

DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA: IMPACT UPON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA?

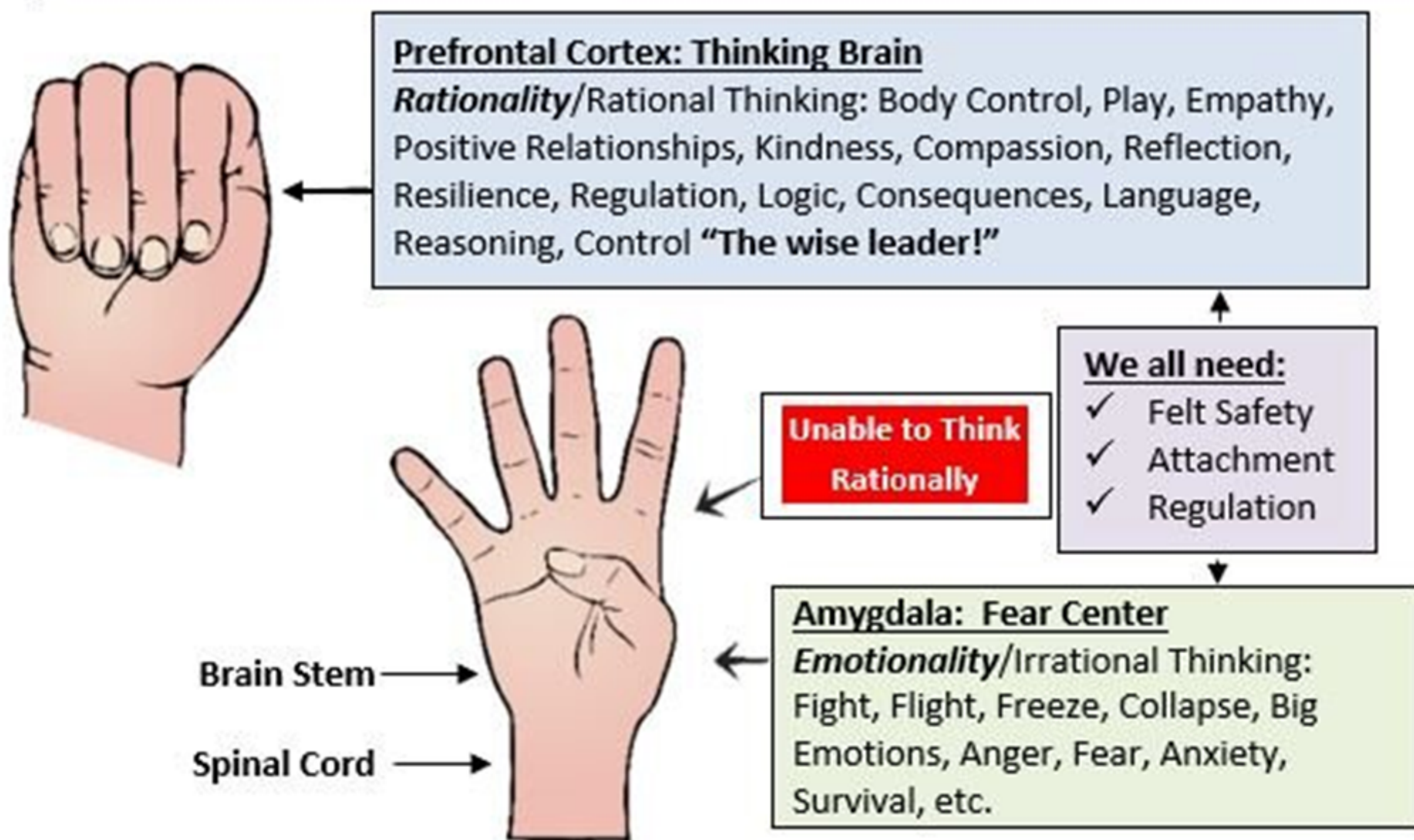
Developmental trauma is a term used to describe the impact of early, repeated trauma and loss which typically happens within the child's important relationships. It can occur as a result of multiple or chronic exposure to one or more forms of developmentally adverse interpersonal trauma, such as neglect or domestic abuse. The term is also used interchangeably with others such as complex childhood or relational trauma.

HOW CAN EXPOSURE TO DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA IMPACT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

Developmental trauma disrupts children's neurological, cognitive and psychological development. Experiences during pregnancy and in the first few years of a child's life, while they may not be consciously remembered by the child, can still impact upon development. Bessel Van der Kolk referred to the body keeping the store, meaning that even though the mind cannot remember experiencing chronic trauma, it can still have a negative impact on the developing brains and bodies of children.



