

The University Of Connecticut Is Helping Kids Handle Big Feelings

University of Connecticut



The statistics are staggering: more than 20% of U.S. children ages 3–17 have been diagnosed with a mental, emotional, or behavioral health condition. In 2021, leading pediatric and psychiatric associations declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health, citing sharp rises in anxiety, depression, and suicide.

At the University of Connecticut (UConn), researchers responded with science, creativity — and puppets.

The result is Feel Your Best Self (FYBS), an award-winning program that uses videos, puppets, and hands-on activities to teach social-emotional learning (SEL) skills to children. Developed by Sandra Chafouleas, Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor in the Neag School of Education, and Emily Wicks, manager at UConn’s Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry, FYBS translates psychology into playful, easy-to-use strategies.

Children meet puppet characters — Nico, CJ, and Mena — who introduce 12 coping skills with names kids can remember, like “Float Your Boat” (writing down heavy feelings and tossing them away) or “Chillax in My Head” (imagining a calm, safe place).

Chafouleas notes that puppets help break down barriers, allowing children to engage, laugh, and absorb lessons naturally—without realizing they’re in a learning environment. Early evaluations confirm FYBS boosts engagement and helps kids retain strategies they can use in real moments of stress.

The program, launched in Connecticut, has reached audiences in four continents through schools, libraries, PBS broadcasts, and community workshops. “It’s been just absolutely amazing for us to see, across the world, the uptake in different settings that we couldn’t have imagined,” says Chafouleas.

Behind the scenes, UConn’s Technology Commercialization Services (TCS) played a vital role in shaping FYBS for broad impact. Dr. Christopher Connors, Director of Licensing, guided the trademark and copyright protection efforts, developed licensing strategies, and built distribution partnerships, ensuring the program could reach far beyond Connecticut. Grants and collaborations with libraries, museums, and community centers accelerated its growth.

The impact is already visible: FYBS has been adopted by educators across multiple states, translated into Spanish, and

showcased nationally as a model for social-emotional learning. It offers a low-cost, culturally adaptable toolkit at a time when schools face growing demands to support mental well-being with limited resources.

From a spark of creativity, Feel Your Best Self has become much more than puppets and play. It is a bridge between research and real-world change — showing how UConn innovation can nurture resilience, strengthen communities, and help children everywhere feel their very best selves.

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