability to self-regulate. The journal is prioritized when the person does not want to or cannot explain the conflict to someone else.</p>	100	100
Asking the mediator or tutor for help	This tool is a way of asking for help. It is prioritized in the case of recurring conflicts or major, one-off conflicts that could lead to bullying.	0	300
Cognitive reappraisal: changing how we think	With this tool, we seek to reframe the conflict from a positive perspective, accepting our responsibility in it and empathizing with the other person. It is one of the most effective	400	300

	tools, although it requires a great deal of training. It is one of the tools that gives the most points.		
Finding the solution	Once we have successfully completed the cognitive reappraisal, we look for the right response, which is usually to speak assertively with the parties involved in the conflict. This is one of the most effective tools, although it requires a great deal of training and overcoming many fears. It is one of the tools that gives the most points.	400	300

After using the regulation strategies, players are shown 4 possible responses to the conflict:

- An **assertive or correct** response
- A **passive** response
- An **aggressive** response
- A misleading response



For each wrong answer, players are shown a reasoned explanation as to why it is wrong. For each right answer, they earn 500 points, which are added to the scoreboard; additionally, their self-esteem bar increases.

Once they have selected the right answer, players are again asked what the character is feeling and have to choose from 9 possible positive emotions. (Again, all are valid, players may choose as many as they want, and they do not give points.) This phase of the video game is intended to enhance personal well-being, which, in turn, benefits social well-being, i.e., the fifth emotional competence (life skills and well-being).

The points provide players with feedback on how the conflict resolution process has gone. Scores lower than 1,500 points mean that the player could have chosen a more appropriate and adaptive regulation strategy or response to the conflict.

Results of the program's implementation

A number of pilot studies have been conducted to date. The initial results suggest that the program has positive effects.

The primary school version of the software, Happy 8-12, was tested first, with a total sample of 576 students. The results obtained after a trial with a pretest-posttest control group design showed that training with the Happy 8-12 software for an academic year significantly improved emotional skills and reduced students' anxiety levels ($p < .001$ in both cases).

Building on these results, a pilot study with a pretest-posttest design of the secondary school version (Happy 12-16) was then also carried out, with a total sample of 903 students. The research results showed that students in the experimental group were more likely to show improvement in their emotional competences ($p < .001$). In conclusion, Happy software can be considered an opportunity to train children in and improve emotional competences.

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