

Understanding and responding to
trauma

Trauma Aware Schools Initiative

Riverbanks College

5th June 2023



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The Australian Childhood
Foundation acknowledges
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
peoples as the traditional
custodians and owners of the land
and waters across Australia.

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.



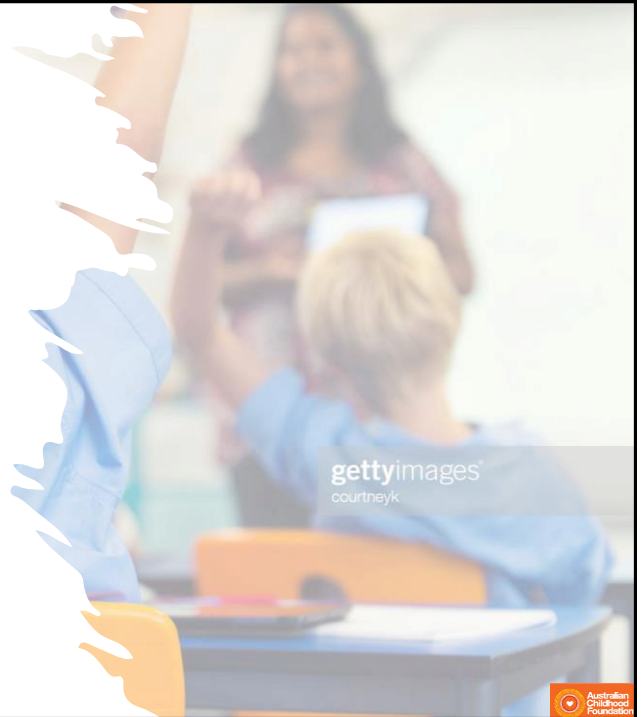
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We acknowledge you and what you bring...

- Knowledge
- Practice skills
- Experience
- Passion
- Compassion
- A desire to bring about change



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Our journey today....

Part 1:

Introducing the SMART PRACTICE Framework & ACF Model of PRACTICE

Part 2:

The brain and body, and the impact of trauma

Part 3:

Healing ways to respond: Introducing the SMART Circle of PRACTICE

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Your emotional safety is paramount
 Our learning is about shared wisdom
 Curiosity and learning build our brains

Learning together



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Success Criteria

- **develop** an enhanced understanding of complex abuse related trauma, with a particular focus on its effects on the brain and body.
- **apply** frameworks for assessing and responding to the impact of trauma on students.
- **begin to build** a toolkit of practice skills to respond, which promote recovery and healing for students.

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PART 1:

Introducing the SMART Framework and ACF Model of practice



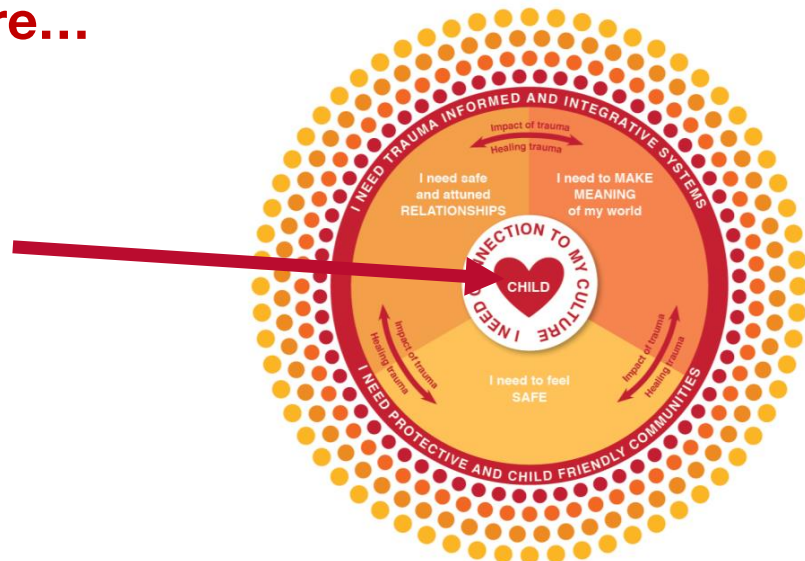
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Introducing the ACF Model of practice



