Big Feelings, Bigger Hearts (and a Little Help from a Sukkah)

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

Education as a career path and life goal began for me in 1992 with my graduation with a BS in Psychology from Binghamton University. That fall, I entered my master's program in Early Childhood Education at the same university, different school and I never looked back! With many relevant degrees, over 3 decades of hands-on experience, Early Childhood Education is my passion, my raison d'etre, my tachlit, my reason for being.

If you've been anywhere near a young child lately, (maybe during Rosh HaShanah services?) you've probably witnessed a full-body meltdown over the wrong color cup, a shrieking negotiation over whose turn it is on the tricycle, or a tearful collapse because a friend said "you can't play with us." If this is you right now — take a breath. You are not doing anything wrong, and neither is your child. Big feelings are not a behavior problem to fix. They're a developmental milestone to walk through, together.

Feelings First, Skills Second

Here's the truth every early childhood educator learns early: young children feel everything before they can name anything. Their emotional world is enormous, but their vocabulary and self-regulation skills are still tiny. When we rush to shut down the tears ("You're fine!") or the anger ("Stop it right now!"), we accidentally teach children that their feelings are unwelcome — rather than teaching them what to *do* with those feelings.

In Judaism, we have a beautiful value called *kol hakavod la'lev* — honor for the heart. Our tradition doesn't ask us to suppress emotion; it asks us to bring intention to it. Think of how many of our holidays make space for the full range of human feeling — joy, grief, gratitude, longing — all within the same calendar year. We don't skip the hard parts. We build rituals around them.

Sukkot: A Lesson in Fragile, Beautiful Feelings

This time of year gives us the perfect metaphor: the sukkah. It's temporary. It's a little wobbly. The roof lets the stars — and sometimes the rain — right in. And yet we sit in it, we eat in it, we invite friends into it (*hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests), and we call it a season of joy — *z'man simchateinu*.

A child's big feeling is a lot like a sukkah. It's temporary. It shakes a little. It lets everything in — no walls up. And our job isn't to build a sturdier structure to keep the feelings out. It's to sit *inside* it with our child until the storm passes.

Strategies to Try at Home

- **Name it to tame it.** "You're so frustrated that Maya took the shovel." Naming the feeling out loud helps a child's brain move from the reactive amygdala toward the thinking, problem-solving prefrontal cortex.
- **Offer a body-safe outlet.** Stomping, squeezing a pillow, blowing out "candles" (deep breaths) — give the big feeling somewhere to go.
- **Practice the words before they need them.** "You can say, 'I don't like that' or 'My turn is coming.'" Children need scripts, not just intentions.
- **Model repair.** After a friend conflict, guide a simple repair: "Are you okay? Do you want to build it again together?" This is our version of *teshuvah* — the turning back toward relationship after rupture.
- **Stay calm and near.** You don't have to solve it. You just have to be a steady sukkah wall while the feeling moves through.

The Bigger Picture

When we let children feel their big feelings — instead of rushing them past — we're not creating "difficult" kids. We're raising children who know their emotions are survivable, who can tolerate discomfort in others, and who grow into the kind of friends, partners, and community members who show up for each other even when things are shaky.

Just like our sukkah: not permanent, not perfect — but full of connection anyway.

#ChagSameach and #ShabbatShalom!