

Supporting Pupils With Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)

Aimee Cave

ADHD & Beyond
Training Solutions



Aimee Cave
ADHD & Beyond Training Solutions
aimee@adhdandbeyond.uk

In this session, we will:

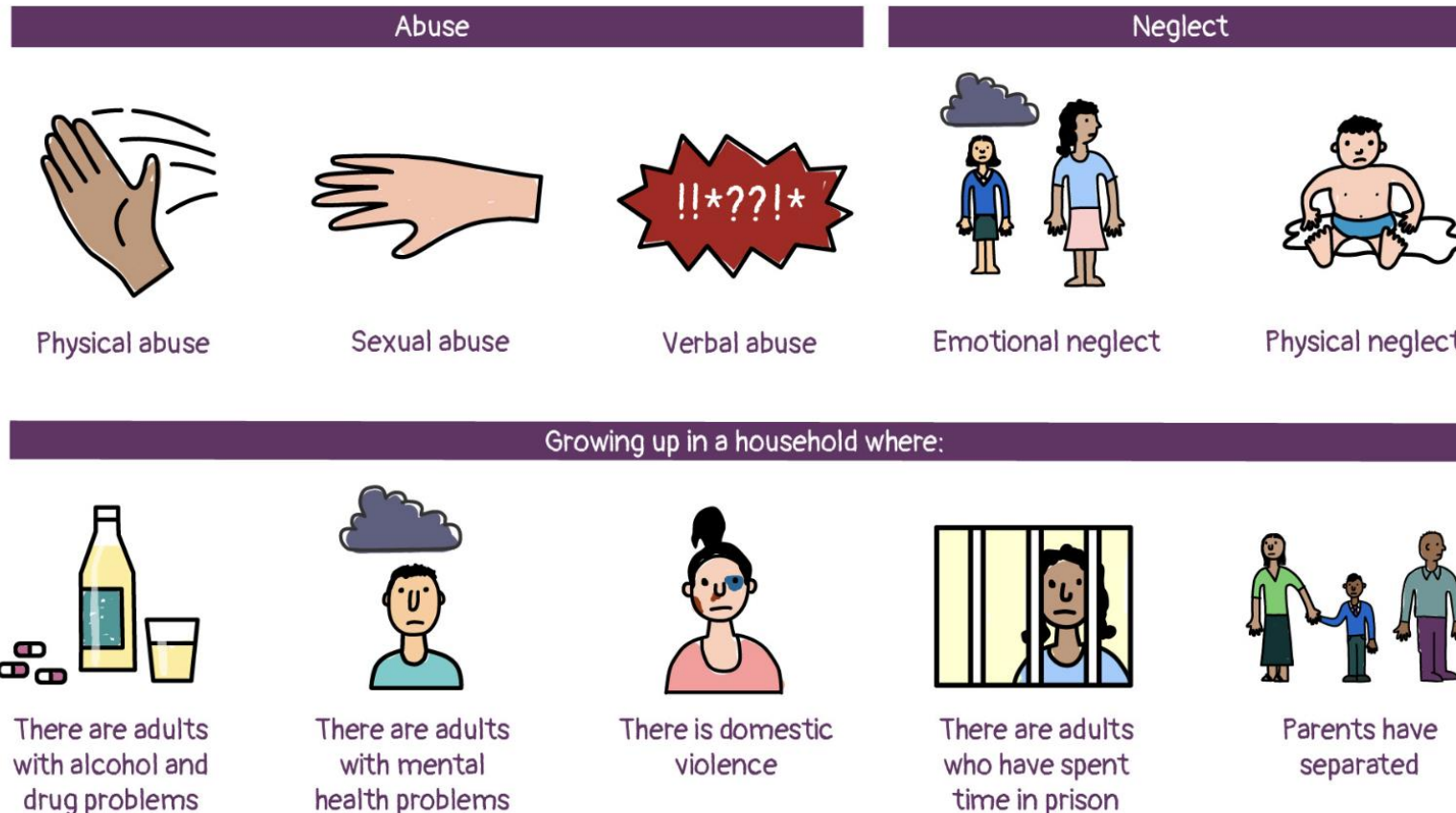
- ☒ Share how to support pupils who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their impact on learning and behaviour.
- Delve into practical strategies for creating trauma-informed classrooms.
- Consider how we can support resilience and recovery through connection, adapting our classroom practice to help children feel seen, heard and supported.



What are ACEs?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful or traumatic experiences that can greatly impact children and young people throughout their lives.

The ten widely recognised ACEs, as identified in a US study from the 1990s, are:



Expanded ACEs Proposed By Researchers

Family / Household Factors:

- Parental unemployment
- Parental chronic illness or disability
- Loss of a parent or caregiver
- Exposure to parental discrimination or bias

Community / Environmental Factors:

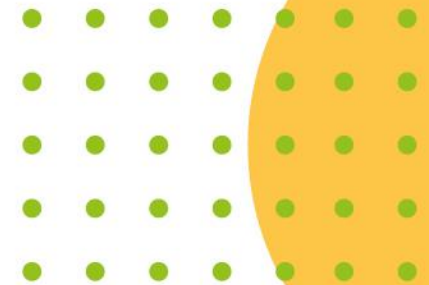
- Bullying or peer victimisation
- Community violence (neighbourhood crime, shootings)
- Racial or ethnic discrimination
- Homelessness
- Poverty / food insecurity

Other Adversities:

- Foster care or frequent moves
- Exposure to natural disasters
- Serious accidents or medical trauma
- Witnessing severe injury or death

