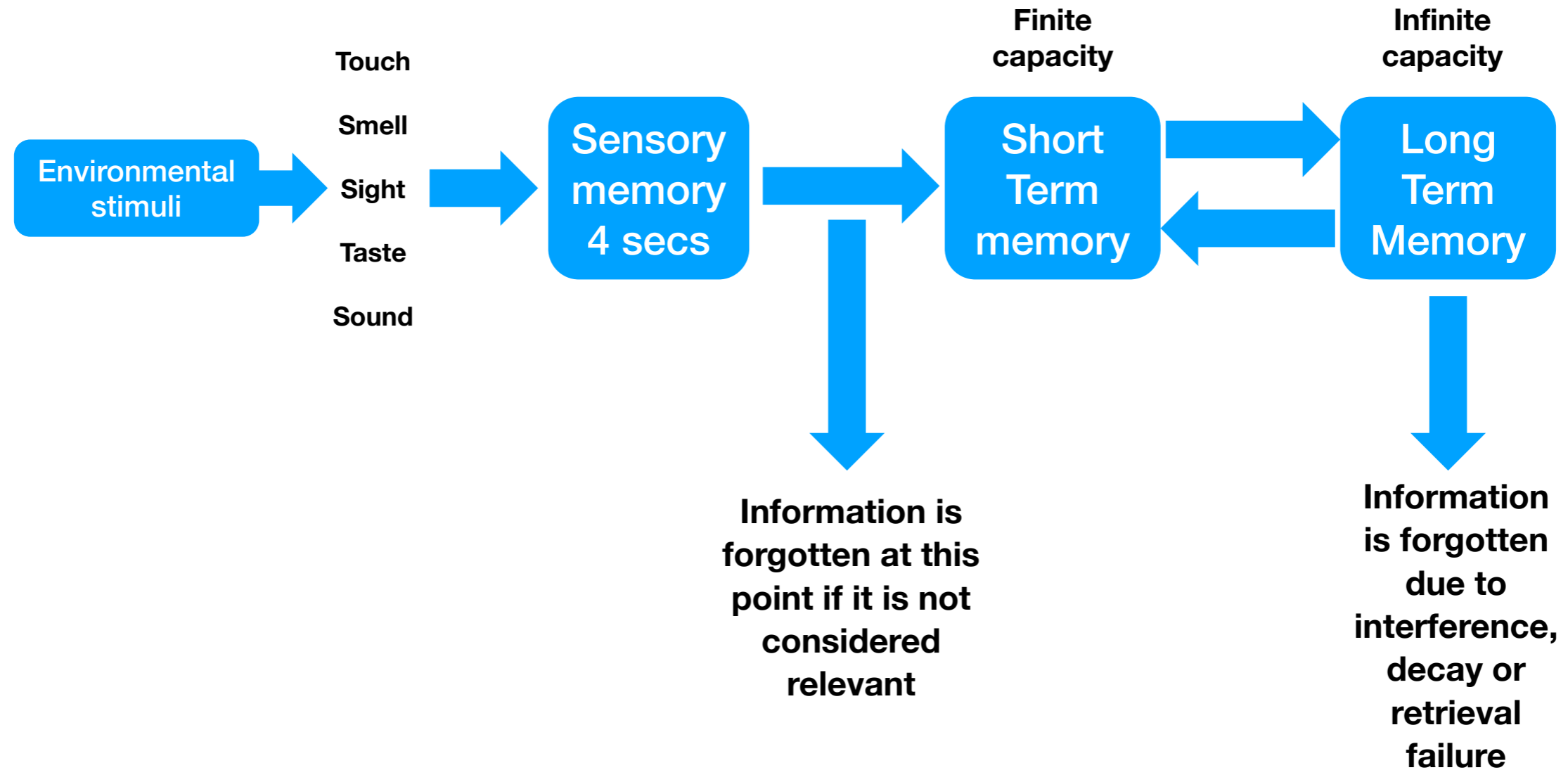




Trauma Sensitive Schooling

Paul Green, Headteacher, Lyng Hall School

A Simple diagram to explain Memory

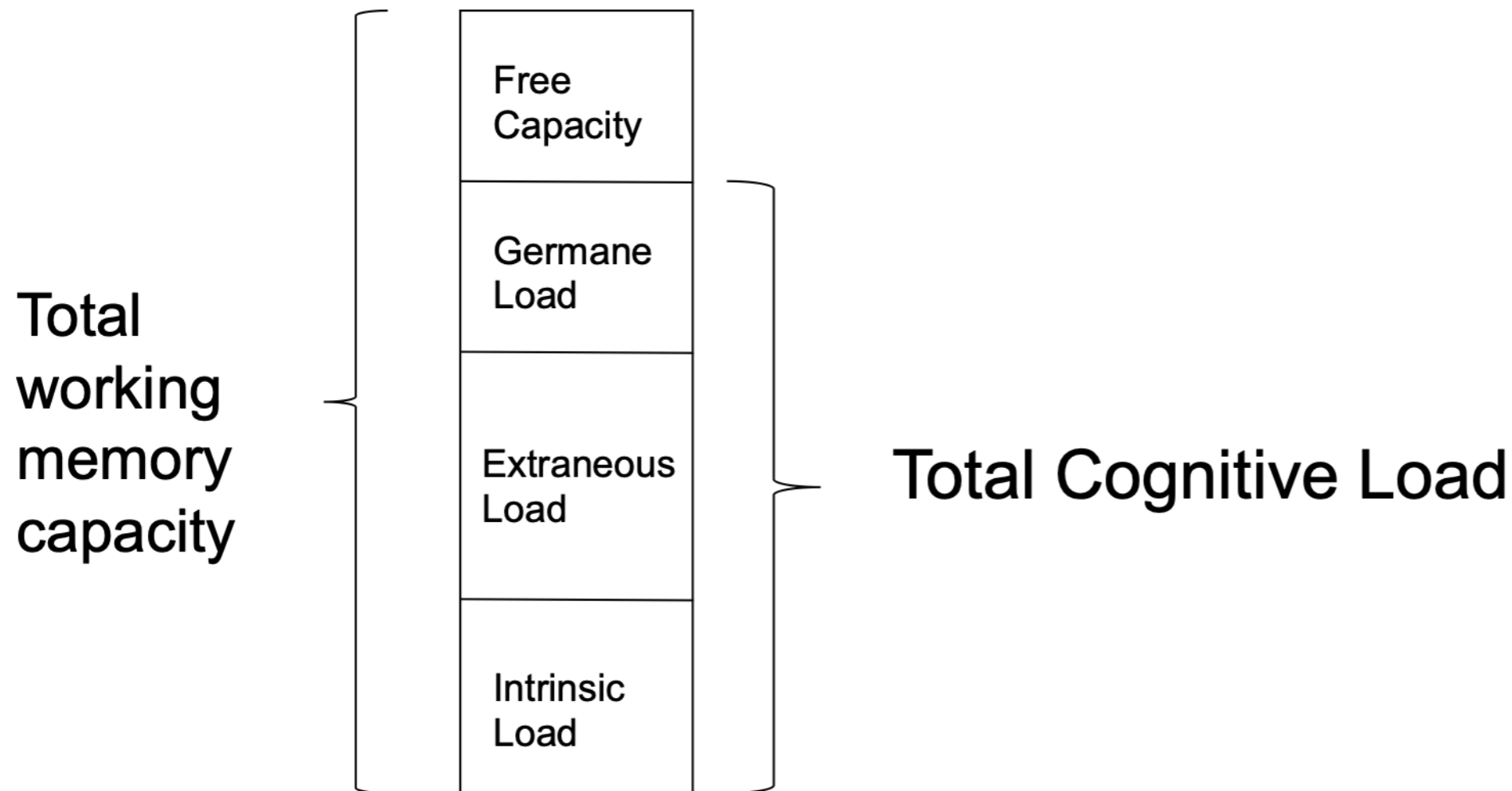


We need to understand how children remember information. We also need to understand how external factors may impact on this capacity through no fault of the Child.

We receive information from our senses, and, if it is considered relevant this information passes into our working memory. The working memory has finite capacity so if the information is considered valuable it is processed and passed into the long term memory. Information can be exchanged between the working and long term memories. This process of retrieval is important as it tells the brain whether the information is useful and therefore whether or not it should be retained permanently.

Access to long term memory is always through the working memory so we need to understand how this works and make sure it is as efficient as possible.

