Beyond the Behavior: Understanding Autism, Anxiety, and Challenging Behaviors Through Conscious Discipline

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About Me









Schedule



8:30 am- 9:45 am- Presentation



9:45 am to 10:00 am- Discussion/Q and A



Welcome

Brain-Smart-Start

Movement boosts brain function.

Objectives

Understand	Understand the connection between autism, anxiety, and challenging behavior.
Recognize	Recognize common signs of anxiety and dysregulation that may present as challenging behavior.
Reframe	Reframe challenging behavior as communication and examine what may be happening beneath the behavior including missing skills and environmental demands.
Apply	Apply proactive, evidence-based strategies that support connection, regulation, and skill development.
Develop	Develop practical, individualized responses to challenging behavior that can be implemented across **home, school, and community settings**.

Reflection

What is one thing you hope to learn today?



What is Autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference that affects how a person communicates, interacts, learns, and experiences the world.

Autism

Every person.
Every experience.
Every strengths and challenges.

Social Communication



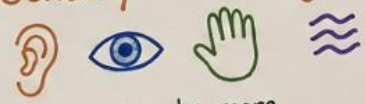
- understanding social cues may be difficult
- challenges with conversation
- may prefer different ways of interacting

Restricted Interests & Repetitive Behaviors



- strong interests
- routines are important
- repetitive movements or behaviors

Sensory Processing



- senses can be more or less sensitive
- everyday sounds, lights, textures, or smells can feel overwhelming or unnoticed

Emotional Regulation



- feelings can be intense
- changes or uncertainty can cause stress
- support with coping is important

Thinking & Learning



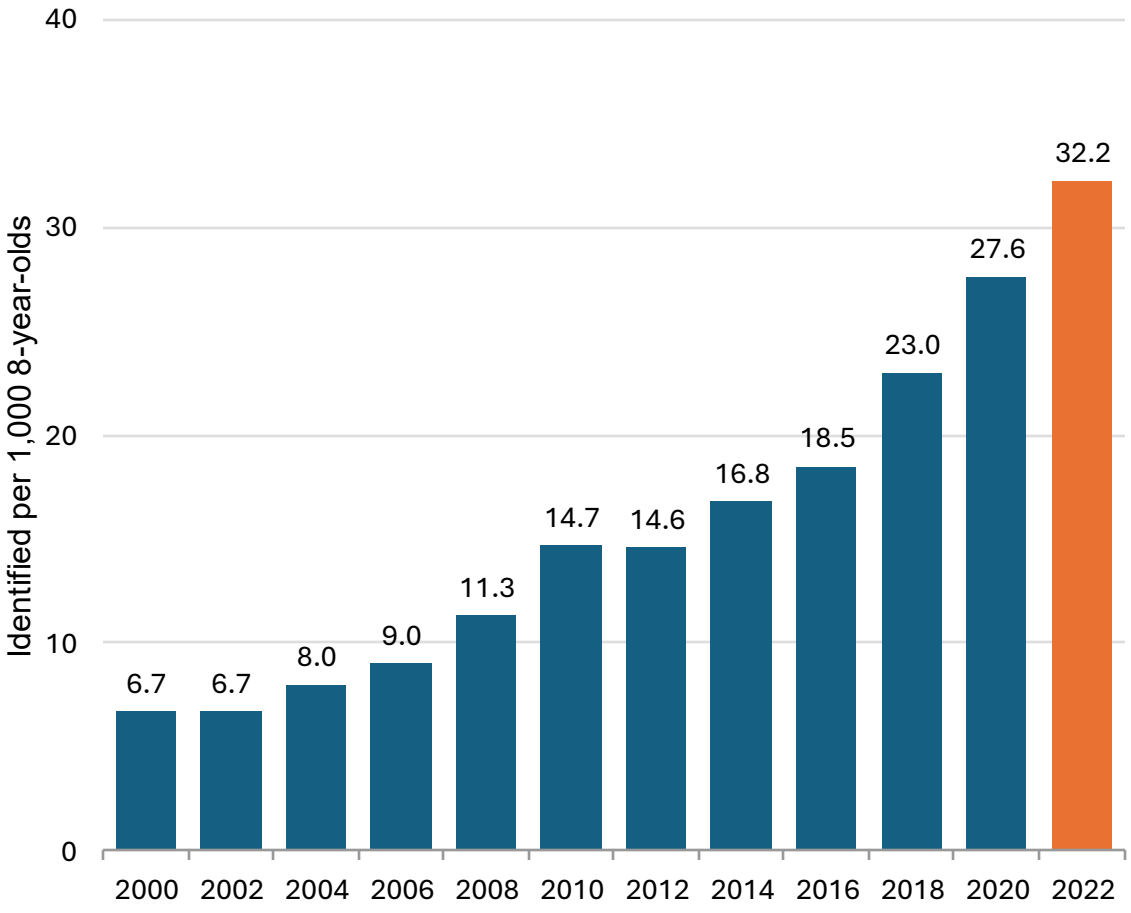
- learns and thinks in unique ways
- may need support with flexibility, planning, or problem solving

Different, not less.
Neurodiversity is a strength.

Remember:

Behavior is communication.
Understanding the <u>why</u> helps us support better.

How common is autism?



