

You Have Feelings All the Time

Deborah Farmer Kris

Illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin



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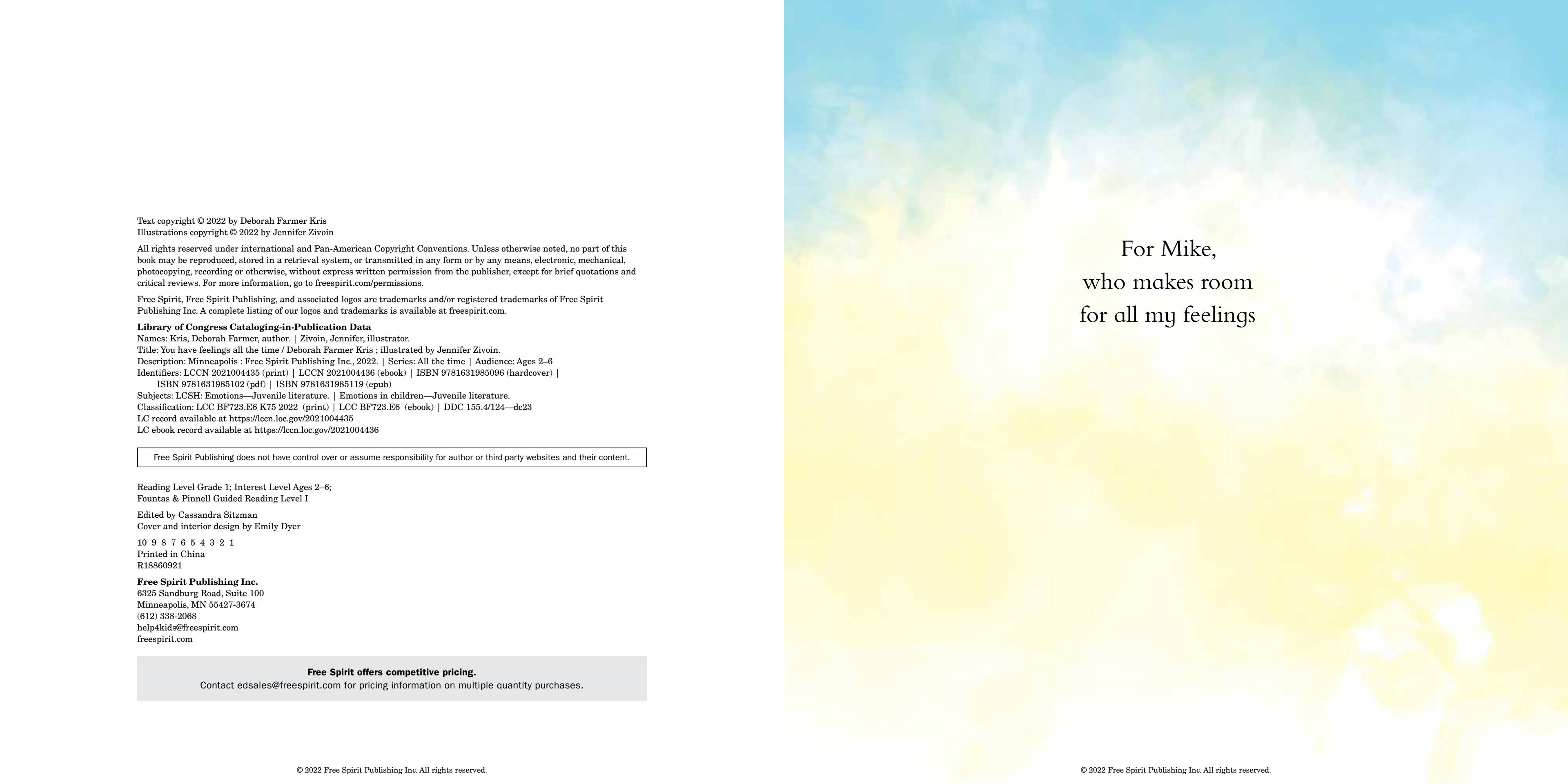
