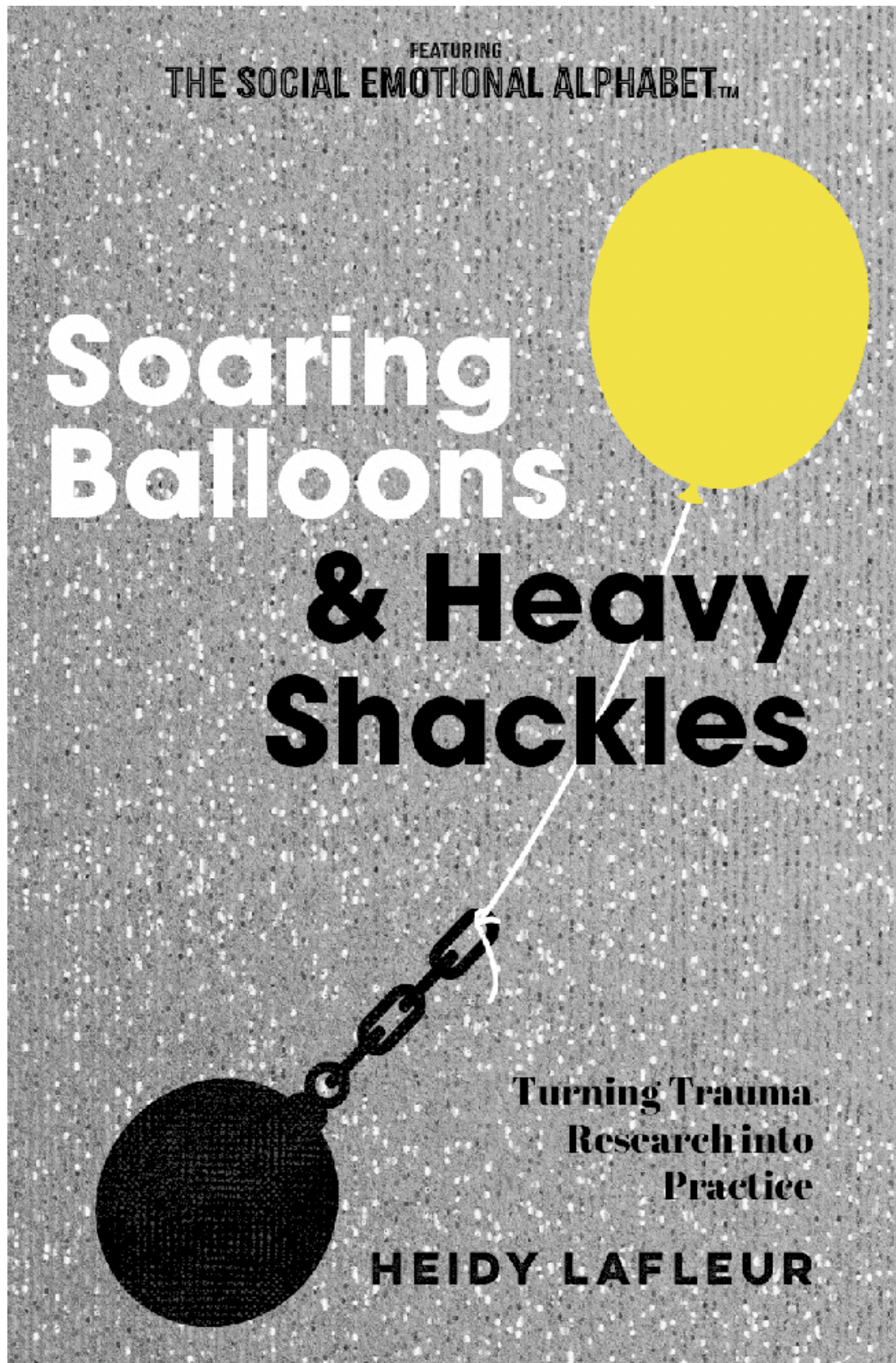


*SNEAK PEEK from Heidi!*



FEATURING  
THE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL ALPHABET™

**Soaring  
Balloons  
& Heavy  
Shackles**

**Turning Trauma  
Research into  
Practice**

**HEIDY LAFLEUR**

# *Soaring Balloons & Heavy Shackles*

TURNING TRAUMA RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

featuring

*The Social Emotional Alphabet™*

For Parents/Guardians...the first educators  
For Teachers/Coaches...the second educators  
For Society & Media...the mega influencers

*Heidy LaFleur*

# Heidy with a WHY, Inc.

## Mission Statement

The mission is to inspire a collective responsibility to cultivate confidence and success; especially for those who've been traumatized, are misunderstood and those who practice frequent detours from what's expected.

## Vision

Equip & support educators, parents & coaches with practical strategies to work through all behavior so everyone feels seen, heard, understood & validated.



Heidy offers a life-altering keynote, unbelievably engaging half day and full day workshops, real, relevant & solution-based behavior coaching, leadership development workshops that rumble with the elephants in the room, team building workshops for teams who are fiercely determined to be the difference, and social emotional learning curriculum to be used daily or as a solution to detention and in-school suspension.

# Testimonials

Heidy LaFleur's Social Emotional Alphabet stands out as a meticulously crafted resource that seamlessly integrates into our socio-emotional efforts. As an educational leader, I am particularly impressed with the program's alignment with the broader goals of social and emotional learning, a vital component of a well-rounded education.

The feedback from our teaching and support staff was overwhelmingly positive. From the beginning of the day until the completion of the alphabet, staff members were intently invested in Heidy's work. The ability to incorporate her experiences as a high school and collegiate athlete in conjunction with her family experiences, allowed the staff to not only feel the emotional stressors experience but more importantly understand how she personally dealt with each event. The teaching and support staff appreciate the program's practicality, engaging content, and the ease with which the alphabet can be integrated into lesson plans and the daily lives of the students. The acquired skills not only contribute to a positive school climate but also lay the foundation for future success, both academically and personally.