1 in 31

8-year-olds identified with autism in 2022, up from 1 in 150 in 2000

3.4×

more common in boys (4.9%) than in girls (1.4%)

Nearly 2×

as likely to be identified by age 4 (children born in 2018 vs. 2014)

Source: CDC ADDM Network, 8-year-olds, 2000–2022 (MMWR Surveill Summ 2025;74[SS-2]). Sites are not a nationally representative sample. The reasons for the rise are not fully known; broader awareness and identification are thought to contribute.

Autism and Behavior

~40%

of autistic children and teens have co-occurring anxiety disorders.

van Steensel et al., 2011 (meta-analysis of 31 studies). Estimates vary widely.

Autism is not the cause of challenging behavior.

Challenging behaviors often occur when a child is experiencing:

💬 **Communication challenges** – expressing wants, needs, or emotions

🧠 **Anxiety**– feeling overwhelmed or unsafe

👂 **Sensory differences- over or under-** responsiveness to sensory input

🔄 **Cognitive inflexibility** – Difficulty with changes, transitions, or unexpected events

❤️‍🔥 **Emotion Dysregulation**– Difficulty identifying, communicating, or regulating emotions

📚 **Skill deficits** – Lacking the skills to meet environmental demands



Reflection

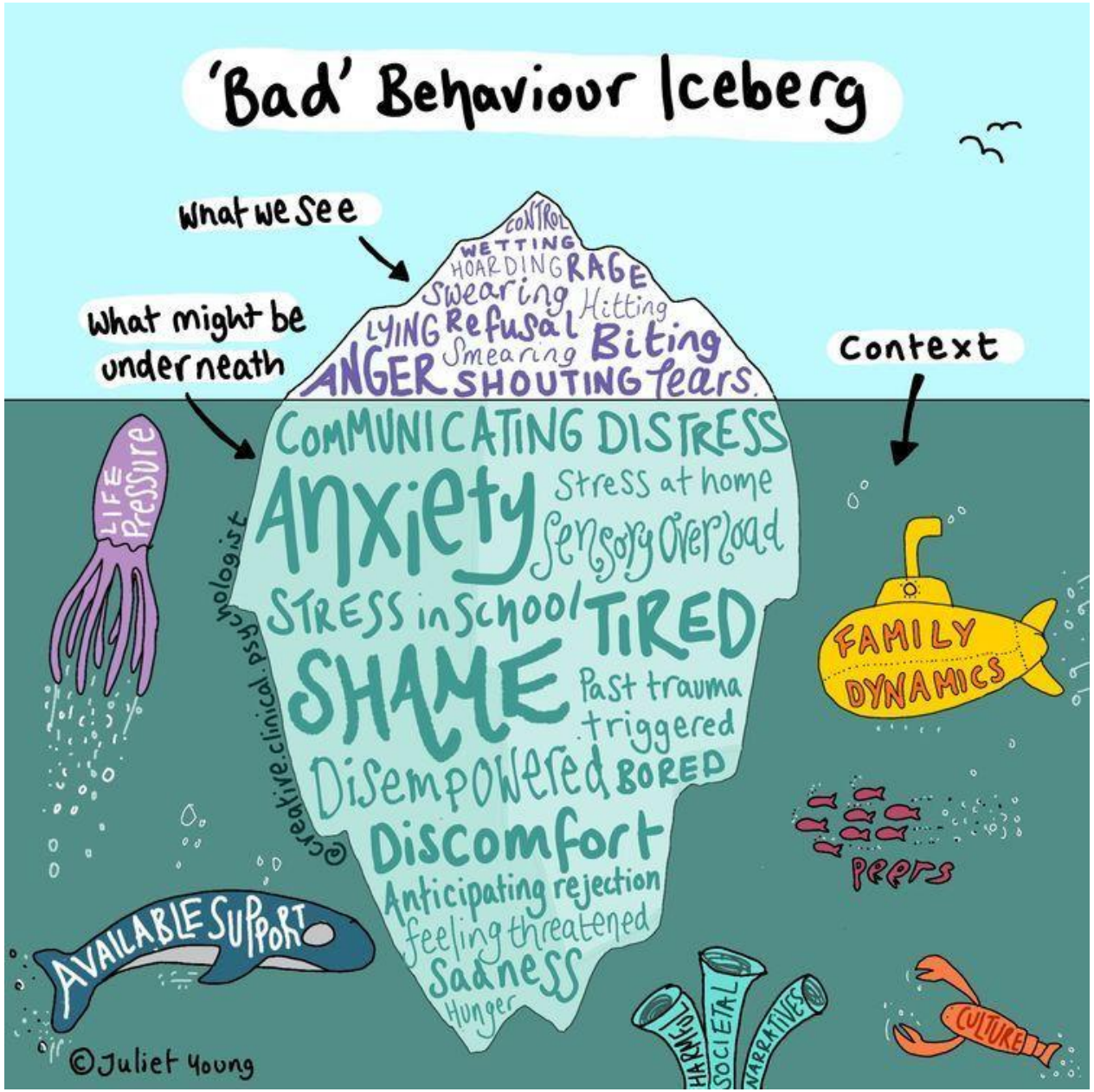
When you feel anxious, what happens in your brain and body?

When anxiety shows up, how do you typically respond? What might others notice about you?

Signs of Anxiety in Children



All behavior is a form of communication.