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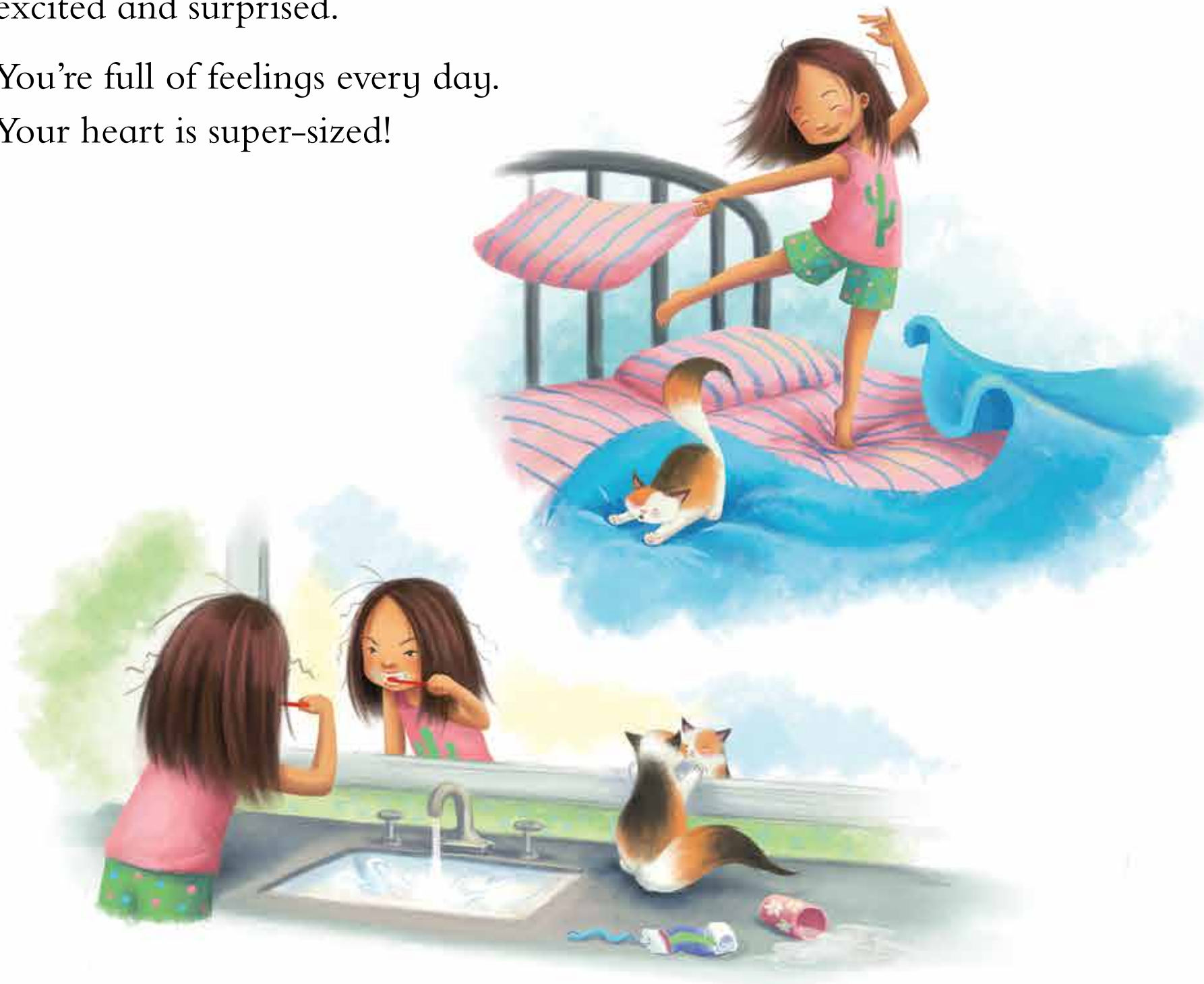
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For Mike,
who makes room
for all my feelings

