



**What's Next? Series**  
**The Child Who Acts Bossy**

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February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023



**Book chapter and webinar on Bossiness and Demanding Behaviour**

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The Child Who Acts Bossy



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6Z9wVLgJA>



**Start with the WHY**  
 Simon Sinek - Golden Circle

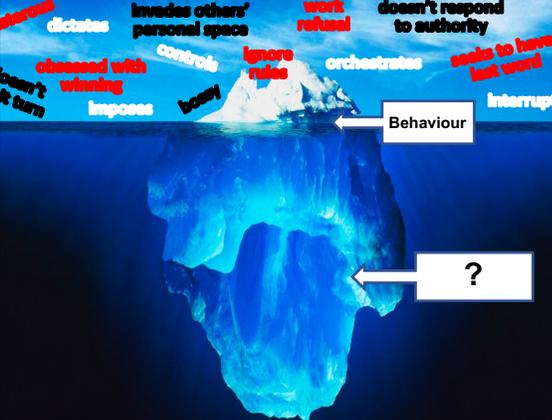
**WHY**  
**HOW**  
**WHAT**

**WHY:** the purpose  
 what is your cause?  
 what do you see?



**KEY INSIGHT #1**

Children's behavior isn't always what it seems, we need to dig deeper and look at what's happening beneath.



**Behaviour**

**?**

Terms on tip: demands, dictates, invades others' personal space, work refusal, doesn't respond to authority, obsessed with winning, controls, ignores rules, orchestrates, needs to have last word, imposes, bossy, interrupts.

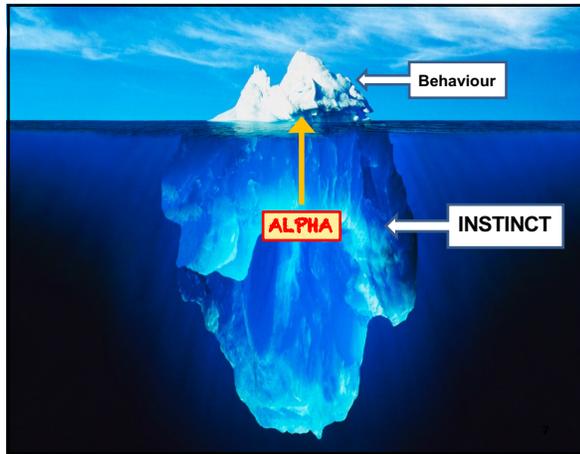
**SHIFTING OUR LENS**  
 To gain perspective and insight



What we SEE influences what we do

When we understand what is behind the behaviour we then:

- choose interventions that will make a difference
- avoid interventions that risk making things worse



### Alpha Instincts

- to be first / to be the best / to be on the top
- to take over / to take charge / to take the lead
- to talk louder / to talk over / to talk for another
- to command attention / to take centre stage
- to demand deference / to give the orders / to take command
- to give the directions / to provide the meanings
- to trump interaction / to have the last word
- to be in the know / to have the most knowledge
- to displace or to resist being displaced: physically, emotionally or psychologically

*Alpha instincts only make sense in the context of attachment*

### The alpha-dependent dance

Two sets of roles:  
Alpha = provider  
Dependent = seeker

seeking dependent instincts	providing alpha instincts
to get one's bearings	to orient and inform
to serve and obey	to protect & defend
to seek assistance	to guide and direct
to look up to	to look out for
to belong	to possess
to follow	to lead
to wait for orders	to give the orders
to look for guidance	to transmit one's values
to comply and conform	to command and prescribe

### The alpha-dependent dance

- attachments are **hierarchically structured** to facilitate dependency and care-taking
- when becoming attached or pursuing proximity, one is **instinctively moved** to assume the alpha position or the dependent position
- the posture of the one should typically call forth the **complementary** set of attachment instincts in the other
- Alpha and dependent instincts **need to MATCH up** with their corresponding **social ROLES** e.g. parent-child, teacher-student, doctor-patient, coach-player, older and younger sibling, etc.
- Individual **MUST NOT BE DEFENDED** against feelings of caring and responsibility.