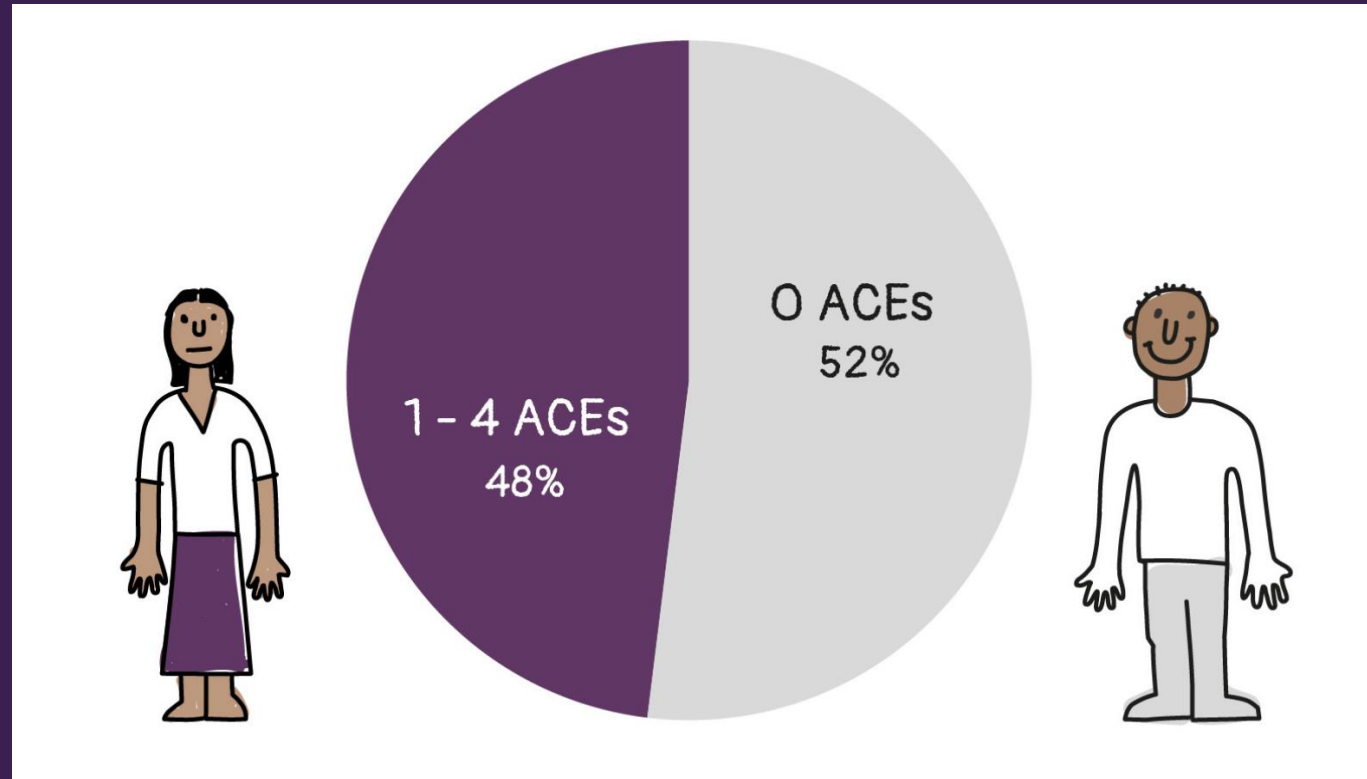


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How Common Are ACEs?

In England, almost half of adults have experienced at least one ACE, and 10% experienced four or more.

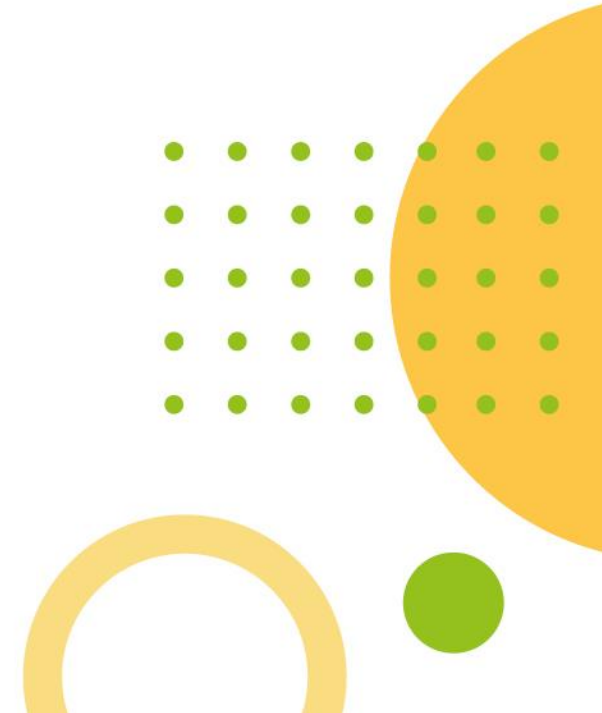
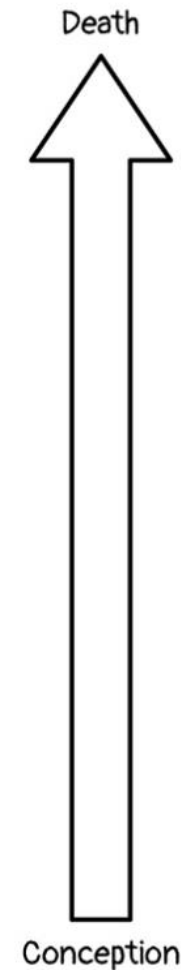
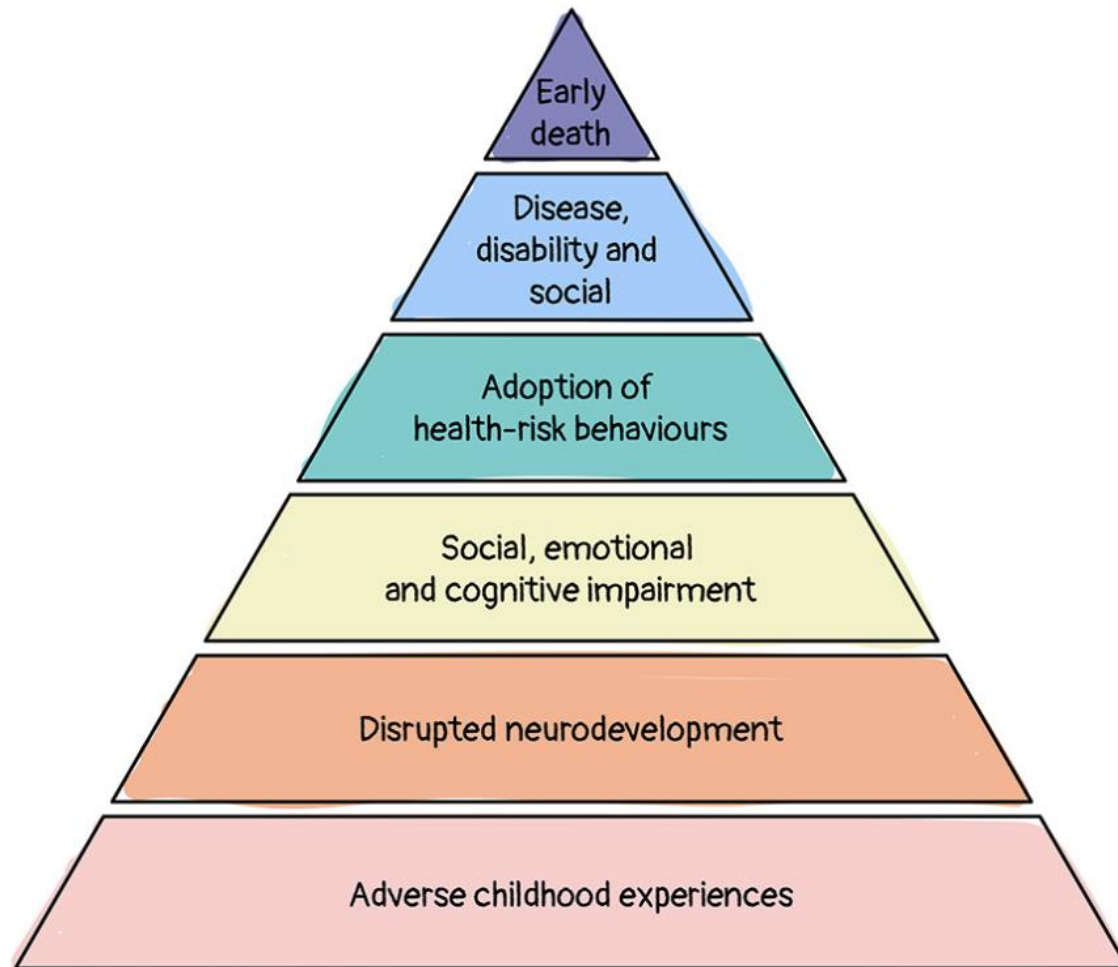


Impact of ACEs

- **0–1:** Low adversity; no elevated health risk
 - **2–3:** Moderate adversity; mild increase in stress-related risks
 - **4+:** Higher adversity; greater risk for mental & physical health challenges
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- ACE score shows **number of adversity types—not severity**
 - Protective factors and support can **significantly reduce risks**

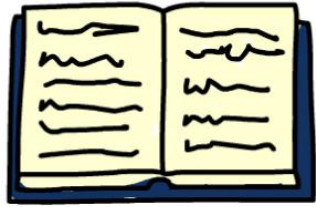


ACEs Pyramid



Impact of ACEs

In addition, ACEs can have a lasting effect on health and wellbeing across the life course. Above all, this can result in profound adverse effects on...



