

Inside the Stamp Game by Claudia Black

Many years ago when I was working with children affected by addiction in the family, a 9 year old girl explained denial as “pretending things are different than they are.” I came to learn the denial she was speaking of had more to do with her feelings than her thinking. When she felt sad, she told herself she had nothing to be sad about; when she was afraid, she told herself she didn’t need to be scared; when embarrassed, she told herself it wasn’t that bad; and when she was angry, she told herself there was enough anger in her house and it didn’t need her anger too.

At the time I was working in a residential treatment program and I witnessed how adult family members and children were as stifled as the addict in their ability to share feelings. Being influenced by the work of Eric Berne, I created what came to be known as The Stamp Game. The game is an educational and therapy tool to help people of any age be more effective in identifying and expressing feelings through the use of colored cards called stamps, and can be used to discuss emotional patterns that occur in the daily life of a child or adult, leading to constructive problem solving, to an emotional sociogram demonstrating emotional connections within the family, to identifying immediate feelings. The game is a creative and fun way to talk about feelings and assist in dialoging emotional intelligence.

While originally I created the game to be played with a facilitator, it is also a great tool for families in recovery. A big part of what I like about the game is it offers structure but allows a facilitator or family to be creative as to how to use it. For several years, the game was unavailable while I searched for a manufacturer. I am so pleased to be able to offer it again.

The Stamp Game

The purpose of the Stamp Game is to help players to better identify, clarify, and discuss feelings. Players will be able to relate more honestly to others as they learn to express feelings. As a result, players become more effective problem-solvers and the identification and expression of feelings brings clarity to players’ needs, which in turn leads to enhanced self-esteem. The game is a wonderful tool to equalize those who use words as a defense but have difficulty being emotionally honest, and for those who have great difficulty being articulate on any level. Playing *The Stamp Game* is a novel, fun and meaningful way for players to learn about themselves and each other.

Age: The game is appropriate for people of all ages — children — adolescents — adults.

Setting: Therapy settings with individuals and groups. Family settings.

Place: The game can be played on a large table or on the floor (more fun).

Players: One game is adequate to use with one to eight players and a facilitator. For use with more than ten players it is recommended that two games be used and mini-groups may be formed. For example: a group of ten players is divided into two five-player groups; a group of twelve players is divided into two six-player groups.

General Directions

1. Players sit in a circle, or if only two people they sit across from each other.
2. Stamps (colored cards) are placed in the center of the circle and in piles according to color.
3. Players pick up stamps that represent their feelings. The more intense the feeling the more stamps a player will pick up.
4. Players position their stamps in the order representing which of their feelings are most visible/most aware of down to those that are least visible/kept hidden.
5. Players take turns sharing their feelings in relation to their stamps and the feeling presented.
6. Other players offer feedback when player sharing finishes. This is optional.

It is suggested that all players pick up their stamps before sharing rather than doing it as their turn comes around. Once the first player begins sharing, it is common for that player and others to pick up more stamps from the piles as the person speaking often says something that they identify with but had not yet recognized. When a player's turn is over, he or she may pick up additional stamps while listening to others share. It is not necessary or even recommended to come back and talk about these additional stamps picked up as this may become too unwieldy in terms of time. What is important is that all players continue to progress in the awareness of their feelings.

These instructions are only guidelines. This game is meant to be a tool. Be creative with it. Change the instructions to best meet the needs of the players. One caution: players want to do this “perfectly” as if there is a way to win. There is no “perfect” or “right” way. It's the process that counts.

The Stamps

This game is not limited to the seven designated feelings. Each color represents a continuum of the specific feeling printed on the stamp. Therefore:

Red stamps = anger, rage, frustration, irritation, disgust, annoyance, resentment, intolerance, exasperation, etc.

Blue stamps = sadness, disappointment, loss, hurt, grief, misery, dissatisfaction, etc.

Black stamps = fear, terror, dread, anxiety, panic, shock, horror, etc.

