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Ministering Effectively to
Children from
Hard Places

Characters Associated with **Physical Abuse**

- Avoids physical contact with adults.
- May seem hard to get along with, demanding, difficulty following directions.
- Small matters are seen as major issues.
- May seek affection indiscriminately or be wary of adults.
- Maybe be fearful or hostile.
- Hyperactive or self-destructive behaviour.
- Inhibited play and unusual fearfulness.



Characteristics Associated with **Sexual Abuse**

- Appears withdrawn or engages in sexual or juvenile behaviour.
- Unwillingness to participate in physical activities or have their photo taken.
- Unusually cautious and protective when using the toilet.
- May seek out or be wary of others using grooming strategies.
- Sexual knowledge atypical for a young child.
- May attempt to touch others inappropriately. (Divert, don't discipline—never shame.)
- Infantile or clingy behaviour, or fear of being touched.



Characteristics Associated with Emotional Abuse

- Depressed, withdrawn, passive. Lack of positive self-image—self-sabotaging.
- Disorganised, distrustful, rigid, compulsive.
- Overly anxious when faced with new situations or people.
- May assume adult roles and responsibilities.
- May appear autistic, delusional and paranoid.
- Throws tantrums, seems impulsive, defiant, antisocial and aggressive—consistently testing limits or boundaries.
- Hyper-alert, lack of creativity and exploration.
- Experiences difficulty making friends and interacting with others, lack of attachment, or excessive peer dependence.
- Excessively fearful, anxious, prone to nightmares, or oblivious to hazards and risks.





Developmental Impact of Abuse, Neglect and Trauma.

- Behaviours displayed by children who have suffered trauma can be a daunting concern.
- It is easy to perceive all behaviour challenges as disobedience or willfulness, but a common cause of behaviour challenges is the pain as well as the developmental impact of past experiences.

Early Risk Factors for Children

- **Difficult Pregnancy**
- **Difficult birth**
- **Early hospitalisation**
- **Abuse**
- **Neglect**
- **Trauma**



Stages of Major Brain Development

In-Utero

First year of life—Attachment

Age 5—Start school: demands of regulation become apparent

Age 8—Medication

Age 12—Depression

Age 16—Psychological disorders

More dramatic





Attachment

A child who was raised in a harsh or dysfunctional environment has had to become a survivalist. They may display behaviours that are:

- Manipulative
- Aggressive
- Controlling
- Unpredictable
- Running away
- Outbursts
- Meltdowns
- Problems with sounds, smells, textures, visual images, vibrant colours

Most challenging behaviours stem from **unmet needs**.
We, as children's ministers need to be investigators to
try and **see the need behind the behaviour**.

BEHIND THE NEED
BEHAVIOUR

Be a Detective



- Are there physical factors at play? Tired? Hungry?, Thirsty? etc?
- Are there situations that trigger physical or behavioural reactions?
- Are there people or people types that seem to trigger more of a reaction?
- Observe how the child interacts with individuals and the environment.



Sensory Processing Disorders



Sensory process disorder is the failure of one or more of the senses to develop appropriately.

- Sensory Defensiveness
- Sensory Seeking

See Beyond the Behaviour

- What is the child really saying?
- What does the child really need?



Appropriate Expectations

What should our expectations be for a child who has experienced trauma?



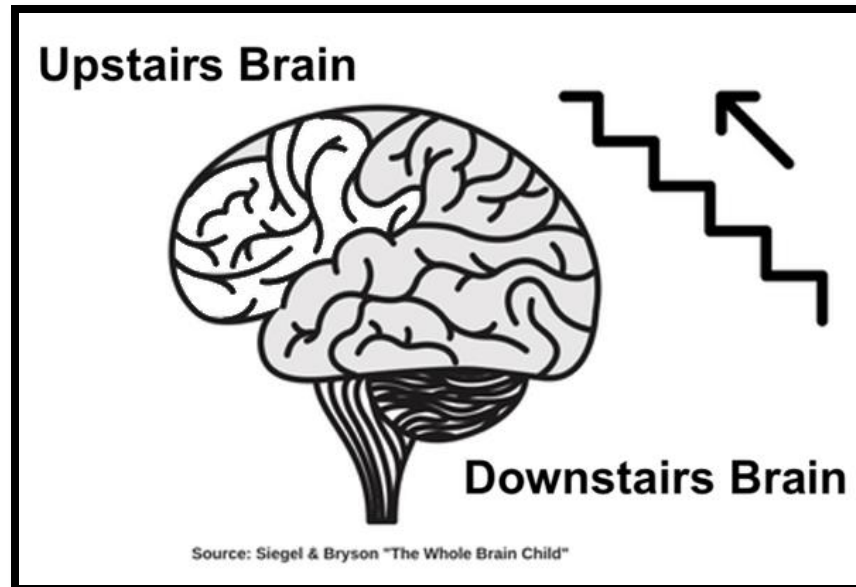
A child in a wheelchair would need extra accommodations.

