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# Trauma-Responsive Practice With Families

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The Australian Childhood Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians and owners of this land and waters. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and to the children who are their leaders of tomorrow. We acknowledge their history and living culture and the many thousands of years in which they have raised their children to be safe and strong.




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## Learning outcomes

- Strengthen your understanding of the broad issues vulnerable children face within the context of culture, relationship, environment and experience.
- Explore the difficulties in engaging and re-engaging marginalised parents and carers who have also experienced complex trauma and explore the long- term implications of their experiences .
- Build your understanding of intergenerational trauma, trans-generational trauma, the science of epigenetics and its impact on our understanding of family functioning and the developing child
- Identify and take away practical skills and strategies that facilitate trauma recovery for children and families and promote healing



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**Session Overview**

- Who are we working with?
- How does trauma impact the children and families we are supporting?
- The 5 Parenting Systems
- Embedding Safety & Enabling Engagement
- Repairing Interpersonal Relationships

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# Vulnerable Families in Australia

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**Why trauma informed practice with families is important**

- Families we work with have experienced both current, historical and generational trauma
- Trauma impacts how people access services
- Responses to trauma are adaptive – without a trauma lens, behaviours can be seen as ‘antisocial’ or ‘maladaptive’
- Trauma survivors require specific, tailored interventions that minimise re-traumatisation and understand individual needs and responses to trauma

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**Transgenerational transmission and cultural impacts:**

- Our culture influences our brain development
- Our relationships influence our culture and our culture influences our relationships
- Sensory data is interpreted according to our culture long before our ability to think about and understand our culture



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**Culture and Transgenerational Trauma**



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**Brain Development and the impact of trauma**



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### Brain development

- The brain develops through a mix of genetics and environmental factors.
- Relationships are key to this development
- The brain develops sequentially from the bottom up, and laterally across left and right hemispheres
- For optimal development and functioning, integration is key (vertical and horizontal)
- Complex trauma disrupts development in multiple areas of the brain. Impacts vary depending on type, timing and severity of exposure (Martin Tiecher)



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### Neuroplasticity:

The brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life.

Neuroplasticity allows the neurons (nerve cells) in the brain to compensate for injury and disease and to adjust their activities in response to new situations or to changes in their environment

<http://www.mcbarns.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/0202>



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### Toxic stress & Epigenetics



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# The 5 Parenting Systems




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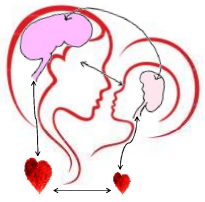
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## Brain systems that support parenting

- Parental Approach System**
  - Get close to the child without becoming defensive.
- Parental Reward System**
  - Enjoy interacting with the child.
- Parental Child Reading System**
  - Understand the mind of the child.
- Parental Meaning Making System**
  - Make sense of our experiences with the child and our social life.
- Parental Executive System**
  - Regulate interpersonal conflicts between approach and avoidance, pro-social and defensive reactions.



The diagram shows a profile of a human head with various brain regions highlighted in pink and red. Arrows indicate connections between these regions and two red hearts below, symbolizing the emotional and physiological aspects of parenting.

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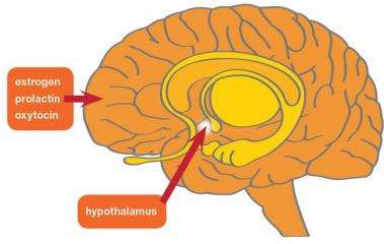
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## The Parental Approach System



The diagram shows a sagittal view of a human brain. A yellow circle highlights the hypothalamus region. A red box labeled 'hypothalamus' has an arrow pointing to this region. Another red box labeled 'estrogen, prolactin, oxytocin' has an arrow pointing to the pituitary gland area just below the hypothalamus.