Orange stamps = guilt, shame, remorse, regret, disgrace, etc.

Green stamps = embarrassment, humiliation, envy, jealousy, etc.

Yellow stamps = happiness, joy, love, gratitude, affection, peace, serenity, etc.

Brown stamps = confusion, uncertainty, misunderstanding, bewilderment, indecision, etc.

White stamps (Wild Cards) = any feeling not represented by another color stamp that the player wants to identify, such as loneliness, helplessness, powerlessness, etc. The possibilities are as individual as the players.

Number of Stamps

The number of stamps a player picks up is proportional to the depths of his/her feelings. The more intense a feeling the more stamps a player will pick up. A player does not pick up every color of stamp unless identifying with every feeling.

Example:

If a player feels a great deal of anger compared to feeling a small amount of fear, he or she may take five to ten red anger stamps, while taking only two or three black fear stamps.

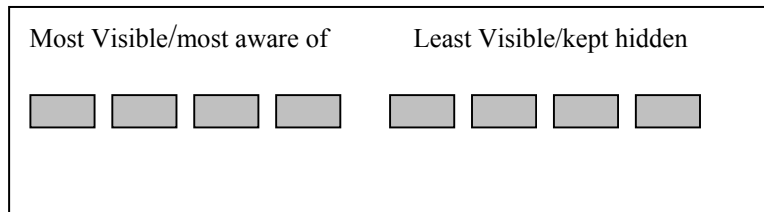
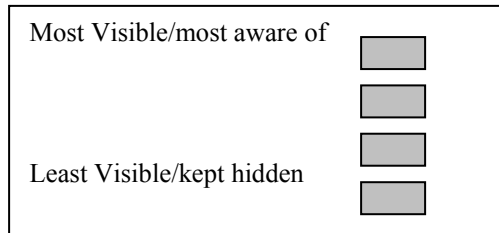
Positioning of Stamps

Once stamps are collected, players arrange the stamps in an order beginning with feelings that they are most aware of and most visible to others, down to feelings they keep hidden and are less visible.

Example: A player who knows that he or she hides anger, yet finds it easy to show sadness, may position blue sadness stamps before red anger stamps. A player who is more afraid and shows that fear but seldom or never shows guilt may put black fear stamps before orange guilt stamps.

There is no one correct way to position stamps; arrangement is left up to each player.

Example:



Feedback

Feedback can be a vital part of *The Stamp Game*. Time available and players' familiarity with each other are the key factors in whether or not this aspect of the game should be included. Feedback is given after each player has completed sharing his/her feelings. To give feedback, group facilitator and/or players reflect on what feelings they think a player has or had that he/she did not identify or share. Not all players will have feedback to give.

Feedback is given only in the form of offering stamps. To give feedback, players (one at a time) take stamps from the community pile. These stamps represent the feelings they believe the sharing player has not identified. Players place those stamps in front of the sharing player's stamps and briefly explain their perceptions, e.g. "This is more anger. I feel that there is more anger with your mom, but it's too scary to share," or "This is more fear, I don't know what it's about, I just sense more fear." Facilitator should instruct players to be as specific as possible with their feedback, but to limit comments to two or three sentences. When feedback goes beyond two or three sentences, the person giving feedback may be analyzing or intellectualizing, and should be politely instructed to stop.

The player receiving feedback listens without verbally responding, yet may acknowledge (agree and accept) feedback by picking up new stamps and bringing them into his/her pile, or reflect openness (a willingness to reflect and consider feedback) by leaving stamps in front of his/her pile. Feedback cannot be rejected. Player receiving feedback is not allowed to say no or give stamps back. Do not wait for player to respond to feedback. When feedback is completed, move to the next player. The player may continue to bring feedback cards into his/her pile as others take their turn.

Since the purpose of the game is to assist players in identifying and expressing feelings, it is not permissible to offer feedback which removes a feeling, i.e. removing a player's stamps. In addition, many times players, in their desire to protect another from his or her painful feelings, inappropriately offer yellow happiness stamps during feedback. In order to facilitate changing this pattern, yellow stamps are not to be used during feedback.

