

Understanding and Supporting Attachment in the Classroom

Tameside Educational Psychology Service

Aims of the session

To cover some of the key concepts in relation to attachment theory.

To touch on the neuropsychology of attachment.

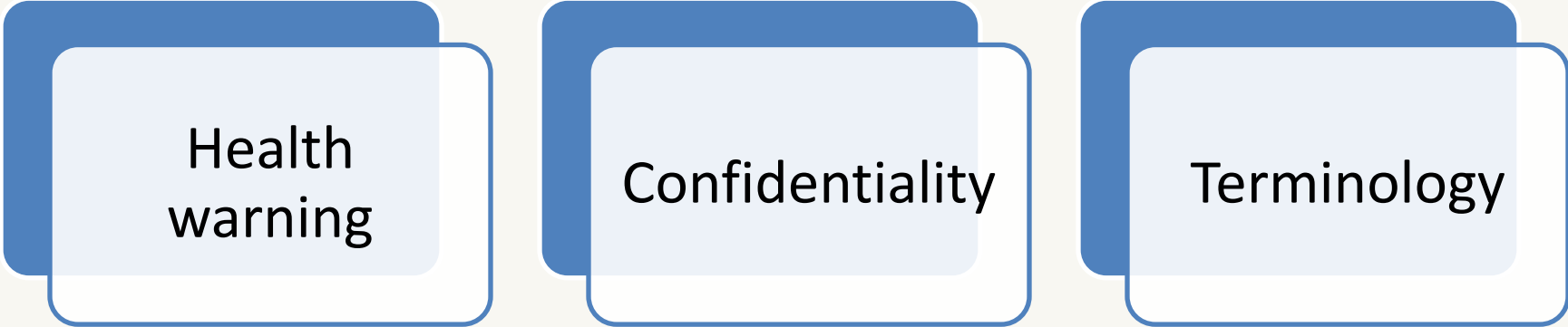
To think about the 'big asks' for pupils with insecure attachment.

To consider how attachment needs may present in the classroom.

To share some strategies which can be used to support children with attachment needs.



Issues to consider



Health
warning

Confidentiality

Terminology

Our starting point

'Children are not slates from which the past can be rubbed by a duster or sponge, but human beings who carry their previous experiences with them and whose behaviour in the present is profoundly affected by what has gone before.'

Bowlby (1951, p.114)



Overview of attachment theory

Attachment theory explains how humans form strong emotional bonds with key individuals, starting in childhood, to help manage stress, fear, and uncertainty. These bonds provide comfort and safety, shape how we see ourselves and others, and influence our relationships throughout life.



