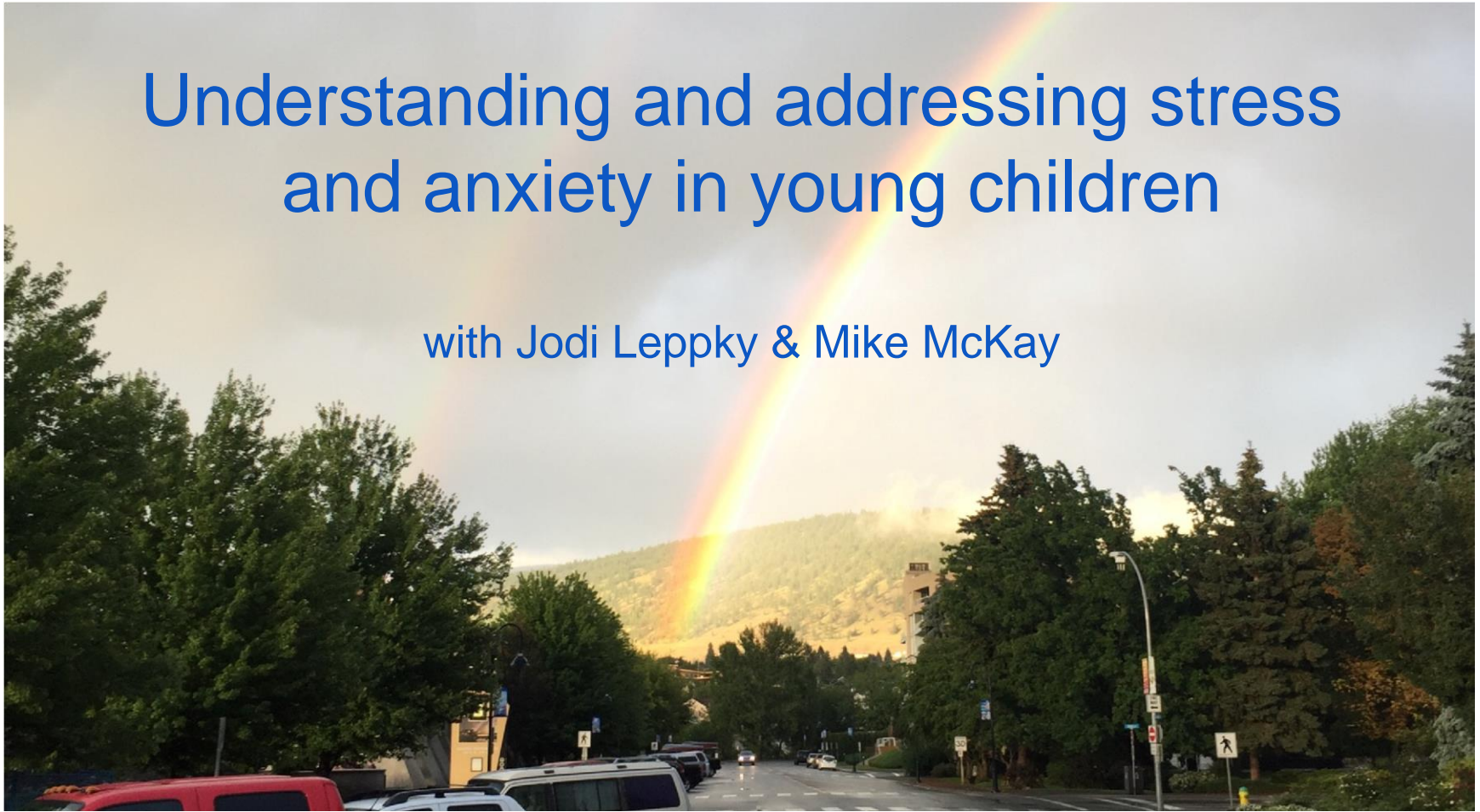


As Parents, You Help Create the Dreams –  
So Your Children Can Find the Rainbow

# Understanding and addressing stress and anxiety in young children

with Jodi Leppky & Mike McKay



# Let's Commit to Being in a Safe Place for Learning and Sharing

A Place Where  
Neuroscience  
Meets Education  
and Parenting

A No Blame  
Zone



*When we didn't  
know better, we  
couldn't do  
better.*

A Tremendous  
Opportunity zone

Remember: It's NOT About:

Willpower or strength of character; "Good kid/bad kid";  
Reward & punishment; "Just get over it" or "Don't be silly"

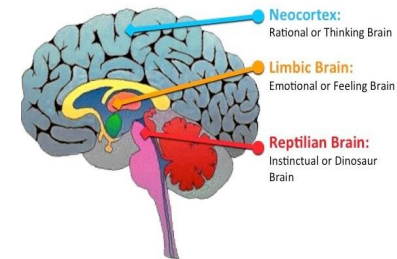
We Know Better Than That

*Just For Fun...Remember When Struggles Were This Simple?*

Marshmallow Test: Self-Control is Making the Decision/Self-Reg is Knowing Why

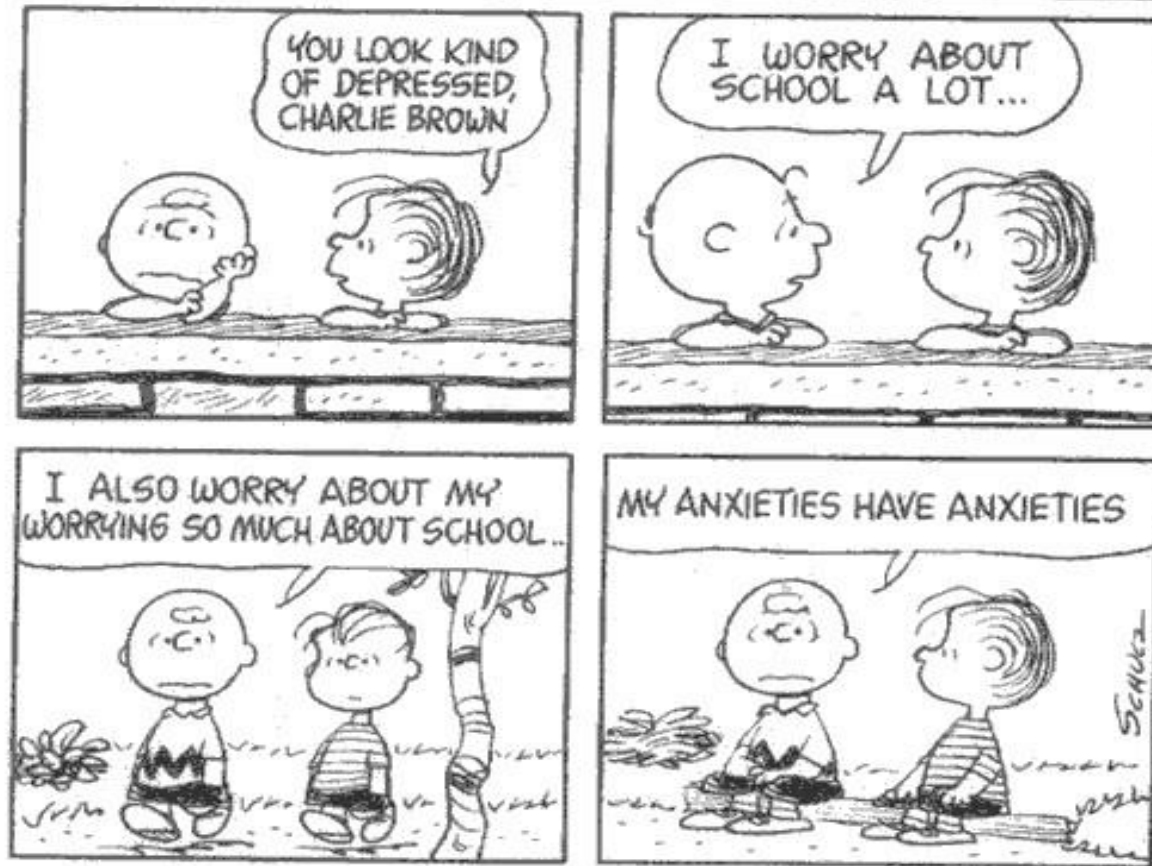
# A FEW KEY TERMS IN OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER

- ❖ **Self-Regulation** – the capacity we develop to expend energy (to deal with stressors) and to restore energy (so we can be ready for the next challenge)
- ❖ **Stress** – a natural condition that contributes to our ability to survive;
- ❖ **Anxiety** – a feeling (or an ongoing state) that emerges when a person or a group are unable to effectively deal with stressors because of their intensity or their volume
- ❖ **Social-Emotional Health** – an area we must explore as individuals, families and communities. Our brains and our biology have not evolved to allow us to deal with the range of stressors we experience in today's world. To achieve positive/optimal social-emotional health, we need to



develop new strategies for new world realities

# What Charles Schultz Said About Anxiety, via Charlie Brown



How do we see Anxiety?