Dan Siegel's Hand Brain Model



Credit: Daniel Siegel, M.D. is the creator of this metaphor and expression “Flipped 180” Copyright © 2014 www.streemvalley.com

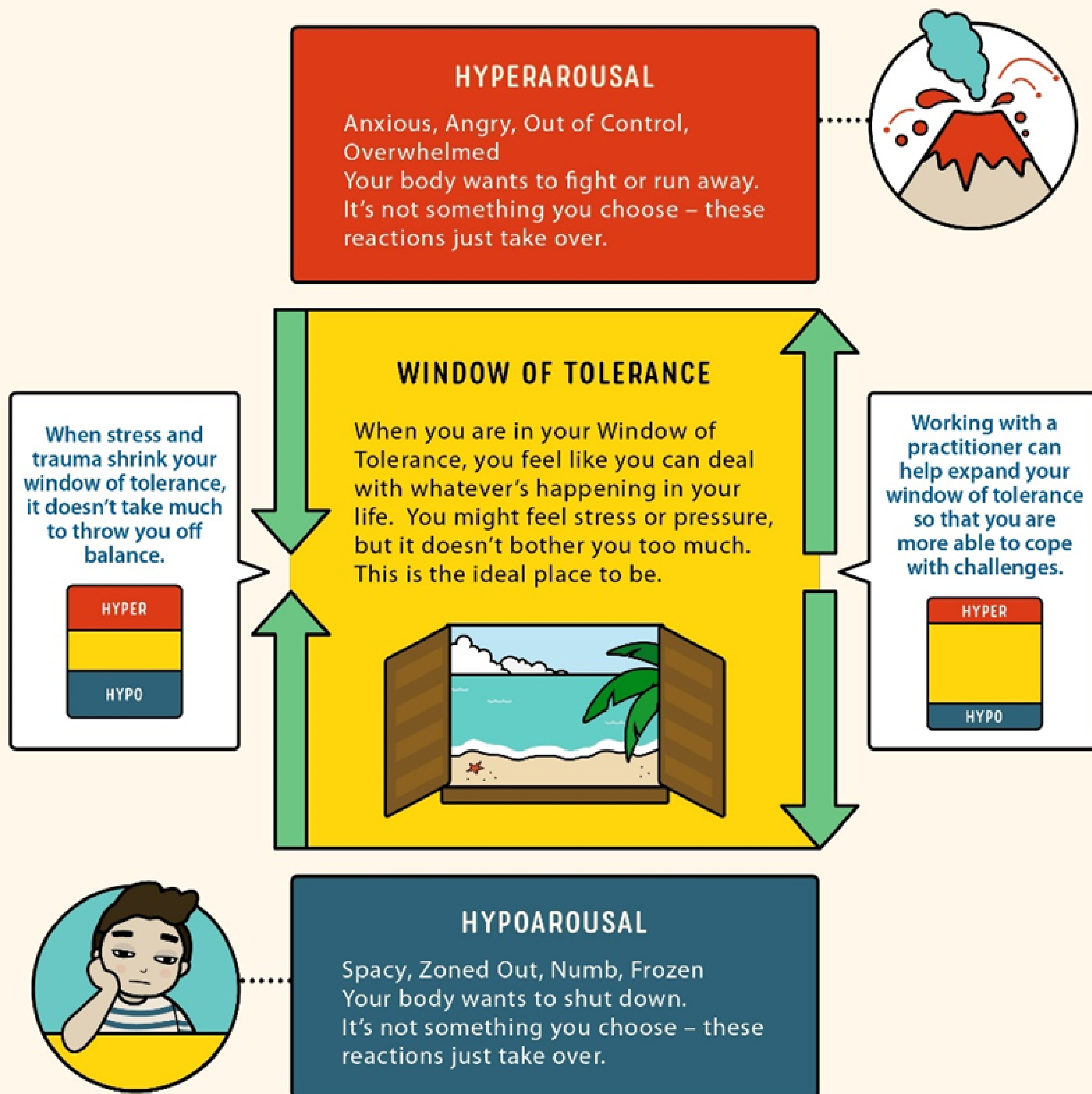
The Amygdala sends waves to the Hypothalamus (command center) which activates the Autonomic Nervous System:

- ✓ Sympathetic (fight, flight, freeze, collapse)
- ✓ Parasympathetic (rest & digest)

Research has shown that among children who have experienced developmental trauma, a consistent profile was found to include:

- Pervasive pattern of dysregulation.
- Problems with attention and concentration (a lot of time focused on staying in control).
- Difficulties getting along with themselves and others (rapidly shifting moods).
- Physical problems such as sleep disturbances / oversensitivity to touch or sound.
- Destructive ways to relieve tension such as rocking and self-harm (Van der Kolk, 2012).