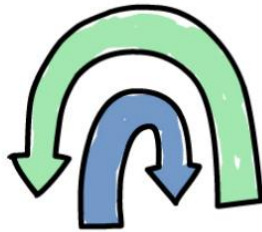
learning



behaviours



emotions



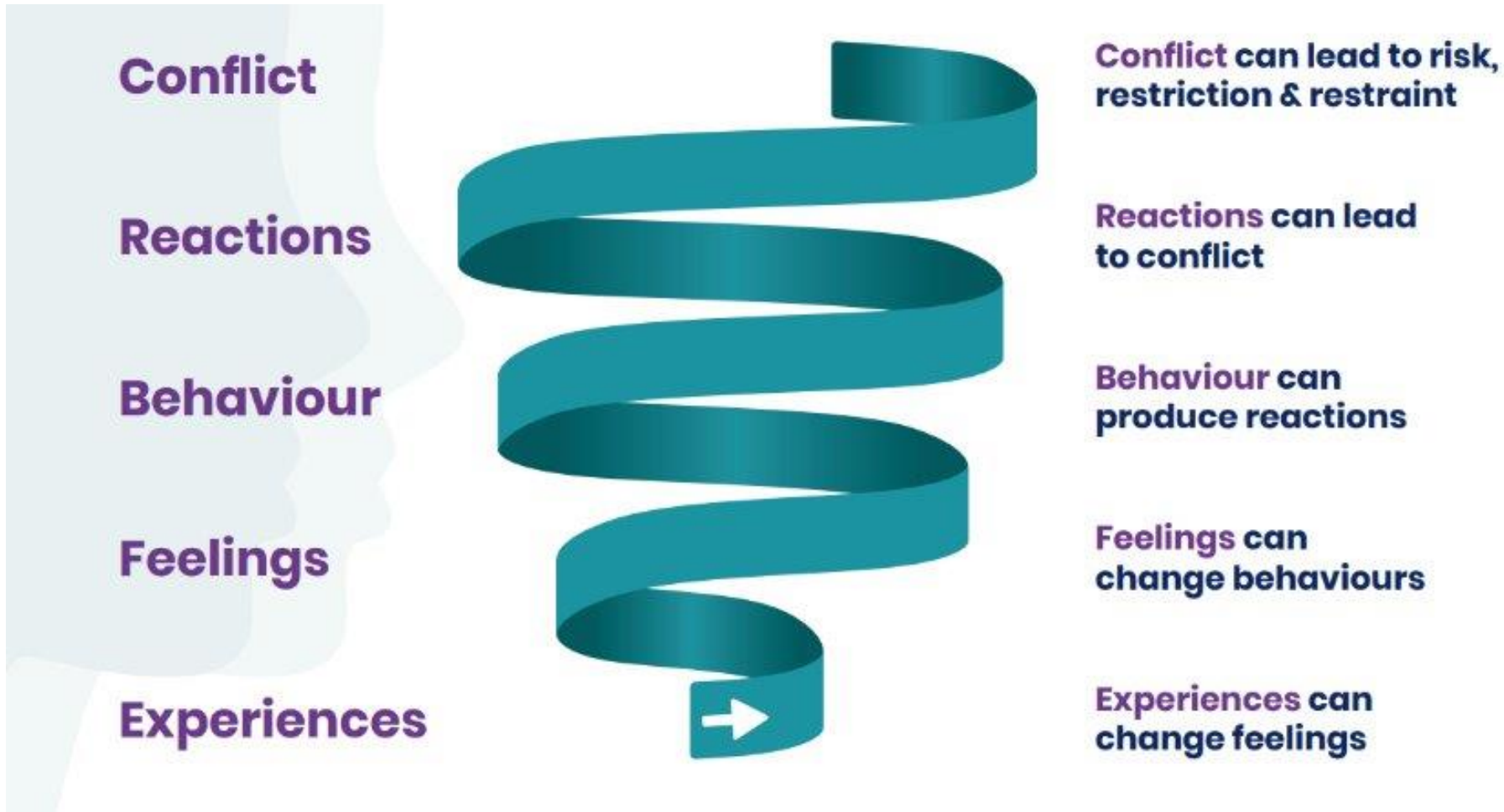
lifelong
opportunities



physical
health



Conflict Spiral

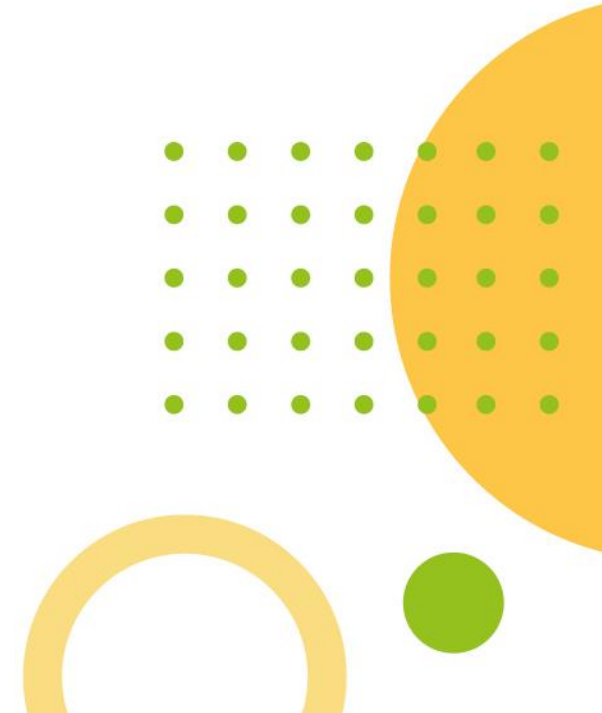


Impact of ACEs

- ACEs do not define a person.
- The statistics show an association, not a causation, between ACEs and later health outcomes.
- The findings highlight the importance of providing support for young people who have experienced adversity or trauma.
- It is crucial to remind young people that their ACEs do not determine their identity or future.
- We can reshape experiences!



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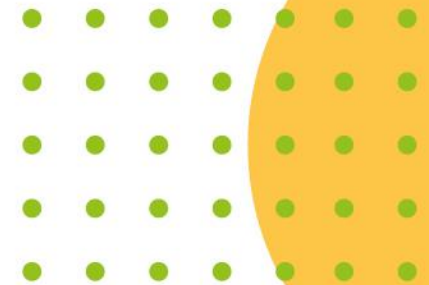


Trauma Informed Approach

- An approach where a person, family, community, organisation, service or system takes account of the widespread impact of adversity and trauma and understands potential ways of preventing, healing and overcoming this as an individual or with the support of others, including communities and services.