Development of Self-Regulation:

1. In infants, caregivers hold babies on their chests. Self-regulation occurs through attachment and adult regulation.
2. In early childhood, children sit on their caregivers' laps. Self-regulation begins to co-occur through attachment and adult regulation.
3. In childhood through early adolescence, children begin to learn to calm in a safety spot such as by sitting on a bean bag. Self-regulation continues to occur through adult regulation and begins to develop on its own.
4. As individuals age, the goal is for them to be able to learn to self-regulate on their own.

Why Self-Regulation Matters

Research suggests that self-regulation is a higher predictor of achievement than IQ or reading, writing, or math skills.



Reflection and Discussion

Think of one child who challenges you the most.

What is the behavior?

When does it typically occur?

What makes it particularly difficult to address?

PROBLEM BEHAVIOR VS. UNSKILLED BEHAVIOR

Behavior happens when expectations exceed skills.

All behaviors are a form of communication.

What is Conscious Discipline?



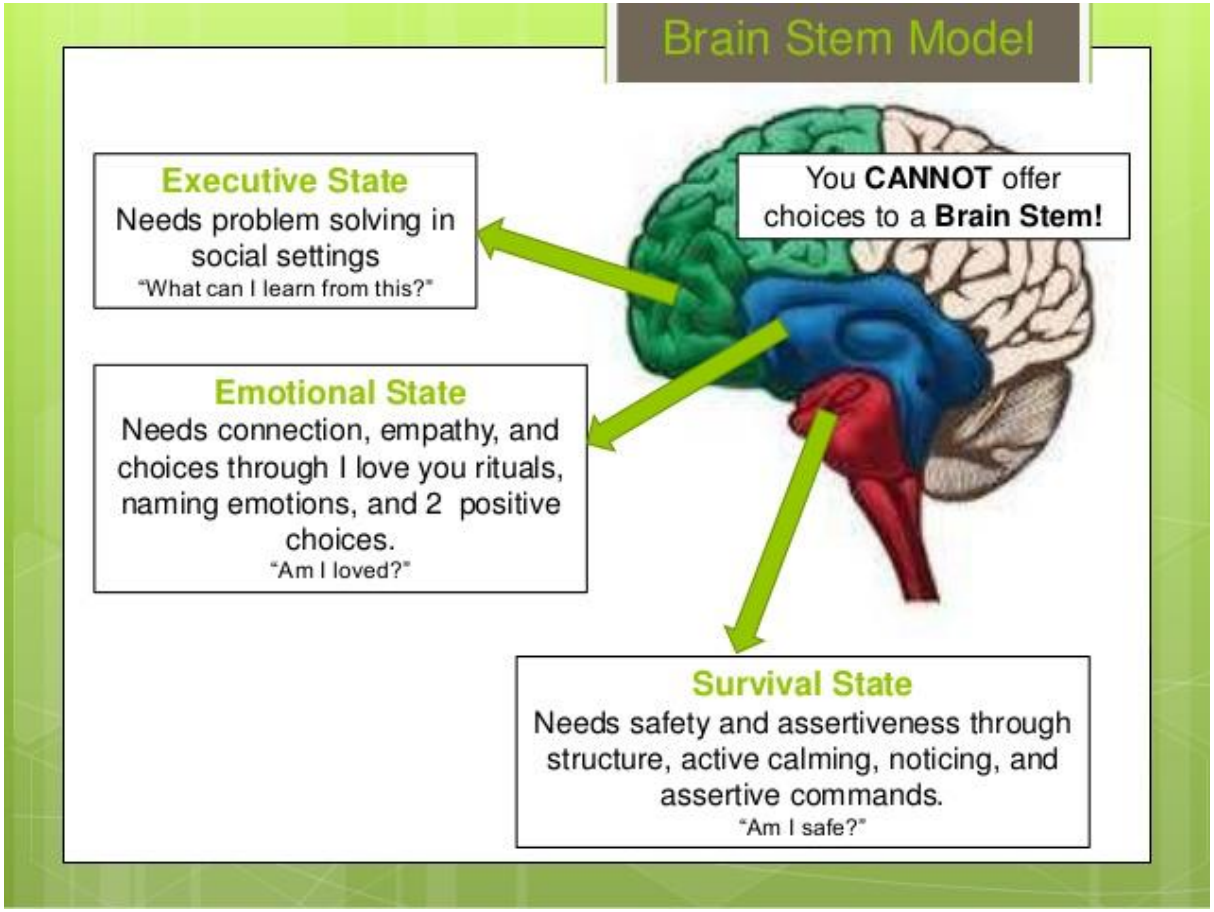
Conscious Discipline is a universal comprehensive program designed to infuse social-emotional wellbeing through systematically enhancing the social-emotional skills of children and families.

Connecting Conscious Discipline to Evidence-Based Care

Domain	Conscious Discipline Principle	Evidence-Based Practice
Regulation	Co-regulation and predictable environments	Assess triggers and setting events; teach coping skills and adjust demands
Connection	Safety, attunement, and supportive relationships	Use collaborative parent coaching, validation, and behavior-specific positive attention
Skill Development	Teach rather than rely on correction alone	Use functional assessment, explicit instruction, reinforcement, and graduated practice

Connection shapes our approach; assessment and evidence guide intervention.