- We would allow more time for transitions, getting ready, and using the toilet.
- We would have patience and empathy.
- We understand the need for additional accommodation was not their fault.



The Upstairs Brain vs. The Downstairs Brain

Siegel and Bryson (2011) explained brain function in children as an interplay between the “upstairs brain” and the “downstairs brain.” A child’s **behaviour** is regulated in part by the part of the brain they are using.

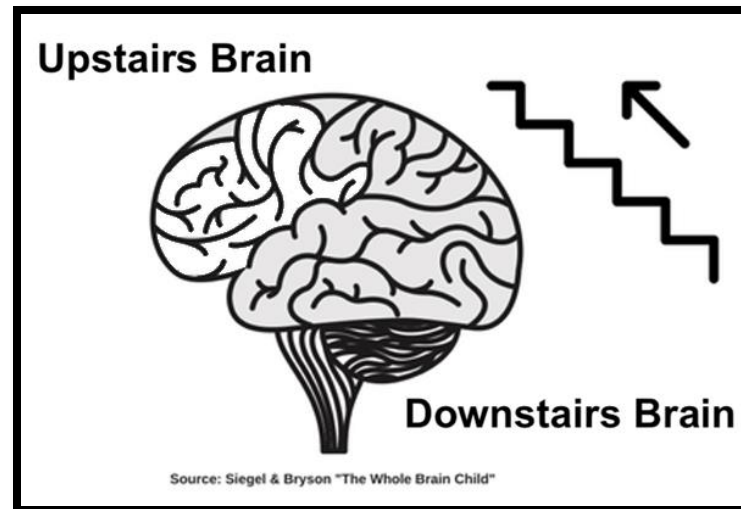


The **upstairs** brain:

- Thinks before we act.
- Uses logic, plans, and reasons.
- Makes decisions.
- Controls emotions and our body.
- Focuses and concentrates.
- Empathises.
- Has self-awareness.

The **downstairs** brain:

- Acts before we think.
- Has emotional reactions.
- Controls bodily functions
- Deals with stress with
Fight.
Flight.
Freeze.
Fawn:



Importance of the downstairs brain

Children who live in dangerous situations need to **act before they think** to survive. Trauma, stress, and anxiety can cause children to default to their downstairs brain for a solution.

“Dysregulation” is when children utilise their downstairs brain when they should use the upstairs brain.

Regulation is the ability to control your emotional responses.

Dysregulation is the inability to control your emotional responses. Dysregulation can lead to:

- Intense emotions.
- Impulsive behaviours.
- Trouble making decisions.
- Inability to manage behaviours.
- Lack of emotional awareness.

Importance of the downstairs brain

Their **emotions** take control of **reason**, so their choices are often counter-productive.

If the only options they know are **fight, flight, freeze, or fawn**, that is the behaviours we may see.

Some children have not had anyone they trust to model or help them develop other skills.

Importance of the downstairs brain

When children with traumatic backgrounds constantly react from their downstairs brain, it is easy to judge their behaviour or believe they are beyond hope.

The correct response is to recognise the impact of abuse on the brain and know that a caring relationship is the key to change.

Insights and Techniques



Dr. David Cross, co-founder of TBRI®, said,

“When dealing with children from hard places, punishment and discipline are the least effective method to address behavioural issues.”

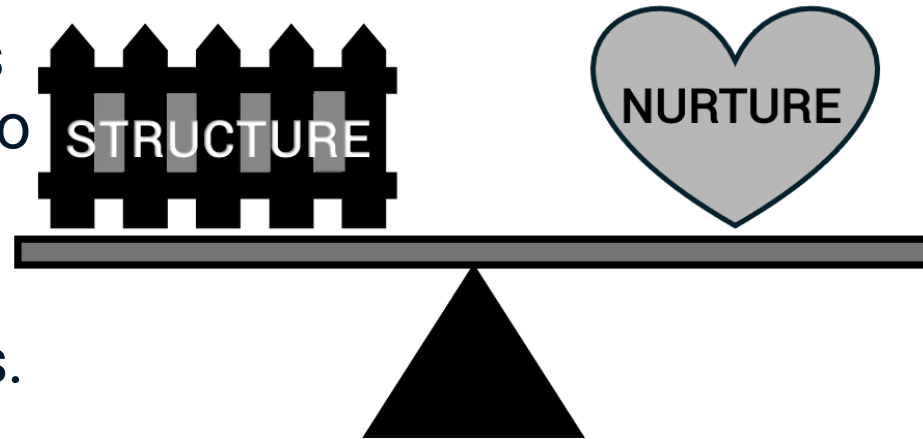
- When a child’s response is because of trauma, using discipline, logic, reasoning, emotion, and shaming will simply not work.
- Loving them alone is not enough.
- Rescuing them is not enough.
- We must add knowledge, skills, and support!
- Godly wisdom, mixed with structure and nurture, can make the difference.



