


WORKING WITH STUDENTS
WITH COMPLEX NEEDS &
TRAUMA INFORMED
APPROACHES

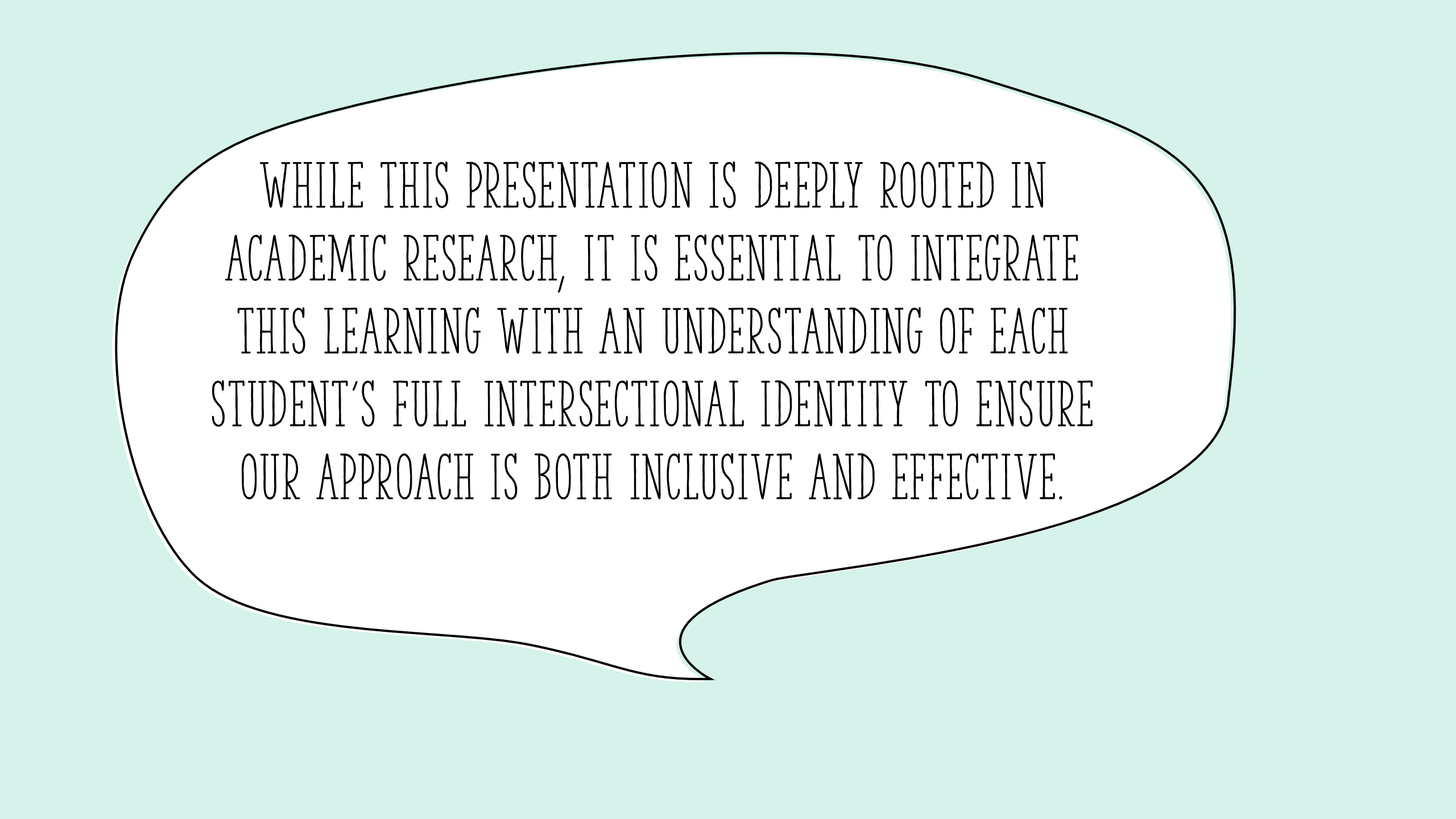
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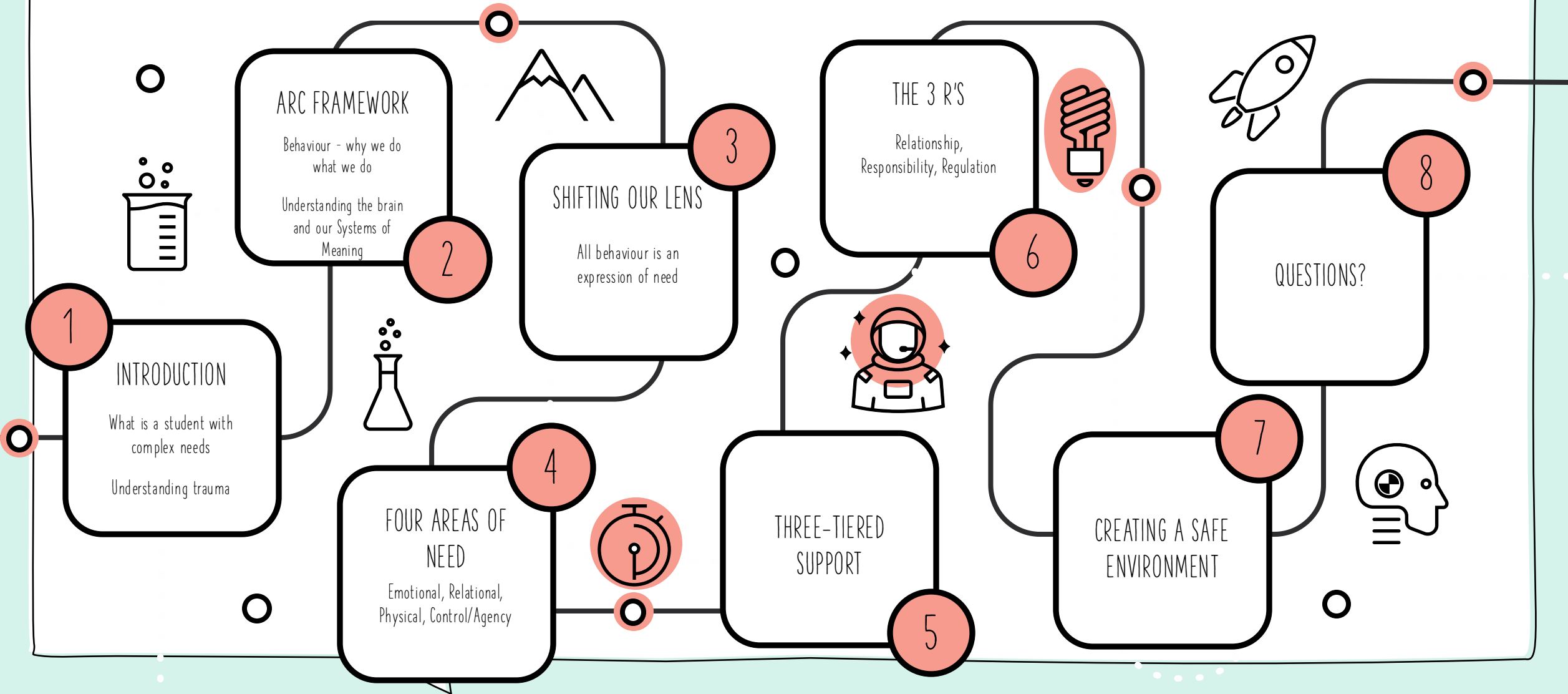
“Beneath every behavior is **A FEELING**.
And beneath every feeling is **A NEED**.
And when we meet that need
rather than focus on the behavior,
we begin to deal with **THE CAUSE**
not the symptom.