Core concepts

Attachment
figure

- Safe haven and secure base

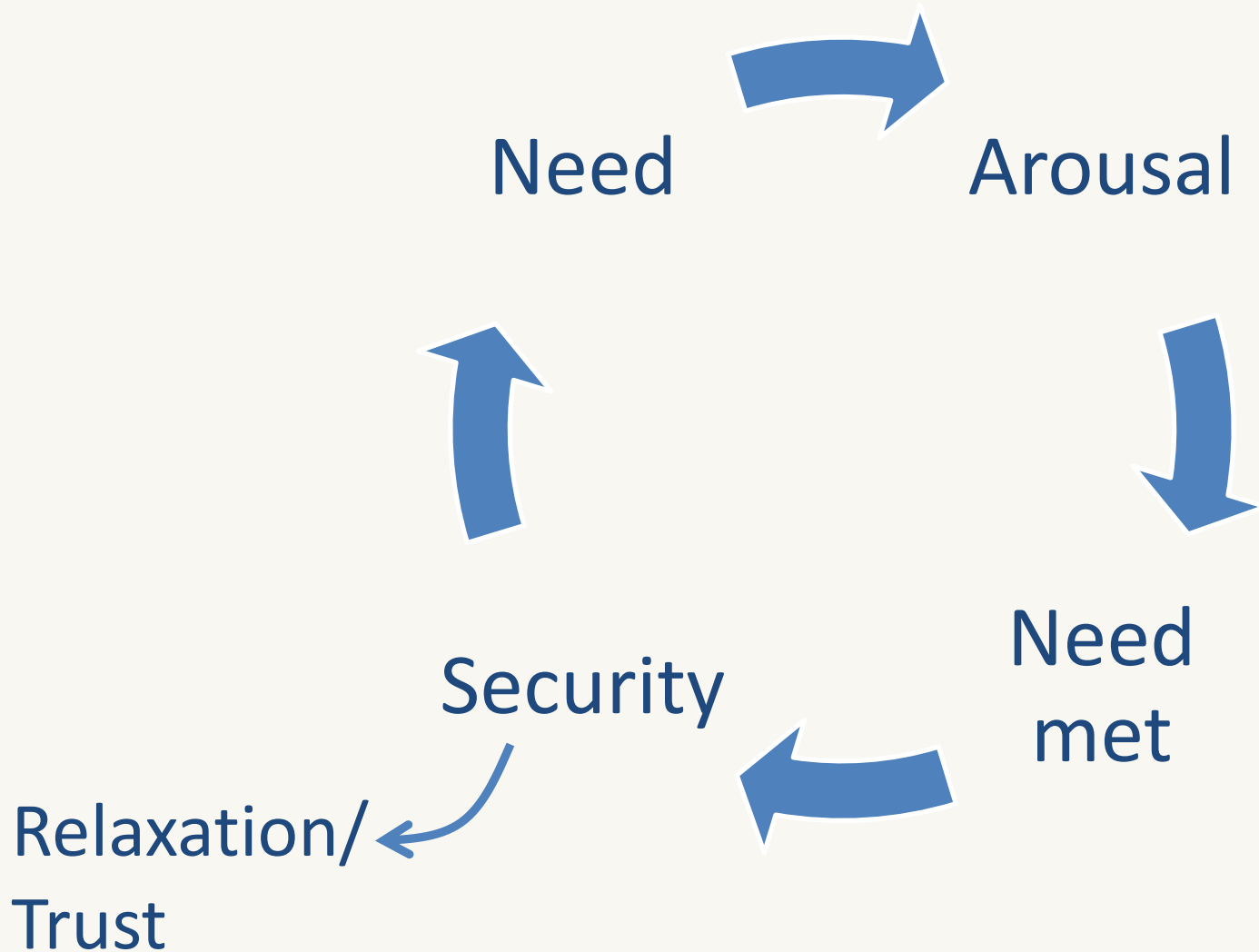
Empathic
attunement

- Repair and connection

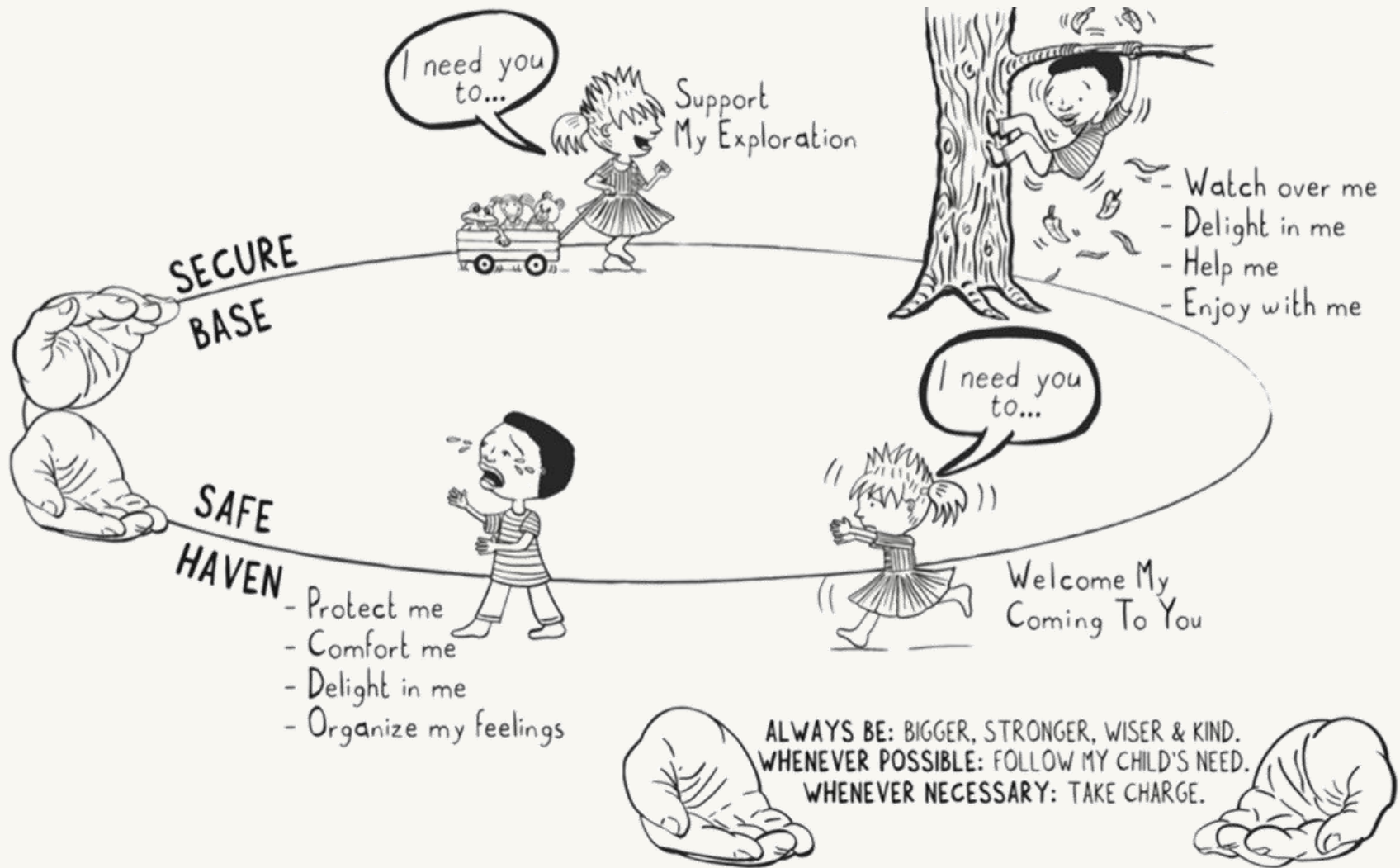
Internal
working models

- Of self, others, relationships

Positive attachment cycle



Attachment figure



Attunement

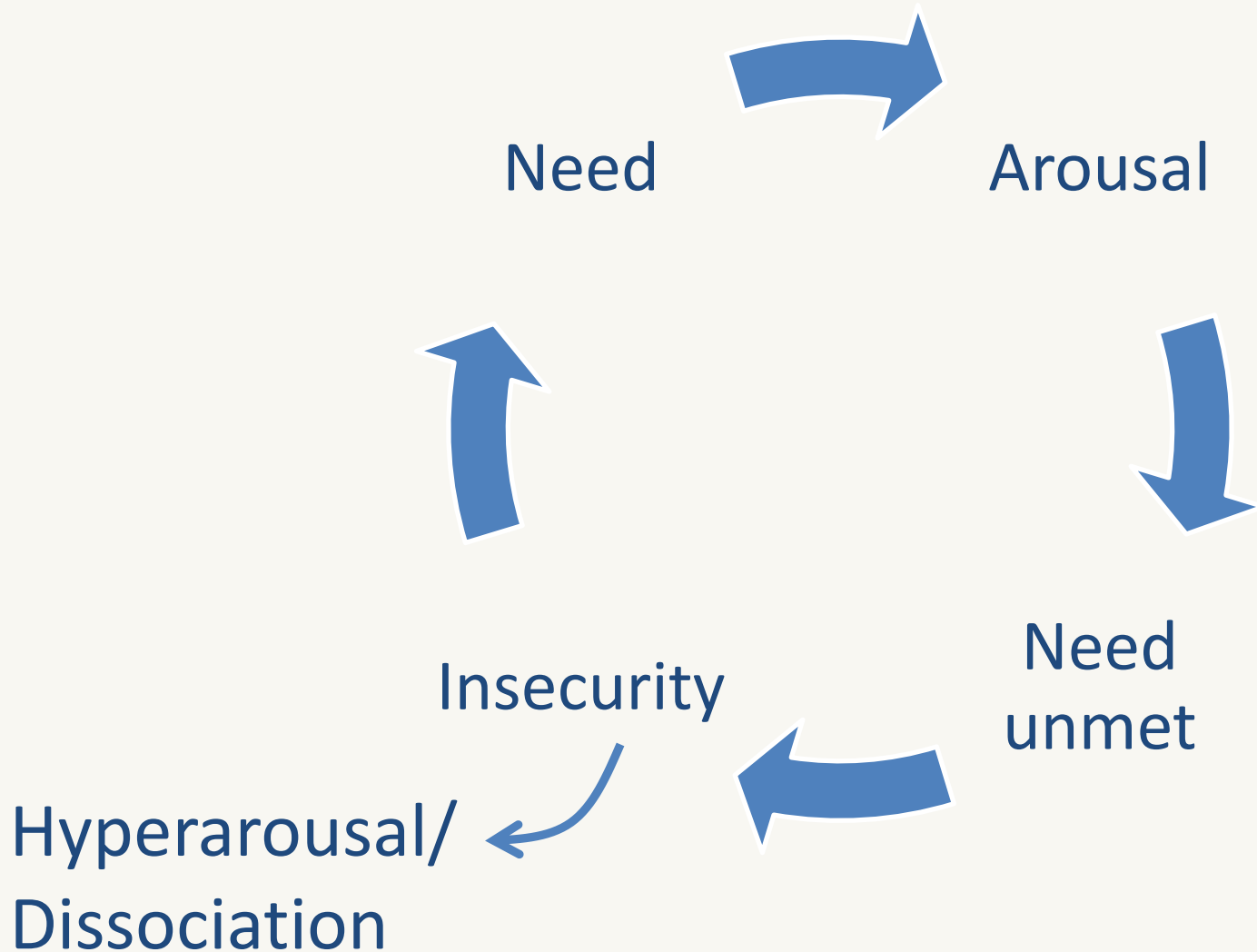


- Attunement is being aware of, and responsive to, another.
- Attunement is essential for secure attachment. When we attune to a child, we “tune into” their emotional wavelength. We reflect back the child’s internal feeling state to them. In doing so we let them know that their feelings are acceptable to share with us.
e.g. “You’re really angry because we’ve got to go inside. You want to stay in the car and it’s not fair!”