Brain-State Model





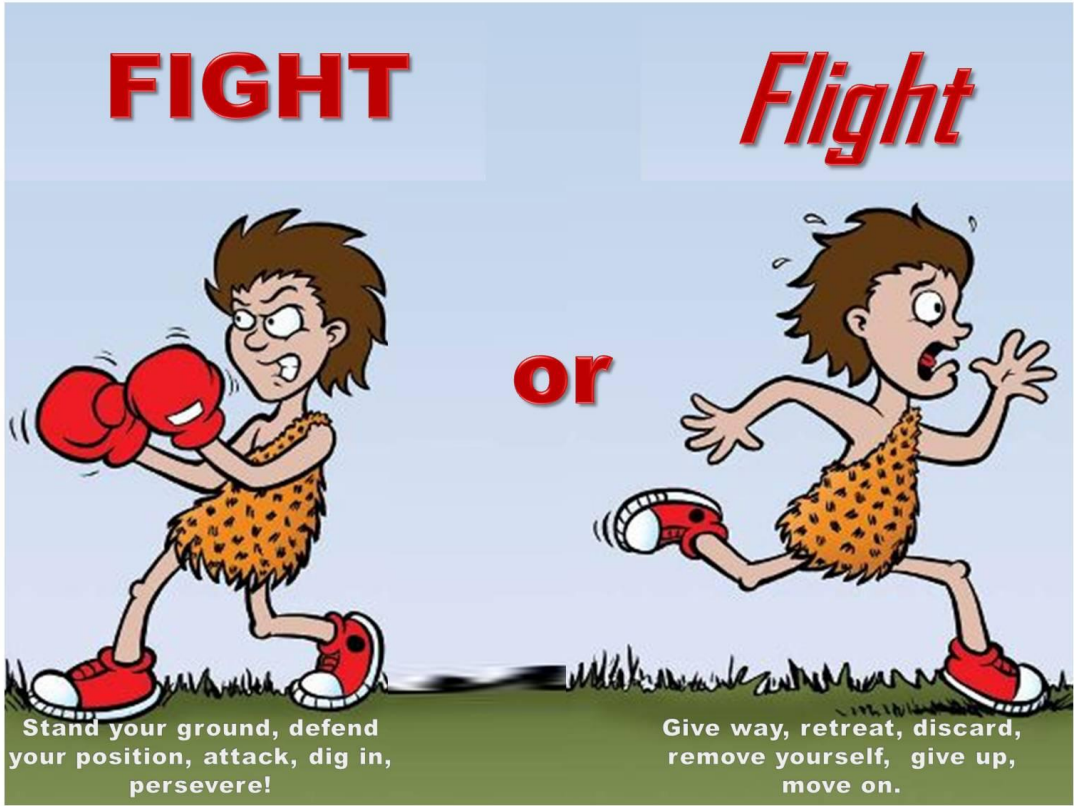
Survival State: "Am I Safe?"

- Primitive
- Self-defense
- Accessed unconsciously, nonverbally, and automatically
- Fight / Flight / Freeze

Needs: Safety

Survival State: Behaviors

- Fight- hit, push, scream, bite, etc.
- Flight- withdraw, run away
- Freeze- surrender by complying, shutting down, or giving in or giving up