### The alpha instincts and the PROVIDER role

The alpha provider assumes the following roles:

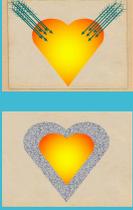
- to move to dominate**  
e.g. to be first or number one, to take over / to take charge / to take the lead, to be on top or take centre stage, to trump interaction / to have the last word, to be in the know / to know more than others, to displace or to resist being displaced: physically, emotionally or psychologically
- to assume responsibility**  
e.g. to take charge of, to take the lead concerning, to make things work for, to feel guilty when..., to feel badly when..., to fix things for, to make things better for, to feel remorse concerning, to make sacrifices for
- to care for and to care about**  
e.g. to be concerned about, to help, to bear the burdens of, to give assistance to, to meet the needs of, to be devoted to, to feel compassion for, to provide for, to shield and protect

### Seeking child

**Child** : depending upon for, cued by felt need. Involves trusting in, wanting, aching for, asking for, wishing for, looking up to.

**Adult** : caring alpha who is cued by perceived need. Involves trumping, leading, initiating, giving, nurturing, taking charge. Holds self responsible, feels guilty when things don't work.

**RESULT**: Both parties feel fulfilled in this dance. The interaction is relatively easy and satisfying for both.



**Defended against vulnerability**

When a child experiences:

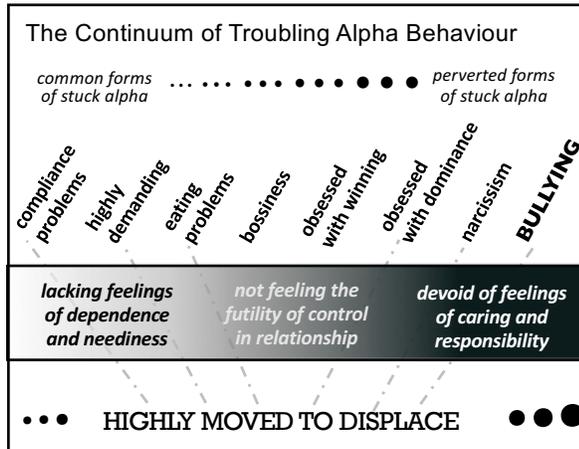
- Overwhelming sensitivity**
  - Inheriting sensitive genes
  - Prenatal stress
  - Birth trauma
- Wounding environment**
  - Facing separation too much to bear
  - Feeling too alarmed or alarmed for too long
  - Experiencing being shamed or humiliated or feeling as if something is wrong with oneself

It could lead to defendedness and stuckness

**Vulnerable feelings more likely to be defended against**



- feelings of shyness and timidity
- feelings of embarrassment including blushing
- feelings of shame (that something is wrong with me)
- feelings of futility (sadness, disappointment, grief, sorrow)
- feelings of fulfillment (joy, delight, enjoyment)
- feelings of dependence (emptiness, neediness, missing, loneliness, insecurity)
- feelings of appreciation (thankful, grateful, indebted)
- feelings of caring (compassion, enthusiasm, devotion, concern, treasure, invested in)
- feelings of alarm (apprehension, anxiety and fear)
- feelings of responsibility (guilt, remorse, to make things better; protective)
- feelings of woundedness (hurt feelings, anguish, pain)

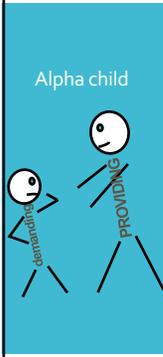


**Alpha child**

**Child** : an ALPHA child who is cued by their own felt needs. Is bossy, assertive, prescriptive, controlling, and cannot let go; insists on fairness, rights, and getting what is deserved. Holds others responsible, feels angry when things don't work.

**Adult** : caring alpha who is cued by perceived need. Involves trumping, leading, initiating, giving, nurturing, taking charge. Holds self responsible, feels guilty when things don't work.

**RESULT**: both parties experience this interaction as confusing, highly frustrating, exhausting, and ultimately unfulfilling.