The Working Memory



The working memory has a finite size and when it is full it cannot retain any more information. There are several components to the working memory...

The Intrinsic load..... this is about the difficulty of the information or task that is being considered.

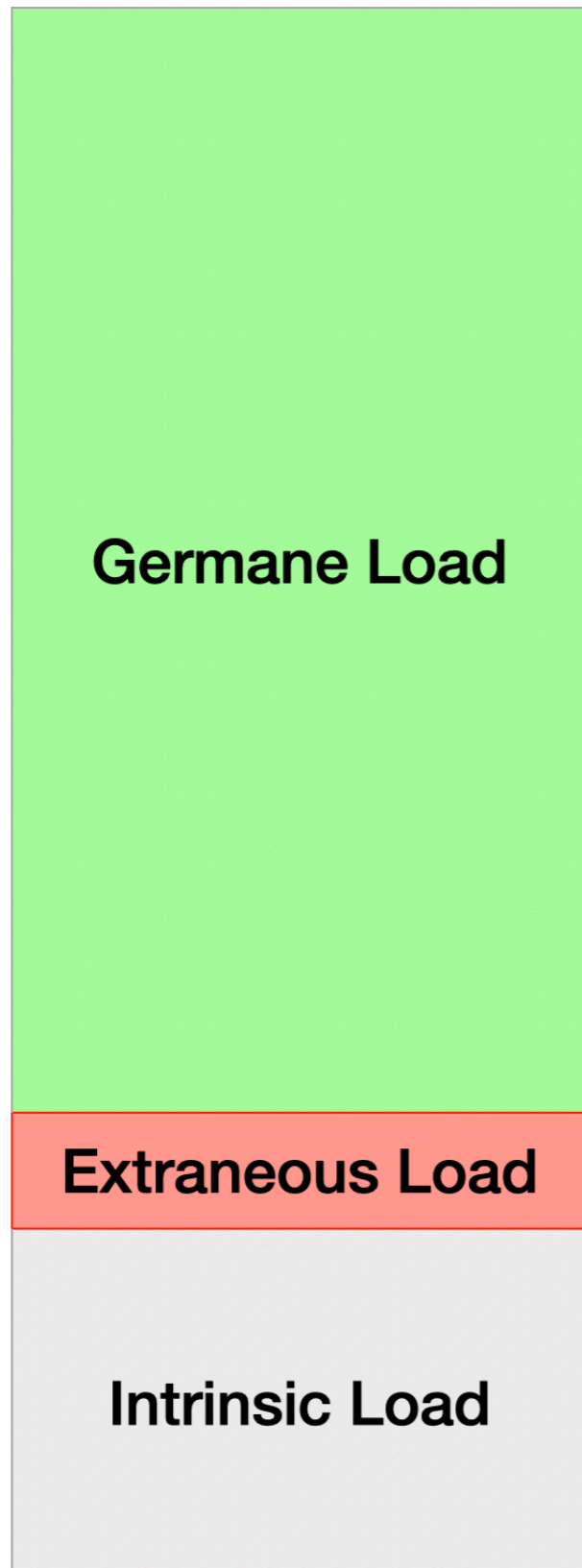
The Germane load.... This is the capacity of the working memory to process the information or “work it out”. The more of the working memory that is available for this the better it can function.

The Extraneous load... This is the amount of working memory being used to process things other than the required task. Emotions can play a big part in this, so worrying about an exam, fear of bullying, anxiety about home circumstances, nervousness about being chosen to answer a question in class. All these will contribute to the extraneous load.

