

ANXIETY, ALARM AND ATTENTION PROBLEMS – HOW TO HELP CHILDREN FOCUS AND ATTEND



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Eva de Gosztanyi, co-ordinator

Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management

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edegosztanyi@rsb.qc.ca

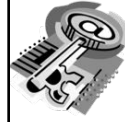
"Building the Capacity of the English School Boards of Quebec"

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DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH



the **Maturation Key**



the **Vulnerability Key**



the **Attachment Key**

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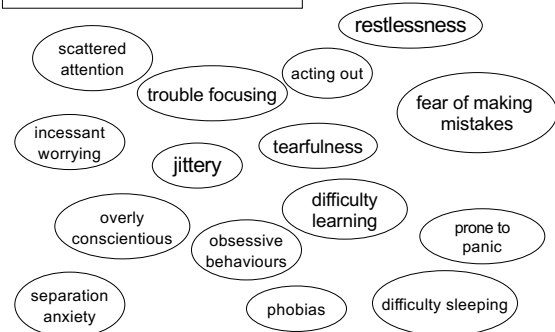
Why do many students have a hard time staying still, paying attention and staying on task?

Why are some of our students so anxious and agitated?

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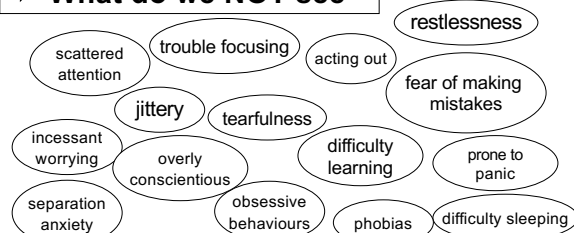
⇒ What do we SEE



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⇒ What do we NOT see



ALARM SYSTEM

The SYMPTOMS of an activated ALARM SYSTEM

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ALARM SYSTEM is in the LIMBIC SYSTEM (EMOTIONAL BRAIN)

Its job is to ensure our SURVIVAL

AMYGDALA

NOTES A THREAT
"smoke detector"

HYPOTHALAMUS

ACTIVATES THE RESPONSE – Sympathetic Nervous System

HIPPOCAMPUS

REMEMBERS WHAT THREATENS US
Memory

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SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM the system of ACTIVATION

- Cortisol – increase blood sugar – suppress immune system
- Adrenaline – increases heart and respiratory rate
- Norepinephrine – responsible for vigilant concentration
- Growth Hormone – increases glucose
- Constricts blood vessels
- Sharp Increase in Breathing & Heart Rate
- Blood diverts to Muscles
- Suspends “rest & digest”

↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓

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THE ALARM SYSTEM

When SURVIVAL is at stake,

- the AROUSAL and ATTENTION systems are highly involved
 - ALARM is given HIGH PRIORITY
 - Emotions are activated
 - We now MUST pay attention to
 - what is threatening us and
 - what could save us

We are usually MOVED to:
CAUTION or FLIGHT

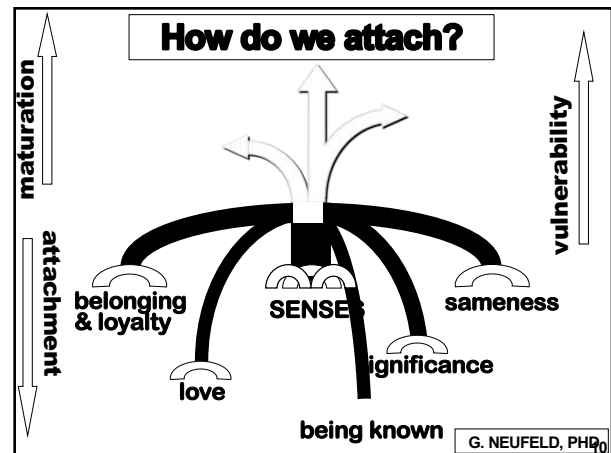
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What is it that **ALARMS** us the MOST?