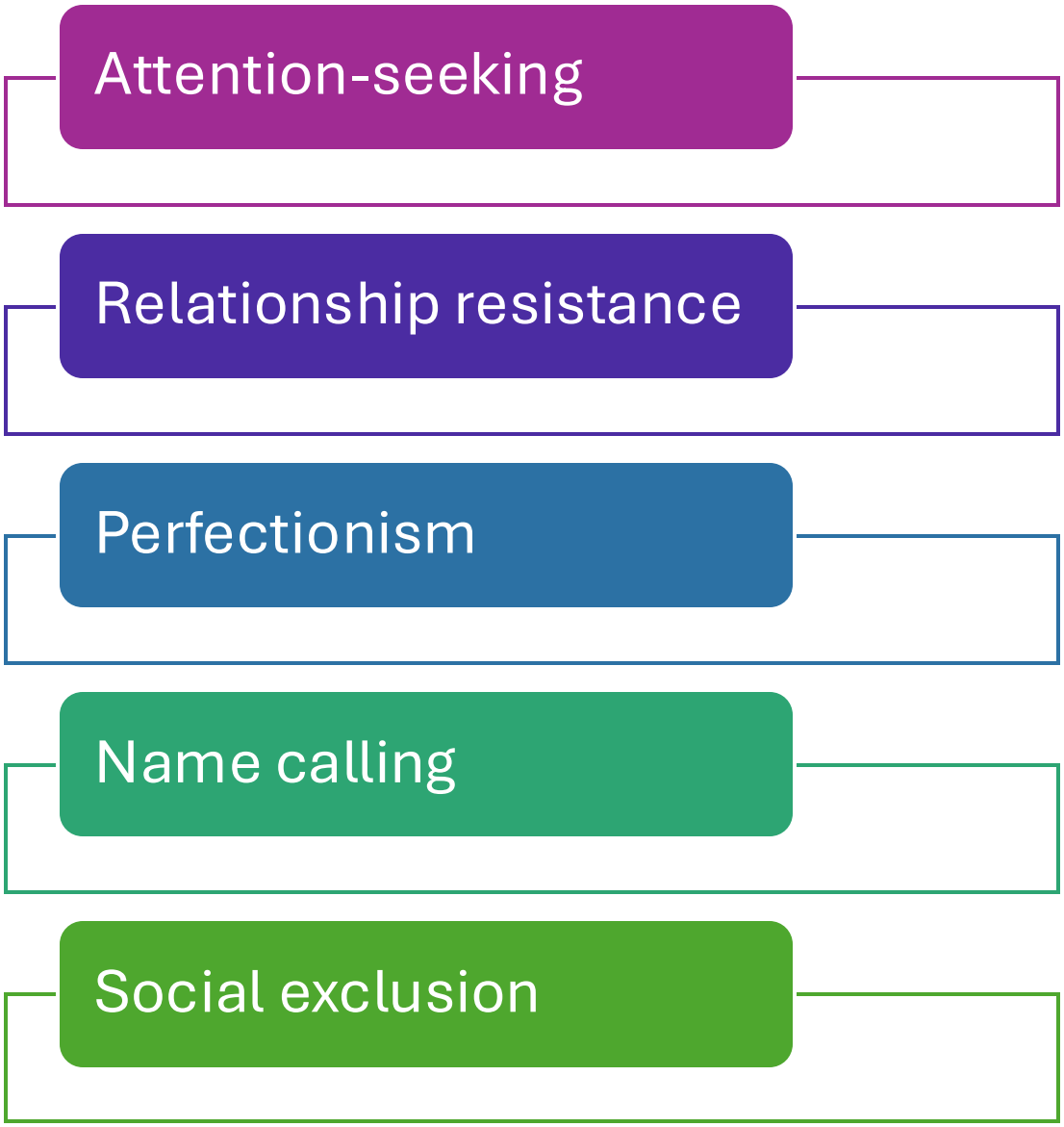


Emotional State: “Am I Loved?”

- Judgement
- Threatened
- Big emotions
- “It’s not fair!”

<u>Needs: Connection</u>

Emotional State: Behaviors





Executive State: “What Can I Learn from This?”

- Problem solving
- Executive function
- Emotional regulation
- Self-control
- Learning

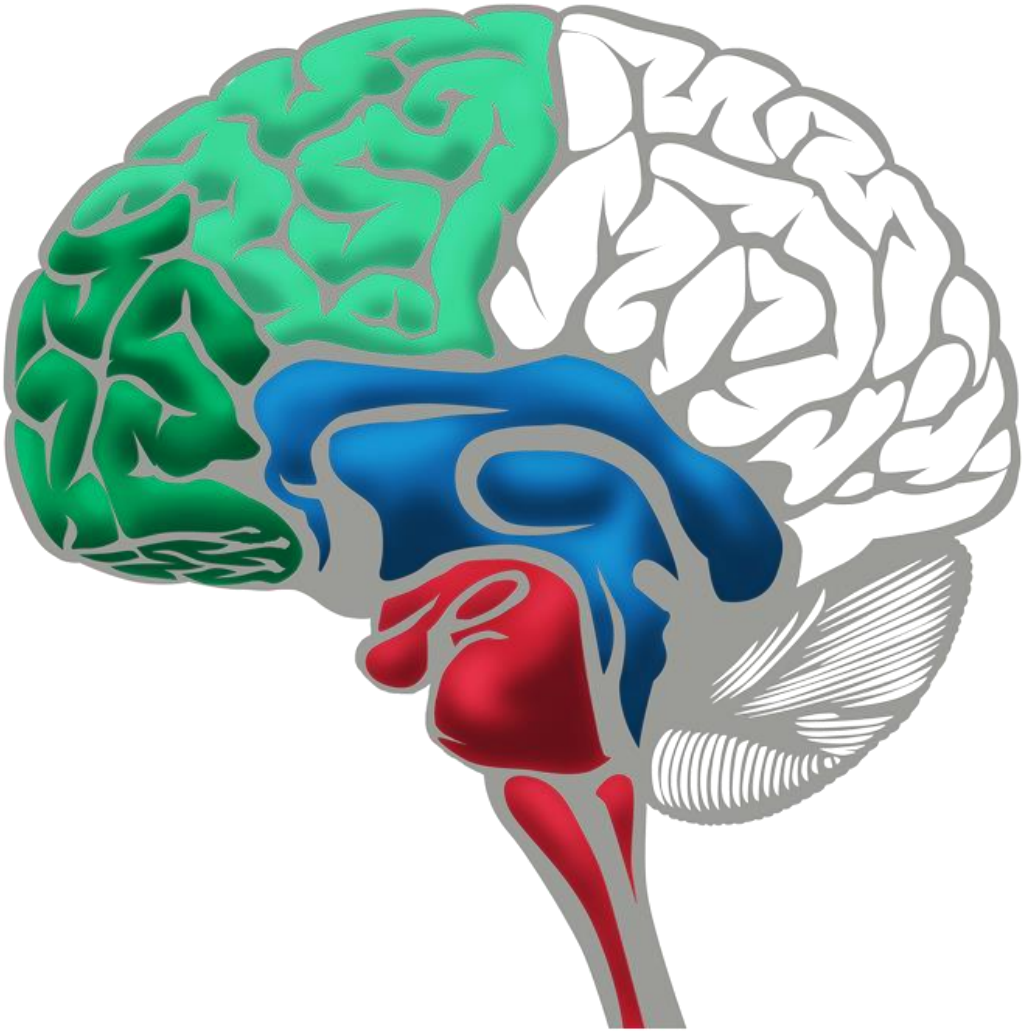
Executive State: Behaviors

- Attention
- Time Management
- Organization
- Prioritization
- Working Memory
- Impulse Control
- Flexibility
- Empathy
- Metacognition
- Goal Achievement
- Task Initiation
- Emotional Regulation



Reflection

- Think of a meltdown or behavior outburst.
- Which state was the child in?
- Which state were you in?