Internal working model



Negative attachment cycle



What could disrupt the
attachment cycle?

i.e., in what circumstances might a
need go unmet?

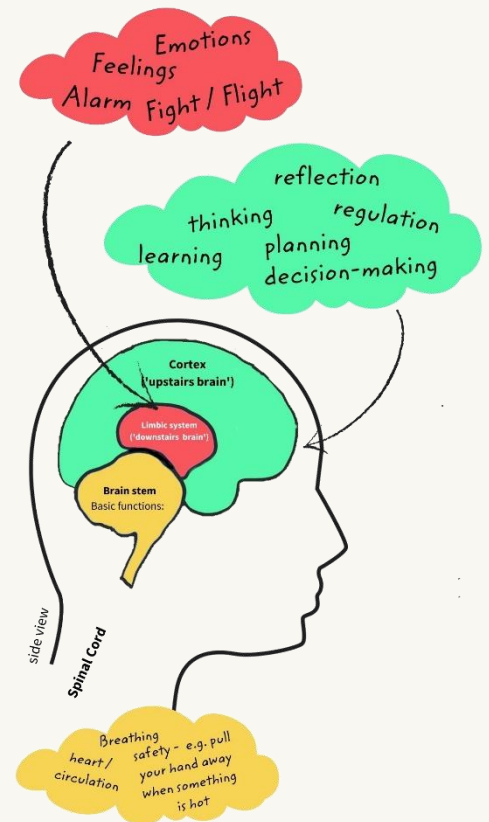
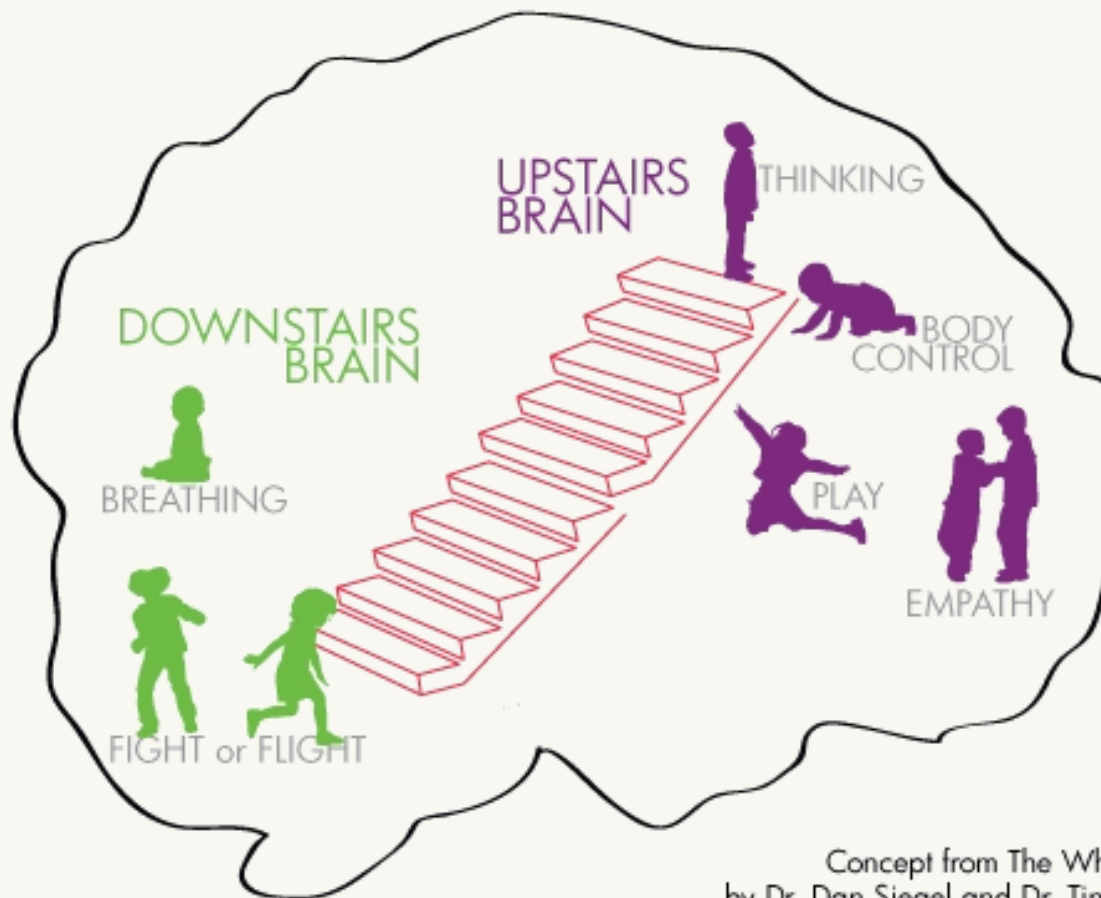
A non-exhaustive list

