



Understanding Trauma in the Classroom

How do we begin to make sense of what we are seeing in
our students?

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Trauma...some definitions...

- Trauma = Psychological Injury. Overwhelmed by stress and caused some harm.
- Post - Traumatic Stress Disorder = intense fear, helplessness or horror in response to exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor such as actual or threatened death or serious injury or a threat to the personal integrity of self or others.
- Complex Trauma = extended exposure to extremes of social and/or interpersonal trauma, including sexual abuse (especially child sexual abuse), physical abuse, emotional abuse, domestic violence and torture.
- Attachment/Relational/Developmental Trauma = other terms for complex trauma - abuse or neglect occurring in the context of relationships.

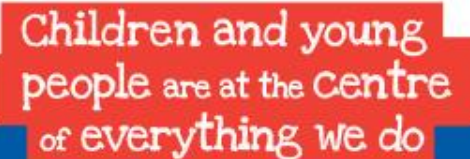
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What have some of your students been exposed to?

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Sexual abuse
- Unstable care
- Rejection and abandonment
- Multiple placement changes
- Multiple school changes

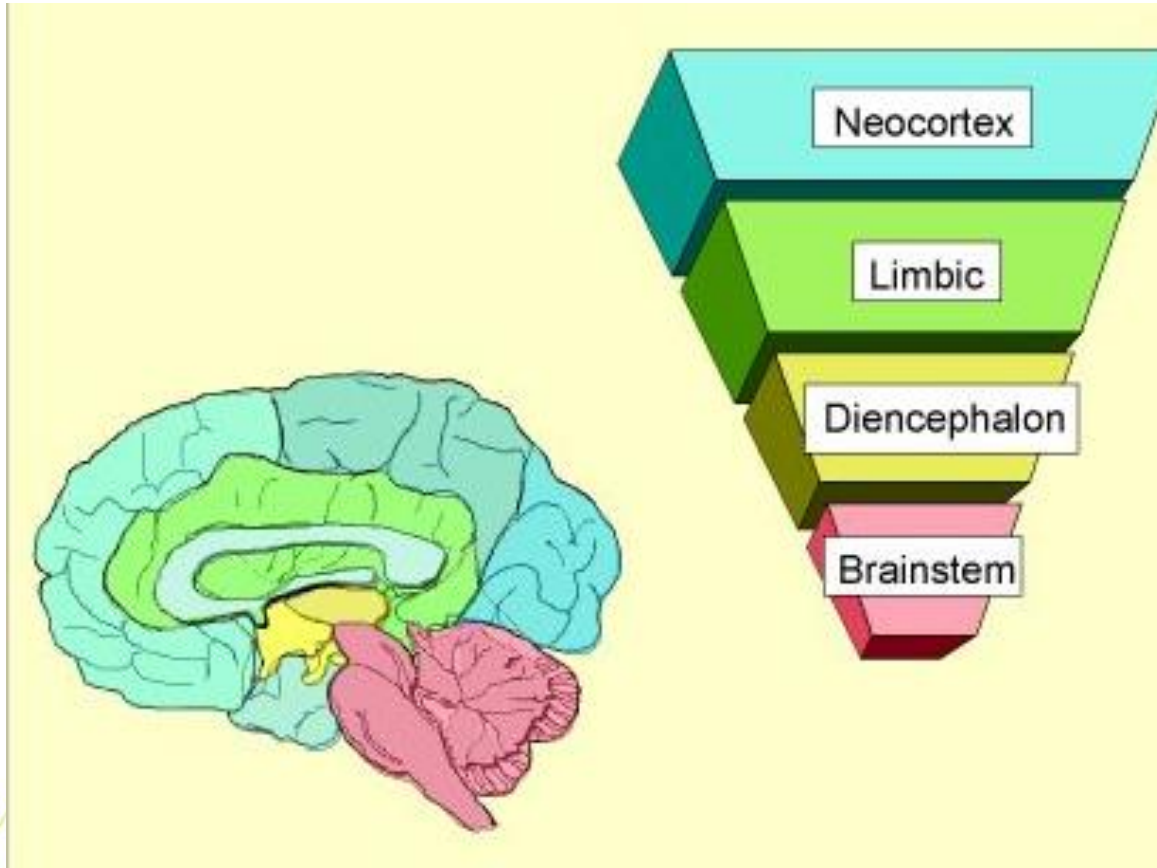
*Fear, chaos, instability,
overwhelming
emotions with no one
to help them...*