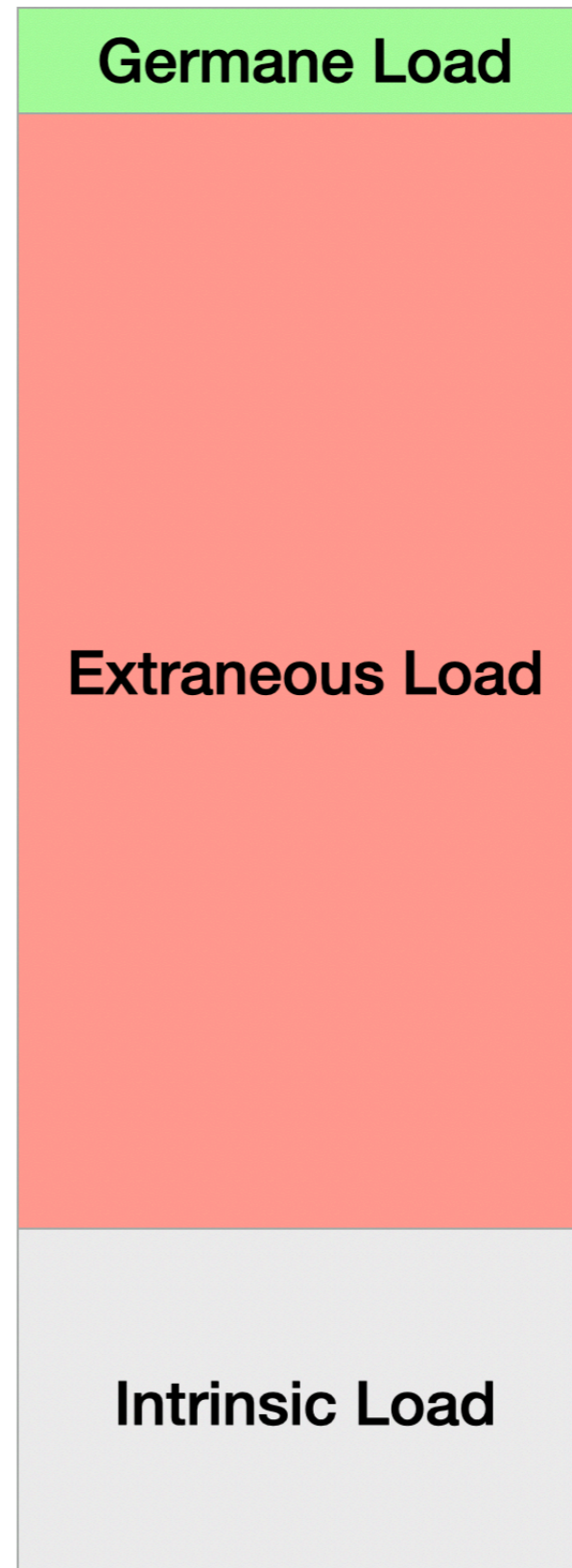
Unfortunately the larger the extraneous load, the less space is available for the germane load..... which is the part that we need to maximise for effective learning.

Trauma or high levels of stress dramatically increase the extraneous load and on the next page you can see the effect that this has on the capacity to learn.

