

Making Sense of Your Child's Social Development in the Early Years

A guide for K4 and K5 parents to understand, support, and nurture young minds.

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The Brain Under Construction

Young children are not simply little adults. Their brains need time to orient to the world. They lack the executive functioning required for complex social interactions.



Multitasking & Perspective



Single-Mindedness

A young child is present in the moment with their dominant thought or emotion. They cannot process multiple perspectives at once.

The “Little Adult” Myth



We expect them to share perfectly, negotiate conflicts fairly, and control their impulses.

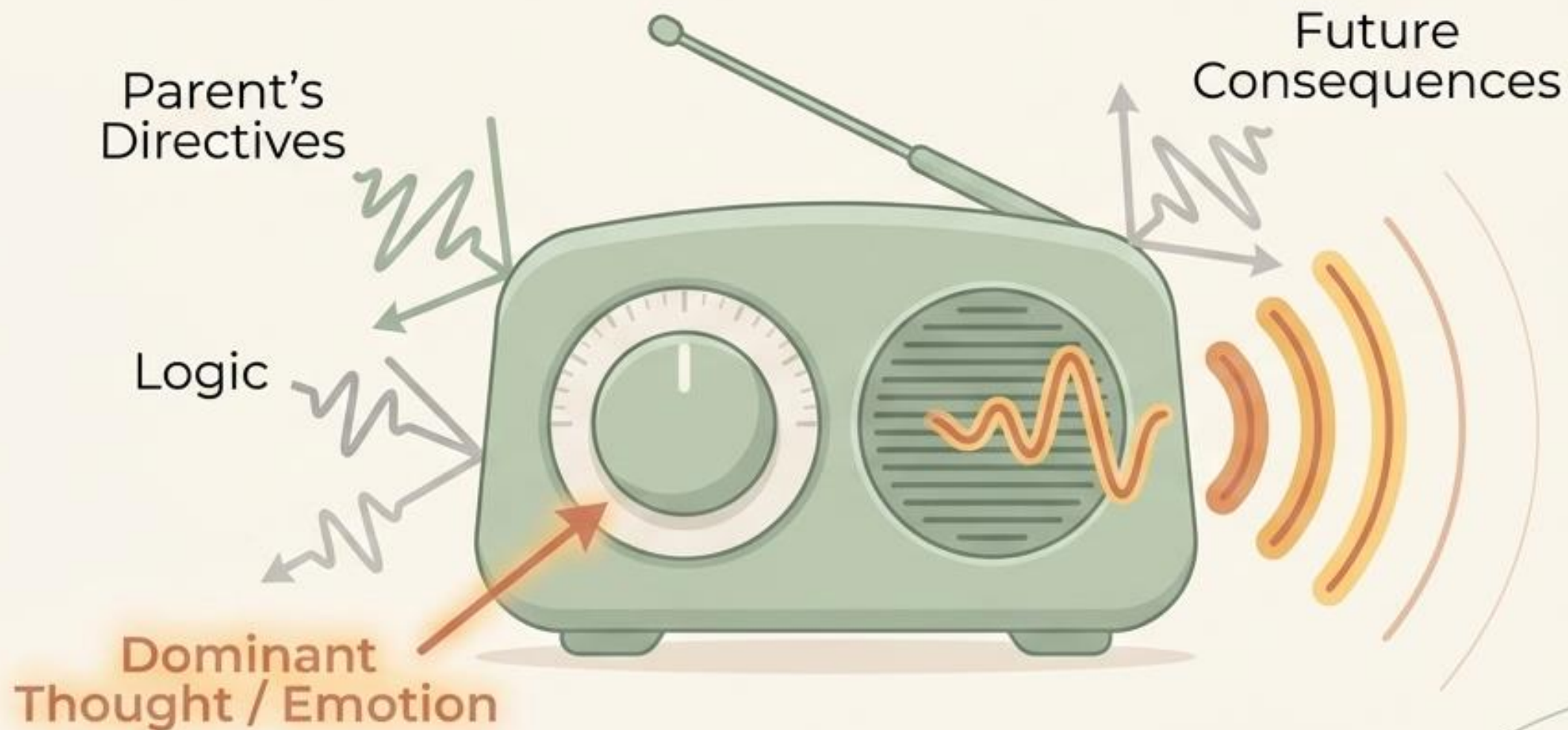
The Biological Reality



Their brains are literally under construction. Nature intentionally protects them from overwhelming social considerations so their tender sense of self can emerge. They are not little adults.

