

BIG FEELINGS, BRAVE RESPONSES HANDOUT



2025

PAVE YOUR WAY THERAPY

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ANXIETY

Anxiety is a normal emotion: it protects us from threats (real or perceived).

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Biological & Cognitive

- Genetic factors: anxiety runs in families, anxious children have increased amygdala/prefrontal cortex activity
- Interpretation bias, catastrophising, hyper vigilance

Environmental

- Parental anxiety & parental reaction; overprotectiveness (children learn by watching others)

Negative life events

- Situations may be viewed more negatively by anxious children, even if they are neutral situations.

Avoidance

- Keeps anxiety going by preventing children from learning they can cope with challenges
- Without chances to practice coping with big feelings, children have fewer opportunities to build emotional regulation skills.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Role of Male Role Models

- Children learn how to handle emotions by watching the men in their lives.
- Stigma around men showing vulnerability (“Man up,” “Don’t cry”) teaches kids to hide feelings
- When male role models openly express emotions and seek help, it shows that feelings are normal and strength comes from honesty and self-awareness.

Break the cycle of silence and stigma.

35% of men said they’d reach out for help– the other 65% suffer in silence! (ABS,2022)

Social Media & Technology

- Since 2010, constant digital connection has extended school and social pressures beyond the classroom.
- Continuous exposure to distressing news, images, and online comparisons increases self-doubt and anxiety.
- A child’s interpretation of their environment directly affects their emotional regulation.

HELP CHILDREN UNDERSTAND THE BRAIN

"Flip Your Lid" by Dr. Daniel Siegel

- Use hand model to show how emotions "disconnect" thinking
- Help kids reconnect with calming strategies

The House Model by Karen Young

- Top Floor = Calm, connected
- Middle = Alert, stressed
- Bottom = Shut down, helpless

Your Brain Friends

Hippocampus (Hippo):

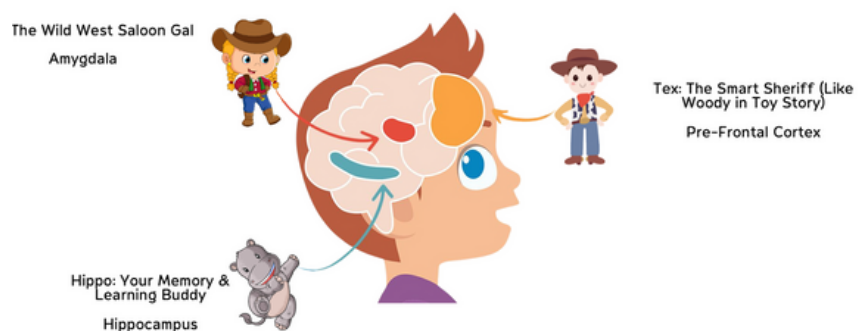
- Memory keeper and learning helper, in remembering and learning new things.

Prefrontal Cortex (Tex):

- Represents clear thinking and decision-making. Helps with planning, understanding emotions, and controlling impulses to stay calm.

Amygdala (Amy):

- Alerts you to danger but can overreact, preventing clear thinking.



REGULATION

Co-regulation is when caregivers help children manage emotions by offering calm, supportive guidance, modelling regulation, and creating emotional safety through connection, tone, and play.

A dysregulated adult cannot regulate a dysregulated child.

Why is it Important?

- Provides children with a sense of safety and trust.
- Teaches them how to manage emotions by experiencing calm support.
- Builds the foundation for self-regulation skills.
- Helps prevent emotional overwhelm from escalating into tricky behaviours.
- Strengthens the parent/ guardian -child bond through empathy and connection.

Co-Regulation Strategies

- **Be warm and responsive:** Listen, comfort, and show love when your child is upset.
- **Keep routines predictable:** Regular daily patterns help children feel secure.
- **Create a safe space:** Ensure your child feels physically and emotionally safe from judgment.
- **Model calm behaviour:** Show how you manage your own big emotions.
- **Teach coping skills in the moment:** Use simple language and offer choices to help them calm down.

REGULATION

Self-regulation: is our ability to match our response or our action to the activity at hand.

Why is it important?

- Learn, it helps us to listen and learn new skills
- Engage with others, it helps us with turn taking, understanding & following rules, sharing & expressing
- Be independent, it helps us to make decisions about behaviour & how to respond to new situations

Emotional regulation: In simple terms it is the ability to effectively manage and respond to an emotional experience. The ability to exert control over your emotional state. Involves changing your thoughts and behaviours.

Why is it important?

- The ability to manage and respond appropriately to emotions.
- Involves controlling emotional reactions by changing thoughts and behaviours.
- Helps prevent overreactions like shouting or hitting when feeling overwhelmed.
- Supports focusing on positive thoughts in difficult situations.
- Allows taking a break or removing yourself from challenging situations when needed.