—ASHLEIGH WARNER
PSYCHOLOGIST



WHILE THIS PRESENTATION IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN
ACADEMIC RESEARCH, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO INTEGRATE
THIS LEARNING WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF EACH
STUDENT'S FULL INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY TO ENSURE
OUR APPROACH IS BOTH INCLUSIVE AND EFFECTIVE.

ROADMAP FOR THE WORKSHOP



TRAUMA INFORMED PRINCIPLES

1. Create a physically and emotionally safe environment.
2. Build trust through consistency and transparency.
3. Encourage support among students.
4. Work collaboratively with students, families, and colleagues.
5. Empower students by giving them a voice and choices.
6. Recognize and address cultural, historical, and gender considerations.

WHAT ARE COMPLEX NEEDS?

'Complex needs' refers to students with unique learning, social and/or communication strengths and needs that intersect with their identity, thus creating complexities. These students may have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Intellectual Disability, Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), or may have no diagnosis at all. Students with complex needs may have an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

1. Trauma is real.
2. Trauma is prevalent. In a 2023 study, almost two-thirds of adult Canadian's reported that they had been exposed to a potentially traumatic event at some point in their lives.
3. Trauma refers to experiences that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope. These experiences can vary and can impact each person differently.
4. Trauma impacts brain development, emotional regulation, behaviour, and learning.
5. Students who have a trauma history may exhibit hypervigilance, aggression, withdrawal or difficulty concentrating.
6. In our schools we need to be prepared to support students who have experienced trauma, even if we do not know who they are.

COMMON CAUSES OF TRAUMA

Child Abuse

(physical, emotional, sexual,
neglect)

Substance Misuse

Medical Trauma

Inter-Generational
Trauma

Grief

Bullying

Separation from
Loved Ones

Racism

Witness/victim of
violence

War/Terrorism

Mental Illness

Serious Accident or
Life-Threatening Illness



DEFENSIVE
RESPONSES RELATED
TO TRAUMA

INDICATORS OF TRAUMA IN COMPLEX STUDENTS

Indicators of Trauma in Autistic Learners:

- Increased repetitive behaviors
- Heightened sensory sensitivities
- Withdrawal or aggression
- Changes in communication patterns

Indicators of Trauma in Learners with Down Syndrome:

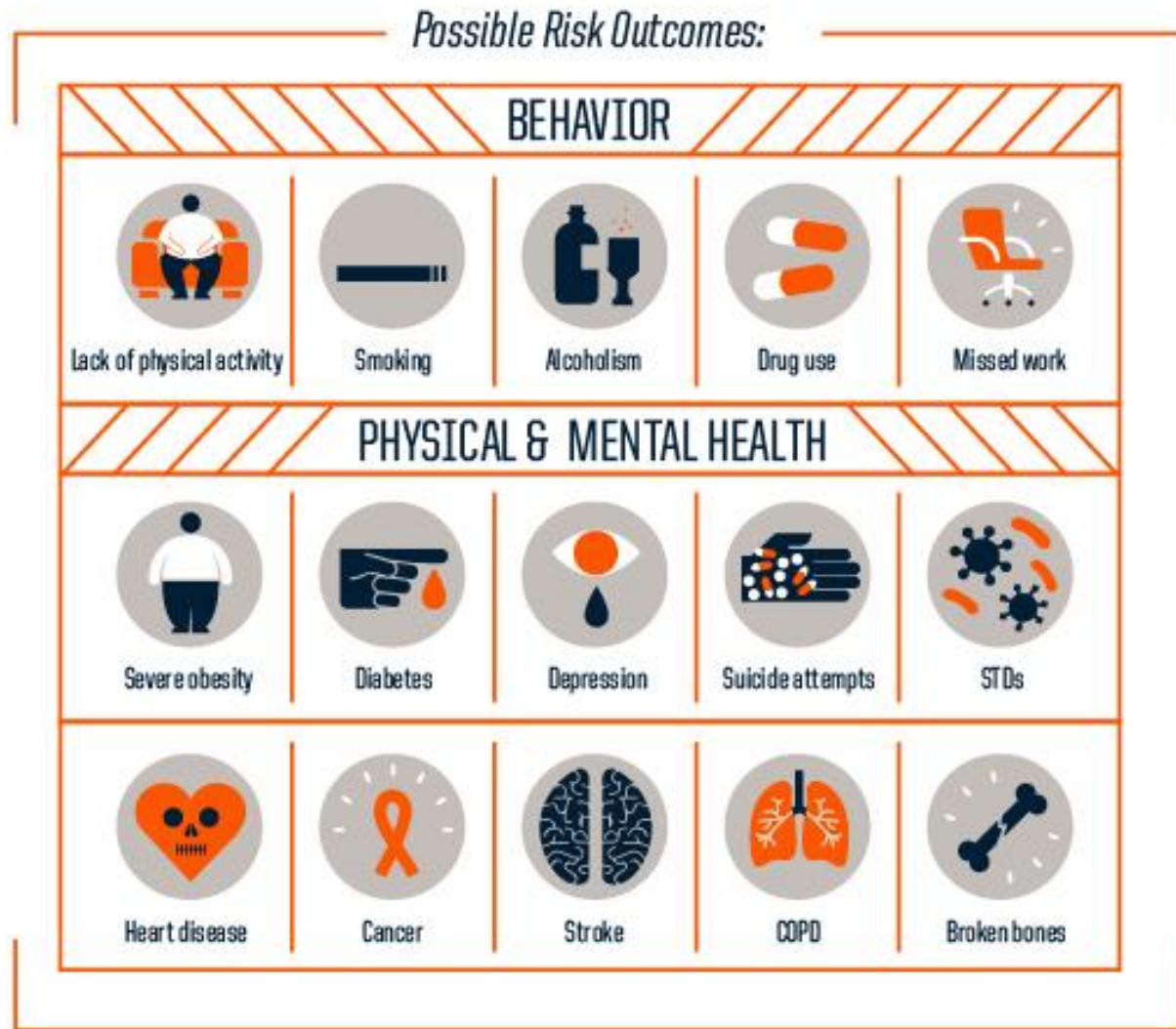
- Regression in skills or behaviors
- Increased anxiety or depression
- Disrupted sleep patterns
- Behavioral changes like withdrawal or aggression

Indicators of Trauma in Learners with ADHD:

- Heightened impulsivity or hyperactivity
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increased emotional outbursts
- Sleep disturbances

Indicators of Trauma in Learners with Learning Disabilities:

- Increased frustration or anger
- Avoidance of academic tasks
- Changes in academic performance
- Emotional withdrawal



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019
Credit: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

POSSIBLE RISK
OUTCOMES OF
CHILDHOOD
TRAUMA

ARC FRAMEWORK

1. Fight-Flight-Freeze Response/Need for Safety or Having an Unmet Need

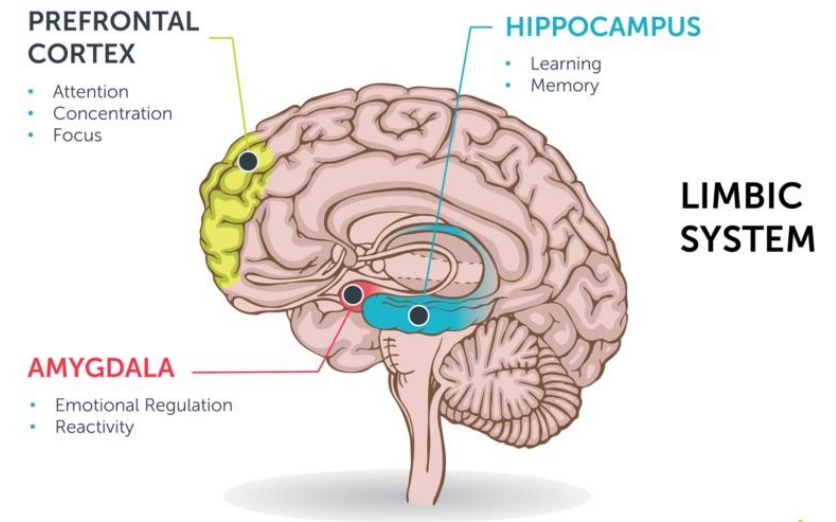
Behaviour
(Why we do what we do)