-Dr. Dan Mart, Chief Administrator - Prairie Lakes Area Education Agency  
(former Iowa Superintendent for 19 years)

The first five minutes of hearing Heidy speak with conviction and sharing her life's knowledge of social emotional health completely changed my perspective on SEL! You will not find a speaker with a deeper understanding of Social Emotional Health or how to personally address it. Her background story will floor you and within minutes, you will be taking notes as fast as you can knowing you might miss another important fact. Heidy will capture your attention, hold it to the end, and her words will resonate in your mind for months...and for those reasons, we immediately booked her to come and speak to our teachers! Putting Heidy in front of your staff is one of the best administrative decisions you can make and placing this book in their hands will be the second best decision!

-Brent Chrisman, Pearl City Elementary, Pearl City Illinois

Heidy is an incredible speaker, mother, administrator, and human. I have had the privilege of attending one of Heidy's in person workshops and was instantly drawn into her safe yet engaging energy. Heidy has a way of reaching your heart, providing you with interventions and techniques, shifting your perspective, and reminding you of your "why" all at once. Not only will The Social Emotional Alphabet be a guide in ways we can better help support our youth, it will also be the reminder we all need to remain compassionate and kind always, as we never know what someone is going through.

-Sarah Nauman, MEd, LCPC - Elementary School Counselor

I have had the opportunity to hear Heidi speak three times within the last two years. Each time has been some of the best learning I have been involved with. The practical strategies in the Social Emotional Alphabet work! Dealing with student behavior can be scary and difficult for teachers. However, by using these strategies, all educators will be well-equipped with tools that will help to form strong relationships with students, be well-informed about behavior, and develop empathy.

-John Zimmerman - Director of Teaching & Learning - Grant Wood Area Education Agency

With a smooth, seemingly effortless blend of research and personal/professional experience, Heidi achieves new heights with her book, *Soaring Balloons and Heavy Shackles*. In this new book, Heidi draws upon her wealth of pedagogical knowledge and firsthand experiences to provide the reader with practical and powerful, research-based strategies to aid with social-emotional instruction and trauma-informed care. Readers will learn novel and effective SEL strategies which will encourage self-reflection and will foster a greater understanding of the individuality of each child. It is a must-read for all educators.

- Matthew J. Bucholz, Elementary School Teacher

Heidi is both a dynamic author and speaker. In drawing from her own personal experiences, Heidi is able to communicate a message with substantial meaning that captivates both the reader and any audience she speaks to. She uses a simple, no-nonsense approach in providing all individuals in a school the tools and resources they need to build successful relationships with their students. The Social Emotional Alphabet can be implemented by anyone, in any school, with any demographics and lead to improved communication and better, more meaningful relationships with all students.

- Nick McLaughlin, Principal - St. Bede Academy

Heidi recently delivered a compelling and powerful keynote address to my client base of youth serving professionals. Her content was exceptionally well organized, actionable and realistic. Moreover, her story telling was truly captivating as she fearlessly told a difficult and emotional tale with grace, compassion and honesty. You could hear a pin drop and the audience was visibly and emotionally moved. Heidi keeps it real.

-Karen Baetzel, Senior Consultant, The Spectrum Group

In December 2021, I had the honor of listening to Heidi spread her impactful message while presenting on the Social Emotional Alphabet. Those memorable four hours resulted in laughs, tears, learning, aha moments, and reflection. It was then that I knew I had to read her book, *Those Kids Are OUR Kids*. After not being able to put the book down, I wanted my colleagues to get the "Heidi LaFleur Experience," too. In August of 2023, Heidi kicked off our school year with her keynote and two sessions: *Reacting vs. Responding to Behavior & Consequence vs. Punishment Mindset*. Fast forward to January 2024: Almost forty staff members have read Heidi's book, and we are in year two of learning, being mindful of, and practicing strategies from the Social Emotional Alphabet. Heidi is a familiar name in our building, and her work comes up often!

In a time where many educators are burnt out and behavior has escalated post pandemic, the Social Emotional Alphabet refreshes and inspires with strategies to keep at the forefront. The tips and suggestions are practical, easy to implement, and not “one more thing to do.” It reminds you of how trauma affects behavior at school and will bring perspective that will push your growth and understanding in supporting ALL students. The Social Emotional Alphabet should be a part of every educator’s practice!

-Jessica Lancaster, Middle School Instructional Coach

The first time I heard Heidy speak I was captivated by her truth. I immediately purchased her book. All of the pre-service teachers that go through my classes are introduced to the Social Emotional Alphabet. Heidy’s book, *Those Kids are Our Kids* is something we all read and discuss together. This is done while they are in the schools observing and can compare and contrast what they read and what they are seeing. I strongly feel her message and strategies need to be heard and put into practice. As a mother of four, I also utilized some of her strategies with my own children. They work!

-Christine Paske, School Health Coordinator and Instructor at SUNY Cortland Health Department

Heidy brings the trauma story to light by showing the ongoing emotional and behavioral struggles these students face while providing interventions that promote resilience and relationships. Heidy is real, unapologetic and brings both her educational and family experiences to deliver a new level of understanding and hope for all who are impacted by trauma.

-B DeVries, School Social Worker

Heidy's Social Emotional Alphabet is exactly what educators need as a guide to understand the needs behind the behaviors. It offers a fresh perspective on how to delve deeper, see beyond the moment, and truly understand how to create an environment that builds positive relationships with students. I love how straightforward and transparent Heidy is! Her passion shines through and through! This is a must read and must do to thrive as an educator!

-Erica Kirlin, Social Emotional Learning Coach

I have had the profound privilege of working with Heidy in Deerfield School District 109 as she was my supervisor in her role as Assistant Principal of Student Services. She is phenomenal in her craft and her knowledge base. Prior to Heidy joining our team, I was lucky enough to attend her professional development where I learned more than I ever have. Heidy just "gets it". Her understanding and support is unwavering. I always felt that Heidy's team approach, through each and every experience I had with her in 109. She was eager to jump in and help students be the best versions of themselves no matter their experience, backgrounds, or behaviors. She never lost hope and always saw the best in every single child. It was an honor to learn from her. I have taken so many of her strategies with me and continue to use them daily within my special education classroom. Trauma comes in many forms. Understanding the whole child and coming from a place of love is the "Heidy Way" and in my opinion, it is important for everyone to learn the strategies from Heidy's playbook!

