FEELINGS MADE SIMPLE

Guiding Your Child Toward Emotional Awareness

This booklet is designed to help you help your child express and understand their feelings through mindful practice and art making.

Feelings are complicated experiences, and children gradually develop the capacity to express and reflect on their feelings as they grow in years. Sometimes, children don't fully grasp what they're feeling, and these emotions can show up as behaviours instead. These behaviours are often signs of deeper needs or feelings. By responding with patience and curiosity, we can help our children understand and express what's really happening inside.

I hope you enjoy the journey and through it learn a fun and effective way of communication and bonding with your child.

Cheers,
Huma Durrani
DAT. AThS. RCAT.RP.

Feelings

There are different theories about the range of feelings that babies have and frankly it is not possible to know exactly what type of feelings they experience since babies cannot talk. But we do know that when a baby coos or cries they are learning to communicate and paying attention to how their environment makes them feel.

As children grow older and start schooling, new environments and relationships add to the complexity of their feelings. **However, children may not posses the vocabulary nor the insight to be able to understand or express these feelings adequately.** For example a child may say they are feeling angry when in reality they are hurt, lonely or sad. Similarly they may say they are happy, even though they are excited or hyper-aroused.

On the next page you will find a variety of words that you can use to help your child build their feeling vocabulary. Explore the list of words with them an help them name their emotions accurately.

HAPPY
Amused
Bouncy
Cheerful
Ecstatic
Energised
Excited
Giggly
Grateful
Glad
Joyful
Loved
Optimistic
Pleased
Satisfied
Silly
Terrific
Thankful
Uplifted

SAD
Alone
Defeated
Depressed
Despair
Despondent
Devastated
Disappointed
Discouraged
Gloomy
Hopeless
Hurt
Let down
Miserable
Misunderstood
Neglected
Pessimistic

SCARED
Afraid
Alarmed
Anxious
Cautious
Fearful
Frightened
Helpless
Hesistant
Horrified
Lost
Insecure
Nervous
Puzzled
Shy
Uncomfortable
Uneasy
Unsafe
Unsure
Useless
Worried

CONFUSED
Astonished
Bewildered
Curious
Distracted
Inquisitive
Mystified
Over-whelmed
Reluctant
Shocked
Stunned
Surprised
Suspicious

UPSET
Angry
Bitter
Cross
Defensive
Defiant
Disturbed
Exasperated
Frustrated
Impatient
Insulted
Intolerant
Irrational
Irritated
Mad
Offended
Outraged
Rebellious
Resistant
Vengeful

DISGUST
Embarrassed
Exposed
Guilty
Inadequate
Incompetent
Inferior
Insignificant
Shame
Stupid
Ugly
Unaccepted

Children and teens today often express their emotions through modern slang that can sound unfamiliar to parents so it's helpful to know what they mean.

Low-key (quietly feeling something) or **high-key** (feeling something strongly) describe the intensity of emotion. **Vibe or vibing** refers to the emotional energy of a moment. **Feeling down bad** means they're sad or heartbroken, **shook** means surprised or unsettled, and being **pressed or salty** often points to feeling annoyed or bitter. If they say **slay,** it means they feel proud or confident; **it's giving**... is used to describe a certain feeling or energy; and **main character energy** means they're feeling self-assured. Saying something is **cringe** means it's awkward or embarrassing, while **sus** describes something suspicious. **No cap** means "I'm being honest," and **I'm dead** usually just means "that's so funny." When they talk about **brain rot**, they mean feeling drained from too much screen time, and **touch grass** suggests taking a break and grounding themselves. **Delulu** is a playful way to admit unrealistic hopes, while **rizz** means charisma or confidence, and the **ick** refers to suddenly losing interest in someone. **Bestie** shows closeness, **ship or shipping** means hoping people connect, and **stan** means deeply admiring someone. **L and W** stand for loss and win — a bad or good moment — while **NPC energy** describes feeling detached or on autopilot. A **vibe check** means checking the emotional tone of a situation, and if they **ate or ate** that up, it means they did really well and feel proud.