The “One-Channel” Brain

The preschool brain needs time to orient to the world. They become completely absorbed in their current experience. They literally cannot listen to you because they can only attend to one dominant thought or emotion at a time, and it isn't always us.



Young children are not “little adults”

The Expectation	The Developmental Reality
They should understand that fair means sharing everything equally.	They do not yet have a concept of sharing; for them, "fair" means getting it all.
If they do something wrong, they should say sorry immediately.	An insincere apology is useless; their immature brains need emotional regulation first, then repair.
They are in school now and should be able to manage tasks on their own.	Pushing for premature independence creates anxiety; they need to feel safe depending on you first.

The transition to school is difficult because their brains are immature and still under construction.



Anatomy of a Preschooler's Mind

Innocent Egocentrism

The whole world is about themselves. "They are egocentric because in order to share yourself with another person you first have to have a self to share." (D. MacNamara)

Lack of Diplomacy

A purity of action without a filter. (e.g., Saying "She stinks!" while pinching their nose).



Single-Mindedness

Their take on unfairness is entirely one-sided; another's reference point is invisible to them. "Fair" means they get it all.

This 'inconsiderate relating' is normal by design. Being considerate requires executive functioning, which simply hasn't developed yet.

Translating the Early Childhood Dictionary

Concept	Adult Meaning	Child Meaning
Fairness 	Equal sharing and compromise. 	"I get it all!" (Unfairness is purely one-sided).
Diplomacy 	Tact, politeness, and reading the room. 	Pure, unfiltered honesty ("She stinks!" while pinching their nose).
Listening 	Receiving and following adult directions. 	Attending completely to my one dominant thought (which isn't always you).

Everyday Challenges:

Listening and Giving Instructions

The Direct Approach (Less Effective)

Repeat the rules

Raise your voice

Expect immediate
compliance without
connection

The Power of Play (Very Effective)



Adopt a playful approach:

use a puppet or a song to announce the clean-up.



Make eye contact:

ensure you have the child's attention before giving the instruction.



Practice first:

play a game to practice the routine at home with figurines.



Provide structure:

use a simple visual schedule.