How do these experiences shape the brain?



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Trauma...some neurobiology...



Neocortex - Higher cognitive functioning, reasoning, abstract thought, executive functions

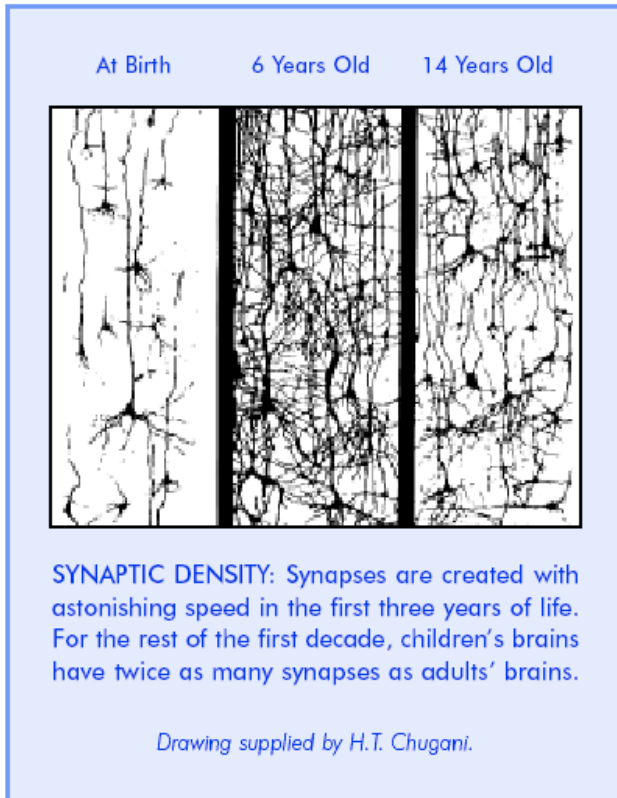
Limbic - Emotional regulation, attachment relationships

Diencephalon – Fight/Flight/Freeze, motor coordination

Brainstem - Regulation of heart rate, breathing, sleep patterns (survival needs)

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Neurological Development



The number of connections increases tremendously in the first several years of a child's life

Disused pathways become redundant and degenerate, while those used regularly strengthen with time.

Children's brains become structured to reflect their environment, and their responses to the environment become 'hard-wired' and automatic

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Trauma and Brain Development