2. How our Brain Was Trained to Respond

3. Systems of Meaning

LIMBIC SYSTEM

- The limbic system is the survival part of our brain.
- Controls arousal, emotion and the fight-flight-freeze response
- When someone feels threatened or perceives a threat, the "downstairs brain" takes charge. When this happens, a student's capacity to learn and retain information is disrupted.
- The "upstairs brain" enables us to think, reason and maintain flexibility. It is primarily responsible for regulating the downstairs brain.
- If the limbic system is primed to remain on alert, people may startle easier, have difficulty recognizing facial and social cues and have difficulty sleeping.



ARC FRAMEWORK

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IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

- Brains are wired to survive, not thrive.
- Physical health and secure attachments can impact one's capacity for healthy behaviour.
- A child's brain development can be impacted by trauma, genetics, toxic or negative environmental exposures, or simply due to the way they were cared for pre- and postnatally.
- As a result a child may have difficulty understanding and coping with their feelings, blame themselves for not succeeding, lack of trust in others, become overdependent on others, have a diagnosis or chronic health issue that impedes development, or have difficulty reading social cues.

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Behaviour
(Why we do what we do)

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SYSTEMS OF MEANING



Age



Culture



Race



**Previous
Experiences**



Beliefs



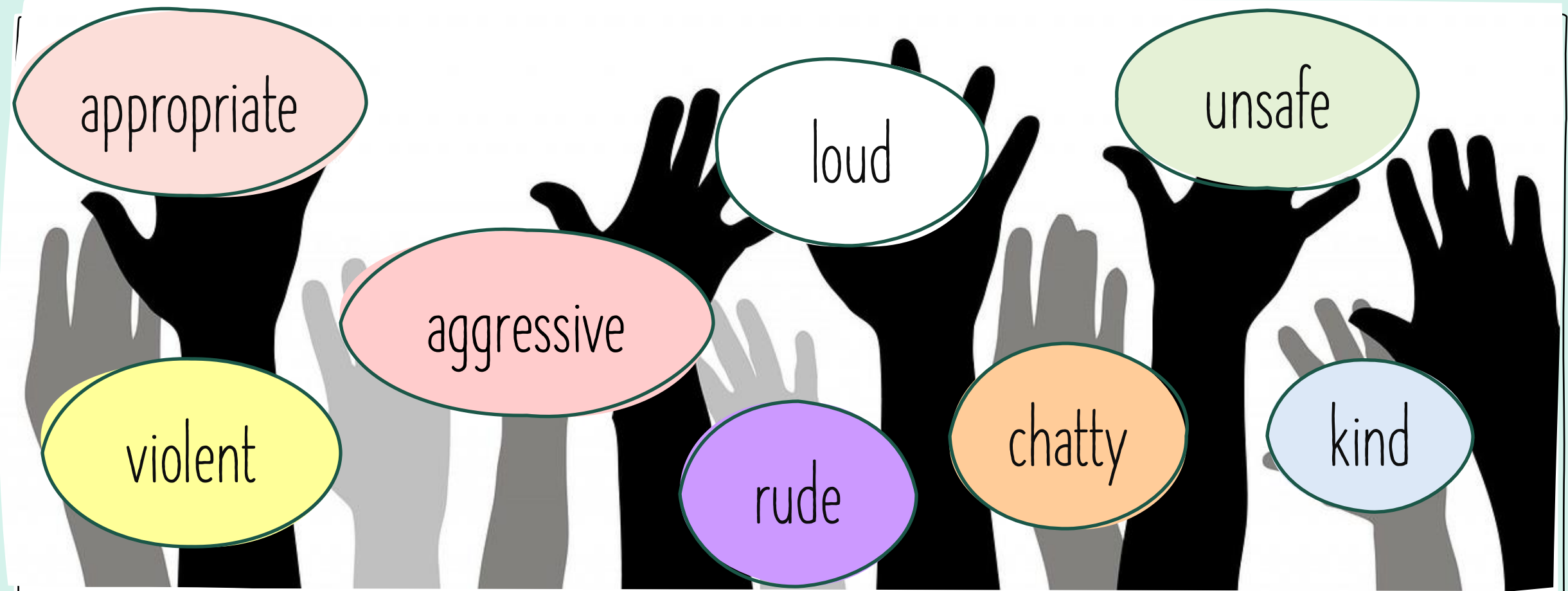
Faith



**Stress
level**



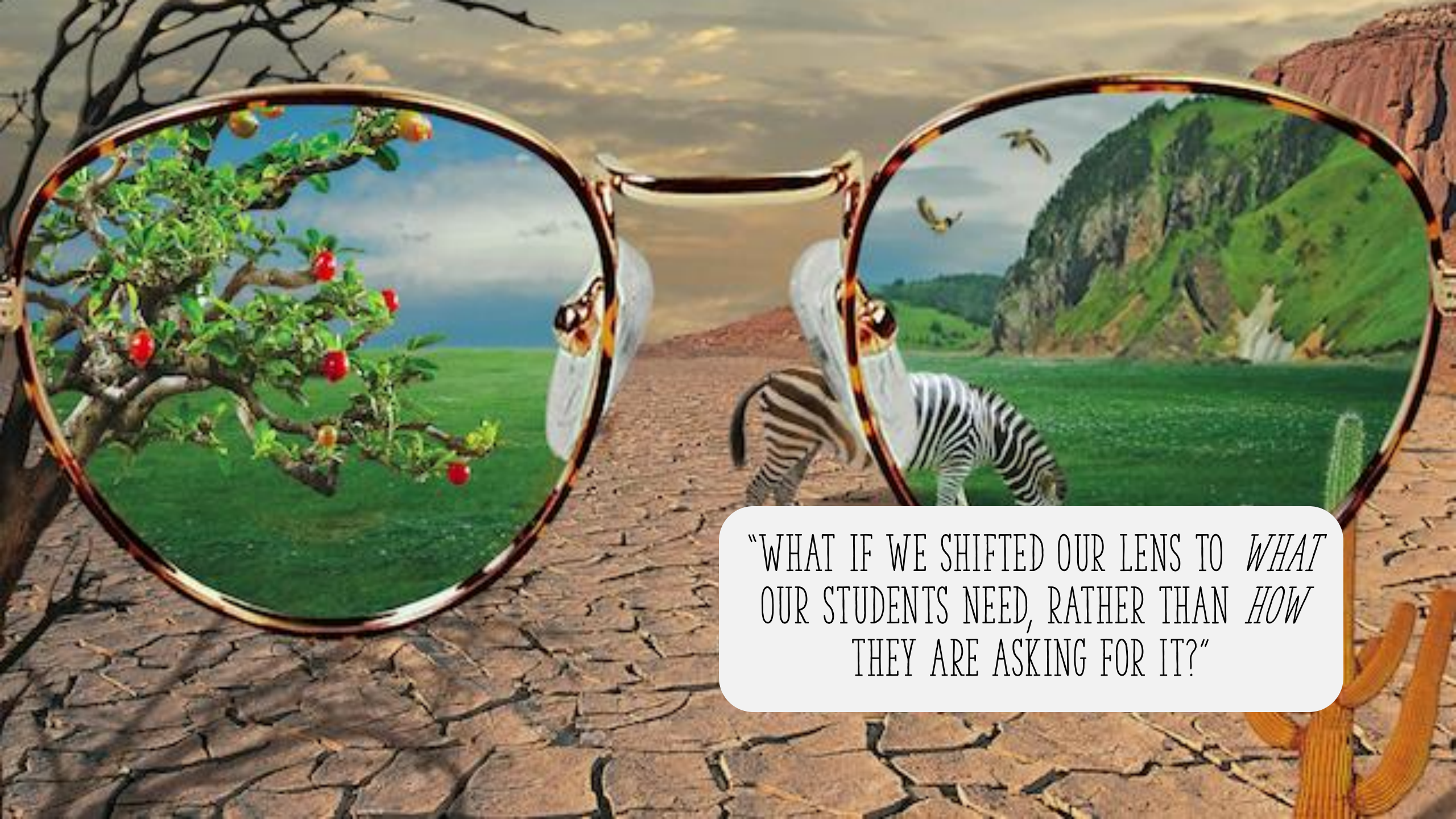
Time of day



HOW DO WE TALK ABOUT STUDENT BEHAVIOURS?