## **Medical News Today says...**

- Anxiety is a general term for several disorders that cause nervousness, fear, apprehension and worrying

## **AnxietyBC says...**

- Anxiety is NORMAL!

- Most often it is temporary (developmental stage, passing crisis)
- It doesn't **have** to be thought of as harmful
- Many people experience it to varying degrees
- Its HARD! Learning to COPE is a critical life skill.

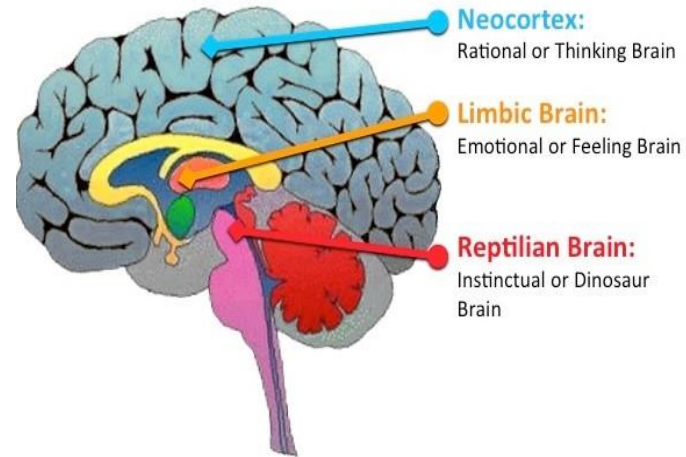
# Anxious Behaviors and Coping – Some of What it Takes



# The Brain, Self-Regulation and the Impact of Stressors

Not a new phenomenon BUT understandings that have evolved over time

- How effectively and efficiently we deal with a stressor and then recover from the effort



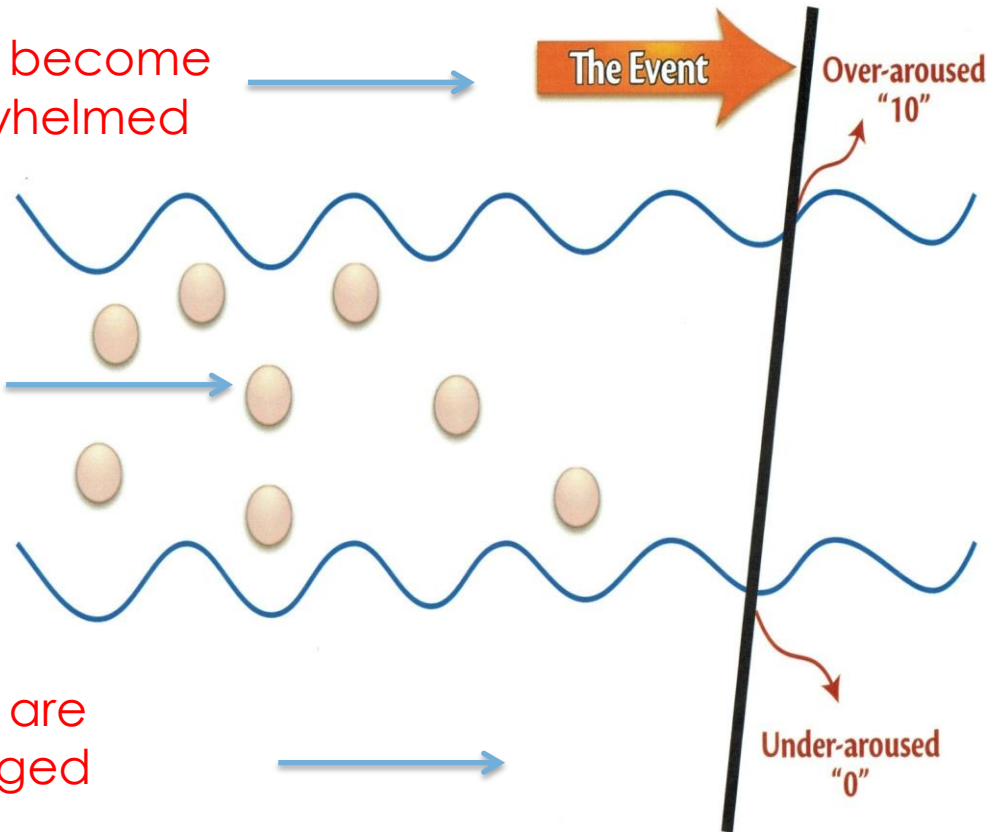
- Every time we encounter a stressor the brain responds with processes that consume energy

