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# INTRODUCTION

The first eighteen years of life. That's our window.

As adults, 95 percent of the time we have with children is in the first eighteen years. Those years are our primary opportunity to ensure kids have positive role models and help them learn how to interact and socialize. Ultimately, those years are the time we have to enable children to become functioning adults and citizens of the world who are resilient and able to bounce back when life inevitably tries to knock them down. But the years go by fast. We need to cherish these days with children to prepare them for the road ahead.

It's easy to do the opposite and try to prepare the road for the child. As caregivers, we can go to great lengths to get them into the right type of schools, signed up for the right types of activities, and surrounded by the right types of people. As educators, we can extend deadlines, offer support after the day ends, and stretch ourselves so our students won't have to stretch as much. As counselors, we can stay late, schedule extra sessions, and make accommodations so that kids will carry a lighter load. While these attempts may ease the burden in the short term, kids who do not learn how to struggle in childhood will not know how to manage struggle as adults.

**In this book, I will outline a path to prepare children emotionally for the road ahead. This path will teach children to identify feelings, manage behaviors, and build emotional muscles while they are still in our homes and schools—before they face the challenges of the world on their own.** This path requires a “wraparound” approach that includes counselors, educators, and parents so that this training takes place in all areas of their lives. Classroom teachers and counselors, with the support of parents, can teach kids the steps to emotion regulation. Along the way, adults will learn how to regulate their own emotions so they can model successful emotion management.

This training can start very early. Children can learn about feelings in Pre-K so that, by the time they enter kindergarten, they possess effective coping strategies to manage them. Our middle schoolers will be able to say, *“I feel angry when you don’t let me use my iPad,”* instead of *“Let me have it! It’s not fair!”* Adults will be able to identify the feelings they have while in conflict with a child and use coping strategies to manage them. A teacher will be able to say, *“I feel angry at a 7 when James doesn’t turn in his notebook. I am going to walk away and take three breaths before I address this issue with him.”* A counselor will be able to teach the four steps of emotion regulation to every student who enters their office.

## MY “WHY” FOR WRITING THIS BOOK

In the spring of 2023, a school shooting took place at Covenant School in Nashville—just two miles from my office. Having my own two kids in schools nearby and counseling children who were either at the school during the shooting or knew kids who attended the school, I found there weren’t enough emotional muscles to be prepared for such an event.

Following the shooting, I met with kids who devised plans to avoid being shot, such as climbing in the ceiling tiles or not allowing themselves to drink water during the school day to avoid going to the bathroom. One child said, *“Since I play sports after school, I’ll allow myself to start drinking water at 1:30 so I won’t have to use the bathroom at school.”*

Another child shared, *“Going to the bathroom is when you’ll get shot.”*

Another student, just weeks after the shooting had a panic attack during a fire drill. *“I thought, ‘This is it,’”* she said, recalling the event.

What’s even more alarming are the kids I spoke to who were relatively unfazed by the incident. One teen said, *“I’ve grown up in the Newtown era.”* She went on, *“If twenty six-year-olds can be killed in five minutes at a school, it’s always a possibility for me.”*

Another child said, “Every time I hear a loud noise, I jump. Another student’s water bottle fell off the top of their desk and I nearly jumped out of my seat. The thing is, other kids jumped too. Even the teacher. We’re all afraid. So now we have a new rule that no metal water bottles are allowed in class.” I shared how sad I was to hear this, and she replied, “That’s just our reality.”

When I think back to my own childhood and the anxiety I felt, I can’t imagine adding school violence to my plate. I can’t imagine sitting in a classroom terrified of a fire drill or the sound of a water bottle falling off a desk, but this is what today’s kids feel they have to do. One art teacher I met shared that her colleagues had quietly devised a plan to go behind a hidden door in the school if a school shooter came in. During a school shooter drill, her colleagues thought it was real and took off to the hidden door. It took an hour to find them. “I guess they were just going to leave me,” the art teacher said. “Guess I know where I stand with them.”

