

Holding Space Program: Supporting the Emotional Journey of Implementing Trauma-informed Practice in Early Childhood Settings

Acknowledgement of Country

The Holding Space Program team respectfully acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and to Elders past and present.



Image: Charles Sturt University, Albury (Wiradjuri Land)



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<https://arts-ed.csu.edu.au/schools/education/events/holding-space>

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Holding Space Program

Holding Space =



A community of respect;
A community of regulation



Workshop 5:

Stress, Trauma and the Brain: Educator Strategies for
the Classroom

*Implemented on the CSU Albury-Wodonga
Campus Tuesday July 29th 2025*

Workshop 5: Key Take Aways

Trauma changes how children process rewards

- Dopamine may not function typically
- Rewards may be confusing or triggering
- Focus on connection, not compliance

Take a Little Moment

- Hook Ups (from Paul Dennison's Brain Gym – see <https://braingym.org.au/about/>)
 - Sitting, cross the left ankle over right
 - Extend arms out in front, crossing the left wrist over right
 - Interlace fingers and draw hands up toward chest
 - Close eyes and breath deeply and relax
 - This helps calm the body through the meridian system



Educator Strategies for the Classroom

Stress, Trauma, and the Brain: Insights for Educators- with
Bruce D. Perry, MD, PhD



- <https://youtu.be/cNzkyFPA7Lc>
- (ThinkTVPBS, 2020)

Let's share our expertise and experience!

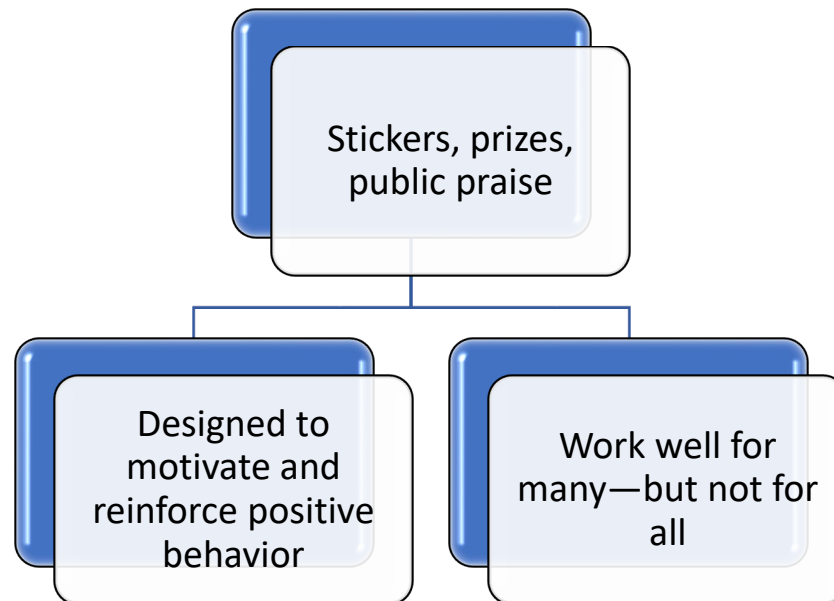
- Share your immediate thoughts about the video with others at your table
- Whole group circle and share

Rethinking Rewards

Let's explore:

- Why traditional reward systems may not work for children who have experienced trauma
- How trauma affects brain development and motivation
- The role of Dopamine in rewards
- Trauma-informed approaches to behaviour and engagement

What Are Reward Systems?



Key question: What if a child doesn't 'feel' rewarded?



Rewards and Trauma

Trauma changes how a child responds to the world—including rewards



Trauma and the Brain

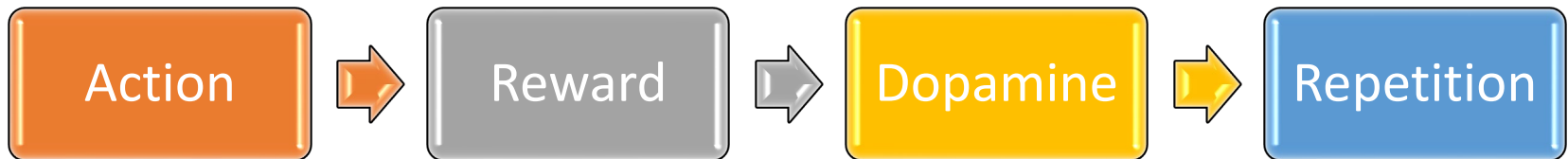
- Trauma affects emotion regulation, trust, sensory processing, motivation
- Stress response dominates; focus shifts to survival, not rewards