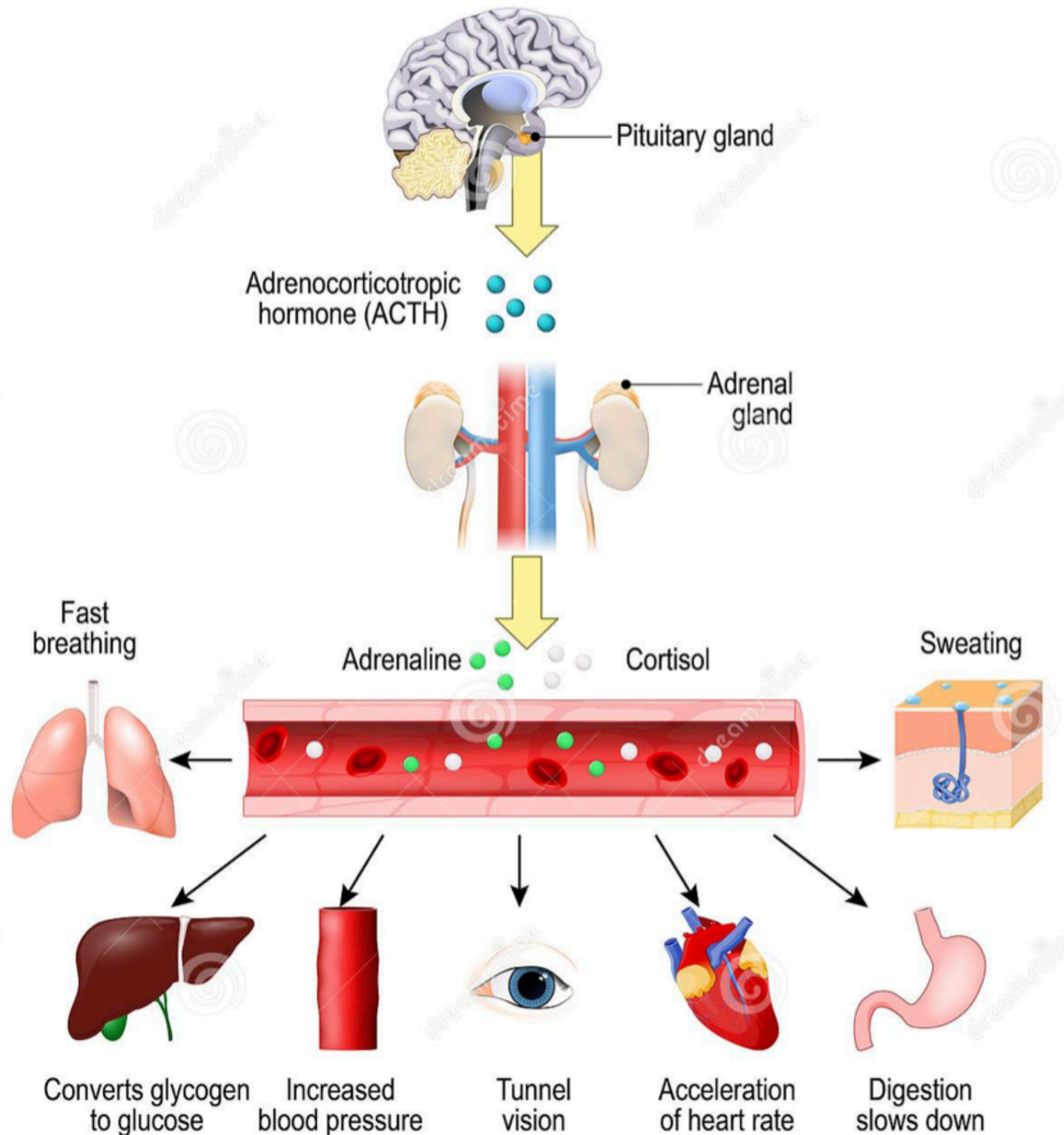
Normal Stress



Toxic Stress / trauma



STRESS RESPONSE



The stress response is a normal function of the human body. When we are placed in a position where we feel threatened or fearful our body makes changes that make our survival more likely.

Cortisol and adrenaline are produced and the effects of these are shown in the diagram.

Additional capacity to feel pain is significantly reduced.

This response is only designed to operate when our threat level is quite severe, however, for some children, their circumstances mean that their stress response is over active and levels of cortisol and adrenaline are maintained for long periods at toxic levels.

This is toxic stress.

This is trauma.

Under these conditions our learning functions are seriously impaired

HIGH CORTISOL LEVELS



**WEIGHT GAIN
(ESPECIALLY AROUND THE
ABDOMEN/STOMACH)**



**HIGHER
SUSCEPTIBILITY
TO INFECTIONS**



**A PUFFY,
FLUSHED FACE**



**HIGH BLOOD
PRESSURE**



MOOD SWINGS



**ACNE OR OTHER
CHANGES IN THE SKIN**



**INCREASED
ANXIETY**



**HIGHER RISK FOR
BONE FRACTURES &
OSTEOPOROSIS**



**FATIGUE/POOR SLEEP
(INCLUDING FEELING
"TIRED BUT WIRED")**



**MUSCLE ACHES
AND PAINS**



INCREASED URINATION



CHANGES IN LIBIDO



**IRREGULAR PERIODS &
FERTILITY PROBLEMS**



EXCESSIVE THIRST

These are some of the symptoms of high cortisol levels.

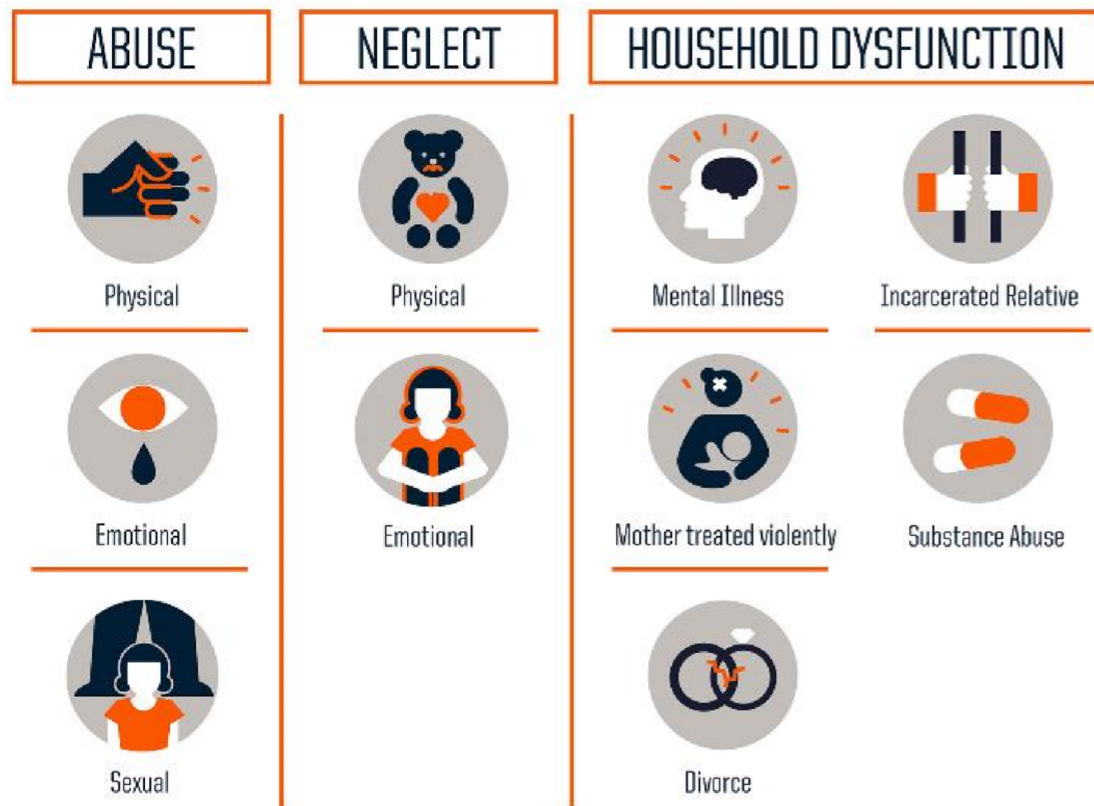
If you think about children whose behaviour is challenging, they often exhibit some of these symptoms

Sadly, the long-term activation of the stress-response system and the overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones can disrupt almost all your body's processes.

