

Research Foundation for the *I Wish They'd Understand* Series

A Narrative Literature Review

Purpose and Scope

The *I Wish They'd Understand* series was created to help children, adolescents, caregivers, and educators consider what may be happening beneath behaviors commonly interpreted as defiance, disrespect, avoidance, disinterest, or attitude. The series includes:

- *I Wish They'd Understand: When Feelings Are Hard to Show* — Elementary School Edition
- *I Wish They'd Understand: When Quiet Looks Like Attitude* — Middle School Edition
- *I Wish They'd Understand: When Survival Looks Like Attitude* — High School Edition

Across the three age levels, the books encourage adults to respond to behavior with curiosity, emotional safety, connection, appropriate boundaries, and developmentally responsive support. They also give young people language for experiences that may be difficult to explain, including overwhelm, shutdown, fear of failure, sensory stress, avoidance, irritability, shame, and difficulty asking for help.

This narrative review examines recent literature related to the primary ideas presented in the series. The review focuses on research and professional guidance concerning childhood stress, relational health, trauma-informed practice, social and emotional learning, school connectedness, motivation, student voice, and supportive adult responses.

This is a narrative review rather than a formal systematic review. It establishes the research foundation supporting the series' overall approach but does not represent an independent evaluation of the books themselves.

Stress, Behavior, and Relational Safety

Children and adolescents do not always communicate distress directly. Stress may affect emotional regulation, attention, relationships, learning, behavior, and a young person's ability to explain what is happening internally. Consequently, silence, withdrawal, anger, avoidance, joking, refusal, or apparent disengagement should not automatically be treated as proof of a single motive.

The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes the role of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships in buffering adversity and supporting resilience. Its relational-health framework recognizes that supportive relationships can strengthen the capacities children need to cope with present and future stress. The framework also encourages adults and systems to move beyond an exclusively problem-focused approach and partner with young people and families in identifying supportive responses ([Garner & Yogman, 2021](#)).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) identifies safety, trustworthiness, transparency, collaboration, empowerment, voice, and choice as central principles of trauma-informed practice. These principles do not require adults to assume that every challenging behavior is caused by trauma. Instead, they support creating environments that reduce unnecessary threat, avoid retraumatization, and preserve personal dignity while addressing needs and expectations ([SAMHSA, 2023](#)).

These findings support the series' central invitation to ask, "What might this young person be experiencing?" before deciding, "This child is simply being difficult." This reframing does not remove accountability or behavioral expectations. It expands the information adults consider before choosing a response.

Regulation and Access to Learning

Social and emotional skills include recognizing emotions, communicating needs, managing reactions, developing relationships, and making responsible decisions. These capacities are connected to both emotional well-being and school functioning.

A contemporary meta-analysis of 424 studies from 53 countries examined universal school-based social and emotional learning interventions involving 575,361 students. Compared with control conditions, participating students demonstrated significant improvements in social-emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, peer relationships, school functioning, school climate and safety, and academic achievement. Outcomes varied according to program content, context, implementation quality, and student characteristics, demonstrating that implementation matters ([Cipriano et al., 2023](#)).

A separate review of 12 meta-analyses, representing 523 reports and approximately one million students from preschool through high school, concluded that universal school-based social and emotional learning programs produced consistent positive effects across multiple student

outcomes. The authors also emphasized that additional research is needed to determine precisely which components work best, for whom, and under which conditions ([Durlak et al., 2022](#)).

These findings support the series' use of simple emotional language, coping options, communication prompts, reflection questions, and practical tools such as the *When I Feel Stuck* card. The books do not present one strategy as universally effective. Instead, they offer multiple ways a student might communicate or regain enough stability to reengage.

The research supports teaching and practicing emotional and relational skills. It does not establish that every grounding strategy, sensory object, phrase, or classroom accommodation will work for every student. Individual needs, disability, neurodivergence, culture, developmental level, environment, and personal history should always be considered.