- This is followed by restorative processes to recover energy from this expenditure. When we are overwhelmed, we default to “fight, flight or freeze”  
We have all been there as kids and as adults.

When things aren't manageable & we become hyperactive/ overwhelmed

The good, the bad & the manageable

When things aren't manageable & we are zoned out/disengaged



None of these is a stress-free zone. Where we are depends on many variables re. our ability to cope

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Dr. Peter Levine's - The Stream of Life

# Brain Circuitry

- Each time the brain is stimulated (touch, sees, hears, thinks), the experience rewires the brain (Siegler, 2000)
- Use it (important info) Lose it (info not relevant) (Siegler, 2000)
- Food, physical activity & learning hardwired
- Moving our muscles produces proteins that travel into the brain where they play pivotal roles in highest thought processes

# Brain Development



- Children's brains are different than adult brains!
- Though they grow rapidly, the pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for decision making, moderating social behavior and logical planning is **not fully developed until sometime between age 19 and late 20's.**
- How does this change how we interact with children?
- How does this change what we expect from children?

**Stress is Natural:** anything that triggers the brain to deal with a challenge by burning up energy and then recover

***New Stressors, Not so Much:*** Our brains and bodies aren't engineered to deal with 21 century stressors



**Our capacity to thrive is determined by how**

# effectively we deal with stressors

## What's Getting in the Way?

### Biological and Environmental Stressors for our Kids and for Us

- less natural food/more fast food packed with sugars/salts/fats
- Disconnection from nature because of crowded urban living, environmental pollution and “stranger danger”
- Lack of sleep – (me and quality)
- Screen (me (the video screen is NOT a good teacher or child care provider). \*\* How many 2 year-olds have TV in their bedroom or i-Pad under the covers
- Exposure to violence and other anti-social behaviour

- Family stressors: parents working two jobs, intergenerational poverty, transience and other disruptions, lack of community supports and connections

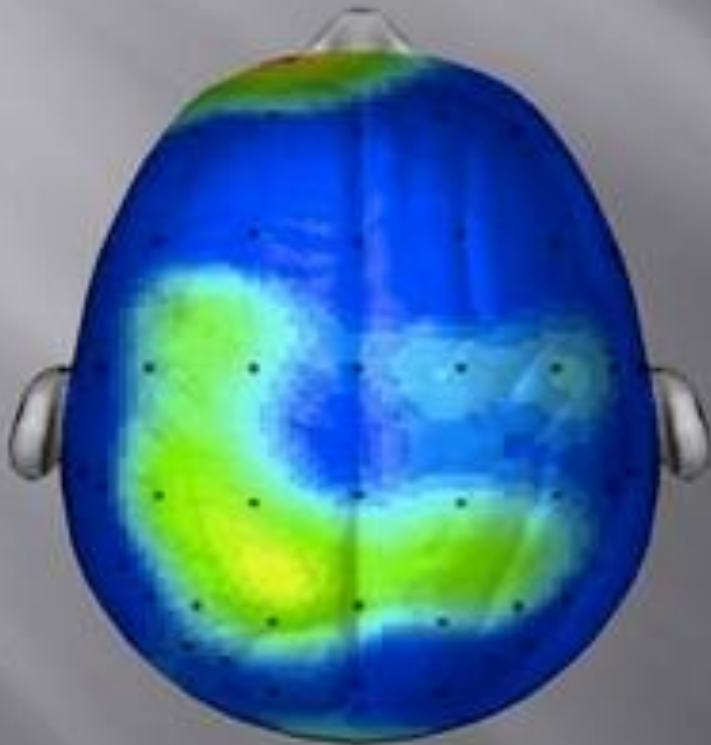


Our brains/minds developed gradually over millions of years. Suddenly, we are being overwhelmed with inputs that are changing our capacity to function. It will take a long time for us to recalibrate.