I finished this book in Portugal, where I spent six weeks with my family. After the school shooting, I needed a professional sabbatical to step away from my practice and take a breath. The grief I have felt for children and the violence placed on them is palpable. My kids were in a summer program and on a bulletin board, were words written in bold, **Children’s Rights**. I am going to begin this book with their words to demonstrate what they value, and what matters to them. After all, they will be our future and their voices will be what matters most.

***I have the right to have a house.***

***I have the right to be protected.***

***I have the right to play.***

***I have the right to be taken care of.***

***I have the right to have someone listen to me.***

***I have the right to feel loved.***

Wishing all of you love as you parent, educate, and counsel the future of this world. In this book, I hope you learn not only how to

build emotional muscles in children, but also to value them, respect them, and know they are the lights, leading us on to better things. As you journey, help the kids, and help yourself. We can never outgrow emotional regulation.

My hope is that readers of this book will join me in changing the paradigms of how we address mental health in children. We will help children identify feelings beneath behaviors and learn how to manage them. We will watch children build emotional muscles and begin facing challenges on their own. And finally, we will gain relief in knowing we have prepared kids well for the road ahead. Let's get started.

*Allison*



## CHAPTER ONE

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# WHY FEELINGS MATTER

This book is about the management of feelings, but before we discuss how to manage them, it's important to understand why they matter so much. Our feelings are the driving force in our life experience. They are what help us understand the world around us, alert us to danger, nudge us to make decisions or say things we need to say. Feelings themselves are beautiful and make us unique. But feelings are not so beautiful when they are big, overwhelming, and keep us from doing things we need to do or really care about. This stark contrast between the beauty of feelings and the fear of them is what makes feelings so bittersweet.

So, what are feelings?

According to the American Psychological Association, a feeling is “a self-contained phenomenal experience:” and feelings are “subjective, evaluative, and independent of the sensations, thoughts, or images evoking them.”<sup>1</sup> What this means in lay terms is that feelings are within yourself and are your interpretations of the world. Feelings are not experienced in the same way by any two people, and they are not a common, collective experience. Because they are our interpretations of what is happening outside of us, they are often misunderstood by others around us.

## **Example: Two Friends Go to a Popular Music Event**

- **Friend One:** Feelings of excitement, joy, happiness
- **Friend Two:** Feelings of fear, frustration, sadness

The two friends were at the same event, but both had very different feelings about the event. Friend One had positive feelings, but Friend Two heard a song that made her think about a past relationship and therefore felt negative feelings. Neither friend is wrong in their feelings, but Friend One is confused as to why Friend Two isn't enjoying herself.

This scenario is common in our interactions with kids. We plan vacations, make special arrangements, and go to a lot of effort to make a fun lesson plan or school event for a child, and then they experience negative feelings. The gap between our *expectations* about their feelings and their actual feelings creates a conflict that often leads to frustration and confusion. When we expect children to have positive feelings and they exhibit negative ones, we want to try to make them feel differently.

## **Example: Student Wins an Award**

You are a counselor, and a child just received an award in school. You are meeting with the child, and they share disappointment. Your natural inclination may be to help them see the good in the situation and be proud of themselves. Instead, it's better to acknowledge their feeling and explore their experience of the award. You can say, *"It sounds like you're disappointed that you received the award. Let's talk about why that is the case for you."*

This reframe becomes harder when you are the one who is directly involved in creating a positive experience for a child.

## **Example: Student Turns an Assignment in Late**

You are a teacher and have allowed a student to turn an assignment in late. You are expecting the child to be grateful for this accommodation and, even though it will be more work for you, you are willing to do it because you care about the student. Instead

of being grateful, the child shows frustration in having to turn the assignment in at all.

It's hard to acknowledge and accept this frustration, but it's still better to acknowledge the frustration and, more importantly, not become frustrated yourself.

It's also hard to see a child exhibit negative emotions when others around them seem happy and excited, especially when you are the parent. As parents, we often take our child's feelings personally. If our child is sad or unhappy, we feel like we are the ones to blame and we are the ones who need to fix the problem. This is not the case. Children's feelings are their own and are separate from us. We can help them learn to manage their feelings but feelings, at their core, are experienced separately from others.