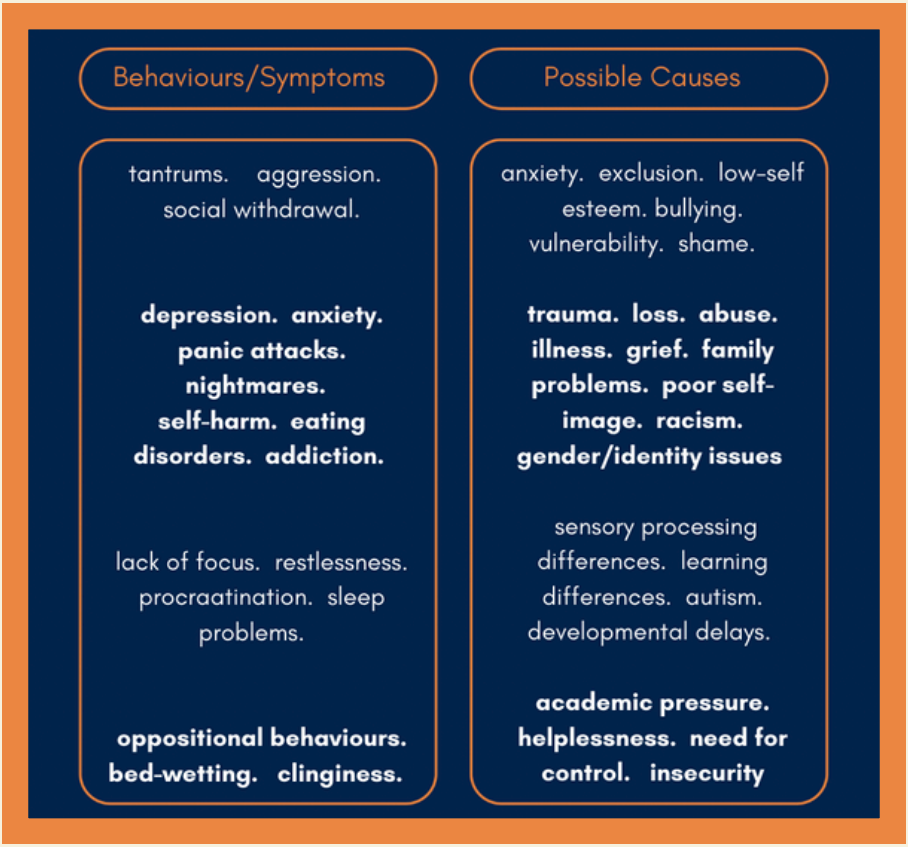
Behaviours

Whether in infancy, childhood or adolescence, children require a safe consistent environment and attuned caregiving for healthy physical and emotional development. Healthy relationships that encourage independence within boundaries, positive reinforcement and validation, foster resilience and problem-solving skills.

But sometimes developmental, and/or environmental factors are not ideal and may result in difficult and painful feelings. Children may struggle to cope with these feelings, and display behaviours/symptoms that parents or caregivers find hard to understand or deal with

On the next page, you will find a list of behaviours that may have underlying causes that are not necessarily visible. For instance depression could be a symptom of isolation or low-self esteem, similarly, a child with learning difficulties may express their anxiety or frustration through aggression or self-harm.