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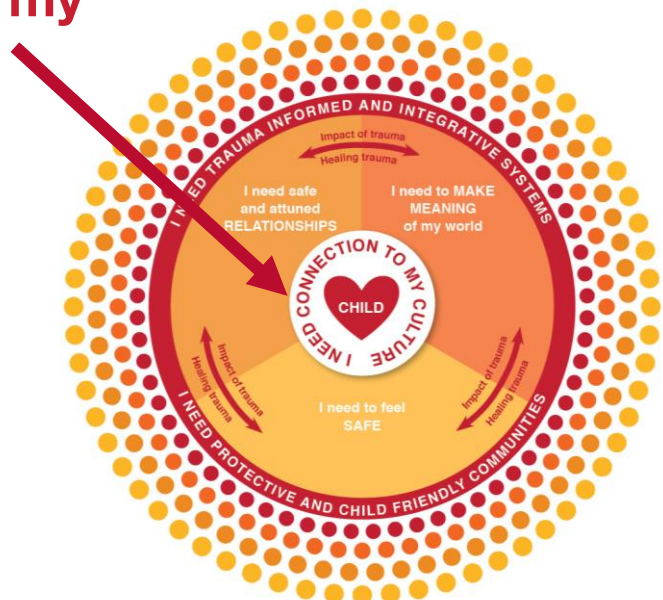
Holding the student at the centre...



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I need connection to my CULTURE

Safety: Belonging
Relationships: Connection
Meaning making: Identity



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I need to FEEL SAFE



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The importance of safety



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I need safe and attuned RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships shape our sense of self and safety

- Secure relationships are central to how a student experiences themselves and others



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I need to MAKE MEANING of my world

We are deeply impacted by both our surrounding relationships and the environment on how we perceive and make sense of:

- The world – safe vs unsafe
- Relationships – trustworthy vs unreliable
- Self- lovable vs unlovable
- Protected vs unprotected



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Reflection

Thinking about your school, what activities do you do that relate back to the **needs*** of the students?

What will you add to your classroom tomorrow?

*needs as a *child* not as a learner. This is a small but important distinction.

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Brain and Body Break



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PART 2:

The brain and body and the impact of trauma

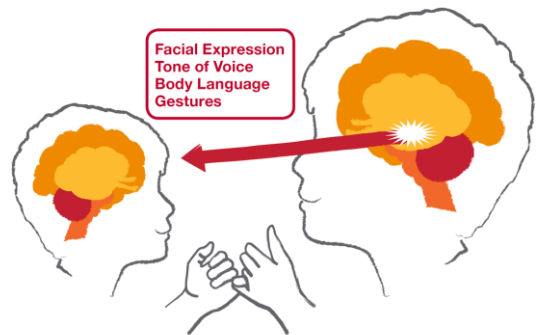


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Early experiences shape the architecture of our brain