Image by Freepik



Understanding of
ACEs/Trauma

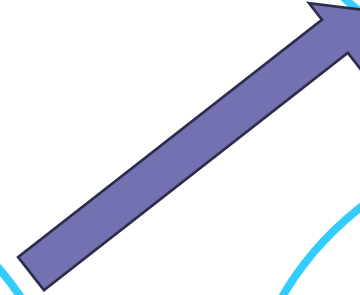
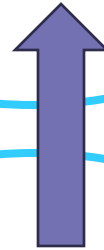
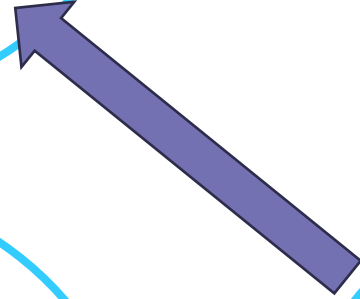
Sense of
Belonging

Relationships –
Secure Base

T&L –
developmentally
appropriate to
individual needs –
The task is right!

What Helps?

Support With
Emotional
Regulation



Co-Occurrence and Individuality

ADHD

Autism

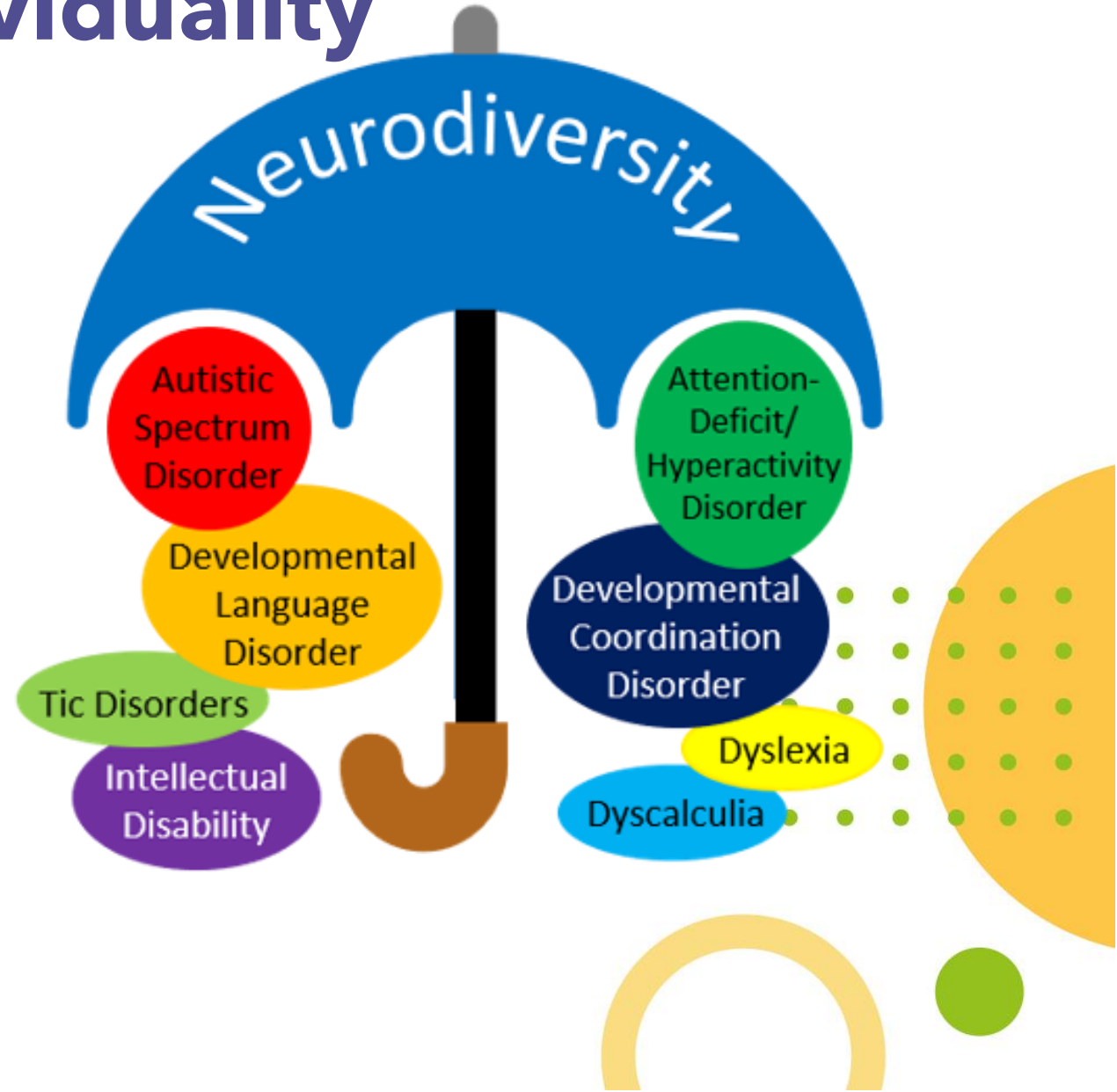
Dyslexia

Dysgraphia

Dyscalculia

Dyspraxia

Tourette's



The Developing Mind

Cortical (3 – 6 years)

Limbic (1 – 4 years)

Cerebellum (birth – 2 years)

Brain Stem



Image by Freepik

But....

The brain continues to develop and mature throughout childhood and adolescence, with the prefrontal cortex, a key area for decision-making and higher-level cognitive functions, not fully developing until the mid-to-late 20s, sometimes reaching full maturity around 25 or 30 years of age.



Image by Freepik

Developmental not Chronological...