Misperceptions of Behavior

Scenario	Negative Perception?	Skills Deficit?
A child throws a fit in the grocery store.	Brat	Inability to handle frustration
A child does not listen or follow directions.	Defiant	Inattention or language delay
A child intentionally hurts another child.	Mean or disrespectful	Inability to cope when something is different than anticipated
A child screams and cries hysterically during swim lessons.	Defiant	Inability to cope with anxiety

Reframe Behavior

Defiance vs. Skill Gap

Disrespect vs. Dysregulation

Practice

- Practice reframing your child's behavior.

- Think of a recent incident of behavior. What happened? How could you see it differently?



Goals for the Brain-State Model:

1	2	3	4
Remain in an executive state. When we change our state, we change our perception, which changes our intent, which changes our response to the child.	Identify the child's internal state: survival, emotional, executive.	Assist the child in achieving an executive state for optimal learning. Safety calms the survival state, connection soothes the emotional state, and problem solving maximizes the executive state.	Address the behavior by teaching a new skill.



Discipline

Discipline is to cause someone to acquire knowledge or a skill.

Synonyms include to teach, instruct, educate, train, and school.

Discipline

The goal of traditional discipline is to **scare** children into compliance.

Fear shuts down the pre-frontal lobe or higher centers of the brain causing more impulses and anxiety.

Regulation, connection, and skill development inform intervention.





Discussion Scenario

What do you see?

What is underneath it?

Understanding Behavior ≠ Excusing Behavior

- Understanding behavior **does not mean eliminating** expectations, consequences, or behavioral intervention.
- It means **choosing interventions** that are responsive to a child's developmental capacities, underlying needs, and the function of the behavior.

Adult Regulation

Seeing a child's behavior as a sign of disrespect derails our own composure.

When we stay calm, we can access our wisdom in the moment. When we have negative perceptions, it lowers our brain center, and we will act or respond in a more emotional manner.

For consequences to be effective, we must own our feelings (instead of blaming others), reflect on our choices, and become conscious of their impact (instead of judging ourselves and others as bad).

Connection

Connection First. Correction Second.

- For the brain to develop optimally, children need to feel emotionally, socially, and physically safe.
- When we feel safe, we are able to learn.
- Connection and firm boundaries can coexist.



Noticing: Being in the Present

Being **present** and providing **specific** feedback.

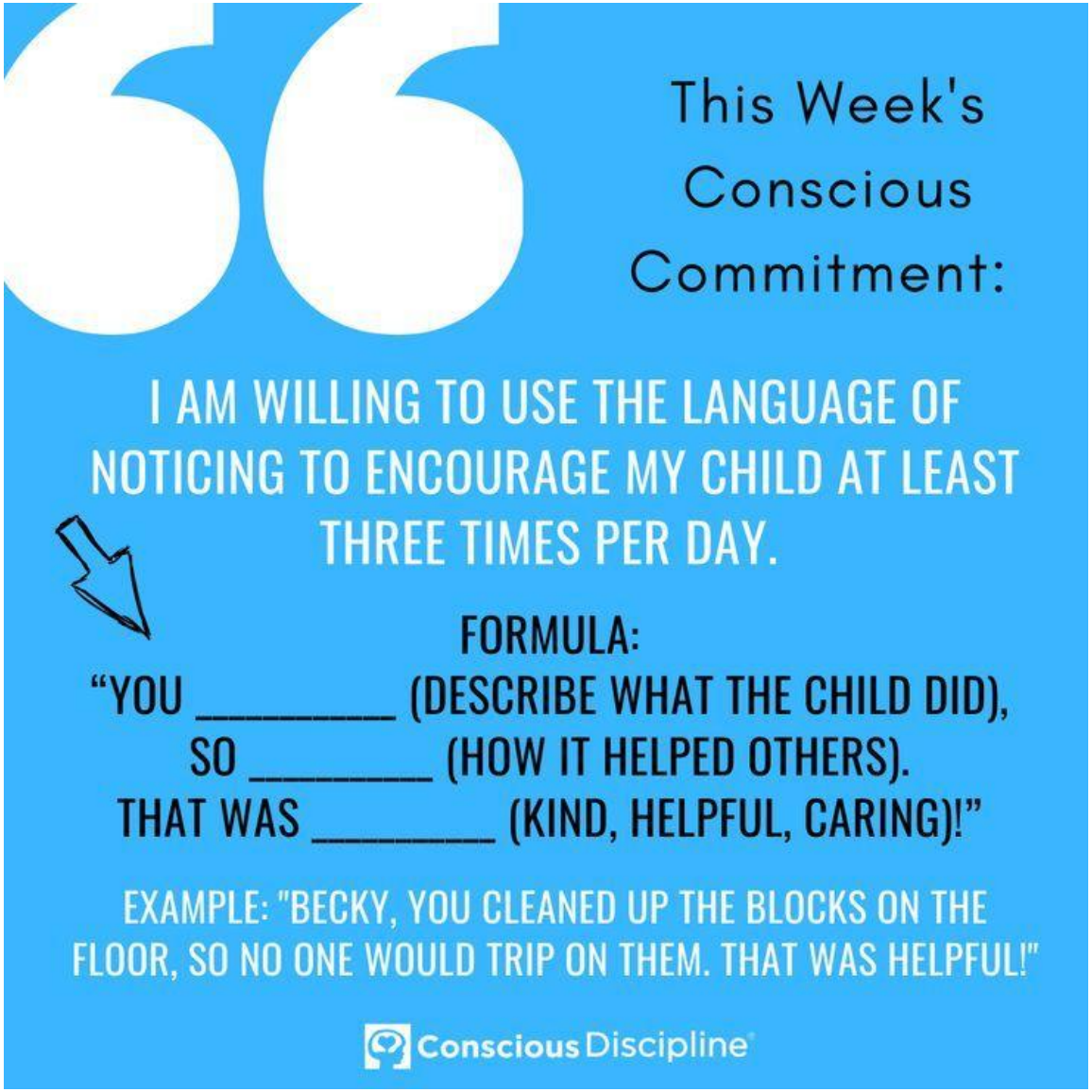
Observing and verbally describing a child's nonverbal actions in a **non-judgmental manner**.

