

KATY WHEELER, PHD, BCBA, LSSP

BUILDING A  
FOUNDATION FOR  
RELATIONAL SAFETY

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AKA -  
"I'M YOUR  
NERVOUS  
SYSTEM;  
WHERE CAN I  
PUT MY  
STUFF?"



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PERSONAL  
DISCLOSURE

- I am a certified BCBA and LSSP and have practiced as a BCBA for over 8 years, am a newly minted LSSP, and have worked in schools in some capacity for 5 years.
- I have worked under appropriate study, mentorship, and case consultation models to support my growth in these practices related to relational/feelt safety
  - I am by no means an expert! In anything! Except maybe Frasier and Clarkson's Farm...



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### AGENDA

- Introduction to key components
- Overview of a paradigm shift
- Overview of Safety-Challenge-Threat (S-C-T)
- How S-C-T fits into schools
- Relational/Felt Safety
- Case Examples (threaded throughout)
- Wrap up

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- At the end of this training, participants will:
  - Describe safety-challenge-threat (S-C-T)
  - Summarize how S-C-T relates to learner behavior from a respondent conditioning lens
  - Identify 2-3 related strategies that can prevent behavioral escalation
  - Identify 1-2 intervention strategies to further support regulation

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### KEY TERMS

- Safety
  - Reduces fear; subjective
- Challenge
  - Involves stress response that can be positive but possibly move to "tolerable"
- Threat
  - Real or perceived harm (physical or psychological) that may lead to toxic stress response and/or automatic fear response
  - NOTE: if a challenge does not match a person's capacity, this can lead to threat

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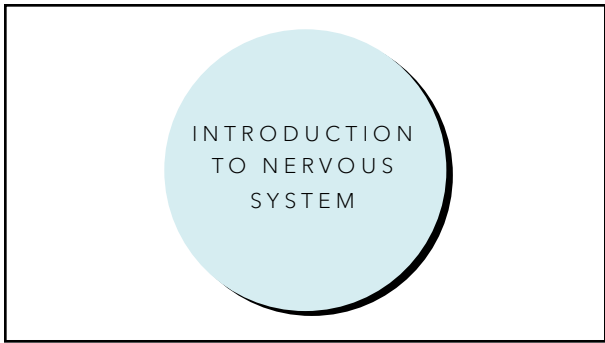
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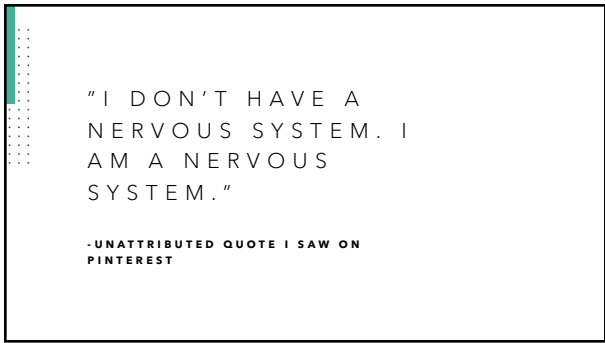
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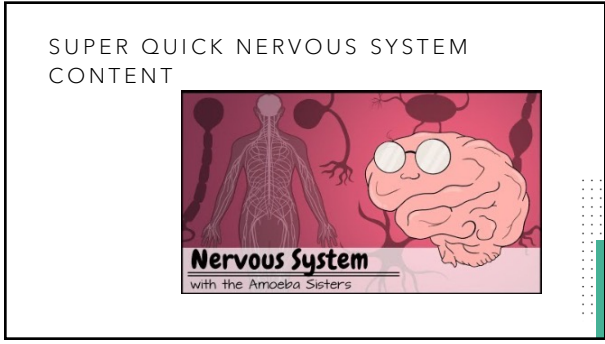
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SO, WHAT ABOUT IT?

- The nervous system evaluates *risk*

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SO, WHAT ABOUT IT?

- The nervous system evaluates *safety*

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DISCUSS

- How does your current role/campus/district consider and implement strategies related to the nervous system?



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**Please engage in self-care during this activity!**

Some of the music selected is intended to feel discomfiting.

**RULES OF THE GAME**

I'm going to play a music clip

You're going to listen and evaluate whether your body is signaling *safe* or *unsafe*

Hold up your paddle with what you're feeling

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SONG 1

*DRIVING MISS DAISY*

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SONG 2



A small speaker icon is located in the bottom left corner of the slide.