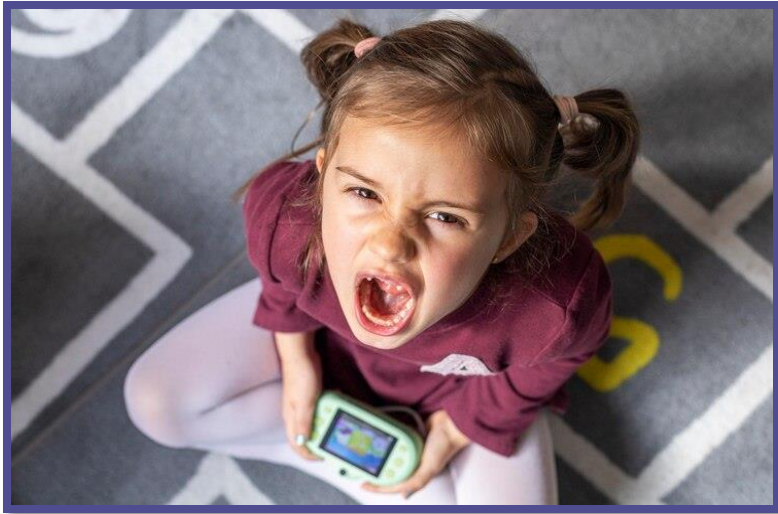


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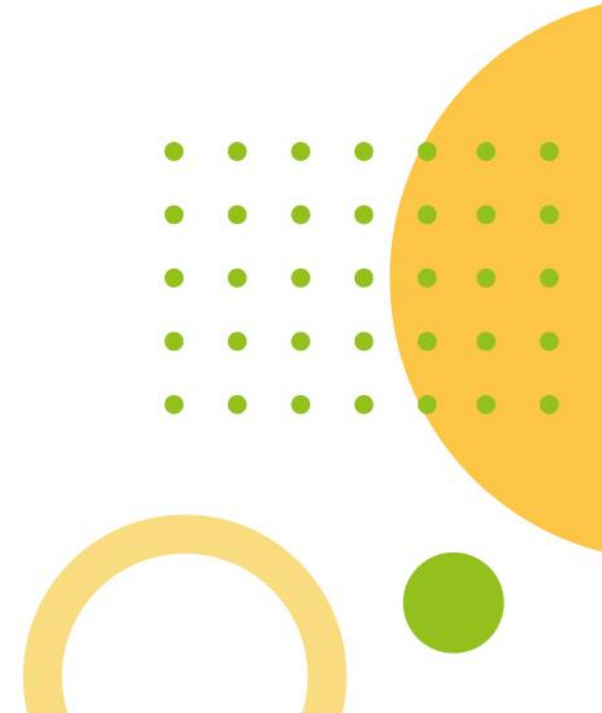


Image by AI




ACEs have strong, well-documented effects on executive function.

Chronic stress disrupts brain development (prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, amygdala), leading to weaker executive skills.



Supporting Executive Function

- **Use visual supports:** schedules, checklists, timers, and step-by-step instructions.
 - **Teach routines explicitly:** model, practise, and reinforce consistent classroom routines.
 - **Break tasks into chunks:** provide manageable steps with clear goals.
 - **Offer organisation tools:** folders, colour-coding, planners, and “to-do/finished” trays.
 - **Build in regulation breaks:** movement, breathing, or sensory breaks to reset attention.
 - **Use prompting strategies:** verbal cues, reminders, and scaffolding that fades over time.
 - **Create predictable environments:** reduce unnecessary distractions and offer clear expectations.
 - **Encourage metacognition:** help students reflect on what strategies work for them.
- 

Sensory Needs

- Chronic stress in childhood can affect how the brain develops, including the systems that process sensory information.
- Children who experience adversity may spend long periods in “fight, flight, or freeze”, making them more sensitive to sounds, touch, or movement.
- Some young people may develop hypersensitivity (easily overwhelmed) or hyposensitivity (seeking stronger input) as a coping mechanism.
- Trauma can make certain sensory experiences feel threatening, even if they are not



Stress Backpack

We all carry around a stress backpack.

What goes into our backpack is dependent on experience.

Throughout the day, we pick up more to put in our backpack.

Some children's backpacks start the day already half full.

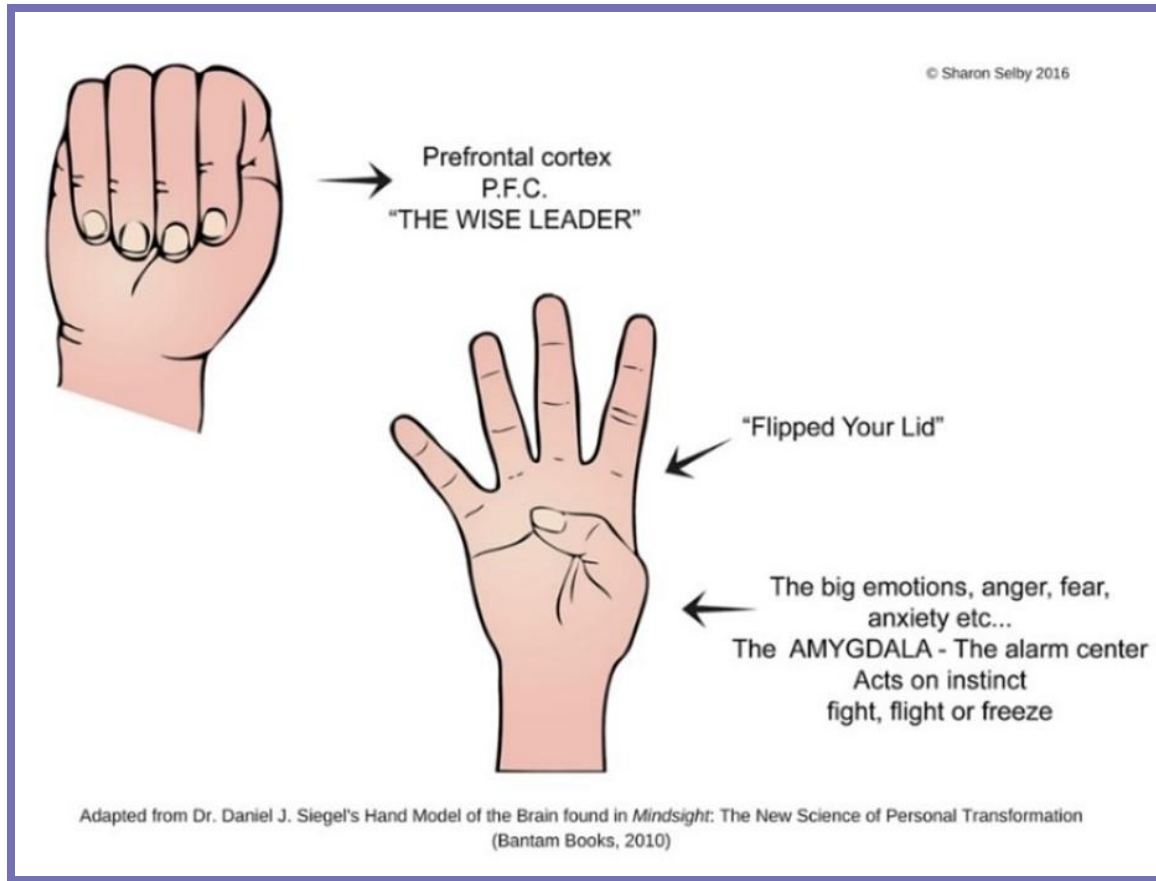
Our genetic makeup can impact how we carry the backpack.

Throughout the day, the backpack becomes heavier.