**Alpha children are challenging**



- much less receptive to being lead in general
- highly resistant to direction and guidance
- often are less endearing, tending to alienate the adults responsible for them
- appear independent and much less needy and so not as likely to evoke care-taking responses in the adults responsible for them
- very difficult to bring to state of REST and SATIATION
- consequences and sanctions are highly PROVOCATIVE




**KEY INSIGHT #2**

Children's behavior is based on development and emotional maturity. We cannot push and pull to get what's expected.

What is the purpose of the alpha instinct?

- It serves **attachment** by setting up the care taking dynamic.
- It is quite **healthy** for a child to show counterwill tendencies.



in the service of  
**attachment**

Alpha Instincts



Why are children moved by their alpha instincts?

- There is a natural and intended purpose to the alpha instincts.
- We are all born with this potential.
- It is quite healthy for a child to show alpha tendencies.
- When children stay stuck in the alpha mode, they may be having difficulties with:
  - Experiencing vulnerable feelings
  - Feeling safe in the dependency role
  - Trusting the adult

**A well-attached child ...**



listens and attends to us

takes our cues

trusts us

looks up to us

seeks our help

likes our company

doesn't want to have secrets from us

feels at home with us

follows us

likes us

likes to please us

seeks to measure up

**WHAT DOESN'T WORK**

**Conventional Classroom Management and Problem Behaviour Centered Intervention**



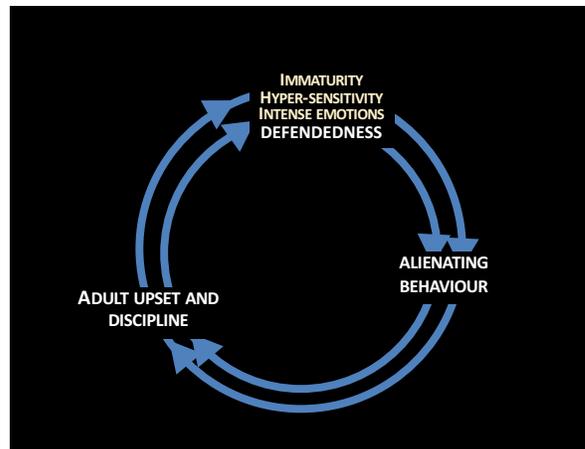
- Rewards/Consequences
- Behaviour management tracking systems
- Being sent to the Principal's office
- Detention/Reflection Room
- Student behaviour contract
- Zero tolerance discipline measures
- Suspensions

*It doesn't help change or improve student behaviour and it exacerbates the problem with troubled students*

**Taking the Lead**  
Orchestrating circumstances vs. Controlling the student

**Trying to Control Students (the pitfalls):**

- Impossible task – it's a myth that anyone can be controlled
- Increases felt frustration and alarm in students who are triggered by a perceived or felt coercive intervention
- This increases 'push back' and often provokes a disconnect with the relationship
- Upping the ante, adding consequences will only lead to a negative outcome
- The group loses trust in the adult as a capable care provider and subsequently they turn to each other to find new guidance and leadership
- Highly frustrating and discouraging for the adult, often left with a feeling of powerlessness





**KEY INSIGHT #3** | Some children are more at-risk towards developing emotional and behavioral problems.

The sensitive child and the alpha instinct



**The more sensitive the child**, the more easily stirred up and overwhelmed by experience, which can evoke more mechanisms of defense.

**The inherent vulnerability can lead to attachment problems**, such as more difficulty falling deeply into attachment, more likely to resist proximity, and more likely to defend against depending.

**The sensitive child is more susceptible to becoming stuck**, as they have more to adapt to, they tend to resist tears and they try to escape futility.