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SONG 3



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SONG 4



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SONG 5



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INTRODUCTION  
TO RELATIONAL  
SAFETY

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“PERHAPS OUR  
MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE  
ROLE OF SAFETY IS BASED ON  
AN ASSUMPTION THAT WE THINK  
WE KNOW WHAT SAFETY MEANS”

DR. PORGES

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### WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT RELATIONAL AND FELT SAFETY?

- Behavioral concerns yield challenges in working with/caring for children.
- Behaviors of concern ARE NOT always related to willfulness.

Purvis et al., 2015; nrfcare.org

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### SAFETY IS ASSOCIATED WITH...

- Different environmental features
  - Defined by bodily response
  - Not defined by cognitive evaluations
- EXAMPLE.



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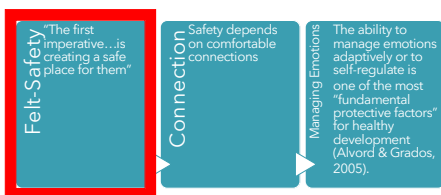
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### WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT FELT SAFETY?



Bath, 2008

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WHAT IS FELT SAFETY?

- Multi-faceted
- Subjective

• "Felt-safety is derived from trusting relationships, an idea that is central to attachment theory" (Purvis et al., 2015)

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HOW CAN WE FACILITATE FELT SAFETY?  
(PURVIS ET AL., 2015; PURVIS ET AL., 2007)

- Empowering
  - Ecological and Physiological strategies
- Connecting
  - Mindful Awareness
  - Engagement

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CASE STUDY

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THE BACKGROUND

- Early childhood special education
- Eligibility of AU
- Non-speaking

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THE RESPONDENT CONDITIONING PROCESS



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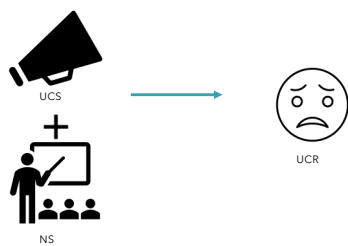
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THE RESPONDENT CONDITIONING PROCESS



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THE RESPONDENT CONDITIONING PROCESS



The diagram illustrates the respondent conditioning process. On the left, a stick figure stands at a whiteboard with a checkmark, representing the Classical Stimulus (CS). A blue arrow points to the right, where a sad face icon represents the Conditioned Response (CR).

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WHAT WE DID

- CONSIDERED THE PARADIGM OF SAFETY-CHALLENGE-THREAT

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INTERVENTION

- Looked at interventions that build felt safety
  - In this case, using a component of Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (don't worry, I am certified, no violation of 1.05 here!)

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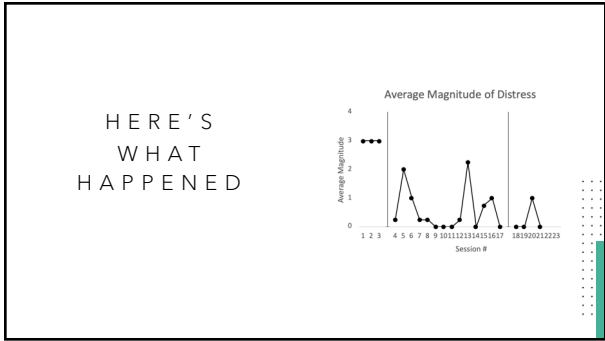
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OVERVIEW: THE INITIAL PARADIGM AND HOW TO SHIFT

Nnrifcare.org

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"LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING, WANDA. OFTENTIMES WHAT IS ISN'T, AND WHAT ISN'T IS."



MS. FRIZZLE

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### COMPLIANCE V. NON-COMPLIANCE

#### compliance noun

com·pli·ance (kəm-ˈpli-ənt) ❧

Synonyms of *compliance* >

- 1 **a** : the act or process of *complying* to a desire, demand, proposal, or regimen or to coercion  
 Patient *compliance* in completing the treatment regimens was excellent.  
 — George A. Crookes
- b** : conformity in fulfilling official requirements  
 His actions were in *compliance* with state law.
- 2 : a disposition to yield to others
- 3 : the ability of an object to yield elastically when a force is applied : **FLEXIBILITY**

nrcare.org; merriam-webster.com

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SAFETY -  
CHALLENGE -  
THREAT



nrcare.org

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THIS SHIFT =

- Shifting how we are interpreting behavior
  - Which can then shift how we respond to behavior

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### BACKGROUND: INTERACTIONS

- **Repeated positive interactions** develop positive relationships.
  - Need to limit negative interactions for these positive patterns to take hold.
- **Negative interactions:**
  - (a) may cause anger or sadness;
  - (b) may damage trust between teacher and students; and/or
  - (c) may disrupt the learning environment.