The Role of Dopamine in Rewards

Dopamine: brain chemical for pleasure and motivation

- It reinforces behaviour



Trauma may disrupt dopamine systems

- Rewards might feel empty, unpredictable, or unsafe



Example Reactions to Rewards

Scenario	Typical response	Trauma Impacted response
Sticker for sitting still	Excitement	Confusion or shame
Public praise	Motivation	Fear, embarrassment
Reward box	Anticipation	Anxiety or shutdown



What Children with Trauma Really Need

Safety: predictable environments

Connection: trusting relationships

Regulation: help calming down

Choice: autonomy



Trauma-Informed Alternatives

Try these instead:

1. Co-regulate
with the child

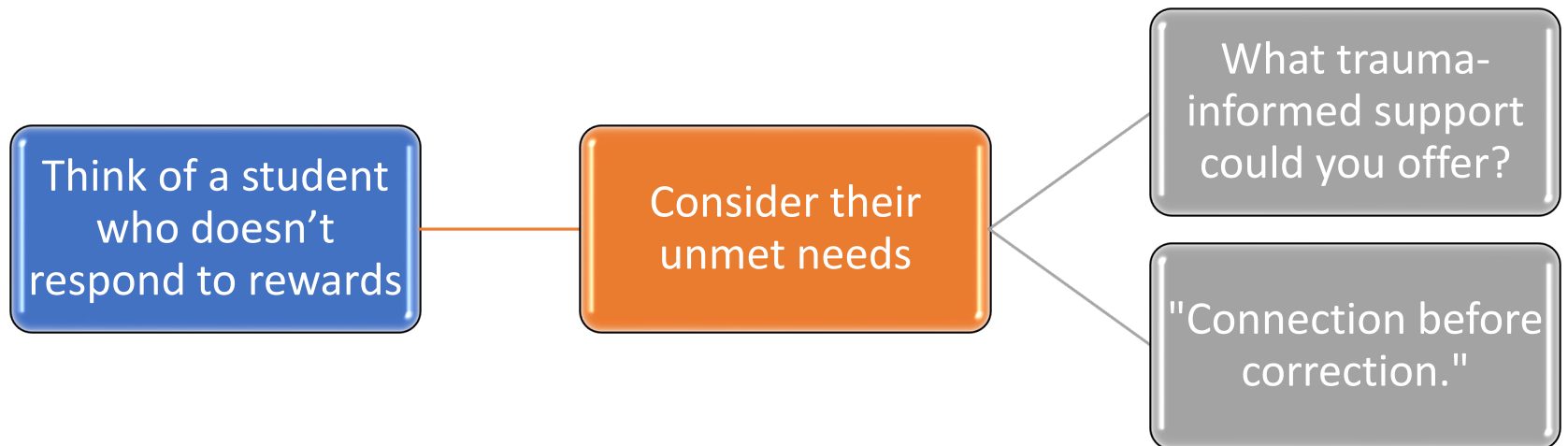
2. Use
descriptive
encouragement

3. Create
routine and
structure

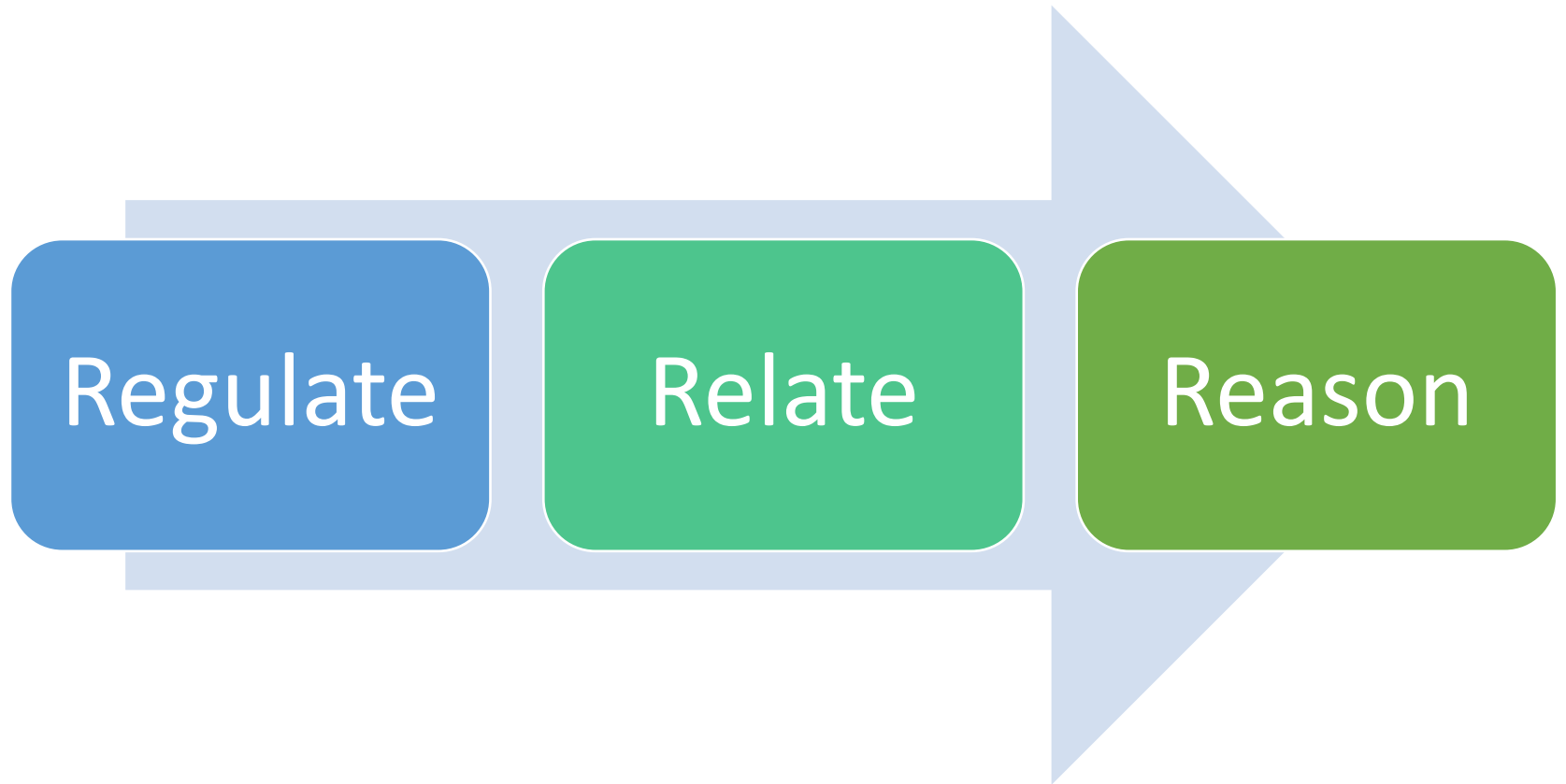
4. Offer praise
privately

5. Provide
empowering
choices

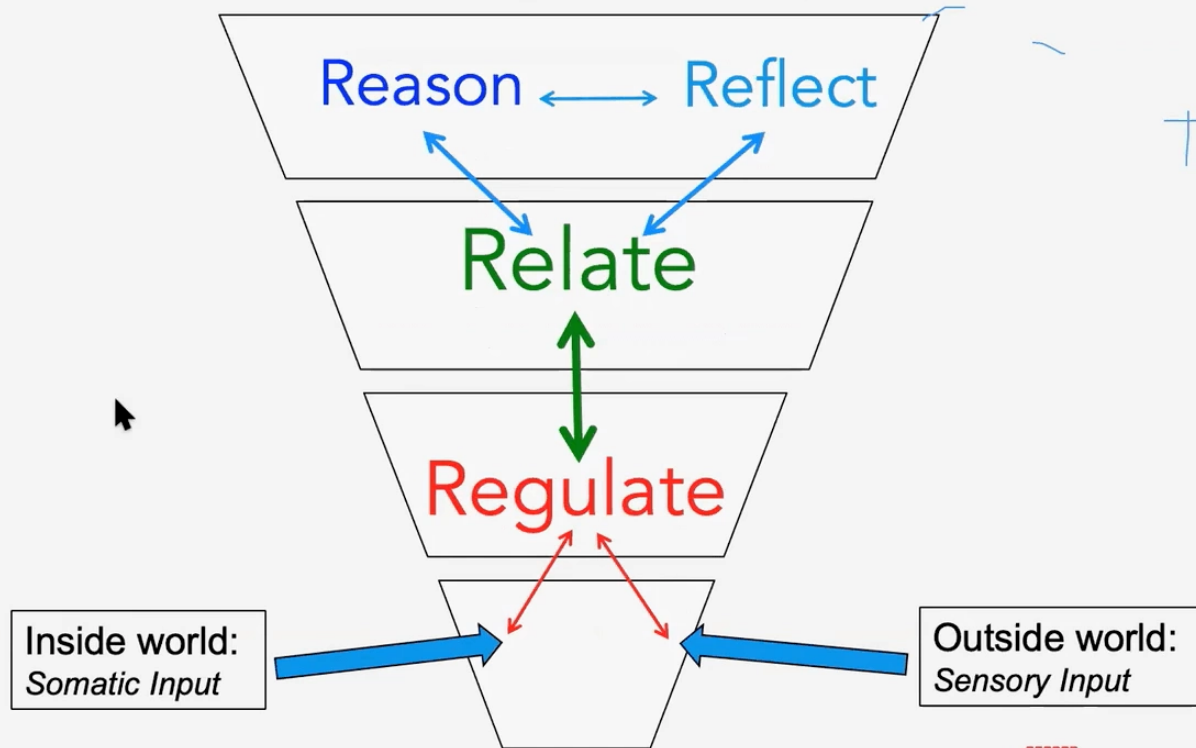
Reflect and Connect



Revisiting the Neurosequential Model



Sequential Engagement & Processing



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NEUROSEQUENTIAL
NETWORK™