- Financial hardship and poverty.
- Substance abuse.
- Mental health issues.
- Trauma and abuse.
- Lack of support and resources.
- Other factors.



Dan Siegel

‘Downstairs Brain’ and ‘Upstairs Brain’



Concept from The Whole-Brain Child
by Dr. Dan Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Neuropsychology of attachment

- Role of the amygdala (part of limbic system):
 - Emotional radar.
 - Alerts us to danger.
- Orbitofrontal cortex (part of prefrontal cortex):
 - Role in managing emotional behaviours.
 - Reflective function.
 - Very experience dependent.
- Stressful early relationships make it more difficult to establish neural pathways between the primitive and social parts of our brain.

The 'big asks' for vulnerable young people

- Trusting grown-ups, following their lead and relinquishing control to them.
- Feeling safe and relaxed.
- Managing transitions.
- Feeling a sense of belonging.
- Feeling special and important.
- Managing sensory overload.
- Being self-aware and aware of others.
- Understanding the motives and intentions of staff and peers.
- Being able to ask for help.
- Making and keeping friends.
- Knowing how to repair relationships when things go wrong.
- Managing uncertainty.
- Taking the risks that are required in learning.



Shame – healthy or toxic?

“A powerful, painful emotion that combines feelings of unworthiness, inadequacy, powerlessness and a deep physical sense of discomfort and self disgust.”

Taransaud (2011)



What strategies have you used to support children with attachment needs?



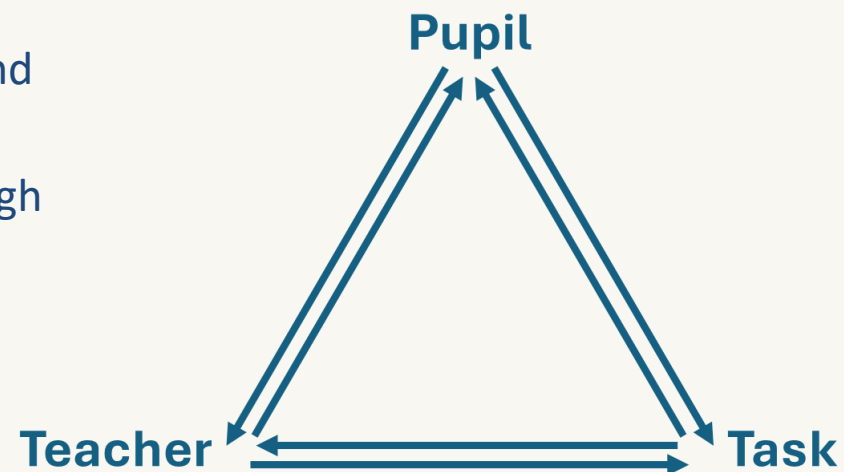
What strategies do you think you could try?

Secure

“I feel safe in the classroom and things are predictable.”

While securely attached children generally manage relationships and learning well, they still benefit from thoughtful support to maintain and build on their positive development.

- Offer choices in learning and allow them to take ownership of tasks.
- Provide chances to mentor peers or take on responsibilities in group work.
- Create a safe space for discussing feelings and navigating challenges.
- Introduce tasks that require perseverance and problem-solving.
- Encourage empathy and collaboration through team activities.
- Be a reliable, engaged presence to reinforce their secure base.