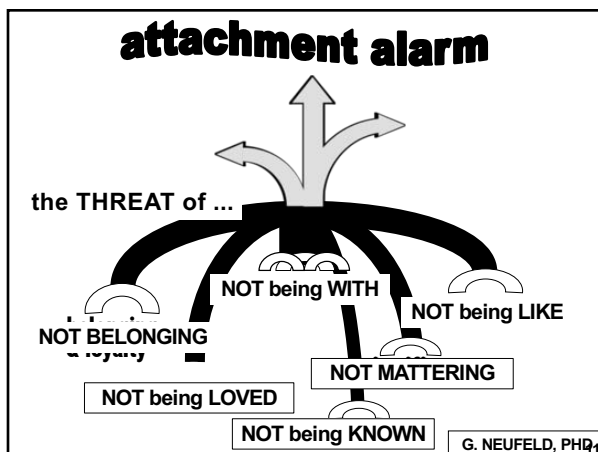
facing separation

EXPERIENCING OR FACING
THE LACK OF OR THE LOSS OF
CLOSENESS
WITH THOSE TO WHOM WE ARE
ATTACHED

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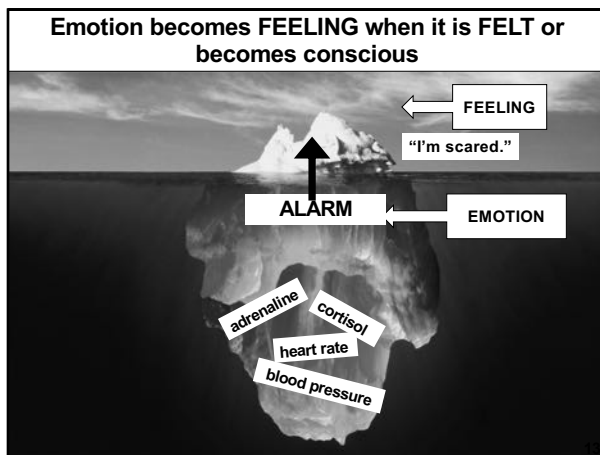
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EXPERIENCES OF SEPARATION

- not being cared for, wanted, or liked by those to whom we are attached
- parents not being present (physically or emotionally)
- shuffling between parents
- being removed from home – foster care
- adoption
- arrival of a sibling
- going to sleep
- adult not happy with us
- the realization that bad things can happen to those to whom we are attached

Separation Alarm is part of the human condition

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When we can't connect our **ALARM** to the separation we are facing.

This is 'alarm without eyes'

ANXIETY

A child who says,
"I'm scared that Mommy/Daddy doesn't love me."
is **feeling** their alarm of the threat of possible separation.

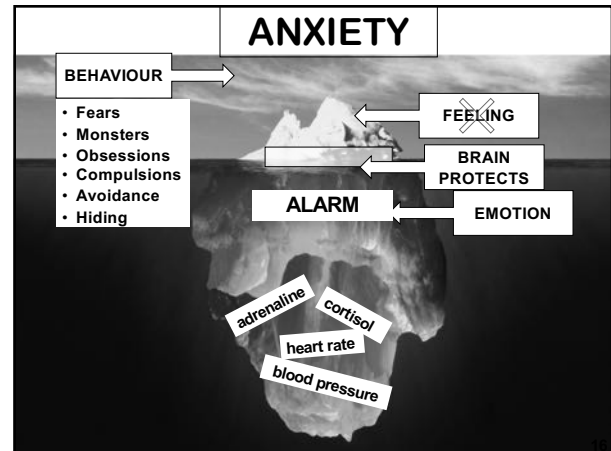
A child who constantly asks,
"Did I do that right? Is this how I do it? Do you like it?"
is experiencing Alarm but not linking it to the threat of possible separation.

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Why can't we connect our **ALARM** to the separation we are facing?

**Our brains protect us
from seeing that which would make us
feel
TOO VULNERABLE
or
TOO WOUNDED.**

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SIGNS OF ELEVATED ALARM

When children can't talk about being "scared" the **ALARM** "energy" gets channeled into other "behaviours"

- anxiety
- obsessions (specific fears)
- compulsions (need to do certain things)
- nightmares
- restlessness
- hyperactivity

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COMPULSIVE ANXIETY-REDUCING BEHAVIOURS