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### INTERACTION RITUAL CHAINS (KENNEDY & JUNKER, 2023)

- Individuals bring **emotional energy (EE)** to an interaction ritual
  - This is based on the EE from **previous similar situations**
    - **Patterns of individuals' EE may repeat and reinforce each other**
- Power differentials can affect EE
  - Individual in position of power (teacher, admin) = more likely to have positive EE
  - Individual receiving orders (student) = more likely to have negative EE

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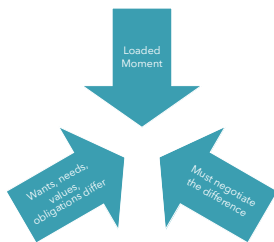
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### LOADED MOMENTS (KENNEDY & JUNKER, 2023)



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LOADED MOMENTS (KENNEDY & JUNKER, 2023)

- De-escalation of a loaded moment maintains or restores harmony
- Escalation of a loaded moment leads to conflict



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LOADED MOMENTS: WHAT PROMPTS THEM? (CHAMBERLAIN ET AL., 2020)

- Mismatches:
  - In power versus autonomy
  - In perceived fairness
  - In participation and response



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WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

- Supports relational and felt safety
- Provides alternative to current practices.



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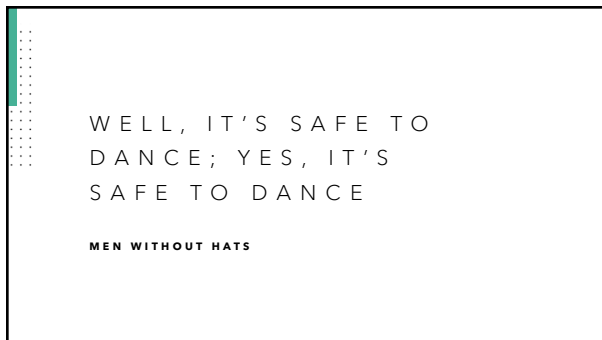
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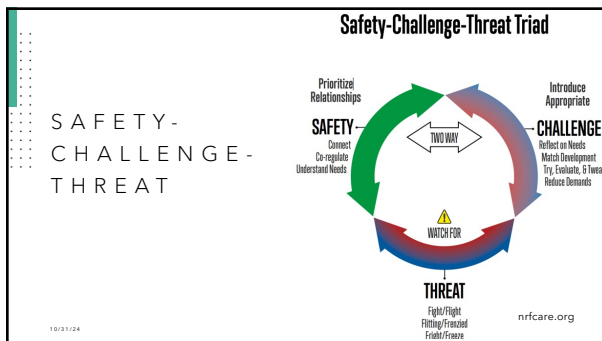
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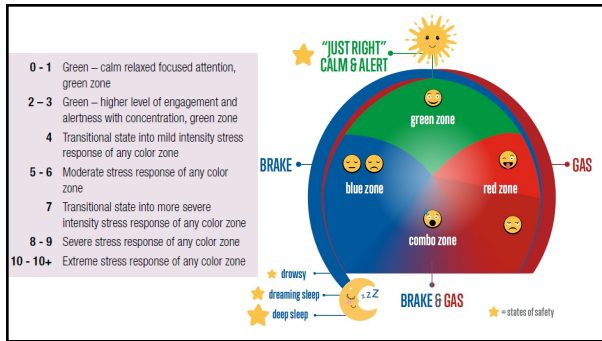
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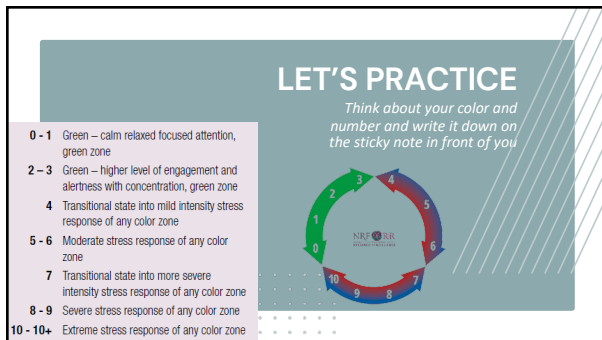
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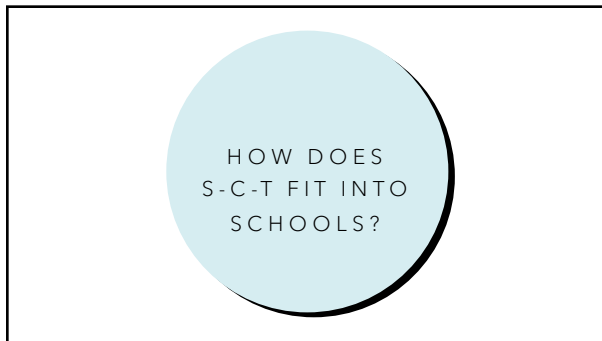
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" I LIKE A TEACHER  
WHO GIVES YOU  
SOMETHING TO TAKE  
HOME AND THINK  
ABOUT BESIDES  
HOMEWORK "

