

Absorb & Express

*How early feelings become
lifelong behaviours.*

A child absorbs
the feelings
of their world.

Those feelings
become their
expressions
for life.

If we want
to change their
future, we must
first understand
what they
absorbed.

R. DAVID DICKINSON
AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

Introduction

What Did You Absorb?

Long before you were old enough to explain what you were feeling, you were already feeling it. Long before you could question the behaviour of the adults around you, you were already being affected by it. Before you could consciously decide what was true, what was false, what was safe, or what was dangerous, you were absorbing the emotional atmosphere of the environment into which you were born.

A young child can think, learn, imagine, and respond, but the conscious, analytical mind is still developing during the earliest years of life. A child does not yet possess the mature reasoning necessary to objectively examine an experience and separate another person's behaviour from their own identity. They cannot easily conclude, "This person is angry because they are overwhelmed," "This person is distant because they are carrying unresolved pain," or "This person's inability to love me has nothing to do with my worthiness of being loved." A young child does not analyze the emotional environment. A young child absorbs it.

The child may not understand why there is tension in the home, but they feel it. They may not understand why a caregiver is angry, unpredictable, emotionally unavailable, or afraid, but they absorb the feelings created by that behaviour. They may not know why affection is withheld, why criticism is constant, or why silence fills the space where reassurance should exist, but their nervous system records the experience. Without the ability to consciously interpret what is happening, the child internalizes how the experience makes them feel.

The same is true when a child is raised in an environment filled with patience, encouragement, affection, stability, and love. The child may not be able to define emotional safety, but they can feel it. They may not understand the lifelong importance of being comforted, supported, and accepted, but they absorb the feelings those experiences create. Before children learn how to describe their world with words, they learn how their world feels.

Consider what happens when a sponge is placed in water. The sponge does not examine the water. It does not question where the water came from, determine whether the water is clean, or decide whether it wants to absorb it. It simply absorbs what surrounds it. When pressure is later applied to the sponge, it expresses what it previously absorbed. If it absorbed clean water, it expresses clean water. If it absorbed contaminated water, it expresses contaminated water. The sponge can only express what it contains.

During the earliest years of life, a child is much like that sponge. If a child is placed in an environment dominated by love, they absorb the feelings created by love. If a child is placed in an environment dominated by fear, they absorb the feelings created by fear. If a child is surrounded by shame, hostility, rejection, or instability, they absorb the emotional effects of those experiences. Whatever surrounds the child repeatedly can become part of what the child eventually expresses.

What was absorbed internally may later appear externally as behaviour. A child who absorbed fear may express anxiety, avoidance, aggression, or a need for control. A child who absorbed rejection may express withdrawal, people-pleasing, jealousy, or a constant need for approval. A child who absorbed shame may express perfectionism, self-criticism, dishonesty, or self-sabotage. A child who absorbed love, acceptance, and emotional safety may be better prepared to express trust, compassion, confidence, and connection.

This does not mean that every behaviour can be traced to a single childhood experience, nor does it mean that children raised in the same household will absorb and express their experiences in identical ways.

Temperament, relationships, later experiences, and many other influences contribute to human development. However, the emotional environment of early childhood can create powerful internal patterns that continue operating long after the original environment has disappeared.

We often judge behaviour by what we can see. We call a child difficult, defiant, overly sensitive, disruptive, withdrawn, needy, or attention-seeking. We may focus so intensely on stopping the behaviour that we fail to recognize the feeling being expressed through it. Behaviour is visible. The feeling beneath it is not. Yet what if the behaviour is not the original problem? What if it is the outward expression of something the child previously absorbed?

The child eventually becomes an adult, but growing older does not automatically remove what was absorbed. The body matures. The vocabulary expands. The analytical mind develops. The surroundings may change completely. Yet the feelings absorbed during childhood can remain beneath the surface, quietly influencing relationships, expectations, decisions, reactions, and beliefs about personal worth.

An adult may understand intellectually that they are safe while continuing to feel threatened. They may know they are loved while expecting to be abandoned. They may recognize their abilities while feeling inadequate. They may want intimacy while repeatedly pushing people away. They may consciously desire success while unconsciously returning to familiar disappointment. These contradictions can be confusing until we recognize that present behaviour may be expressing feelings absorbed in the past.

What feels familiar can easily be mistaken for what is true. If rejection was familiar, acceptance may feel uncomfortable. If chaos was familiar, peace may feel suspicious. If criticism was familiar, encouragement may feel undeserved. If struggle was familiar, success may feel unsafe. Adults do not always return to familiar feelings because those feelings are beneficial. They may return

because familiarity creates predictability, and predictability can be mistaken for safety.

This book is not about blaming parents, caregivers, or previous generations. Many caregivers expressed what they had once absorbed themselves. They may have passed along fear, shame, anger, or emotional distance without understanding where those feelings originated. They could only express what remained within them. Recognizing this does not excuse harmful behaviour, but it can help us understand how emotional patterns move through families from one generation to the next.

Understanding the past is not about remaining trapped within it. It is about discovering why certain thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have felt so automatic. Awareness allows us to look compassionately at the child we once were and recognize that much of what we absorbed was never consciously chosen. We were shaped by an emotional environment we did not create and influenced by people whose own behaviour may have been shaped long before we arrived.

A sponge that is already saturated has little room to absorb anything new. It must first release some of what it contains. Human healing can follow a similar process. We begin by identifying what we have carried, acknowledging how it has affected us, and releasing feelings and beliefs that no longer serve us. We cannot change what happened, but we can change our relationship with what happened. We can make room for something different.

Squeezing out the sponge does not mean forgetting the past, denying pain, or pretending that harmful experiences did not matter. It means allowing grief to be acknowledged, shame to be questioned, fear to be understood, and anger to be safely processed. It may involve reflection, self-compassion, supportive relationships, professional guidance, and the repeated experience of feeling safe enough to respond differently.

As something old is released, something new can be absorbed. Fear can gradually make room for safety. Shame can make room for self-acceptance. Rejection can make room for belonging. Helplessness can make room

for personal agency. The process is rarely immediate, but every conscious choice creates an opportunity to absorb a different feeling and eventually express a different behaviour.

Throughout these ten chapters, we will explore the absorbing years of early childhood, the development of the analytical mind, the influence of caregivers, and the emotional environments that shape us. We will examine how absorbed feelings become expressed behaviours, why those patterns can persist into adulthood, and how awareness can interrupt what once operated automatically. Most importantly, we will explore how to release what no longer belongs within us and create room for healthier emotional experiences.

You may not have chosen what surrounded you. You may not have understood what you were absorbing. You may have spent years expressing feelings that were placed within you before you had the ability to question them. But what happened before conscious choice became possible does not have to control what happens after conscious awareness begins.

You were once the child who absorbed. You may have become the adult who continued to express. Now you can become the conscious person who decides what to release, what to retain, and what to absorb next.

Absorb & Express. That may be how the pattern began - but awareness gives you the power to decide how it continues.

R. David Dickinson • Hidden Oak Publishing