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# RIDING OUT THE STORM: MANAGING EMOTIONAL INTENSITY IN NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN

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# WHO AM I?



Dr. Matt Zakreski – you can call me “Dr. Matt”



I’m a clinical psychologist, professional speaker, and neurodivergence advocate



I’m known as someone who can bridge neuroscience and clinical practice to make skills accessible for you and your loved ones

## GOALS FOR TODAY



1. Learn how to better manage emotional outbursts (Frequency, Intensity, and Duration)



2. Increase understanding of where big emotions come from



3. Develop the language to communicate about emotional intelligence

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## WHAT WE AREN'T DOING TODAY

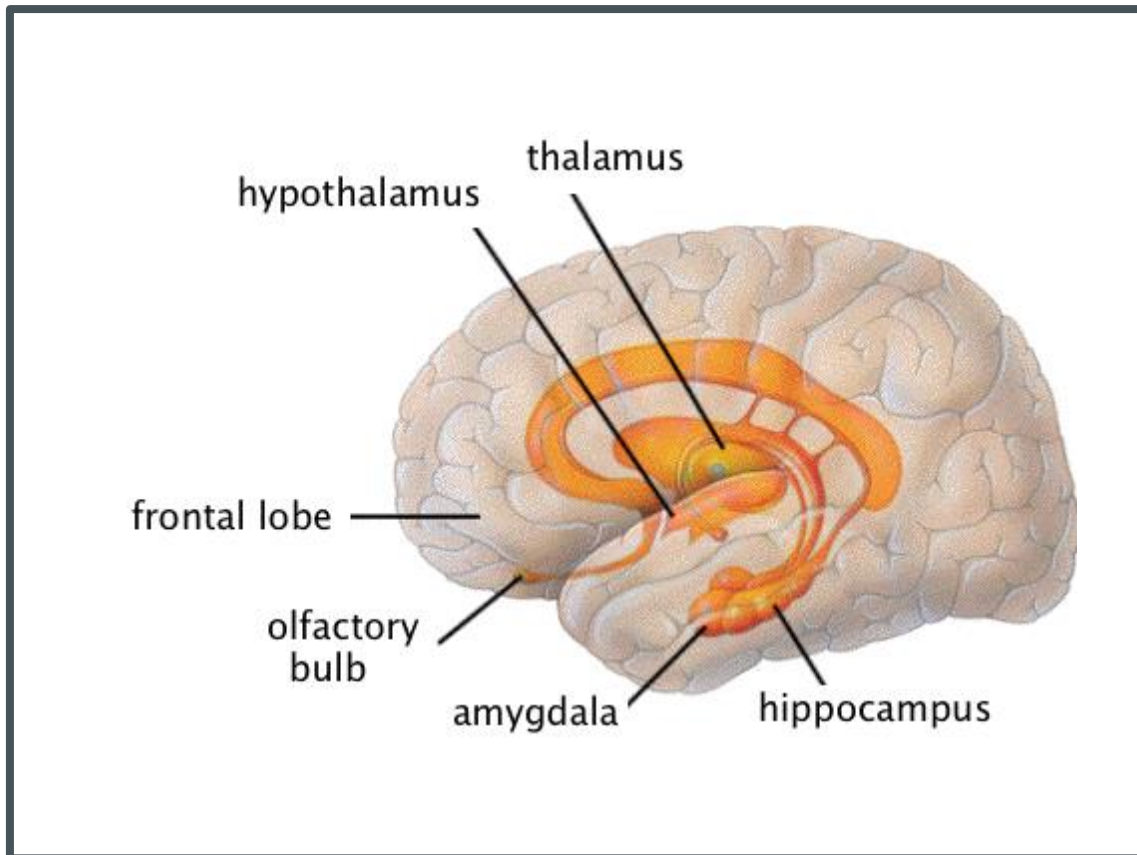


1. TEACHING OUR KIDS  
NOT TO HAVE FEELINGS

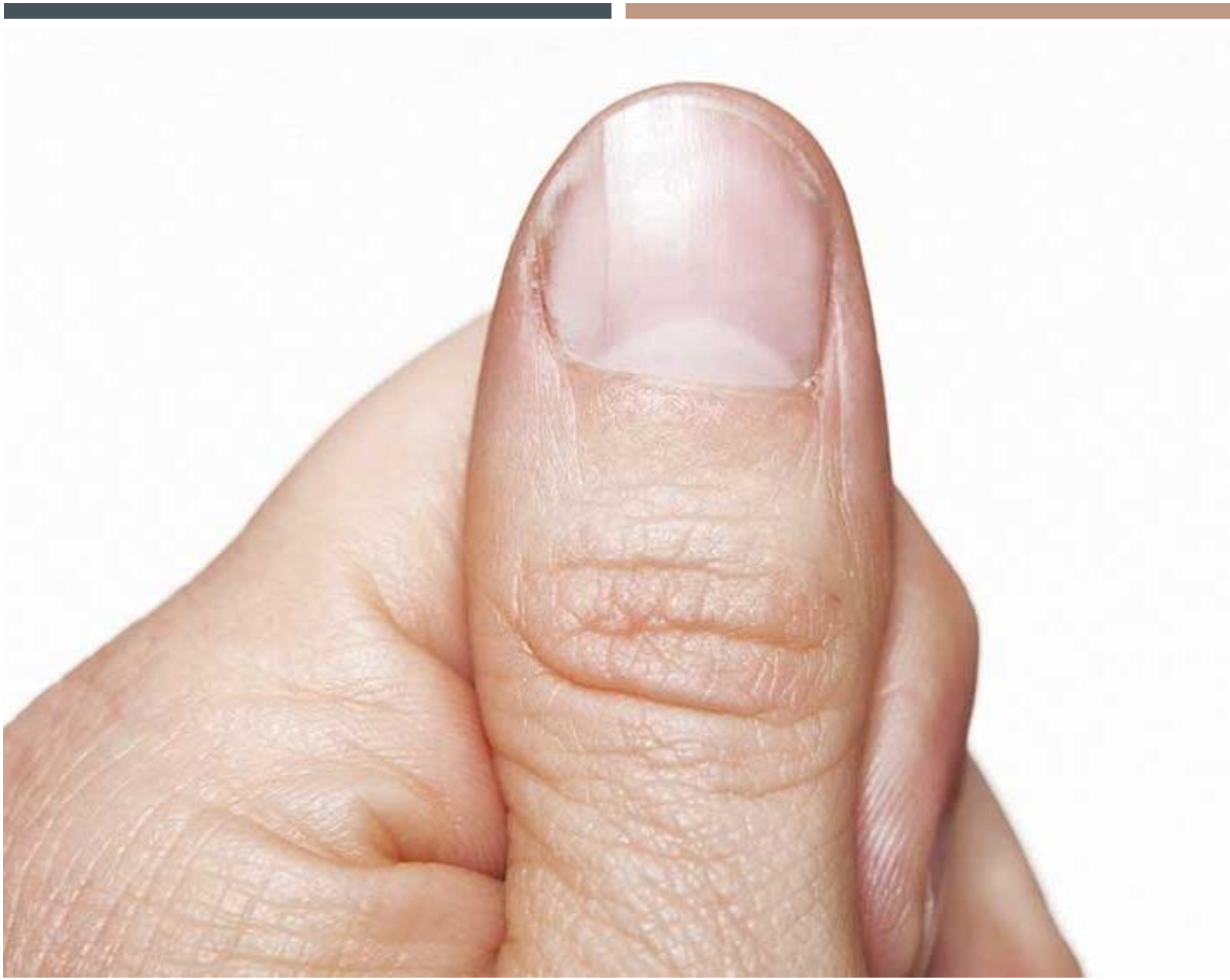


2. GIVING UP ON OUR  
ABILITIES TO HELP OUR KIDS

# BACKGROUND



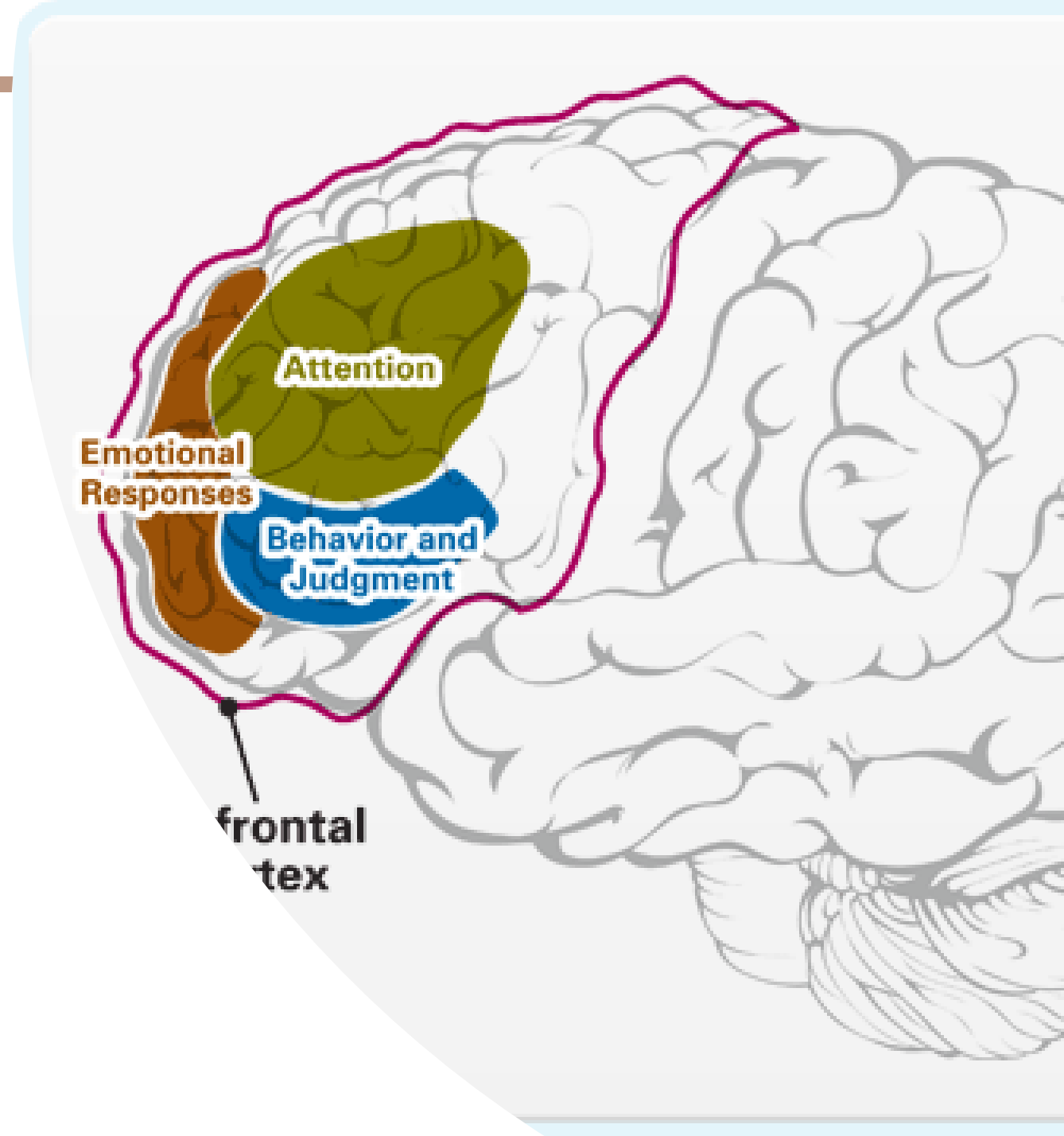
- The emotional control system in the brain is the Limbic System
  - Hypothalamus – relay system
  - Hippocampus – memory
  - Amygdala – fear and anger responses to stimuli
  - Limbic cortex – two structures that impact judgement, mood, and motivation
- Neurodivergent brains are more “wired” with interconnecting neurons.
- The system that is responsible for regulating our behavioral responses is the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC), which matures later in the gifted brain
- Big feelings = Big behaviors