Threat and Neglect → Survival

Safety and Connection → Integration



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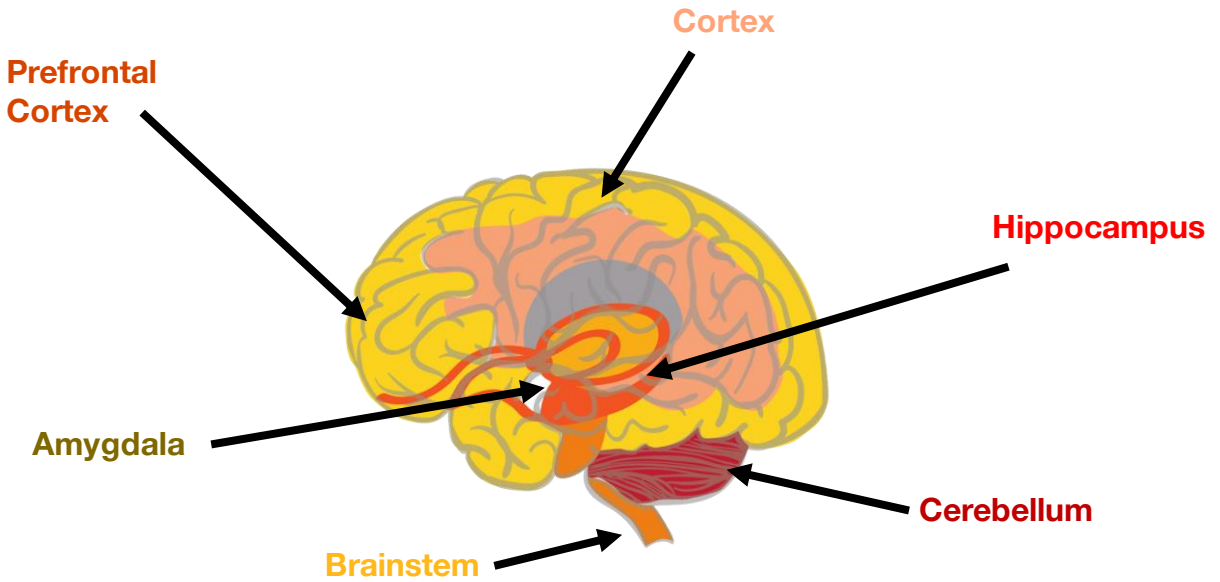
Brain development - vertically



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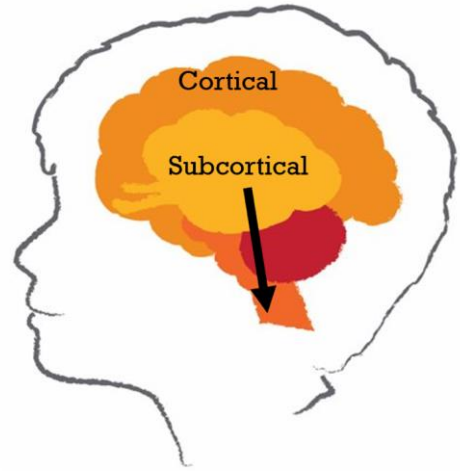
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Cortical

- Cortex
- Prefrontal Cortex
- Medial Prefrontal Cortex

Consciously activated for reflection

Responsive



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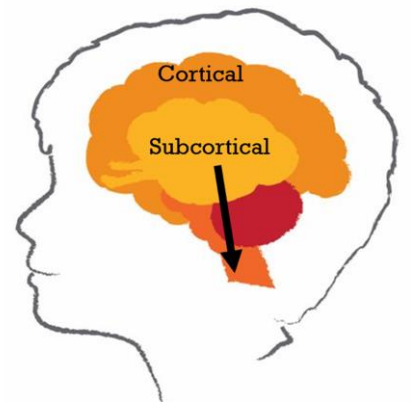
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Subcortical

- Brainstem
- Cerebellum
- Limbic System – Amygdala & Hippocampus

Unconsciously activated for constant survival

Reactive

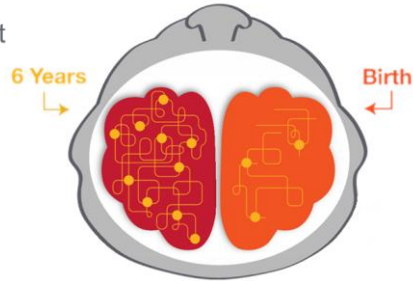


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Brain development – horizontally

Left Hemisphere

- Evaluates language content
- Optimistic hemisphere
- Understands beginning, middle and end
- Learns from the past and expects the future
- Looks for patterns



Right Hemisphere

- In the present moment
- Eye contact
- Facial expression
- Tone of voice
- Posture
- Gesture
- Intensity

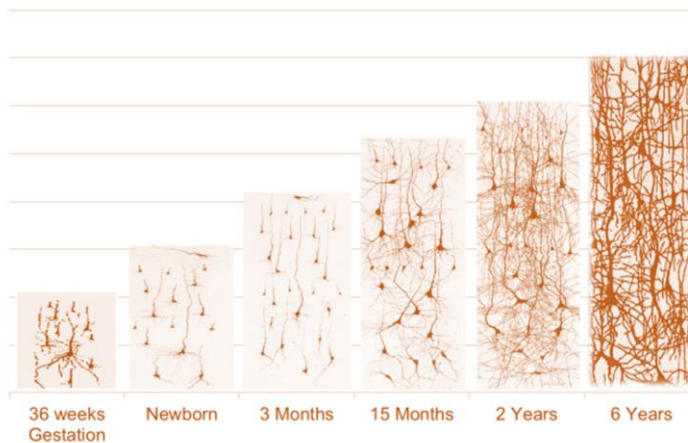
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The importance of the early years...