LILY TOMLIN

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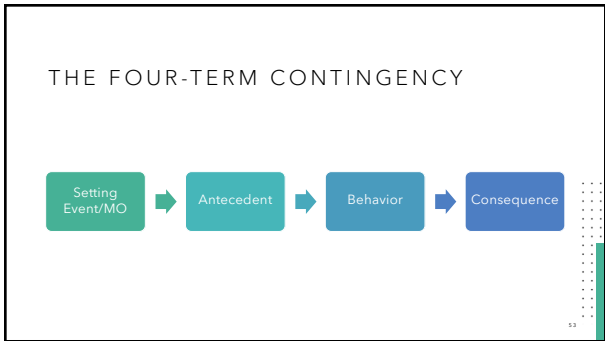
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4-TERM (CONTINUED) PORGES, 2015

- Autonomic state sits in our MO
  - Including feelings of being safe
- Autonomic state changes = shifts in probability that specific behaviors and \*feelings\* will occur
- *We respect the physiological state as a "major determinant of the range of behavior that can be expressed."*
  - What does this **mean**?

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VARIABILITY



- The old classic –  
– Can't Do v. Won't Do

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HOW DOES THIS FIT IN OUR PRACTICE?

- We are tuned in to our students!
- We all affect each other
  - Think back to our loaded moments!
- We need to listen to our *own body responses*

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Antecedent Modifications

Environmental modification prior to behavior occurring

Change the conditions that bring on interfering behaviors

ANTECEDENT MODIFICATIONS

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ANTECEDENT STRATEGIES/MODIFICATIONS

- How we say something matters
- Pacing
- Being positive versus negative
- Clearly stating task requirements

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6 CATEGORIES OF ANTECEDENT-BASED INTERVENTIONS

- Using Learner Preferences
- Changing Schedules / Routines
- Implementing Pre-Activity Interventions
- Using Choice Making
- Altering How Instruction is Delivered
- Enriching the Environment

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SKILL ACQUISITION

- TEKS (Don't hate me...)
  - The student is expected to develop **social communication** such as introducing himself/herself, using common greetings, and **expressing needs and wants**. ELAR.K.1.E
  - The student is expected to **listen actively**, to **interpret verbal and non-verbal messages**, **ask relevant questions**, and make **pertinent comments**; ELAR.5.1.A
  - The student is expected to ask questions **and define problems based** on observations or information from text, **phenomena, models, or investigations**; Science.8.1.A
  - The student is expected to **identify and describe common traits** that define cultures and culture regions; Social Studies(Culture)6.13.A