### **Example: Your Child Often Has a Negative Attitude**

You are a parent of a child who is routinely feeling negatively. Things never seem good enough and, on a beautiful Saturday morning, your child wakes up irritable and angry. You have made their favorite breakfast, have a day full of fun activities planned, and all you hear from them is negativity.

It would be easy to try to talk the child out of their feelings but in doing so you are devaluing their experience. It's better to accept their feelings and move on with the day. It's also important, in this situation, not to change plans or take away activities due to the negativity. This will only reinforce negativity. A good rule of thumb when kids, or anyone for that matter, experience feelings different from those you expect is to remember:

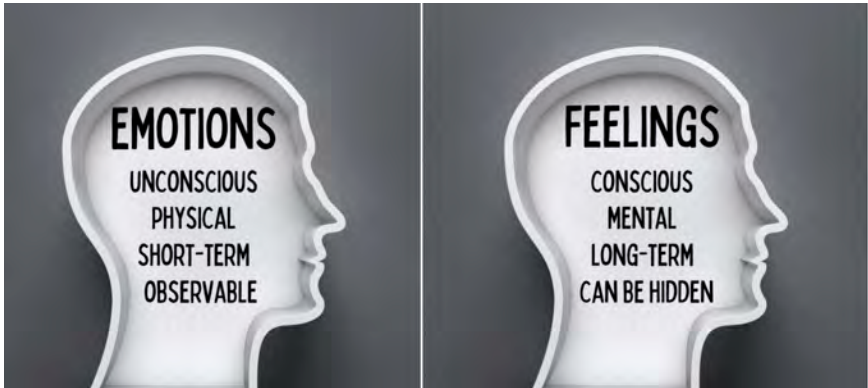
- 1. Everyone is entitled to their own feelings.**
- 2. Don't take it personally.**

This will take the pressure off you, as the adult, to make a child happy. It will also show the child that you value their feelings and perceptions about those experiences.



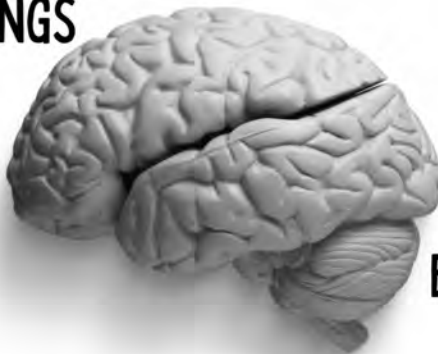
# THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

The words “feelings” and “emotions” are often used interchangeably, but there are key differences between the two. Emotions are chemical reactions in the body, whereas feelings are the responses to those reactions. Let’s look at the differences below:



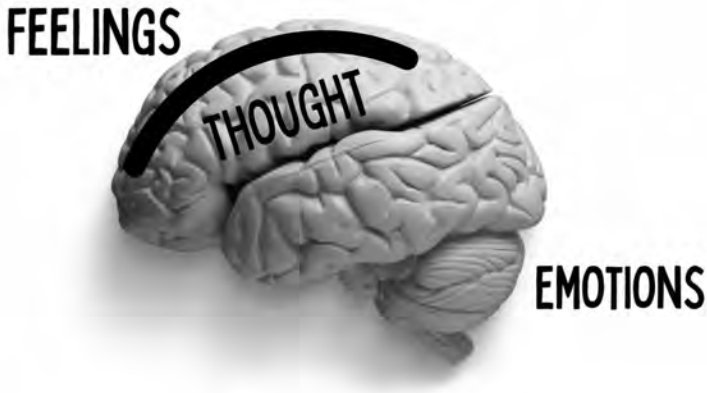
In my book, *Flooded*,<sup>2</sup> I talk about the emotional responses to triggering events that stem from the amygdala. The book was focused on the body and how to reset the brain using the senses, not thought. In this book, we are focusing on feelings, or what happens *after* the body’s response. Both are important to understand as they make up the picture of mental health.