As an educator deeply invested in the well-being and academic success of every child, I cannot recommend *Soaring Balloons & Heavy Shackles* highly enough. Heidi LaFleur does a magnificent job of capturing and guiding educators so they can learn and grow with their students' challenges. This book is a beacon of hope for educators, administrators, parents and anyone involved in the nurturing and education of children. In a world where trauma is far too prevalent, it's imperative that educators have the tools and understanding to support children who have experienced adversity, and who better than Heidi? This book doesn't just skim the surface; it delves deep into the science of trauma and its impact on the developing brain. What sets it apart is its unwavering commitment to turning this research into actionable strategies for the classroom and beyond. What stood out to me most about this book is the emphasis on collective responsibility. It takes a village and prioritizing a collaborative team approach is critical to the success of students who have experienced trauma. Through honest anecdotes and heartfelt narratives, Heidi uncovers the transformative power of a school culture that is grounded in empathy, understanding, and inclusivity.

Furthermore, *Soaring Balloons and Heavy Shackles* is practical in a field that is often abstract. The tangible strategies are realistic and help educators reflect on their current practices and empower them to implement meaningful change in their classrooms. Heidi's knowledge and overall experience within itself leaves educators with the tools they need to make a lasting difference. This read is a roadmap for transformative change within the educational system especially with the rising social emotional needs. If you are passionate about fostering a more inclusive, compassionate, and successful educational environment, Heidi's book is not just recommended—it is essential reading for all educators.

-Tracy Markin, Special Education Teacher

# Dedication

To my beautiful mother.  
I know you're here walking this with me.  
Until we meet again.  
I love you.



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# Introduction

## My Why

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I remember the day I found the drawing in my child's bedroom. I knew what we were going through at the time and the pain was fierce. I looked at the drawing and was blown away by the detail, the truth, and the raw feelings. My child was an amazing artist and would draw, paint and create many pieces that took my breath away, but this one hit me hard.

I asked my child to tell me about it. As a mom and educator I've learned that asking, not demanding or commanding things from kids works well, especially when emotional dysregulation is the norm. At first I was hit with silence. That's communication. Then I got, "No one was supposed to see that. I don't want to talk about it." That's communication. I knew that pressing was not going to Better the Ball, so I let it go.

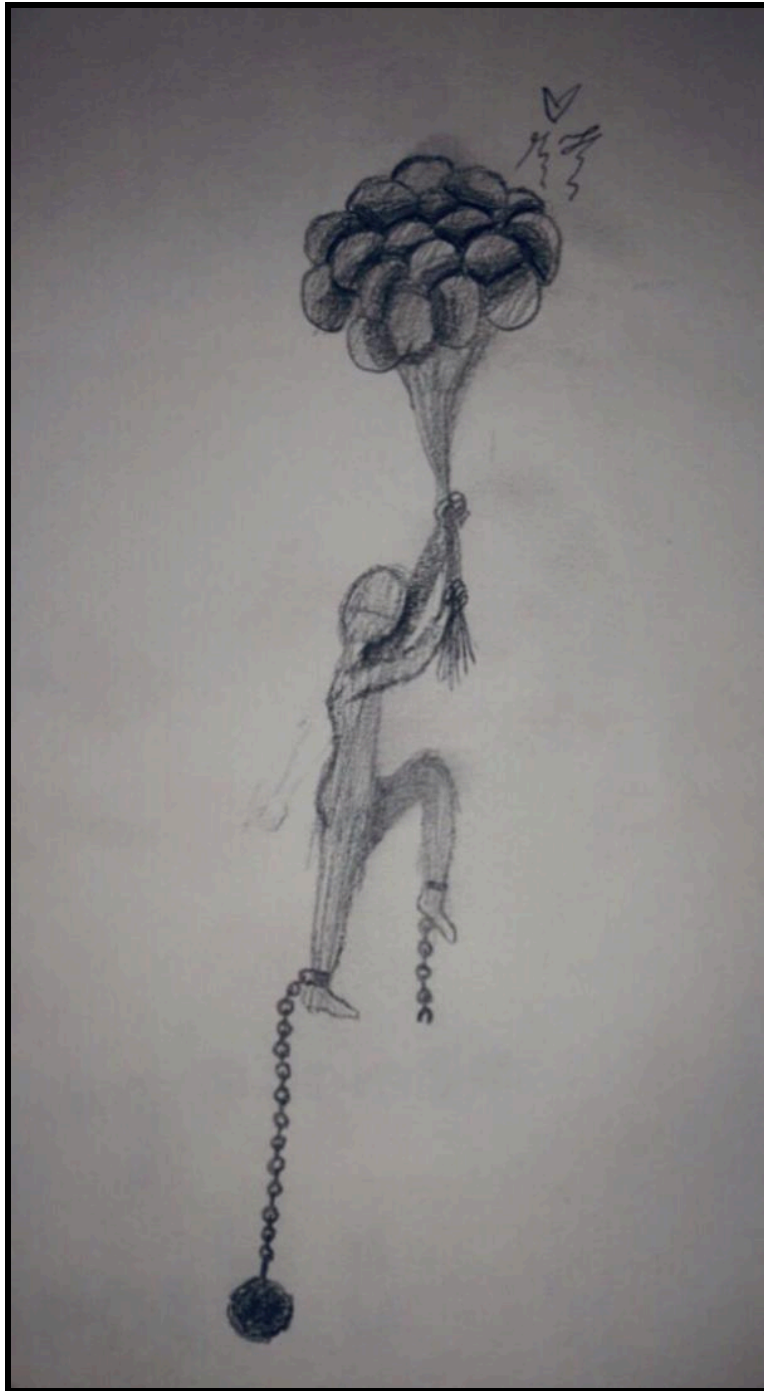
A few days later, when we were in a good place (self-regulated) I told my child that if they ever wanted to tell me about the drawing, I would love to hear about it because I thought it was one of the most life changing things I had ever seen. More communication in the form of silence. I set the drawing on the kitchen counter and again, let it go.