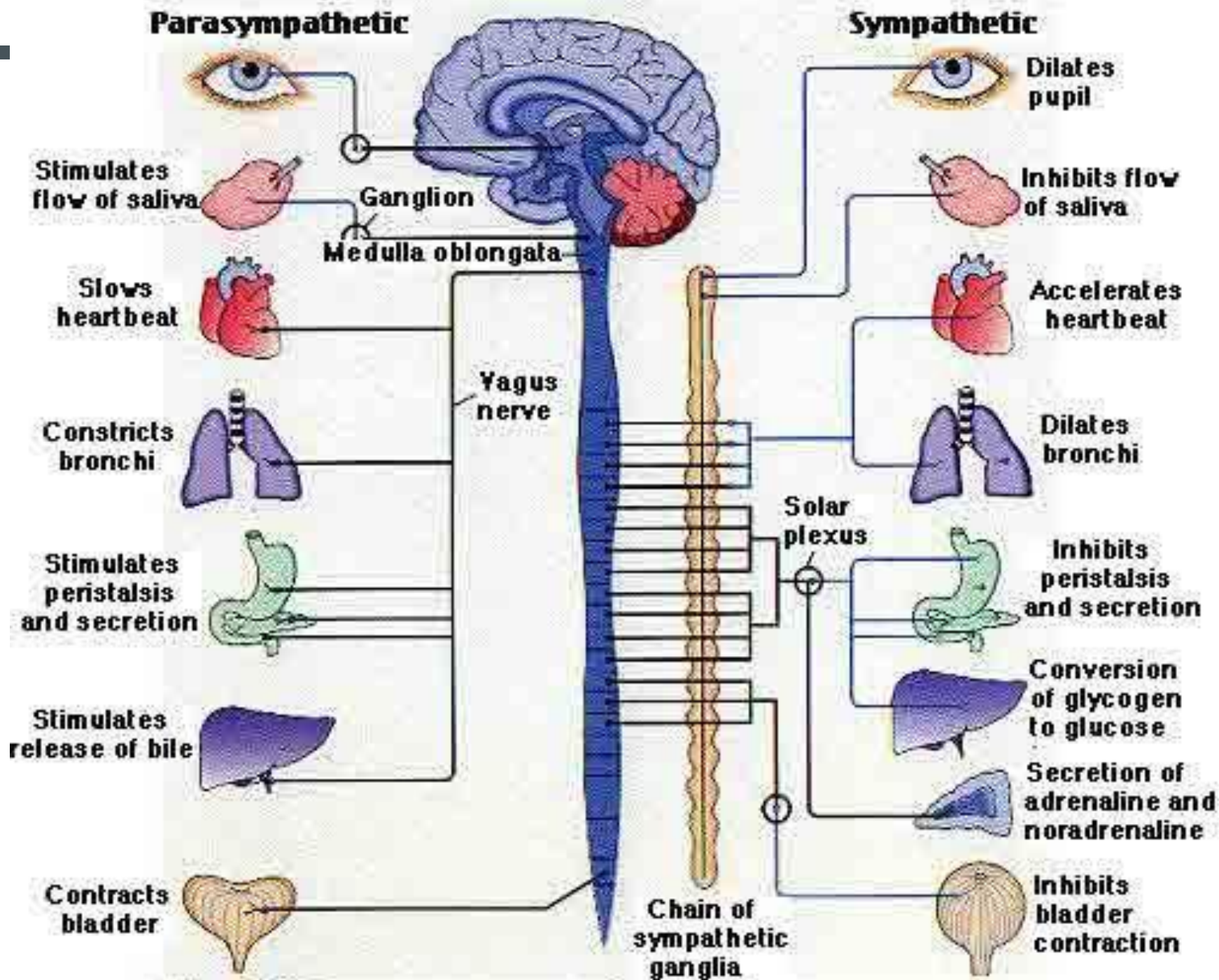
CASE IN POINT

## PREFRONTAL CORTEX (PFC)

- Located in the Frontal Lobe
- Executive Functioning Skills
  - Planning
  - Follow through
  - Task initiation/completion
  - Self-regulation (emotional)
  - Time management
  - Attention
- Behavioral Inhibition