Neural Circuit Formation in the Early Years



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The importance of connection and play as a reparative activity

“ Play is a neural exercise and I have never met a child who is able to resist being part of this type of exercise ”

Theresa Kestley

Image source: ©2021 ACF

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What's going on in the Adolescent Brain? – Prefrontal Cortex



Final part of the brain to reach maturity in one's mid to late twenties

- self awareness
- reasoning and judgement
- foresight and anticipation
- focusing and sustaining attention
- planning organising and prioritising
- decision making
- reflecting
- enthusiasm, motivation and persistence
- impulse control
- working memory

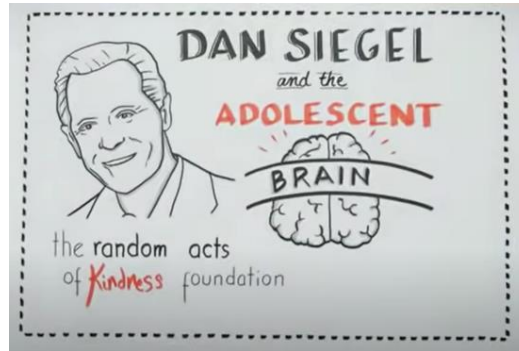
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Adolescent brain development

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0O1u5OEc5eY>

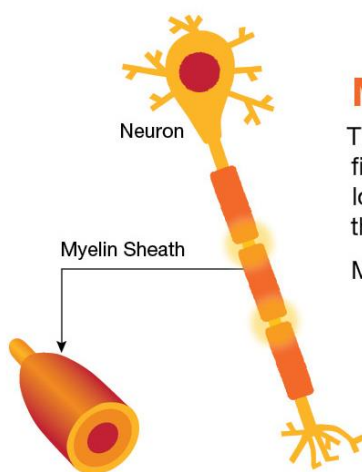


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Pruning & myelination in the adolescent brain



Myelination

The second change is in myelination: in adolescence, it is not finished. The last part of the brain to myelinate is the frontal lobes. And myelination is not complete in the frontal lobes of the brain until around 18 to 20 or later.

Myelination on a neuron allows it to operate more efficiently.

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Pruning in the adolescent brain



Birth



2 Years



6 Years



12 Years



Adult

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What does this mean for our students - the importance of rest and sleep...

- Pruning and myelination occur during sleep
- Sleep strengthens learning and memories

What impacts our adolescents' sleep?

- Later release of melatonin during adolescence
- Lack of safety to sleep well, if at all
- Poor sleep hygiene
- Use of devices

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What can we do? – The four C's