ALL BEHAVIOUR IS AN
EXPRESSION OF NEED



"WHAT IF WE SHIFTED OUR LENS TO *WHAT*
OUR STUDENTS NEED, RATHER THAN *HOW*
THEY ARE ASKING FOR IT?"

THE FOUR AREAS OF NEED

1. Emotional - the need to be regulated and in the "upstairs brain" (safe)
2. Relational - the need to feel connected and to belong.
3. Physical - the need to have our basic physiological and biological needs met for survival.
4. Control/Agency - the need to have a say.

LET'S REEXAMINE THE LIST OF BEHAVIOURAL DESCRIPTORS

Can you identify an unmet need that might be at the root of each behaviour?

- Manipulative
- Immature
- Prone to negotiation
- Clingy
- Aggressive
- Eager to please
- Bossy
- Disinterested
- Passive-aggressive
- Attention-seeking
- Oppositional
- Overly sweet

CASE STUDY: CHARLIE

Charlie is a fictional (but realistic) 3rd grade student who struggles with the start of their day. Their educator is starting to feel some anxiety and frustration because Charlie's behaviour is so unpredictable. Some days, they come in smiling and ready to work, they are pleasant and kind and a joy to have in class. Other days, they come in scowling and attempt to pick fights with the other students. Charlie gets aggressive and will often push or shove a classmate. Occasionally, they come in and immediately burst into tears and curl up in a ball under the back desk. The educator acknowledges that they feel as though they're walking on eggshells and that Charlie is determining the direction the class will go every day. The educator is at a loss as to what to do with Charlie.



WHEN SHOULD YOU ENGAGE WITH CHARLIE?

- A. First thing in the morning when they arrive, so we can support their day.
- B. When Charlie is dysregulated, so we can uncover the cause of stress.
- C. When they are regulated, so their upstairs brain is free to process.
- D. Never; Charlie is too young, so we should just observe and connect with their adults at home instead.

THREE-TIERED SUPPORT

Tier 1 - Universal

- They are whole-school, whole-class structures that every student should be able to rely on and expect.

Tier 2 - For students who "bubble up" from Tier 1 and need a little more support to be learning ready.

- They may be in small groups, for a limited time, as needed supports.

Tier 3 - Intensive, specific interventions for students to participate and experience positive outcomes.

- They may support an individual's unmet needs and teach skills & strategies specific to the individual

THE THREE R'S



Relationship



Responsibility



Regulation

RELATIONSHIP

A meaningful connection with another human being - in particular, a student's relationship with an educator.



"Kids don't learn from people they don't like" - Rita Pierson

UNIVERSAL RELATIONSHIP STRATEGIES

- 1 Communicate effectively
- 2 Be supportive and encouraging
- 3 Be patient and understanding
- 4 Maintain a positive classroom environment

CASE STUDY

Situation Overview: You are supporting multiple students who have impulse control issues, causing significant disruptions in the classroom. The challenge is to re-engage the students into the learning environment..

Commonality: This situation is not unique. It resonates with educators across various settings, highlighting a universal challenge in education.

Key Question: What are strategies that you can use to support regulation and continued learning of students?

RESPONSIBILITY

A sense of self-worth, ability, and competence. A child with these traits can more easily engage in learning and mastering tasks.

"Intense focus on external factors, [such as determining whether they are safe or unsafe], supersedes students' ability to internalize how they affect their surroundings. This impedes the development of responsibility."



RESPONSIBILITY

WHEN WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONALITIES (ASD, DD, DS, ETC.)

