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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *The Emotionally Connected Classroom* by Bill Adair. In this introduction, learn about the effects of emotions on the adolescent brain, especially those caused by the social and academic challenges students face in schools. Use this introduction to start your journey toward understanding education's role in the mental health of students.

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# Introduction

*Every child wants to belong.*

*Every child wants to contribute.*

*Every child wants to learn.*

*Children want to be their best.*

These authentic truths liberate students from stereotypes and reputations that negatively define them. They inspire hope for teachers that there is something positive and beautiful to strive for within every child. Compassion and understanding open the door for new beginnings.

## THE PURSUIT OF AUTHENTIC REWARD

All children want to be happy and experience a joyful life. Many just don't know what that looks like, where to find it, or how to embrace it as their own. Children want experiences that make them feel good, but all too often they find their endeavors emotionally muted and less than satisfying. A mountain of texts and tweets smothers warm encounters with those they love. Confusion and anxiety rise as media pressures to be someone they are not begin to dominate their thoughts. Ultrasafe environments created by loving but fearful parents limit purposeful challenge and learning. Isolating technological obsessions replace casual meetings and memories made with multiple friends at the park. The pressures of a disconnected inauthentic world have slowly eroded nature's plan for what it means to be a child.

*In the absence of authentic healthy connections, attachments to unhealthy ones are almost a certainty.*

For the child lacking authentic connections and feel-good rewards, an unhealthy emotional payoff is more attractive than no payoff at all. This opens the door to dysfunctional behaviors and beliefs that incite anger, guilt, shame, or feelings of

“less than.” The downward spiral continues as they bring their anxiety to school only to be tested, judged, and still meet expectations for optimal performance and learning. This can be a monumental task for a child more concerned about simply surviving an anxious existence.

*At some point, a diagnosable mental health issue will emerge for about 25% of students.*  
(Merikangas, 2010)

Most experienced teachers willingly share their belief that the classroom is a much more challenging and complex environment than it once was. As the number of chronically dysfunctional or “identified” children on class lists soars, compassion collides with stress as overwhelmed teachers struggle to meet the diverse needs and emotional challenges of their students. An ultra-competitive, curriculum-driven education model separating children into winners and losers exacerbates the scenario. For teachers, falling short is a painful experience. Making choices of whom to leave behind is not an option.

## EMOTIONS: THE CREATOR OF REALITY

Experiences come and go, but emotions linger with lasting psychological and physiological takeaways. Feelings and emotion are powerful things that constantly influence brain chemistry and neural circuitry patterns. These changes reflect attachments that filter and give context to future beliefs and experiences. The emotional narrative or story they write becomes children’s reality and, ultimately, their destiny. The brain is built up through actual emotional experiences (Gerhardt, 2015). What goes in will ultimately determine what comes out. Shaping the minds of students is not a metaphorical mantra for teachers; it is a literal one.

Every emotional experience, fleeting or dramatic, joyous or painful, has lasting impacts on brain development, neural networks, and emotional attachments. In the context of education, this understanding is particularly important. Learning and social challenges at school are emotionally charged and account for a large proportion of attachments children will embrace as part of their developing personas.

Learning can be an exhilarating joyride for one and an emotional nightmare for the next. Even the most thoughtful, well-planned lesson is no guarantee of a rewarding learning experience. The battle lines are drawn. Will a child experience learning and life through the lens of joy, safety, and resilience, or will it be from a perspective of emotional pain and self-doubt?

## EMOTIONAL ALIGNMENT, LEARNING, AND CONNECTION

Children come to school with their own unique set of experiences, beliefs, and neural network patterning that determines how an educational experience is processed.

Learning and social challenges at school are not a problem for emotionally balanced children hardwired to beliefs of bravery and resiliency. Exploration, risk, and challenge are exciting endeavors that come with abundant emotional reward. Curricular learning takes place, but a far greater outcome occurs as a direct result of the authentically rewarding experience. An emotionally rewarding learning experience supports normal brain development and neural circuitry that positively influences future learning and the capacity for a fulfilling connected life.

Things are not so easy for children disconnected from healthy beliefs and emotions. Life's journey has resulted in a different pattern of neurological wiring. These children tend to cope with the challenge of learning in unhealthy ways because experiences of the past have created that mold. Anxious physiological responses, fear, feelings of low self-worth, avoidance strategies, or outright dysfunctional behavior are the established way to navigate social and learning challenges. Regardless of their intelligence or capacity to learn, filtering experiences through unhealthy beliefs and emotions will always push students further from emotional balance and a healthy connection to learning.

From a standpoint of healthy brain development, the obvious goal is to have children leave class each day feeling good about their educational experience. The challenge for teachers becomes all the emotional baggage and unhealthy stories children already possess and the sad realization that those most desperately in need of connection are often the ones to most fiercely deny it. If healthy connections feel so good, why is it so difficult for the disconnected to embrace them?