Some time had passed and my child said, "Do you really want to know about my drawing?" I told them that I did. My child said, "Mom, I'm a broken human being. I'm weighed down by everything that happened to me and I can't break free. I can't please my teachers or you or dad and I don't like myself. I'm broken." My child was 12 years old.

I shared that I believed all of their feelings and thanked them for telling me. I remember saying, "I too struggle in different ways living our trauma as your mom and that I also noticed something else in the drawing. I see the shackles you feel weighed down by and I also see a big bunch of beautiful balloons which tell me you want to soar." As my heart pounded and I held back tears, I said, "My job is to advocate for you, love you and help you learn to advocate for yourself because you are so amazing." That's when it all came together for me. My child's drawing is exactly what life and education is all about. Every interaction we have with our own children, our students, our athletes, our actors, our artists, etc, we either help them soar or add weight to their shackles. Over the past decade, I've researched and lived the trauma cycle and what it does to the brain, body and relationships. I believe Dr. Bessel van der Kolk summed it up best when introducing trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He said, "You see it. You feel it. But even more important, you behave like it. You automatically live out the trauma all of the time even though your environment is no longer traumatizing. What we need to focus on is how trauma changes your brain. You look at the world differently. You look at yourself

differently. You live in a different world from before. You live a very devastated internal landscape and world that not only impacts your traumatic triggers, but all the details of your life. Trauma changes your brain and gets you stuck in the past. It's a complex picture. Most people who learn to process these memories still have impaired connection with reality ” (van der Kolk *Understanding Trauma: Foundations*).

Everything in our lives will always be different, and I've accepted that. I've also accepted the opportunity our story has provided to help so many people never feel alone. The power we have to change lives every single day and my child's drawing have become the reasons I get out of bed each morning and share practical strategies to work with Those Kids who are OUR kids. Your awareness, attitude, & perspective of trauma majorly impact the healing of people every day. Know that what you do and what you say can and will guide others to reconnecting with some reality and help them soar, or stay connected to their past and continue to be weighed down. I present to you *Soaring Balloons & Heavy Shackles*.



*"The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed - to be seen, heard, and companioned exactly as it is."*

-Parker Palmer

# The Social Emotional Alphabet™

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The Social Emotional Alphabet™ was born when I was a principal and has since morphed into over 50 practical strategies for educators, parents, coaches, mentors and our society to guide all kids to success; especially those who've been traumatized, are misunderstood and those who take frequent detours from what's expected. Part of understanding The Social Emotional Alphabet™ is that success looks different for every child. For some, success is taking all AP classes and getting accepted into Harvard. For another it's graduating high school and moving on to become a mechanic, electrician or plumber. Others work their whole lives to earn an athletic scholarship and live the honor of being a student-athlete. Some find success staying alive in their own neighborhoods, working to put food on their tables or earning a GED. And yet for others, merely showing up to school is a win. Success is not a canned commodity, as it is personal. Success is figuring out inner peace, satisfaction and making a difference in the world how YOU see it. As educators, parents, coaches and mentors WE get to be a part of that and I don't believe there is anything better.

These tools of actions, words and body language are the missing pieces to raising OUR kids with integrity, perseverance, positive mental health and kindness. What you will learn in this book besides the ideas and techniques, is the growth mindset and perspective that must be in place to change behavior and persevere through the difficulties that come with the trauma cycle, dysregulation & mental health. The Social Emotional Alphabet™ breathes hope into adults who guide our kids to find the confidence to be mentally healthy, hard-working and productive members of our world and keep themselves sane in the process. It is important to realize that many adults in our world are struggling and surviving instead of thriving and therefore have difficulty bringing a solid foundation of social emotional learning to their children. Together, with the right attitude, we can change the world one kid at a time so they can grow up to do the same.

Winfrey shares, "Yet whether or not they are loved, every current and former newborn (that's you and me) shares one profoundly important trait. Despite the myriad of circumstances into which we were born, we come into the world with an innate sense of wholeness. We don't begin our lives by asking: Am I enough? Am I worthy? Am I deserving or lovable? Not one baby in the earliest moments of awareness asks, "Do I matter?" Their world is a place of wonder. But with their very first breaths, these tiny humans begin trying to make sense of their surroundings. Who will nurture and care for them? What will bring comfort? And for so many little ones, life begins to take its toll, with violent eruptions by the caregiver or simply the lack of a soothing voice or a gentle touch. In our first encounters, our human experiences diverge" (Perry and Winfrey *1/Making Sense of the World* 21).

As an educator, I know the importance of an awesome teacher, who understands that we work with human beings, not just students. I know the importance of an amazing teacher who understands that all kids come from different circumstances and levels of support. I know the importance of a true life-changing teacher who teaches kids, not curriculum. As a coach, it's about getting the kids to believe in each other, but first I knew I had to believe in them in order for that to happen. As an administrator, it was about leading and supporting others to success, celebrating others strengths and supporting their challenge, not managing that my teachers could only wear jeans on Fridays. But, it wasn't until I was a mother of a child who was diagnosed with PTSD, Major Depressive Disorder and Anxiety that *I felt* the difference people make in our lives. Often, we think we need to fix kids and that puts enormous stress on our backs. The truth is, we don't have to fix anyone. I can't fix my own child and it breaks my heart everyday. You can't fix kids either, but what we can do is live the Social Emotional Alphabet™ to give every kid the best possible chance to find happiness and success in this world. Dr. Bruce Perry shares, “In the wake of trauma, the hardest thing to understand is that nothing and no one can take away the pain. And yet that's exactly what we desperately want to do because we are social creatures, subject to emotional cognition, and when we're around people who are hurting, we hurt too” (Perry and Winfrey *7/Post-Traumatic Wisdom* 188).