**FEELINGS**



**EMOTIONS**

As you can see from the above image, *emotion* comes from the base of the brain or primal brain. The primal brain does not allow for reasoning or thought. It is automatic and is only functioning to survive. *Feeling* is what occurs as the emotion rises from the primal brain to the top brain, where it can be filtered through the lens of thought.



Because of this key factor—thought—we can work with feelings much more than we can with emotions. We can adjust thoughts to help feelings become more manageable. **This is a powerful component of emotion regulation.**

Psychology and counseling are geared toward thoughts and feelings, specifically how to change thoughts to help feelings become more manageable. Changing thoughts is the foundation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and is a powerful tool to improve mental health. The awareness of feelings coupled with the ability to change negative thoughts is a powerful combination that helps kids manage difficult emotions.

I also want to mention that while emotions are automatic and come regardless of environment, beliefs, or upbringing, feelings are highly dependent on these factors. Because thoughts affect feelings and thoughts are learned in belief systems, our beliefs about feelings and their expression will affect how we react to them. From the chart shared earlier in this section, we learned

feelings can be hidden. Hiding feelings is often a behavior learned in childhood.

## HOW OUR CHILDHOOD AFFECTS OUR CURRENT BELIEFS AND FEELINGS

Many of us grew up in environments where feelings weren't valued. We were taught to be tough and strong and to "buck up" when things got hard. Our parents, caregivers and educators were often taught the same approach in their childhoods. Consequently, generations of ignoring and suppressing feelings have led our current generation of educators, parents, and counselors to be unsure of what to do with the expression of emotions, especially negative ones. Many who grew up in a "buck up" mentality have continued the same approach in parenting and education. They are tough on students and their own kids and employ the same "buck up" mentality with themselves.

Others have taken the opposite approach and have become very invested in children having positive feelings. They make accommodations, allow kids to get out of hard tasks and make great effort to keep kids emotionally comfortable. I call this the "bubble wrap" approach. In the "bubble wrap" approach, there is a fear of kids struggling and when kids do hit an emotional bump, the trigger is often removed so kids don't have to feel the negative effects. While there is short-term emotional relief in this approach, the long-term consequences is that kids can't develop resilience.

While both the "buck up" and "bubble wrap" approaches are rooted in good intentions, they both fail to help kids acknowledge emotions *and* do hard things. The "buck up" approach ignores emotions. The "bubble wrap" approach removes hard things. Neither approach is ideal. Instead, I recommend a "scaffolding approach" which supports kids emotionally in doing hard things.

Let's look at the differences in the messages below:

**BUCK UP**

Get over it.

It's not a big deal.

Stop crying.

**BUBBLE WRAP**

I'll take care of it.

It may be too hard.

You don't have  
to go.

**SCAFFOLDING**

You can do it.

I believe in you.

How can I  
support you?



The scaffolding approach gives kids the support they need to overcome the challenges of childhood. As children walk through life, they are supported by caring educators, counselors, and parents. They are still expected to do hard things, but the messages they hear from adults include three components:

- 1. Empathy and recognition of feelings**
- 2. Maintaining boundaries**
- 3. Teaching a coping strategy and/or making a plan**

The scaffolding approach provides the ability for kids to do hard things, and build confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth while still under the roofs of our homes and schools—well within our

primary window of contact. As we move through this book, we will see how this approach will help kids get to where they need to be emotionally before heading out into the world.



## AT HOME

### The Scaffolding Approach

**Child:** *“I don’t want to go to the piano recital!”*

**Parent:** *“I know you’re worried about going but they are expecting you.”*

**Child:** *“It is scary! I really don’t want to go.”*

**Parent:** *“Scary things are hard, and I am here to help you. Let’s take a walk and reset our brains for a few minutes. Then, we can listen to your favorite song on the car ride there. You can use your headphones to help you calm your brain.”*

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# AT SCHOOL

## The Scaffolding Approach

### CLASSROOM EXAMPLE

**Student:** *“I didn’t know we had an assignment due today! Can I turn it in tomorrow?”*

**Teacher:** *“I know you’re frustrated that you don’t have yours completed but it wouldn’t be fair to the other students if I let you turn it in late. Let’s come up with a plan for you to turn it in on time for the next deadline.”*

### COUNSELING EXAMPLE

**Student:** *“Where were you yesterday? I thought we had an appointment scheduled. I was outside your door waiting on you! Can I see you now?”*

**Counselor:** *“I know you’re angry that I wasn’t here for our session yesterday, but I needed to be out of the office unexpectedly. I am heading to a meeting now but if you write down your feelings we can talk about them during our next appointment.”*

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The scaffolding approach helps kids do hard things with empathy. We never want to keep kids from doing hard things because only through accomplishing hard things repeatedly will they gain the confidence they need to do hard things while managing their feelings.