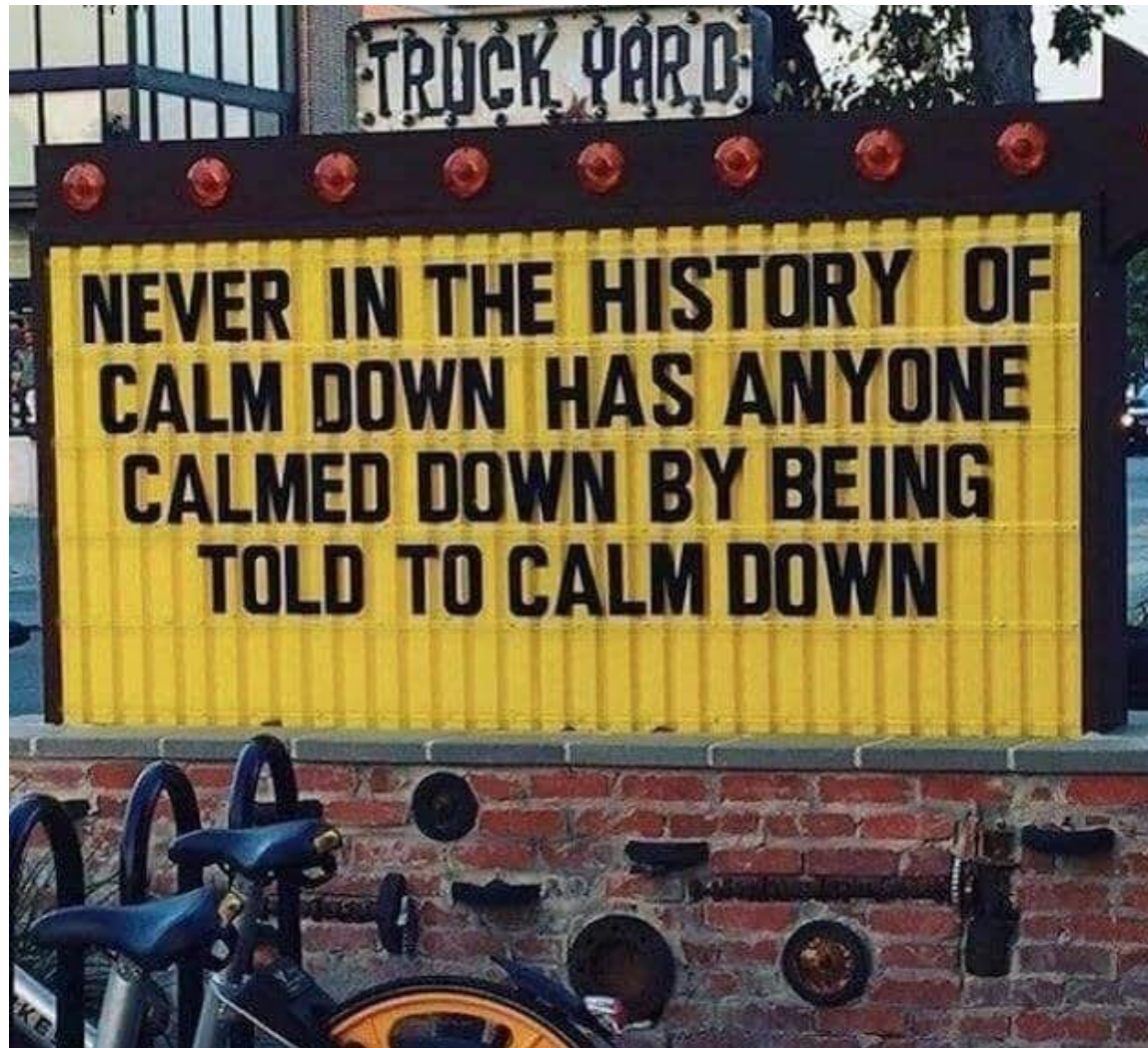




## WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

- Two "levels" of the brain – the wizard and the lizard
- When our kids are very upset, their "thinking" brains cannot respond
  - coping skills
  - self-regulation skills
- We ask them to use their words when they can't
- We need to help them put the cap back on





## BUT IT IS SO FRUSTRATING

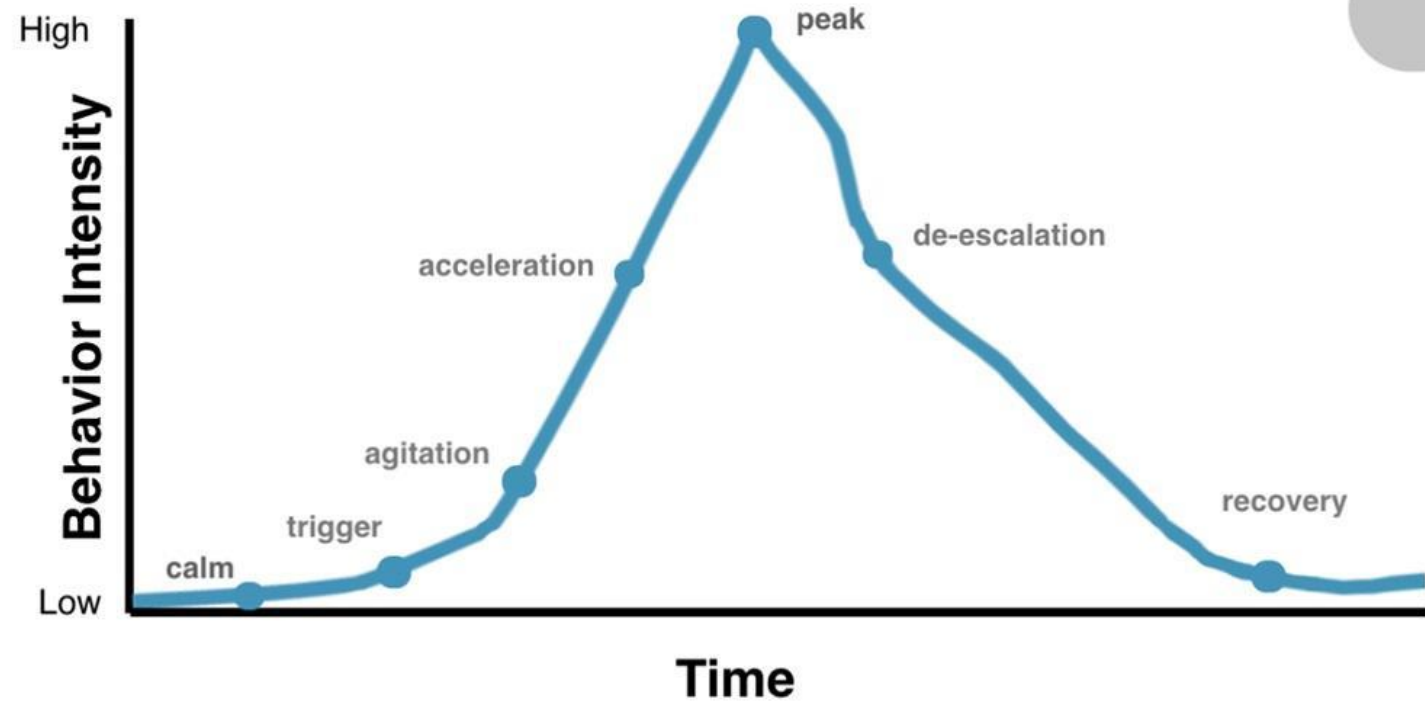
- To do this, YOU must be as OK as possible before you intervene
- Co-Regulation!
- First thing is to check in with yourself about what's making you so angry.
  - Your needs? (i.e., I need you to take out the garbage)
  - Their needs? (i.e., your kid is being bullied)
  - Society's needs? (i.e., your kid is refusing to shower)
- Second thing is to separate Content vs. Process
  - Content: the things that they are saying
  - Process: the emotions that drive those comments (<- this is where we want you to be)

# THE SECRET



- Our brains and bodies WANT to return to homeostasis
- The brain needs to have a request to engage the parasympathetic nervous system
- The code is “I’m feeling \_\_\_\_\_”
- Must be spoken OUT LOUD

# The Escalation Cycle



WAIT A  
SECOND...

