



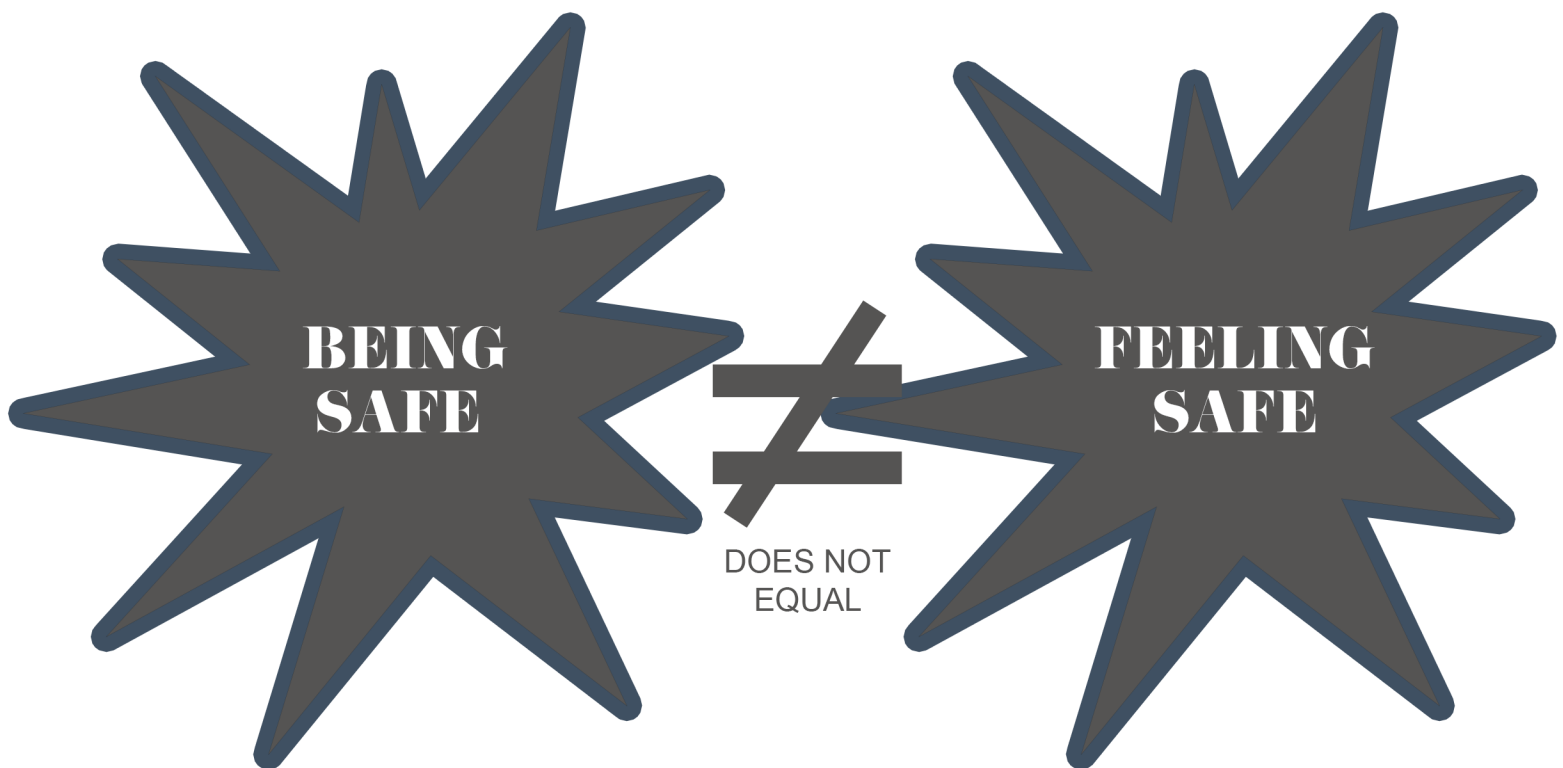
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felt safety:

A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING
EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS

WHAT IS FELT SAFETY?

Felt safety is a key concept in understanding why you may react, or be perceived as overreacting, to a situation or person.



“Felt safety is when you [*caregivers*] arrange the environment and adjust your behavior so your children can feel in a profound and basic way that they are truly safe in their home with you. Until your child experiences safety for himself or herself, trust can’t develop, and healing and learning won’t progress.”