- oral activities such as sucking, chewing, nail biting and eating
- rhythmic activity and stimulation - rocking, pacing, music with a beat, swinging, flickering fire, watching waves, worry beads, stroking, twirling hair, rubbing genitals
- seeking comfort through contact with transitional objects – blankies, stuffed animals
- physical exertion - running, jumping, squirming
- drug taking (in adults) - nicotine, alcohol, marijuana and most prescription drugs (Ritalin)

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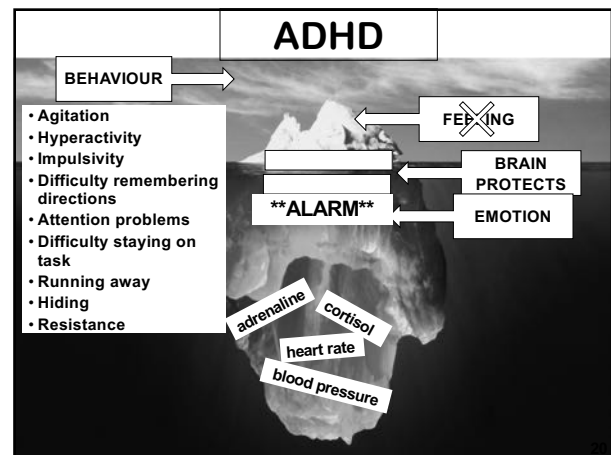
WHEN ALARM BECOMES OVERWHELMING

Our brains protect even more
Now the chemicals of alarm remain but the feelings are numbed out.

The **agitation** of alarm is still there but there are no “feelings” of being scared or no signs of being afraid.

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ADHD – typical characteristics

Distractibility
Can't stay on task
Can't complete tasks
Can't organize self
Poor time management
Motivation issues
Moves all the time
Can't get along with others
Academic deficits and difficulties

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ATTENTION & DISTRACTABILITY

1. Attention is a neutral mechanism that is driven by instinct, emotion and intention.
2. Attention is maintained through a combination of TUNING IN and TUNING OUT.
3. When the natural bias to TUNE IN to **what's wrong** competes with the perceptual defense to TUNE OUT what leads to vulnerable feelings.

ATTENTION SCATTERS.

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What happens when Alarm is defended against?

Attention is focused on

- trying to avoid more vulnerability (leading to more alarm)
- other alarming stimuli (door slamming, voices in the corridor)

As a result the student:

- is easily distracted from the task at hand
- is very fidgety and squirmy
- pays attention to other stimuli in the environment - other students, sounds, items
- looks for distraction from that which is challenging
- as a result, has a hard time finishing tasks
- reluctant or refuses to engage in any task that seems "difficult" (avoidance)
- fatigues easily and gives up – seem unmotivated

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What ELSE happens when Alarm is defended against?

When alarm is very high and **defenses are strong**
(more emotion – less feeling)

The student can:

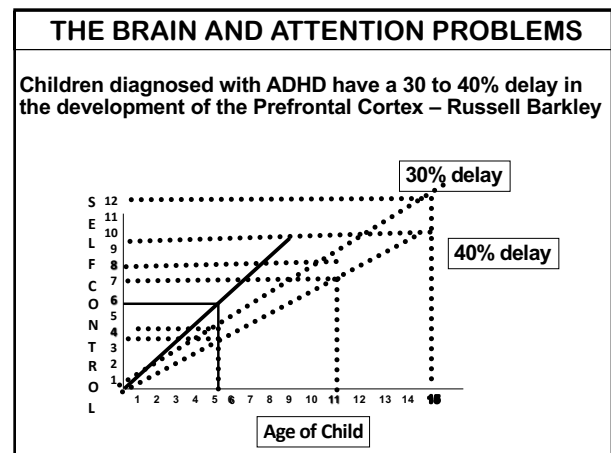
- run away but not seem scared
- can be very silly and “sassy”
- say rude things without seeming angry or distressed
- refuse to listen to adults
- destroy school work
- say, “I don't care”

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ATTENTION AND FOCUS mediated by the Prefrontal Cortex	
Co-ordination of complex tasks	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-Awareness – self-directed attention 2. Inhibition: self-restraint or impulse control 3. Non-Verbal Working Memory: “pictures” 4. Verbal Working Memory: Self-talk 5. Emotional Self-regulation 6. Self-Motivation 7. Planning and Problem Solving 8. Expenditure of effort 9. Time management 10. Respond to & benefit from feedback 11. Resistance to outside influence 	EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

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PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only starts to become connected between 5 to 7 years of age. • Continues to change and develop significantly until mid to late 20's. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fatigues easily. • Development is slowed by stress or complex trauma – too much emotion not enough “feeling”.