This puts you at increased risk of many health problems, including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Digestive problems
- Headaches
- Heart disease
- Sleep problems
- Weight gain
- Memory and concentration impairment

Following significant research we now know that some factors are very significant causes of trauma and stress in children. These are referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) and they are summarised in the diagram below.



Unfortunately the impact of these experiences is cumulative.

Other factors which contribute to accumulated stress include...

- **Being bullied**
- **Homelessness**
- **Refugee**
- **Community violence**
- **Looked after**
- **Surviving a disaster**
- **Undergoing multiple invasive surgeries**
- **Live with a parent suffering from PTSD**

As members of staff in a school this means that we need to remember that.....

Children do not respond to trauma in exactly the same way

Knowing this helps us to avoid viewing trauma related behaviours as intentional or stemming from a lack of motivation, laziness or overtly attention seeking.

This helps us to stop punishing poor behaviour and instead helps us to recognise the need to diagnose the reasons for it.

So what do we need to do.....

Learning requires.....

- attention,
- Concentration
- organisation,
- comprehension,
- memory,
- the ability to produce work,
- engagement in learning, and
- trust.

Another prerequisite for making good progress is the ability to self- regulate emotions, and behaviour

traumatic experiences inhibit learning on a neurobiological level, but teachers and other adults of importance can have a tremendous healing effect.

When teachers and school staff create a safe environment and model a trust-filled and consistent relationship with their students, they can help heal the effects of trauma and build a better foundation for future learning.

Young children are not exempt from the effects of trauma, but, as in so many other areas of development, early positive interventions can counter the negative impact.

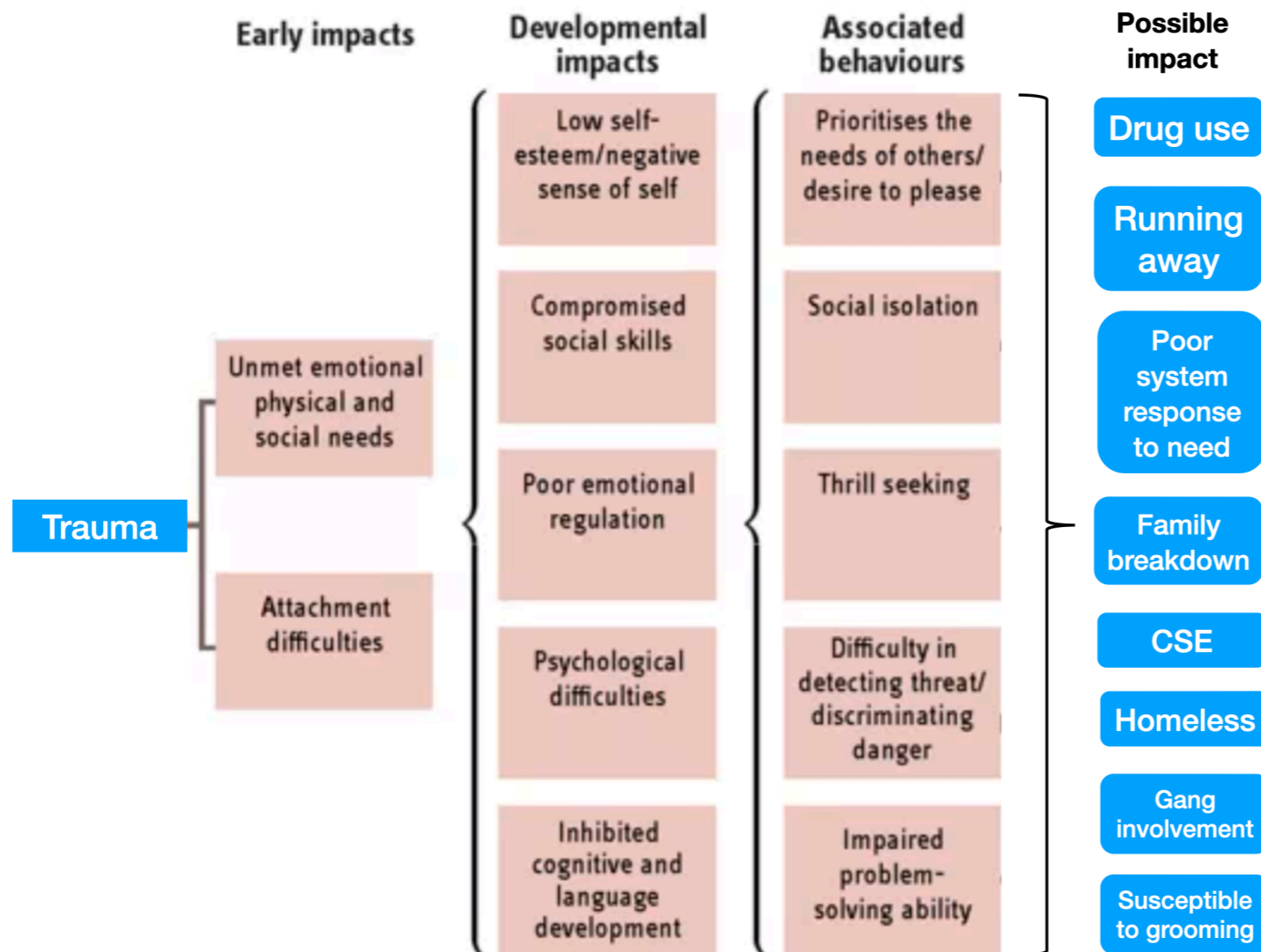
So, what behaviour might we expect to see in school when a child is suffering from toxic stress or trauma?