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Flipping Your Lid – Dr Daniel Siegel

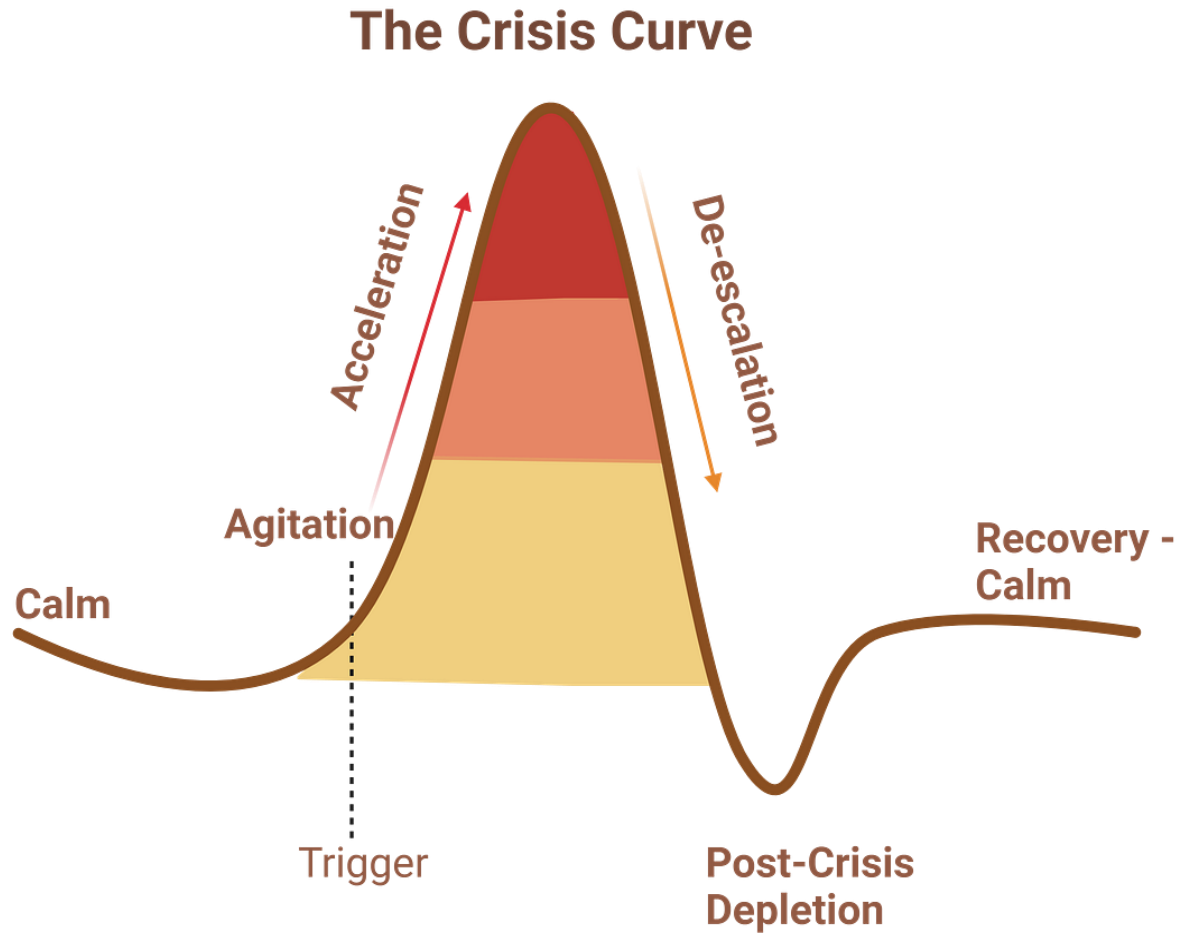


Limbic Brain "It's a spider"

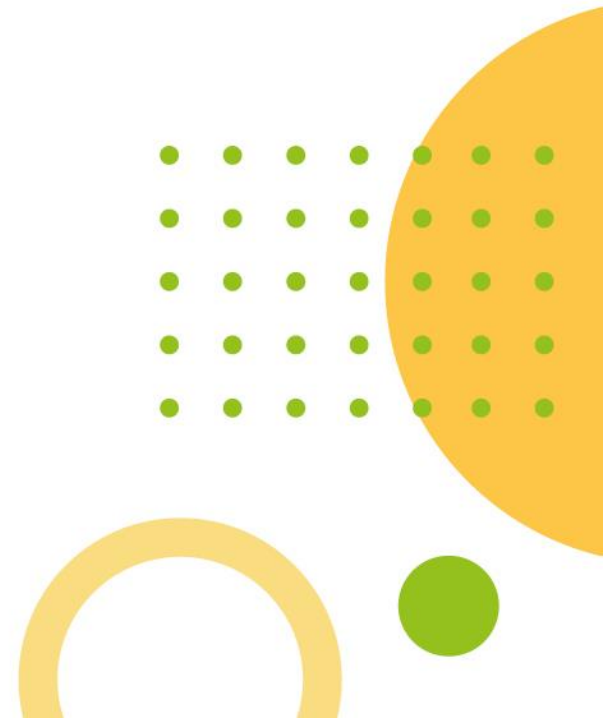


Cortical Brain "It's a hair clip"

Navigating the Storm...



REWIRE WITH NICOLE VIGNOLA





Hitting

Running

Crying

Refusal

The what

Kicking

Biological

Temperature,
Hunger,
Thirst,
Tired,
Environment discomfort

The why

Social

Being bullied,
Lack of friends,
Peer pressure,
Interaction with others

Emotional

Grief/loss,
Anxiety/Fear,
Embarrassment,
Loneliness,
Helplessness

Cognitive

Organising thoughts,
Making decisions,
Memory,
Under-stimulation (bored),
Overstimulation.