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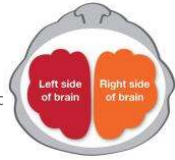
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### Early Adversity impacts on our Parenting ability

- The environment we grow up in can shape how we use our right and left brain systems of avoidance and approach.
- If we begin life exposed to insensitive care giving our right brained harm avoidance system is likely to be used a lot.
- Instead of feeling protected and connected with our caregiver, we are more likely to shift into a defensive state of protest or collapse in order to try to protect ourselves.



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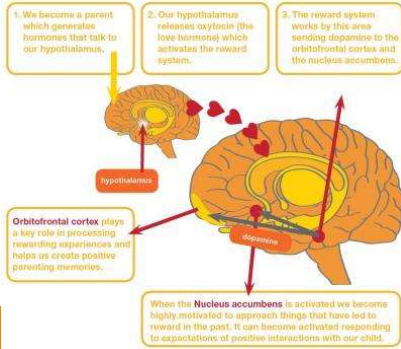
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### The Parental Reward System



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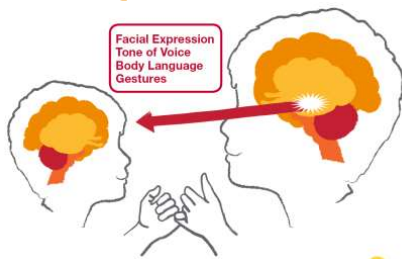
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### Parental child reading System



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### The Parental Meaning Making System

**Well-Connected Brain**  
Utilizing the front part of the brain



Open Flexible and Adaptive

**Stressed out Brain**  
Utilizing the more primitive middle region of the brain



Closed and Rigid

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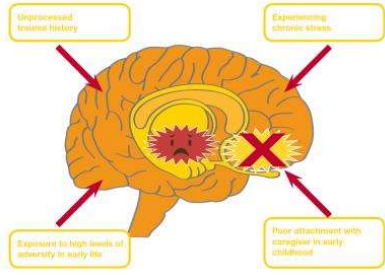
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### The Blocked Executive Parenting System



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### Legacy of trauma

- Trauma is re-enacted in the relationship with the infant/child
- Unresolved parental attachment trauma is reflected in the handling and care of the infant
- Trauma disrupts emotional interaction and regulation
- Attachment relationship is impaired
- 'Re-organizing' adult attachment is protective against the transmission of attachment trauma between generations



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# Embedding Safety and Enabling Engagement

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### How do you promote safety for the families you work with?

**Think about:**

- Client's perception of safety
- Physical & emotional safety – triggers
- Risk of re-traumatisation – triggers
- Attunement
- Body language
- Cultural safety
- The language you use
- Environmental safety – service space – warm/cold, dark/light, noise, colours etc
- The worker-client relationship- trust, respect, transparency
- Addressing both child AND parental trauma

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Behavioural Functions	Body Functions
 <p><b>Social Engagement</b> Soothing and calming Indicates safety</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Lowers or raises vocalization pitch</li> <li>* Regulates middle ear muscles to perceive human voice</li> <li>* Changes facial expressivity</li> <li>* Head turning</li> <li>* Tears and eyelids</li> <li>* Slows or speeds heart rate</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Mobilization</b> Fight or Flight Active Freeze Moderate to extreme danger</p>	<p><b>Hyper arousal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Increases heart rate</li> <li>* Sweat increases</li> <li>* Inhibits gastrointestinal function</li> <li>* Narrowing blood vessels- to slow blood flow to extremities</li> <li>* Release of adrenaline</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Immobilization</b> Collapse or submission Death feigning Increased pain threshold Conserves metabolic resources Life threatening situations</p>	<p><b>Hypo- arousal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Slows heart rate</li> <li>* Constricts bronchi</li> <li>* Stimulates gastrointestinal function</li> </ul>

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**Activating Social Engagement**

Strategies to help clients regulate and return to a neuroception of safety:

- **Prosody** – gentle calm voice (*brainstem/limbic*)
- **Facial expressions** – (*vagus nerve/ ANS*)
- **Body language** – (*vagus nerve/ANS/right brain*)
- **Offer a glass of water, cup of tea** (*brainstem*)
- **Breathing 5-2-7** breath work (*brainstem, limbic*)