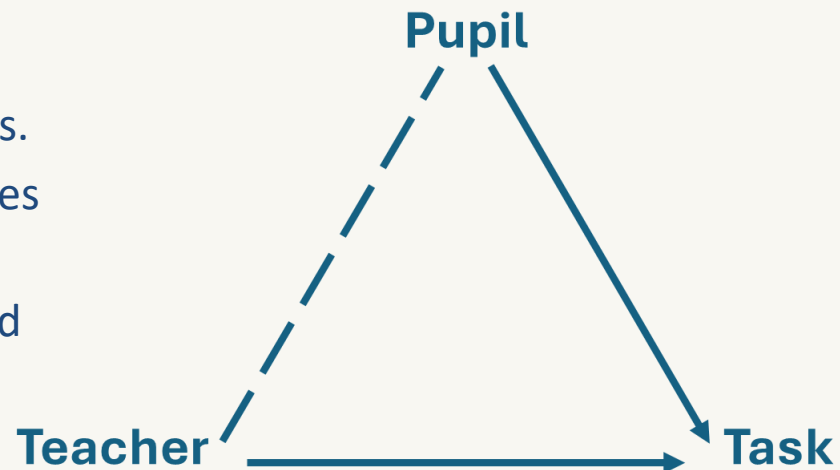


Avoidant

"I don't expect you to care, so I want to do things on my own."

These students may appear quiet, self-reliant and reluctant to ask for help. They are sensitive to the teacher's proximity and find creative and open-ended tasks more difficult.

- Support independent work by setting clear goals and providing materials and resources.
- Build in choice – what steps to do first, what materials to use, who to work with, etc.
- Schedule time for concrete tasks – matching, sorting, categorising and building.
- Add structure to creative tasks – cloze procedure, mind maps, worked-out examples.
- Interact indirectly – praise the ideas/outcomes of work and deliver group feedback.
- Utilise older students or peers as buddies and mentors.

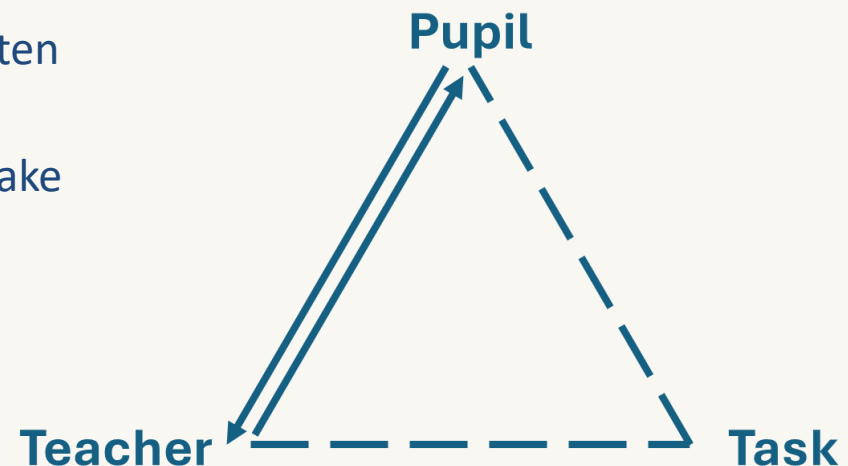


Anxious

“I worry that you’ll forget me, so I have to keep you involved.”

Worried about being forgotten, they struggle to focus on the task and need reassurance when working independently. Some may be perceived as bossy or domineering by their peers.

- Notice the student on a regular basis. Give reassuring commentaries about daily routines.
- Provide clear roles for group activities and responsibilities which help them feel valued.
- Break tasks down into small steps. Manage separations with timers and transitional objects.
- Keep the student in mind – “I haven’t forgotten about you; I’ll be back in...”.
- Reinforce persistence – “It’s frustrating to make a mistake, but you haven’t given up”.
- Play hide-and-seek, peek-a-boo and action songs with younger children.

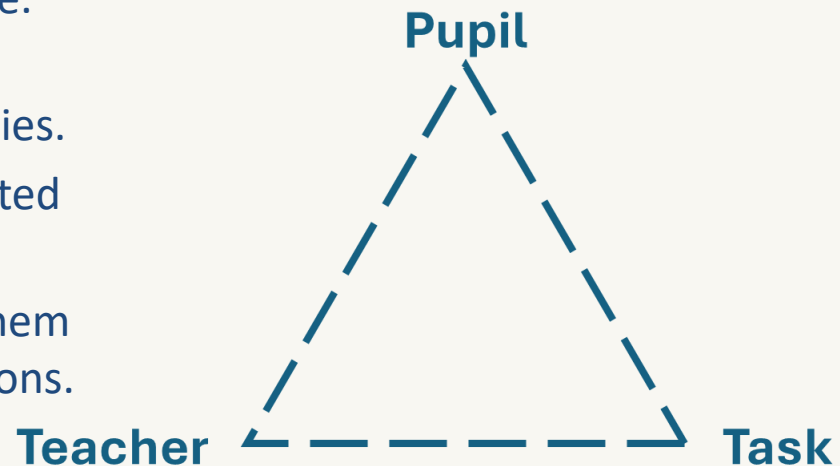


Disorganised

“It’s hard to feel safe, so I have to watch for danger and stay in control.”