-- Dr. Karyn Purvis

The science behind

Felt Safety

Evidence based brain research has revealed understanding of felt safety.

Without us even realizing it, our brains are continually gauging our safety.

Brain research reveals that **FOUR TIMES** every second the brain is performing a very basic function of asking “Am I safe?”

This brain reaction is scanning three things:

- Our inner experience
(heart rate, hunger, biology, even genetics, inflammation, neuroimmunity)
- The environment
- The person I'm with and our relationship

Gobbel, Robyn. “Felt-Safety? What is that?” www.robbyngobbel.com, September 14, 2020, <https://robbyngobbel.com/feltsafety/>, August 27, 2021.

When Felt Safety is Threatened

REALITY

When told she can't have a snack so close to dinner, a child erupts into an emotional meltdown.



FELT SAFETY

Food insecurity from past starvation, prior to this placement, triggers the reaction.

REALITY

Going on vacation is supposed to be fun, but it feels stressful and uncomfortable to you.



FELT SAFETY

As an adult with care experience, changes in routine threaten a sense of comfort.

REALITY

After months of good progress, an adopted child suddenly regresses & becomes inconsolable.



FELT SAFETY

The family recently took a trip. The last time this child was on a plane, he was leaving his home country.

REALITY

Close relationships are hard for you. Even after knowing someone for a long while, you find it hard to let down your walls. Romantic relationships seldom last long.



FELT SAFETY

Being an adult with care experience has impacted your ability to bond to, attach to, and trust people. Being guarded and insulating yourself from intimacy is related to your early life experiences.

Felt Safety Strategies

1 Beyond the Behavior

Look beyond the behavior. Consider that what is seen or felt can be related to a past trauma or event that you may never realize. See the behavior as the language of trauma.

2 Track it

When is the behavior happening? When does the “problem” present itself? Start tracking it, in a note on your phone or in a journal. Consider time of day, people present, and the circumstances.

3 Be Attuned

Be attuned to your subtle indicators of increasing emotion, such as heart rate, breathing, and clenched fists.

Caregivers --Teach these indicators to the child, coach calm down strategies, & help name emotions.

4 Build Felt Safety

Implement strategies to increase felt safety, such as the ones included in this guide. Stay consistent and keep at it as preventative measures. Feeling safe is as important as being safe.

Adoption Impacts Felt Safety

- Brain research shows that what the brain does not remember still has lasting impact.
- This is an important fact for adoptees, adoption and foster care practice, policy, and parenting.
- Everyone must remember that events at birth and even in-utero can trigger the fight or flight response, and other biological changes.
- Even with the “best of adoption circumstances,” being adopted or fostered can threaten a sense of felt safety,
- Understanding felt safety can help adult adoptees make sense of themselves and how they function and relate to others.

Felt Safety and the Adult Adoptee

- Understanding felt safety as a “why” can help adult adoptees & former foster youth find strategies toward better well-being.

Why felt safety matters

- Trauma triggers the fight, flight , or freeze response in the brain.
- The brain can get stuck in a suspended state of fight, flight, or freeze particularly with ongoing trauma exposure.
- We're wired to learn from a dangerous situation. This is why our brain can flip to "Danger!" after a situation when we are no longer in danger.
- Helping yourself (or your child) feel safe is a key to unlocking the ability for building trust, and then, attachment.
- The person from trauma needs the people around them to be mindful of helping them feel safe and not crossing the person's fear threshold.
- *Caregivers of children:* Discipline techniques should not cross the fear threshold. Avoid using shame, loud voices, angry facial expressions, or making the child feel isolated.

