**UConn CSCH Podcast Episode - Puppets and Emotional Well-being: The Making of the Feel Your Best Self** **Project Transcript**

Helene Marcy: Hello and Welcome to the CSCH Podcast. My name is Helene Marcy, Director of Programs & Communications at the UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health, or CSCH. The CSCH mission is to facilitate innovative and impactful connections across research, policy, and practice arenas to advance equity in school and child health. CSCH is committed to anti-racist work that prioritizes inclusion, reduces disparities, and creates systemic change. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

Today I’m here with Sandra Chafouleas, Emily Wicks, and Emily Iovino. Sandy is a Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor in UConn’s Department of Educational Psychology at UConn and is Co-Director of CSCH. Emily Wicks is Co-Interim Director of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry at UConn, and Emily Iovino is a Postdoctoral Scholar with both CSCH and the Neag School of Education in the Department of Educational Psychology.

Together they have created a project called Feel Your Best Self, which uses puppets to teach children strategies that promote emotional well-being. And today we'll be talking about that project. Welcome to you three!

Emily Iovino: Hi, thanks for having us.

Sandy Chafouleas: Glad to be here.

Emily Wicks: Yeah, I'm looking forward to talking with you.

Helene: So my first question is for Emily Wicks. Emily, how did this partnership between Ballard and CSCH come about and how has it been important?

Emily Wicks: I love this collaboration, because I think it's an example of the creativity and, you know, positivity that can come from an interdisciplinary collaboration at UConn. You know, during COVID, like so many organizations, the Ballard Institute, was looking for a way to shift programming online. And specifically, we were trying to create virtual puppet building workshops. And my graduate assistant at the time, Felicia, and I wanted to, you know, try to reach out to faculty at the Neag School of Education to really think about best practices, but also what type of research was happening there that might align with what we were trying to do. And so that's how we happened upon Sandy's research and her work looking at strategies to promote emotional well-being. So we reached out, I think, a little over two years ago, and haven't really looked back since then. I think education and puppetry are is such a natural pairing, that it's really a great way to present this really important and, and timely information, but in a fun and engaging way.

Helene: Sandy, tell us about the background and foundation behind Feel Your Best Self and what you’re expecting it will do.

Sandy: Yeah So Emily did a great setup by talking about why the partnership is so cool—this combination of education and puppetry. But backing it up a little bit more, what was I talking about that maybe got them interested in, in thinking about how we could partner is around this idea of emotional well-being. So we were just coming out of—not really out of the pandemic—but out of the full lockdowns and schools were starting to reopen. And obviously, there was a lot of stress going on around how to reopen. There was a ton of focus on physical mitigation efforts for good reason. But in the back of that was a lot of worry and a lot of stress, a lot of concern. It could be from substantial reasons for grief and loss that you had experienced, or your kids had experienced to being nervous about wearing masks to just being nervous about reintegrating into the social world and how that was going to work.

On top of that kids had lost time to be able to be social to do the skills that they normally would do developmentally across social, emotional and behavioral areas. And so I was worried, I was worried on my own self about what that was going to look like when schools open. We have systems that are already tremendously stressed and we're asking them to do more, as schools reopen. And how is that going to work? It doesn't really. So you know, it was ridiculous to think that schools could do something complex. And so the work that I had been doing, I think, that Emily and Felicia had found, was talking about this idea of simple strategies. What are the simplest things that every single adult can do that every adult needed a dose of themselves and every child needed as well? So what are these really simple things that we know from our work in psychology, that works to help with emotional regulation, that's founded within cognitive behavioral therapy, which I think we'll probably talk about a little bit more later. But what are the what are the simplest things that we can do and how can we package them? And that's where the packaging part became really fun in this partnership, to do it in ways that, I think, neither of us or any of us really thought was going to happen when we first started. We thought we'd start very small scale with one little thing, and then it's just exploded since then. So we're expecting that Feel Your Best Self is going to give every person some emotion-focused coping strategies, very simple ones that they would have to use to navigate through challenging situations.

Helene Marcy: Emily, can you describe the strategies that Sandy was just mentioning the strategies that the puppets teach in Feel Your Best Self? Where did they come from? And how do they work?