Connection, Belonging, and Supportive Adults

School connectedness exists when students feel that adults and peers care about them as individuals and care about their learning. It includes feeling valued, supported, included, and connected to the school community.

A 2022 systematic review examined 34 longitudinal studies and two intervention studies involving young people. Most studies found that stronger school connectedness predicted lower levels of later depressive or anxiety symptoms. Both intervention studies designed to improve connectedness also reported improvements in depressive symptoms, although the authors cautioned that more intervention research is needed, particularly regarding anxiety and the mechanisms responsible for the observed effects ([Raniti et al., 2022](#)).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) similarly identifies school connectedness as an important protective factor associated with mental health, school attendance, academic outcomes, and graduation. The CDC defines connectedness through students' sense that adults and peers care about them and their learning ([CDC, 2024](#)).

This evidence aligns with the series' repeated emphasis on calm adult presence, private conversation, listening, relationship repair, and continued support after a difficult moment. A young person may still need consequences, correction, academic intervention, or additional services. However, those actions can occur within a relationship that communicates, "Your behavior matters, and you still matter."

Choice, Motivation, and Student Voice

The books encourage adults to offer appropriate choices, allow processing time, and provide more than one way for a student to communicate. These practices are consistent with research on motivation and autonomy.

Howard and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of 344 samples involving 223,209 students. Intrinsic motivation was associated with student success and well-being, while personally valuing an activity was especially related to persistence. Motivation based primarily on rewards or punishment was not associated with stronger performance or persistence and was associated with reduced well-being (Howard et al., 2021).

This does not mean that students should control every decision or that adults should eliminate expectations. Developmentally appropriate choice can exist within clear boundaries. Examples may include allowing a student to respond verbally or in writing, choosing between two acceptable tasks, requesting a short break, identifying which support would be most helpful, or receiving additional processing time before discussing an incident.

The series uses student-centered language to make internal experiences more understandable. This approach is consistent with trauma-informed principles of voice, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. However, the books should not be treated as speaking for every child or adolescent. Their first-person narratives represent possible experiences, not universal explanations.

Trauma-Informed Educational Practice

Trauma-informed educational practice generally seeks to increase awareness of how adversity may affect students while promoting physical and psychological safety, supportive relationships, predictable environments, staff capacity, and access to appropriate services.

A systematic review of school-wide trauma-informed approaches found encouraging results across several school and student outcomes, but it also identified substantial differences in programs, implementation, research methods, and outcome measures. The authors concluded that the evidence base was promising but still developing and called for more rigorous evaluations (Avery et al., 2021).

Therefore, it would be inaccurate to claim that every practice commonly described as trauma-informed has been conclusively proven or that a trauma-informed approach guarantees particular outcomes. The stronger conclusion is that the *I Wish They'd Understand* series is consistent with recognized trauma-informed principles, contemporary relational-health guidance, and the broader evidence supporting social-emotional learning and school connectedness.

The books appropriately preserve the distinction between understanding and excusing. Recognizing that behavior may have a protective, emotional, sensory, relational, or stress-related function does not mean unsafe or harmful behavior should be ignored. Rather, understanding can influence how adults teach skills, apply consequences, repair relationships, and support future success.

Application to Each Book

Elementary School Edition

When Feelings Are Hard to Show

The elementary edition presents feelings and behavior in simple, concrete language. It describes experiences such as noise or light feeling overwhelming, work appearing too large, getting quiet, pushing others away, becoming loud, or feeling unable to explain what is wrong.

Its strongest research alignment includes:

- Teaching foundational emotional and communication skills
- Recognizing that behavior may communicate an unmet need or overwhelmed state
- Using calm, supportive adult relationships to help children recover
- Reducing unnecessary verbal demands during intense distress
- Offering simple choices and multiple ways to communicate
- Providing a concrete request tool through the *When I Feel Stuck* card
- Maintaining boundaries while approaching the child with curiosity

The intentionally sparse design can support flexible use by educators and caregivers. It allows adults to add discussion, drawing, examples, or activities appropriate to a particular child. However, the visual design itself has not been independently evaluated, so it should be described as an intentional instructional choice rather than an evidence-proven format.