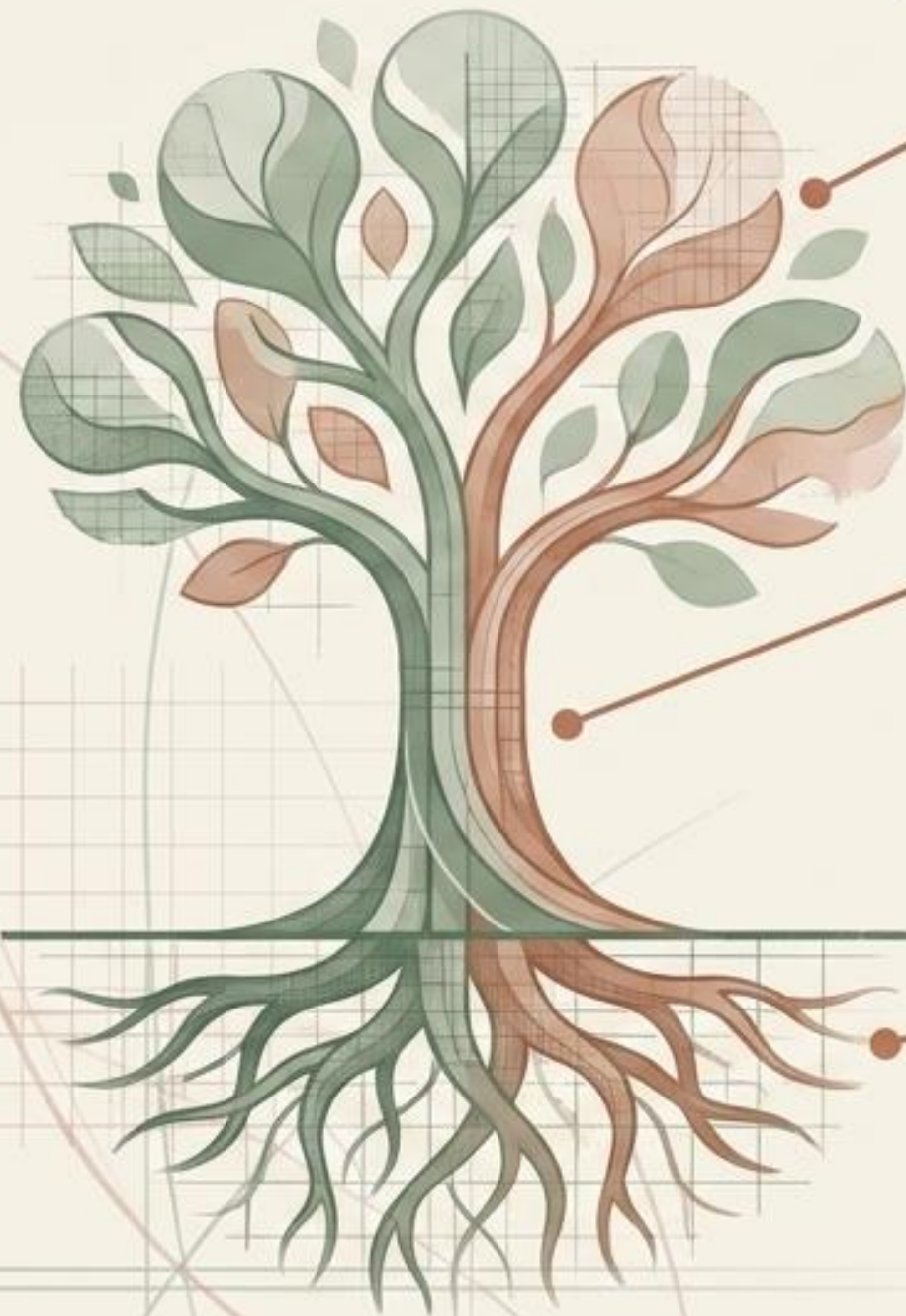
Egocentrism is a Feature, Not a Bug

Why is a young child so seemingly inconsiderate? It is nature's design. This single-minded focus protects them from social considerations that could overwhelm and undermine the emergence of their tender, new identity.



"They are egocentric because in order to share yourself with another person you first have to have a self to share." — Deborah MacNamara

The Empathy Tree: Why We Can't Force Sharing



The Leaves

Consideration & Empathy.
(The civilized form of sharing,
requiring executive function).

The Trunk

Caring. (A natural,
spontaneous emotion evoked
when hearts are soft).

The Roots

Attachment & A Soft Heart.
(Safety, feeling important,
being cared for).

Actionable Insights

- Don't demand the leaves if the roots aren't watered.
- Don't attribute selfish behavior to the child's identity.
- Do: Use fun games that naturally promote sharing (e.g., Mr. Potato Head) rather than forcing it in high-stakes moments.

Everyday Challenge: The Myth of Forced Sharing

Young children do not yet have the executive functioning required to share. Instead of demanding they give up a toy, rely on managing the circumstances.

1. Model It



Respond with generosity when children need help, demonstrating kindness.

2. Use Workarounds



Implement physical systems rather than relying on willpower (e.g., visual timers, clear turn-taking).

3. Play to Share



Propose engaging games that naturally require sharing pieces to succeed (e.g., building a Mr. Potato Head together).

The anatomy of a kindergarten conflict

The Ascent (Trigger)

The brain is flooded. Young children get easily triggered emotionally; their prefrontal cortex cannot see the other person's perspective.