The simple answer is that disconnected experiences and emotional distress may be all they know. A more sinister perspective suggests the forces that distance children from healthy beliefs and lifestyles are sneaky and deceptive and may come with their own unconscious emotional rewards. Why else would a child embrace and hang on to unhealthy beliefs and engage in behavior that always ends in chronic drama and deepening emotional despair?

*An old grandfather told his grandson, "My son, there's an old battle between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, jealousy, greed, resentment, inferiority, lies and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, empathy and truth." Somewhat worried, the boy thought about it, then asked, "Grandfather, which wolf wins?" The old man replied, "The one you feed."*

*—North American Legend*

## **DISCONNECTION, NEURAL DYSREGULATION, AND EMOTIONAL ADDICTION**

In an emotionally balanced person, the reward centers of the brain generate beta-endorphin payoffs that make us feel good in an effort to reinforce healthy

choices and behaviors. Emotions like happiness, love, and self-worth are pleasurable and encourage connected behaviors that keep us centered. This effective reward system would lead us to believe that behavior always follows pleasurable feelings, but this is not always the case.

Attachment theorists beginning with Bowlby (1907–1990) have long suggested neglecting the basic human need for connection may lead to chemical and neural imbalance inhibiting normalized brain development (Bowlby, 1965). Children need connection as much as they ever have, but rising anxiety rates and disorders may suggest they are simply not getting a large enough dose to nurture the attachments that help them feel safe, resilient, and worthy. The resulting neural dysregulation triggers a chronic survival mode state and a dependence on anxiety, anger, self-pity, and emotional dysfunction to cope with their distress.

Recent discoveries in neuroscience propose this type of neural dysregulation may result in unconscious biochemical addictions to stress hormones that act in remarkably similar ways to addictive drugs (Koob, 2008). These pain-killing hormones are free and readily available for those who know how to find them. All that is needed is a little, or a lot, of emotional drama. This may be an attractive option for disconnected children with no other alternative to cope with their enduring emotional distress. Teachers have always known that children get something out of chronic attention-seeking behaviors, bullying, procrastination, or “poor me” attitudes. Current neuroscience backs that up.

Teachers perceptive to the workings of emotional addiction can

- See dysfunctional behaviors for what they really are: **an unconscious drive for unhealthy emotional payoffs**
- Plan strategies to break the cycle of emotional and behavioral addictions
- Avoid emotional control dramas that feed all addiction
- See children as something greater than their dysfunction

## EMOTIONAL ALIGNMENT AND HEALING

Fortunately, the human brain is resilient, and the same neural plasticity exposing it to dysregulation and out-of-balance states leaves room for the healing power of healthy experiences and authentic connections (Santa Barbara Graduate Institute Center for Clinical Studies and Research, n.d.). From a therapeutic and neurological perspective, it may be that teachers are positioned, better than anyone, to influence

the physiology of a child's brain in healthy ways. They can control, manage, and monitor much of the emotional experience that can literally shape and heal the minds of children.

*The Emotionally Connected Classroom* is an innovative educational approach inspired by an addiction therapy model that teaches the disconnected how to weave authentic connections, behaviors, and thought patterns into their daily lives. Changing a life stuck in dysfunction and emotional pain takes more than talk. Curriculum-driven social and emotional learning objectives are meaningless fluff if not expressed as real experiences. It takes actual connected moments and authentic feelings to balance brain chemistry and prove a new narrative is possible. Emotions, joyful or uncomfortable, are the real tools of the teaching trade.

*Connection is nature's multipurpose tool for nurturing emotional wellness and a healthy balanced brain. It can affect significant positive change in all aspects of a person's life. It is a simple but powerful solution for complex issues in an even more complicated world.*

Todd Ritchey

Emotional Addiction Specialist

*Healthy emotional attachments are not taught, they are the product of actual connected emotional experiences.*

Emotions are not really good or bad as measured by levels of pleasure or discomfort. They all have purpose if embraced in proper context. In the world of education, feel-good emotions have the obvious upside, but uncomfortable feelings are also an expected and necessary component of learning, challenge, taking risks, and exploring the unknown. If anxious feelings or even physical pain are never experienced, children will never learn to manage, overcome, or value these challenges.

It may seem counterintuitive, but uncomfortable feelings, sometimes even painful ones, may be the most important and overlooked tool for emotional balance and healing. Overcoming anxious feelings is a thrilling, liberating, and joyful achievement. It takes fear to experience bravery and frustration to practice patience. The transition or journey from emotional discomfort to emotional balance is also the source of the most powerful healing.

This gets to the crux of the Emotionally Connected Classroom model. Empowering students to use thought patterns and emotions in healthy ways to learn, do big exciting things, share positive energy, and embrace life to the fullest is the greatest gift a teacher can give. Ultimately, it will be the experiences and emotions children choose to embrace that will dictate their destiny. It makes sense to begin every lesson with this in mind.

## THE CHANGING ROLE OF EDUCATION

The education system that governs teaching and learning is a relic of the past century that has experienced only incremental changes in its attempt to meet the changing needs of children and society. The demands of an antiquated education structure dependent on curricular objectives, comparative testing, and control never seem to disappear, and they dominate a stressful learning experience. As a cultural whole, we have largely cast aside the natural drive to learn in a playful, adventurous, and cooperative way.