- Difficulties with regulation
- Impaired cognitive capacities
- Developmental delays
- Poor peer relationships
- Difficulties in relationships with adults.
- A state of hyperarousal or dissociation due to children misreading cues and being quickly triggered into a fear response.
- Reduced cognitive abilities due to neglect and/or hyperarousal, or difficulty concentrating.
- Difficulties in problem solving and organising narrative materials.
- Delays in language, social skills and motor skills – which impact directly on learning, comprehension and expression.
- When children have grown up with violence they may have been restricted in play and exploration and subject to excessive control.
- They may have an inability to understand cause and effect and to see themselves as capable of achieving goals.
- Difficulties with managing strong feelings and the consequent social problems with peers and adults.
- Difficulties with empathy.
- Severe disruptions to attachment that make it difficult for children to form appropriate trusting relationships with adults.
- Anxiety, fear
- Eating, sleeping, toileting problems
- Lack of executive functions of goal-setting, planning and anticipating consequences. Risky behaviour.

- Fear, uncertainty.
- Problems with eating.
- Children show disturbed sleep patterns and may become hyper- aroused at sleep time. This may be due to night-time being associated with danger, fewer distractions and more intrusive thoughts or feelings, and/or an underdeveloped capacity to regulate sleep.
- Children may have problems with self-soothing and resort to ‘bizarre’ or regressed behaviours. These can include rocking, scratching or biting themselves (such as picking at sores or biting lips), head banging, chanting.
- Expects failure, does not foresee a hopeful future and has difficulty making and carrying out plans.

All of these are significant barriers to formal learning.

The potential impact of this is summarised in the diagram below....



So what do trauma sensitive learning environments look like.....

Trauma-sensitive learning environments should have several key elements that promote safety and the potential for healing:

1. **Calming colour schemes** for walls and decor help set the mind at ease.
2. **Uncluttered and organized classrooms** create a sense of calm, well-being, and predictability.
3. **Posted visual cues for routines** that are well-established and known to students provide reminders for what comes next.
4. **Advance warning for transitions** helps students mentally and emotionally prepare for the next thing.
5. **Designated safe spaces** provide students a place for self-regulation. In our preschool, we use the term “peace island,” but others use “Zen den” or “calm corner,” for example.
6. **Having students repeat back verbal instructions** helps build the capacity for active listening.

What strategies can we use that will help children and their families?

- Understand the child's chronological age and development age may be at odds
- Understand the 'good intention of the child even if behaviour may not be ideal'
- Notice things the child does well and build on these
- Set and maintain appropriate boundaries
- View discipline as a 'learning moment as opposed to a punitive moment'
- Provide therapy and solutions, not punishment
- Use praise and acknowledge good choices and behaviours
- Always be 'Bigger, Stronger, Wiser and Kind'
- Partner with parents and earn their trust
- Be mindful of the risk of shaming experiences
- Keeping parents informed
- Welcome parental involvement and create opportunities for this to occur
- Be respectful of parents, carers and family.
- Become culturally informed and sensitive
- Provide opportunities to repair relationships

Typical School Vision / Mission Statement

OUR SCHOOL'S VISION IS TO HAVE UNCOMPROMISING ASPIRATIONS FOR EVERY INDIVIDUAL AND FOR OUR SCHOOL TO BE AN EXCEPTIONAL AND INSPIRATIONAL COMMUNITY OF LIFELONG LEARNERS.

We shall achieve this through:

- High quality, inspirational and innovative teaching and learning.
- Inspirational and accountable leadership at all levels.
- Consistently high academic standards and expectations
- Creative, exciting and memorable experiences
- A safe, secure and caring environment in which to work and learn
- First class resources and state of the art facilities to support learning

Of course, this is admirable but, in practice, unless a school is operating in a trauma informed way, this only applies to well behaved children who have no issues or adverse childhood experiences and with supportive parents who will go the extra mile to make sure their children work hard and behave well in school.

Early Childhood Trauma Changes the Brain By Way of...

Fight



- Oppositional
- Argumentative
- Stubborn
- Challenging Authority
- Dangerous/Violent

Flight



- Distracted
- Hyperactive
- Seeks Attention
- May Flee or Hide

Freeze



- May Seem Lazy
- Daydreams
- Doesn't Try
- Doesn't Seem to Care
- Stares Off



QUESTION:



WHAT DO MOST SCHOOLS DO WITH A STUDENT WHO HAS LAGGING SKILLS IN READING?

ANSWER –



THEY PROVIDE HIM WITH SUPPLEMENTAL, MORE INTENSE READING INSTRUCTION.

QUESTION:



WHAT DO MOST SCHOOLS DO WITH A STUDENT WHO HAS LAGGING SKILLS IN MATH?



ANSWER -

THEY PROVIDE HER WITH SUPPLEMENTAL, MORE INTENSE MATH INSTRUCTION.