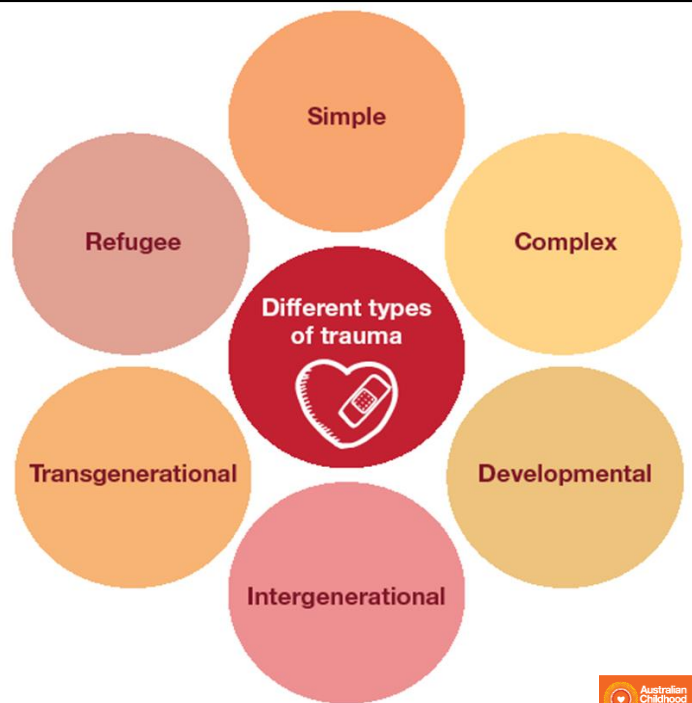
- **Compassion and empathy** is so important. There may be many reasons why your student is turning up tired. Be gently curious as to why they may be tired.
- **Check in** with your students how did they sleep? Have they had breakfast? Can breakfast or food be provided? What else do they need? Check in also at the beginning of any change process.
- **Consider** adjusting morning structures /include movement and invigoration, before heavy cortical work.
If you are working with students in the afternoon allow more creativity rather than problem solving, or analytical work as their concentration may dip in the afternoon.
- **Create** spaces for students to have rest breaks, or to work quietly.

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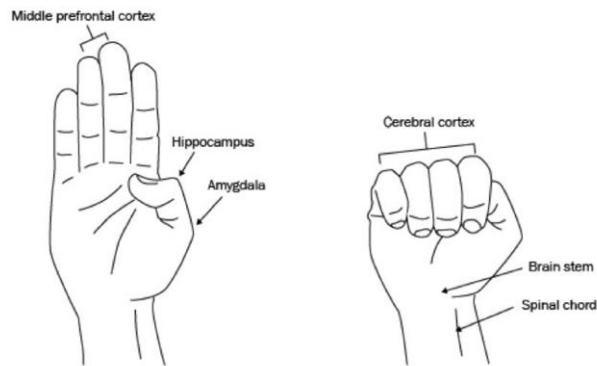
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Experiences of trauma and the impacts at school



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Flipping a Lid – the impacts of toxic stress on the higher brain parts



Hand model courtesy of Dan Siegel

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Embodied Trauma

- It is important that we understand the deep connection between the body, the brain and trauma.
- Our implicit memory can make us feel the sensations of trauma long after the trauma has occurred.
- Students may struggle to remain in the present 'here and now'
- Ensure there is a de-escalation plan for students to help them recover from their distress within relationship.

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Effects of trauma on behaviour



To cope with trauma children use initial adaptive responses to survive

This is reasonable as a once off occurrence, but, if they continue they can become maladaptive patterns of behaviour

These responses will be different for an individual child at different developmental stages

Often a combination of appropriate developmental behaviours and maladaptive patterns of behaviour emerge

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How do I know what is trauma-related and what is disability or neurodivergence related?

- Various research indicates children and young people with disabilities and neurodivergence are more vulnerable to experiencing trauma and those identified as experiencing trauma often have diagnosed learning difficulties, sensitivities, and disabilities.
- Due to research into epigenetics, we also know that what life experiences the mother has had can influence the development of her unborn child.
- Misdiagnosis can occur if not all factors are taken into consideration.



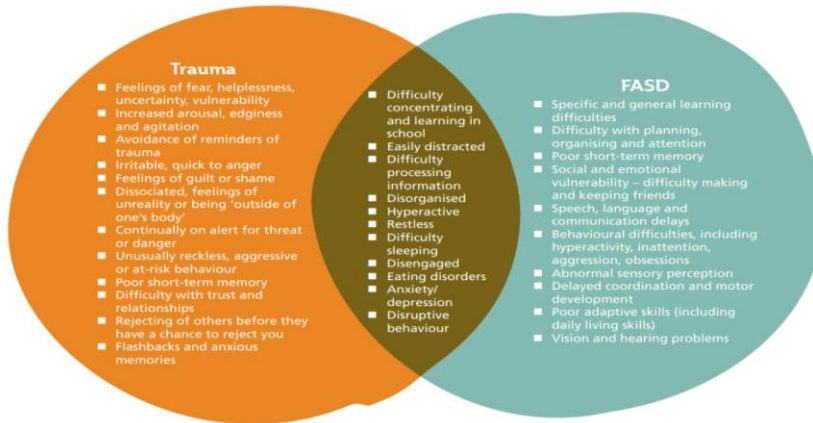
Photo credit: freepik.com

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Figure 3: Symptoms of trauma and FASD and areas of overlap