Dr Bruce Perry's model reminds us that the brain develops from the bottom up. We must provide **safety and regulation** before we can expect **connection or reasoning**. This model gives us a compassionate roadmap for how to support children through their behavioural and emotional challenges.

It also invites us to look beneath the surface of a child's behaviour and consider what **unmet needs** might be driving that behaviour. For example:

- a need for **safety**
- a need for **connection**
- a need to be **understood**
- a need for **support**.

When we approach behaviour through this lens, we can respond with empathy rather than judgment and meet children where they are at.



Regulate

What does it mean?

To help a child settle their nervous system so they feel physically and emotionally safe.

When a child is dysregulated, it's not that they *won't behave*, it's that they *can't behave*. Their thinking brain is offline.

Examples of regulation:

- Sitting calmly beside the child [helps co-regulation]
- Sensory tools [fidget toys, weighted items, calming scents]
- Rhythmic movement e.g. swinging, rocking, pacing
- Water and sand play
- Calm breathwork

Key Reminder [when supporting a child to regulate]

Don't talk or reason yet – just help the body feel safe.

*Refer to the Trauma Expression and Connection Assessment tool (Australian Childhood Foundation) as your guide to unpack what is happening for the child.
– weblink in additional resources at end of PPT*

Relate

What does it mean?

Connecting through safe, nurturing relationships.

Once a child is calm, we can start to connect on a heart-to-heart level.

This is where relationships become a powerful tool to help a child feel:

- Safe
- Valued
- Emotionally supported

Examples of relating:

- Active listening and being present - listening with intent
This is a whole-body experience
- Naming emotions: *“That really upset you!”*
- Use *Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotions*:
<https://www.6seconds.org/2025/02/06/plutchik-wheel-emotions/>
- Sharing a moment of warmth, humour or quiet - together

Key reminder:

Connection before correction - the bridge to healing and trust.

Reason

What does it mean:

Supporting reflection, insight, and skill-building.

Only when the child is regulated and connected can we begin to explore thinking, learning or behaviour change.