Prosocial

The world, expectations of others, responsibility, empathy/sympathy

Strategic Approach

Understand

Regulate

Restore and Repair

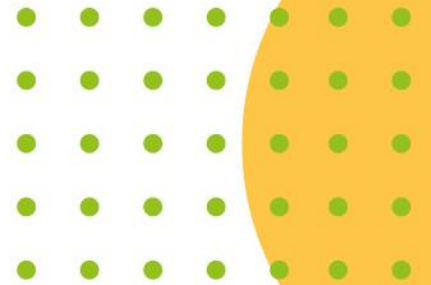


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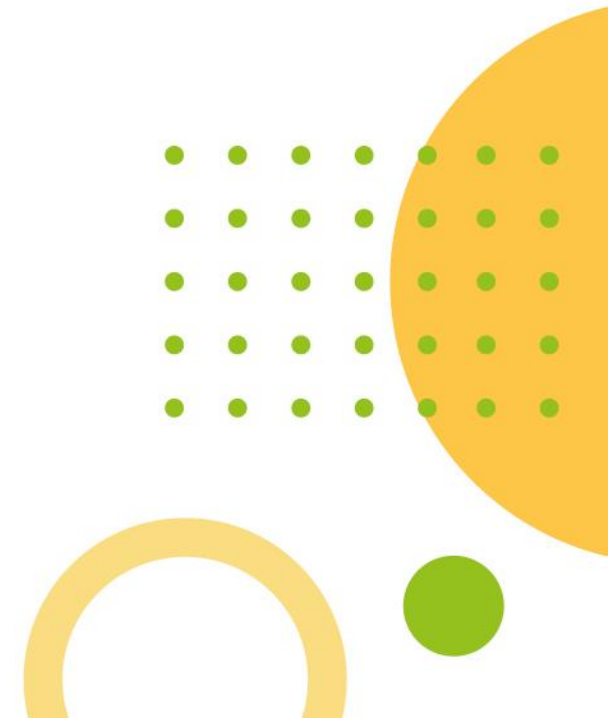
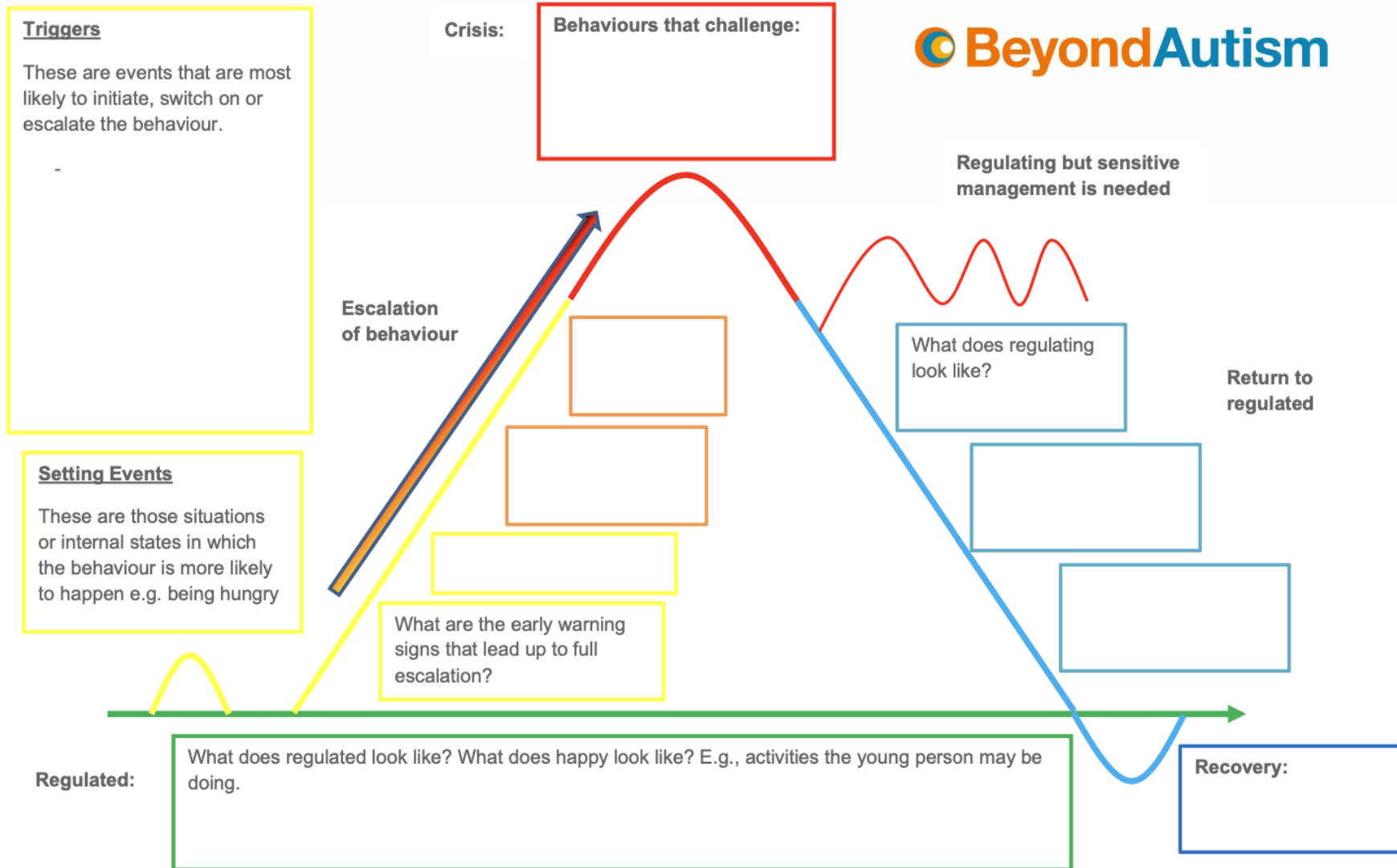
WTF?!



**WHAT'S
THE
FUNCTION?**

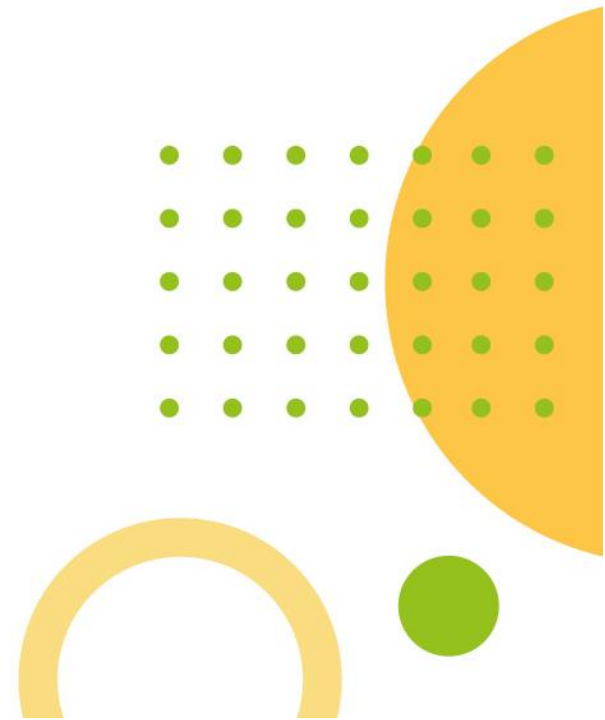


Proactive and Reactive Support



Relationships Matter

- **Prioritise consistent adults:** Ensure pupils know who their key safe people are, with predictable interactions and availability.
- **Be reliably calm and regulated:** Adults model emotional stability, helping pupils feel secure even when they are dysregulated.
- **Use attuned communication:** Notice, name, and respond to pupils' emotional cues with warmth and curiosity.
- **Build connection before correction:** Focus on relationship first; use relational approaches rather than punitive responses.
- **Provide structure and predictability:** Clear routines and expectations reduce uncertainty and build trust.
- **Offer unconditional positive regard:** Show acceptance and empathy, even when behaviour is challenging.
- **Repair ruptures quickly:** When things go wrong, reconnect, apologise if needed, and rebuild trust.
- **Celebrate strengths and efforts:** Highlight every small success to reinforce a sense of safety, competence, and belonging.