How Trauma Can Affect Your Window Of Tolerance



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Children who have experienced early trauma mean that their brains are likely to have adapted to enable them to survive when feeling under threat. While these strategies may enable them to survive or stay safe in the past, in more typical, safe environments, such as classrooms, these strategies tend not to be helpful.

Although they may be in a safe environment, their fear response system may be triggered more easily by different factors and when faced with perceived threat, they can become either hypo (under) responsive or hyper (over) responsive when trying to manage these uncomfortable feelings: they are in survival mode. This can be not only frightening and confusing for these children and young people but also exhausting.

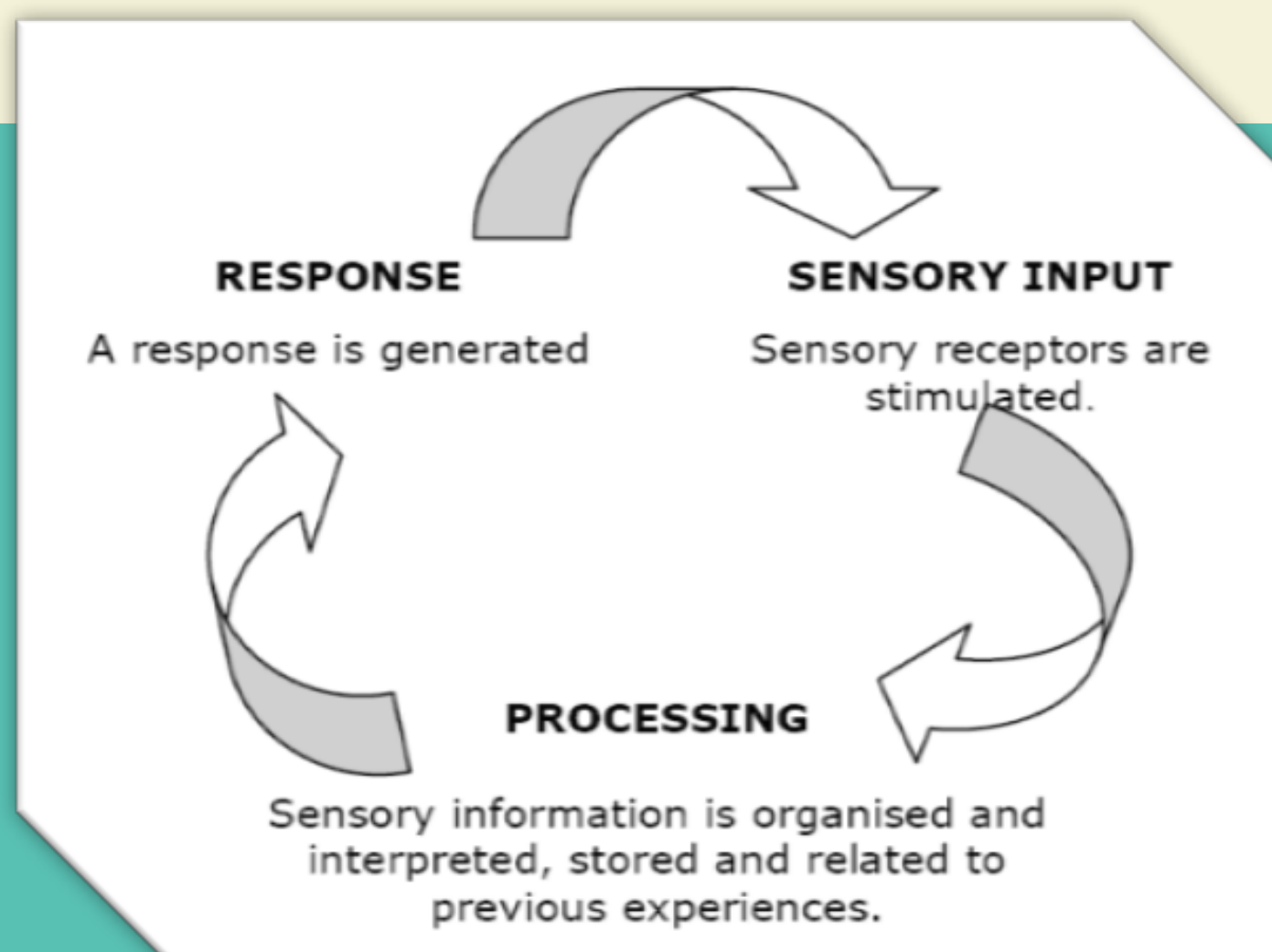
IMPACT ON DEVELOPMENT

Developmental trauma can disrupt children's development in several areas which have implications for how they perceive and engage with the world around them.