## MY RULE

You are allowed to  
feel **HOWEVER**  
you want to feel  
about **ANYTHING**.

But it's what you  
**DO** with those  
feelings that matter.

# SETTING EXPECTATIONS

We may never get these disruptive feelings to ZERO (F.I.D.)

The presence of a feeling/meltdown does NOT mean that you (or your kids) failed

Progress is not linear, consistent, or forever

The impact of environment (people, places, crowds, etc.) is REAL – pay attention

We want to focus on skills (self-regulation, naming feelings, etc) that can generalize

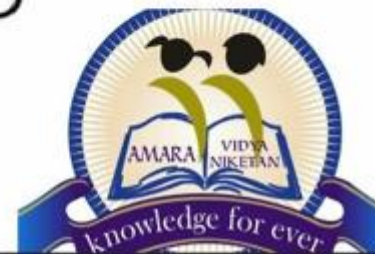
Praise is way more powerful than punishment

This work is REALLY HARD

**It is up to us, the parents/teachers, to help our kids regulate their emotions.**

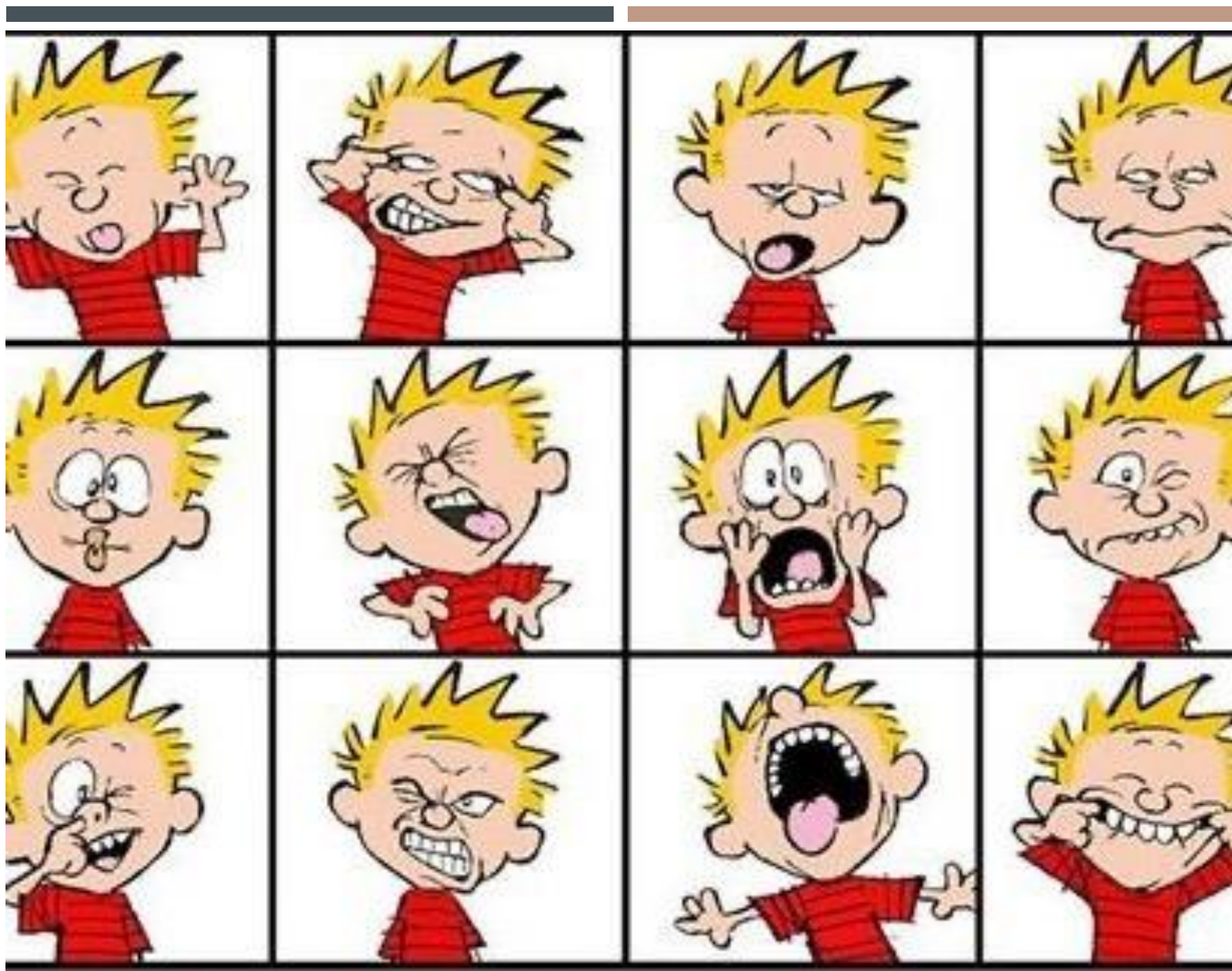
# **BENEATH EVERY BEHAVIOR THERE IS A FEELING.**

