

Practical Strategies *to* Support Resilient Children *and* Teachers *in the* Face *of* Stress



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Session Overview



Children's Stories

- ▶ What's on the cover?
 - *Presenting behaviors*
- ▶ Main characters and events
 - *Developmental history*
- ▶ Once upon a time...
 - *The child's narrative*



Our Role in Their Story

- ▶ Playing into their narrative
- ▶ Helping children rewrite their story
- ▶ What tools can we offer to help children in future chapters?



Writing Our Own Stories

- ▶ What factors affect our own stories?
- ▶ What can we do to take an active role in authoring our own stories?



Storycrafting

- ▶ Over our lifetimes we all construct stories about ourselves and how the world works
- ▶ These stories are written as a result of:
 - what happens to us (*being acted on*)
 - how we interpret it
 - choices we make as a result (*how we act*)
- ▶ We begin constructing these stories at birth (or even before)
 - the early years are critical in establishing the author's point of view and subsequent storyline
- ▶ Understanding a child's story can help us move from:
“What is wrong with you?” → **“What happened to you?”**





Sometimes I Hit, Bite, Kick, Spit,
Scratch, Head Butt, Yell
Profanity, Threaten to Hurt
Myself or Others, Run Away or
Hide, Try to Jump from High
Places, Tantrum, Have Bathroom
Accidents, Do Not Follow
Directions, & Refuse to Go
Places Unless I Am Carried:

The Lelani Story

Reflection Activity #1

What's the Cover Story?

- ▶ Think about a child you have worked with or are working with that exhibits some challenging behaviors. What is their “cover story”?
- ▶ Write or draw a description of some of their behaviors
 - Keep descriptions objective and specific
 - Behaviors you can see or hear (e.g., you can't **see** a child not liking another child or deciding not to follow directions)
 - Avoid labels
 - e.g., *stubborn, mean, aggressive*



Main Characters *and* Events



Lelani, age 3, is a playful, affectionate girl with a bright smile and warm personality. She loves to dance, play and listen to music, draw, and play games with balls.

Removed from her **biological mother** at birth due to cocaine exposure

Father assumes custody until allegations of neglect, physical and sexual abuse.
(6–14 mos.)

Placed with **foster family**
(birth–6 mos.)

Placed with second **foster family**; separated from **biological sister and brother**
(14–17 mos.)

Placed in care of her father's niece, **Ms. Williams**

- caring for Lelani + own **four children**
- committed advocate for Lelani
- strong network of **extended family**
- depression, health conditions, & several stressors

Lelani's **father** in and out of jail, occasional visitation
(17 mos.–present)

The Brain, Body, *and* Behavior Story

Lelani has experienced:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Incarcerated household member | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional abuse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mother treated violently | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sexual abuse |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mental illness of household member | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Physical abuse |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parental divorce | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional neglect |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Household member substance abuse | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Physical neglect |

Her ACEs score is: **7**

- About twice as likely to be severely obese, have a stroke, diabetes, cancer, or heart disease
- Around 4–5 times more likely to use drugs, be depressed, or suffer from pulmonary disease
- High risk of shortened life span



The Brain, Body, *and* Behavior Story



▶ **Difficulty regulating emotions and behaviors**

- Self-harm (e.g., scratching self, pulling hair out, banging head)
- Verbal defiance and aggression (e.g., “Shut up”, profanity)
- Physical aggression (e.g., hitting, kicking, biting, spitting, scratching, head-butting)

▶ **Extremely quick to react, often with strong emotions**

- Threatens to harm self or others (e.g., jumping from high places, threatens others with scissors)
- Grabs desired objects or engages in physical aggression to achieve goal

▶ **Strong focus on present and changes in environment**

- Appears wary and watchful, difficulty attending to activities
- Struggles with transitions (e.g., to and from school, leaving a preferred activity)
- Difficulty remembering and following directions



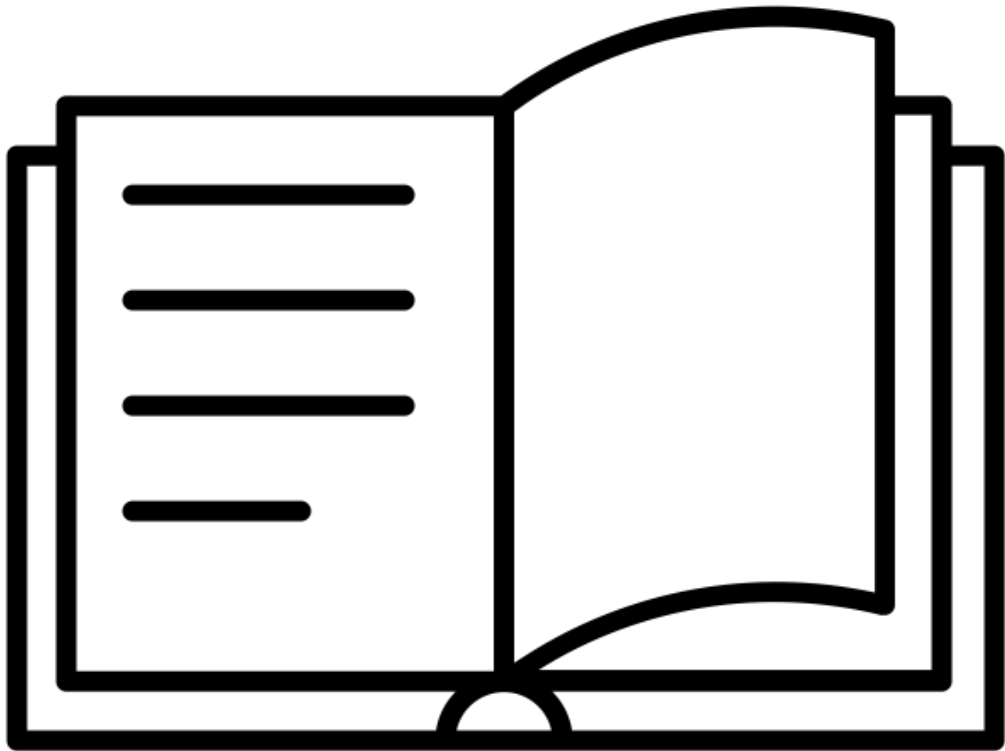
Reflection Activity #2

Main Characters and Events

- ▶ What do you know about this child's history?
- ▶ What are their past and current experiences with caregivers?
- ▶ What stressors have they and their families encountered?
- ▶ What more would you like to know? Why?
- ▶ What insights do you have about their behavior from a toxic stress perspective?