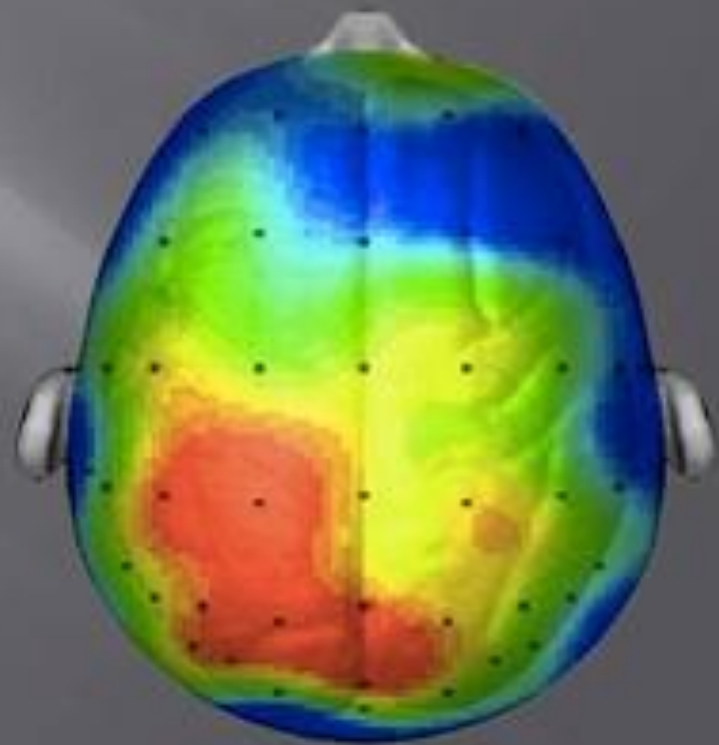
**Evidence of dysregulation & social-emotional/mental health issues are growing exponentially.**

# What Brain Scans Tell Us in an Age of Sitting & Screen Time

BRAIN AFTER SITTING  
QUIETLY



BRAIN AFTER 20 MINUTE  
WALK



Research/scan compliments of Dr. Chuck Hillman University of Illinois

# Brain Paradox – Every Day, We Seem to be Decreasing the Very Thing Our Kids Need Most

- “Physical Exercise is the best and most unappreciated form of brain exercise”. Dr. Adrian Preda, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behaviour, UC Irvine School of Medicine
- “Nothing beats exercise for promoting brain health”. Dr. John Ratey, Harvard Psychiatry Professor
- “Play is crucial to physical, intellectual, and socialemotional development at all ages.” Dr. David Eklund, Professor Emeritus Child Development, Tufts University



- “Exercise is the ultimate way to improve plasticity in the brain”. Dr. John Ratey, Harvard Psychiatry Professor

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## **...Resulting In These Common Challenges to Self-Regulation & Learning**

- Overstimulation • ADHD  
(environment, technology, etc.) • Sensorimotor  
processing disorders
- Stress

- **Autism spectrum disorders**
- **Anxiety**
- **Dysregulated “others” in one’s life**
- **Anger**            **(parents, teachers, bullies ...)**
- **Depression**    • **Trauma and/or abuse**

Let's Not Forget

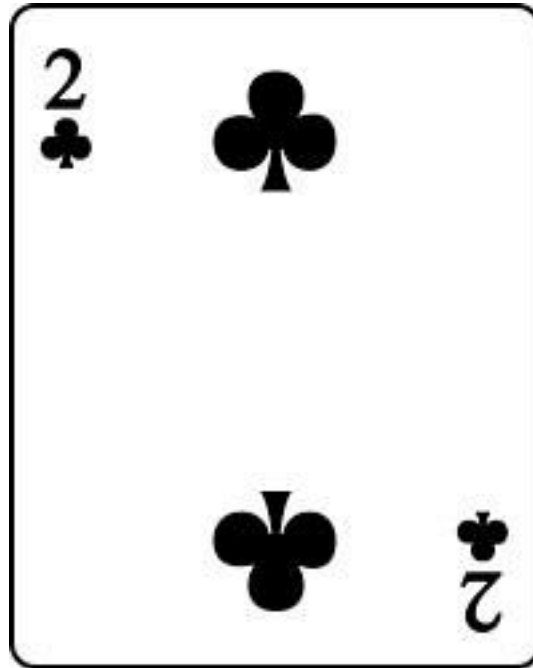


Our Kids Play the Cards Available to Them

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Whatever They Might Be

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As educators, we help kids add cards to their deck or we reinforce deficits that limit their capacity to thrive