Noticing is a "you" statement versus an "I" statement.

"You wanted a turn on the swing. You used your words and you got a turn!"

Noticing: Being in the Present

"You put your shoes away so we can find them next time. That was helpful!" vs. "Good job!"



Connecting Emotions to Interoception, Communication, and Coping Skills

It looks like you are feeling worried. Let's go somewhere safe to talk about this.

You can handle this. You got it!

It is okay to feel that way.

It is my job to keep you **safe** and it is your job to help me keep you **safe**.

Help me understand.

That seems really tricky.

I am here to help you.

Limits and Boundaries

Boundary- something you tell someone you will do and it requires nothing of the other person.

Setting Effective Boundaries:

"It is my job to keep you safe and your job to help me keep you safe."	Set consistent limits.	Be clear and specific.	Clearly state any exceptions you may have.	Provide reminders of consequences of actions.

Giving Effective Directions

- Use simple, concise demands.
- Give one demand at a time.
- Provide “do requests.”
- Use a neutral tone.
- Praise for effort.

Practice

Think of an activity that a child or student struggles to complete.

Practice giving an effective direction.





Structure Builds Safety

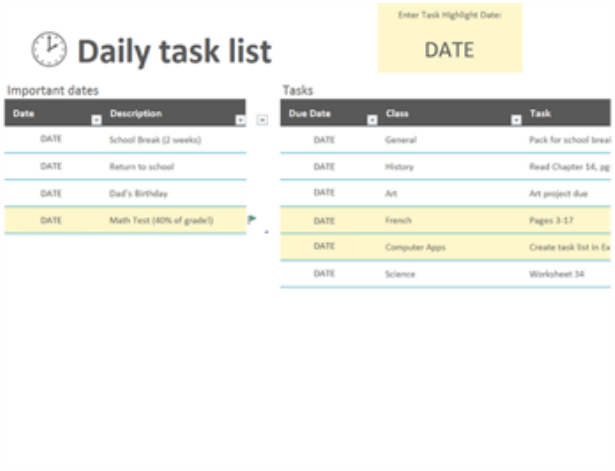
- Rules- enforced and have consequences; non-negotiables
- Agreements- shared expectations or guidelines for acceptable behavior within a group
- Commitments- promises to oneself based on one's morals and values
- Routines- create consistency and predictability

Reflection

What is hardest:

- Setting limits?
- Following through?
- Letting go?





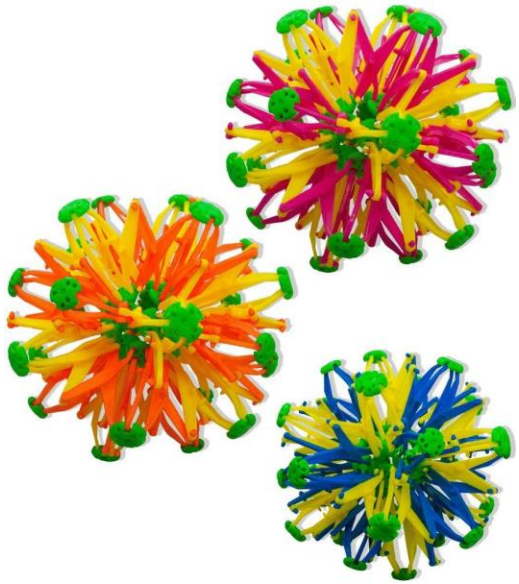
Routines and Task Analysis

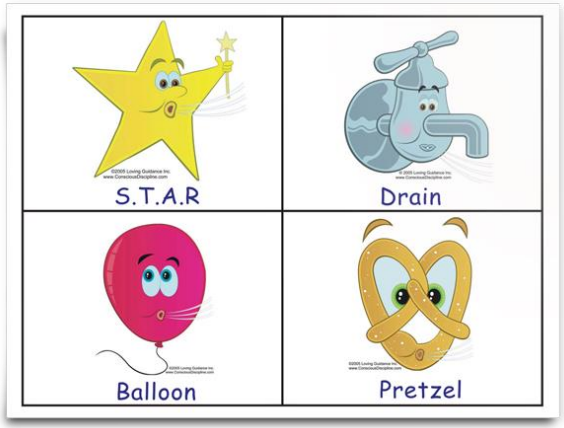
Make it doable.