The Incident

Do NOT try to teach a lesson here.
Do NOT talk too much.
Do NOT force a 'sorry'.
The brain cannot process it.

The Cooldown

The child feels badly after the incident, even if they couldn't temper themselves during it. Wait until emotions have subsided.

Repair

Now is the time to focus on the gesture of reparation.

Handling Conflict: Act, Don't Talk

When emotions run high, logic goes out the window.
Don't try to teach a lesson or figure out "who did what to whom."

1. Separate (Preserve Dignity)

Defuse the situation kindly. Give one child something else to play with or ask for their help with a task. No blame.

2. Cool Down

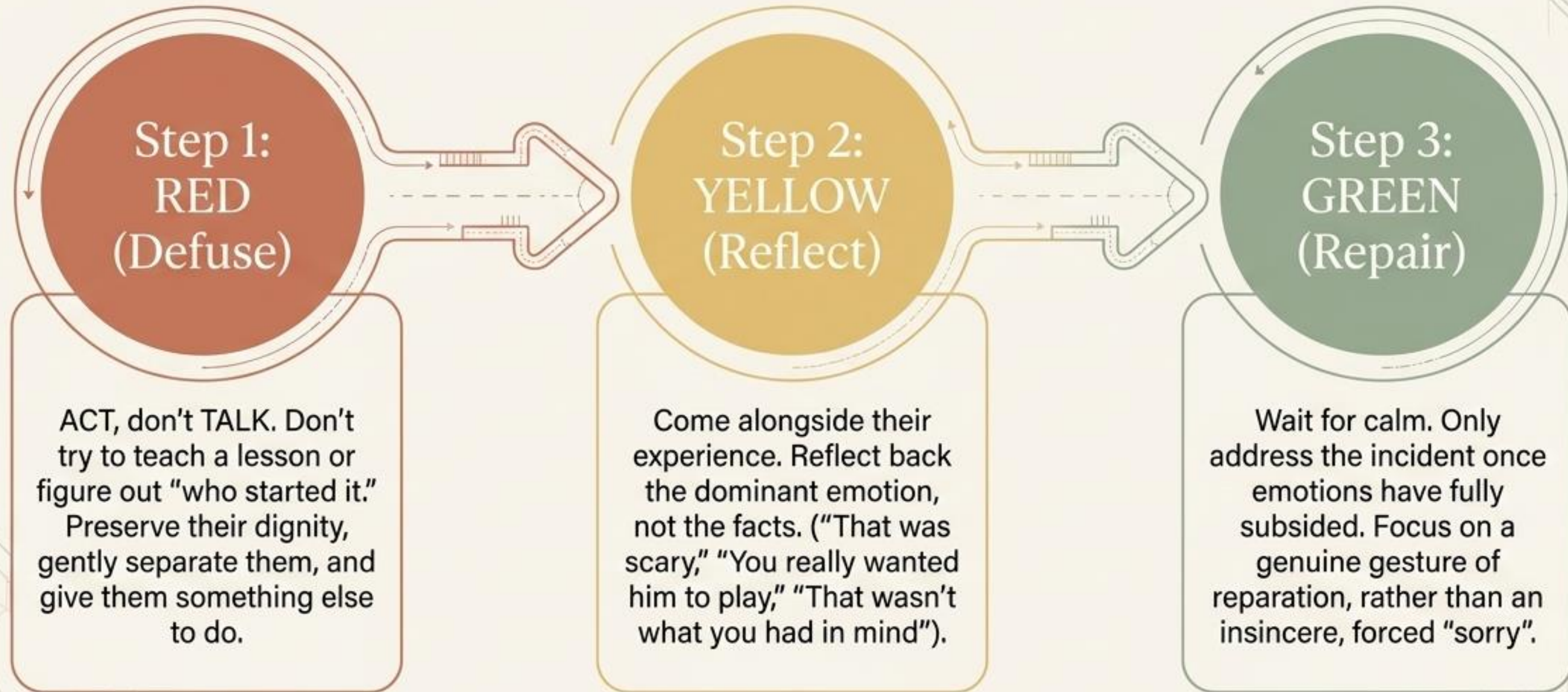
Wait. Do not address the incident until emotions have completely subsided. The immature brain needs time to reset.