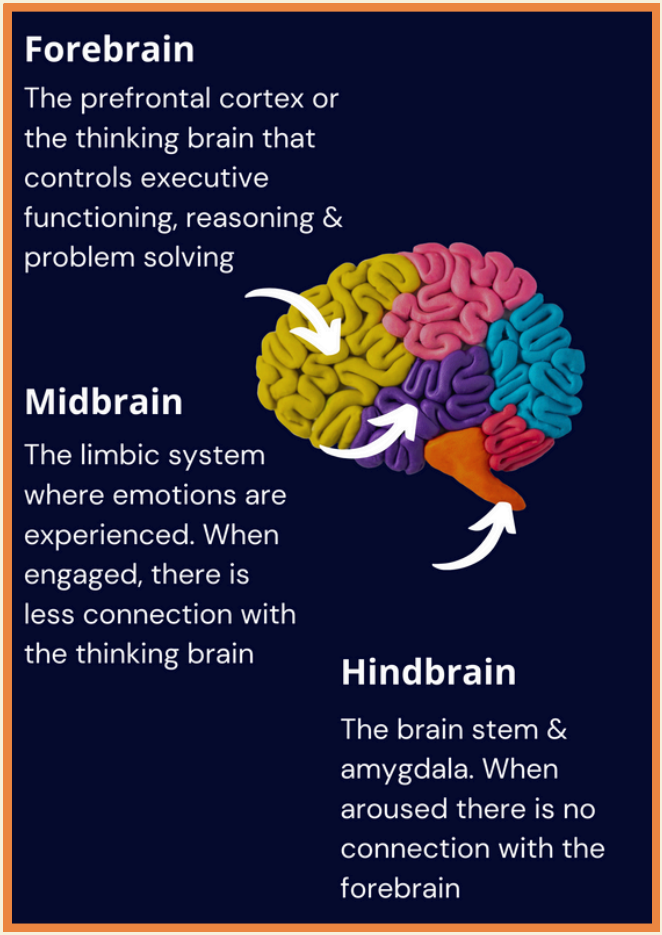
By reframing behaviours as signals rather than problems, we can respond with empathy and curiosity — helping children understand, express, and regulate what they feel inside.



The Brain

Karen Young* uses the analogy of a 2 storey house to illustrate emotional processing in the brain. She calls our thinking brains the upstairs and our feeling brain the downstairs. Broadly speaking the brain may be divided into **3 parts: the forebrain, the mid brain and the hindbrain** (see diagram on next page).

Deep within the brain system just above the brain stem lies the limbic system. This system facilitates memory storage and retrieval, establishes emotional states, and link the conscious, intellectual functions of the forebrain with the unconscious, autonomic functions of the hindbrain. To put it simply, it is the seat of emotional regulation and the fight, flight freeze response.



In order to better understand the fight flight freeze response take a look at the diagram on this page on the **Window of Tolerance or WOT**,a concept that was introduced by Dr Dan Siegel*.

According to Dr Siegel, the 3 parts of the brain, meaning the forebrain, mid brain and hind brain, work like an orchestra to maintain the **optimal zone of "arousal"** for an individual to function in everyday life. When a child is operating within this zone or window, they can effectively manage and cope with their emotions. This is their WOT

THE WOT

When the child exists within this window, they are able to learn effectively, play, and relate well to themselves and others. However, if they move outside their WOT they are likely become hyper-aroused or hypo-aroused, in other words dysregulate.

Hyper-arousal results from the fight or flight response and is characterised by excessive activation/energy. It can present as difficulties concentrating, irritability, anger and angry outbursts, panic, constant anxiety, easily scared or startled, self-destructive behaviour, etc.

Hypo-arousal results from the freeze / flop drop response where there is a sense of shutting down or disassociating. This can present as exhaustion, depression, flat affect, numbness and disconnection.

Most unwanted behaviors in children occur when they are not functioning within their WOT or dysregulating. Therefore, **it is important to recognize your child's WOT** and help them identify it through mindful practice and verbal and non-verbal expression.

Sit with your child and explain the WOT to them. Encourage them identify possible triggers and resulting behaviours.