As you know, teaching, learning, coaching and parenting don't come with a step-by-step handbook on what to say and what to do, especially when OUR kids show undesired behavior. Every interaction we have is crucial to their growth, especially when trauma is involved. ***Allow this book to guide you on your journey as you take care of OUR kids in whatever capacity you do so.***

My hope is that you love the contents of this book as much as I've loved writing it. Leave every person, conversation, circumstance and situation better than you found it. That's what The Social Emotional Alphabet™ is all about.

## *The Social Emotional Alphabet™*

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Acknowledge before Accusation</i></b></p> <p>Listen to understand the intent of behavior while using non-accusatory language. Every child needs validation through due process.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Nevertheless Negotiate</i></b></p> <p>Know when you can negotiate a situation with a student and when the situation calls for more help. Do they stay or do they go? Error on the side of keeping kids in class. Establish an understanding of safe vs. unsafe behavior.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Bonfire Behavior</i></b></p> <p>Take personal accountability that our Actions, Words &amp; Expressions affect the outcome of any situation. Better the Ball. Realize that the need for sensory input can be disguised as undesired behavior.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Open to Opposition</i></b></p> <p>Don't let behavior come as a surprise. Every behavior has a why. Work to discover it. There is a magic wand for tough behavior, but only if you want to see it &amp; realize behavior modification takes time.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Compassion before Curriculum</i></b></p> <p>Curriculum guides are a waste of words if compassion doesn't exist in our classrooms. Empathy. Social Emotional Skills. Compassion.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Practice Perspective</i></b></p> <p>Our personal realities become our lens to life. Learn about life from many points of view. Never stop growing as a human being.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Defiant vs. Deficient</i></b></p> <p>Work to understand and empower our deficiencies &amp; realize that when our stories aren't heard, many of us turn defiant. All emotions are ok. Punishment mindset is about adults. Consequence mindset is about kids.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Question then Quiet</i></b></p> <p>Build relationships by asking questions. Be curious &amp; interested in others' stories. Avoid power struggles at all costs.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Empower over Ego</i></b></p> <p>Be certain to include the entire team in training, personal growth &amp; expectations. It is a collective responsibility to raise our future.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Relationships before Rigor</i></b></p> <p>Genuine human connection builds relationships. We have the power to change the world by listening, empathizing and loving. Help others know they're not alone.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Feedback with Feeling</i></b></p> <p>Meet people where they are and provide uplifting &amp; encouraging feedback. Words matter. Strive for commitment over compliance.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Sorry so Sorry</i></b></p> <p>Realize we may be wrong &amp; apologize for it. It's powerful to show you're human.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Golden Greeting</i></b></p> <p>Use the look in your eyes, your facial expressions &amp; your heart to greet all people and never fear to take "academic minutes" to build human connections. Take advantage of every opportunity.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Tell Them your story</i></b></p> <p>Our stories are stepping stones to the success of others. It is critical to our growth &amp; the growth of others to share our stories. Adversity has no bias.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Hexagon of Hope</i></b></p> <p>Hope is the greatest gift we can give our children. Be the bridge to empower all kids to be proud of who they are. Advocate for every child.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Understand and Uplift</i></b></p> <p>Know that backpacks are filled with emotions, experiences, struggles and strengths, not just books. Yours included. Give them what they need. Give yourself grace.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Interest before Instruction</i></b></p> <p>Aim to know our kids' stories. Know them as people, not just students. Build trust before expecting them to listen to our instruction.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Value Vulnerability</i></b></p> <p>Empathy is understanding that a child may be stuck. Provide an opportunity for the child to be heard. Learn to empathize by connecting, acknowledging emotions and allowing another to communicate. Seek awareness of Mental Health.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Journey without Judgment</i></b></p> <p>Walk in others' shoes first before forming an opinion. Be curious instead of judgmental. Empathy vs. sympathy.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Wonder What happened</i></b></p> <p>Let go of saying, "What's wrong with you?" and replace it with, "What happened to you?" Behavior is communication.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Kindness for every Kid</i></b></p> <p>Recognize &amp; celebrate the strengths of EVERY child. Focus on how they're smart, not just how smart they are.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Xtra flexible</i></b></p> <p>This is how we've always done it needs to go bye-bye. Expected behavior must be taught.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>siLent Listening</i></b></p> <p>Listen to them. Focus on silence as you listen. Sometimes they just want to be heard.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Yes to Yet</i></b></p> <p>Open ourselves to growth every single day. The best is YET to come.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Meaningful Mission</i></b></p> <p>Take care of yourself. Strive for inner peace in all you do. Take care of each other. Pause, vent &amp; reset often.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Zilch Zero tolerance</i></b></p> <p>Every situation is different. Zero tolerance policies promote punitive mandatory punishments that do not teach appropriate behavior. Equality vs. Equity.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">©Heidy LaFleur</p>

## Part 1

# Better the Ball

I practice life by a few phrases that help me live my why and the first is Better the Ball. Better the Ball came from my high school volleyball coach, Tom Keating. He taught us that no matter how the ball comes to you, better it. Period. Don't waste time complaining about a shanked pass, instead run as fast as you can to get it up and to a hitter. BETTER THE BALL. Resist the temptation to complain about a tight set or one too far off of the net. Rather, get up in the air and take a smart swing to Better the Ball. When you take a smart swing, you better the setter, which betters the passer, which betters the entire team.

I've taken this phrase to every aspect of my life. *Better the* \_\_\_\_\_. Better the workout. Better the presentation. Better the relationship. Better the lesson. Better the person. You see, each of us is either a part of the problem or part of the solution in all we do, all we say and all we believe. Leave every person, conversation, and situation better than you found it. That's what it means to Better the Ball.