3. Reflect the Emotion

Come alongside their experience. Validate what they felt rather than judging the action:

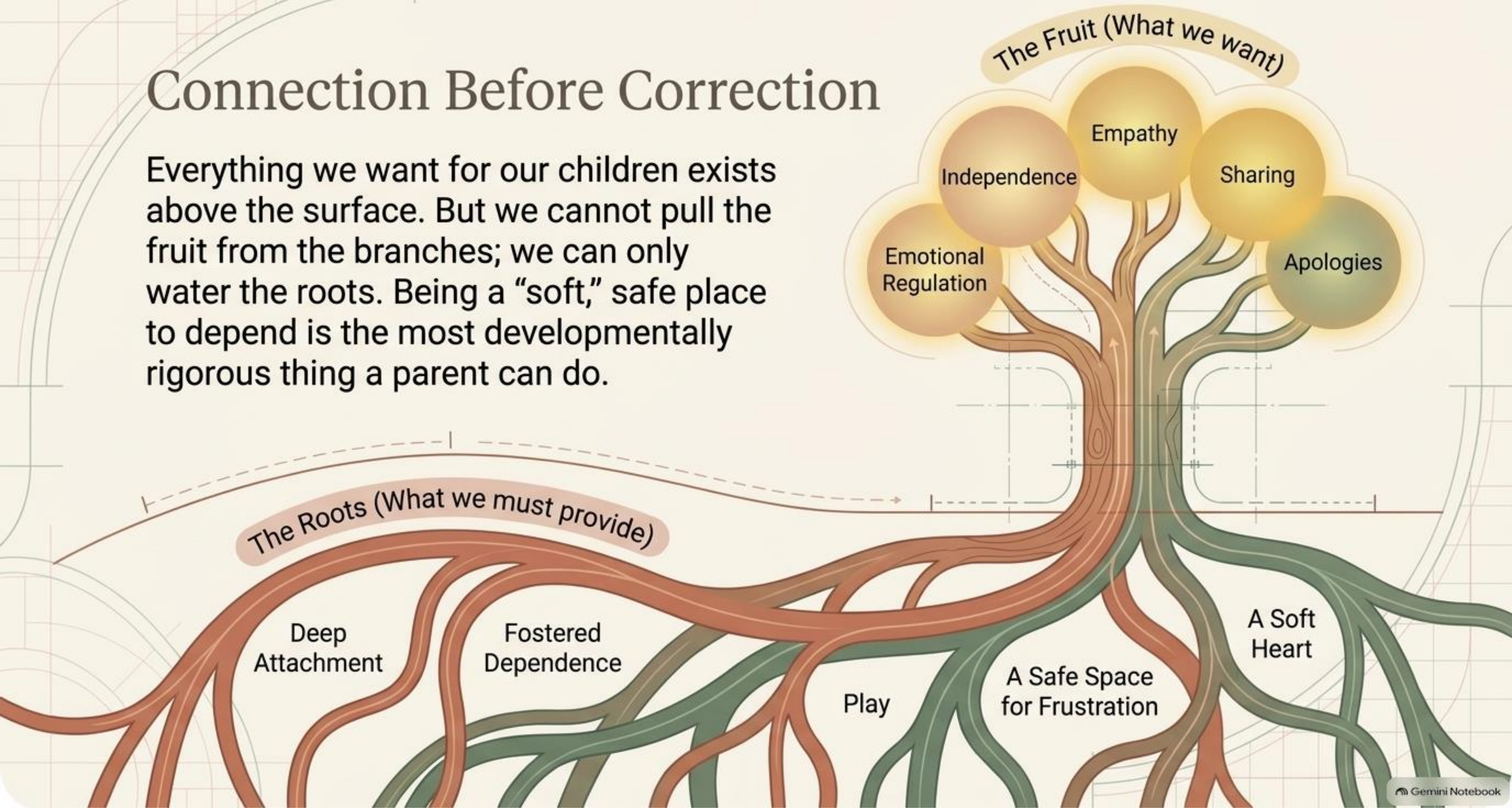
- Frustration: "That wasn't working for you."
- Alarm: "That was scary."
- Sadness: "That was upsetting."