The Breath

You have learned what may happen when a child exist their WOT. Their breathing may get affected, the heart rate may increase, muscles get tense and so on. These physiological changes are messages from our body that tell us that something is wrong and that we should act to manage this response and bring it under control. **Our breath has a special power over our mind and is one free and inexhaustible source of regulation.**

Practiced correctly, effective breathing patterns lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduce the stress hormone, cortisol, help regulate body temperature and force us to slow down our breathing. **In short effective breathing can help the child stay within our WOT.**

You will find many fun and engaging breathing techniques on YouTube that you can practice with your child and have them use the different patterns of breath to stay within their WOT. **Search for 'smell the flower breathing', 'five finger breathing' and so on.**

On the next page is a simple directive you can use to help your child increase their WOT through reminders and practice.

The Feelings Signal

1. **"Red means STOP.** When big feelings show up, freeze your body like a statue.
2. **Yellow means BREATHE & THINK.** Take 3 slow breaths. Name the feeling ('I'm angry/nervous/sad'). Think of two choices.
3. **Green means CHOOSE & ACT.** Pick the helpful choice and try it —use kind words, ask for help, take a break, or squeeze a stress ball."

How to practice together:

1. **Play "traffic light":** Parent calls Red–Yellow–Green while the child practices stop → 3 breaths → a helpful action.
2. **Use it on small moments first** (toy trouble, turn-taking) so it's ready for bigger feelings later.
3. **Praise the process:** "I saw you stop, breathe, and choose—great self-control!"

The Body

Emotions are physical experiences which when triggered are felt in the body through a series of impulses sent by the brain. For example, when you feel nervous you may get cramps in the stomach or too much excitability and you feel butterflies. A sense of panic can make your legs feel like jelly or sadness may make you want to curl up and lie down in bed.

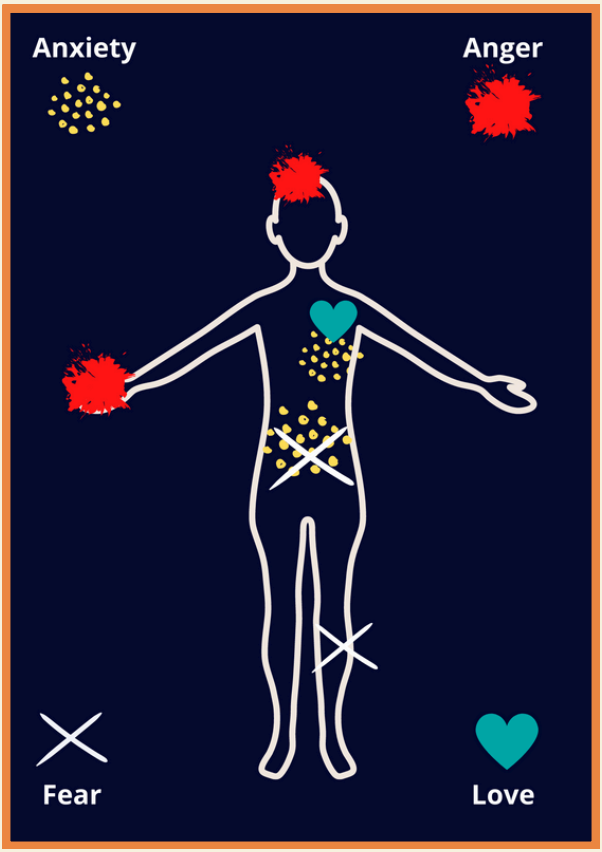
Think of this as the language of the body through which it communicates and the ability to understand this language is called interoception. Interoception helps you recognize that you may be hungry or thirsty, that you heart is beating faster, or what you are experiencing is a feeling of sadness or happiness or frustration.

Some children, especially those with sensory processing differences, may have difficulty with interoception. This can make emotional regulation challenging. For instance, a child might feel angry but not recognize the feeling, and as a result, be unable to talk about it. Similarly, a child may feel low or overwhelmed but not identify the cause, leading to an emotional outburst or shutdown.

An impaired sense of interoception makes self-regulation hard — because if a child cannot recognize what they're feeling in their body, they can't take steps to soothe or express it in healthy ways.