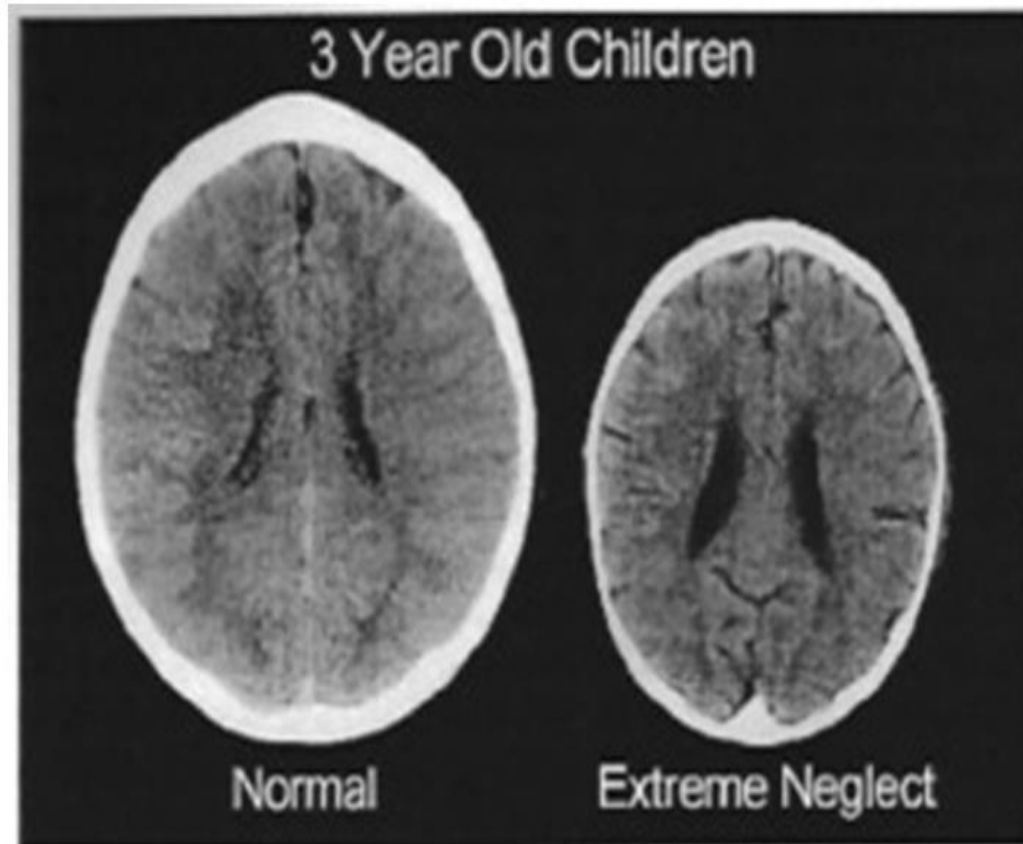
- The primary caregiver acts as an external regulator of the growth of the infant's brain.
- **BUT** an abusive caregiver induces traumatic states of extreme levels of stimulation and arousal.
- If children are left chronically distressed, they have high levels of stress hormones circulating through their brains.
- Early adverse experiences may leave behind a permanent physiological reactivity in limbic areas of the brain.



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Brain architecture is experience dependent.

Consequences of Trauma



Dr. Bruce Perry. Childhood Experience and the Expression of Genetic Potential: What Childhood Neglect Tells Us About Nature and Nurture. *Brain and Mind* 3: 79-100, 2002.

Attachment, Trauma and Brain Development

- Children in homes where there is violence constantly watch their parents for signs of anger and violence.
- Children in homes where there is mental illness can't trust their caregivers will meet their needs consistently.
- The same goes for children in homes with caregivers have intellectual disabilities or substance abuse issues.
- Bottom line is that...children in chaotic, unpredictable and violent homes learn to be hyper-vigilant and see danger in everyday situations.



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Stress & Arousal



Peak of Stress

Flight / Flight
Freeze

Vigilant to threats

BEHAVIOURS

Learning
Clear thinking
Resting
Sleeping

Abused child's
resting state

Non-abused child's
resting state

Calm

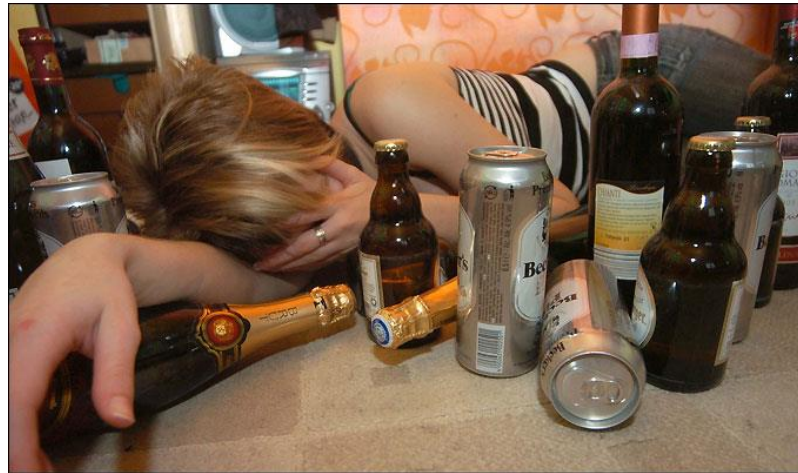
Stress

Calm

STATE OF STRESS / AROUSAL

Maladaptive or Adaptive?