DR. STUART SHANKER'S STRESS LENS

Biological:

Physical factors that disrupt body function: noises, smells, bright lights, lack of exercise, poor sleep.

Emotion:

Ability to experience & understand feelings. Stressors include grief, disappointment, routine changes, and fears, which often increase stress in other areas.

Cognitive:

Challenges with thinking skills, organising thoughts, learning, decision making, boredom.

Social:

Difficulty reading social cues & understanding impact on others. Stressors include peer pressure, bullying, exclusion, public speaking, meeting new people.

Prosocial:

Struggles with managing others' stress. Signs include trouble sharing, honesty, and understanding right from wrong.

Why its important to understand?

- When a child's nervous system is overwhelmed by stress, they can't think clearly or regulate well.
- The goal is to reduce stressors and help the child return to a calm, alert state to support better regulation.

DR. JEAN AYRES: SENSORY LENS

Tactile (Touch): Detects texture, pressure, pain, temperature through skin receptors

Vestibular (Balance & Movement): Senses motion, gravity, and balance via the inner ear

Proprioceptive (Body Awareness): Feedback from muscles and joints about body position and movement

Visual (Sight): Processes light, color, depth, and movement

Auditory (Hearing): Detects sound, pitch, volume, and direction

Olfactory (Smell): Detects odours and scents

Gustatory (Taste): Senses flavours like sweet, sour, salty, bitter

Interoception (Internal Awareness): Senses internal states like hunger, thirst, heartbeat, temperature, and breathing needs

Why its important to understand?

- Emotional dysregulation can stem from how the brain processes sensory input (e.g., sound, touch, movement).
- Children may be over- or under-sensitive to sensory stimuli, which affects their ability to stay calm and focused.

KELLY MAHLER- INTEROCEPTION LENS

“Interoception is a sense that allows us to notice internal body signals like a growling stomach, racing heart, tense muscles or full bladder. When we notice these body signals our brain uses them as clues to our emotions. Interoception helps us to feel many important emotion”

Why its important?

- Interoception is the awareness of internal body signals (hunger, heart rate, emotions).
- Some children struggle to recognise these internal cues, making it harder to manage emotions before they become overwhelming.
- Building interoceptive awareness helps children notice and label feelings, supporting emotional regulation.

3 LENSES FOR UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL REGULATION

- **Stress Lens (Dr. Stuart Shanker)**

Looks at behaviour as a response to stress, aiming to reduce stressors and restore a calm alert state.

- **Sensory Lens (Dr. A. Jean Ayres)**

Focuses on how the body processes sensory input, and how over or under responsiveness can affect behaviour.

- **Interoception Lens (Kelly Mahler)**

Examines how we notice and interpret internal body signals that influence emotions.

Why it Matters:

- Understanding all three lenses helps us see the underlying causes behind behaviours, rather than just the actions.
- By recognising stress, sensory, and interoceptive needs, we can give children the right tools and support to regulate their emotions effectively.

STRATEGIES

Sensory Ladders

- A visual tool that helps children recognise their energy or emotional levels.
- Uses steps or colours to show how their body feels; from calm to overexcited or overwhelmed.
- Teaches children to notice early signs of dysregulation.
- Guides them in choosing strategies to move back to a calm, ready-to-learn state.

Zones of Regulation

- A colour coded framework that helps children identify and talk about their feelings and energy levels.
- Blue Zone: Sad, tired, low energy.
- Green Zone : Calm, focused, ready to learn.
- Yellow Zone: Excited, silly, anxious, starting to lose control.
- Red Zone: Angry, overwhelmed, out of control.
- Teaches children strategies to move between zones and return to being regulated and calm.

STRATEGIES

The Alert Program

- Uses the analogy “How Does Your Engine Run?” to help children understand self-regulation.
- Encourages noticing if their “engine” is running high (overactive), low (sluggish), or just right (calm and focused).
- Teaches strategies called “engine tools”, to change their energy level to match the situation.
- Builds awareness and independence in managing emotions and behaviour.

Play

- Play creates a safe space for children to explore and express emotions.
- Helps children express feelings they can’t yet put into words.
- Supports learning self control and coping skills naturally.
- Acts as practice for real life situations.
- Builds strong connections with parents/ guardians through shared fun and interaction.
- Helps children practice problem solving and emotional flexibility.
- Prepares children to handle future challenges with confidence.
- Reduces stress and promotes overall emotional well-being.