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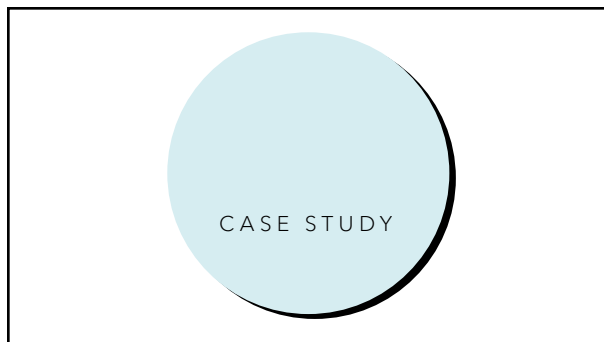
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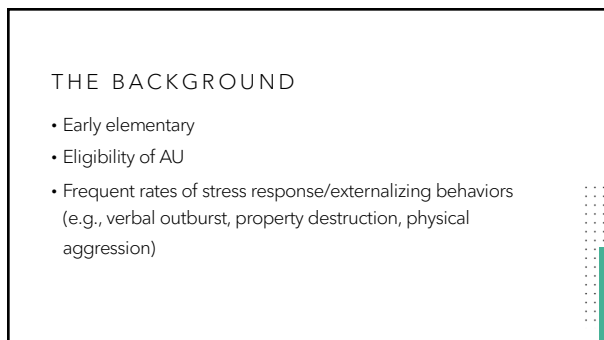
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### INTERVENTION

- BST on S-C-T
- Consistent check-ins
- Introduction of body signals

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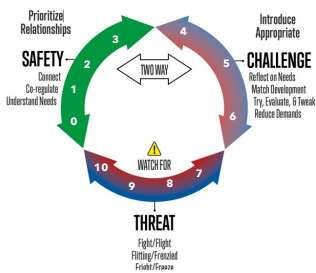
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### Safety-Challenge-Threat Triad



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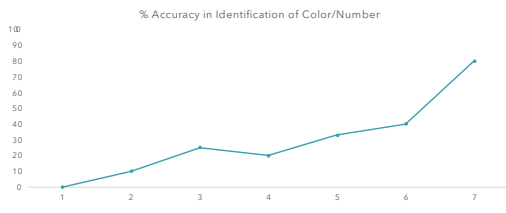
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### WHAT'S YOUR COLOR AND NUMBER?



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**BODY SIGNALS**

- Temperature
- Heart Rate
- Breathing
- Muscle Tension
- Whole Body.

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**BUILDING CONNECTEDNESS**

- Contact moments that support connectedness = building positive relationships
  - These shape *later* contact moments.
- Examples of contact moments that support connectedness (nrhcare.org):
  - Looking at the person\*
  - Vocalizing/singing
  - Rocking/body movement/dancing
  - Familiar/positive tastes and smells

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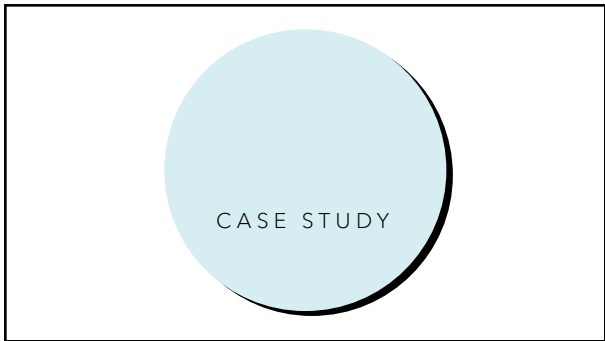
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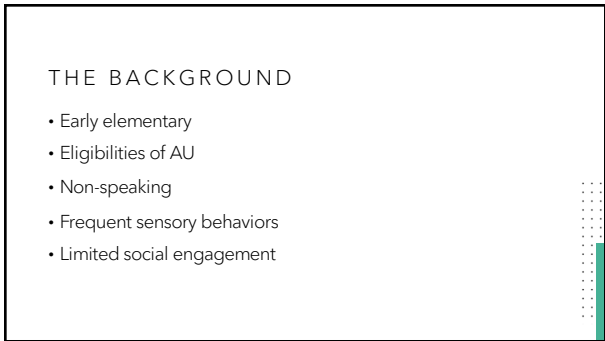
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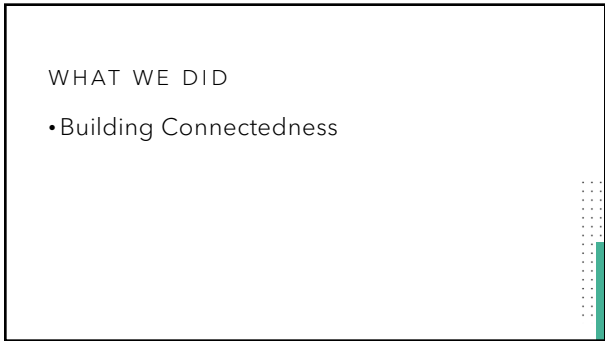
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INTERVENTION