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Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences	
Erin E. Edmiston et al., Yale Univ. 2011 Self-reported scores on the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) show that experiences of physical abuse, physical &/or emotional neglect can decrease the volume of the PREFRONTAL CORTEX MALES = IMPULSE CONTROL FEMALES = EMOTIONAL REGULATION	
A.P. Jackowski et al., 2008 Children with PTSD had reduced volume in the Corpus Callosum.	

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PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX DELAY CAUSES DIFFICULTIES IN:	
MOTIVATION « self-starting » - Motivation Deficit Disorder	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty regulating arousal when needed for future events • Difficulty over-riding natural distaste for work at an age-appropriate level 	
TIME MANAGEMENT & ORGANIZATION	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NOW-driven • Short event horizon • Don't see things coming • Do not plan or prepare • Behaviour not guided by consequences of past actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act only when event is upon them • Difficulty increases as get older because the demands increase • Mess builds up over time • Much difficulty juggling demands of complex tasks • Struggle to <u>resist distractions</u>

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PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX DELAY CAUSES DIFFICULTIES IN:	
Personal/Social Development	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with impulse control • Difficulty with emotional regulation – over react • Difficulty in taking another's perspective • Do not see impact of their actions on others • Do not « see it coming » • Seem surprised when others lose patience • Tend not to take responsibility for their actions 	

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Some reasons for escalating alarm

1. As adults become more alarmed children feel the alarm.
2. How we try to manage challenging behaviour:
 - a. Using separation - Time out or isolation
 - b. Using consequences, especially for the immature
 - c. Using reward systems – making attachment contingent on good behaviour

All these increase Separation Alarm for an already alarmed child – who then becomes more defended or hardened.

These interventions also increase Alarm for the “good” children who worry about not being “good enough”.

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WHAT DO STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY, ALARM AND ATTENTION PROBLEMS NEED FROM US?

- To reduce alarm by increasing attachment
- To compensate for an immature brain by providing the external structure their brain is not yet ready to provide naturally
- To reduce agitation by increasing opportunities for physical and emotional release
- To be patient with their development

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HELPING the UNFOCUSED STUDENT

To compensate for attention problems,
CULTIVATE A STRONG RELATIONSHIP:
to ATTRACT ATTENTION



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ENGAGE THE ATTACHMENT INSTINCTS BEFORE TRYING TO GET THE CHILD TO LISTEN OR TO BEHAVE

COLLECT BEFORE YOU DIRECT

space - eyes - a smile - a nod

How can I get the child/ren to look at me
and **smile**?

- Sing a song
- Say a chant
- Funny way to say name – endearing –

**DOES THIS CHILD GIVE ME
PERMISSION TO EXIST IN HIS/HER
PRESENCE?**



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HELPING the UNFOCUSED STUDENT

K 4 AND K5 – seat work

- Keep seatwork activities **SHORT** for all students
- When focus wanders – redirect to completing one small step / fold the paper / highlight the one/s you want completed
- When focus wanders again – provide an alternate activity – **PLAY** – if other children ask why he gets to play – say, “He completed **his** work.”
- Read the group, cut the activity short and give permission for more free play

Insisting on completing an assignment is not necessary
for development

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HELPING the UNFOCUSED STUDENT

Elementary– seat work

- Divide work into small chunks
- When focus wanders –
 - ❖ redirect to completing one small step
 - ❖ fold the paper
 - ❖ highlight the ones you want completed
- Provide encouragement and support – swing by often
- Prioritize the important work
- Accept that much work won't be completed

**It is more important that the student gets a sense of
accomplishment and senses that you value his/her efforts.**

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HELPING the UNFOCUSED STUDENT**HOW ELSE TO HELP**

- Writing assignments – may need computer
- For distraction – Study Carrel
- Remembering and following instructions – on blackboard or note on desk
- Staying on task – “private sign”
- Use name - with a SMILE – in voice and in eyes

By the time these students “hear” your voice, you are likely to be a bit frustrated. Some children only ever see a frustrated adult face – and so it is hard for them to attach and attend to us.