AND BENEATH EACH FEELING  
IS A NEED. AND WHEN WE  
MEET THAT NEED RATHER  
THAN FOCUS ON THE  
BEHAVIOR, WE BEGIN TO DEAL  
WITH THE CAUSE AND  
NOT THE SYMPTOM.



ALLOW ME TO  
INTRODUCE  
OUR CO-  
PILOT...





## IDENTIFYING FEELINGS

## TIPS AND TRICKS

- Becoming more aware of our feelings is a great way to increase control over them
- Feelings start in our brain but impact our entire body
- What does your \_\_\_\_\_ look like when you're angry?
  - Eyes            cheeks            neck            hands    feet
  - Mouth          nose            shoulders    chest
  - Eyebrows      forehead      arms            legs
- You may need to prime them early on: “You look \_\_\_\_\_ to me because of \_\_\_\_\_”
- Start someplace safe and accessible: favorite book, best YouTube, etc.
- REPEAT!

IF I GROW UP TO BE SOME  
SORT OF PSYCHOPATH  
BECAUSE OF THIS, YOU'LL  
ALL BE SORRY!!



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OUTBURSTS

## TIPS AND TRICKS

- Watch out for “replacement language” – kids may use code words/phrases to replace their feelings
  - “I’m bored”
  - “I’ll kill you!”
  - “All of my friends hate me!”
  - “School is stupid!”
- Validate first. “I’m sorry to hear that.” THEN move into: “How can I help?”
- Prompt a use of feelings terms: “I’m \_\_\_\_\_” or “I feel \_\_\_\_\_” (or “you look \_\_\_\_\_”)
- Remember: not everyone knows what you know or experienced what you experienced
- Prompt them for problem-solving (when they are calm): “So, what can you do about that?”
- Remember: Feelings can’t be **WRONG**



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# VERBAL AGGRESSION



## TIPS AND TRICKS

- Content vs. Process – what are you trying to communicate?
  - Fairly high-stakes in terms of intervening
  - What's the context? Who knows it?
  - Let's get away from the person/situation if you can (3-5 minutes at least)
  - Can you find a safe person?
  - Never email/text angry
- 
- You are allowed to feel angry/scared/jealous – you are NOT allowed to say/threaten inappropriate/unsafe words



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IN PUBLIC

# TIPS AND TRICKS

- The stakes for emotional meltdowns in public are (or at least FEEL) higher
- Set clear expectations BEFORE you go
  - How long                      What do I need from you there                      Who else may be there
  - Where are we going        What do we have to help us be successful                      Code word
- Check in often
- What are the triggers? Can you avoid/minimize them?
- Don't panic
- Your needs vs. the kid's needs
- “If you haven't carried your kid out of Target like a football running back, are you even a parent???”

LIFE'S DISAPPOINTMENTS ARE  
HARDER TO TAKE WHEN YOU  
DON'T KNOW ANY SWEAR WORDS.



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DISAPPOINTMENT



## TIPS AND TRICKS

- We tend to rush to “fix” the problem – can minimize their pain
  - “OK Boomer” – Do we really even understand?
  - Ask if you CAN share a similar anecdote
- An upset kid is not the time to have a Life Lesson ®
- Empathize first – “you seem really upset” or “I’m sorry that it didn’t go your way.”
- What is making them upset?
- What can we do to fix the problem? Now? Later?
- F.A.I.L. = Frequent Attempts in Learning



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PANIC



## TIPS AND TRICKS

- We all have different trigger items and levels of response
- Get to know your kid and their specific concerns/fears/phobias
- “How big is your feeling right now?” (Concretize the feelings – size, shape, rating from 1-10, etc.)
- Escape?
  - Mentally
  - Physically
  - Socially
- The longer you survive, the longer you can survive
  - BE STRATEGIC!