Emily Iovino: Of course, so we've got 12 core strategies that are featured in Feel Your Best Self. And we identified these strategies by sort of mapping to the smallest kernels of evidence-informed intervention, specifically cognitive behavioral therapy, like Sandy mentioned, that we could teach to evoke behavior change, and that can then change how someone feels. So these 12 strategies then map onto three categories, which we refer to as Calm Yourself, Catch Your Feelings and Connect with Others. So Calm Yourself strategies are focused on building self-soothing skills like belly breathing, or Shaking out the Yuck—sort of that physical activity piece. Catch your Feelings strategies, support self-awareness of one's emotional state, so that we can then shift our thoughts to change how we feel. And those strategies that we have some fun names for, like, you know, Turning the Dial or Pushing the Clouds to get rid of some of those heavy thoughts that hang over our heads. And then Connecting with Others is focused on social relationships, which can help both ourselves and others feel their best.

Helene Marcy: So the toolkit has different parts that can support the use of those strategies. Can you tell us about those?

Emily Iovino: Yeah, of course. So one of my favorite things that was said during the initial development pieces and talking to some teachers was that this toolkit allows kids to experience fun again in schools and experience fun around this kind of teaching. And so we've got videos with tip sheets that support learning of what happens in the videos, which is a—basically a skit where these puppet kids go through a challenging situation and teach one another a strategy to feel their best self. So those are the 12 strategies that I was talking about before. And the tip sheets provide some very brief discussion questions, can be shared with families. We've got strategy cards that outline the strategy in three to five very simple steps that walk you through with some icons to remind what that step entails. We've got facilitator guidance, to walk folks through how to actually implement the strategies and teach them using the videos. We've got the puppet making, of course, which is often the most fun part.

And we've got reflection sheets, which allow kids to really think about after they've learned a strategy, okay, how was I feeling before using this strategy? And how am I feeling now after trying this strategy that allows them to tailor their own personal toolkit of strategies that work best for them.

Sandy: One thing that we do like to emphasize is that it should be fun, and it should fit for whatever your situation or setting might be. So there's all these parts, you could use all of them. Or you could just use one or two, or different parts in different combinations. And that's really the creative space of being able to be flexible and adaptive. And really why we call it a toolkit, not a program or a curriculum.

Helene Marcy: What are your favorite strategies?

Sandy: We like different ones on different days, which I think is a reflection of why we want to have a few different tools in our backpack to find the right tool that fits for the different situation. One of my favorites if I go first would be to say Shake out the Yuck because I just love that kids talk about this physical movement like the show how the emotions are connected the physical movement and how you can really use your body to change the way you feel in your head.

Emily Iovino: My personal favorite is probably Chillax in my Head, because I think I often need to go to a chillaxing place, right, we need to visualize a place that makes us feel our best self and bring us bring us back to the moment. But my surprising favorite that I've watched kids use is Ground it Down because they get really creative with how to ground it down and how to have their puppets ground it down with them.

Emily Wicks: And I think personally, I like Turn the Dial and Belly Breathing. Those are ones that I use, I think more and more on a daily basis. But with the kids, I really have loved watching them use, Shake out the Yuck and Bring a High Five because of the creativity of making those strategies their own.

Sandy: So the bottom line is like, we can't just pick one. You have to watch all of them.

Emily Iovino: Yeah.

Helene: Emily Wicks, can you talk more about the puppetry aspect of the product? How can puppet support learning?

Emily Wicks: Yeah, so I mean, I think puppetry is such a natural complement to education, because it really allows us to present these strategies and ideas in an engaging and fun way. So rather than just telling the kids what they need to do the strategies, these videos present stories that show how our puppet characters navigate day to day issues that that might be relatable to the kids watching. So we're really trying to create characters and situations that might feel familiar and show the kids watching that they can use these strategies to try to shift their emotions. So situations that we probably have all found ourselves in, for example, being scared to up on stage in front of a crowd. These videos, help kids gain a new perspective on a situation and try to shift how they might be feeling. And I think you know, you see puppetry used in a therapy setting. And in a similar way, puppets here, give kids a voice. They might be scared to share how they're personally feeling. But through our puppet building activities, they're able to create a character that can maybe give voice to some of their concerns or worries. They might not want to share how they feel, but they can tell you how their puppet feels. And what has been really fun is to see kids use the puppets and the strategies to shift the emotions of their puppets. And I think, as Emily was mentioning, the kids love the puppet building. And I think it's because you can't build a puppet and still feel upset. Even as adults we love going into the classroom and building puppets with the kids because it is a creative outlet that really helps you kind of maybe feel a little lighter and happier.