The root cause of alpha instincts

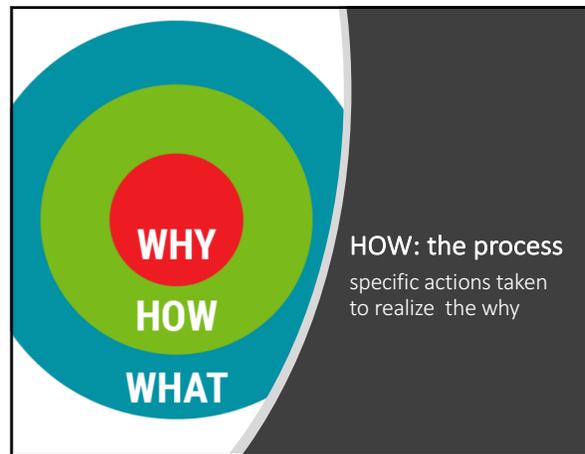
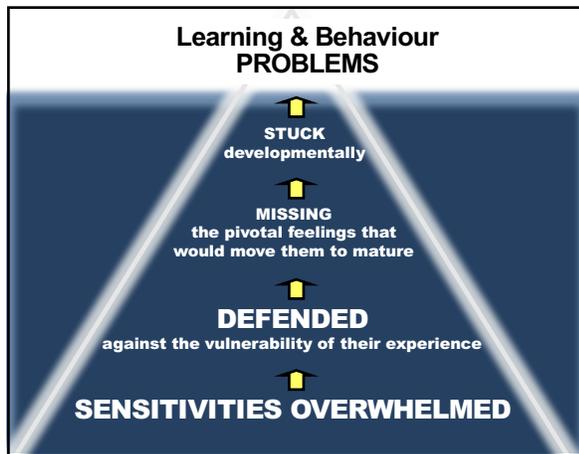
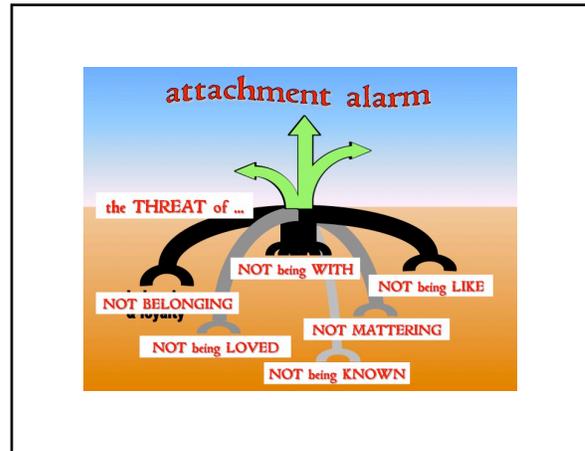


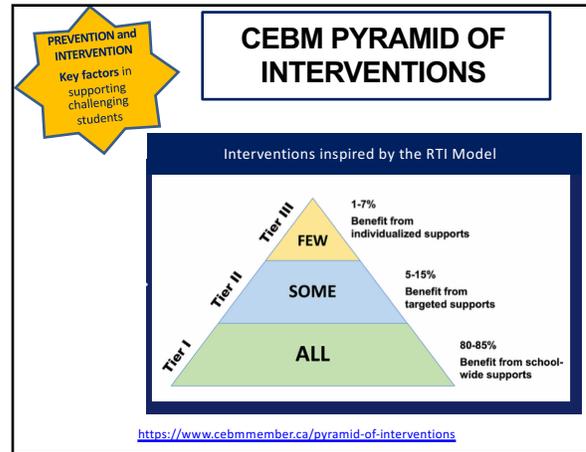
**alpha by default**  
happens when adults do not assume an alpha posture or convey an alpha presence

- parents reacting to their own backgrounds
- failure of today's culture to script alpha posturing
- weak or inadequate parenting
- parents looking to child to fill needs
- parenting on demand
- egalitarian parenting
- child-led parenting
- parents looking for answers rather than being their child's answer

**alpha by defense**  
happens when it does not feel safe to depend

- separation too much to bear
- not feeling taken care of
- being bullied by parents, siblings, peers or teachers
- feeling abused or exploited
- extreme vulnerability or overwhelming sensitivity
- parenting practices that exploit a child's state of dependency
- experiencing alarming situations or circumstances