The Child's Narrative



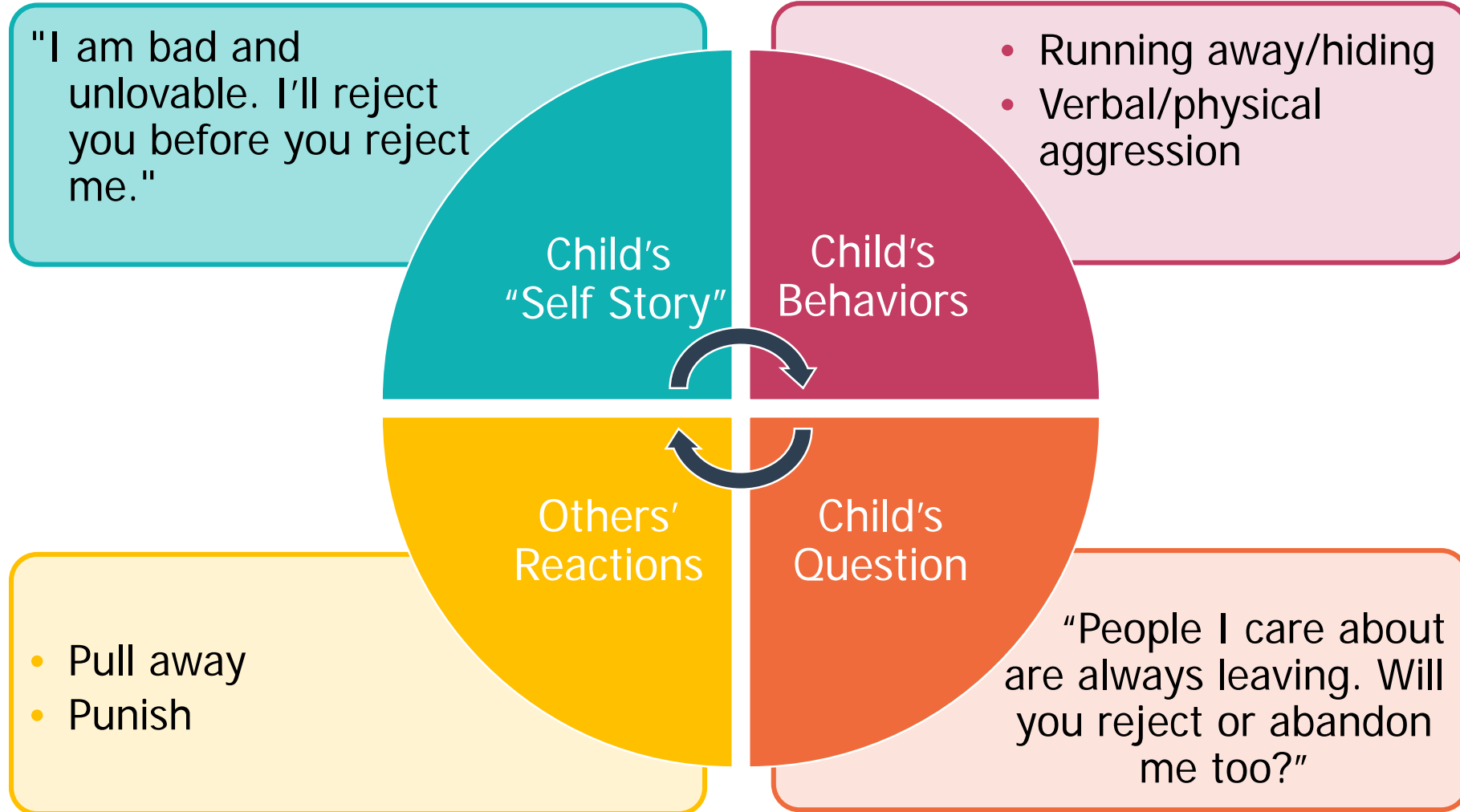
- ▶ Created from experience with caretakers and past events
- ▶ Picture of the world and how it works
- ▶ Beliefs about how others will treat them and how they must respond
- ▶ Perceptions of self and self-worth
- ▶ Anticipation of future events



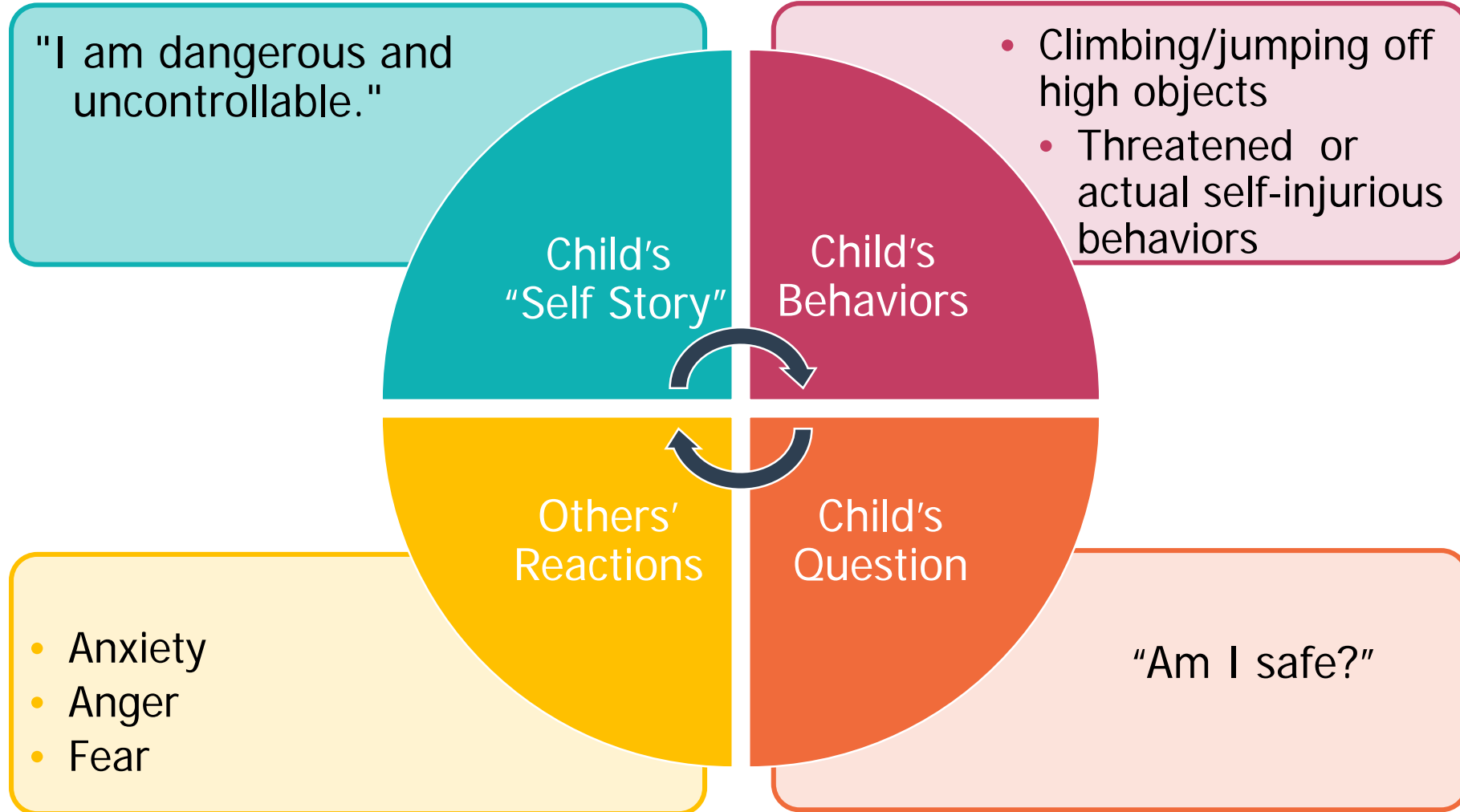
Behavior Story Cycles



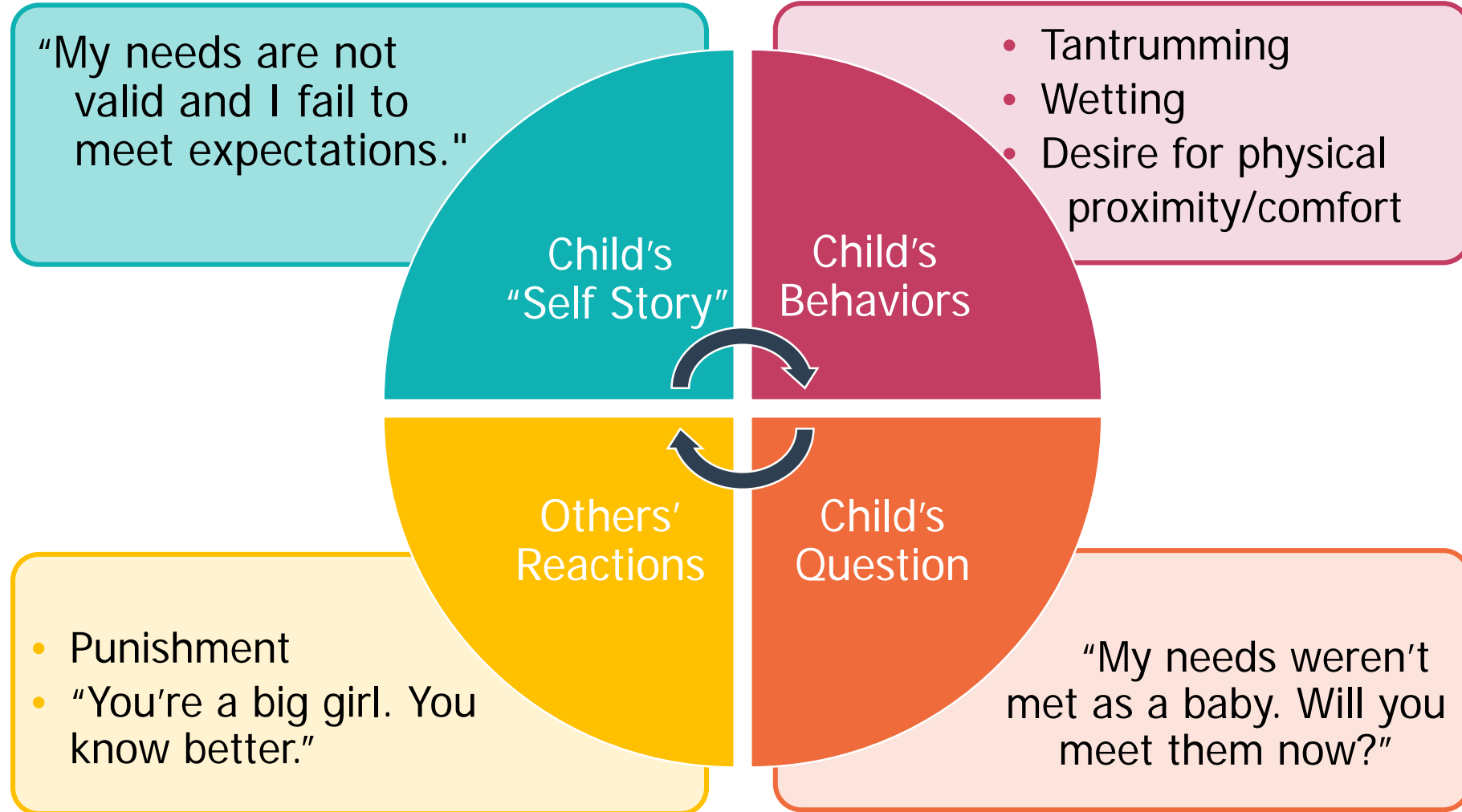
Lelani's Rejecting Behaviors Story Cycle