These students show inconsistent patterns of approach and avoid, and unpredictable behaviour, due to hypervigilance and high levels of stress. Fear of failure and appearing vulnerable are common.

- Prioritise safety – structure, predictability, routines and regular check-ins.
- Schedule time for ‘flow activities’ and provide a sensory diet to support emotional regulation.
- Low arousal for crises – simplify language, calm posture, diversions and access to a safe space.
- Teach skills and rules through play-based experiences, active modelling and social stories.
- Acceptance and empathy – “I know you wanted to have another turn. It feels so unfair...”
- Communicate change in advance and help them anticipate and prepare for upcoming transitions.



Read each vignette and identify the attachment style. Consider what strategies you would use to support each of these children within your classroom.

Oliver works quietly, avoiding eye contact and brushing off offers of help. He keeps his responses short, as though interaction is unnecessary. At lunch, he sits apart from his peers, observing but not engaging.

Jake hovers uncertainly, his body tense as he scans the room. He reaches out for support but then pulls away, unsure whether to trust. His reactions shift unpredictably—one moment engaged, the next withdrawn.

Emily constantly seeks reassurance, her hand up before the question is finished. She watches her teacher closely, needing frequent validation. During group tasks, she struggles to let others take the lead, fearing mistakes.

Lily listens attentively, her hand confidently raised when she knows the answer. When she struggles, she asks for help without hesitation, trusting her teacher's support. During group work, she collaborates smoothly, balancing independence with teamwork. At breaktime, she joins her friends to play games.

Impact on adults

- Secondary traumatic stress is the stress that results from caring for or about someone who has been traumatised.
- It can result in injuries similar to those produced by primary trauma.
- People who are empathic, and/or have experienced trauma in their own lives, and/or have unresolved personal trauma are vulnerable.
- People who care for traumatised children are particularly vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress.

Kate Cairns and Chris Stanway (2010)

Emotion coaching

- External frameworks



- External regulation
(sanctions and rewards)

- Internal frameworks



- Internal regulation
(emotion coaching)

Adapted from Janet Rose

Connecting Emotionally

- Empathy is always the place to start in order to help the child work from both sides of the upstairs brain
- **Emotional ‘first aid’** is needed first
- Proposing solutions before empathising is like trying to build a house before you lay a firm foundation
- Stop talking and listen – even when you don’t like the behaviour, acknowledge the feelings
- **CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION**
- **RAPPORT BEFORE REASON**
- **NAME IT, TO TAME IT**

5 Steps to Emotion Coaching

1



Tune in, become aware.

Be on the look out for and recognise behavioural cues that indicate that the child or young person is experiencing strong and/or difficult feelings and tune in when you spot the signs.

3



Listen empathically and validate their feelings.

Connect before you correct

Calm and curious not fast and furious

Use wondering questions to help the child or young person to recognise and label their emotions (i.e. "I have noticed x, I wonder if you might be feeling x...")

5

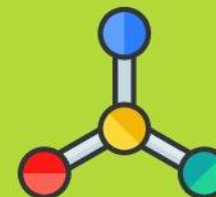


Problem-solve together.

Support the child to think of possible strategies and/or alternative solutions that they could try in order to avoid the same situation/outcome in the future.

Depending on their age and understanding, some children and young people may require more support with this than others; use visuals and offer suggestions and choices where this helpful.

2



Utilise the situation as an opportunity for connection and learning ('coaching').

4



Set limits. (if necessary)

If necessary, remind the child or young person about the expectations for behaviour (e.g. "we use kind words when we speak to each other in school", "it is against school rules to hit").