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HELPING the UNFOCUSED STUDENT**SECONDARY - ASSIGNMENTS**

- Divide work into small chunks
- Provide an assignment sheet that indicates what work has been completed and what needs to be done
- Provide encouragement and support – swing by often
- Prioritize the important work
- Assign a study partner
- Accept that much work won't be completed
- Have back up copies of assignment sheets

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HELPING the AGITATED STUDENT**SEE THE ALARM**

Remember, these students don't LOOK alarmed.

Their agitation comes from alarm that is defended against.

These are the students hardest to help because they look like they don't need us – but they DO!

These students need MORE attachment!

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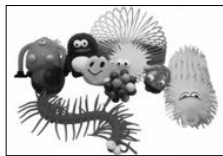
HELPING the AGITATED STUDENT

Provide the student with an environment that is necessary for THEIR level of functioning.

- Tolerate movement – allow for pacing or squirming
- Provide acceptable fidget items
- **Provide sufficient “elbow room”**
- Allow for frequent movement breaks – Active Corner
- Give active jobs
- Use Brain Breaks – all the class will benefit
- Go outdoors!

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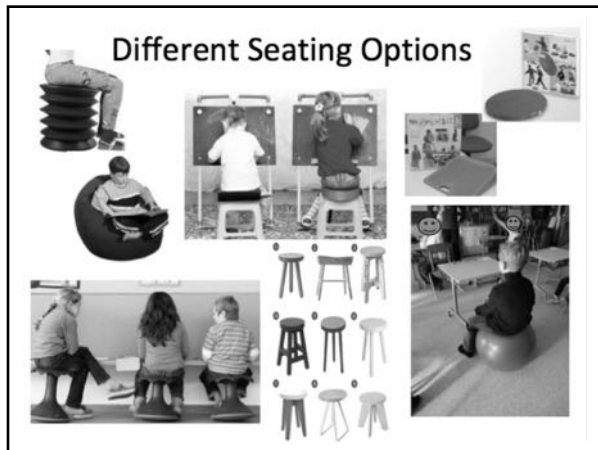
PROVIDE OUTLETS FOR REDUCING ALARM**FIDGET ITEMS****WEIGHTED ITEMS**

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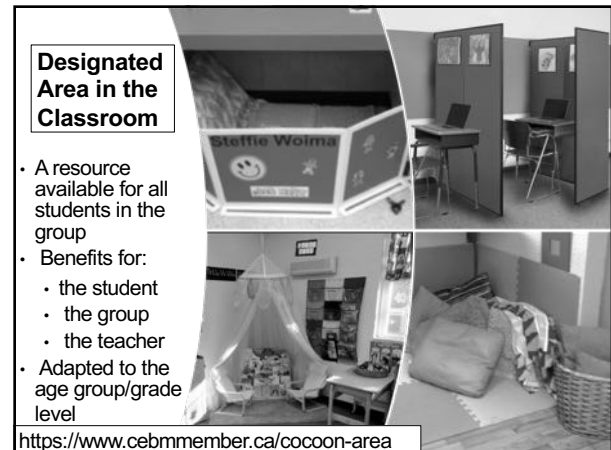
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Different Work Stations