Therapeutic Settings

Here and Now: One or more players.

Objective: To bring focus on the players' present day situations. This can set the theme for a session or be used to help the facilitator assess the appropriate direction for the session. These instructions can be used as an integral part of ongoing individual or group sessions, where each session begins and concludes with this as a focusing technique.

Suggested Exercises:

A) Players may be asked to pick up and arrange the stamps that reflect:

How they have been since the last session.

Their awareness of feelings they are currently experiencing.

What feelings they are having about a particular person.

What feelings they are having in a particular setting, e.g. work, school, home.

B) At close of a session, a player may choose to take a feeling stamp so as to work on or stay present with that particular feeling. At the next session, the player shares how he/she worked on the particular feeling.

C) The group or facilitator may assign a feeling stamp to a player for that player to address prior to the next session. At the next session, the player can then share his/her progress or lack of progress.

D) During the course of a session, if a player appears to be having difficulty knowing or articulating feelings, you may want to ask him/her to use the stamps.

Example: Pick up stamps that represent how you felt when . . .

your mother said she was leaving

your boss indicated they had chosen someone other than you for the project

you said "no" to your son

E) Prior to the close of a session, another way to use this game is to ask a player to express any feelings he/she has not shared and/or to identify feelings he/she is leaving with at the session's end. This gives the facilitator and the player who may be experiencing painful feelings the opportunity to problem-solve any self-care issues.

Emotional Sociogram: One or more players.

Objective: To allow players to demonstrate their emotional relationship with family, peers, co-workers, etc.

When working with an individual, group or family, the stamps can be used to develop an emotional sociogram. Ask players to identify the significant people in their lives, or the people they live with. After they have named their significant others, ask players to present the stamps that emotionally reflect their relationship with the various people.

Example:

A player's family sociogram may have anger stamps sitting on top of fear and sadness stamps in reference to Dad and yellow happiness stamps on top of anger stamps in reference to Mom.

If addressing a problem in a specific setting, identify the people in the specific setting and then use the stamps to show emotional relationships.

If a player is very young or pre-teen it is helpful to first have him/her draw pictures to represent the different people or to write their names down and then set the stamps upon the picture or name.

Remember to have all of the players gather their stamps and position them before the first person takes a turn sharing.

This is a very powerful and positive exercise to use in a family group with all family members.

Childhood Exploration: One or more players.

Objective: To facilitate players' expression and clarity of feelings regarding early years. This process facilitates grief work.

Each player chooses and positions stamps to represent the feelings they experienced during their growing-up years. The stamps reflect feelings the player believes he/she had at that time regardless of whether or not these feelings were acknowledged as a child. The strength of a feeling is indicated by the number of stamps selected which represent that particular feeling.

Players then share by talking about his/her feelings using the stamps as prompts. There is no dialogue between players until all have shared. It is suggested that the game end with a quick self-reflection or self-image exercise, for example:

- a) What is it you are particularly glad you shared?
- b) What did you learn about yourself during this game?
- c) What did you learn that would be helpful for you to work on?

Extended Version of Childhood Exploration

After a player shares his/her childhood feelings and before another's turn, ask him/her to reflect on how the stamps are different today as an adult. Ask the player to represent that change by adding to or subtracting from the stamp collection and/or repositioning the order of the stamps. While the player is changing the stamps ask him/her to tell the group what has created the changes. When completed move on to the next player.

Feedback is optional. If playing the extended version of childhood exploration, feedback would only be given regarding adult years not childhood years. (See **Feedback** page #)

Clock Exercise: One or more players.

Objective: To assist in identifying emotional patterns that occur throughout the day.