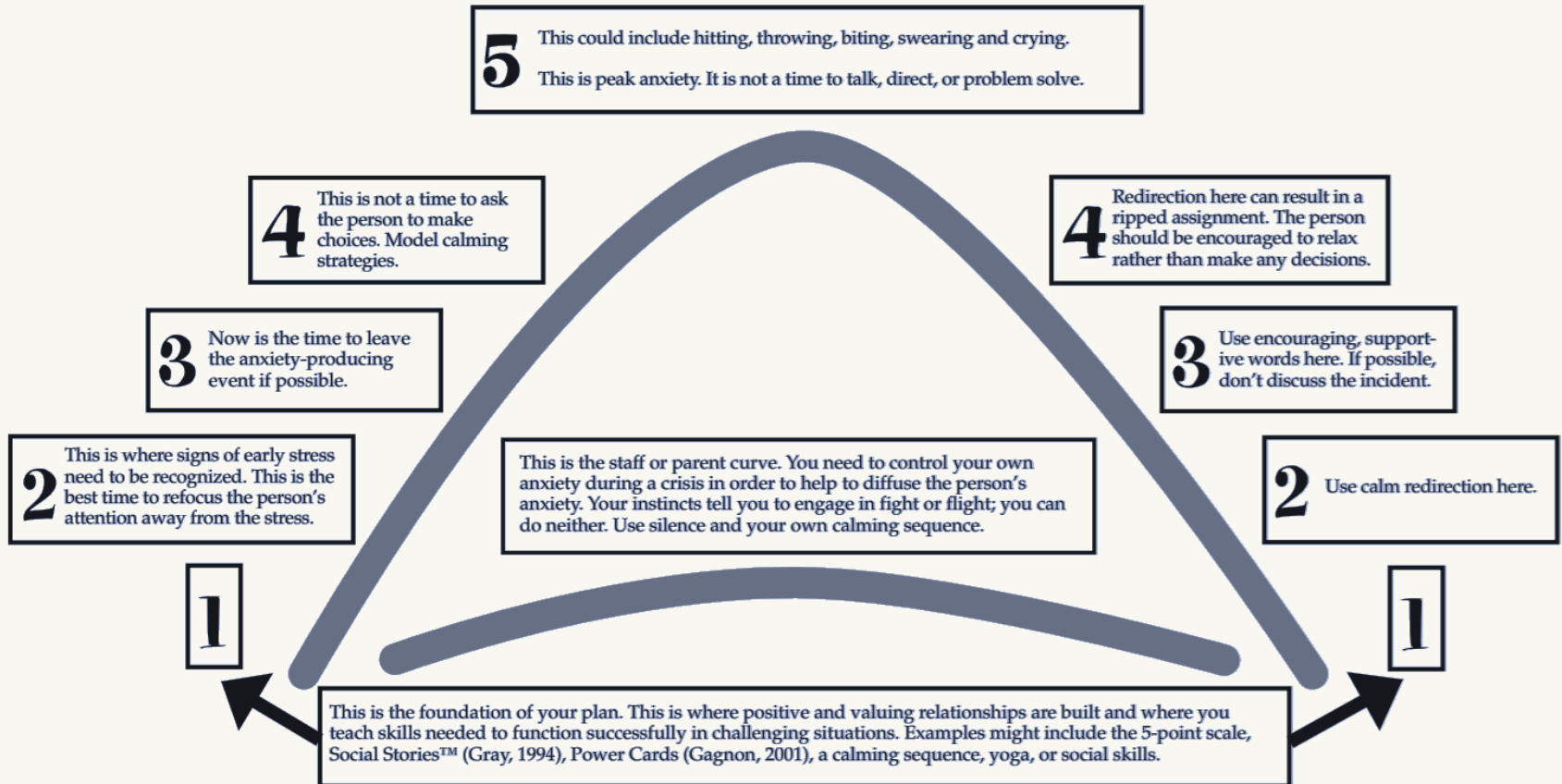
It is important not to judge or shame the child, this is about nurturing your connection with them and helping (i.e. coaching) them to learn alternative, prosocial ways to manage their feelings and emotions.

Reducing anxiety management planning

- How do we bring this together to support children with attachment difficulties?
- Educators as scientists:
 - Working together.
 - Making hypotheses.
 - Testing strategies.
 - Reviewing and recording.
- Remember staff wellbeing 😊

The anxiety curve

(Dunn Buron & Curtis , 2022)



Reducing anxiety management planning

REDUCING ANXIETY MANAGEMENT PLAN: **SCHOOL:** _____ **PUPIL:** _____ **YEAR:** _____ **DATE:** _____

LEVEL (5): ATTACKING / DISTRESSED STATE		PUPIL BEHAVIOUR:	PUPIL SELF-CALMING STRATEGIES:	STAFF STRATEGIES:
LEVEL (4): AGGRESSIVE / HIGHLY STRESSED STATE		PUPIL BEHAVIOUR:	PUPIL SELF-CALMING STRATEGIES:	STAFF STRATEGIES:
LEVEL (3): AGITATED STATE (Threshold between Rational / Irrational Behaviour)		PUPIL BEHAVIOUR:	PUPIL SELF-CALMING STRATEGIES:	STAFF STRATEGIES:
LEVEL (2): ANXIOUS STATE		PUPIL BEHAVIOUR:	PUPIL SELF-CALMING STRATEGIES:	STAFF STRATEGIES:
LEVEL (1): CONTROLLED STATE		PUPIL BEHAVIOUR:	PUPIL SELF-CALMING STRATEGIES:	STAFF STRATEGIES:

Setting (Codes): (C) = Class (PL) = Playground (DT) = Dinner Time (TR) = Transport (A) = Assembly (PE/G) = Physical Education/Games
 (ST) = School Trip [public space] (QU) = Queueing [lining up]