



"This method works and once teachers see it in action they want more of it."

ON FEELING BRAVE AND OTHER STORIES

Feel Brave is a series of books for young children, described by their author as "little stories about big feelings". The aim of the books is to give all children access to tools to help them manage tough emotions. *Gazette Focus* meets *Feel Brave* creator Avril McDonald.

Stories are powerful.

Building on the belief that stories have the power to transform and give courage, ex-primary school teacher turned author Avril McDonald has set about writing a series of books for children aged 4–7 years.

The *Feel Brave* collection includes stories about sharing and being kind, feeling left out, nightmares and worrying, and woven through each book is Avril's expertise in teaching emotional intelligence and self-regulation techniques through the characters.

The ideas for the books come from her own experiences as a child and a mother.

"When I was eight years old I had my first 'panic attack' but nothing was spoken about anxiety disorders at that time, or mental health, for that matter," she says.

"It was only years later when my sister, who was training to be a nurse, came home with some material that explained everything that I had suffered from, that I felt such relief that I wasn't alone!

"This gave me an insatiable curiosity about the mind/body connection. I found the famous coach Tony Robbins and his very simple strategies (often based on cognitive behavioural therapy or neuro-linguistic programming), worked for me in not only helping to manage my anxiety but in reaching my potential. I wondered why we were not teaching these types of strategies to children."

When her daughter had her first nightmare, Avril found that these methods helped to support her.

"I realised that I might be able to help children everywhere manage their own tough emotions by being able to translate powerful strategies to them through characters and stories. *Feel Brave* was born.

"I am a trained teacher, businesswoman and a mum so by creating *Feel Brave*, I was joining all of my dots and doing something creative for myself that hopefully helps to make the world a better place. I think that when you are able to join all of your dots, your work is authentic and can be incredibly fulfilling," she says.

STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

The *Feel Brave* website describes these resources as akin to "Peppa Pig meets Tony Robbins".

"I have always admired the way Tony Robbins can very quickly and simply change phobias or deep emotional blocks with adults and the positive impact he has had on people all around the world just from his books and videos," explains Avril.

"I aspire to do something similar for children by creating a brand that has the appeal and wide reach of something like *Peppa Pig* but that also is teaching powerful strategies at the same time, without children even realising it."

Avril's method involves consulting with child psychologists and other experts to formulate helpful strategies to deal with particular emotional issues. She then takes this advice and builds a story around it.

"This method works and once teachers see it in action they want more of it, so not only is it growing on the ground in schools, we are also in negotiations with one of the world's largest global broadcasters for an animated series, which means we are getting closer to our goal to give all children access to it."

FEEL BRAVE IN NEW ZEALAND

Now living in the UK, Avril maintains her links with home and has now joined forces with the New Zealand-based Life Education Trust to deliver the *Feel Brave* books and strategies through the trust's mobile classrooms.

"I am thrilled to have formally partnered with the Life Education Trust and that they will be using the *Feel Brave* books, resources and characters for their emotional wellbeing lessons all around New Zealand," says Avril.

"We know that the books work like magic for children, but there is only one of me, so in order to now spread the work around the world I need strategic partnerships with people on the ground

sharing it all, which is exactly what the Life Education partnership is doing."

The trust is pleased to be able to add another resource to their programme to support students with resilience strategies – something teachers are increasingly requesting help with.

Life Education Trust chief executive John O'Connell says their team are seeing trends of increased awareness and a willingness to discuss mental health and wellbeing.

He believes collaborating and working with others to provide the best support possible for teachers, children and their whānau is a great way forward.

"Our philosophy is that each child is unique and we have a flexible approach to work with each school to meet their specific needs. *Feel Brave* is a wonderful resource and we can integrate the story and themes with the teacher in their classroom and importantly, in children's homes," says John.

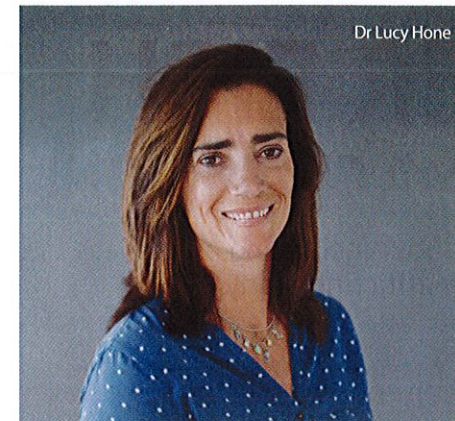
Jo Mortimer, Life Education Trust programme and development manager, agrees, and believes the *Feel Brave* stories and strategies align perfectly to what the trust is trying to do in schools.