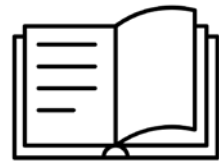


Lelani's Reckless Behaviors Story Cycle



Lelani's Regressive Behaviors Story Cycle





Lelani's Self-Stories



"I will cause you to reject me and then I am at least the author of my own story."



"I'm bad, unlovable, and undeserving of care and attention."



"My body and behavior are dangerous and uncontrollable."



"My needs and feelings are not valid."



"The world is chaotic and unpredictable."

Reflection Activity #3

What Are the Child's Self-Stories

- ▶ Come up with a few statements that you think capture the child's view of themselves, what to expect from relationships, and how the world works.
- ▶ You might think about:
 - *What have they learned about the world from their past?*
 - *What messages are their behaviors sending?*
 - *What question might they be challenging you to confirm?*
 - *How are they "inviting" you to feel?*





How Do We Play Into Their Narrative?

- ▶ Children's behaviors are often an "invitation" to us to confirm their existing view of the world and the way relationships work
 - Do we give in to the "pull" and confirm their stories?
- ▶ Children are surprisingly good at "reading" us
 - Children who have experienced trauma have even more sensitive "emotional radar"
 - Can even read "micro-expressions" (flashes of facial expressions, body language, tone of voice)
 - Tend to over-interpret negative cues
- ▶ Acknowledging and learning from our feelings and reactions



What messages are we sending?

“I am constantly having to interrupt whatever I’m doing to run to the other side of the classroom to deal with her disruptions.”

“She gets so upset about the littlest things. I’m always having to tell her ‘You’re fine. It’s no big deal.’”

“I have to call the director in 3 or 4 times a day to calm her down since nothing I do helps. I don’t know why she hates me so much.”

“Whenever I get close, my teacher moves away to be with other kids. She can’t stand to be near me because I’m so bad.”

“I’m always having the wrong feelings but I don’t know how to change them.”

“My feelings are so big they scare my teacher and she has to get away from me. If a grown-up can’t help me it must be really bad.”

How Can We Help Them Rewrite Their Story?

- ▶ “The Opposite Game”
- ▶ Challenge child’s narrative by:
 - Showing them a different model of relationships and the world
 - Disconfirming thoughts and beliefs about themselves
 - Giving them new experiences
- ▶ **Unconditional care:** “I will be here with you and for you no matter what you do or what happens. Sometimes I may not like your behavior, but I will always like you.”



What Tools Can We Give Children?

In all great adventure stories, hero's journey starts with meeting a mentor or magical helper

Mentor/helper gives hero tools to help on their quest



Glenda the Good Witch gives Dorothy ruby slippers



Obi-Wan Kenobi gives Luke Skywalker his father's light saber



Hagrid gives Harry Potter Hedwig the owl for his birthday

As mentors and magical helpers, what tools can you give children to assist them on their journeys?





“I’m bad, unlovable, and undeserving of care and attention.”

“You have big feelings, but they’re not too big for me and I’ll be here with you to help you hold them.”

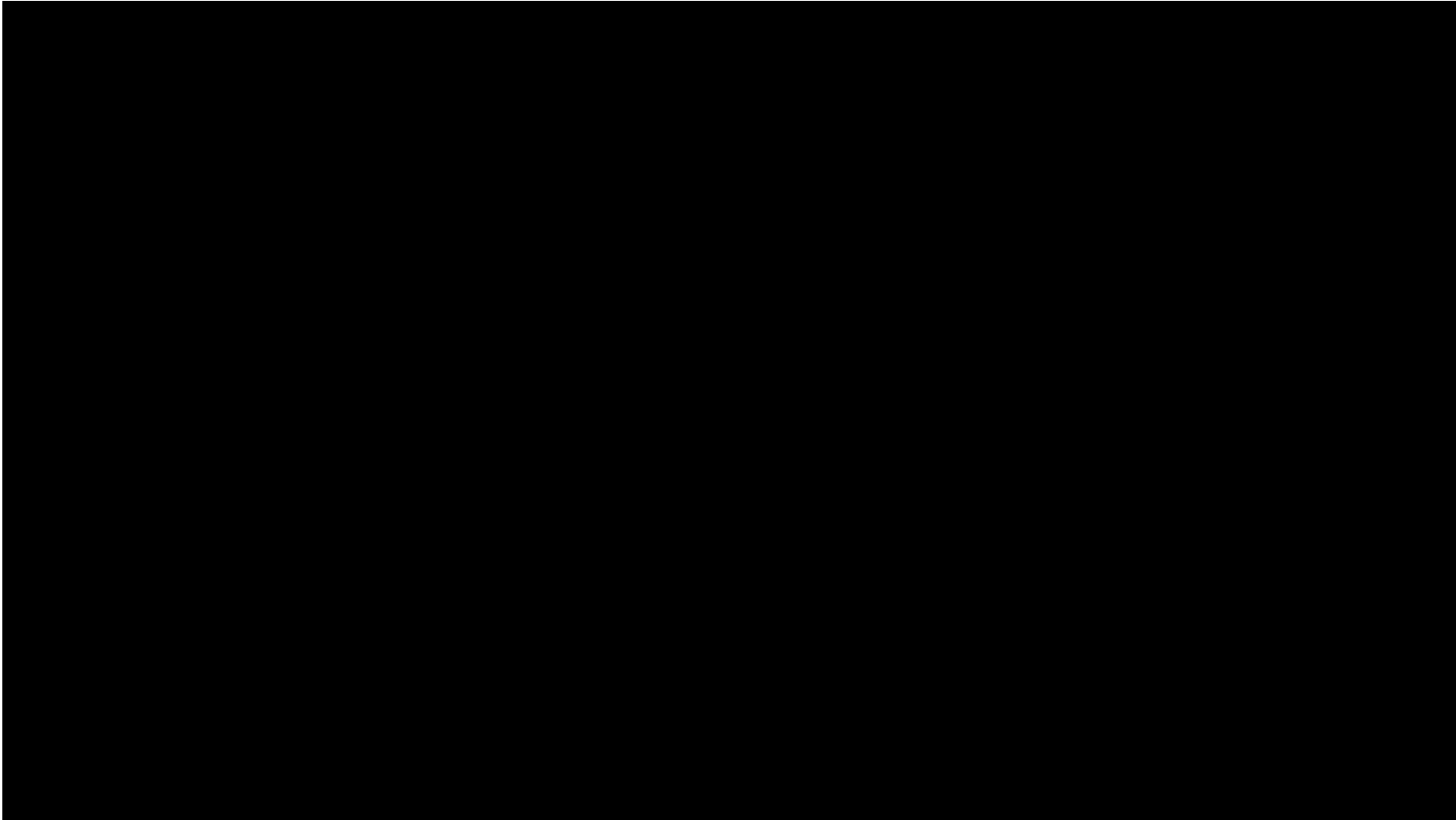
- Remaining present and engaged even during the most intense behaviors and interactions

“You are a worthy and wonderful person. Let me prove it to you.”