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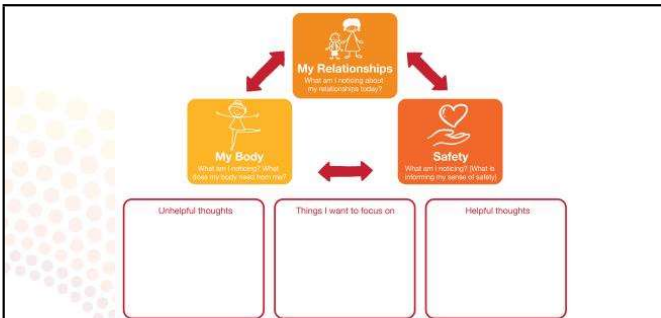
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**My Body**  
What am I feeling? What are my body (and) feelings like?

**My Relationships**  
What am I feeling about my relationships/love?

**Safety**  
What am I feeling? What is boosting my sense of safety?

Unhelpful thoughts

Things I want to focus on

Helpful thoughts

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**Trauma-Responsive Approaches:**

- Understanding **trauma** and its impacts
- Promoting **Safety**
- Ensuring **cultural competence/humility**
- Healing happens in **relationships**
- **Having a voice** – a sense of control in decision making
- **Integrating Care** (collaboration)
- **Hope** based recovery
- **Empowerment/Strength** based
- Understanding trauma in the context of **child development**
- Worker **self care** and reflective capacity



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### Trauma Responsive Practice

- Ongoing **observation and assessment** of the child and the relationship with their parents/carers
- Goals and interventions focused on **attunement with the child**
- In the healing environment, **relationship and provision of consistency and predictability are the focus** to help create safety and security, which enables consolidation of healing

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## Repairing interpersonal relationships

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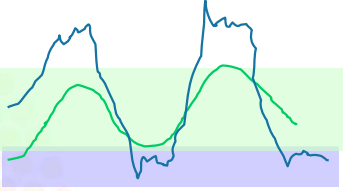
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### Interpersonal Regulation

- When people are in relationship, the ability of one to regulate him/herself affects the other's ability to regulate
- The child's arousal states, are shaped by calming and engaging relationships

Child's movement in her/his window of tolerance

Movement in adults window of tolerance



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### Helping caregiver and child to repair their relationship

- **Empathise** with how difficult it may be for both parents & infant/child.
- **Encourage/promote** consistent, sensitive, responsive, attuned caregiving and replicate this in the therapeutic relationship.
- The therapeutic relationship needs to **mimic secure attachment** characteristics including:
  - worker provides consistency, reliability, attunement, reflective capacity.
  - containment by worker (ability of the worker to tolerate the intolerable feelings/thoughts of the parent(s) and/or child and not pass judgement on these feelings/thoughts).



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### Helping caregiver and child to repair their relationship

- **Explore** what is getting in the way of parent providing this consistent, sensitive, responsive, attuned, caregiving
- Help parents to **identify arousal states** in their child and explore what's underneath the behaviour
- **Respectfully challenge** the parent about punitive or authoritarian approaches – explore the impact that this style of parenting had on them
- Help families to create **new ways of relating** through:
  - ✓ play and
  - ✓ exploratory discussion to increase capacity to reflect and to offer what their child needs.



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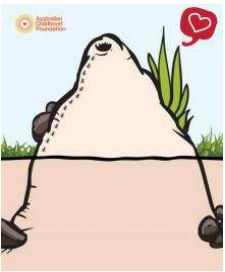
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### Helping Parents Understand Behaviour

- When parents feel understood, they become open to trying to understand others
- Always consider the underlying function of parents' behaviours and reactions
- Help parents to wonder about their child's inner world
- Develop openness and curiosity about behaviour
- If we can understand what drives a behaviour, we can work out how to respond to it
- If we can meet the need that is driving a behaviour, the behaviour can start to reduce
- **Some clues:** is the behaviour a fight/flight/freeze/withdraw response? Is it related to hunger/tiredness? Is it a bid for connection or space?



