

# Introduction for Parents and Teachers

Children with social disabilities, including Asperger Syndrome and autism spectrum disorders (ASD), struggle to understand their own and other people's feelings.

Because they don't **catch on** to the clues by which most people learn about each other in ordinary social interactions, they often suffer dire consequences of rejection, confusion and loneliness.

One of the major difficulties for such children – and one which this book hopes to help improve – is that their emotions have only an **ON** or an **OFF** switch. They either don't express their feelings at all or they react with an intensity far beyond what the actual situation would indicate.

The parents and professionals who work with these children – teachers, psychologists, social workers, speech-language therapists, occupational therapists (OTs), psychiatrists and many others – want to help them learn to **modulate their feelings**, to teach them how **gradations of expression** – from mild to intense – will work for them in which situations. In other words, the goal is to give them some tools with which they can learn the clues, recognize their own slide toward inappropriate responses, and master appropriate interactions with others that will be more realistically geared to work and play during the real-life situations in which they must function.

As they emerge from the cocoon of early childhood, children with these challenges simply do not have in their emotional tool-boxes the means to differentiate between **little feelings** – like annoyance about a missing toy – **medium feelings** – like some anger felt when others don't do what they want – or **big feelings** of frustration when a toy breaks and it can't be fixed. Parents, and professionals, are increasingly gaining new knowledge of techniques and processes to help children develop individual strategies to deal with feelings that in some instances seem to escalate from zero to 100 miles an hour in a few seconds.

Among these techniques, this book uses **gradated color cues** to match the *gradation of expression* being taught and **visual images** that coordinate with each emotion so that the child has a **visual reminder** of the feeling that will work for him in social situations or in the classroom. An especially helpful addition is the **fully interactive and customizable examples of emotional triggers and appropriate responses** that can be written in with a dry-erase marker, wiped off with a paper towel and changed as the needs of the child change.

# How This Book Is Structured

This book is designed as a teaching tool for parents, teachers and others to use when working directly with a child. The goal is eventually to enable the child to internalize the lessons taught about feelings and use the book independently to check his or her responses.

## Form & Function of Each Two-Page Spread:

**Little-to-Big Pyramid**

**Color-Coded Emotion**

**Cartoon Face Reminder**

**Small, Medium & Big Emotional Triggers with Color-Coded Intensity Level**

**Corresponding Appropriate Responses with Color-Coded Intensity Level**

## Some Key Points:

**CUES – Colors** identify each emotion – blue for sad, red for angry, and so on. **Cartoon Faces** identify the sad, angry, calm, happy feelings, and the **Little-to-Big Pyramid** reflects the levels of emotional intensity.

**THREE SIMPLE WORDS – Little, Medium and Big** – are used to demonstrate different levels of feeling, and these levels are **color-coded** with lighter to darker colors to match the appropriate intensity of feeling in given situations.

### **LEFT-HAND PAGES LIST EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS**

– For each feeling a left-hand page sets up possible situations that would evoke each level of feeling. For example, on the **SAD** left page are examples of **LITTLE** triggers that might come up when toys are misplaced or friends don't want to play. Next, examples of **MEDIUM** triggers might include a child finds that her mother is not home when she expected her to be, or the child is being punished for doing something wrong. The **BIG** feelings might be experienced when the child falls and is hurt or a best friend moves away.

### **RIGHT-HAND PAGES LIST CORRESPONDING APPROPRIATE RESPONSES**

– The right-hand page, facing these hypothetical trigger situations with their recognizable colors and by-now-familiar cartoon faces, tells the child what to do at each level of feeling, **starting with taking three slow, deep breaths, and then beginning an action program** at each level of intensity.

For the **LITTLE** feelings, the child could try to find the missing toy or turn to another activity like reading a favorite story book; for the **MEDIUM** feelings, the child could ask someone to help; and for the **BIG** feelings, such as losing a best friend, she could try to lessen the loss by writing a letter to the friend.