Your Turn

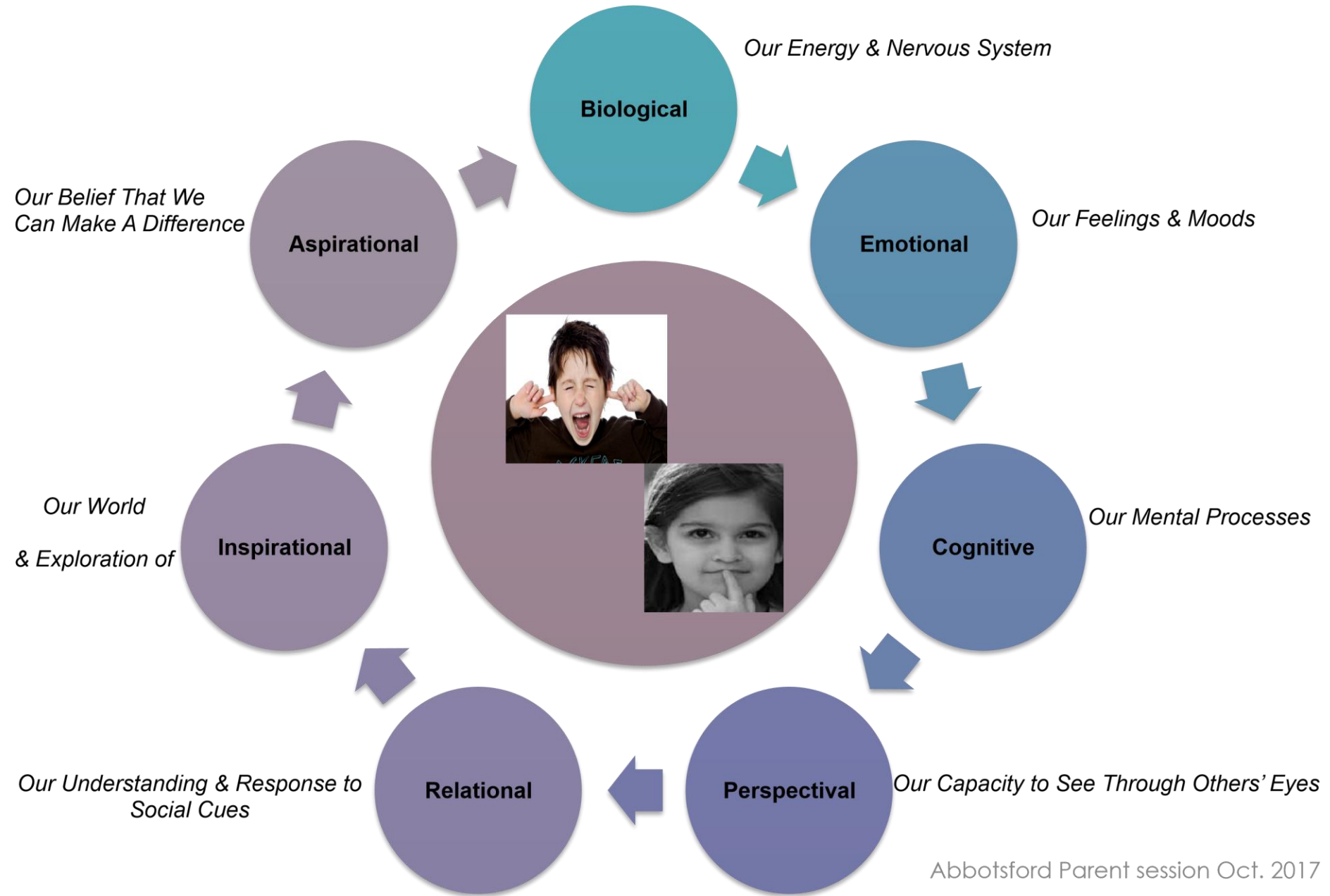


## *What Are You Wondering About?*

Canadian Self-Regulation Initiative

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# Developing Our Self-Regulation Capacities – Each One Essential in our Ability to Cope With Stress