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**Discuss in Groups:**

- Behaviour examples: *clinginess or defiance/refusal*
- what are some different ways we could understand these behaviours?
- How might you wonder with a parent about the function underlying these behaviours?
- What would be some supportive responses to each of these behaviours, depending on how we have understood them?



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**Parental Reflective Function**



**What is it:** the parent's capacity to ascribe meaning to emotions and behaviours– linked to positive outcomes across multiple developmental domains. RF has explicit and implicit components, as well as self/other aspects

**The impact of stress and trauma:** as stress increases, child-rearing system gives way to hypervigilance for signs of distress, anger or rejection –which trigger defensive reactions and bias the child-rearing system toward negative perceptions (Hughes & Baylin).

**How do we develop it:** Research demonstrates that reflective capacity can be increased through targeted intervention that focuses on the inner world and intentionality of the child (e.g. Bringing up Great Kids, Circle of Security, Tuned-In Parenting, Lighthouse Parenting).

Promoted through active, facilitated **wondering** about mental states. Support curiosity and 'wondering'. Listen to parents' speech about their child – does it contain any 'mental state' talk? Watch parents interact with their child – look for instances of 'mind-mindedness' and highlight these to the parent.



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**p.A.C.E (Dan Hughes, DDP)**

- playful (when appropriate)
- Accepting
- Curious
- Empathic



*"p.A.C.E is a formula for epigenetic reprogramming of the child's neuroceptive system" (Jon Baylin)*



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**p.A.C.E video – Dan Hughes**



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**Relationship-based strategies**

- For school age children:
- Increase understanding of developmental needs and expectations
- Explore what's under the behaviour
- Notice what the child does well and offer praise
- Set boundaries and have good routines
- View discipline as a learning not a punishment
- Use 'time-in' rather than time-out
- Support families learning how to have fun together

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**Establishing parent-child boundaries**

- 'Parentification' can be instrumental or emotional
- Help parents to establish their role as the parent – identify appropriate alternatives for emotional and practical support
- Help parents to develop appropriate expectations for: behaviours, emotional capacities, household contributions, relational repair

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### Connection through Movement & Play

- Incorporate interventions that involve the body
- Explore opportunities for families to engage in movement-based activities together
- Support families to establish a culture of play and fun (not all parents know how to "play")

Family yoga?  
 Family walks  
 Loungeroom dance party  
 Infant massage  
 Hammock/swings

Connected play – blowing bubbles together  
 Cotton ball hockey  
 Feather tennis



*Support parents to engage in their children's play in a child-led way – let the child direct and script*



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### Managing parents/caregiver responses

- Parents need assistance to make sense of their life experience through a supportive, empathic emotional relationship which encourages authenticity, nurturing and direct communication
- Often, accessing internal recollections can enable a parent to become part of a larger narrative of their life. This is not always comfortable but can assist in discovering new possibilities.....



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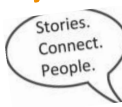
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### Building Strength and Belonging through Story

- Develop Family Traditions and Rituals
- Story Telling
- Family/Child Story Book
- Help Families Explore their History



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**Helpful Resources**

**The Handbook of Therapeutic Care for Children**  
Trauma-Informed Approaches to Working with Traumatized Children and Adolescents in Foster, Kinship and Adoptive Care  
Edited by Janise Mitchell, Joe Tucci and Ed Trovick  
Foreword by Stephen W. Porges

**Healing Relational Trauma with Attachment-Focused Interventions**  
DIADIC DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES  
Daniel A. Hughes | Kim S. Golding | Julie Houben

**Brain-Based Parenting**  
THE NEUROSCIENCE OF CARING FOR HEALTHY ATTACHMENT  
Daniel A. Hughes | Jonathan Rayle  
Foreword by Daniel J. Siegel

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