- Child-directed interaction

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**P** raise

**R** effect

**I** mitate

**D** escribe

**E** njoy



Funderburk & Eyberg, 2011

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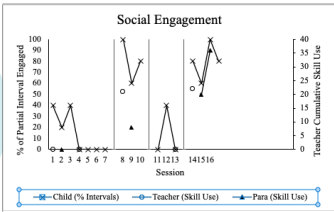
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WHAT HAPPENED



Session	Child (% Intervals)	Teacher (Skill Use)	Para (Skill Use)
1	40	0	0
2	30	0	0
3	45	0	0
4	35	0	0
5	30	0	0
6	30	0	0
7	30	0	0
8	100	10	0
9	90	15	0
10	80	20	0
11	100	25	0
12	90	30	0
13	100	35	0
14	90	40	0
15	100	35	0
16	100	40	0

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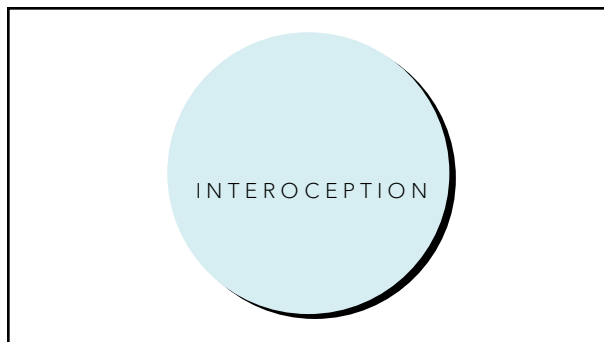
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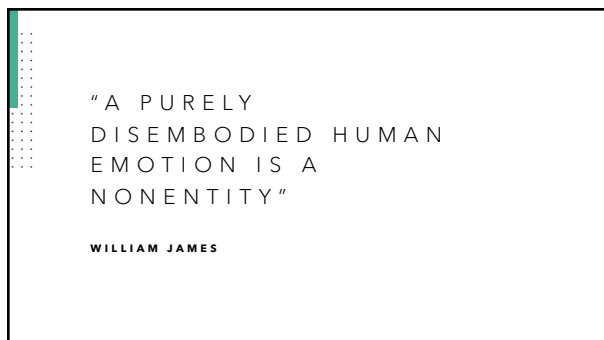
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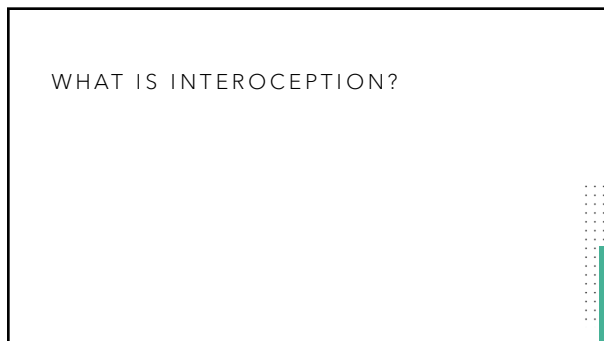
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WHAT IS INTEROCEPTION?

- Sensory signaling
- Arises from physiological processes inside the body
- Sends sensory signals to the brain

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INTEROCEPTIVE AWARENESS

- Ability to perceive, identify, recognize interoceptive signals
- Brings interoception into a conscious level
- Can affect behavioral responses.

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INTEROCEPTIVE AWARENESS

- The key to *managing* how we feel is *understanding* how we feel first

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EXAMPLE:

- Step 1: noticing the cue
- Step 2: contextualizing the cue
- Step 3: doing something about the cue

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INTEROCEPTION AND EMOTION REGULATION

- Emotional regulation is an aspect of the multi-layered self-regulatory system which determines behavioral responses
  - But what about our students who have barriers?

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DISCUSSION

- What ER systems are you currently using in your campuses/districts?