### BEST PRACTICES

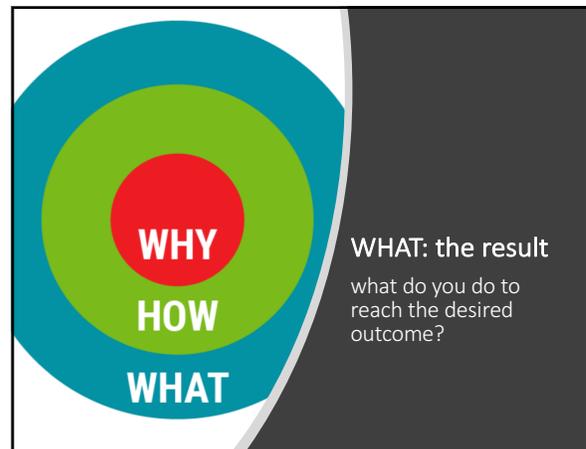
Gaining insight to inform practice

**From:** What's wrong with you? This behaviour has to stop.

**To:** She's experiencing too much **separation**

*How can I help the student feel safe and taken care of?*

- ### BEHAVIOUR CHANGES WHEN...
- Maturation  
 Behaviour changes as the brain matures
  - Emotions  
 Behaviour changes when emotions are felt
  - Vulnerability  
 Behaviour changes when vulnerability is protected
  - Attachment  
 Behaviour changes when students are attached to adults





## REDUCE COERCION

- use **structures** and **routines** to orchestrate behavior
- the routine guides the behavior
- teach routines in a fun way
- make routines engaging:  
*"quiet as a mouse", "super-hero role"*



## REDUCE COERCION

- **Address student privately** (if possible) to avoid escalating the power struggle – this also protects the child’s dignity and preserves the adult’s position vis-à-vis the other students
- **back off** until you get a better attachment hold
- **LEAD** the child out of the **impasse** (power struggle)
- draw attention **AWAY** from the coercive elements of the situation



### HOW TO CHANGE YOUR MIND while staying ALPHA

*"I've decided that..."  
"I see that we need a change of plans, we'll..."*

Be willing to make the decisions you believe are best for the student, even if they are upsetting to them.



### Classroom "Quiet Corner"



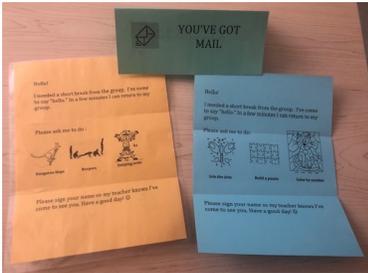
<https://www.cebmmember.ca/cocoon-area>

### "You've Got Mail" Transition with a Destination

*"You've Got Mail"* letters provide something tangible for a student to hold as they head to a pre-determined destination for a short period of time.

Two types of letters are available:

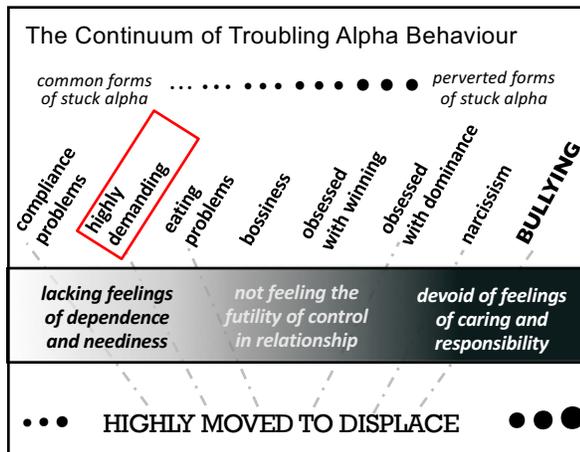
- Active movement
- Quiet activity



<https://www.cebmmember.ca/practices-outside-the-classroom>

### TIER 2 – TARGETED Practices in the Classroom and School

- Interventions for challenging students who struggle in the classroom (situational, for a short period of time)
- Practices lead by the Teacher with the help of Support Staff and other adults in the room.
- In-class and out-of-class targeted interventions based on student needs
- Student continues to benefit from T1 interventions in addition to supplemental T2 measures



providing alpha	demanding alpha ≠ roles
takes care of others	demands to be taken care of
fulfills others' needs	demands needs to be fulfilled
protects the vulnerable	avoids being vulnerable
assumes responsibility	holds others responsible
provides safety and allays fears	demands safety and hides fears
needs deference to be effective	demands deference to stay on top
celebrates others' success	resents others' success
avoids exposing & shaming	demands NOT to be exposed
conveys belonging	possesses and owns