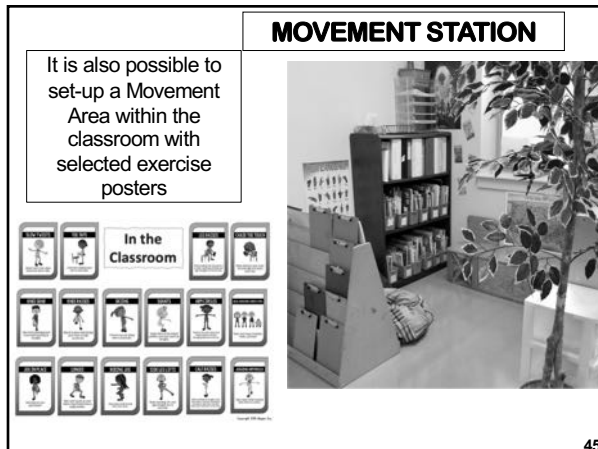
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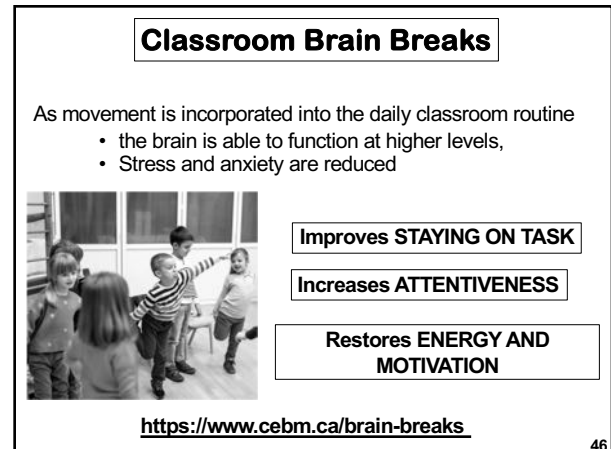
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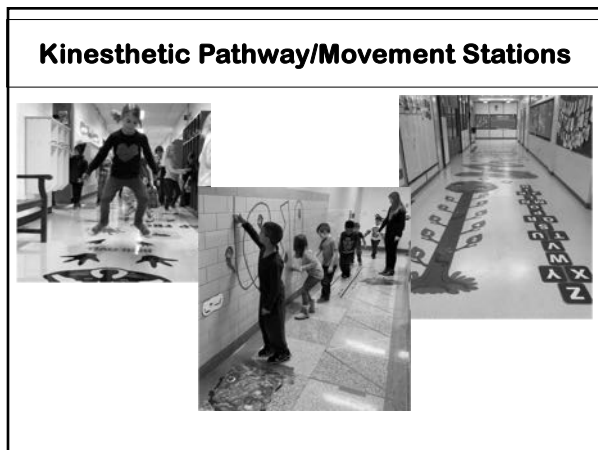
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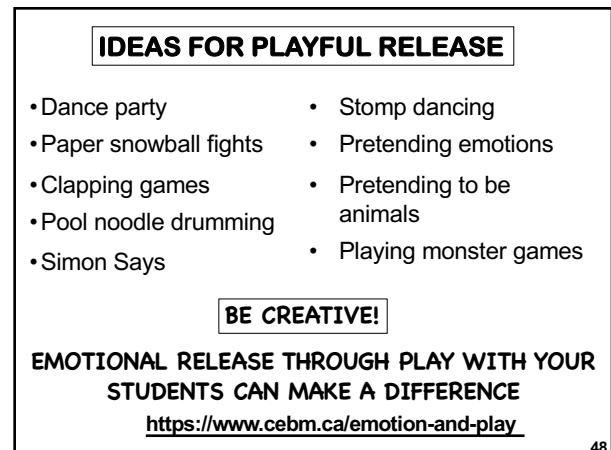
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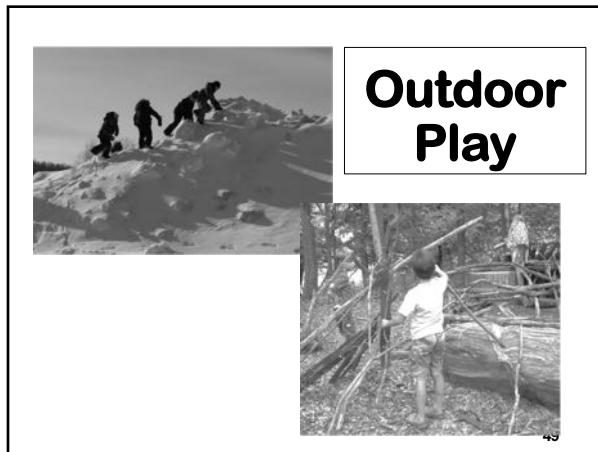
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WAYS TO DECREASE ALARM
1. Help the student to believe that you will continue to help and support despite their "short comings"
2. Bridge all separations
3. <u>Reconsider</u> the use of a behaviour chart
4. <u>Reconsider</u> the use of a behaviour report at the end of the day


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Use Time Away instead of Time Out
KNOW YOUR LIMITS AND WORK WITHIN THEM
If you are starting to "reach your limit" with a student:
1. Send the student to another place <input type="checkbox"/> The "Designated Area" in the classroom 2. Send the student TO SOMEONE with a "task" <input type="checkbox"/> a book or an envelope ➤ Another adult – Behaviour technician, secretary ➤ Nurturing Support Centre 3. Always go to the student and let them know that the relationship is still intact and that you will take care of them the next day.