These areas of development include:

Sensory processing

Children need the combination of emotional interactions and sensory experiences for their sensory systems to develop. Activities such as being held tightly and rocked to sleep, being fed, soothed through touch etc combined with emotionally attuned interactions support the child's sensory systems to develop. Without these, the brain does not develop these pathways and children can find it difficult to make sense of sensory input and therefore generate appropriate responses.



Cognitive functioning

A child who has experienced chronic trauma in the past, is likely to be hypervigilant, scanning the environment for possible threats. This means they are more focussed on protecting themselves and less able to engage positively in their environment. When the fight-flight system is activated, the child is no longer able to effectively access the pre-frontal cortex which is responsible for decision making, impulse control, planning, attending and problem solving.



Attachment and relationships

Developmental trauma often occurs within the context of what should be trusting caregiving relationships and so this relational trauma requires relational repair.

Children are likely to perceive adults as unsafe and untrustworthy as this has been their predominant experience of adults in their lives. They have not had consistent good enough care, enough 'serve and return' interactions to learn that adults can generally be trusted and that they are worthy of having their needs met.

Children who have experienced developmental trauma may have difficulties around friendships, both making and maintaining friendships. Some children may be stuck in 'fight/flight/freeze' response and find new faces threatening. Social connections can be missed because new faces can appear threatening. Children who have been forced to live in 'survival mode' for prolonged periods of time have learned that to keep themselves safe they have to anticipate what adults are going to be like. Recent research around autobiographical memory has suggested that bad memories are more salient than everyday memories, possibly contributing to children's belief that other people cannot be trusted.

Emotional regulation

Children rely on their caregivers to help them regulate their emotions by co-regulating with them (think of the attachment cycle). By co-regulation, a child learns from a very early age that their feelings can be tolerated and that they will change in time.

Think toddler!

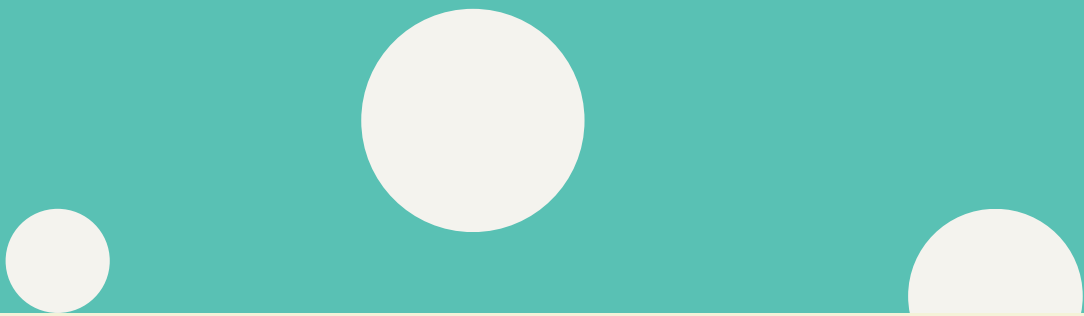
Children who are not consistently provided with co-regulation learn the opposite: that their feelings can be dangerous, can lead to them being hurt or ignored and that they are in charge of them and can 'take over.' In these situations, the parts of the brain involved in emotional regulation do not develop as they should and the child gets stuck in the toddler phase of emotional regulation where they can't do it alone and they need adults to co-regulate for them. This is why at times of distress, children who are stuck in this phase of development and are perhaps much older, even teenagers, can appear to behave as a much younger child when they are dysregulated: stomping their feet, biting, slamming the door etc. They seem to react in a way which seems out of proportion to the situation.

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

A large blue circle is centered on a background of teal and yellow geometric shapes. Inside the circle, the word 'Relationships' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below it, the phrase 'Relational trauma requires relational repair' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font, arranged in three lines.

Relationships

**Relational
trauma requires
relational repair**



RESOURCES

The following websites and resource provide further information around developmental trauma and how to support children and young people:

- Beacon House [Home](https://beaconhouse.org.uk) (beaconhouse.org.uk).
- Arc: The attachment research community [Attachment & Trauma Aware approaches in education](https://the-arc.org.uk) | [ARC](https://the-arc.org.uk) (the-arc.org.uk).
- Safe Hands Thinking Minds (Karen Treisman) [Safe Hands Thinking Minds](https://www.safehands.org.uk) | [Relational and developmental trauma in children](https://www.safehands.org.uk)
- UK Trauma Council: Childhood trauma and the Brain video [Bing Videos](https://www.uktraumacouncil.org.uk)
- Sensory Attachment Intervention
<http://www.sensoryattachmentintervention.com/>
- NSPCC [Understanding child brain development](https://www.nspcc.org.uk) | [NSPCC Learning](https://www.nspcc.org.uk)
- Anna Freud Centre [Anna Freud](https://www.annafreud.org) | [Anna Freud](https://www.annafreud.org)

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