As a student-athlete, I knew the difference a coach who teaches and puts the growth of people first could make. I lived it on both sides. I had a volleyball coach in high school who taught us to Better the Ball and realize that it's not about the accolades we get individually. Instead, what we do to make each other better is what makes a dynamic and successful team. As head volleyball coach of Wahlert High School for 24 years, Tom Keating sits as the most decorated coach in Iowa history. With an overall record of 776-82, he led the Golden Eagles to 11 state titles, was ranked top 10 nationally ten times, was Iowa Coach of the Year seven times and twice named national coach of the year. He mentored one Olympic champion, four High School All-Americans and 31 Division I student-athletes came from his program. I was one of the lucky ones to be there, hear it, feel it and live it. It changed my life. That is the power we have as educators, coaches, parents and mentors. Why isn't every person's experience like this? Because not every educator, parent, coach or mentor has the knowledge, words, actions and tools to set the culture, climate and chemistry...until now.

As a student-athlete in college, I thought it was going to be more of Coach Keating. I was wrong, as I have been many times in my life. I thought all of my principals and superintendents would be like Coach Keating too. Wrong. What's interesting, though, is that I learned just as much from my college coach as I did from my high school coach. I learned what not to be. Again, that is the power we have in every interaction with every student we face. We either model how to be a part of the problem, or how to be a part of the solution.



Our kids need us to Better the Ball every day, especially those who've been traumatized, feel misunderstood and those who take frequent detours from what's expected. We need to teach our kids to Better the Ball for each other. Providing them with moments of nurturing, guidance and support from all of us will build confidence in our kids. "For individual human beings, moments are the thing. Moments are what we remember and what we cherish. Certainly we might celebrate achieving a goal, such as completing a marathon or landing a significant client, but the achievement is embedded in the moment" (Heath and Heath 2/*Thinking in Moments* 18). When you create moments to help kids know they matter, they are believed in and that making mistakes is part of the life journey, they will have the tools to go wherever they want to go and do whatever they want to do. Self-confidence is the number one factor of success, not a test score. Every interaction with our kids is a moment and every moment matters.

When we do things not just for ourselves, but for the betterment of others, we Better the Ball. By asking questions when we don't understand rather than judging others, we Better the Ball. When we recognize that mistakes are stepping stones, not stumbling blocks, we Better the Ball. When we take accountability that our Actions, Words and Expressions (AWE) make or break opportunities for our kids, we Better the Ball. When we give consequences that teach desired behavior, instead of punishments that expect desired behavior, we Better the Ball. When we live our lives knowing it's not about me, but what I can do for another, we Better the Ball. When we accept that we, nor the kids we serve are supposed to be perfect, we Better the Ball. When we realize that our job is not to fix kids, but instead guide them, we Better the Ball.

***In this book, you will find over 50 practical strategies*** to Better the Ball with every person you encounter regardless of age, background, behavior, eligibility status or socioeconomic situation. The Social Emotional Alphabet™ is a road map with suggestions on how to understand the why behind behavior, to learn more about what our kids need, recognize that all behavior is communication and gain tactics to be proactive rather than reactive. The key is to embrace our kids for who they are and what they bring. As we embrace them, guide them and love them for who they are, we realize that our job is to make EVERY day the BEST day for EVERY Child. For when we focus our efforts on that, we Better the Ball for all of us. Thank you for everything you do to see, support and love ~~THOSE~~, OUR kids.

Oh, one more thing...the strategies of The Social Emotional Alphabet™ work well with THOSE adults too!

## Part 2

# Reacting vs. Responding to Behavior

In our trauma-filled world, our kids want to be seen, heard, understood and validated as they communicate with us through behavior. Allowing our kids to have a voice produces desired behavior. When we shut it down, undesired behavior is the outcome...60 seconds is the difference. Know that **A**cknowledgement must come before **A**ccusation, **B**ehavior is a **B**onfire, **C**ompassion comes before **C**urriculum, kids need a **H**exagon of **H**ope & together, we must **P**ractise **P**erspective. Featuring *The Social Emotional Alphabet™* letters A, B, C, H, P

## Acknowledge before Accusation

Listen to understand the intent of behavior while using non-accusatory language. Every child needs validation through due process.



Often we find ourselves overwhelmed with behavior and accuse someone before acknowledging the truth. Getting to the truth can be difficult especially when dealing with kids who struggle with undesired behavior. When we feel frustrated, it's easy to accuse someone quickly and hastily write a referral, ground them, bench them or kick them out of your class. I challenge you to acknowledge every side of the story before handing out consequences. Validation is something we all search for.

For kids who have experienced trauma, the need for validation is tremendous. "When we go through trauma, our brains don't function like they normally do. We shift into survival mode. Like a deer in the headlights, our brains direct all our mental and physical energy toward dealing with the immediate threat until it's gone. In normal situations, this state fades over time. Trauma isn't just something we experience after being in a warzone or in a violent situation, we can be traumatized by our relationships. Sometimes, though, our initial trauma response sticks, making it difficult for us to function as we'd like. Trauma can change the way we think, feel, and act for a long time after the initial event. For many people, this could mean flashbacks or nightmares, a constant feeling of being on edge, loneliness, anger, intrusive thoughts and memories, self-destructive actions, and more. All these things are very normal responses to trauma, but they don't always go away on their own. The good news is that patterns that might seem permanent can actually be reversed--with the right approach and knowledge, you can shift your brain towards healing. However, it can be difficult to see a path forward without first understanding how and why these changes happen" (Smith *How does trauma affect the brain? - and what it means for you*).

When trauma occurs it is usually followed by lack of trust, heightened sense of threat from all places and

feelings of confusion. This is why acknowledging a situation before accusing people is imperative to validation and relationship building. One way we can do this is to provide due process. Allow every kid to tell their side of the story, regardless of what you already think you know, provide the opportunity for kids to be heard. We know that life isn't fair, but providing time for kids to tell their side of the story, however simple we may believe it is, provides equal opportunity and that's as fair as we can get. When people feel heard, there is a sense of calm and validation that comes. With calm and validation comes trust. With trust comes relationships that are needed for everything we do to raise positive and productive citizens of the world. We must Better the Ball. Dr. Bruce Perry shares, "What I've learned from talking to so many victims of traumatic events, abuse, or neglect is that after absorbing these painful experiences, the child begins to ache. A deep longing to feel needed, validated, and valued begins to take hold. As these children grow, they lack the ability to set a standard for what they deserve. And if that lack is not addressed, what often follows is a complicated, frustrating pattern of self-sabotage, violence, promiscuity, or addiction" (Perry and Winfrey *1/Making Sense of the World* 22).