- When living in an abusive home, children may develop a range of behaviours to keep themselves safe from physical or emotional harm. In that abusive environment, those behaviours are considered very adaptive.
- When those behaviours are taken out of the context of the abusive and neglectful environment, those behaviours then begin to cause them problems, for instance in schools, homes, work, and in friendships.



of everything we do

Iceberg Theory

Tip of the Iceberg

The behaviours we see

**The underlying
emotions, thoughts
and beliefs about the
world, themselves
and relationships**

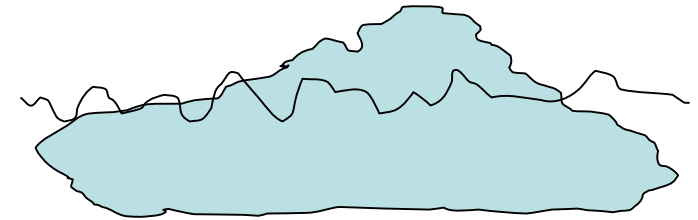
Under the Surface

ing
centre
we do

Iceberg Theory

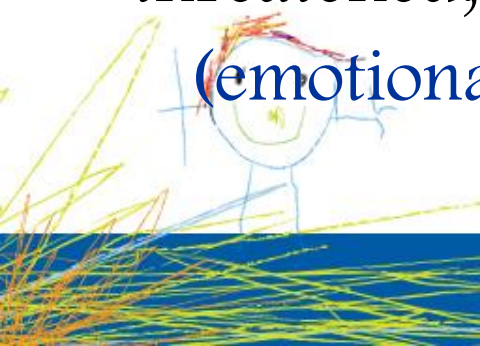


Behaviour (anger, hitting, stealing, sabotaging, running away, hurting, lying, self harming, sexual behaviours, superficial charm, non-compliance)
(coping mechanism)



Real Issues

(worthless, alone, rejected, unloved, incompetent, unsafe, afraid, always expecting bad things, threatened, self as a bad person)
(emotional core)