**THE LITTLE-TO-BIG PYRAMID** – Each left-hand page contains a pyramid graphic that the child can use to point out exactly how he feels. The graphic uses the same **color gradation cues** and **three simple words** – **LITTLE, MEDIUM, BIG** – to categorize and help identify the intensity of the feeling.

### **BLANK SPACES FOR MEANINGFUL CUSTOMIZATION**

– Blank spaces have been left among the hypothetical emotion-evoking situations and corresponding responses so that experiences specific to each can be inserted for a given child. Situations that relate directly to the child's own life and times are the most meaningful. Write in triggers and appropriate responses using a fine-tip, dry-erase marker and wipe with a paper towel and update as the child's needs change. A goal would be that the child learns a pattern in his own triggers and corresponding responses. This is a beginning step on the road to independently learning his emotions and responses. Furthermore, the child can refer back to the book as a reminder.

**SENSORY STRATEGIES** – Certain sensory activities and manipulatives, such as squeezing a ball, swinging, or deep hugs, help to calm children. These sensory strategies can sometimes be used as the appropriate response to a triggered emotion to initially calm the child. In many instances, the advice and guidance of an OT is recommended.

As the sensory strategies are child-specific, we recommend that the parent, teacher or OT working with a child write them in as responses when appropriate. It is important to keep in mind that the sensory strategy chosen should be one the child can access independently in a variety of settings. A deep hug is something one can give oneself; a squeeze ball is something a child can carry in his pocket, but a swing is not always readily available.

## How to Use This Book

Before parents and other adults use this book with children, a series of preparatory steps and considerations are necessary.

**PICK A CALM TIME** to begin teaching. It is assumed that the child either already has an ability to identify emotions from pictures or faces or has the capacity to learn how to do this. If it is necessary to teach the child how to link the faces with a specific feeling, keep in mind that the goal is *for the child to eventually use the book himself – to identify his feelings and to get guidance and remind himself of the correct strategy for handling the feeling.*

**REFER TO THE BOOK** – the parent, teacher or other professional begins by referring to the book to show what the emotion looks like – what color it is, what sort of face expresses it – and describing what the emotion might feel like in our bodies. This could be a stomachache (**WORRIED**), tears (**SAD**) or a big grin (**HAPPY**).

**SHOW THE CHILD** some visualization of the three sizes of feelings – **SMALL, MEDIUM, BIG** – and discuss what kinds of situations might evoke all three sizes at different times. It is important to identify and add to the list situations that are specific to the child's own life and experience.

As a visual reminder, you may also consider developing a triangle scale of emotions pendant to wear on a lanyard around your neck. When examples of emotions and their intensity arise in everyday life, prompt the child to use the

appropriate degree of response by pointing to the corresponding area on the pendant. Having the visual available throughout the day can help teach the concept in a natural setting.

**AFTER A PATTERN OF RECOGNITION** has been established, turn to the issue of coping strategies, as outlined on the right-hand facing page for each emotion. It is often helpful if the adult models her own emotions. The adult would spell out her thinking process and point to the corresponding **SMALL, MEDIUM, BIG** response. Then, the adult can take some steps to *make the response fit* the problem that she is sharing with the child. For example, "Oh no, I spilled some milk. I feel a little frustrated, but I think this could be fixed. I can wipe up the milk and try again."

**COMFORT ZONE** – Teach the child that getting to the *right fit* – making the response the *right size* for the problem – can help create a comfort zone for the child in interactions with peers or adults. For example, if the problem the child is confronting would appropriately evoke a **MEDIUM**-sized response and he is able to identify that, instead of wearing a too **BIG** emotional overcoat, he will pick an appropriate, **MEDIUM**-sized response, which fits more comfortably into social interactions.

