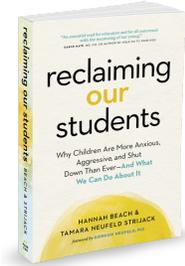




Room Required – Feelings Getting too Big: The importance of making space for teens’ thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

by Hannah Beach | Mar 1, 2021 | Emotional Health, Emotional Release, Expression, Feelings, Hands-on Activities | 0 comments





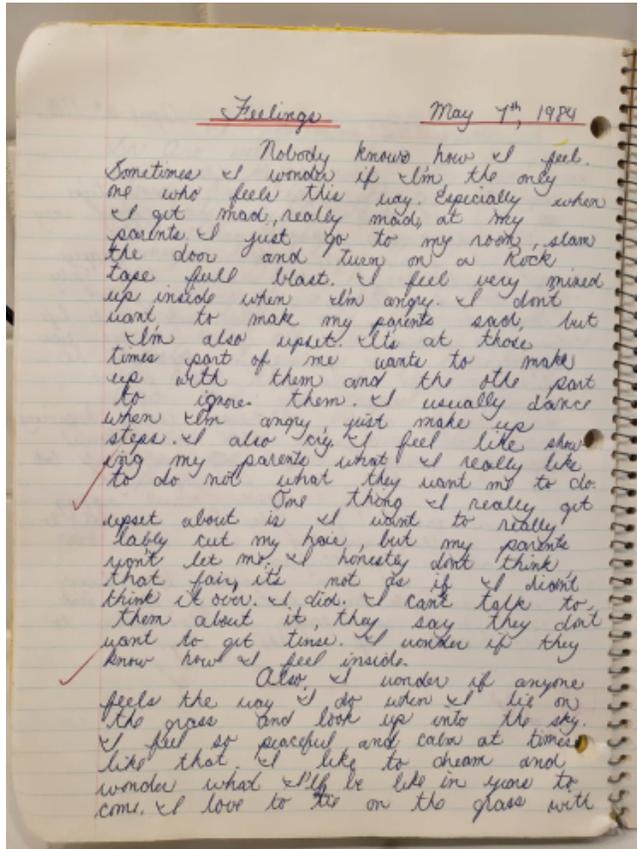
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My elderly parents are currently clearing out their house and, in the process, they found an old Creative Writing scribbler of mine from grade 7. This week I sat down and re-visited my 12-year-old self. What a gift it was to read back through my thoughts, feelings and stories from that age. It was especially interesting for me, as I have a child of this age right now. Having a window into my own internal world at the age of 12, was such a helpful reminder of how much is stirred up within our young as they embark on the transition to adulthood.

From the outside, it might look like an insignificant little scribbler, but as I read through the pages, I could see how consciously my teacher provided us with meaningful prompts to help us discover more of who we were and have a safe space in which we could express ourselves. This wasn't just 'an old scribbler' – this little book held so much of me in it. And looking at it now through the

lens of an adult, I am reminded of how vital it is that we make room for our adolescents' thoughts, feelings, ideas and opinions to percolate, be felt, and be expressed.

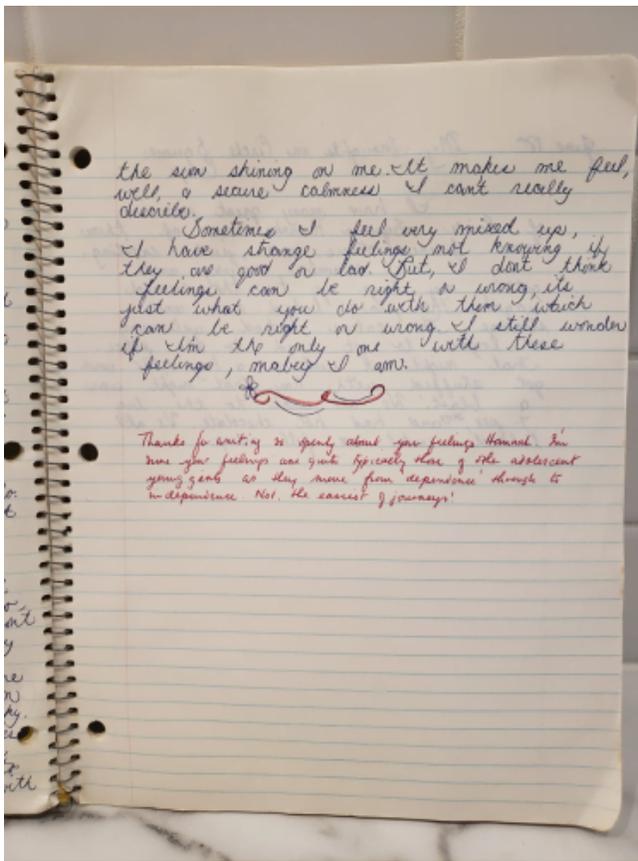
Below is my grade 7 Creative Writing Journal entry that responds to the prompt "Feelings". (So funny reading back on when I was mad, and would slam a door, and listen to rock tapes! Oh, the Eighties ...)



