



Two Big Insights

Current research highlights two important truths about social awareness in character development:

1. We cannot reliably “read” another person’s emotions just by looking at their face or body language.
2. Our need for relationships is deeply tied to how the brain manages the body’s energy and balance (sometimes called the “body budget”).

Both may feel surprising, especially if you were taught that expressions map directly to emotions. Let’s unpack them.

Why Faces Don’t Tell the Whole Story

It’s common to assume a smile means happiness, a frown means sadness, and yelling means anger. Yet real life isn’t that simple.

Think of a wedding: some guests beam with joy while others shed tears. Crying isn’t always sadness, it can accompany deep happiness too. If we rely only on faces or gestures, we may guess wrong.

So how do we sometimes get it right? The answer lies in shared concepts. If your understanding of a situation matches someone else’s, you’re more likely to predict their feelings accurately. But if your concepts don’t align, say, one person loves surprises and the other dreads them, you may completely misread the emotional impact.

In short: we don’t read emotions, we predict them. Those predictions can be close to the mark when our concepts overlap, but they’re still educated guesses, not facts.



Relationships and the Body Budget

The second insight connects relationships to physical wellbeing. Our brains constantly regulate the body's "budget", things like temperature, energy, and heart rate. Early caregiving provides the first lessons in how relationships help balance that budget.

- Infants rely on caregivers for warmth, food, soothing, and rhythm. A baby's early sense of safety and regulation is literally co-created through rocking, singing, feeding, and comforting.
- Joint attention (looking at what a caregiver points to, sharing an object or word) is one of the earliest social skills. It helps children align concepts with others and begin learning culture, language, and social norms.

This research suggests the "social brain" is not pre-programmed but develops because of our need for others to help us regulate. Over time, shared routines and interactions teach children to synchronize with others, build concepts in common, and form attachments that make further learning possible.

Put simply: our brains are built to be social because survival depends on relationships.

What This Means for Character Development

- We can't assume accuracy. Since facial expressions and body cues are unreliable, it's important to ask others how they're feeling instead of jumping to conclusions.
- Communication matters. If we want others to understand us, we need to be clear and intentional in the words we choose. The language we use shapes the predictions others make about us.
- Shared experiences create alignment. When classrooms develop shared routines, language, and ways of handling feelings, students build common ground that makes empathy and collaboration easier.
- Relationships regulate us. Just as infants regulate with caregivers, students regulate with peers and teachers. Supportive, predictable classroom connections strengthen



both emotional stability and learning capacity.

Words Shape Experience

Because emotions are built from concepts, the words we choose influence how others understand and respond. Compare these two questions:

- “How are you feeling about this situation?”
- “Are you upset about this situation?”

The first invites any response; the second narrows the options and may even suggest the “correct” answer. Thoughtful word choice gives others space to share authentically and improves mutual understanding.

Bottom line: Our interpretations of others’ feelings are guesses. To build true social awareness, we must combine curiosity with clear, respectful communication and recognize that our relationships are as important for wellbeing as food, rest, or exercise.