Nurture & Structure

Structure means:

- Keep a schedule/predictable routine
- Provide protein snacks and hydration every two hours .
- Clearly & simply communicate the rules.
- Say yes within safety, supervision, and schedule.
- Now and next
- Early warnings

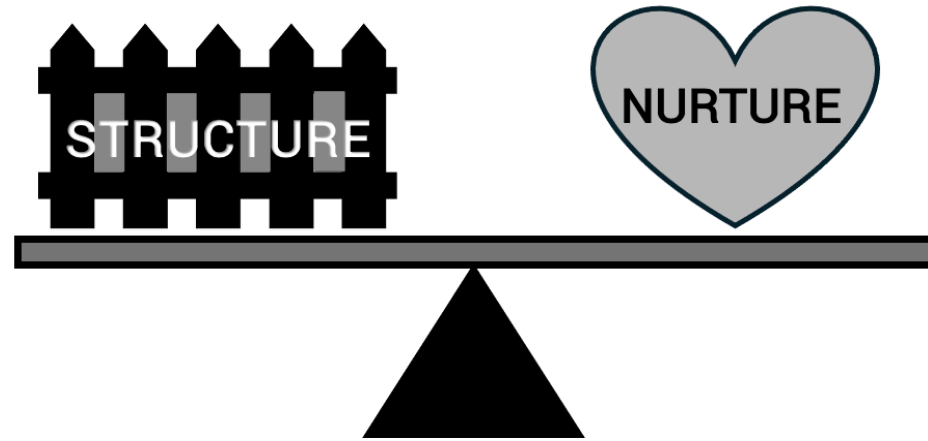


Nurture means:

- Use a calm voice.
- Truly care.
- Practice healthy touch.
- Genuinely listen.
- Try to make time for children's interests.
- Show as much patience as possible.
- Warm eyes

Nurture & Structure

Giving children **structure** when they need **nurture** impedes **trust**.



Giving children **nurture** when they need **structure** impedes **growth**.

Be aware: How **you** were parented may indicate how you how you naturally supervise children.

The three TBRI® Principles are:

- **Connecting**
- **Empowering**
- **Correcting**



Connecting Principles

Connection is the heart and core of building a relationship.

Behaviours can dramatically be improved when we **connect intentionally** with the kids we serve.



Connecting Principles

The **more we connect**, the less we will have to **correct!**

Connection **precedes** cooperation.

Connection **precedes** compliance.

When connection precedes correction, correction goes better.

Relationship Brings Behaviour

- Most of their trauma is caused within the context of a broken relationship.
- Therefore, much of the healing will need to occur through a healthy relationship.



Connection Basics

- Being emotionally present with the child is the biggest predictor of their success.
- Start by developing trust.
- Trust starts with **felt safety**.





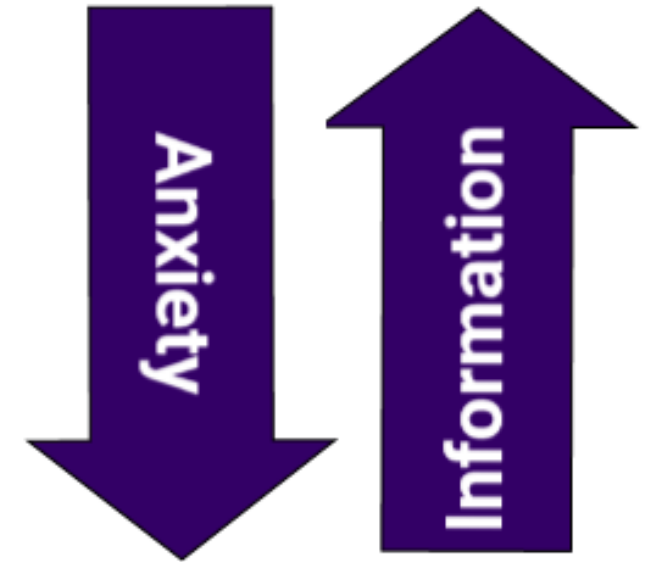
Felt Safety

Providing an atmosphere of “felt safety” disarms the primitive brain and reduces fear. It is a critical first step toward helping a child heal and grow.