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Iceberg Theory: Example

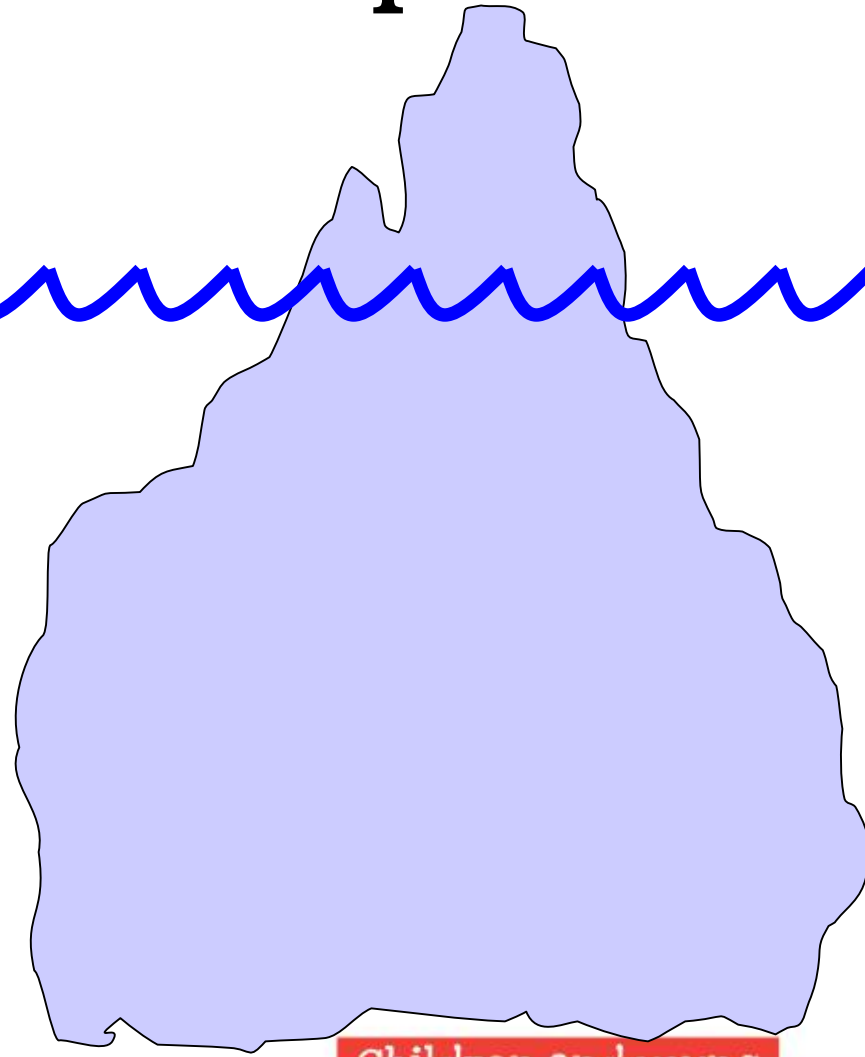
Aggression

“The only way I can stop you from ignoring me is to get in your face.”

“I’m a bad kid, I do bad things.”

“If I don’t fight first, someone will hurt me, so I need to prove I’m tough.”

“People will hurt me, so I’ll push them away by hurting them.”