Have each player draw three large clocks. The clocks represent three continuous days in their life. Once clocks are drawn, each player is to put stamps on the face of the clock that represent how he/she feels at strategic times in the day, such as when they awaken; how they feel by the time they leave the house for work or school; how they feel by lunch time; when they leave work or school; arrive at home; dinner time and bedtime. This is an excellent tool to recognize patterns that occur in daily life and problem-solve what to do to lessen negative feelings and to garner more positive feelings. This may be an exercise you ask players to do as an assignment.

Using The Stamp Game with Videos

Objective: To facilitate players to stay emotionally present.

If you are using videos in a therapeutic setting viewers may be emotionally impacted by the presentation but when it's over, frequently everyone smiles and says they are fine. It is suggested stamps be available with participants expected to pick up stamps that reflect their feelings as they are watching the video. Once the viewing is over and they are holding stamps in hand, it's not as easy to deny or to disassociate themselves so quickly from their feelings. Facilitators may ask those who want to share their stamps to do so or have each person take their turn.

Games with Young Children or Adolescents

Here and Now: One or more players.

See **Here and Now** Page as many of the instructions are relevant to playing with children.

Emotional Sociogram: One or more players.

See **Emotional Sociogram** as the instructions are relevant to playing with children.

Childhood Exploration: One or more players.

Objective: To facilitate players' expression and clarity of feelings pertaining to earlier years and present day.

Players choose stamps that reflect feelings they are most aware of during growing up years. Class grades, e.g., first grade, second grade, or school levels, e.g., elementary school, middle school, junior high or high school are age frames players may most identify with. Facilitator needs to be specific to the time frame as it relates to the therapeutic focus.

Location Exercise: One or more players.

Objective: To facilitate players in expressing where and with whom they show specific feelings.

Ask players to draw a picture of their house, neighborhood and/or school. Then, one by one, ask them to place stamps in the location where they show/take their feelings.

Examples:

Where do you show or take your anger?

Where do you show or take your fear?

Where do you show or take your sadness?

Where do you show or take your joy?

Where do you show or take your embarrassment?

Body Exercise: One or more players.

Objective: To facilitate players in identifying where they hold feelings in their body.

Ask players to draw a large picture of a body (a “dough-boy” body representation works best, not a stick figure) and place stamps on the body where the various feelings are held.

Examples:

One player may feel anger and the red anger stamp may go in his/her mouth.

Another player’s stamp may go over his/her stomach.

Another player’s stamp may go on his/her eyes.

Clock Exercise: One or more players.

See **Clock Exercise** as the instructions are relevant to playing with children.

Games with Families or Couples

At Home Use: Two or more players.

Objective: To assist family members in being more open and honest about their feelings.

This game can be played with a family or couple whose trust level is such that the players know what they say will not be used in a negative manner.

Playing *The Stamp Game* could be a part of a daily ritual, at a certain time, with a specified amount of time set aside, wherein all family members sit down and share feelings that reflect their day. This is not a game to play at mealtime. In fact, a good time to play is prior to mealtime, as this prevents family members coming to the table and inappropriately acting out their feelings.

It can also be used as a format for weekly family meetings:

Players pick up stamps that reflect feelings they have had since a previous family meeting.

Players pick up stamps to reflect feelings they have in the moment.

Players pick up stamps to reflect feelings they have about a specific family situation.

Optional: After sharing, a player tells other family members if he/she needs or wants something, i.e., “I’d like you to give me a hug.” “I’d like you to take a walk with me.” “I’d like to have some private time today.”

Note: The feedback component is *not* suggested for families as members could easily begin to act as junior therapists with each other.

Note

All of these ways to play *The Stamp Game* were created by Claudia Black and she strongly encourages players and facilitators to create and develop additional ways and settings to use the game. Express yourself and enjoy the process.

Common Language

When *The Stamp Game* has been used a few times by the same people, a common language develops. When a mother asks her daughter how she is, the daughter responds, “Two yellows and one white.” When a counselor asks a client, the client responds, “Five blacks.” Friends often say, “I had a blue day.” This becomes a fun language.