Anxiety

We can help lessen anxiety by sharing information.

When they know schedules, routine, rituals, etc., it can help children know what's coming and reduce anxiety.



Anxiety goes down when information goes up.

Anxiety

It takes **12 repetitions** of a concept in fun play times to build new neural pathways.

In stressful times, it takes **300 repetitions** to create new neural pathways.

Connect—Give them a Voice

- Give them your **full** attention when possible.
- Genuinely **listen** to them.
- Embrace what they have to say. (Say it back to them)
- Give children the opportunity to express themselves.

Engagement Strategies

- Eye contact
- Voice
- Behaviour matching



Engagement Strategies

- Playful interaction
- Appropriate, healthy touch
- Play



Avoid Sarcasm

Sarcasm is not a healthy way to establish trust, safety, or connection.



Meet physiological (internal) needs



- Water and a protein snack every two hours.
- Fidget toys.
- Hard chewable sweets (Hi-Chew), or gum - The hard chewing can help them redirect mentally and physically and aid in information retention.




Meet ecological (external) needs.

- Incorporate songs with motions, physical activities.
- Create predictable rituals that connect or strengthen relationships.
- Manage **transitions** (programme and life transitions).
- Provide several **verbal warnings** before leaving one activity for another, i.e., 5 min, 3 min, 1 min.
- Give notice of sudden changes.
- Predictability brings a feeling of control.
- Post picture schedules of the programme on doors, toilets, etc.



Regulation Techniques

- **Whisper to calm down**
- **Push and pull hands**
- **Deep breathing exercises**
- **Chair pushes, wall pushes**
- **Ear massage**
- **Hands across**



calm



Methods to help avoid escalation.

- **Choices** are given rather than commands.
- **Compromises** are ways to allow children to negotiate their needs before an escalation happens. Engage before a meltdown.

TBRI Life Value Terms

- **With respect**
- **Gentle and kind**
- **Askin' or Tellin'**

(Find 3-4 you are comfortable with and stick with those)



TBRI Life Value Terms

- **Listen and Follow Directions**
- **No Hurts**
- **Stick Together**
- **Use Your Words**

(Find 3-4 you are comfortable with and stick with those)



How to respond to challenging behaviours— Levels of Response

1. Playful Engagement

When the child:

- Uses sassy behaviour.
- Talks back.
- Has a demanding tone.
- Makes animated expressions.

Suggested scripts:

- “Are you asking or telling?”
- “Try again with respect.”
- “Your voice matters to me.”
- “Manners, please.”

2. **Structured Engagement**

When the child is:

- Hyper
- Fidgety
- Mildly frustrated

Suggested scripts:

- Give choices.
- Ask for a redo, such as “Try again. Shut the door softer.”
- “Rewind. Ask, don’t grab.”
- “Are you asking for a compromise?”

3. Calming Engagement

When the child:

- Needs help to regulate.
- Is escalated but not out of control.
- Does not know what they need.

Calming Engagement

- Time Ins: Sit with the child, connect, and **never send away**.
- Provide a safe space.
- “Sometimes I have hard days too.”
- Sometimes I feel angry when I am hungry. Let’s get a snack.
- “Sometimes I feel scared too.”
- “You are safe.”
- “It’s normal to feel frustrated.”
- “I want to understand you”

Levels of Response

Protective Engagement

All about Safety and Containment

When you see:

- Escalating behaviour.
- Sudden acts of aggression.
- Threats of danger.
- Out of control.
- Total meltdown.

Suggested scripts:

- Clear, short, slow directives.
- Get the child to a safe space away from other children but Two-Deep.
- “Calm. Use your words.”
- “I need you to be safe.”
- “Let’s walk.”
- “Take a break.”

The goals for every challenging situation are to:

- Maintain connection with the child.
- Have everyone leave the situation feeling content.
- The child is not discouraged or shamed.
- End with a behavioural change.

After correction, immediately return to **playful engagement** and **nurture**.

How do I tell a child “No” without escalating things or creating a power struggle?

- Start with a compliment
- Say no
- Praise the child before they realise what’s happened.

Even on those occasions when you’re asking the child to accept no, you can demonstrate your willingness to help her get what she wants by suggesting she try again in the future.

Discussion Questions

1. Share a story when you successfully managed a challenging behaviour.
2. Which insights and strategies stuck out to you and which ones will you take back with you?