The recommended activity on this page called the 'feeling body' can help in building awareness of what may be happening inside the body. By pairing feelings with colours or patterns and guiding the child through this exercise you can help build their body-mind connection which plays a central role in self-regulation.

The Feeling Body



Directive: The Feeling Body

Materials:

Outline of a human body (printed or drawn)

Coloured pencils, markers, or crayons

Instructions:

1. Invite your child to take a few deep breaths and think about how they are feeling right now.
2. Ask them to choose colours or patterns to show where and how they feel different emotions in their body — for example, red for anger in the hands, blue for sadness in the chest, or yellow for happiness in the heart.
3. Encourage them to fill in the body outline with these colours, patterns, or shapes. There is no right or wrong way — each body map is unique.
4. Once complete, talk together about what they notice: "Where do you feel that emotion the most?" or "What helps when that part feels tight or heavy?"
5. End by inviting your child to take a slow breath and notice how their body feels now.

Purpose:

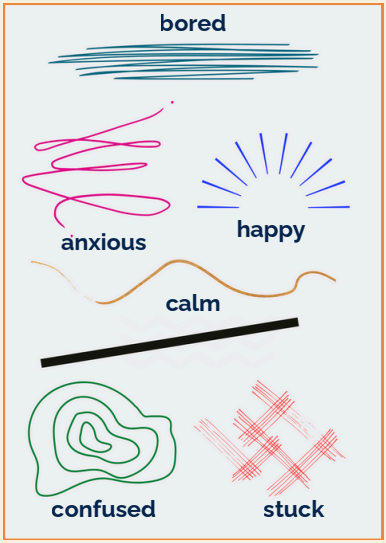
This activity helps children connect feelings with physical sensations, developing body awareness and the ability to identify and regulate emotions.

Doodle It

A line is a sequence of dots that are joined together and a doodle is the line that goes for a walk in all sorts of directions. On a serious note a doodle is a simple drawing that has a concrete representation or it may be a collection of random lines in which case it is called a scribble. **Lines can be drawn, scribbled or doodled in infinite ways and therefore can represent a variety of feelings.** For example, a curved line facing upward may suggest happiness, while the same line turned downward can reflect sadness. **The very act of creating — whether through doodling or scribbling — engages the emotional brain through its multi-sensory nature and offers a visual outlet for feelings that might otherwise be hard to put into words.**

Now that you have identified your child's WOT, provided them a vocabulary to name an emotion that they are experiencing and locate it on the body, encourage them to draw a feeling doodle or a scribble drawing. You can practice some breathing patterns before and after the activity.

Some types of doodles



Example of a doodle drawing depicting anxiety

Finally

Below are the directions for an activity called **"The Container."** It can be done after a doodle or scribble drawing to help hold unprocessed feelings — emotions that may not be ready to explore just yet, but can be safely returned to and understood later.

Steps:

1. **Begin with your drawing.** Look at your doodle or scribble and notice any feelings, thoughts, or memories that may have surfaced while making it.
2. Draw a container. This could be any shape that feels right to you — a box, jar, basket, or even a treasure chest. There's no right or wrong way.
3. **Place your feelings inside.** Imagine putting the feelings, images, or colors from your doodle into this container. You might draw them going in or simply visualize it.
4. **Seal your container.** Add a lid, lock, or cover — something that gives a sense of closure and safety. This symbolizes that your feelings are held and can be revisited when you're ready.
5. **Reflect.** Notice how your body feels after completing this step. You may want to add a few words, a title, or a date to mark the moment.

This activity helps children (and adults) create emotional distance in a safe way — acknowledging feelings without being overwhelmed by them, and knowing they can return to them when they feel ready.

I hope this little booklet gave you some simple, fun ways to help your child understand and express their feelings, grow their window of tolerance, and enjoy a few moments of real connection together.

References

- Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2011). The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind. Delacorte Press.

- Young, K. (n.d.). The House Model: A New Way to Think About Anxiety, Regulation, Relationships and Connection. HeySigmund.