Examples of reasoning:

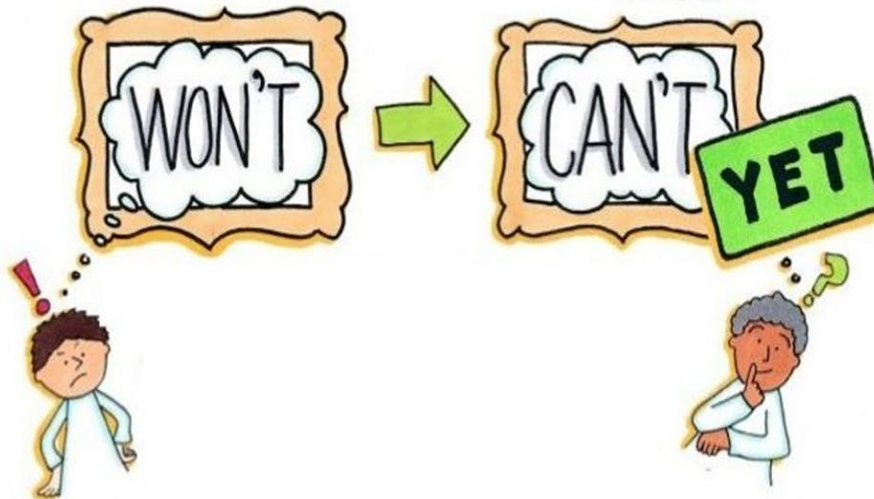
- Collaborative problem-solving (*“What’s been tricky for you?”*)
- Offering choices to restore a sense of control
- Gently exploring cause and effect
- **Meeting children where they are:** When a child shows us that they’re having a hard time, it’s often a sign of an unmet need or a skill they haven’t yet learned. Instead of seeing this as misbehaviour, we can respond with curiosity and care, supporting them to build the skills they need in a way that feels safe and encouraging.

Key reminder:

Reasoning is the *last* step, not the first.

REFRAME THE BEHAVIOUR

"KIDS DO WELL IF THEY CAN"
~ROSS GREENE



SELF-REG GRAPHIC SERIES

Dr Ross Green - "It's not that they *won't* – it's that they *can't*... yet."

With time, the right tools, and a safe, unconditional space built on strong relationships, children have the capacity to thrive and achieve incredible things

Behaviour as a Communication

What does this child need?

The Neurosequential Model of:

- REGULATE
 - RELATE
 - REASON
- Helps us understand behaviour as an expression of **need** and not something we MUST correct
 - We begin to recognise that children aren't *giving us* a hard time, they're *having* a hard time.
 - We notice that they may not have the skills, regulation, or support to succeed
... **so, it's our role to meet them where they are.**

Ask yourself these reflective questions ?

1. “What’s making things hard for this child right now?”
2. “What’s creating stress or overwhelm for this child right now?”
3. “What’s blocking this child from feeling safe, regulated, or connected right now?”
4. “What’s standing in the way of this child being able to engage right now?”
5. “What does this child need?” [see iceberg model]
6. “What is the ‘*why*’ behind this behaviour?”

Praise vs Encouragement

Praise and encouragement both focus on positive behaviours.

However, **praise** fosters dependance by teaching the child to rely on an external source of control and motivation e.g.:

- 'You're such a good boy!
- 'I'm proud of you'
- 'What a beautiful painting. I love it!'

Encouragement focuses on internal evaluation and shows the contribution or effort children make e.g.:

- 'You didn't give up until you worked it out'
- 'You knew just what you wanted to do and you did it!'

Key Reminder:

Encourage the effort *rather than* praise the product

Giving Choice and Setting Limits – A.C.T.

Acknowledge the feeling

‘Stevie, you’re having so much fun playing outside. It feels really hard to stop’

Communicate the limit

‘But it’s time to come inside and get ready for home’

Target an alternative

‘You can hop like a kangaroo or walk on your tippy toes to the door. You get to choose’.

Take a little moment



Additional Resources

- Allison Davies: Music and the brain:
 - <https://allisondavies.com.au/>
 - <https://youtu.be/IE6jnezy1MU>
- Australian Childhood Foundation. The trauma expression and connection assessment (TECA) – A tool to support healing and connection:
 - <https://learn.childhood.org.au/trauma-expression-and-connection-assessment/>

Sources used during the workshop

Dennison, P.E., & Dennison G.E. (2010) *Brain Gym, Teachers Edition*. Edu - Kinesthetics.

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van der Kolk, B. A. (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Publishing Group.