- Positive reinforcement – “Catch children being good”
- Out-of-sight but not out-of-mind
- Repeated affirmations



"I'm bad, unlovable, and undeserving of care and attention."





“My body and behavior are dangerous and uncontrollable.”

“Many people care about you and want to keep you safe. You are also capable of making safe choices.”

- Name those who care about the child and ways they will help the child safe
- Give choices and opportunities for child to make safe choices

“Sometimes big feelings try to take over our bodies and brains, but I can help you name and tame them.”

- Acknowledge, validate, and label a range of feeling states and associated physical sensations
- Teach self-regulation and coping strategies
- In-the-moment and baseline teaching opportunities



"My body and behavior are dangerous and uncontrollable."



ABOUT HIGHLIGHTS RESOURCES SEFEL IN MARYLAND TOOLS FOR YOU STRATEGIES COMMUNITY CADRE ^{NEW!}

FAMILIES TEACHERS & PROVIDERS TRAINERS & COACHES OUTCOMES MONITORING SYSTEM (OMS) ONLINE TRAINING ▾

SEFEL for Teachers & Providers / Resources & Tools

Resources & Tools for TEACHERS & PROVIDERS

SEFEL promotes child social and emotional development and supportive environments. SEFEL helps support healthy development as well as communication, feeling identification, and important executive functioning.

Check out these strategies and activities to teach social emotional skills to your students!

Book Nook

Stories to Help Children Respond Positively to Challenging Social Emotional Situations

Book List

Find a Book to Promote Positive Social Emotional Development in the Classroom

Scripted Stories for Social Situations

Relaxation Techniques

- Relaxing Like An Ice Cube
- Bubble Pens
- Troll Yoga Poses for Childrens
- Breathing Exercise Cards for Children



“The world is chaotic and out of my control.”

“The world is not always unpredictable and your choices have power to influence what happens.”

- Provide consistent environment, experiences, and responses
- Set limits with “If...then...” statements

“When changes do happen, I’ll help you understand and navigate them.”

- Narrate upcoming transitions and provide reassurance about the future
- “Teach them how to say goodbye”

Reflection Activity #4

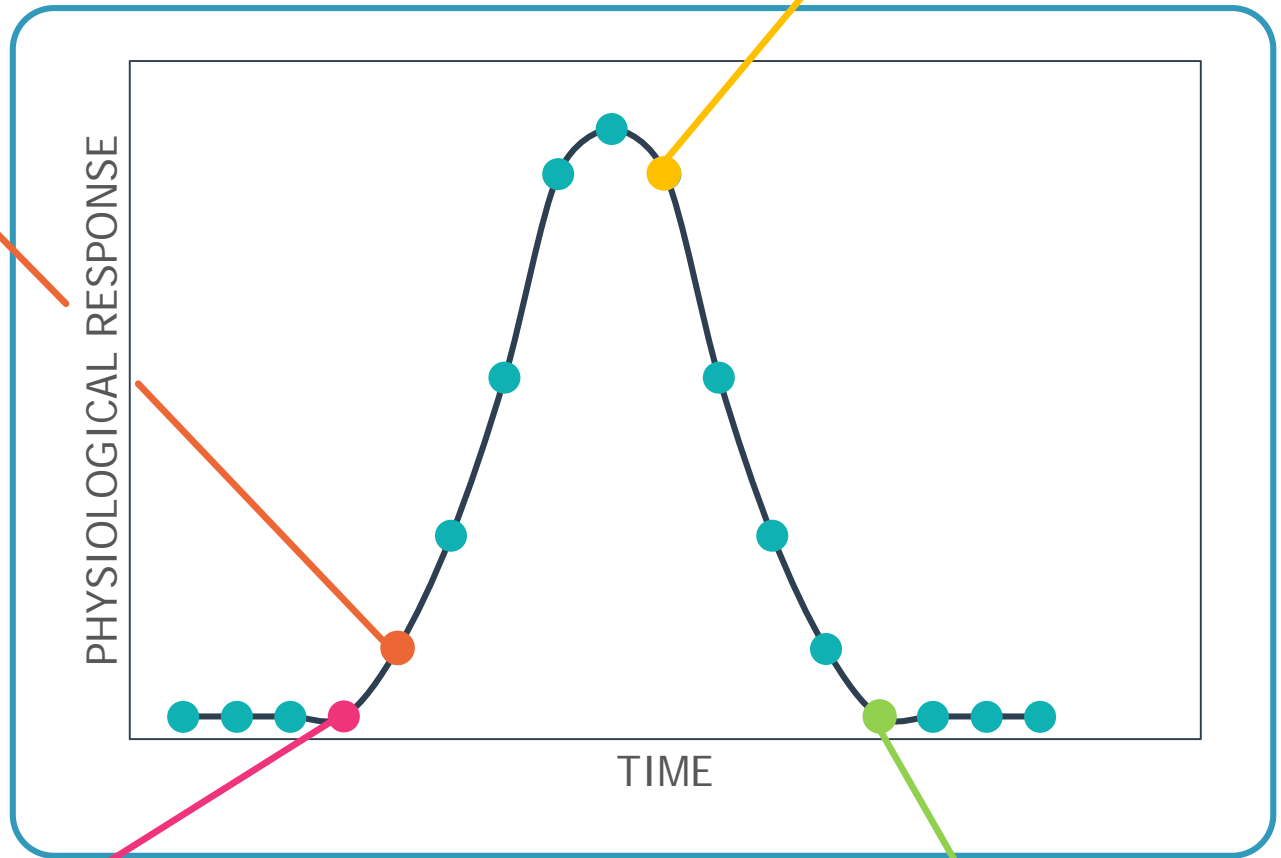
The Opposite Game

- ▶ What messages would you like to give the child to contradict any negative self-stories?
- ▶ Think about how you might:
 - Show them a different model of relationships
 - Disconfirm negative thoughts and beliefs about themselves
 - Give them new experiences that change what they expect about the world.





ACTIVATION OF STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEMS



STRESSOR ENDS OR COPING STRATEGIES ENGAGED



ONSET OF STRESS



FULL RECOVERY TO BASELINE

Escalation

- What are triggers?
- What are signs of escalation?

Crisis

- What are peak crisis behaviors?