Helene: Tell us about the puppet characters and how they were created.

Emily Wicks: So the three main characters were really a group effort to create. The original character designs were by a UConn puppet arts graduate student, Yanniv Frank, and then we worked with UConn puppet arts alumni John Cody and Sarah Nolan to create the actual characters, and I think we worked really hard to make sure that that the characters would be as relatable as they could be. Thinking about how they were designed down to the color of the puppets and their clothes and their hair, and trying to really think about what characteristics they could have to make them fun, engaging, but relatable. But then also their personality traits. You know, I think that each of the puppets have their own characteristics and storylines that we can all relate to. But what I love about these characters is they each kind of go through situations and, and struggle. Not one of them is, you know, perfect or has a total hold over their emotions. They all need help, just like we all need help with our feelings sometimes. They really rely on each other to navigate these difficult situations.

Mena is someone that I often identify with, because I had to wear glasses when I was younger, and I loved basketball. And she's very smart, and at times maybe seems like the big sister. But just like all kids, she struggles. On one of the videos, she's upset when her friend moves away, and Nico has to kind of console and help her. Nico’s the youngest, and I think the most excited, but also struggles with his emotions as well if something doesn't go his way. And then there’s CJ. I definitely love CJ. They often are nervous, maybe a little bit scared, but they're also very compassionate and very supportive of their friends. And so it's amazing to me that we were able to create this cast of characters, which are puppets, but feel so relatable, and like something that we've all been through.

Helene Marcy: So this question is for both Emilys. What has been the most fun about getting into schools and camps with the puppets?

Emily Iovino: Getting to relive the initial first time we were talking about things through the eyes of kids has been really, really cool. To see them react to the more funny pieces of videos or see them practice along while they're watching videos, with the puppet kids and to be able to identify things in their own lives that relate to what Mena, CJ, and Nico are experiencing in the videos has been really cool. And I think also, not just from the kids ‘side, but getting to see teachers, at least in schools, take the toolkit and make it their own. It's been really great to see that, and we learn probably more than the kids learn from the strategies by watching teachers get to implement this.

Emily Wicks: Yeah, I completely agree. I think to be able to step back and see it being used, and seeing the kids engage with it so positively is really rewarding. You're seeing how the teachers and the kids use it in new and creative ways that we had never imagined. Specifically for me, it's been amazing to see the kids just light up when they get to open their kit and make their puppet. And then to see how they are able to use the puppets to think about these strategies and think about their own emotions has been immensely rewarding.

Helene Marcy: Sandy, how else do you see the project being used? Are there other applications?

Sandy: Yeah, that's a great question. Because if you remember, our original intent was to help the whole school or whole class when classrooms were coming back into full live in-person spaces. And so the original intent was that these would be used in a whole class, like in a morning meeting time, or whenever you're doing transition times when you have a few minutes to give some space to work on a strategy. But since then, we've certainly seen application and extensions in different ways. So in more targeted ways. So, for example, our school psychologists and our school counselors, and our community providers are saying that they can use these strategies and integrate them into their treatment plans, their lesson plans with specific kids who might be struggling with certain coping skills or needing some emotional regulation spaces that they can use these materials in different ways.

Since then, we've also extended to have family focused materials. So the materials are generally the same—the video is like the core foundation to a lot of the pieces—but we've created, as Emily Iovino had said earlier, these tip sheets so that you could watch it at home and talk about it and practice when you're driving to the next activity or wherever you need to be. We've also worked on extensions into earlier childhood. So earlier preschool, and then just a couple of weeks ago, Emily Iovino and I were presenting and one of the participants said that they saw very specific extensions that they could take these strategies and the strategy cards into nursing homes, in their work, that they could see this. And so I think that's the really cool part about the extension or application is that the strategies that we've curated, are lifelong, They're life course. They may be taught or learned in different ways based on your age and stage. But the same things that we're asking our kids to do, our teachers are also doing as well.

Helene Marcy: Yeah. And how lucky that they learned it earlier than the rest of us.

Sandy: That's the that's the hope and the lucky part, right? Actually we do often hear that from some of the older adults saying, “Boy, I wish I had this vocabulary. I wish I had these strategies. When I was younger, or when I was in school. We didn't have this.”