Simply put, learning has become stress-inducing work. This may represent the single greatest controllable disconnection in the lives of children. School is at least partially responsible for denying the free-spirited, connected experiences children need to develop in normal healthy ways. In many regards, the school experience has systematically nurtured anxious, disconnected children.

The skill sets for success in the twenty-first century have changed and revolve around healthy connections that nurture teamwork, intrapersonal skills, and free-flowing creative thought. Pressure for change exists, and new educational strategies have emerged to address whole child learning philosophies. Recently rewritten curriculum in British Columbia, Canada, demonstrates a trend toward a reduction in content and testing that leaves room for connected healthy learning experiences. Emotional wellness, communication, socioemotional skill sets, and connected student-centered learning experiences are at the center of the redesign of curriculum and assessment strategies (Government of British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018). Emotionally balanced and resilient youth prepared for the challenges of a rapidly changing disconnected world is a new priority.

Curriculum will always matter, but at the end of the day, how a child feels about the learning experience is far more important than what they have learned. Fortunately, connected experiences and curriculum do not have to be an either-or proposition. We know emotionally unbalanced children chronically underperform and act out. We also know they are the time stealers in every class and consume much of a teacher's own emotional energy. The best student learning always relies on connected feelings and a playful adventurous spirit for inspired learning. Setting a daily connection intention helps teachers stay the course on the things they know matter most and creates a win-win scenario.

What has been missing for teachers is a practical approach that goes beyond talk and respects the challenges teachers and children face in existing educational systems. *The Emotionally Connected Classroom* offers a new definition of connectedness allowing teachers to develop their own socioemotional agenda best suited for the needs of each unique student or class. The Six Ps of Connection set the stage for healthy emotional reward and authentic attachments children need to emotionally thrive and learn. Together with an innovative lesson plan template, it becomes easy for teachers to drive out fear and integrate healthy connections into the everyday curricular learning experience.

## Imagine If ...

The anxious, isolated, and painfully shy girl in your class who stumbles with debilitating fear when called on, the one who forces smiles to hide her pain and spends almost as much time away sick as she does in the classroom, leaves at the end of the day excited about school. At home, she greets her mother with an enthusiastic smile and shares the news of the day. Today she contributed in a group project, encouraged others, made a new friend, and most important, she felt good about it. Imagine the feeling of hope.

This is more than a dream. Stripping away the debilitating disconnecting forces of a modern culture, unhealthy attachments, and emotional addictions, reveals the authentic truth and potential that lies within every child. There is no need for excuses, labels, or drama to explain or justify behavior. There is only connection and authentic reward or disconnection and the unhealthy payoffs of emotional pain. An authentic choice may be difficult, but for students armed with healthy thinking patterns and authentic support, it becomes a viable attractive option in spite of the powerful disconnecting forces that surround us all. It is a sad commentary on the education system when students graduate not knowing how to feel good or be their best. It is time to teach them. It is time to feed their “Good Wolf.”

The journey begins with a bold proclamation for transformational change and a willingness to forge a new path, a paradigm shift that allows teachers and students to view the world and the learning experience in a new light. The journey begins with a trip back in time to rediscover the biological truth of who we are as humans. Our children are hunter-gatherers who need each other. Connection is not a luxury, it is a matter of survival.



## GETTING THE MOST OUT *THE EMOTIONALLY CONNECTED CLASSROOM*

- **Think mindset.** *The Emotionally Connected Classroom* is a mindset, framework, or lens for viewing learning process rather than a package of lessons or strategies for all grades or subject areas. Examples of strategies, lessons, case studies, and vignettes attempt to bring theory to life, but the best strategy for understanding remains with shifting perspectives. Thinking like a Hunter-Gatherer in Chapter 1 is a good start.
- **Consider your best lessons.** Value, filter, and fine-tune what you already do well through a new lens. Best lessons are always student-centered connected experiences. Be the expert in connection you already are.
- **Experiences shape who you are.** Experiences and emotions in the classroom always influence neural connections, emotional attachments, and brain capacity. The book attempts to keep the brain science accessible and usable. Be a budding neuroscientist. Teach your students to be one, too!
- **Reflect on past practice.** Take time to analyze past practice, learning experiences, and student interactions. Could a new way of thinking have changed things?
- **Personal introspection.** Feel free to drift and reflect on your own life connections and experiences. Real change starts with a teacher's personal relationship with connectedness.
- **Take a first step.** It can be a strategy, a lesson, or a unit. It takes an actual experience to create belief. Connection perfection is not necessary, and it always takes time. The only step that matters is the first one.
- **Recruit others.** Community is a cornerstone of connectedness. Sharing an action plan with other teachers will clarify thoughts, foster collaboration, and help make a new direction feel less intimidating.
- **Embrace your emotions as you read.** This book is all about the emotional experience.