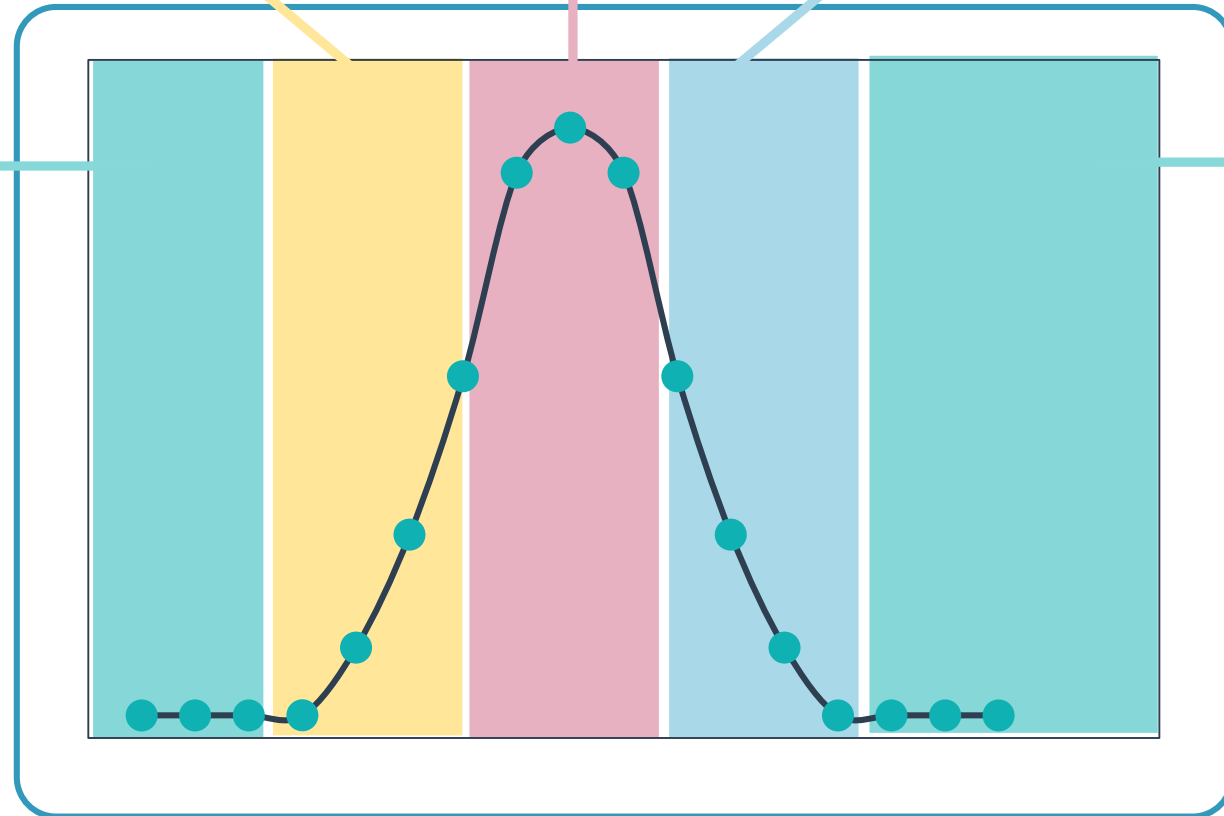
Recovery

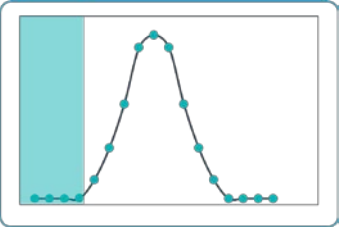
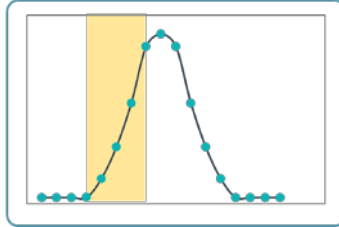
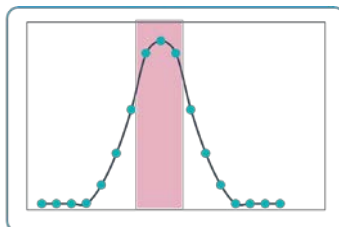
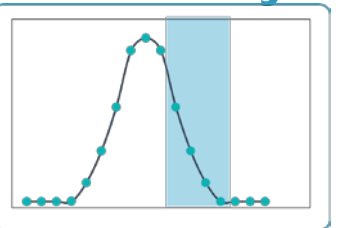
- What are child's needs during recovery?

Baseline

- What are child's interests & strengths?
- How can these be used to support learning?

Baseline



Phase	Lelani's Behaviors	Interventions
<p>Baseline</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoys singing, movement activities, reading books Adult attention is highly motivating Strong verbal, fine & gross motor skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching about emotions using songs and books Physical/OT self-regulation strategies Positive feedback and repeated affirmations
<p>Escalation</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Triggers: transitions, limit setting, sharing with peers, end of the day Limit testing Verbal defiance (e.g., "No!" "Shut up!") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Narrate upcoming transitions Offer choices Label feelings and physical cues
<p>Crisis</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical aggression Unsafe behaviors Self-injurious behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stay present and engaged Compassionate limits Coaching in self-regulation strategies
<p>Recovery</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-soothing behaviors Requests physical comfort Needs time to re-engage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive feedback Narrate and validate of feelings Offer physical comfort Quiet activities Repair relationship

Who Do You Need *to be in* This Child's Story?

You are an important CARE-acter in their stories.

Consistent

- ▶ Show children they can count on you by being a stable and reliable presence in their life

Attuned

- ▶ Think about what a child may be trying to tell you with their behavior and show them you are hearing what they need

Responsive

- ▶ Engage in “serve-and-return” interactions by responding to children’s initiations and signals

Engaged

- ▶ Be present in the moment when you are with a child, including an awareness of your own emotions



What Does *it* Take *to be* this CARE-acter?

Super Powers

Consistent

Attuned

Responsive

Engaged

Self-awareness

Recognition of strengths, weaknesses, triggers, fears, and awareness of how internal state affects behavior

Emotional availability

Capacity to be in touch with own emotions, read feelings of others, and form emotional connections

Self-regulation

Ability to manage disruptive emotions and think before one acts

Stress management

Engaging in healthy habits to cope with stressors

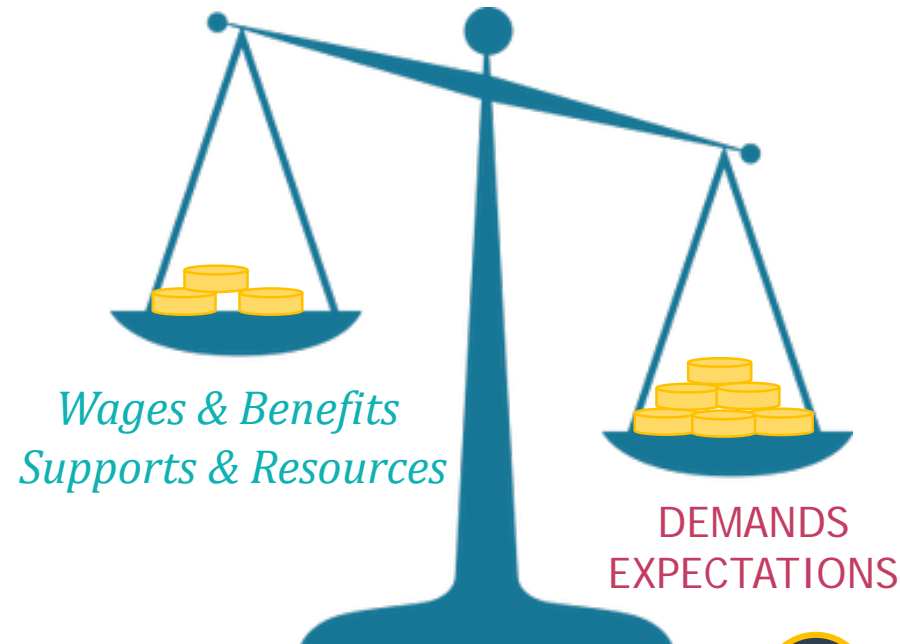




What Factors Affect Our Own Stories?

“There is a serious mismatch between the preparation (and the compensation) of the average early childhood professional and the growing expectations of parents and policymakers”

- Eager to Learn





What Factors Affect Our Own Stories?

COMPASSION FATIGUE

The emotional strain from helping others, especially those in distress, and putting caring for the needs of others before your own.

“We have not been directly exposed to the trauma scene, but we hear the story told with such intensity, or we hear similar stories so often, or we have the gift and curse of extreme empathy and we suffer. We feel the feelings of our clients. We experience their fears. We dream their dreams. Eventually, we lose a certain spark of optimism, humor and hope. We tire. We aren’t sick, but we aren’t ourselves.”