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PRACTICES TO RECONSIDER
 THE BEHAVIOUR CHART ➤ after the first few weeks of school, it is usually the same children who are in yellow, orange or red ➤ if they could change their behaviour they would ➤ <u>immaturity</u> and <u>emotional needs</u> fuel most "mis-behaviour" ➤ the warning system can cause <u>shame</u> or <u>alarm</u> – displacing behaviour but not changing the underlying cause
USE THE TIME TO FOR PREVENTATIVE INTERVENTIONS

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 USING THE AGENDA TO REPORT A CHILD'S BEHAVIOUR AT THE END OF EACH DAY Does it make things worse?
i. A "red" or "yellow" face puts the child into a state of <u>facing separation – imagining and/or seeing DISAPPOINTMENT</u> on the parent's face. ii. The parent is disappointed, wants to correct the behavior, but it can't happen overnight, so everyone is tense. iii. The parent and child are both frustrated or alarmed and therefore, the child cannot "rest" in the relationship – poor rest increases the likelihood of poor behaviour. iv. "Good" children can become alarmed – fearful of getting a "yellow" or "red" face = Sunday night meltdowns. v. The adults at school are not seen as "safe" because they are the ones reporting the behavior to the parents. vi. Children's <u>anxiety increases</u> or <u>they start not caring</u> . Link to an article: https://tinyurl.com/ybkpvy53

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MINIMIZE THE INFLUENCE OF PEERS
① Expect poor behaviour when the student spends unsupervised time with peers ② Allow the student to spend time in the presence of those more mature. ③ Find "dignified" ways of keeping students separated a. Helping in another class b. Helping others in the school

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BUILD A VILLAGE OF ATTACHMENT

1. Surround the child with as many caring adults as possible
2. Help students form attachments to adults and adults to form relationships to the student
3. Create a positive relationship with the parents
 - Positive phone calls/notes home
 - Welcome parents warmly even when there is "trouble".
 - Avoid overuse of the "green/yellow/red" face type of behaviour management system or digital management systems

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HELPING a STUDENT with CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS

1. Manage the situation
2. Don't expect that any one intervention will correct or "fix" the student.
3. Protect the RELATIONSHIP.
4. Provide more Play Time

The only cure for a student who is full of ALARM is time (lots of time), Attachment and PATIENCE!

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WHAT DO OUR STUDENTS NEED FROM US?UNCONDITIONAL ATTACHMENT

Children are not meant to have to WORK for attachment by earning a star or a green light through meeting social expectations which are beyond them.

When they are working for attachment, they are not able to **rest and grow**.

REMEMBER TO have a SMILE IN YOUR EYES WHEN THEY FINALLY LOOK AT YOU.

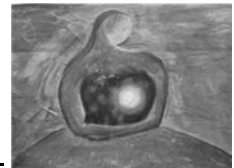
PROVIDE MORE ATTACHMENT (kindness and caring) WHEN BEHAVIOUR IS AT ITS WORST.

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A SENSE OF REST AND SAFETY

1. Put the emphasis on togetherness and relationship
2. **Bridge all separations –**
 - i. welcome the student each day with warmth
 - ii. be the one to restore the relationship
3. Assure the children and youth that adults will continue to be there to care for them when they are at school
4. Reassure the them that we will find a way through even if it is different from what we had in mind



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Eva de Gosztanyi, Martine Demers, Catherine Korah
Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management

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THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT (CEBM)

Welcome to our site! As a support to the 10 English School Boards of Quebec, the CEBM aims to enable boards and their staff to find developmentally friendly and trauma informed interventions that are effective in helping students who are struggling with behavioural challenges in the school setting.

WELCOME BACK!

Upcoming Events 2021-2022

2021-2022 will be another "interesting" year. Things are still in flux, but we are all better prepared for the challenges that a pandemic year.

A website that helps schools to use a developmental-trauma-responsive-attachment friendly approach

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