**Feelings- May 7,
1984**

Nobody knows how I feel. Sometimes I wonder if I'm the only one who feels this way. Especially when I get mad, really mad, at my parents I just go to my room, slam the door and turn on a Rock tape full blast. I feel very mixed up inside when I'm angry. I don't want to make my parents sad, but I'm also upset. It's at those times part of me wants to make up with them and the other part to ignore them. I usually dance when I'm angry, just make up steps. I also cry. I feel like showing my parents what I really like to do not what they want me to do. One thing I really get upset about is I want to really badly cut my hair, but my parents won't let me. I honestly don't think that's fair, it's not fair if I don't think it over. I did. I can't talk to them about it, they say they don't want to get tense. I wonder if they know how I feel inside. Also, I wonder if anyone feels the way I do when I lie on the grass and look up into the sky. I feel so peaceful and calm at times like that. I like to dream and wonder what it'll be like in years to come. I love to lie on the grass with

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a secure calmness I can't really describe.

Sometimes I feel very mixed up, I have strange feelings not knowing if they are good or bad. But, I don't think feelings can be right or wrong, it's just what you do with them which can be right or wrong. I still wonder if I'm the only one with these feelings, maybe I am.

Teachers response:

Thanks for writing so openly about your feelings Hannah. I'm sure your feelings are quite typically those of other adolescent young girls as they move from dependence through to independence. Not, the easiest of journeys!

Having 'mixed-up' feelings at this age is not only normal, it's healthy.

When I re-read my journal entry, I see a girl who was mixed up about her feelings – which is exactly how it should be at this age. As we emotionally develop and mature, we start to hold many different and often opposing feelings at once. *(I want to express myself but I also don't want to hurt my parents' feelings.)*

Having opposite feelings and being mixed-up about how one feels might be worrying to a young person, as all of this is so new to them. I often reassure the young people who come to me worried that their feelings are all over the place, that not only is

this normal, but it is wonderful! It is a sign of emotional health and development ... it means that they are on the way to becoming adults. It means that they are exploring both sides of things and different perspectives and although this can feel all jumbled up inside of them, this is part of the process of becoming an empathic adult.

[Read more about how to make room for expression.](#)

Wanting to do things 'their own way' is part of figuring out who they are, it's not personal.

And in reading back, I also see a girl who wants to do things her own way, apart from what her parents want. (*I badly want to cut my hair, but my parents don't want me to.*) This is part of the individuation process and the journey to adulthood. We see this emergent energy in toddlers when they express 'I want to do it *myself*.' This energy re-emerges in adolescence but comes out as 'I want to do it *my way*.' This key period of development is the time when youth typically feel propelled to discover their unique self; who they are outside of others. Who am I? What do I think, feel, want?

There is not always an invitation or room for our young to express themselves and therefore, sometimes their thoughts and feelings can come out quite forcefully. And as their awareness of self is new, budding, and fragile, it may feel to them as if this new self of theirs may not take hold if they don't push or stand strong.

This can be challenging for those of us that share our lives with teens, especially if they yell their opinions, slam doors, or burst into tears of frustration because they don't have words for all that is bubbling inside of them. We may feel at a loss.

It can help us if we can remember that kids of this age are desperately trying to discover who they are. And in those moments where they don't share it as gently and eloquently as we may wish, it is not the time to teach a lesson. We can try to see what is behind the behavior, see a young person yearning to find out who they are and struggling to express this. (Sure, we might wish to address HOW it was expressed at a later time, but in that moment of intense feeling, it can help to just gently provide room for expression.)

It can also help if we remember that the journey to adulthood often includes trying out different 'selves.' This might mean wanting to do things differently than those around them or

experimenting with how one looks. We may see new haircuts, hair colors, different styles of clothing being worn – and all of this is healthy. Kids will often try many things, and ways of being in the world, before they land on what feels like them.



Adolescence is typically the first time kids dive into their internal world, it's normal to wonder if they are the 'only one.'

And finally, in reading back on my journal, I see a girl who is wondering if she is the only one who feels this way. As adolescence is typically the first time we dive into our internal world, kids often wonder if they are the only ones experiencing such intense feelings. (*Nobody knows how I feel. Am I the only one who feels...?*)

Dr. Gordon Neufeld* points out that it is in adolescence that children often become introspective for the first time. In childhood they are living the experience of their lives, without typically being reflective about it. But in adolescence, youth visit their inner selves in a more reflective way for the first time. And in doing so, a new sense of self-consciousness arises. This can feel both good and bad (Yikes! Everyone is staring at me!) but along with that also comes a new awareness of their inner world. Who am I outside of everyone else? What do I think and feel? And, am I the only one who feels this way?

These new feelings can be alarming, but also exciting. Budding adolescents and teens are often filled with the raw energy of hope, longing, worry, alarm, and self-consciousness, swirling alongside the excitement of discovering their unique place in the world. This period of life is not typically an easy time, but oh, such an important time in one's life.

Educators play an important role in providing a

space for ‘percolation and expression of self.’