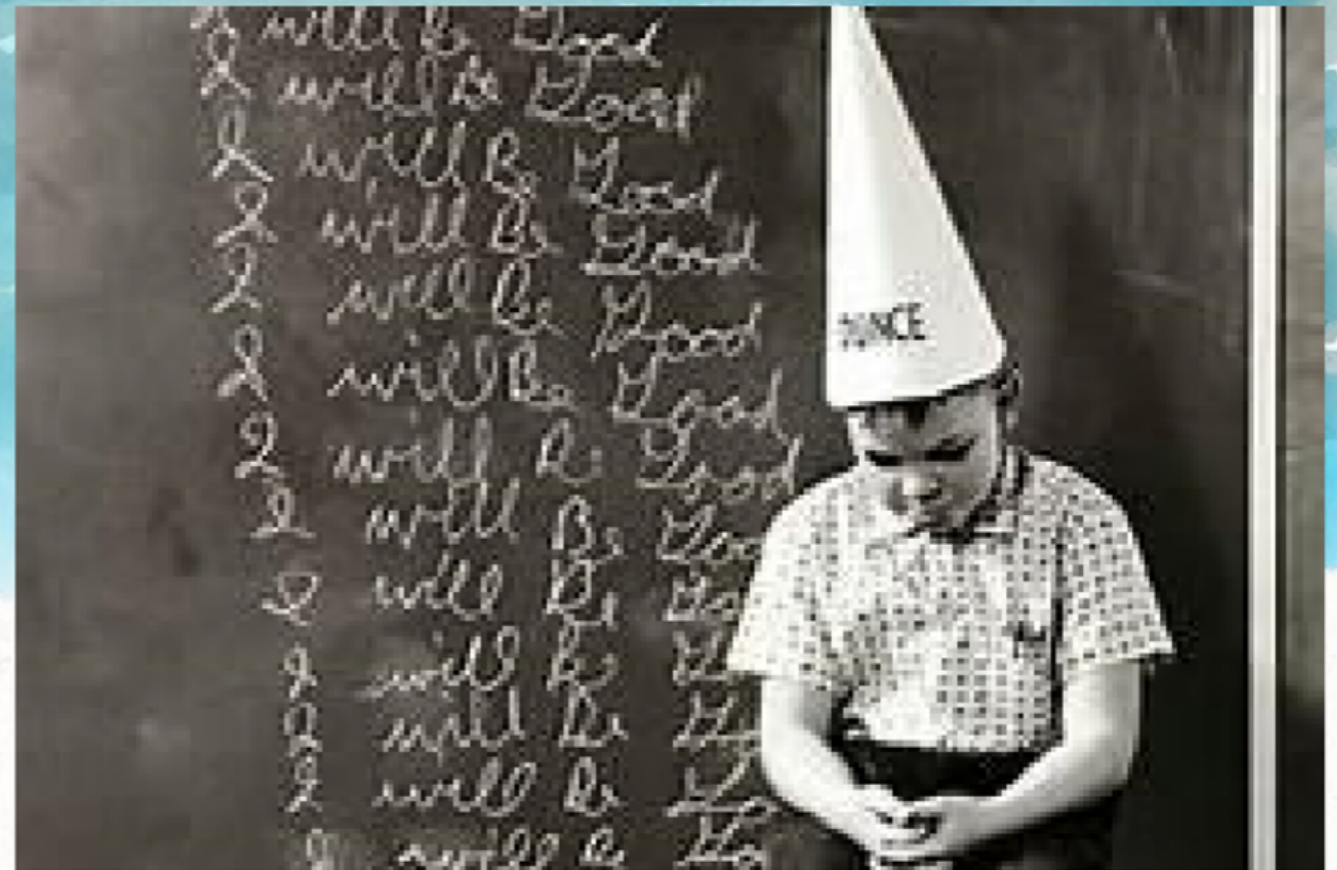
QUESTION:



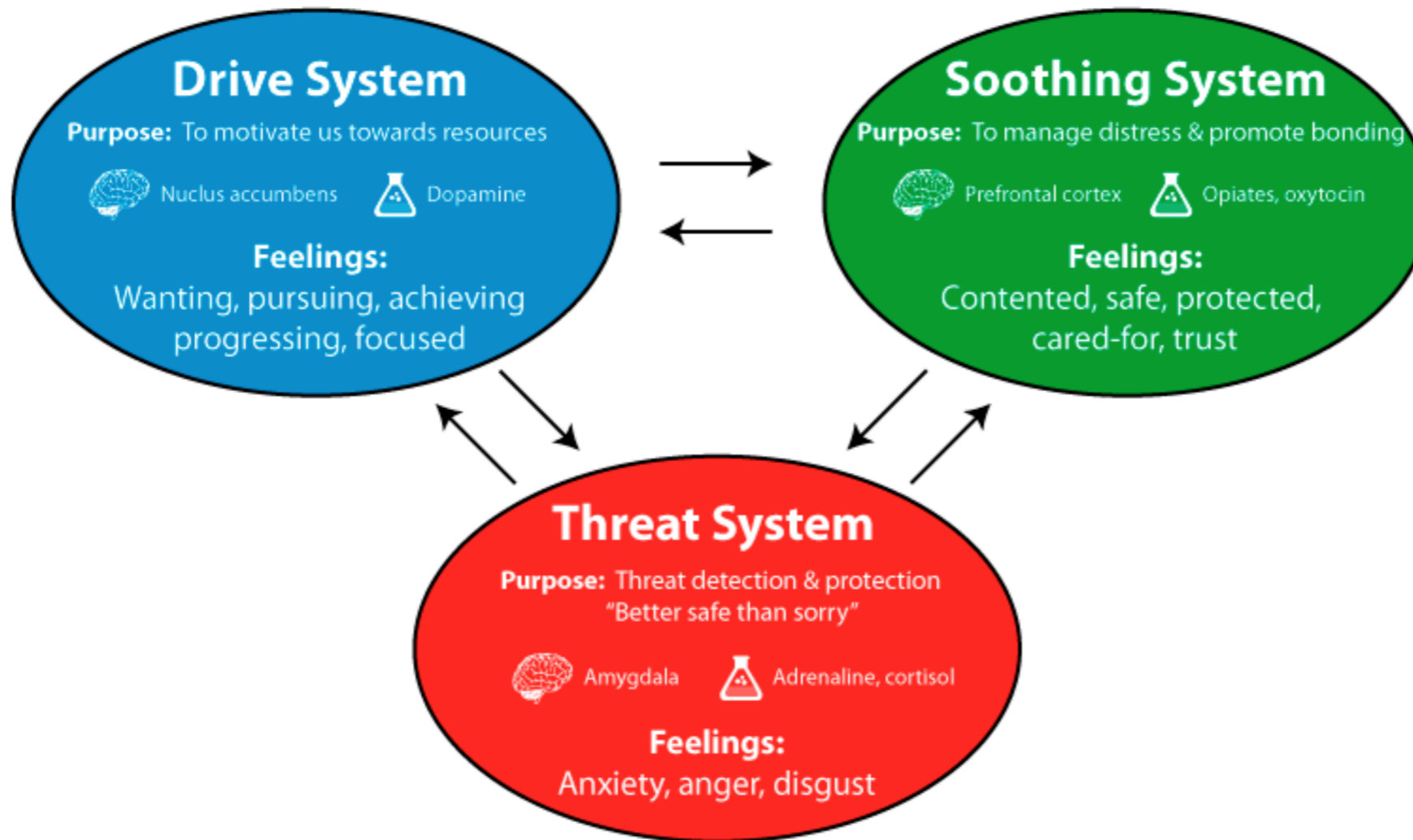
WHAT DO MOST SCHOOLS DO WITH A STUDENT WHO HAS LAGGING SKILLS IN EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

ANSWER -

THEY PUNISH HIM.