Intervening in Conflict: A Step-by-Step Guide



Connection Before Correction

Everything we want for our children exists above the surface. But we cannot pull the fruit from the branches; we can only water the roots. Being a “soft,” safe place to depend is the most developmentally rigorous thing a parent can do.



Navigating conflict without losing the relationship

Instead of...	Try this...
Figuring out “who did what to whom”	Defusing the situation. Kindly separate the children and preserve their dignity. Give one child something else to play with. ACT, don't TALK.
Forcing an insincere apology	Going to the affected child. Validate their pain. Model the behavior by saying you are sorry the situation turned out this way.
Lecturing on why their behavior was wrong	Reflecting the emotional experience. Name the feeling: “That really wasn't working for you.” “That was scary.” Come alongside their experience.

The “Sorry” Trap

An insincere apology teaches nothing. Even young children know when a forced “sorry” isn’t. Young children often feel badly after an incident, even if they couldn’t temper themselves during it.

Instead of this:



Forcing a child to mumble an empty apology while they are still dysregulated.

Do this:



Go to the affected child. Acknowledge their pain. Say, “I am sorry this happened,” letting both children know you are taking charge. Later, when calm, guide the child toward a genuine gesture of reparation.

Forced vs. Fostered Parenting

Forced (Reactive)	Fostered (Developmental)
The Apology	
Demanding an immediate "Say you're sorry," even if insincere.	Modeling an apology yourself, acknowledging the pain, and waiting for calm to facilitate a genuine gesture of reparation.
Independence	
Pushing the child to do it alone to "build character."	Inviting dependence, offering to do it together, and waiting for natural emergence.
Conflict Resolution	
Acting as a judge to figure out "who did what to whom."	Defusing the situation and validating the messy emotional experience behind the behavior.

Play is the Ultimate Classroom

Familiarize children with complex social concepts through play, not lectures. Play acts as the training wheels for real life, allowing them to practice getting along, waiting, and impulse control safely.



Red Light / Green Light

Practicing listening and impulse control.



Puppets & Figurines

Exploring social situations and role-playing conflict resolution safely.



Storybooks

Building community, exploring diversity, and discussing feelings.

Establishing the Adult Posture

When a child has the 'right' conditions, they do better.
You are the architect of those conditions.

Strong Leadership

Taking a caring, alpha lead so they feel safe to depend on you.

Providing Rest

Ensuring adequate supervision, transitions, and outdoor opportunities to switch gears.



Predictability

Using visual schedules and consistent routines.

Making Room

Giving them safe space to voice frustration and emotional outbursts.

The Paradox of Independence

Society tells us to push children to do things alone so they become independent.
The science of attachment (Dr. Gordon Neufeld) tells us the exact opposite.



Why pushing for independence backfires

Resistance and opposition happen when the experience of outside pressure is greater than the child's sense of their own will.

The Heavy Pressure



The Child's Internal Will



Takeaway: “NO! I do it myself, but don’t make me!” Placing outside pressure towards independence prematurely triggers frustration and opposition.

The Formula for Resistance

Why do they say, "NO! I do it myself, but don't make me!"?
Resistance happens when the experience of outside pressure outweighs the child's own sense of will.