Emily Iovino: Yeah, and people in talks we've given that say, oh, boy, I really could use this strategy right now and talking about it for themselves. It's not just oh, I can see myself using this with the kids I work with. It's Oh, I'm gonna Shake out the Yuck a little bit. Or I'm gonna do some Belly Breathing or I need to Ground it Down.

Helene Marcy: Yeah, my son is older but he's loving watching the videos. He uses some of the strategies. So this is a question for all of you. But let's start with Emily Iovino. Stepping back, what has surprised you the most about what you're seeing in the different spaces as people use the project.

Emily Iovino: I think what you'd actually just said is how much older kids are enjoying this. How much when we're getting into third grade and 10, 11 12-year-olds are still identifying with and enjoying the videos and the puppet making and all of that, I think, has been really refreshing for me and has shown me how much this is –really, the fun part of it is needed, I think has kind of been the most surprising for me is how much this is really working, needed, and useful for that upper end of the range.

Emily Wicks: Yeah, I think for me, the creativity of the educators that are using it and the kids has been really impressive to see teachers use it in their own ways and adapt it into their already existing structures has been really amazing. And I think given us new ideas.

And then at the same time, you have teachers who maybe stick more to the facilitator guide. And that's okay. Because this project has been created to really be used, how it can be helpful to you. It's not something that you have to learn to use; it's something that you can really adapt into your existing routine. And with the kids, I think their creativity never ceases to amaze me: how excited they get and the ideas that they come up with relating to the strategies and the puppets, is always fun to see.

Sandy Chafouleas: And for me, this might sound silly, but I am just, I am in awe at how riveted the kids are watching these videos—how much they identify with the characters. You know, I was out to dinner with a friend over the weekend, and who had a five and a half year old and the child just kept saying over and over again, “I gotta meet those puppets!”, you know, and just while we were waiting in line for dinner, or you know, waiting for all these things just riveted at watching: “I want to watch another one; I want to watch another one.” And then it's not just watching and like leaving it at the table, like not remembering what those strategies are. Because then you can hear them picking up pieces of, of the strategies and using them and saying, “And I can do it the way I want to do it.”

Helene Marcy: So tell us about what your future plans are for the project.

Emily Iovino: So I think Emily just got at this a little bit with how much we're learning in schools, but I think one of the biggest future things is to continue to revise and update our materials as we get feedback from the people who are doing this the boots on the ground, as we'll call them as the people who are using this can and do and will help to make this so much better.

Along those lines, I think as much as we can getting into more schools and providing technical assistance. We're getting some requests already for people that want us to come and do a presentation or want to have us help them figure out how to get started with this. So I think that's really something that we're looking into for the future.

Sandy Chafouleas: Our punch list is certainly very long as we like to say. And for me, I –the extension to family and community settings is a really interesting and unique space for us to be able to have impact as well, because this toolkit can be adapted for use anywhere.

Helene Marcy: So Emily Wicks, what's the main takeaway that you want listeners to know about the Feel Your Best Self Project?

Emily Wicks: So I think the main takeaway is that Feel Your Best Self is ready for use. It is on the website, feelyourbestself.org. All the videos are there. All the resources are there, in both English and Spanish. And what's great about it is that you can use it while you're on the bus; you can listen to it while you're in the car. The videos are each five minutes or less, and you can use it however works for you and your family or your classroom. So get out there and try it. You'll hopefully find some strategies that become your favorites and you have in your back pocket to use either for you as an adult or for the kids in your life. Because I think what we've all learned is that these strategies are for people of all ages.

Sandy: To help them feel their best.

Emily Wicks: Yes, these strategies help all of us feel our best.

Helene Marcy: So this is terrific. It's such a fun project. And it could be so impactful. I was listening to the story on Morning Edition on NPR about the project and Cory Turner, their education reporter, said that he'd been in a lot of classrooms as an education reporter but couldn't remember kids seeming more joyful than when he saw kids participating in this. So how wonderful that your project is sparking joy when we need it, both for kids and for adults. We'll add links to the to Feel Your Best Self project in the podcast description too. And Sandy, Emily and Emily, thank you so much for joining us today.

Emily Iovino: Thanks for having us.

Sandy Chafouleas: so much fun to be here.

Emily Wicks: Thank you.

Helene: And a reminder to listeners that you can find information about all our projects at the CSCH website, csch.uconn.edu. You can also follow us on social media @UConnCSCH. Thanks for listening.