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Iceberg Theory: Example

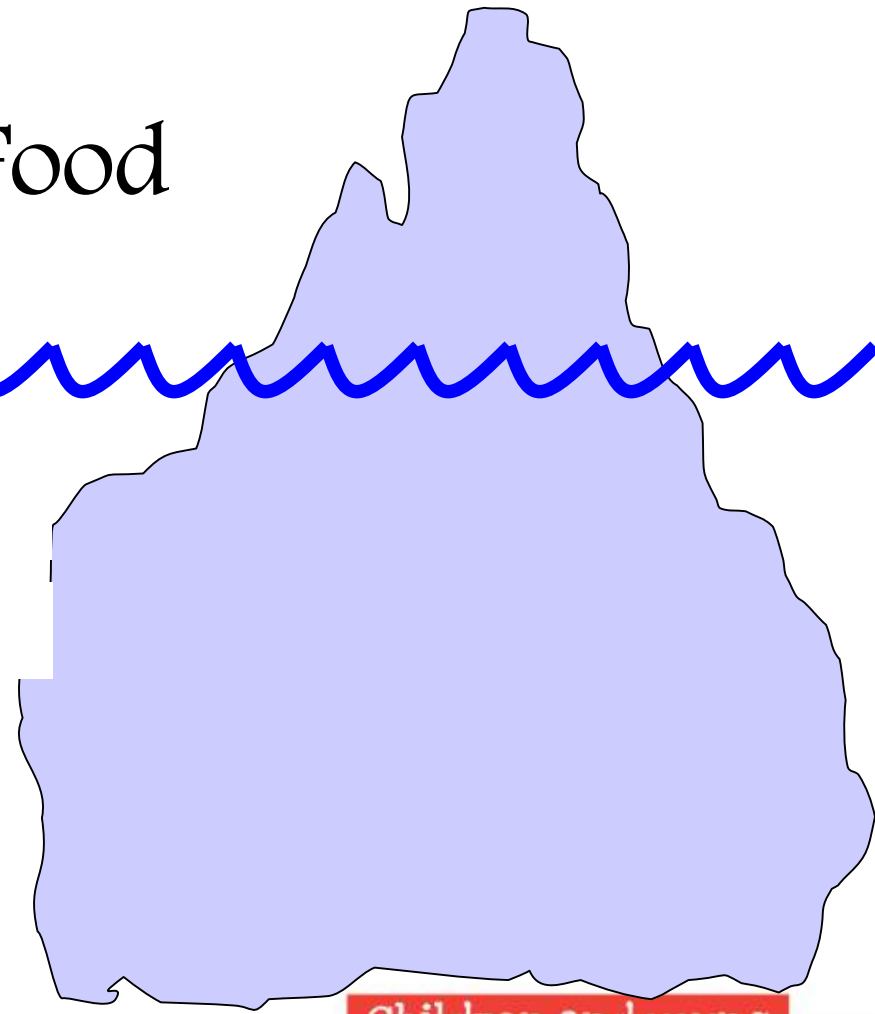
Stealing & Hoarding Food

Experiences of neglect

Don't believe food will be available

Don't trust others to provide food

Learned to hide food so they
wouldn't be hungry



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Food for thought ...

How successful do you think you would be if you tried to teach a child new information when they're in a state of vigilance or fear?

How much are they going to understand?

How much are they going to remember?



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The Impact of Abuse on Learning

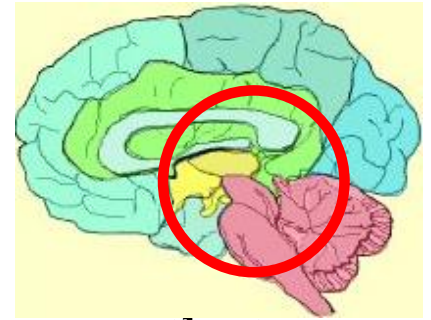
- Abuse and prolonged stress adversely affects areas of brain development needed for learning
 - Attention and concentration
 - Processing speed
 - Visual processing
 - Verbal development
 - Memory
 - Problem solving (analytical / hypothetical thinking)

Putting theory into practice ...

What works in the Classroom?



Safety and stability



- When children are aroused (eg, stressed, upset, scared), they are operating from their lower brain areas that control survival needs and motor movement (fight/flight/freeze). Their focus is on keeping *safe*.
- The best thing you can do is help children feel safe. This can be done by:
 - Offering verbal reassurance (eg, “You’re safe, I’m here to keep you safe.”)
 - Moving children away from stimulating areas
 - Hugging and rocking (acknowledging organisational limitations)

Safety and stability

- Use your relationships
 - If children trust you, they will feel safer with you
 - Enhance trust by:
 - Showing respect
 - Being patient
 - Offering unconditional positive regard (*“You’re okay, the behaviour isn’t.”*)
 - Setting a calm emotional tone
 - Offer verbal reassurance that your actions are to keep them safe (not to punish or hurt them)

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Safety and stability

- Use the environment

- Routine, structure, consistency = **predictable** = safe
- Remove stimulation (noise and movement can be interpreted by a fearful child as threatening)
- Offer a ‘safe place’ (eg, a tent in the corner of the room that children can retreat to, a space in the yard that they can go when they need to regulate)

Provide ‘low stimulation’ times and encourage children to use their safe place frequently throughout the day to help the brain remain regulated

(don't just wait until things get out of control)

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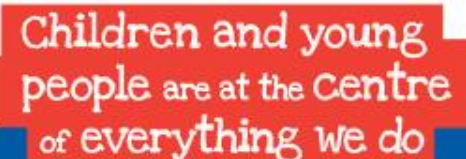
Structure and routine

- **Allow children to have control** (*where appropriate*)
 - Abused children have often had no control over what happened to them, and the people in control hurt them.
 - When teachers try to control their actions, abused children can feel fearful.
 - Letting children have some control over their environment and activities can help them feel safer.
 - Control involves choices; letting children make choices for themselves will help them feel in control.
 - Give choices and some sense of control appropriate to their emotional age.
 - Offer two choices (*“You can do X, or Y”*), but make sure the choices are acceptable to you!