Now, let’s look at the most common childhood feelings and how to teach kids about them.

## The Top 20 Feelings Children Experience in Childhood

Surprised	Embarrassed	Silly	Jealous
Excited	Frustrated	Angry	Worried
Happy	Lonely	Proud	Disappointed
Sad	Confused	Shy	Calm
Brave	Confident	Hopeful	Overwhelmed

There are many more feelings, but it's important for children to be able to learn at least these twenty feelings in childhood. When I was a school counselor, I started every classroom lesson by pointing to a row of feeling pictures on the wall saying a feeling, and then asking the class to repeat the feeling. I started this with kindergarten students, many of whom did not know the feelings when the school year started. Within a few weeks, each child would go around the room and be able to name the feeling they were experiencing. Children can learn new things in such a short time because of brain neuroplasticity and the rapid rate of brain growth during childhood.

## NEUROPLASTICITY AND FEELINGS

A child's brain is much like an onion. If you slice an onion down the middle, you can see the core and then the layers that surround the core. Birth to age five is the core of the onion and when the most rapid brain development occurs. When neurons fire together, they wire together, and since humans are wired to try repeatedly, neurons fire over and over until a task is completed. Once a baby learns to walk, the neurons are wired together, thus creating neuroplasticity.

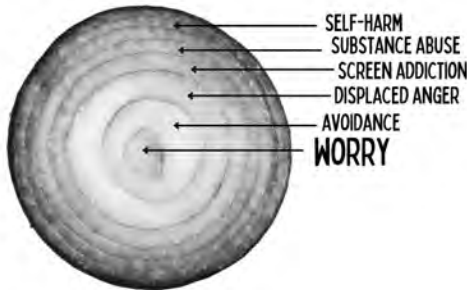
As kids begin to grow and develop, layers surround their core. They develop reactions, coping strategies, and ways to manage

their feelings. If they don't get support in their early years, many of the coping strategies they develop to manage feelings will be maladaptive. Kids often resort to unhealthy methods to manage their feelings and, if no intervention takes place, they can wind up in very precarious situations as teenagers. Let's look at an example of a child who struggles with worry at a young age and the results of early intervention versus no intervention:

### EARLY INTERVENTION



### NO INTERVENTION



The child who received early intervention learned coping strategies and began developing self-esteem, empathy, and, eventually, the ability to self-advocate despite feeling intense worry. The child who received no intervention developed avoidance strategies to manage worry, which turned into addictive behaviors and eventually self-harm. Not all kids who struggle with feelings develop addiction or self-harm but kids who do not get the support they need will inevitably try to



manage feelings on their own, without the support of trusting adults.

## ROOT FEELINGS

There are twenty important feelings in childhood, but each child will generally have one that will be more important than the others. I call these “root feelings” because they are felt more intensely and more frequently than the others. My root feeling is worry, and I have felt worry more frequently and more intensely than any other feeling since I was a child. Since root feelings are so intense, they often become the driving force in our decisions and, ultimately, our lives. In the image below, you can see life, the road where others are traveling, and then you see a detour.



This detour is created by a root feeling that is not managed. The feeling is so intense that the road seems impossible to travel. Over time, root feelings keep us from living our fullest lives. We miss out on experiences and opportunities because we feel unable to manage the intensity of the root feeling.