Teaching responsibility involves helping students understand their role in their learning and behavior. For students with special needs, this can mean adapting expectations to match their abilities while still encouraging independence and self-management.

Examples:

- Learning to make choices that are in their best interest.
- Using visual schedules or checklists to help them track their responsibilities.

RESPONSIBILITY UNIVERSAL STRATEGIES

1. Say *yet*.
2. Provide clear expectations.
3. Set goals, create action plans and monitor progress often.
4. Flexible seating.
5. Assigned seating.
6. Teach grit.
7. Assign jobs.
8. Alert to schedule changes.
9. Explicitly point out cause and effect.
10. Use positive self-talk.

REGULATION

The ability to take in stimuli and manage emotional and behavioural responses accordingly. Regulated students can access reason in their upstairs brain.

Regulation

Staying in our upstairs brain!
Targeted outcome of the other 2 Rs

Relationship helps
our students achieve
regulated states.

Responsibility helps
our students self-
regulate



REGULATION

WHEN WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH EXCEPTIONALITIES (ASD, DD, DS, ETC.)

For students with special needs, developing self-regulation skills can be challenging but is essential for their overall success and well-being.

- Emotional Regulation: This might involve helping them identify when they are feeling overwhelmed, teaching them breathing exercises, or providing a quiet space where they can go to calm down. Teaching strategies on how to manage and reduce anxiety as well as improving focus.
- Behavioral Regulation: Techniques can include using visual cues, social stories, or role-playing scenarios to practice appropriate responses in various situations.
- Sensory Regulation: Many students with special needs may have sensory processing challenges that affect their ability to focus and learn. Providing sensory breaks, using sensory tools (ex. fidget toys or weighted blankets), or adjusting the classroom environment to reduce sensory overload can help these students maintain regulation throughout the day.

UNIVERSAL REGULATION STRATEGIES

1. Play soothing music
2. Offer a stress ball or a worry stone
3. Play catch
4. Let students choose where to work
5. Keep students' hands busy
6. Offer a brain break
(calisthenics, yoga, moving around the room, switching seats, cross-lateral exercises, meditation, getting a drink of water)
7. Consult board OT/BCBA for strategies specific to your student's needs.



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT



UNDERSTAND THE
IMPORTANCE OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



CREATE CONSISTENT
ROUTINES AND
STRUCTURE



CREATE A SENSORY
FRIENDLY
ENVIRONMENT



INCLUDE TRAUMA
INFORMED PRACTICES



PROVIDE
INDIVIDUALIZED
SUPPORT PLANS

RESOURCES



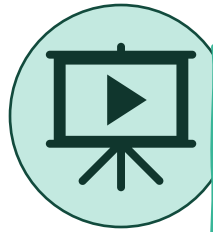
Websites to Explore:

[School Mental Health Ontario](#)

[Mehrit Centre](#)

[Executive Functioning](#)

[camh - Child Trauma Toolkit](#)



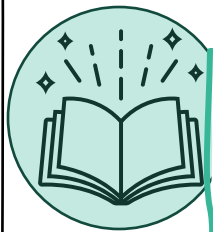
Videos to Watch:

[Self Reg in 60 Seconds](#)

[The Limbic Brain & Its Role in Trauma](#)

[Upstairs Brain Downstairs Brain](#)

[Self-Reg Misconceptions](#)



Texts to Read:

Relationship, Responsibility and Regulation: Trauma-Invested Practices for Fostering Resilient Learners by Kristin VanMarter Souers with Pete Hall

Equity Centred Trauma-Informed Education by Alex Shevrin Venet

Building a Trauma Informed Restorative School: Skills and Approaches for Improving Culture and Behaviour by Joe Brummer

I AM COMMITTED TO APPLYING THIS LEARNING BY
ADAPTING MY PRACTICE TO BETTER ADDRESS THE
DIVERSE NEEDS OF MY STUDENTS, ENSURING THAT
MY APPROACH IS BOTH INFORMED AND RESPONSIVE
TO THEIR UNIQUE CONTEXTS BY.....

TAKE AWAY