Our Actions, Words and Expressions (AWE) are equally as important when providing due process or as Perry shares "a deep longing to feel needed, validated and valued". How we speak with kids, our proximity, body language and tone also send a message. The message is either, I want to hear you or hurry up and tell me what you need to tell me so I can move on with my day. When it comes to human behavior, we have two choices:

	<b>Intentional Goal #1</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Choice 1	Our goal is to help ourselves help others by realizing that with our AWE, we guide our interactions to the cortex in order to problem solve and have access to emotional, social and cognitive health.	I am with you. I am aware that behavior is communication and through my AWE, I want to help you through this behavior.	Growth in social emotional regulation and skills so we are available to learn.  Relief for adults & kids.
	<b>Intentional Goal #2</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Choice 2	Our goal is to stop bad behavior.	I am above you. I am in charge of you. I am unaware that there are physiological needs behind behavior.	Behavior comes back next hour, next day or next week. Behavior patterns continue with little to no growth in social emotional regulation.  Frustration for adults & kids.

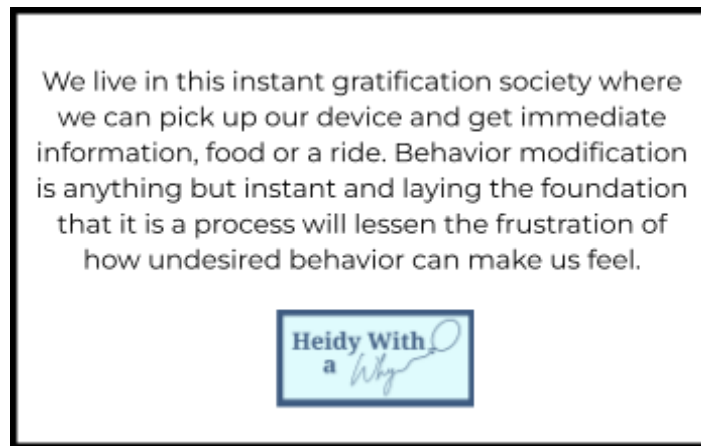
This story, taken from my book, *Those Kids are OUR Kids*, digs into the reason we must acknowledge before we accuse:

When my middle child was a freshman in high school, they were called to the dean's office and told to sit down. The dean said, "At this school, we respect security. Looks like this morning you didn't show respect to security and you need to apologize." My 14-year-old said their heart started to beat really fast and they felt angry because they didn't know what the dean was talking about. They told her that they weren't disrespectful to anyone that morning. The dean insisted they go out and apologize to the security guard. My freshman went into the hall and apologized to the security guard, but didn't know what for. The security guard said, "Wait. What? Are you in trouble? It wasn't you I was talking about." My child went back to the dean and was visibly upset by this situation. The dean asked how the apology went and they said fine. She said, "Well I don't think it went fine by the attitude you are showing." She then dismissed them from her office. When my kid left her office, they texted me in all caps (and we all know what that means) how angry they were because they felt they were yelled at and accused of something they didn't do. This triggered my child who was then set off by an adult who accused before acknowledging. We need the opposite. I called the dean to ask about the situation. She reminded me that she was the disciplinarian and she was here to help in any way that she could. I shared that I respect her position, but starting a conversation with accusing before acknowledging adds fuel to the fire. She shared that she looked into it more and found out that it wasn't my child and that it was a misunderstanding. Unfortunately, the damage was done. Traumatized kids are often misunderstood and take frequent detours from what is expected. They often struggle to regain regulation when Accusation comes before Acknowledgement. A child who has experienced trauma already has a backpack filled with anxious emotions and if the words and tone appear accusatory, it automatically adds fuel to any interaction. We don't want to add stress to the already compromised child and situation. To build relationships with kids, they need to feel that we are genuinely interested in hearing their story. That takes time, love, compassion and the perspective that building a trusting relationship with this child will certainly help them grow to be better. It takes guts as educators to look in the mirror and say, man, maybe it's something I am doing that is setting this kid off. Along with offering the child a chance to speak, carefully choosing our words determines how conversations will unfold with our kids. Think about how differently this could have been handled if the dean said, "Good morning! Hey who did you walk into school with this morning? Were there any issues with security?" Word choice is everything.

This is why we have to be regulated, as adults, before working through the behavior of another. Self-regulation means we have the ability to regulate our nervous system. If we aren't regulated, our AWE will come as angry, frustrated, burned out or annoyed which relays a message. However, as the adult in a stressful situation with a child, when we can take care of ourselves and self-regulate, we can now co-regulate. Co-regulation is a process that occurs when the adult provides a safe, nurturing and resourceful environment with boundaries and

guidance. It means that I (the adult) am regulated enough to help you (the student) become emotionally regulated. It's using a calm and soothing voice, acknowledging the child's emotions, sitting in silence if the child isn't able to share yet, inviting them to problem solve with you and asking questions instead of giving demands. The key is establishing an understanding that a process is something that takes modeling, practice, failure and time. We live in this instant gratification society where we can pick up our device and get immediate information, food or a ride. Behavior modification is anything but instant and laying the foundation that it is a process will lessen the frustration of how undesired behavior can make us feel. Co-regulation is your Actions, Words & Expressions (AWE). As has been quoted by so many, "There's not a human being in the world who calms down when someone tells them to calm down." I couldn't agree more. Every person wants to be seen, heard, understood and validated & the way we handle everyday situations can either make this happen, or trigger more undesired behavior.