### Examples of Alpha at Tier 2

At Tier 2, some students in the group may exhibit more overt signs of the alpha instinct by:

In the classroom:

- demands for wants to be fulfilled
- holds others responsible when not getting what is being demanded

During transitions/ in the schoolyard:

- demands to be included in the game
- blames others for all that is not working well

### Why Kids Don't Need Attention but an Invitation for Relationship

by Deborah MacNamara

"We cannot release our children from their hunger for relationship by simply responding to their calls for our attention. We need to seize the lead in providing for them, to give more than is being pursued, and to take responsibility for fulfilling their hunger for connection. If they have to work to get our attention, then they cannot rest in it and can become enslaved to the performance required to get it."

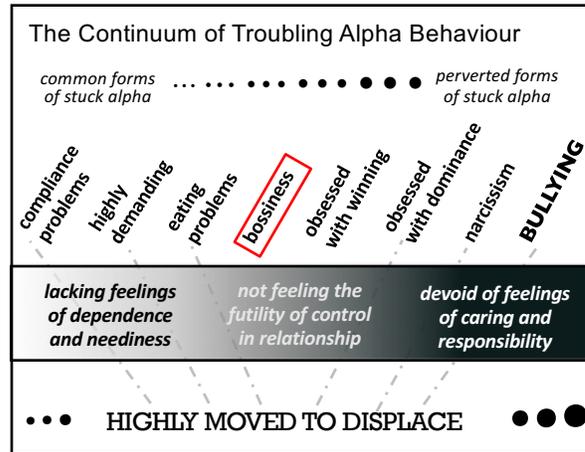
<https://macnamara.ca/portfolio/why-kids-dont-need-attention-but-an-invitation-for-relationship/>

Six Stages of Attachment	Characteristics & Dynamics	Adult involvement at school in good times...	Adult involvement at school in not so good times...
<b>Senses</b> (from first year) ... to be with ... in smell, taste, touch, sight, sound	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>seeks to be with or near primary attachments some or much of the time, or seeks proximity in some way</li> <li>is receptive and accepting of the sensory experiences with primary attachments (including eating with)</li> </ul>	Hand on the shoulder, songs, special snacks, favorite foods, something to hold onto (e.g. special pencil)	Being near (especially during meltdowns), silence, gentle warm voice, slower rhythm, something to hold onto (soft cuddly object)
<b>Sameness</b> (two) ... to be like ... to imitate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>seeks to be like primary attachments</li> <li>shows signs of imitation, or of seeking or being receptive to doing the same things, sharing activities</li> </ul>	Shared activity, playing together, noticing a likeness, a similarity, something held in common (in appearance, in mannerisms, in likes and preferences, etc.)	Empathy, a shared story of difficulty, find a common ground during times of frustration
<b>Belonging/Loyalty</b> (three) ... to belong to ... to be loyal to ... to be on the side of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>seeks or shares a sense of belonging to, shows signs of a growing loyalty towards</li> <li>shows signs of seeking belonging and loyalty</li> </ul>	"My special guy/girl", using words that evoke a sense of belonging, to make things work for, to defend, to welcome, to prepare for, loyalty language	Loyalty language, belonging language, to come alongside the child's feelings, to hold onto and anchor verbally, to communicate unconditional trust in the child's good intentions
<b>Significance</b> (four) ... to be important to ... to hold as important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>seeks to be important to, to be noticed by, to be listened to</li> <li>holds attachments as important, attends to, listens to, allows influence</li> </ul>	To notice, to value, to regard highly, to hold dear (giving terms of endearment), to show appreciation, to show respect, to slow down and listen to what the child has to say	To hold dear regardless, to show respect, to show to the child the relationship is bigger than the problem, to let the child know their feelings matter
<b>Love</b> (five) ... to love, to be dear to ... to be loved by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>seeks to be dear to attachments, to be loved, is loving</li> <li>gives love and holds attachments dear, gives signs of affection</li> </ul>	Gestures and words that convey delight, enjoyment, warmth (DEW), special consideration	Warmth, unconditional regard, consideration, protecting, making room for, holding dear
<b>Being known</b> (six) ... to be known ... to be understood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>seeks to be known, seeks to be understood from the inside-out, is able to express inner self in some way</li> <li>is able to express frustrations, upset, difficulties, as well as joy</li> </ul>	Providing time/place for self-disclosure, inviting perspective, listening, displaying interest in knowing them, trying to understand their feelings, making room	Inviting perspective, listening, appreciating, making space, giving room, normalizing the child's feelings even if messy, giving a sign that we truly get them