”
“ - Charles Figley, 1995

Figley (1995)

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REWRITING STORIES FOR CHILDREN WITH TOXIC STRESS



Caregiver Stress *and* Well-Being

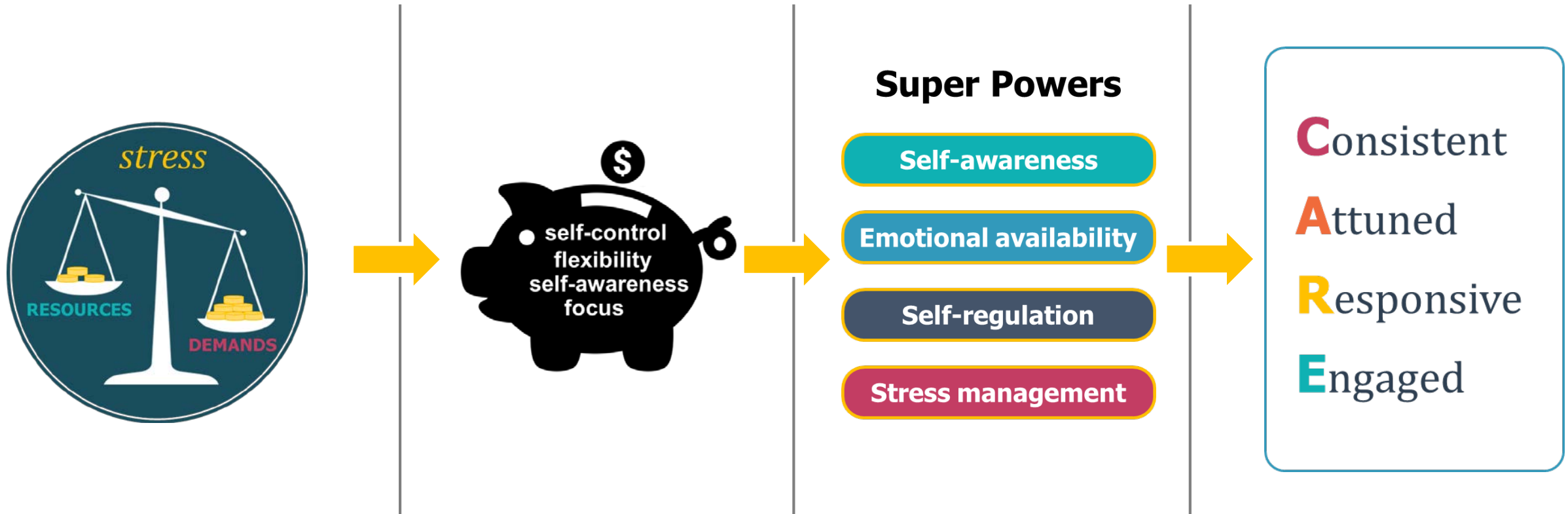
“We aren’t sick, but we aren’t ourselves”

- ▶ During the last few decades, we have discovered that these kinds of stressors **CAN** make us sick
 - When caregivers experience chronic stressors, more likely to experience dysregulated stress response systems
- ▶ Early childhood educators report significantly higher rates of:
 - chronic illnesses (e.g., asthma, hypertension, diabetes)
 - physical problems (e.g., back pain, headaches, sleep disturbance)
 - mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression)

Up to **30%** of child care staff report depressive symptoms



Caregiver Stress, Well-Being, *and* Relationships





HOW CAN WE
TAKE CARE OF YOU
SO THAT YOU
CAN TAKE CARE OF
CHILDREN?

QUICK BREAK!



stretch



check your phone



say "hi" to the person next to you!

2 minutes and...**GO!**



Montgomery County, Maryland | November 3, 2018

Stress Management Strategies *for* Early Care *and* Education Providers: *Helping You Do a Hard Job Well*



Darryl Etter, Psy.D.

Clinical Health Psychologist
VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System

Let's review...

In order to be...

Consistent

Attuned

Responsive

Engaged

We need...

Self-awareness

Emotional availability

Self-regulation

Stress management



SELF-CARE

Let's review...

GOAL: Caregiving interactions that are...

Consistent **A**ttuned **R**esponsive **E**ngaged

WHAT WE NEED:

Self-awareness

What is going on when it's harder to be the kind of caregiver I'd like to be?

Emotional availability

Self-regulation

Stress management

How do I stay connected to how I would like to be with children when it's hard?



Getting in the Mindset

Bring to mind a child with whom you have a challenging relationship.

Bring to mind a child with whom you have a rewarding relationship.





Thoughts, Feelings, and Interactions

- ▶ There is a relationship between our thoughts and how we feel
- ▶ There is a relationship between how we feel and how we are ready to interact
- ▶ Changing our thinking can change how we feel (better!) **and** how we are with children (more CARE!)





Step-by-Step Stress Management

Changing thinking is hard when stressed

For today: 5 doable steps for a stress management plan

Step 1: Reading Your Body

Step 2: Getting Present

Step 3: Know Your “Why”

Step 4: Catch & Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts

Step 5: Reinforce Successes



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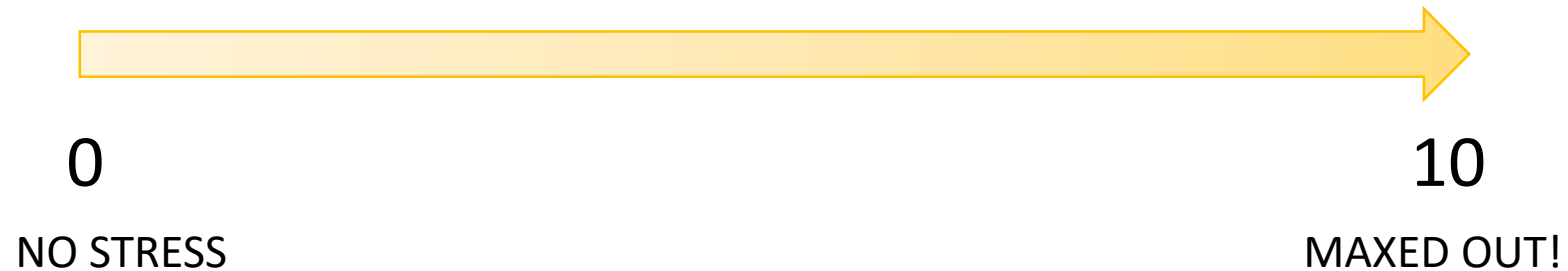
Step 1: Reading Your Body

▶ Self-Awareness & Self-Regulation



Step 1: Reading Your Body

Check in with yourself – where is your stress level *right now*?



**We are usually carrying more stress than we notice
(Especially caregivers)**



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Step 1: Reading Your Body

Diaphragmatic Breathing

HOW TO DO IT:

- ▶ Set a timer for at least 2–5 minutes
- ▶ Find a quiet place and comfortable seat (or lie down)
- ▶ Breathe deep through your nose
- ▶ Fill your belly first, then your chest
 - You can feel the movement by placing a hand on each
- ▶ Slowly breathe out through your mouth
 - Like you're blowing on a cup of coffee
- ▶ When you notice your mind wandering, note where it's going, then gently bring your attention back to your breath
 - Try counting up to 10 breaths, start over if you lose count
 - Picture wandering thoughts as leaves, feathers, etc. floating away





Step 1: Reading Your Body

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

HOW TO DO IT:

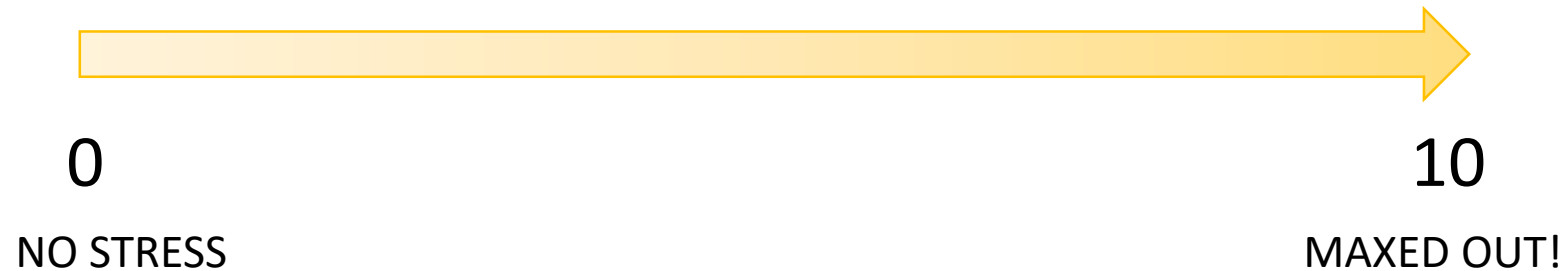
- ▶ Find a quiet place and comfortable seat
- ▶ Tense a muscle, then totally relax it
- ▶ Pay attention to how it feels for a muscle to really be relaxed—tension can sneak up on us
- ▶ Go from top to bottom—forehead, eyes, jaw, shoulders, biceps, forearms & hands, core, thighs, calves, toes
- ▶ Mentally scan your body to find any remaining tension
- ▶ Try to relax that muscle; tense and relax it if you're having difficulty





Step 1: Reading Your Body

Check in with yourself again – where is your stress level *now*?