The process of co-regulation provides predictability. Clear, simple & logical consequences are set together so there are no surprises. When communication occurs, we label emotions, not behavior, we model what we want to see, practice what we want to see and praise for self-care and self-regulation. We assist kids in



structure and rules and are no via undesired individuals. what we any sign of problem

solving, but allow discomfort to settle in because that's where learning happens. Dr. Lori Desautels's 4 Pillars of Applied Educational Neuroscience (Desautels *4 Pillars of Applied Educational Neuroscience*) is an awesome tool to simplify the true process of behavior regulation and modification. Let's break down her pillars to bring the research into practice:

Educator Nervous System	Co-Regulation	Touch Points	Language of the Nervous System
Behavior management is about adults. Our brains and bodies hold the state of our nervous system, and it takes a steady adult to settle another person.	Coregulation is our biological priority. Coregulation is at the heart of discipline protocols. When we share an emotionally available space and a trusting presence, people can borrow from our calm moments.	Touch points are micro-moments of connection that often occur through our facial expressions, tone, greetings, noticing, validation, and deep listening as we follow the person's agenda.	When we understand that behaviors are only signals addressing the dysregulation of the nervous system, we begin to feel empowered and relieved by the way we feel, think, and behave.

### **Putting the Research into Practice**

#### Goal: Self-Regulation Awareness

My emotions, thoughts & behaviors are in check so I can cope & manage daily life.

1. What are my triggers?
  - a. What puts me in a bad mood?
  - b. What in my life has been depleted and needs to be refilled?
  
2. What parts of the day do I feel the most regulated?
  - a. What is happening around me? Where am I and who am I with?
  - b. What parts of my day do I have control over modifying in order to gain more self-regulation?

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### **Putting the Research into Practice**

#### Goal: Co-Regulation

My nervous system is in a safe place in order for another to get to the same space.

1. Set the environment by focusing on empathy which provides calm and acceptance.
2. Bring curiosity instead of judgment.
3. Sit with the student and just be.
4. Your calm body will calm theirs. Your calm voice will help make theirs calm. Your movements will provide a model for their movements.
5. Help carry the “weight” of the emotions without absorbing their emotions.
6. Non-verbals carry more communication than we could ever imagine.
7. Know that this looks easy in theory, but it’s not. It takes a lot of practice so be sure to give the balance needed to fail, grow and learn.



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### **Putting the Research into Practice**

Goal: Controlling our AWE

I practice self-awareness knowing that my AWE impacts every interaction.

**Actions**- They watch every move we make. Show honesty, integrity, acceptance & kindness.

**Words**- They listen to our words, our tone, & our body language. Make every interaction count.

**Expressions**- They pick up on our eyes, our mouth & our self-control. Express wisely.

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### Putting the Research into Practice

Goal: Realize Behavior is Communication

Build relationships & practice coping strategies while regulated. Every interaction is a relationship-building opportunity.

1. Believe they are having a hard time, not giving you a hard time.
2. When regulated, show interest, show they matter to you, ask them about life outside of school, share yourself with them, assess their academic & emotional needs, practice coping skills...this builds trust.
3. If dysregulation continues, reflect on this question: How much time have I spent building trusting relationships outside of my classroom walls? The small moments are all we need and they add up.

Dr. Desautels shares, “This research helps us to understand that when we hold the sacred space of co-regulation for our children & youth, we are helping them, through the safety of our own regulated nervous system, to digest and integrate the dysregulating experiences they have amassed” (Desautels *A Pandemic Crisis Calls for a Re-Envisioning and an Opportunity in our Educational Systems* ix).

Overall, we respond to behavior instead of react to behavior and prepare to be as proactive as possible. Give them a voice. For when they are heard, they feel understood. For when they feel understood, they feel relieved. For when they feel relieved, they can move forward, absorb academics and Better the Ball.

## *Acknowledge before Accusation*

**V**alidate my feelings

**O**ptions please

**I**nclude me in decisions

**C**larify options & celebrate my strengths

**E**xercise understanding & empathy

*Heidy LaFleur*

## VALIDATION THROUGH VOICE

<b>VALIDATION THROUGH VOICE</b>	<b>Tell me more to help them soar...</b>	<b>What can I do to <i>Better the Ball?</i></b>
<b>V</b> Validate my feelings	All people want to be heard. Emotions can be validated without validating undesired behavior. All emotions are OK and teaching kids how to be angry, upset, etc. is part of the process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I can say, "It's ok to be angry, but it's not ok to throw a chair."</li> <li>● Provide options for what to do and where to go when one feels angry. Model &amp; practice.</li> </ul>
<b>O</b> Options please	Part of learning problem solving skills is to be a part of the process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be proactive &amp; share options with kids before they become dysregulated.</li> <li>● Before engaging and accusing a child, regulate your own emotions so you can acknowledge the child first.</li> </ul>
<b>I</b> Include me in decisions	Giving kids a voice allows for self-reflection and growth of coping skills to deal with undesired behavior. When someone feels heard, it changes the entire perspective and allows for justice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● For minor issues ask the student what they should get for a consequence.</li> <li>● Discuss options &amp; decide what will help shape behavior rather than expect a behavior change.</li> <li>● Remember, none of this can happen effectively if the adult isn't emotionally and physically regulated.</li> </ul>
<b>C</b> Clarify options & celebrate strengths	Every child has strengths. Recognize something they did well, even in a tough time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use phrases like,                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ I appreciate how you...</li> <li>○ I know it was hard to...</li> <li>○ Thank you for...</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>E</b> Exercise understanding & empathy	<p>We are all flawed and are works in progress. Before responding to unpleasant behavior, remember to give yourself 60 seconds to gather your thoughts and realize your words and actions can trigger behavior.</p> <p>Self-regulation is key to problem solving with kids and building solid and trusting relationships.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Instead of saying, "What did you do?", say, "I want to hear your side. Can you tell me what happened?"</li> <li>● Co-regulate before offering due process in order to build trusting relationships.</li> </ul>

# A

## Acknowledge before Accusation

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*I can't change where I come from or what I've been through, so why should I be ashamed of what makes me, me?*

— Angela Thomas, The Hate U Give