The Brain has 3 systems that work together to help us manage our emotions.



The important point to consider here is that the 3 systems are controlled by the release of chemicals. They are not about choice! If the threat system is overloading as a result of the over production of adrenaline and cortisol the only way to bring it into balance is the activate the soothing system and the drive system.

If you look at the feelings required I.e. contentment, safety, protection, care and trust, or, desire to achieve, focus and progress; these are not the emotions and feelings that a standard response to a challenging child will produce.

So, if we accept the science we have to accept that the challenging behaviours are chemically induced, are not a choice and that the response has to be the activation of the soothing system followed by the drive system. Our understanding about the chemistry of the brain should bring about a revolution in standard behaviour policies about consequence, punishment and exclusion. Further, it should promote some understanding of why conventional strategies don't work and the same children keep getting into trouble.

So, how do we reduce the impact of toxic stress and re balance emotional regulation ?

These things help...

- Healthy food and hydration
- Sleep and rest
- Periods of calmness
- Creative activities
- Fun and enjoyment
- Set and monitor achievement of goals

But these things are the game changer.....

- **Help students to learn emotional self regulation**
- **Unrelenting positivity and kindness**
- **Language that reduces stress rather than increases it.**

So.....

- **Remove all negative language**
- **Do not refer to punishments (instead think of therapies)**
- **Do not introduce systems that cause confrontation (e.g. equipment, lateness)**
- **Build strong, positive, self-affirming relationships**
- **Don't lose patience with children**
- **Don't trivialise their issues**
- **Don't over analyse... you are not a therapist.**

In trauma Sensitive Schools..... the adults....

- **Share an understanding of how trauma impacts on learning.**
- **Support all students to feel safe.**
- **Address students needs taking account of relationships, ability to self regulate, academic competence, physical and emotional well being.**
- **Explicitly connect students to the school community.**
- **Embrace teamwork, demonstrating a shared responsibility for every student.**
- **Anticipate and adapt to the ever changing needs of individual students and their community.**

Avoid “dumbing down” as children will often interpret this lowering of standards as a validation of their own worthlessness.

The feeling of physical safety is crucial

In the

- Classroom
- Corridor
- Playground
- Toilets
- Bus
- Gym
- Walk to school

Social, Emotional and Academic safety are also important

Children need to feel safe enough to make mistakes.

Answering questions poses a huge risk.

Highly attention seeking students may not be controlled by ignoring them as they may be seeking reassurance about their own safety.

Correct adult behaviour is crucial:

- Unrelentingly positive
- Never giving up
- Calm at all times
- Reliable
- Confident
- Interested
- Never outwardly anxious

Although difficult, the ability to mask our own anxiety is really important. We all have mirror neurones which pick up and respond to the emotions of others near us. You will have heard people say “You are making me feel anxious”, well yes, they are!

It is normal to feel anxious when dealing with someone displaying challenging behaviour but we must try and mask it. Smile, speak calmly, keep smiling, face yourself to relax your posture etc.

Incidentally, if you are very anxious when you meet a class, you communicate this to them as well which affects their extraneous load!!

Disconnection

Traumatised children can feel disconnected from others.

Too often we respond negatively to a child who is seeking attention or whose behaviour is confusing or oppositional.

We discipline children for an inappropriate response which we label disrespectful when it may in fact be a clumsy and awkward effort to relate to us.

In an effective trauma sensitive school, parents are fully engaged. As their parents start to become engaged students can begin to feel that they belong to a community that cares.

Remember, you may be dealing with traumatised adults!!!

School structures that support connectedness

- **Define the role of support staff so that they are used to build trust and can therefore help students to calm down and de escalate. They should never be used to deliver or reinforce punishments as this will conflict with their primary function. They should consistently advocate on behalf of the child.**
- **Use trauma sensitive alternatives to sanctions**
- **Use registration time to “Frame the day” with positivity**
- **Make sure there are teams or groups for everyone to belong to or join in with.**
- **Get the children involved in charity work. Helping others is a powerful tool in helping children to feel worthwhile and positive.**
- **Create student leadership responsibilities**
- **Make outrageous opportunities so that students do the things they would never have thought possible.**
- **Celebrate and publish their successes**
- **Relentlessly recognise positive social behaviour**

Three things that all children need.....

Affection

Attention

Affirmation

Common Challenges to this approach

- We need to focus on academic attainment not relationships.
- Positive trusting relationships are at the heart of academic achievement. Most secondary age students choose their options based on the teachers they like or the friends they will be with. If you reflect on your own school experience, you remember (for good or bad) the way teachers made you feel.
- Children need to know the difference between right and wrong.
- Children know the difference between right and wrong but they don't always make the right decisions. One reason for referring to the students as children is so that they can be allowed to make mistakes. Most children appreciate this (despite what they may say). We have to recognise the factors that are pushing them towards the unhelpful decisions or actions and support them.
- We need a clear sanctions policy, the punishment should fit the crime
- Have you read this booklet? Children need to be treated as individuals, we need to understand why they have behaved in a certain way and address it with a solution focus. Remember, challenging or badly behaved children are never happy children.
- The parents aren't that interested in what goes on at school, its just free child care
- I have never yet met a parent who wanted their child to fail!! Parents want the best for their children in most cases and need our professional support and expertise to help them achieve this. Working closely with families is fundamental to getting good outcomes for children in school.

Some questions for you.....

- How do I feel about what I have read?
- What do I think about developing trauma sensitive approaches in my teaching / support for children?
- Which colleagues will I approach to work with me?
- What challenges or barriers must we overcome?