Outside Expectations > Child's Initiative = **Resistance**

Parental Pressure > Child's Purpose = **Opposition**

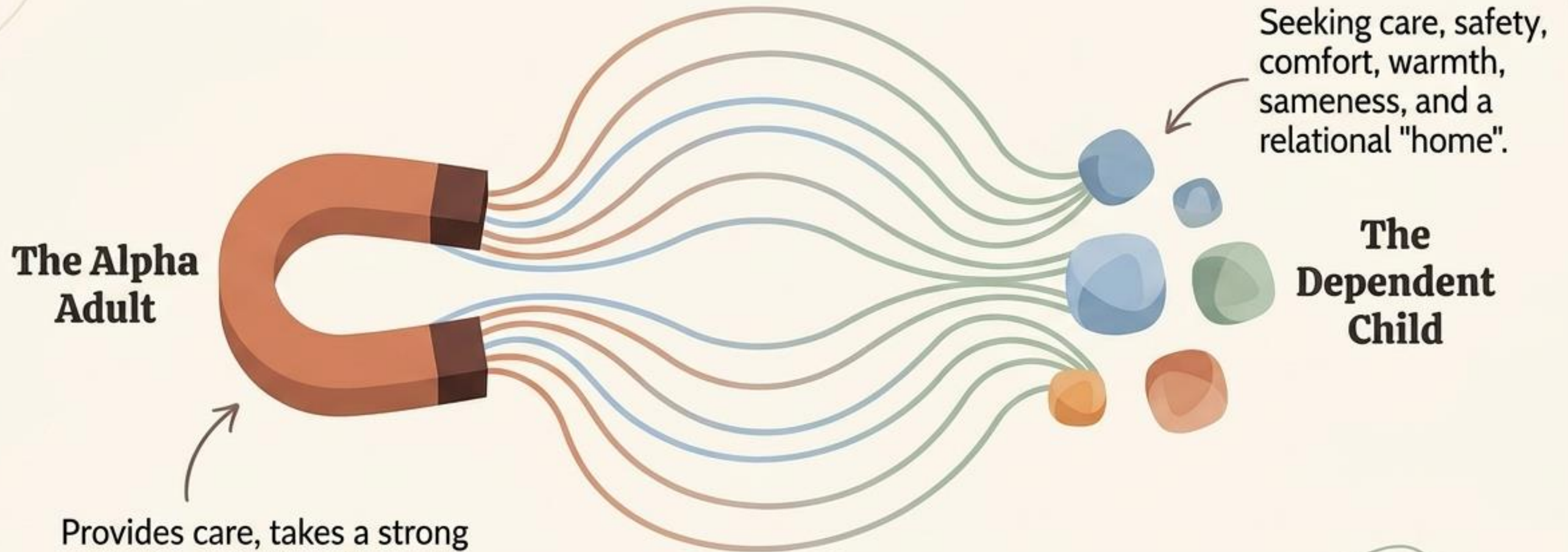
Our Demands > Their Desires = **Pushback**

"Have To's" > "Want To's" = **Reluctance**

Adult Input > Child's Curiosity = **Defiance**

The invisible pull of attachment

True independence and social maturity do not come from discipline alone; they come from deep, dependable attachment.