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BARRIERS TO CURRENT E.R. PRACTICES

- Top-down



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CASE STUDY

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THE BACKGROUND

- Young Adult
- AU, ADHD, Anxiety
- Difficulties in emotion regulation
- Difficulties in identifying interoceptive cues



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WHAT WE DID

- Discrimination training of interoceptive domains



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WHAT HAPPENED



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ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES



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"A QUEST FOR SAFETY  
IS THE BASIS FOR  
LIVING A SUCCESSFUL  
LIFE"  
  
DR. PORGES

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NOTE:  
  
• I have tried to ensure these strategies are not simply  
for our early childhood or early elementary learners,  
but also for our secondary and postsecondary  
learners.

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PREVENTATIVE

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ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES AND SENSORY MODULATION (LEBEL ET AL., 2014)

- Sensory tools can reduce tension associated with intense emotions
- How: identify sensory preferences, offer before/when escalation first starting

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SENSORY

- Music (Kemper & Danhaur, 2005; McPherson et al., 2019)
  - Perhaps of all the most basic elements of music, rhythm most directly affects our central nervous system." George Crumb (American composer)
- Pressure/sensory input (Grandin, 1992; Burleson & Davis, 2013; Morrison, 2016)
  - "Pressure is calming to the nervous system." Temple Grandin

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SKILL ACQUISITION

- Teaching SUDs
- Teaching body signals/interoceptive cues
- Linking these two to a range of coping options available

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CONNECTEDNESS

- Elementary
  - CDI
  - Sensory motor
  - Co-regulation
- Secondary
  - Community connectedness
  - Community service
  - Co-regulation

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RESPONSIVE

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NON-VERBAL STRATEGIES (PICONE, 2009)

- Must be non-threatening
- Consider:
  - Getting on child's level when feasible
  - Remain comfortable and relaxed
  - Avoid gestures (crossing arms, pointing)
- Sensory-motor!
  - Consider tone, volume, and rate of speech

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### ACTIVE LISTENING

- Undivided attention
- Non-judgmental
- Minimize distractions
- You can clarify, repeat, and re-state to ensure understanding
- Remain respectful, even if they are not
- **Allow for moments of silence/processing**

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### DE-ESCALATION

- When prevention steps are not enough, communication will be a large part of de-escalating students (Picone, 2009).
- Non-verbal focus on controlling:
  - body language, voice, and proximity before engaging a student

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### REDIRECTION (WEST, 2009)

- Redirection (not reprimand!!!) can be a very effective tactic to divert the student from the behavior escalation path.
- Teachers can redirect students to the desired behavior by a delivering a **quick, calm statement about what the student is expected to be doing** and then disengaging.
- Redirection must be implemented **relatively early** in the stages of escalation to be effective on its own.

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### TRADE-OFF

- Offer warmth and accommodation of student behavior (within reason; Henry & Thorsen, 2018)
  - Be willing to bend a little for continued relationship as well as to reduce further disruption
  - Example: allowing a student to listen to music during work task as long as disruptive behavior isn't occurring
  - Ask what the student needs/wants in that moment and wait for response\*
    - If it is not unreasonable, offer it.

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### CO-REGULATION



- "Relies on fostering a warm, responsive relationship with children, providing structure, and setting limits."  
(health.harvard.edu)

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### CO-REGULATION

- "For the social interaction to be mutually supportive and to enable a co-regulation of physiological state, the expressed cues from the dyad's social engagement systems need to communicate mutual safety and trust."

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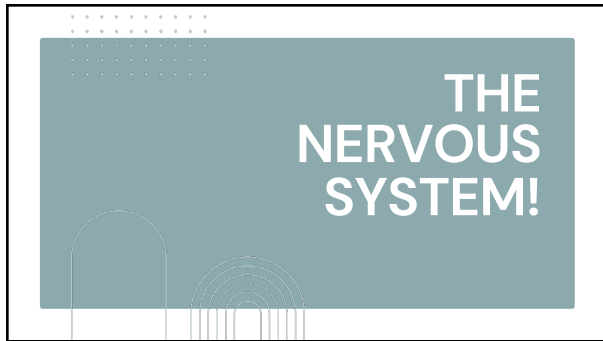
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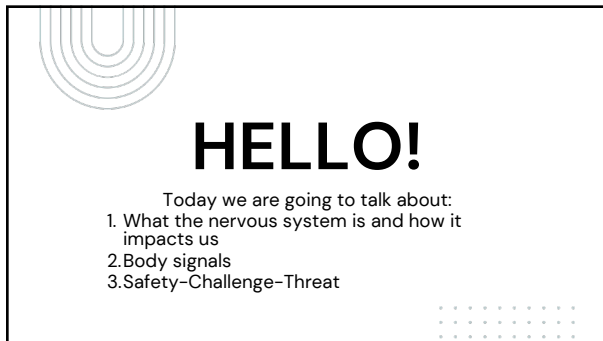
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# EXPECTATIONS

1. Engage and Participate
2. Ask Questions if you have them
3. Reflect on how this relates to your life (it relates to everyone!!!)