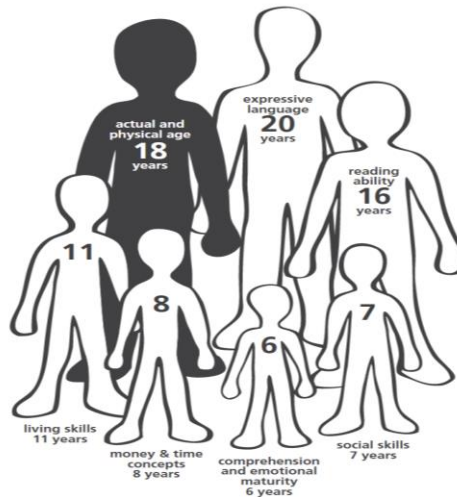
Source: Adapted from National Child Traumatic Stress Network, *Is it ADHD or child traumatic stress? A guide for clinicians*, NCTSN, Los Angeles, 2016, p. 5, www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/is_it_adhd_or_child_traumatic_stress.pdf.

Image taken from Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and complex trauma: A resource for educators, 2018 Published by Marni nwarntikura Women's Resource Centre

Figure 6: The developmental age and ability of an 18-year-old with FASD

This diagram shows how a child's chronological age and developmental age can vary dramatically at any one time.

Be alert to disparities between chronological age and abilities.



Source: Jodee Kulp <http://www.betterendings.org>

Look for and be curious about

an increase or decrease in....

- **Frequency**
- **Intensity**
- **Repetition**



...of behaviours and responses...that is different to what you know is “*normal*” for your student.

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Activity

Think about the students you have interacted with recently.

In the classroom, on yard duty, before school, students leaving early or within a formal meeting.

What behaviour have you seen that could be the impact of trauma?

What did it

- **Look like**
- **Sound like**
- **Feel like**

Trauma can impact on all elements of children's development.



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What might it look like at school?

- Difficulties coordinating cognitive processes such as planning & working memory
- Difficulty with voluntary movement tasks – walking or writing
- Becoming overwhelmed and not able to sort incoming sensory information
- Can't place memories in time or place – flooding & flashbacks
- Working memory, retention and recall (retrieval) capacity severely impacted
- Difficulty in emotional regulation
- Difficulty in reading facial expressions
- Constantly perceiving threat where there is none
- Might be unable to use foresight and anticipation, focus or sustain attention and focus, plan, organise or prioritise or make decisions well, reflect or have self-awareness, be enthusiastic, motivated or persist with activities, use impulse control

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Brain and Body Break



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PART 3:

Healing ways to respond: SMART Circle of PRACTICE



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Reframing our view

“what’s wrong with you”

versus

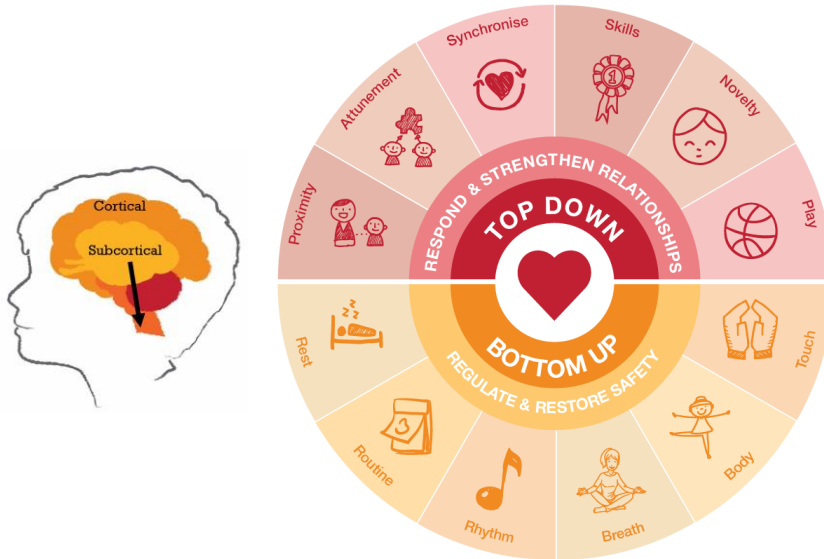
“what has happened to you?”