Connection before correction

- Before correcting a child’s behaviour, connect with them by acknowledging what they’re experiencing, showing empathy, and reminding them of your relationship.
- Example: Sam throws his book at Jamie’s seat.
 - Connection – *“Sam, I can see you’re angry, and I know it’s hard for you to manage that. Remember, I’m here to help in these tricky times.”*
 - Correction – *“But you know the rules in here, we don’t throw things at each other.”*

When children act out aggressively, they’re often operating from their brainstem. Connecting helps activate a child’s limbic system. If you try to correct before you connect, you run the risk of exacerbating the brainstem response (and provoking fight / flight behaviour).



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Connection before correction (cont'd)

- Connection seeking versus attention seeking
 - If you define a child's behaviour as attention, it is easy to dismiss it as not needed, as opposed to connection, which is needed (Kent Hoffman, 2011).
 - Each time you want to use '*attention seeking behaviour*' to describe a child, replace it with 'seeking a connection'.....this gives different meaning to the behaviour.

Base interactions on emotional age, not intellectual age

- Ability to learn is directly related to a child's emotional skill level and not only their intellectual age.
- Overall, abused children operate at lower emotional levels than their age suggests. Interact with the child at their emotional age, not their intellectual age.
- Allow regression and provide a nurturing experience such as a soft toy, younger child's book, figurines, play space.