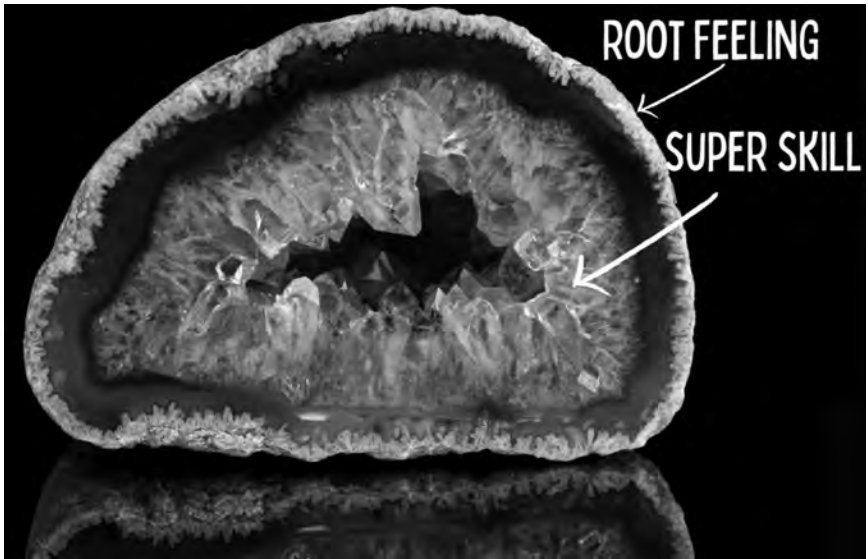
Root feelings never really go away. I still feel worry as an adult. What changes is that root feelings become less intense the more

we overcome them. We can continue down the road (instead of taking the detour), empowered by learned strategies to manage that root feeling. This does not mean that we won't feel our root feeling on the journey. It just means that we don't let our root feeling keep us from the journey. It comes along with us.

What's so amazing about root feelings is that since they are so intense and so frequent, we can use them to our advantage. I call this a "super skill." Below, we can see how to turn a root feeling into a super skill.

### **Turning a Root Feeling into a Super Skill**

Super skills are abilities that are unique to us, based on our root feeling. Basically, if you turn a root feeling inside out to see the good in it, and use it effectively, it becomes a super skill. I like to describe this to kids by using a geode, as in the image below.



You wouldn't know how beautiful this geode is if you didn't crack it open to see the inside. It's the same with root feelings. On the outside, they are hard and ugly and seem to do nothing but hinder

us. But if we look closely and crack them open, we can see the beauty and power that lie within, which help propel us through our lives.

### **Example: Root Feeling - SAD**

Juan is a boy who struggles with sadness. He feels sad more often than other kids and seems to notice the hurt in others and in the world.

**Automatic response:** avoidance, isolation

Juan tries to avoid his sadness through humor. He tries to make everyone laugh in class but, when he's alone, he hides in his bedroom away from others.

But what if Juan doesn't avoid his sadness and instead learns how to channel it? What if Juan turned his root feeling into a super skill? It would look something like this:

### **Channeled Response:**

Juan starts paying attention to his own sadness and observes the same feeling in others. He notices the sad girl on the playground and even the sadness in his mom when she talks about the divorce from his father. Juan begins drawing other people and using art to help him understand his own sadness and the emotions of others. In high school, he begins to fine-tune his art and receives a scholarship to an art college.

## **ROOT FEELINGS REFLECTION**

The above story is true. I have seen countless kids harness root feelings and turn them into super skills. Now, think about a child you work with or parent and consider these questions:

- **What is one Root Feeling for this child?**
- **What is their Automatic Response?**

## • What could be their Channeled Response?

Think about what they could be capable of if they channeled their root feeling into a super skill.

Ask yourself what your root feeling is and how (or whether) you are channeling it. Look back through your life and identify your super skill and the purposes it has served. For most of us, our root feeling is what we have tried to run away from, but it is also what has helped us get to where we are.

- **Everyone is entitled to their own feelings.**
- **Emotions are chemical reactions. Feelings are responses to the reactions.**
- **Early intervention is always best.**
- **A root feeling is the feeling you struggle with the most.**
- **A super skill is a root feeling turned inside out.**



**KEY POINTS  
TO REMEMBER**