Happy, angry, sad, and scared,
excited and surprised.

You're full of feelings every day.
Your heart is super-sized!



You have feelings all the time.

Sometimes you sport a goofy grin,
and everything seems funny!



But sometimes you feel grumpy till
there's food inside your tummy.



You have feelings all the time.

➔ A Letter to Caregivers ➔

When my daughter was two, she was terrified of houseflies. Every time a fly buzzed near her, she would scream. After a few rough days, I had an idea. What if we named the fly “Bob”? What if we gave Bob a personality—a favorite color, a favorite food, a reason for visiting our house.

It worked. Instead of screaming, she began saying, “Hi, Bob. You came back!”

So much of my parenting and teaching comes down to some version of Bob the Fly: First, you name it. Name the feeling you are experiencing—whether it’s fear, sadness, anger, or excitement. If we can name it, we can talk about it.

I often draw inspiration from Fred Rogers, who spoke to children clearly, calmly, and concretely about emotions. “Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable,” he once wrote. “When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary.” Helping young children develop an emotional vocabulary is powerful. In this book, you’ve found depictions of over a dozen emotions. You’ve seen children feeling happy, angry, sad, scared, excited, surprised, silly, grumpy, proud, frustrated, confident, connected, worried, relieved, peaceful, comforted, and loved.

Young children have big feelings *all the time*. When we help them recognize and name those feelings, we help them learn to manage their feelings in the moment—an important life skill. Here are a few ideas you can try in your home or classroom.

Four Ideas for Helping Children Manage Big Feelings

1. Name Emotions

Toddlers and preschoolers have limited (but growing!) expressive language skills. Caregivers can “listen” to children’s behavior—be it yelling, pushing, crying, or withdrawing—and help them put a name to what they are feeling. Sometimes we want to jump to a solution, but it’s important to first acknowledge the emotion. This might sound like:

- “You look mad. Your friend scribbled on your picture, and that doesn’t feel good.”
- “You look sad. You forgot to bring your stuffy for naptime, and I know how much you love that stuffy. It’s okay to feel sad.”

As children mature, you can use this strategy to introduce more nuanced feelings to build their emotional vocabulary: “You sound frustrated. Your tower fell down and you worked hard to make it tall! That’s disappointing.” Or, “You look startled. That thunder was really loud, and it surprised you.”

Sometimes you will get it wrong! And as children get better at understanding and expressing emotions, that can be a great conversation starter. As my eight-year-old daughter told me the other day, “I’m not mad, Mom, I’m nervous. Sometimes when I’m nervous, I act mad.” Me too!



2. Normalize Emotions

It’s important not to classify emotions as good or bad. We all have feelings all the time, and they are all normal. Even so, strong emotions can scare or overwhelm children, so normalizing their reactions—helping them see that everyone feels mad, sad, or scared sometimes—can comfort them and build their perspective-taking skills.

Try this: after the child has calmed down, circle back and briefly summarize what happened, including how the child felt. Then, remind the child that everyone—including you—feels this way sometimes.

This might sound like:

“When grandma left this morning, it seemed like you felt very sad and mad. You kicked me and cried. You wanted grandma to stay and play with you. Everyone feels sad and mad sometimes. I felt sad when grandma left too. I like talking with her and watching her read books to you. Do you want to draw her a picture or call her tomorrow to say hello?”

As you revisit emotional events, don’t be surprised if a child wants to hear the story about “the time I got mad at the grocery store” multiple times. But such repetition has its benefits. With the triggering event safely in the past, you and the child can use it as a reference point to talk about how they are growing in their ability to manage their emotions.

3. Practice Emotional Regulation Skills

We can’t always control how we feel, but we can make choices about what we *do* when we have strong feelings. That’s called emotional regulation. When children are feeling intense emotions—such as anger, frustration, or fear—they tend to have less impulse

control. But once those emotions start to settle, it’s easier to problem-solve with them and to practice self-regulation skills. Here are a few strategies to help calm these emotional storms.

My favorite technique for both children and adults is mindful breathing. When we are upset, our breathing often becomes fast and shallow. It’s a normal biological response to stress. But when we take deep breaths through our nose, we send a message back to the brain: “It’s okay to calm down.” In moments of peace, practice these breathing strategies with children, and then guide them to use the strategies when big feelings arise:

- **Birthday Cake:** Pretend your fingers are birthday candles and blow them out one by one.
- **Breathing Buddies:** Lie on your back, put a favorite stuffed animal on your tummy, and watch that animal slowly move up and down as you inhale and exhale.
- **Square Breathing:** Breathe in through the nose to the count of four. Hold the breath to the count of four. Breathe out to the count of four. Then hold to the count of four. Repeat two or three times. Counting can help children focus their mind on breathing and distract them from stressors.