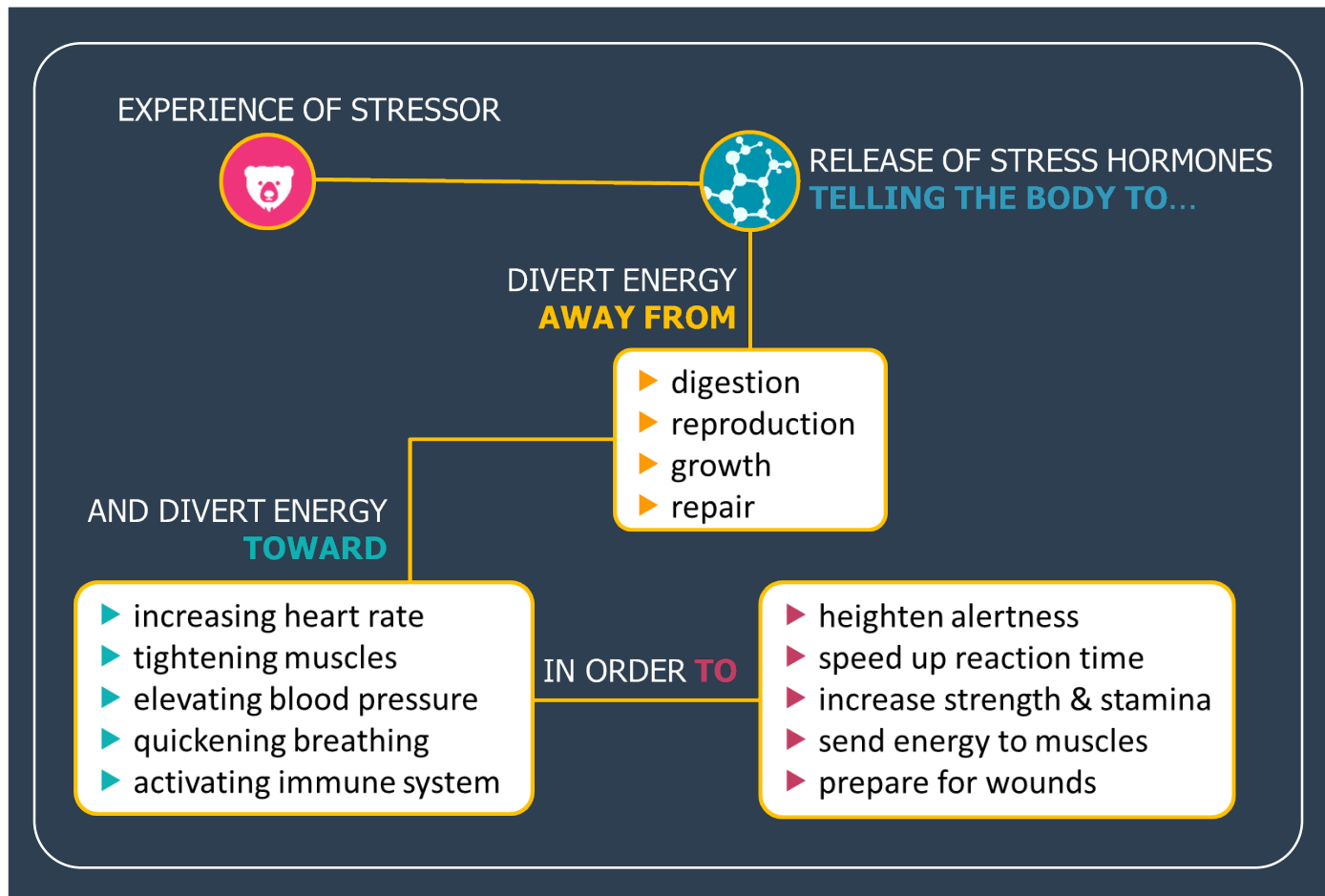
How does that compare to your first number?



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Step 1: Reading Your Body

How do these strategies help counteract stress?

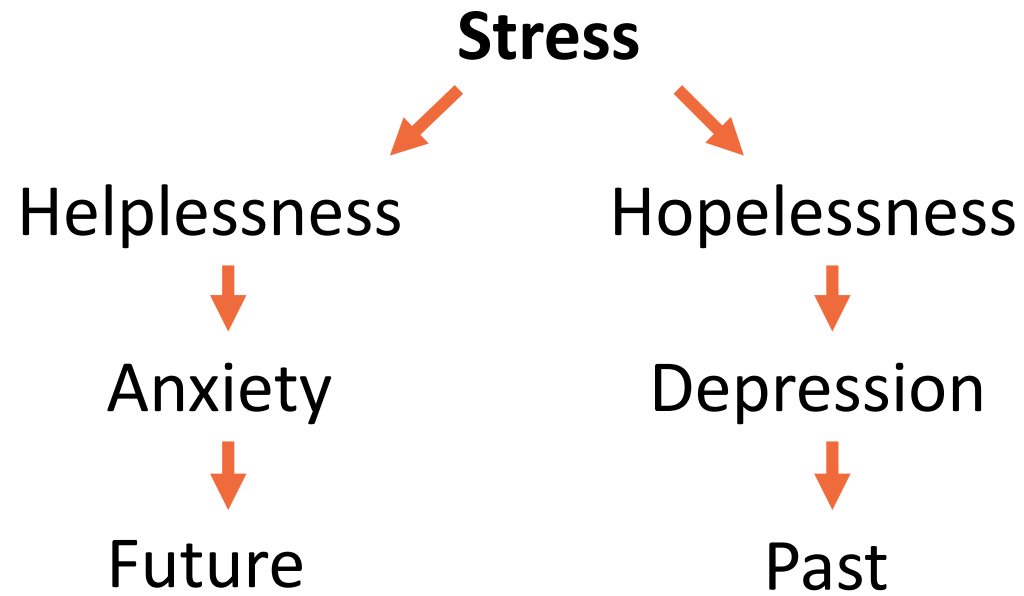


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Step 2: Getting Present

- ▶ Emotional Availability & Stress Management

Step 2: Getting Present



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Step 2: Getting Present

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Exercise



Acknowledge **5** things that you see. Perhaps it's a color, a bird out the window, a pencil on your desk.



Find **4** things that you can touch or feel. It might be the temperature of the air on your body, the chair you're sitting on, the weight or texture of your clothes, or the skin on your ear or face.



Become aware of **3** things you can hear. Maybe it is a clock ticking, a car outside, the buzzing of the lights.



Acknowledge **2** things you can smell. It might be a sharpened pencil or lotion on your hands.



Find **1** thing you can taste. Perhaps it's the coffee you drank earlier or the memory of a sandwich you had for lunch.

Practice this when you aren't busy to make it easier to get grounded when you are busy.



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Step 3: Know Your “Why”

▶ Self-Awareness & Emotional Availability



Step 3: Know Your “Why”

- ▶ We need a reason to do things
 - Not just goals, but a direction or a way of doing things
- ▶ When things are tough, values can guide us
 - When we have to change tacks, values help us find a new way to be in a situation that still feels right
- ▶ Values are there, even when we can't make progress toward the outcomes associated with them
 - Especially important because teachers often have systemic things blocking or limiting implementation

“He [or she] who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How”
- Friedrich Nietzsche



SELF-CARE



Step 3: Know Your “Why”

Exercise: Retirement Party

Imagine three of your favorite children to work with have come to your retirement party. Give them a chance to say:

- What was most memorable about your work with them?
- What was most important about how you were with them?
- What you meant to them?