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SMART Circle of PRACTICE – responsive ways to co-regulate

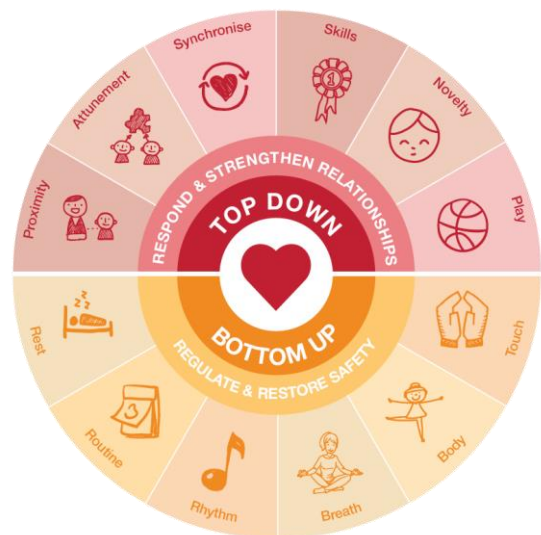


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What is the SMART Circle of PRACTICE?

The **SMART Circle of PRACTICE** is a tool designed by the Australian Childhood Foundation to conceptualise ways to support and co-regulate students using what is called “Bottom Up and Top Down” responding and strategies.

When under stress or having been impacted from trauma, a student’s ability to stay engaged in their learning and social interactions is significantly impacted...

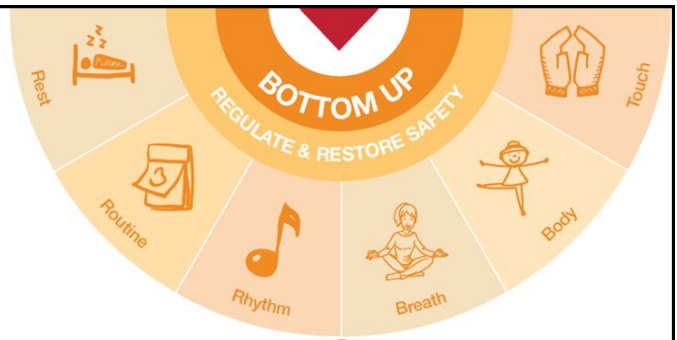


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Bottom Up

“Bottom Up” responding refers to engaging the subcortical (lower) parts of the brain to regulate the higher parts of the brain.



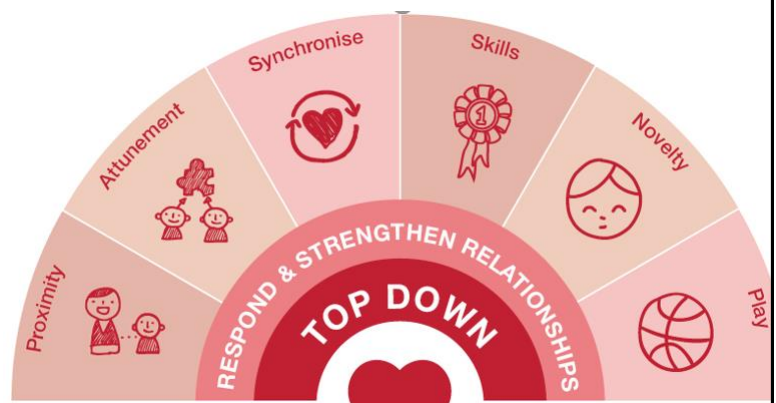
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Top Down

“Top Down” responding refers to engaging the cortical (higher) parts of the brain to regulate the lower parts of the brain.