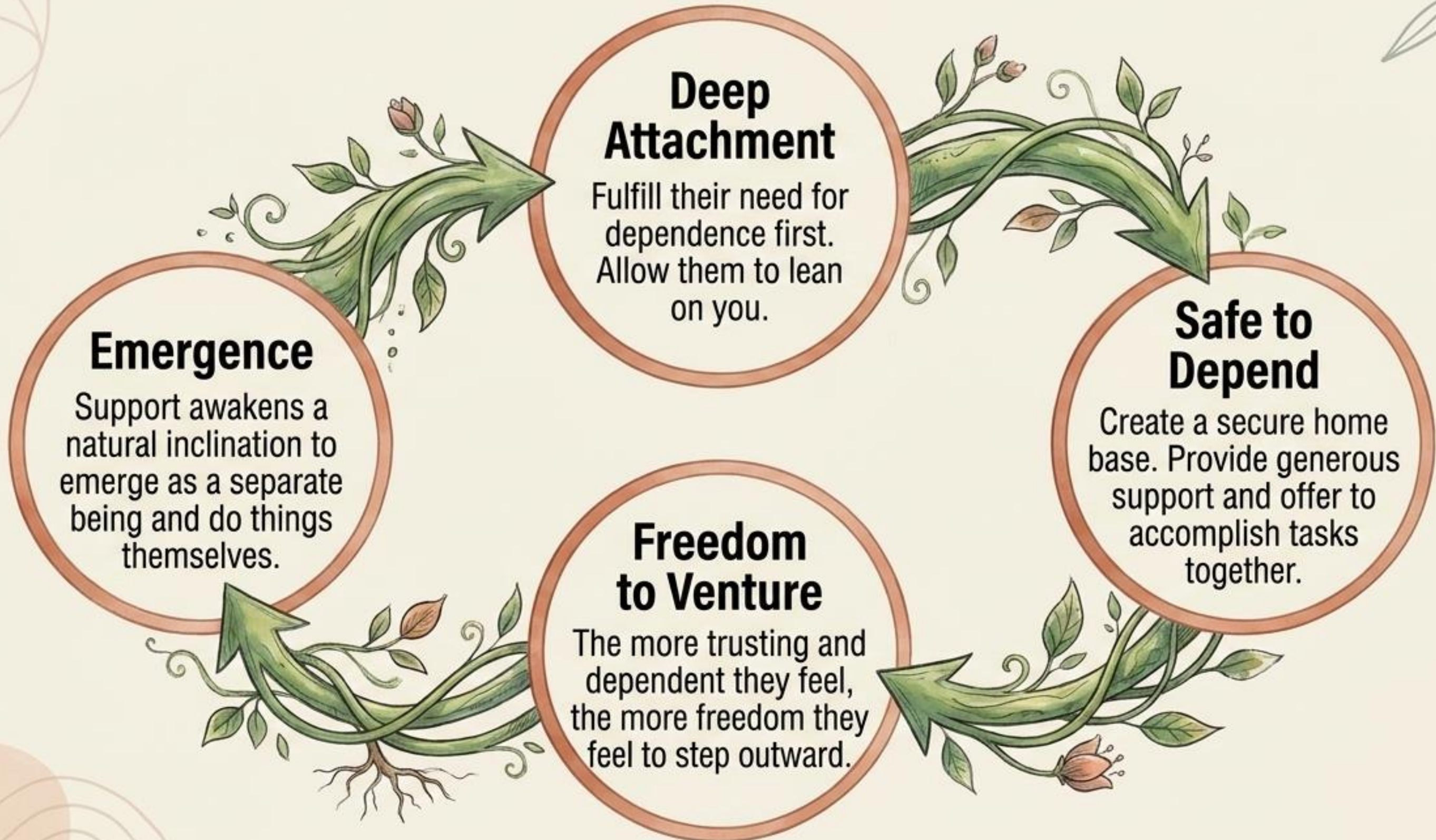


Provides care, takes a strong caring lead, invites dependence, offers an invitation to exist. Provide more care than is pursued.

Seeking care, safety, comfort, warmth, sameness, and a relational "home".

Key Insight: A child's instinct to attach to a caring adult provides a natural leadership influence. Inspire dependence by taking a strong, caring lead.

The path to independence starts with dependence



The central paradox of early childhood



Social maturity is not a skill we can force a child to practice; it is a developmental stage they will reach when we provide the right environmental conditions and a strong relational home.

You don't have to navigate this alone.

The Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management (**CEBM**) has built a comprehensive toolkit designed specifically for parents of K4 and K5 children.

Visual guides for routines and rules

Step-by-step conflict resolution posters

Guides on the benefits of play and reading



Explore the CEBM K4-K5 Toolkit

Watch & Read Together

YouTube Read-Alouds

Curated video links for books exploring social development, body boundaries, and inclusion (e.g., All We Need is Love, The Sorry Plane).

Parent Night Video Capsules

Quick, digestible video advice on handling K4/K5 practices.

Adult Resources & Articles

Emergence & Independence

Rethinking dependence and fostering their own person.

Sharing & Kindness

How to grow caring kids.

Friendship & Conflict

Steering through sibling conflict and why forced 'sorrys' do more harm than good.

Discipline

Shifting the lens on time-outs and consequences.

Access the full library of resources, articles, and printables at:
www.cebmmember.ca/k4-k5-social-development