## *Unpacking Our Capacities*





# Biological

*I have a body ...  
my body doesn't have me.*

*For Each of the Capacities,  
Consider the Statements  
Highlighted in Red. Let's Make  
Those our Focus for  
Questions/Comments*

Canadian Self-Regulation Initiative

## To Think About:

- ☐ What are the triggers that set a child off? Is it sensitivity to noise, light, proximity, certain foods, too much active or passive time...?
- ☐ A negative spiral can result unless the setting changes and we create conditions to allow the child to transition out of a dysregulated state ☐

Recognize that no two kids are the same

- ☐ It helps to be a detective when looking for environmental variables that can lead to



# Emotional

*I have behaviour ...  
dysregulation my  
behaviour doesn't  
have me.*

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## To Think About:

- ☐ Our emotional capacity is first developed during our early years in the “co-regulation” stage of life
- ☐ Is there an emotional response pattern that emerges in certain circumstances?
- ☐ Can we create circumstances to “unpack” those feelings once the moment has passed? \*\*\* It is essential to remain non-judgmental in those

*I have emotions ...  
My emotions don't have me.*



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**To Think About:**

debriefing sessions. “Don’t be silly” or “It’s not so bad” are not productive feedback.

- ☐ We need safe/nurturing acceptance and guidance to help us create new reference points
- ☐ Everyone spends energy in unique ways, leaving different reservoirs for the next challenges. How can you create energy-restoring (non-punitive) spaces for a child after an emotionally flooded event

☐ Never add more emotional baggage to a full load.

2017

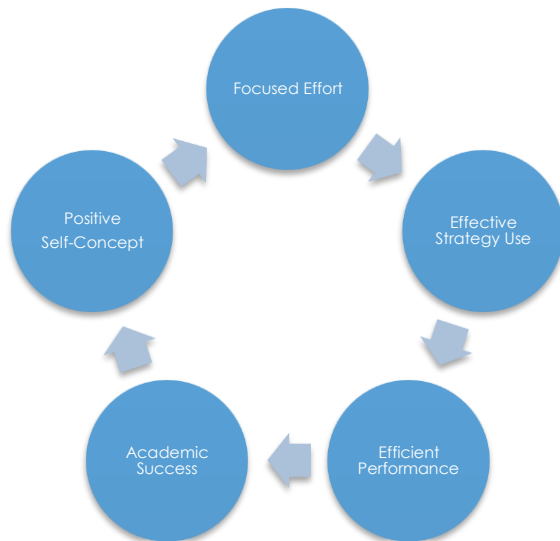
**Cognitive**

☐ Success is directly linked with motivation, effort, persistence, self-concept and self-efficacy

- ❑ What are the specific challenges/stressors for a youngster when it comes to managing cognitive inputs?
- ❑ We can break down overly complex demands into simpler subsets – and then acknowledge success / *have my thoughts ...* and growth in achieving success.
- ❑ Right-size the praise. Overwhelmingly positive is still overwhelming!
- ❑ We can support the frontal lobe activation by providing supports – visual aids, notes, non-verbal or verbal cues.
- ❑ Environmental situations can change brain development. **Calm** is a good place to start

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*My thoughts don't have me.*





# Relational

*I can learn how to connect positively in the world and make a place for myself that is relationship rich*

## To Think About:

- ❑ Accepting the uniqueness of each child's development. Their relational/social capacity develops at very different times and rates. Two kids in the same family = very different rhythm.
- ❑ How might a child's Biological, Emotional and Cognitive capacities be influencing our Relational strengths
- ❑ What cues are our kids picking up from us? They are being co-regulated from infancy in reading cues and responding. *They are learning even when we aren't teaching.*
- ❑ Some children's early experiences hamper capacities to understand and respond. Regular exposure to new and positive inputs helps to "overwrite" those adverse earlier ones.
- ❑ **Formal guidance (manners...) and informal experience (play) help to shape relational capacity** ❑ Increasing isolation is a major issue

# Perspectival

## To Think About:

- ☐ How well developed is our child's Perspectival/ProSocial capacity & how is it demonstrated in connecting with others? What can we do to model and provide non-punitive feedback?
- ☐ Do we take the opportunity to “deconstruct” the themes in popular media – with winners and losers, the in-crowd and outsiders?
- ☐ How do we address put downs as part of the commonly used narrative?