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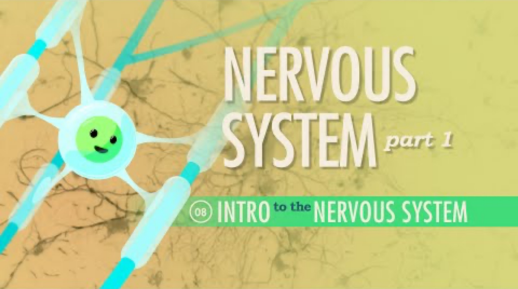
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## NERVOUS SYSTEM *part 1*

09 INTRO to the NERVOUS SYSTEM

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01. CONTROLS EVERYTHING YOU DO
02. IS MADE UP OF...
03. NERVES DO...



## YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

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**SO WHY DOES THIS MATTER?**  
 Our nervous system signals when we are in danger (real or perceived)



SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM  
 © THE PHYSIOLOGY OF STRESS

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01. TEMPERATURE
02. HEART RATE
03. BREATHING
04. MUSCLE TENSION
05. WHOLE BODY



BODY SIGNALS

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Temperature	Heart Rate	Breathing	Muscle Tension	Whole Body	Other	can you think of examples?

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**EXAMPLE**  
 Sarah and Tim were playing  
 Tim was getting really hot, but didn't notice  
 He became very frustrated.  
 Sarah was getting hot, and did notice  
 She suggested a break and got cold water.  
 What do you think happened next? . . . . .



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**SAFETY-CHALLENGE-THREAT**



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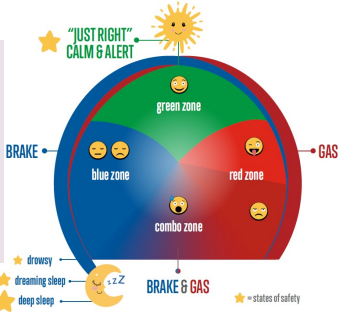
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0-1 Green – calm relaxed focused attention, green zone  
 2-3 Green – higher level of engagement and alertness with concentration, green zone  
 4 Transitional state into mild intensity stress response of any color zone  
 5-6 Moderate stress response of any color zone  
 7 Transitional state into more severe intensity stress response of any color zone  
 8-9 Severe stress response of any color zone  
 10-10+ Extreme stress response of any color zone



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**LET'S PRACTICE**

*Think about your color and number and write it down on the stick note in front of you*



0 - 1 Green – calm relaxed focused attention, green zone  
2 - 3 Green – higher level of engagement and alertness with concentration, green zone  
4 Transitional state into mild intensity stress response of any color zone  
5 - 6 Moderate stress response of any color zone  
7 Transitional state into more severe intensity stress response of any color zone  
8 - 9 Severe stress response of any color zone  
10 - 10+ Extreme stress response of any color zone

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**MOVING FORWARD**

You will each begin checking in during morning circle with your color and number and can check in with staff throughout the day. Staff may even ask you during the day "what is your color and number?"

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**SUMMARY**

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### REPEATED REVIEW

- The nervous system evaluates risk AND safety
- Felt safety is subjective
  - Comes from trusting relationships
  - Not defined by cognitive evaluations but rather bodily responses
- We can support felt safety through empowering and connecting
- We can teach ourselves and our students how to identify their subjective units of distress and their internal body signals to facilitate coping

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### • FELT SAFETY IS CRITICAL

- Recognizing, instructing, and supporting S-C-T, interoceptive cues, and relational safety can provide a level of structure and support that will continue on in perpetuity

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### PARTING REMINDER

- "trying to understand the child not just as a passive recipient of knowledge and me as the prophet teacher ... understanding them as people and as humans, and **you're offering them the dignity of being able to have a bad day, and that's actually okay.**" (Participant from Ziaian-Ghafari & Berg, 2019)

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