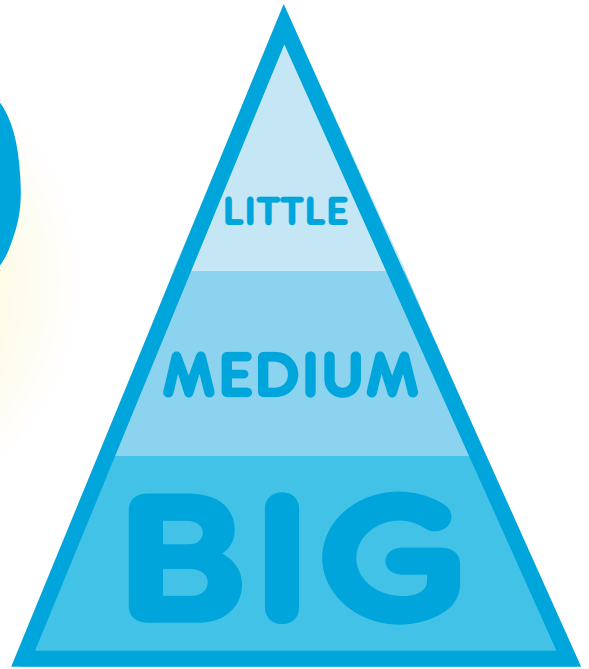
**HOME-SCHOOL COLLABORATION** – In piloting this method of teaching, we found that a significant factor in the success of the program was the ongoing collaboration between home and school. If a parent teaches a specific emotion with corresponding responses at home, this should be communicated to the teacher. The teacher can then address the emotion as it arises in school and social settings. Conversely, if a teacher introduces an emotion in school, this should be communicated to the parent. This allows for repeated reinforcement of concepts, and most important, fosters generalization. The child will learn that **LITTLE**,

**MEDIUM** and **BIG** emotions occur in many situations and how the concepts apply. We have included a tear-off pad at the back of the book as one way of communicating between settings. E-mail and the child's communication book are additional ways of keeping both settings up to date on the emotion of the day, week or month. The pad may also be used by the parent to keep track of situations during family life and discuss them with the child at an appropriate time. Some children may want to use the form independently to record their emotions and responses. They could be "emotion detectives" searching for a particular emotional level in their day.

### **SOME ADDITIONAL TIPS**

- **TEACH** one feeling at a time.
- **SHOW** the child only one level at a time and **SCAN** to the corresponding strategy.
- **HIGHLIGHT IN DISCUSSION** where a range of feelings occurred in the adult's life or the child. Then **NOTE WHICH STRATEGY WAS USED** and how it worked, or didn't work.
- **BIG WORRIED FEELING** – We have intentionally left out an example under **BIG** in the **WORRIED** section. Examples would be a parent is very sick, or a parent or grandparent dies. These were left out as some children tend to perseverate on ideas, and we did not want to introduce something that could increase the child's fears and worries. However, should a **BIG** worry occur in a child's life, this can be added in the blank spaces with the corresponding response.

How  
**SAD**  
am I?



## THINGS THAT MAKE ME FEEL **SAD** . . .

LITTLE

1. I cannot find *my* toy.
2. My friends can't play with me.
3. \_\_\_\_\_.
4. \_\_\_\_\_.

MEDIUM

5. Mom's not home and I want her to help me.
6. Being punished for doing something wrong.
7. \_\_\_\_\_.
8. \_\_\_\_\_.

BIG

9. I scrape *my* knee or get hurt.
10. My best friend *moves* away.
11. \_\_\_\_\_.
12. \_\_\_\_\_.

# SAD



SAD

I feel **SAD**, what should I do?

WHEN I AM **SAD**, I CAN TAKE 3 SLOW, DEEP BREATHS AND . . .

LITTLE

1. Try to find my missing toy.
2. Read my favorite story book.
3. \_\_\_\_\_.
4. \_\_\_\_\_.

MEDIUM

5. Ask someone else to help me.
6. Give myself a strong hug. **SAY:** "It's okay that I made a mistake. I'll try to do better next time."
7. \_\_\_\_\_.
8. \_\_\_\_\_.

BIG

9. Ask for help.
10. Write a letter to my friend.
11. \_\_\_\_\_.
12. \_\_\_\_\_.



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