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Bottom up and top down intention



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When to use each of the approaches

“Top Down” approach

when students are in, or able to still engage, a regulated state to help them stay there

“Bottom Up” approach

to help students access a regulated state when feeling distressed, unsafe or disconnected.



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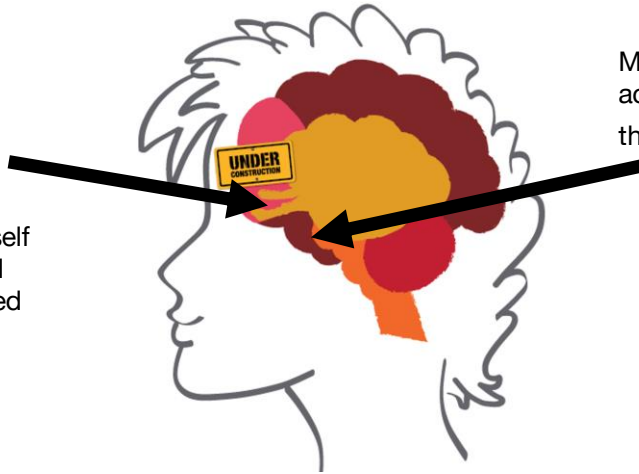


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Top down to support regulation

Medial Prefrontal Cortex

The centre of self awareness and mindful, focused activity



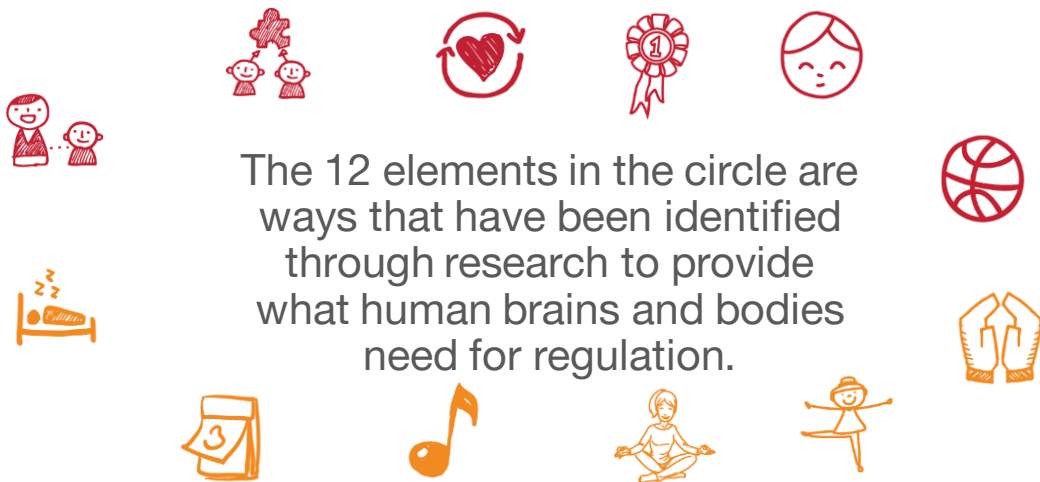
Mindful, focused activities de-activates the **amygdala**

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The 12 elements of the CIRCLE of PRACTICE



The 12 elements in the circle are ways that have been identified through research to provide what human brains and bodies need for regulation.

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Responses and Strategies

Activities and Discussions







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Building our toolkit:

Responsive Activities and Strategies

BOTTOM UP

- Breath
- Body
- Touch
- Rhythm
- Routine
- Rest

TOP DOWN

- Proximity
- Attunement
- Synchronizing
- Skills
- Novelty
- Play





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Checkout
 Feedback
 Keep in touch
 SMART Learning Pathway
 ACF & SMART Resources
 References



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Check out

What are you taking back to your classroom tomorrow?

- Strategy?
- Activity?
- New perspective?



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ACF & SMART Resources

- SMART training – register through PLINK
- Discussion papers – available on TLC Teams page
- Prosody Blog

<https://professionals.childhood.org.au/professional-community-network/>

- Other ACF Training

<https://professionals.childhood.org.au/training-development/course-list/>

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