STRATEGIES

Physical Activity/ Exercise

- Reduces stress and anxiety by releasing mood boosting chemicals.
- Builds brain connections that manage emotions, attention, and self-control.
- Regulates the nervous system by releasing excess energy.
- Encourages mind body awareness through activities like yoga.
- Teaches social & emotional skills like patience and teamwork in group play.
- Helps children “reset” after strong emotions for better focus.

Mindfulness

- Breaks negative thought patterns and promotes a positive mindset.
- Reduces stress by shifting the brain to a calm, relaxed state.
- Helps control emotional reactions by encouraging awareness and acceptance.
- Supports calmer, more peaceful environments at home, school & in the community.

STRATEGIES

Routine

- Provide predictability and security, reducing anxiety.
- Visual schedules help children know what to expect next.
- Build family connections through shared, quality time.
- Boost children's confidence and independence.
- Help plan for special or uncertain events by focusing on what's known rather than the unknown.






Connection and Support

- Build emotional vocabulary by naming feelings and reading or watching about emotions. (e.g Bluey Bike episode)
- Practice regulation during calm moments through role play and discussion.
- Be patient, emotional regulation develops gradually with consistent support.
- Celebrate children's emotional awareness to encourage growth.
- Connect first by being present, calm, and gentle before guiding or correcting.

STURDY PARENTING STRATEGIES

What Is Sturdy Parenting by Dr. Becky Kennedy?

Sturdy parenting means:

-  Regulating yourself first, so you don't react out of anger or fear
-  Holding boundaries with kindness
-  Staying connected even when your child is upset, yelling, or 'melting' down
-  Being the emotional anchor when your child feels out of control
-  Offering empathy while still guiding their behaviour

Becky Kennedy says:

"Your child doesn't need you to be perfect. They need you to be sturdy."

This approach shifts parenting away from controlling behaviour toward co-regulating emotions and helping children feel safe enough to learn and grow.

Summary:

- Validate & Hold Limits: Acknowledge feelings & stay firm on boundaries
- Connect Before Correcting: Discipline through emotional safety, not punishment
- Firm, Fair, Compassionate: Not harsh or passive but steady and responsive

STURDY PARENTING STRATEGIES

Boundaries/Limits

- Boundaries are not requests.
- They are clear expectations with compassionate follow through.

Boundaries = clear expectations & compassionate follow-through

- Through consistent limits children learn self-control, choice, and responsibility, supporting emotional regulation.

According to Landreth (2012):

"Limit setting provides children 'an opportunity to learn self-control, that they have choices, what making choices feels like, and how responsibility feels.'"

This aligns with child-centred play therapy principles.

STURDY PARENTING STRATEGIES

How to set boundaries/ limits with the A.C.T. Method:

- Acknowledge: feelings by getting on your child's level, making eye contact, and validating their emotions.
- Communicate: the limit clearly and calmly.
- Target: acceptable alternatives/ choices

Example: Saying: 'I told you only one TV show, now I need the remote' ***is a request.***

Using A.C.T.

- "I know it's hard to stop watching. You can turn the TV off now, or I'll do it when I get there."
- If they don't: "You've chosen not to turn it off, so I'll help by turning it off for you."
- When your child reacts which they likely will: Validate feelings ("It's frustrating when fun things end.")
- Stay calm and hold the **boundary**.

Ultimate choice makes the consequence the child's decision using phrases like ("you're choosing...you've decided....."), which builds accountability.

STURDY PARENTING STRATEGIES

Similar to Dr. Becky Kennedy's Sturdy Parenting approach and Play Therapy, we create a safe container, where all feelings are welcome, but not all behaviours are allowed.

These approaches send this powerful message to the child: 'You are safe. Your feelings make sense. And I will help you manage them without shaming or losing connection with you.'

That's the foundation of emotional regulation, trust, and long-term resilience.

As parents:


"Our job is to raise children to be responsible, respectful, and resilient."


KEY TAKEAWYS


Emotions Have Three Parts:


- What we feel: the emotion itself (happy, sad, angry, worried).
- How our body reacts: changes in heart rate, breathing, muscle tension, energy levels.
- How we express it : words, actions, facial expressions, and body language.

Support Strategies for Emotional Regulation:

 **Connect & Validate:** Acknowledge what they're feeling and show understanding. Help them name the emotion.

 **Stay Balanced:** Respond calmly without overreacting or over-reassuring. Guide them through the feeling together.

 **Recognise & Meet:** Notice physical and behavioural signs, and support them in the moment based on what they need.

 **Build Resilience:** Be a steady role model. Use play, movement and mindfulness to strengthen coping skills.

Parenting isn't about perfection, it's about progress.

Mistakes are part of learning, for both us & our children. When we repair, reflect, and keep showing up, we teach our kids that growth comes from trying, mistakes are safe, relationships can recover, and being human is enough.

CONNECT WITH ME



With thanks

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