

## POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT ISLANDS AND BRIDGES: A METAPHOR FOR THE BRAIN

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Our brain is an amazing but complex system. Here we share a simple metaphor to help carers understand what a child's brain is coping with when it comes to challenging behaviour.

### Islands, bridges and trauma

The brain can be thought of as three islands:

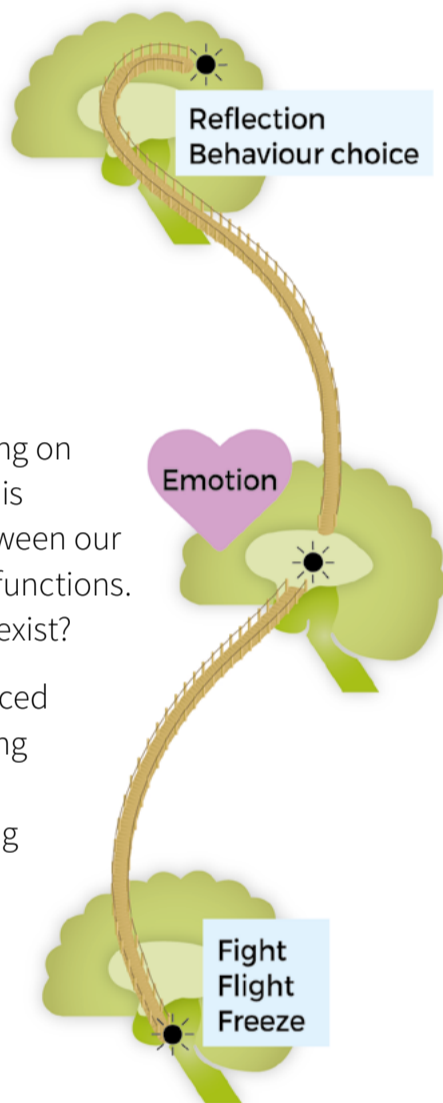
- the **cortex** island – responsible for executive functions like reflection, inhibition and problem-solving
- the **limbic** island – responsible for emotion, threat detection and memory
- the **brainstem** island – responsible for fight, flight, freeze responses.

Each island comes in to play depending on what we are doing and how our body is responding to it. We use 'bridges' between our brain islands to access their different functions. But what happens if a bridge doesn't exist?

For many children who have experienced trauma, they often have a bridge linking their **limbic island** and **brainstem island**. When these children feel strong emotions (limbic island) they quickly divert to using their reptilian brain (brainstem island) responsible for primitive emotional and behavioural responses, such as fight, flight, freeze. However, these children rarely have a bridge linking their **limbic island** with their **cortex island**, meaning they can't access higher order thinking needed to understand and regulate their emotions.

When we teach a child coping (regulation) skills, those skills stay on their cortex island, while the child remains on their limbic island feeling highly unstable and out of control. This is because they have no bridge to their cortex island to use the necessary skills.

Our role in caring for children is to help children build bridges from their limbic island to their cortex island and to walk alongside them to help them access higher order thinking such as problem solving, regulation, expression and reflection. Our job is to help co-regulate children when they are distressed, which over time gradually builds their bridge to their cortex island.



### What carers can do to help children build bridges

#### Brainstem island – Create safety

- **Empathise with and accept emotions:** Be genuinely curious about the child's experience – share and enjoy their various emotional states. Sit with and provide support to the child when they are upset or distressed and role model emotional regulation.
- **Build a strong sense of belonging:** Embrace the child as part of your family and community and engage in rituals to mark this belonging.
- **Understand and look after yourself:** This is so you can provide a secure relationship to the child. Reflect on your own stress responses and manage your stress through rest, relaxation and connection with others.

#### Limbic island – Build the relationship

- Build the child's relational web. This is the number of people the child has a positive relationship with. Help the child to enjoy relationships.
- Parent with PACE. Base your interactions with the child on Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy to help the child regulate and make sense of their experiences. Avoid battles and power struggles (confrontation). Empathise with and understand the child's feelings and behaviours and connect those for them to help them learn.
- Provide structure and supervision. Develop predictability in the child's environment and set boundaries to help them feel safe.

#### Cortex island – Support behaviour

- Support the child to think, feel and make behavioural choices. Comment on their feelings and why they might be feeling a particular way, to help them understand the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Help the child problem-solve and generate natural consequences when they are calm, and provide praise and rewards.

Don't forget part 1 and 2 in our positive behaviour support series to help you understand and manage challenging behaviour.

*Note: The terms 'child' and 'children' also refer to 'young person' and 'young people'.*

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

> Training Institute – Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy Institute, 2018. *Dyadic Developmental Practice, Psychotherapy and Parenting. Introducing a Framework for Therapy and Parenting Developmentally Traumatized Children.*

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