- ▶ *What do I really want in life?*
- ▶ *What do I want my life to be about?*
- ▶ *Who do I want to be?*



Step 4: Catch & Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts


▶ Self-Regulation & Stress Management



Step 4: Catch & Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts

- ▶ We can prepare as much as we like, and things are still going to happen that we aren't happy with!
- ▶ Automatic thoughts are automatic, but we can choose our next thoughts
 - With practice, we tend to have unhelpful automatic thoughts less often



- 
- ▶ **Personalization:** bad things are my fault, and bad things happen specifically to hurt me
 - ▶ **“Shoulds”:** expectations for ourselves and for others
 - ▶ **Overgeneralization:** assuming lots of things are/will be bad because of a few bad things
 - ▶ **All-or-Nothing:** look for “always/never,” “can’t,” “everything/nothing”
 - ▶ **Magnifying Negatives & Minimizing Positives:** noticing more negatives than positives and giving more weight to negatives
 - ▶ **Jumping to Conclusions**
 - Mind-Reading: we know what others are intending
 - Fortune-Telling: we know for certain how things will end up
 - ▶ **Catastrophizing:** thinking that the worst case will happen and that it will be unbearable
 - ▶ **“If Only”:** thinking that there is one important thing that swung our life in a bad direction or is keeping it from getting better



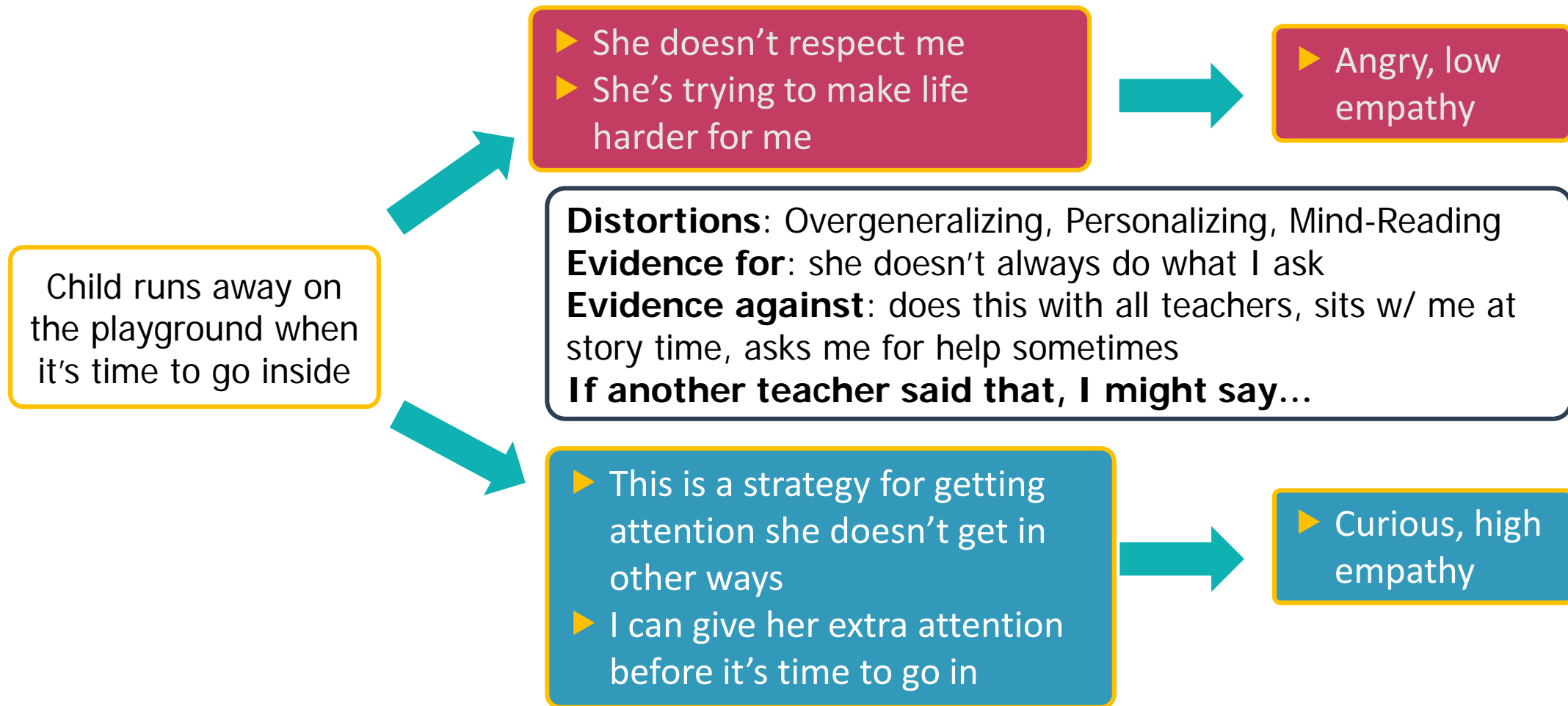
Step 4: Catch & Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts

Strategies to challenge

- ▶ Examine the evidence
- ▶ Find a gray area
- ▶ Gather more data
 - Ask others' perspectives about the situation
 - Check in to see if assumptions you're making about others' thinking is correct
- ▶ Consider it from an outside perspective
 - If a friend came to you with the same situation, how would you interpret it? What would you tell them?
- ▶ Replace “should” with “want to,” “would be good to,” or even “could”



Step 4: Catch & Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts



SELF-CARE

Step 4: Catch & Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts

Parent doesn't practice the strategies you suggested to help with child's behavior at home

- ▶ If he doesn't do the work, nothing is going to change
- ▶ He doesn't care about the time and effort I'm putting into this

- ▶ Frustrated
- ▶ Isolated

Distortions: All-or-Nothing, Fortune-Telling, Mind-Reading, Personalizing
Evidence For: didn't do homework
Evidence Against: he came to appt., he's busy w/ lots of other demands
Gray Area: something small could change even if he doesn't have time to do much homework outside of meetings

- ▶ It sounds like he had a really stressful week
- ▶ Maybe this was too big a change to suggest right now. We can start with something smaller

- ▶ Collaborative
- ▶ Willing to meet parent where they are



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Step 4: Catch & Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts

Tips for finding alternative thoughts that you're *actually going to believe*:

- ▶ Make sure thoughts are balanced and realistic—if they are too extreme, you might not believe them

“Child was running away from me because she cares about my health and wants me to get more exercise!”

- ▶ Remember your “Why”
 - *Why do you work in ECE?*
 - *Why are you here today?*

“Yes, I’m frustrated she’s not listening. And I got into this work to help children learn and grow and this is an opportunity where I can help her reach the next developmental step in self-regulation.”



SELF-CARE

Step 5: Reinforce Successes

- ▶ Self-Regulation & Emotional Availability



Step 5: Reinforce Successes

- ▶ Write 3 things that went well each day and why they went well
- ▶ Share a success with someone
- ▶ Create “coping cards” or rehearse guiding statements
 - Really effective challenges to unhelpful thoughts
 - Really meaningful values
- ▶ Don’t fall into the burnout cycle
 - Add pleasant or productive activities on purpose rather than just crashing



Troubleshooting

- ▶ Making changes is hard!
- ▶ Biggest challenges to change
 - We say: Time & energy
 - In fact: Expectations, habit, & priorities
 - Often set goals based on wanting to do a full, intense, ideal version
 - Often set goals we will have to maintain the change forever
 - Have lives that aren't structured to support the new activity
 - Have other things that matter to us – not just this new plan



Troubleshooting

- ▶ **Getting around expectations, habit, & priorities as barriers**
 - Start with a smaller amount of the activity that still would be a step in the direction you want to go
 - Make it a short-term change & plan to reevaluate
 - Work with other people in your life to restructure and support the change
 - Acknowledge that this isn't the only important thing in your life
- ▶ **Practice when you don't need it!**



Putting It All Together

Make a plan for yourself to try a new pattern of managing stress

Step 1: Check in on stress, calm body with diaphragmatic breathing

Step 2: Get present using grounding

Step 3: Review and focus on values

Step 4: Catch & challenge unhelpful thoughts

- Can review coping cards before going into stressful situations

Step 5: Reinforce successes rather than struggles

- 3 things that went well each day and why
- Share a success with someone
- Make new coping cards/write new values as needed



Final Reflections

- ▶ What was new in this or struck you in a new way, even if you've encountered it before?
- ▶ What do you feel excited to try?
- ▶ What questions do you have?



THANK YOU
FOR BEING HERE TODAY
AND FOR ALL THE WORK
YOU DO ON BEHALF OF
CHILDREN
AND FAMILIES!



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References

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