felt safety is about
**FIGHT
OR
FLIGHT**

Environment of Felt Safety

SET EXPECTATIONS
CLARIFYING WHAT'S TO COME, WHEN THINGS WILL HAPPEN, AND WHAT COMES NEXT BUILDS FELT SAFETY

GIVE CONTROL

HAVING OPPORTUNITIES TO FEEL IN CONTROL, LEAD, AND MAKE CHOICES BUILDS FELT SAFETY

PREDICTABILITY
PREDICTABLE & REGULAR DAILY ROUTINE & RHYTHMS PROMOTES FELT SAFETY

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

FEW WORDS, CLEAR COMMUNICATION, HOLDING TO PROMISES ARE IMPORTANT

SENSORY INPUT

LEARN ABOUT SENSORY PROCESSING AND IMPLEMENT SENSORY HELP & SELF CARE IS

Be intentional & consistent

**PICK
YOUR BATTLES**
BUILD FELT SAFETY BY
BEING MINDFUL TO AVOID
UNNECESSARY
CONFRONTATIONS

**PREPARE
FOR NEW
SITUATIONS**

BUILD FELT SAFETY BY
PREVIEWING NEW
ENVIRONMENTS, PRACTICING
NEW EXPERIENCES, &
PREPARING AS MUCH
AS POSSIBLE

**BUILD
CONNECTION**
FOR FELT SAFETY TO BE BUILT,
STRONG CONNECTIONS AND
RELATIONSHIPS THAT FEEL
SAFE ARE IMPORTANT. AT
EVERY OPPORTUNITY,
CONNECTION, CONNECTION,
CONNECTION.

RESPECT

PAST TRAUMA
CREATES A DEEP NEED
TO FEEL RESPECTED
AND HONORED.

**BELIEF
& BEING SEEN**

TRAUMA IS NOT A
PROBLEM TO BE FIXED.
THOSE WHO'VE
EXPERIENCED TRAUMA
NEED TO BE BELIEVED IN,
SEEN, SOUGHT TO BE
UNDERSTOOD.

The work of Dr. Karyn Purvis

Trauma & Felt Safety

brain research

Dr. Karyn Purvis was a pioneer of brain research and trauma, studying neurotransmitter levels before and after working towards felt safety. When foster and adoptive families create an intentional environment with felt safety in mind, they 'soothe and disengage the primitive brain so it won't bully the child into poor behavior,' (p.49, *The Connected Child**).

ADULTS WITH CARE EXPERIENCE CAN BUILD THEIR OWN ENVIRONMENTS OF FELT SAFETY.

encourage healing

"Not every child is destined to become a super-achiever, but we believe with all our hearts that through the right care and treatment, virtually every at-risk child can become a happier, more loving and better-adjusted member of his or her family and society" (p.19, *The Connected Child*).

NEUROPLASTICITY OF THE BRAIN MEANS IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO FIND HEALING.

learn more

TBRI® was developed by Dr. Karyn Purvis and Dr. David Cross at the Child Development Institute at Texas Christian University. TBRI® is a model of care for children, and was developed from a decade of research. *The Connected Child* is important read that summarizes and explains the work of Dr. Purvis and Dr. Cross.

*Purvis, K.B., Cross, D.R. & Sunshine, W.L. (2007)
The Connected Child. New York, NY: McGraw Hill

28 Ways to Build Felt Safety

- be attuned to emotions & reactions
- use feeling charts to help name emotions*
- emotions need to be validated
- practice appropriate expressions of emotions
- maintain regular routines
- post the routine (use a picture chart for non-readers)*
- proactively practice what to do with big emotions
- use a calendar at bedtime to prepare for the next day
- use countdown charts or chains to anticipate upcoming events
- have an introduction to a new environment before the day of
- have daily affirmations
- create family traditions together
- let the child plan a meal, a family night, or an outing
- specific praise is helpful (I'm proud of you because _____)
- make family rules together and post them
- discipline by allowing "redo's" and "try-agains"
- protect the child's belongings & allow them ownership
- proactively practice what to do when "plot twists" happen in life
- direct discipline and correction at the behavior, not the child
- avoid time-outs; have calming corner or calm spot near or with you
- praise, affirm, and positive reinforcement are important
- active listening and full attention during conversations
- repeat stories from shared experiences & good memories
- prepare & practice how to handle scary experiences
- be open, honest, and transparent about birth history
- allow ownership of their own story
- embrace & hold space for trauma, loss, and questions
- admit mistakes and offer apologies



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Our vision is to be a healing adoptee community who revolutionize the systems that impact them. Adoption and foster care have historically catered to decision-makers rather than being transparent, adoptee centered, and trauma informed. We believe adoptees have the right to information and ownership of their own story, with a sense of felt safety and belonging. We seek to hold space for adoptees to co-exist with all the chapters of their story, with opportunity to revolutionize the systems that impact them.

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