*I have the capacity to see the world from others' point of view and to respond appropriately based on context.*

☐ Empathy can & should be modeled, practiced, “unpacked” and acknowledged



<b>worldcentric</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• focus on "All of Us"</li><li>• ability to take into account multiple perspectives</li><li>• care and concern for all people <i>and</i> the environment</li></ul>
<b>sociocentric</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• focus on "We" - eg. ethnic group, religion, nation</li><li>• also known as ethnocentric</li><li>• care and concern for people like me</li></ul>
<b>selfcentric</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• focus on "I"</li><li>• also known as egocentric</li><li>• care and concern for self</li></ul>

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## Empathy vs. Sympathy

# Inspirational

## To Think About:

- ☐ How are we being deliberate in creating environments where kids at greatest risk are nurtured to explore “wonder” without fear of failure?
- ☐ Are we sufficiently persistent so that our kids are exposed to new realities outside their current world view?
- ☐ What is the self-talk in your child’s head and in the environment surrounding him/her?
- ☐ How can we help our child re-engage with nature and its mystery?

I have wonder for my world.  
greater than myself.

## To Think About:

I feel connected  
to something

- ☐ How can you create opportunities (and



# Aspirational

support safe risks) for your child to make a real difference.

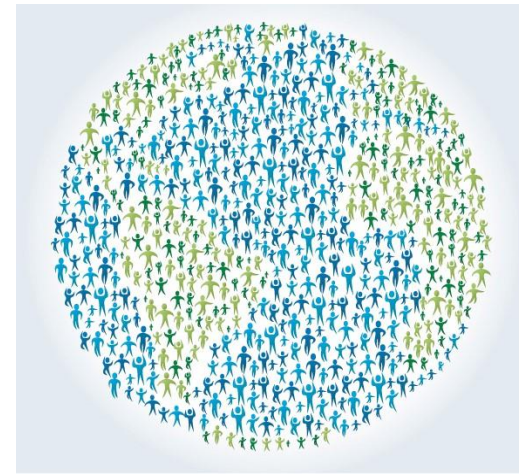
- ❑ Nurturing a “growth mindset” requires acknowledging kids for how they are meeting challenges, not just for “being smart.”
- ❑ What does it look like to scaffold their experiences (increasing independence) and challenge/extend their boundaries beyond I am inspired to learn ... to grow ... comfort zones but not into anxiety zones? to make my own unique contribution ... to make a difference in my world.

*Step up!*

*Be a game changer!*

One More Thought: A Dysregulated Adult  
Interacting With A Dysregulated Youngster Simply  
Doesn't Work:

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## *Things Get Better When We Consider the 'SELF' in Self-Regulation*

1. How am I reacting to this situation and why?
2. What is my adult perspective?
3. How is the environment influencing the situation?
4. What is the child's need?
5. How can we strengthen our relationship?

A Great Resource: Psychology Foundation of Canada

[www.psychologyfoundation.org](http://www.psychologyfoundation.org)

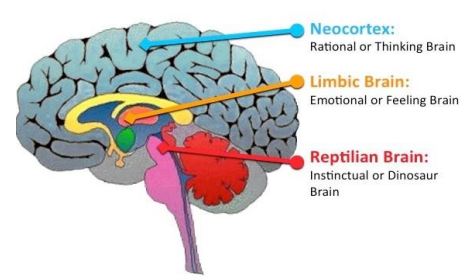
# Stress Lessons Parent's Guide



# Together, We Build Human Capacity



It's Never Too Late



# Thank You.

## Understanding Learning & Social-Emotional Development Through a Self-Regulation Lens

*So That What We Know Changes What We Do*



Canadian Self-Regulation Initiative

[www.self-regulation.ca](http://www.self-regulation.ca)

@csri\_self-reg

@mikemckay\_ca

*Supporting Caring Families, Communities & Schools and  
Positive Youth Mental Health*

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