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# PEER DIFFICULTIES



## TIPS AND TRICKS

- Other people can make living very difficult – we cannot control their reactions/behavior
- There are always other possible explanations
  - Start silly/ridiculous
  - Prompt – what if?
  - Don't disagree. Just acknowledge
- Perspective taking is key – what do we know? What don't we know?
- Positive exposure – can school help?
- “Intent vs. Impact” – we must acknowledge both sides
- Setting matters – let's set up for success (birthday parties vs. sleepovers)



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# THE THUNDERSTORM METAPHOR



# STEPS

- 1. Get someplace safe
- 2. Try not to be mad at the thunderstorm
  - You are allowed to be disappointed (even scared!)
  - But getting angry at the thunderstorm is not helpful (and can be dangerous)
  - All storms pass eventually – most are shorter than you think
- 3. How can we clean up?
- 4. Let's get back to what we were doing



# PROCESSING

- When the “storm” is over
- When you can both be calm and focused on the task at hand
- Non-judgmental – what happened? What made you feel that way? What do you think was the impact?
- What can we learn? (WE = parents, teachers, kid, peers, etc.)
- It is going to happen again – the trick is to see it coming whenever possible and be proactive

WHEN THEIR STORM



MEETS OUR CALM



CO-REGULATION OCCURS



TRY TO BE THE  
LIGHTHOUSE

# PARENT SKILLS



We must practice what we preach – modeling behavior



Meta-communication – talking about talking



Remove your ego (as much as possible)



A bit of proactive work goes a long way



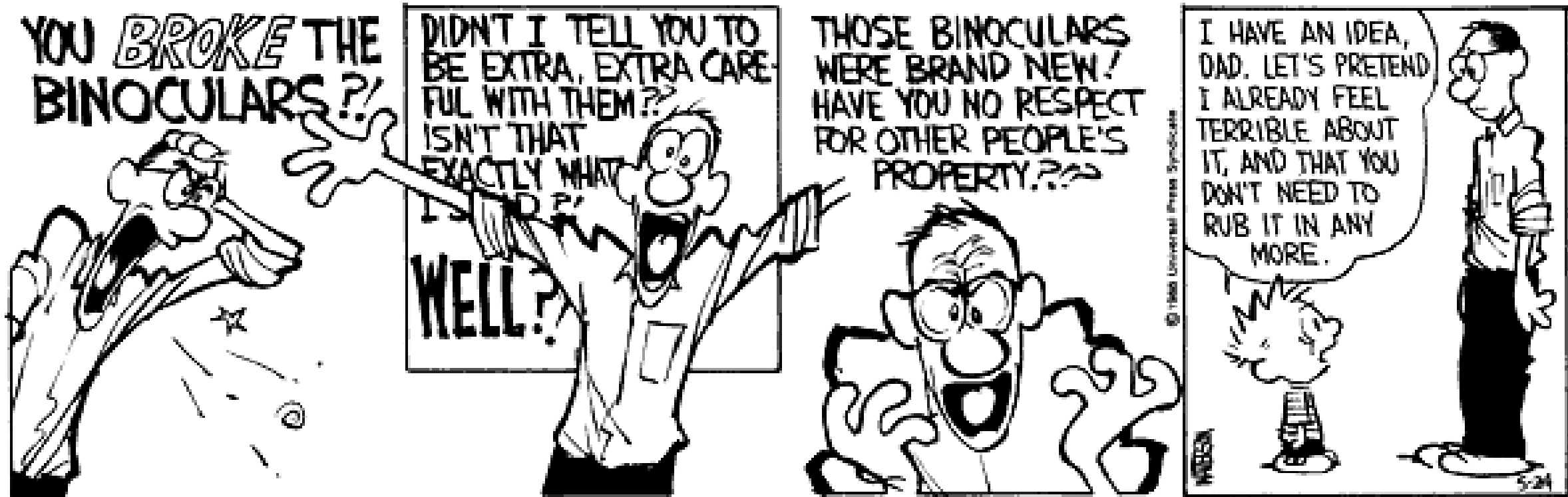
Check-ins



Avoid “Shoulds”



Emotions are normal, and non-valued (i.e., not “good or bad” but “comfortable or uncomfortable”)



WHY WE WORK SO HARD AT THIS



## RESOURCES

- <https://parentswithconfidence.com/calm-down-strategies-for-kids/>
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/peaceful-parents-happy-kids/201307/5-steps-help-kids-learn-control-their-emotions>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/age-age-guide-helping-kids-manage-emotions/>
- <https://www.gro-gifted.org/neuroscience-of-giftedness-increased-brain-areas-associated-with-emotional-processing/>
- <https://www.nicoletetreault.com/single-post/2017/07/26/emotionally-gifted-and-navigating-the-world>
- <https://educationaladvancement.org/blog-many-gifted-children-also-highly-sensitive/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4n2MiGgDUI>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD4O7ama3o8>

# QUESTIONS?

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO EMAIL ME  
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## Give feedback to Dr. Matt

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STORM

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