### Student "Check-In" with a significant adult

**TIER 3 – INDIVIDUALIZED Practices**  
with the help of Support Staff and/or Professionals

- Interventions for highly challenging students who are unable to function well within the classroom and/or the school
- Collaboration between the school team, with the support of the board consultants/professionals
- In-class and out-of-class individualized interventions based on close observations and reflection
- Adaptation-Accommodations – Student specific needs (pull-out 1 on 1)
- Student continues to benefit from T1 interventions in addition to supplemental T2 and T3 measures



**Examples of Alpha at Tier 3**

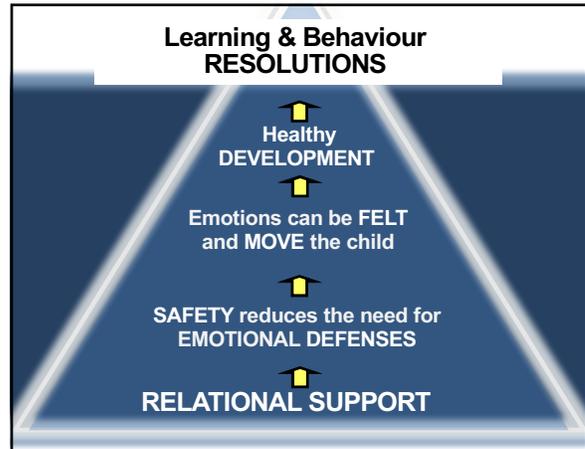
At Tier 3, few students in the group exhibit frequent and disruptive behaviours resulting from the alpha instinct.

In the classroom:

- loud & imposes self onto others
- does not willingly respond to authority (can be extremely difficult to manage by substitute teachers)

During transitions/ in the schoolyard:

- tries to control who will speak to whom amongst the peer group
- wants to dictate the what and how in the game



**Don't let the alpha instinct Break the CONNECTION**

- Don't take it personally
- Anticipate and expect the alpha related behaviour
- Reflect the instinct as natural & normal
- Don't use disciplinary measures (consequences, time outs, behaviour management systems) that cause separation
- Don't make behaviour the bottom line
- Repair damage done by alpha fallout

Channeling the 'bossy' alpha energy:

- Teacher's helper (passing out papers, recycling, opening doors for the group, etc.)
- Helping out other students with an academic task, reading buddy
- Taking care of class plants, class pet
- In charge of organizing the "Special Activity" on fun days
- In charge of organizing outdoor games for younger students

### USE PLAY & PLAYFULNESS



- Invite the alpha instinct in the play mode, such as games or fantasies of being a superhero, person or animal in charge (boss, parent, policeman, conductor, lion), the most important person (king, queen), the most famous person, etc.
- Displacement play can also appeal to the alpha instinct, such as games of competition (e.g. dodgeball) and fantasy games where one displaces another
- When possible, use singing and playful actions to direct the alpha child
- Playing usually evokes smiles – increasing attachment