"I was really interested in Avril's work and how she introduces young children to ways in which their brain works," she says.

"One of the principles of the Life Education Trust's philosophy is to teach children about the magnificence of the human body. We believe that the more students know about their incredible bodies and how they function, the better they are able to understand what they are experiencing and what their bodies need.

"We are looking forward to integrating the *Feel Brave* resources to help children develop their emotional intelligence," says Jo.

For more information, visit www.feelbrave.com. ★



THE VIRTUES OF 'GRIT'

Dr Lucy Hone is a widely published writer on topics such as resilience, grief, and coping strategies. Her regular columns appear in publications including stuff.co.nz and the *Sunday Star Times*, and she's director of the New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing and Resilience. Dr Hone talks about 'grit', and the importance of patience and perseverance in success.

A decade ago I wrote an article for *North & South* extolling the virtues of cricket. Taking part in a game that unfolds over hours – and, at the professional level, days – teaches our tamariki that good things sometimes take time. As a parent I regarded the somewhat unglamorous game of children's cricket as the 'slow food of sport' – a rare opportunity to teach our children the art and value of patience in a fast-paced world where instant gratification has come to rule.

I've long been intrigued by the findings following on from Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow experiment, whereby those children demonstrating the capacity for delayed gratification as four to six year olds went on to experience better outcomes on a range of variables in later life, including their academic test scores and ability to cope with stress.

More recently, I've been delving deeper into the topics of self-control and 'grit' through the work of Angela Duckworth, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Defining grit as "passion and perseverance for very long term goals", Duckworth's studies suggest that an individual's grit is more strongly predictive of academic achievement than their IQ.

Whether she was studying naval cadets from West Point Military Academy, children participating in the National Spelling Bee competition, or students from a wide variety of schools, the same pattern emerged: grit was the key factor determining success.

Grit, the book she wrote summarising the findings of her studies and other research relating to grit,

became an overnight publishing sensation in America, reflecting a growing appreciation of the importance of considering learning from a motivational perspective.

While I'm not personally a huge fan of the term 'grit' – finding it perhaps too American in a gun-slinging John Wayne-esque kind of way – I have become fascinated by the topic of perseverance and the mechanisms through which we can stay motivated to achieve our goals over time, and despite obstacles.

In my opinion, too much emphasis is still put on the limited remit of 'goal setting' in our schools, with insufficient attention applied to the all-important related area of 'goal planning'. Here I find Rick Snyder and Shane Lopez's hope theory a useful addition to traditional pedagogy, emphasising as it does the importance of both the *will power* and the *way power* aspects of our goals.

Will power concerns agency thinking ('why is this goal important to me?'; 'what will motivate me to go the distance?') while way power refers to pathways thinking (the perceived capacity to find routes to desired goals by anticipating obstacles we may encounter and envisaging strategies to find a way around them). I'd love to see schools introduce these conversations into their student planning meetings next year.

Likewise, useful recent additions to the literature have been Caroline Adams-Miller's *Getting Grit* and Caren Baruch-Feldman's *The Grit Guide for Teens*.

The Baruch-Feldman workbook, particularly, makes a worthwhile addition to any secondary school's

teaching resources for the way it provides students with research-based scientific strategies shown to enhance self-control (situation selection, situation modification, selective attention, cognitive change and response modulation) and draws attention to the areas of their life where they already demonstrate passion and perseverance, asking how can you build on that? It's written for teens and encourages them to consider grit across five distinct life domains – academic grit, social/relationship grit, health grit, extracurricular grit, and emotional grit.

Ultimately, we all do better when we set ourselves up for success, identifying obstacles and planning for alternatives. Let's dedicate more time to understanding what motivates our students, to the way power that will help them navigate their way around obstacles, to identifying the strengths and self-efficacy that has enabled past successes, to sharing with them the neuroscience indicating their brains' ability to learn new things and master new skills, and to helping them identify the strategies underlying success in one life domain and then consider how these might transfer to support goals in other areas. Let's notice where they do demonstrate grit in their current lives and build on the ingredients of that.

Dr Lucy Hone, a research associate at AUT University, will be a keynote speaker at the Positive Education New Zealand conference on 6–7 April 2018. ★

FRIDAY & SATURDAY
6 – 7
APRIL
2018
CHRIST'S COLLEGE,
CHRISTCHURCH

REGISTER NOW AT
positiveeducation.nz

Positive Education
New Zealand
Conference 2018
will address topics and
key questions facing
decision makers and
educators wanting to
implement, evaluate
and promote wellbeing
in your school.

Positive Education
New Zealand 2018

REGISTER NOW!

Register by 14 DECEMBER for early bird discount
Register 4 from your school and the 5th is FREE!