Middle School Edition

When Quiet Looks Like Attitude

The middle school edition addresses a developmental period in which students may become highly sensitive to embarrassment, peer perception, public failure, belonging, and adult judgment. The book explores silence, sarcasm, joking, avoidance, anger, missing work, and “I’m fine” as possible outward presentations of an internal struggle.

Its strongest research alignment includes:

- Protecting student dignity during correction
- Using private conversation when possible
- Offering processing time before expecting an explanation
- Allowing writing or another communication method when speaking is difficult
- Addressing missing work in manageable steps
- Strengthening school connectedness and access to supportive adults

- Offering meaningful choices within established expectations
- Separating a student's identity from a difficult behavior or academic problem

The book does not claim that quietness, sarcasm, missing assignments, or anger necessarily indicate trauma or a mental-health condition. These behaviors can have many explanations. Its purpose is to help adults avoid prematurely assigning a negative motive and to encourage further conversation and appropriate support.

High School Edition

When Survival Looks Like Attitude

The high school edition addresses more complex patterns, including hidden distress, withdrawal, irritability, fear of failure, shame, avoidance, hyper-independence, declining performance, and coping behaviors that may have begun as attempts at protection.

Its strongest research alignment includes:

- Recognizing the relationship between adversity, stress, connection, and functioning
- Preserving accountability without relying on humiliation
- Supporting student voice and age-appropriate autonomy
- Offering practical ways to communicate needs
- Helping students break overwhelming responsibilities into smaller steps
- Maintaining connection after conflict or academic difficulty
- Recognizing that apparent independence does not always mean a student has adequate support
- Encouraging access to trusted adults and appropriate professional services

The term “survival” is used narratively rather than diagnostically. The book should not be used to determine whether a student has experienced trauma, has a disability, or meets criteria for a mental-health diagnosis. Those determinations require qualified professionals and appropriate assessment.

Evidence Boundaries and Responsible Use

The available literature supports the broad foundations of the series, particularly its emphasis on relationships, emotional skill development, student voice, school connectedness, and responses that protect dignity. At the same time, responsible presentation requires several limitations to be stated clearly:

1. **The books have not yet undergone an independent outcome evaluation.**
Research supporting the principles behind a resource is not the same as direct evidence that the resource itself produces measurable outcomes.
2. **Behavior alone cannot identify trauma or a diagnosis.**
Silence, anger, avoidance, incomplete work, sensory distress, or withdrawal may have numerous causes.
3. **The books are educational resources, not clinical treatment.**
They should not replace individualized assessment, counseling, medical care, special-education evaluation, crisis response, or other professional services when those services are needed.
4. **No individual strategy works for everyone.**
Students differ in developmental level, disability, neurotype, language, culture, history, preferences, and current circumstances.
5. **Support and accountability can coexist.**
A trauma-informed or regulation-supportive response does not require adults to overlook harm, abandon expectations, or compromise safety.
6. **Implementation affects outcomes.**
Social-emotional and trauma-informed practices are more credible when they are developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, consistently implemented, and connected to broader systems of support.

Conclusion

The current research provides a credible foundation for the central message of the *I Wish They'd Understand* series: behavior should be addressed, but it should not be interpreted without curiosity about the young person experiencing it.

Recent evidence supports social-emotional skill development, safe and nurturing relationships, student voice, appropriate choice, school connectedness, and adult responses that preserve dignity. The literature also supports the understanding that stress and adversity can influence learning, relationships, emotional expression, and behavior. At the same time, the research cautions against assuming that one explanation, strategy, or program will fit every student.

The series is best understood as a set of developmentally differentiated psychoeducational and discussion resources. Its purpose is not to diagnose, excuse behavior, or replace professional care. Its purpose is to help children and adolescents find language for difficult experiences and help adults respond with greater understanding, structure, connection, and care.

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