**Nurturing Support Centre**  
*Tier 3 Intervention*

**Personalized & adapted schedule**

**Individualized support**



**Managing the ALPHA instinct is a matter of RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS and SOFT HEARTS.**

- Gordon Neufeld, PhD

### The Continuum of Troubling Alpha Behaviour

*common forms of stuck alpha* ... .. *perverted forms of stuck alpha*

*compliance problems*    *highly demanding*    *eating problems*    *bossiness*    *obsessed with winning*    *obsessed with dominance*    *narcissism*    **BULLYING**

*lacking feelings of dependence and neediness*    *not feeling the futility of control in relationship*    *devoid of feelings of caring and responsibility*

... ● **HIGHLY MOVED TO DISPLACE** ... ● ● ●

### Bully instinct

**alpha complex + defended against caring & responsibility = BULLY INSTINCT & SYNDROME**

- the bully instinct results from the alpha instincts perverted by emotional defendedness
- the bullying instinct can be:
  - specific to certain situations or relationships or
  - can become a signature trait of personality

providing alpha	demanding alpha ≠ roles	bullying devoid of caring & responsibility
takes care of others	demands to be taken care of	exploits signs of caring
fulfills others' needs	demands needs to be fulfilled	exploits neediness
protects the vulnerable	avoids being vulnerable	exploits vulnerability
assumes responsibility	holds others responsible	holds victims responsible
provides safety and allays fears	demands safety and hides fears	attempts to alarm and exploits fears
needs deference to be effective	demands deference to stay on top	punishes the lack of deference
celebrates others' success	resents others' success	sabotages others' success
avoids exposing & shaming	demands NOT to be exposed	exposes & shames others
conveys belonging	possesses and owns	exploits need to belong

**Our ROLE as the adult**

**teacher**  
Educator  
**Principal**  
coach  
Technician  
Attendant  
**counsellor**

**Adjusting our VIEW** Taking things LESS PERSONALLY

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Recognizing that instinct is involved

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Aiming to "do no harm"

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**Adjusting our STANCE** Allowing the child to feel safe in depending on us

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Conveying a strong alpha presence (inspiring trust & confidence)

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Refraining from revealing one's own needs, fears or felt inadequacies

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**Making ROOM for** To display some healthy leadership

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To be indulged in the play mode

**Catherine Korah and Martine Demers**  
 Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management  
[www.cebm.ca](http://www.cebm.ca)

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**THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT (CEBM)**  
 As a support to the 10 English School Boards of Quebec, the CEBM aims to help boards and their staff to find effective and developmentally friendly interventions for working with students who experience significant behavioural challenges in the school setting.

**Also visit the CEBM Resource Center**  
<https://www.cebmmember.ca/resistance-and-opposition>

### Editorials on Alpha

**The Five Things Master Teachers Know and Do**  
by Deborah MacNamara  
Dec 17, 2016

**Who's In Charge? Reclaiming the Lead with an Alpha Child**  
by Deborah MacNamara  
August 1, 2015

**Does your child have an alpha complex?**  
by Gordon Neufeld  
March 7, 2012

**Children in the Lead with Nowhere to Go**  
by Deborah MacNamara  
June 13, 2011

<https://macnamara.ca/portfolio/the-five-things-master-teachers-know/>

<https://macnamara.ca/portfolio/reclaiming-the-lead-with-an-alpha-children-in-the-lead/>

<https://neufeldinstitute.org/does-your-child-have-an-alpha-complex/>

<https://neufeldinstitute.org/children-in-the-lead-with-nowhere-to-go/>

### Upcoming Events

Tue, Mar 20 | Online Professional Development  
**Teen Anxiety and Resilience**  
Join us ONLINE: Tuesday, March 20th, 2023 - 4:00-5:00 pm. Presenter: Catherine Korah. Event is FREE. The session will be recorded and available on the CEBM website.

[To Register](#)

Thu, Apr 20 | Online Professional Development  
**How to Handle Behavioural Challenges of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**  
Join us ONLINE: Thursday, April 20th, 2023 - 3:30-5:00 pm. Presenters: Catherine Korah from CEBM as well as Andrew Barnett and Kim Segal from CxS ASD. Event is FREE. The session will be recorded and available on the CEBM website.

[To Register](#)

Presented by Catherine Korah, CEBM

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