- Break it down
- Show + Tell
- Use visuals

Composure: Breathing







Composure: Safe Space



A safe space is a pre-identified location to learn managing emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

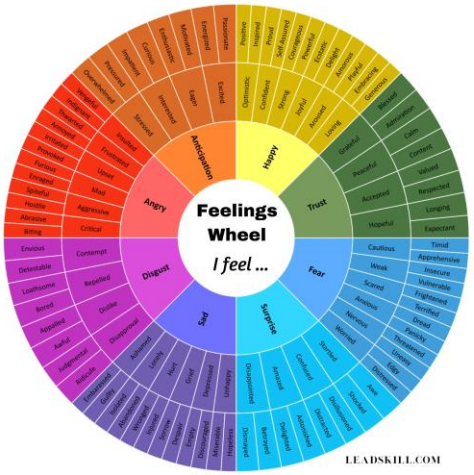
It involves more than taking deep breaths and it is more than just a quiet space.

A safe space provides a place to actively calm and to bring our brain from a lower state to a higher executive state.

Composure: Naming Feelings

1.) Separate feelings from identity.

I am anxious vs. I feel anxious.



2.) Teach and label where emotions are felt in the body. Name it to tame it.

“Your eyes are going like this. Your mouth is going like this. You seem angry."

“Her face is saying I don’t like it when you step on me.”



Conscious Discipline
“Feeling Buddies”

Reinforcement through Skills and Connection

Be Intentional

Reinforce specific skills and behaviors, not just quiet or compliance.

Example: Teach and reinforce asking for a break.

Build Connection

Pair reinforcement with encouragement, noticing, and positive interaction.

Example: "You put your shoes away, so we can find them next time."

Individualize

Choose reinforcers based on each child's needs and preferences.

Example: Ask the child or run a preference assessment; update it often.

Promote Independence

Gradually shift toward natural reinforcement and self-monitoring.

Example: Fade tangibles; move to natural outcomes and self-checks.

Rewards and Reinforcement: Conscious Discipline emphasizes noticing and encouragement over external rewards. Behavior analysis plans reinforcement on purpose. In practice: plan it, then deliver it through connection.

The goal is to build meaningful, lasting skills.



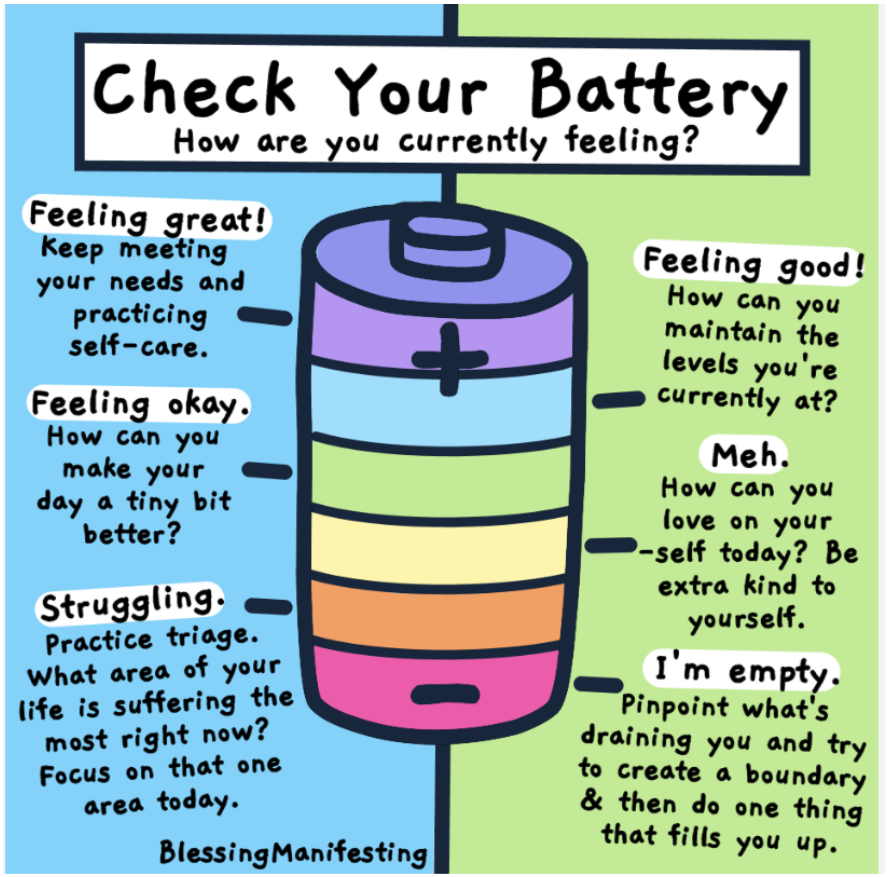
Reflection

Your relationship is the intervention.

What is one small shift you commit to making in your clinical work?

The Importance of Self-Care





“Every child deserves a champion, an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

- Rita Pierson (TED talk, “Every Kid Needs a Champion”)



For questions, contact me at www.behavioralpediatricinstitute.com.

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