FAIR ISN'T

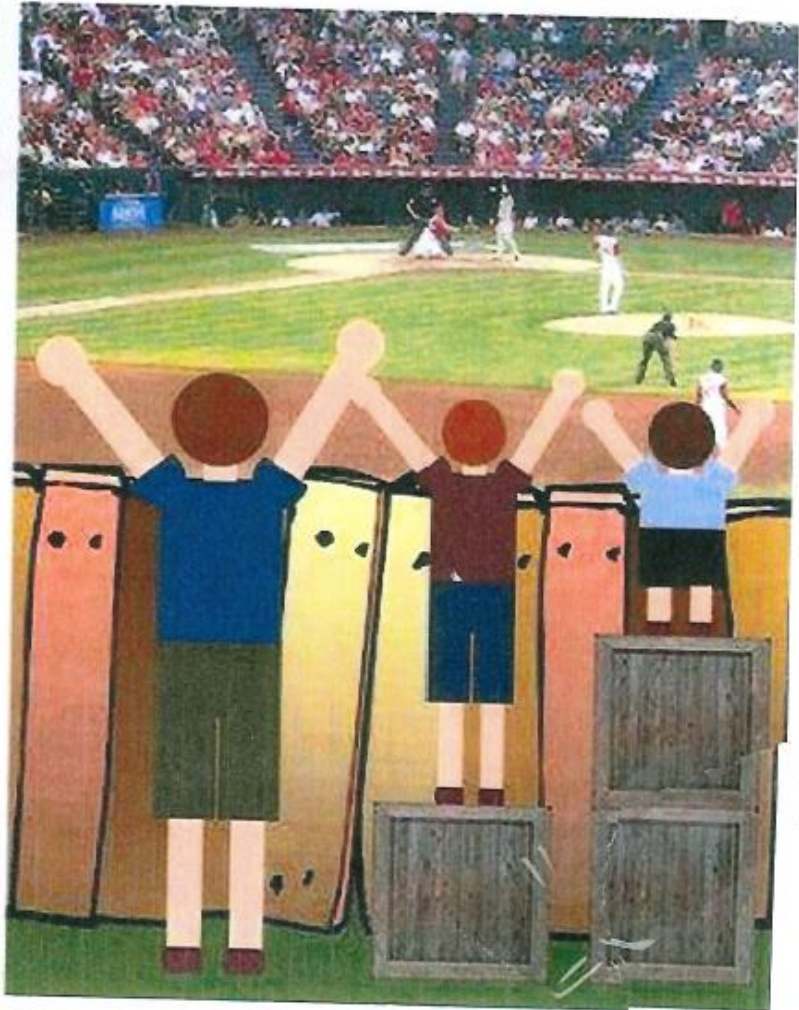
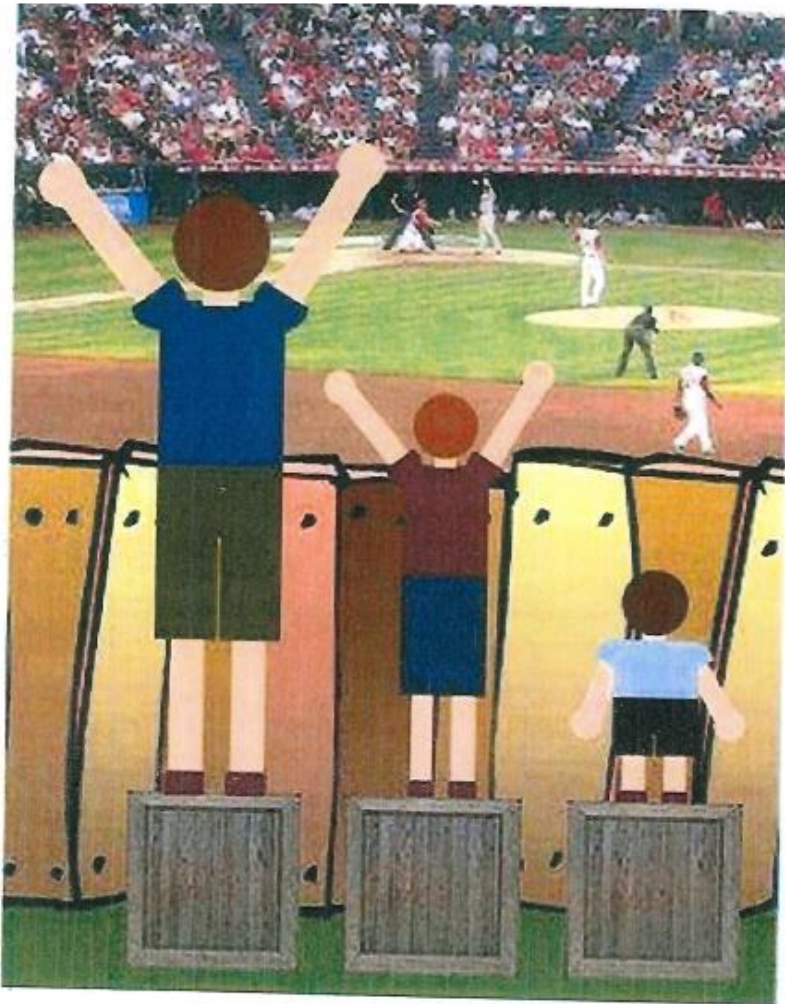
everybody getting the same
thing.....

FAIR IS

everybody getting what they
need in order to be

SUCCESSFUL

Fair isn't all the same picture



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Resources

- Calmer Classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children Complex Trauma in Children and Adolescents

<https://education.qld.gov.au/student/Documents/calmer-classrooms-guide.pdf>

- Making Space for Learning: Trauma informed practice in schools

www.theactgroup.com.au/documents/makingspaceforlearning-traumainschools.pdf



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Resources

- Articles

- Child Maltreatment: Effects on Development and Learning

<http://ecap.crc.illinois.edu/pubs/katzsym/lowenthal.pdf>

- Making Space for Learning: Trauma informed practice in schools www.childhood.org.au

- Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators

http://rems.ed.gov/docs/nctsn_childtraumatoolkitforeducators.pdf