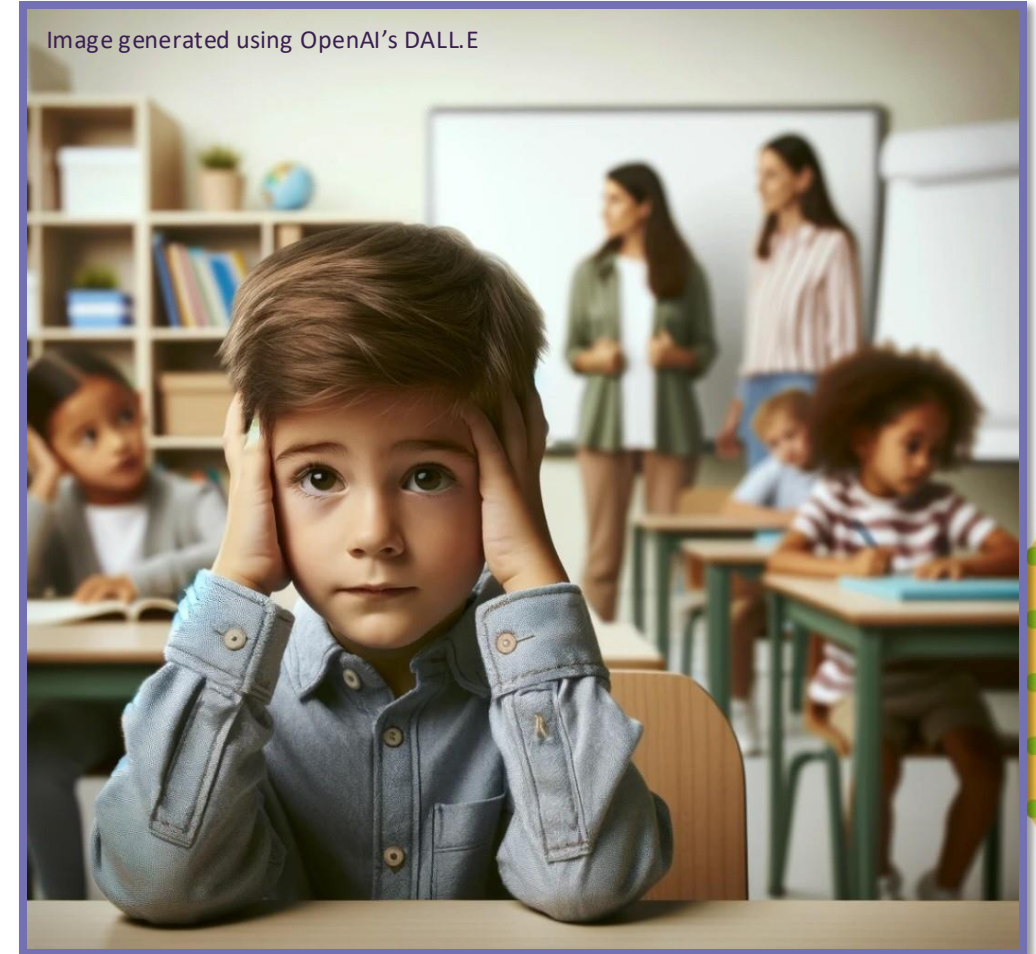
Supporting Emotional Regulation

Proactive Strategies (Preventing Crisis):

- Teach and practise regulation skills daily (breathing, grounding, sensory strategies).
- Create structured, predictable routines and environments.
- Use visual supports and regular emotion check-ins.
- Provide consistent movement or sensory breaks.
- Build strong, trusting relationships with key adults.
- Model calm behaviour and co-regulation.

Reactive Strategies (During Crisis):

- Stay calm, use a low tone, and reduce language.
- Ensure safety by giving space and minimising demands.
- Offer simple choices to restore a sense of control.
- Use grounding or sensory tools only if the young person finds them helpful.
- Re-connect after the crisis with a calm, supportive reflection.



REGULATE, RELATE, REASON, REPAIR

Restoration

🧠 Reflection on the Incident

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- How were you feeling?
- What made you feel that way?
- What was going on just before it started?

🔧 Taking Responsibility & Repair

- What needs to happen to make things right?
- What could you say or do to help repair the situation?
- What would you do differently next time?
- How can we help prevent this in the future?

❤️ Understanding the Impact

- Who else was affected by what happened?
- How do you think they felt?
- How did your actions affect others?
- What do you wish others understood about your feelings?

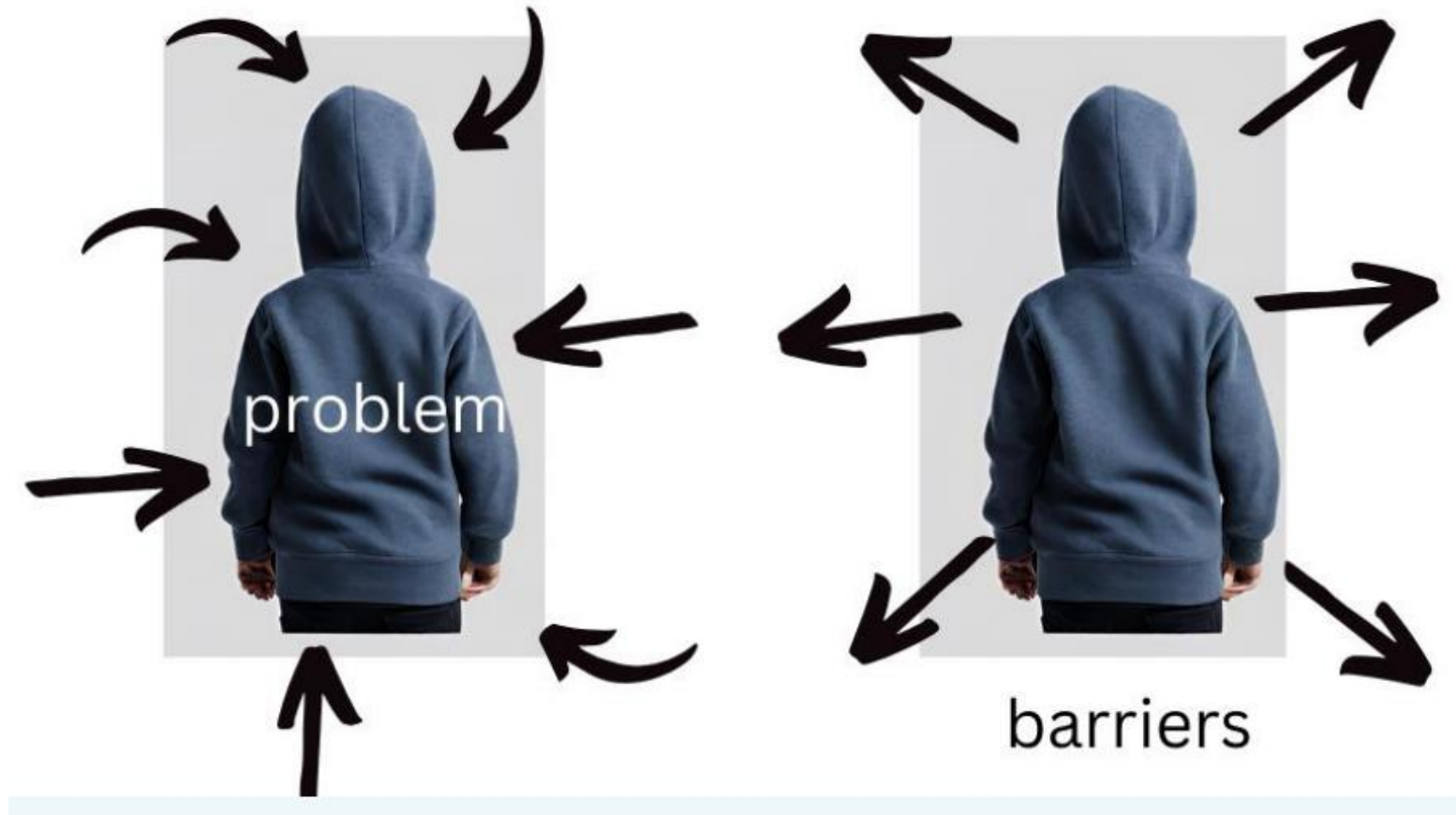
🌱 Moving Forward

- What helps you calm down when upset?
- What support do you need now?
- What are you proud of in how you handled things afterward?



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Where Does The Problem Lie?



Questions?

aimee@adhdandbeyond.uk

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THANK YOU!