Teachers play a crucial role in providing an important space for ‘percolation and expression’. When youth are given the time and space to explore the richness of their inner world, it can lower their alarm, decrease frustration and support them on their journey into adulthood. I am so grateful to have had Mr. Guilfoyle (my grade 7 teacher) provide a space in which I could visit what was inside of me, and share it.

There are many ways to support youth in discovering and expressing themselves. Whether we gather outside in nature where their walls may more naturally come down, or we hold safe spaces in which they can dance, sing, write, compose or create – what we need to remember is that kids need a safe space to feel their emotions. And our culture isn’t taking care of this in the ways it used to. Many of our young have no ‘void’ moments left, no empty moments of nothingness in which their feelings would arise. Many of them (us included!) are inundated with constant stimuli and have little space for wonder or expression. And this does not bode well for their emotional health nor support them on their journey towards independence.

So, what can we do?

Like I said above, there are many different ways to create this space for youth. Each of us will do what works for us as educators, for the students whom we work with, and according to our own natural inclinations and resources.



Journaling (like my Creative Writing Scribbler above) is one way for youth to reflect on and express their feelings. While some students feel really comfortable expressing themselves physically or in front of others, others prefer the intimate nature of being able to express their feelings on paper that is only seen by themselves or the teacher. Journaling does not only mean writing

—we can expand our students' journaling reflections by supporting them in discovering other ways to journal. In my [Inside-Out Companion guide](#) that comes free with our book, we provide various journaling tips, prompts and ideas. I thought it might be helpful to include one of them from our Guide here.

Journaling:

What age groups does this work for?

This is a great activity for students ages twelve to eighteen.

What do you need to make it happen?

A journal per student—this could be a simple notebook, or you could even have students make their own journals out of paper with creative covers. For the extended journaling exercise described

below, you will need:

- crayons/pencil crayons/markers for each student
- a selection of magazines
- scissors for each student
- glue for each student

You also need to play background music as music will help to hold the space as well as support the students to fall more readily into their feelings. I recommend music that is gentle yet rousing. (Here's a suggestion.)

Title: "Night Sky"

Artist: Tracey Chattaway

Album: Night Sky

How do you do it?

Journaling in the classroom is an activity that requires structure and ritual. It should be done in repeated sessions over time. Before incorporating journaling into your classroom, you should:

- introduce the idea to your students
- tell your students how often they will journal in the classroom

It is also important to set clear expectations for the students as to whether their journal entries will be completely private or if they will be shared with you. If the journals are going to be read by you, then you need to make this clear to your students. One idea is to let your students know that they can write DNR (for “do not read”) on the top right corner of any page they do not want you to read. When you see those letters, you will skip that page. If you are not going to read their journal entries, then it is important to stick to that promise. Also make sure you provide a safe, secure place to lock up everyone’s journals when they are not in use, so students can trust their privacy is protected.

Do not allow students to take their journals home or store them in their lockers and bring them back and forth to class. This is to protect their emotional safety. Because you have set a tone for safety during the journal time by prompting them with questions and playing music, the students may end up writing things that could be quite private in nature. You need to make sure that this privacy is protected as much as possible. If a journal is seen in someone’s locker, it is possible that other students might think it is funny to grab it, read it, pass it on . . . To lessen this likelihood, keep the journals locked in your classroom and return them on the last day of class. Hand them each back sealed in a manila envelope, and explain why to the students. (“I put your journal in an envelope so that if others see the envelope they will probably not ask you any questions about it, as it will look like forms or handouts. It will not be obvious that it is a journal.”) Then suggest they put that envelope right into their backpacks to bring home.

Once you have set a clear structure, commence each journaling session by providing a clear prompt for each journal entry. Tell your students that they can write about anything they like, but that they can use your prompt as a way to get started. Staring at a blank page with no prompt for how to begin can be intimidating. Prompts can support students to start the reflection process.

Some prompts for journal entries include:

- I feel [name a feeling or emotion here—frustrated, sad, happy] when . . .
- I hate it when . . .
- Things that bug me are . . .
- I love . . .
- Things that make me happy are . . .
- Inside of me is . . .
- I wish . . .
- If I was magic, I would . . .
- If I could change the world, what I would do is . . .

Extending this activity

We can expand our students'



journaling reflections by supporting them to discover other ways to journal. It doesn't just have to be about writing! And putting out art supplies can help teens feel at ease. It invites imagination, creativity and playfulness.

- Hold a colouring session. For this journal entry, each student uses only crayons. This can be quite relaxing for many teens, as it reduces the pressure to be neat and tidy. Using a crayon may also change how they write, the size of their letters, and what they write or doodle about.
- Expressing feelings and ideas through collage. For this exercise, provide a prompt for the journaling session, but have your students share their feelings and ideas through collage, using images cut from old magazines or even torn out by hand. Make sure to have many different kinds of magazines—not just fashion magazines.

Helpful tips

It is helpful to turn off all bright lights, close the curtains, or dim the lights to create a gentler, warmer atmosphere.

*Neufeld, G., Making Sense of Adolescence course ([Neufeld Institute](#), Vancouver BC, 2015).

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