

Attachment and trauma



Homerton Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

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Malcolm Wong • Trainee Clinical Psychologist
City & Hackney CAMHS First Steps
Wellbeing and Mental Health in Schools Project (WAMHS)

Attachment

- Attachment theory first proposed by John Bowlby as “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings”
- Attachment is formed between a child and their parents/carers, starting from their early years
- Multiple attachments are possible, with varying effects

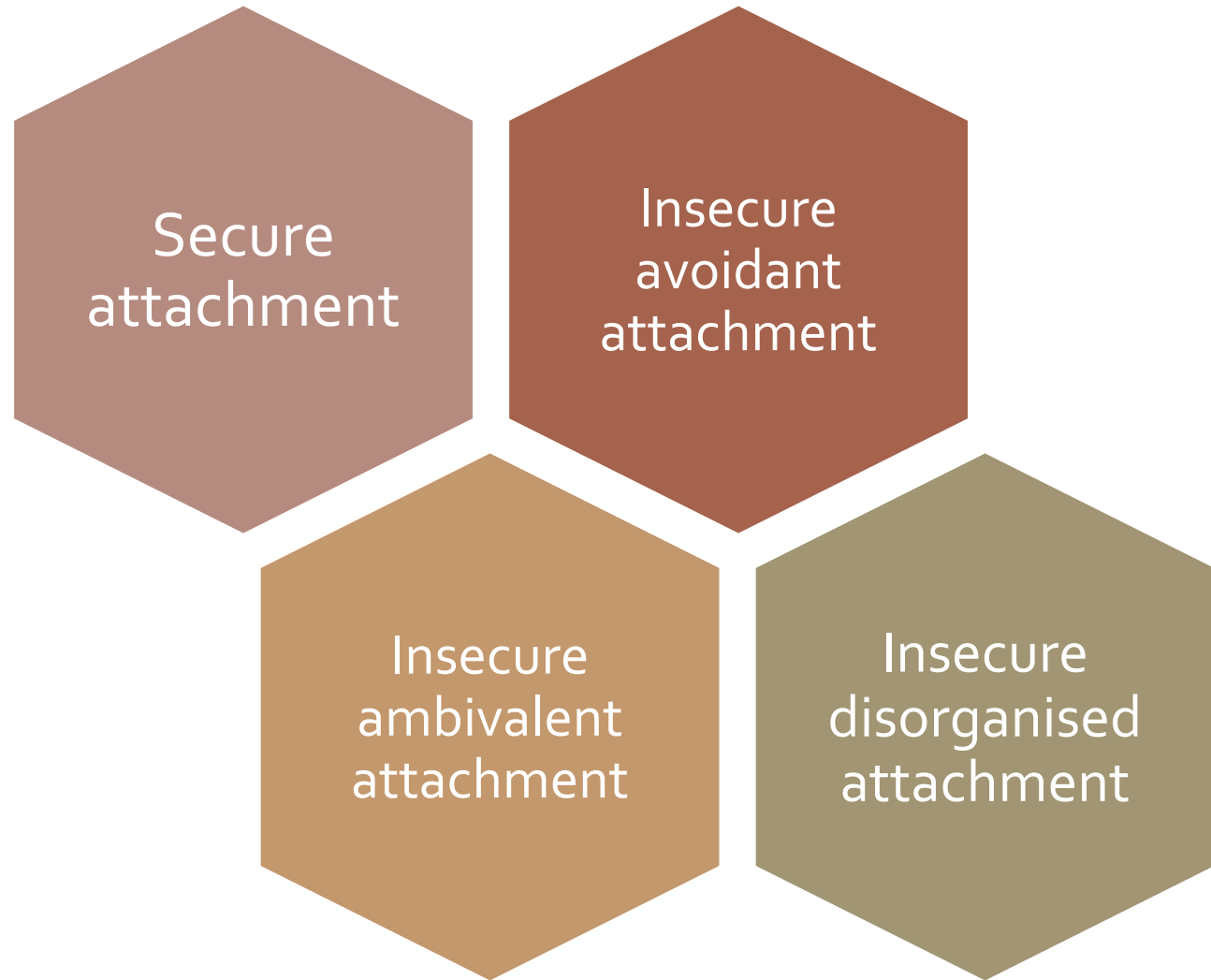
The importance of attachment

- Nurturing adult attachments provide children with protective, safe havens and secure bases from which to explore and engage with others and their environment
- Early caregiving has a long-lasting impact on development, the ability to learn, personality development, resilience, as well as the capacity to regulate emotions and form satisfying relationships
- Teachers, youth workers and significant adults in a child's life can provide important attachments for children
- "The biological function of attachment is survival; the psychological function is to gain security" (Schaffer 2004)

Statistics on attachment

- At least one third of children have an insecure attachment with at least one caregiver
- 98% of children surveyed experienced one or more trauma event – for one in four this trauma resulted in behavioural and/or emotional difficulties

Types of attachment



Secure attachment

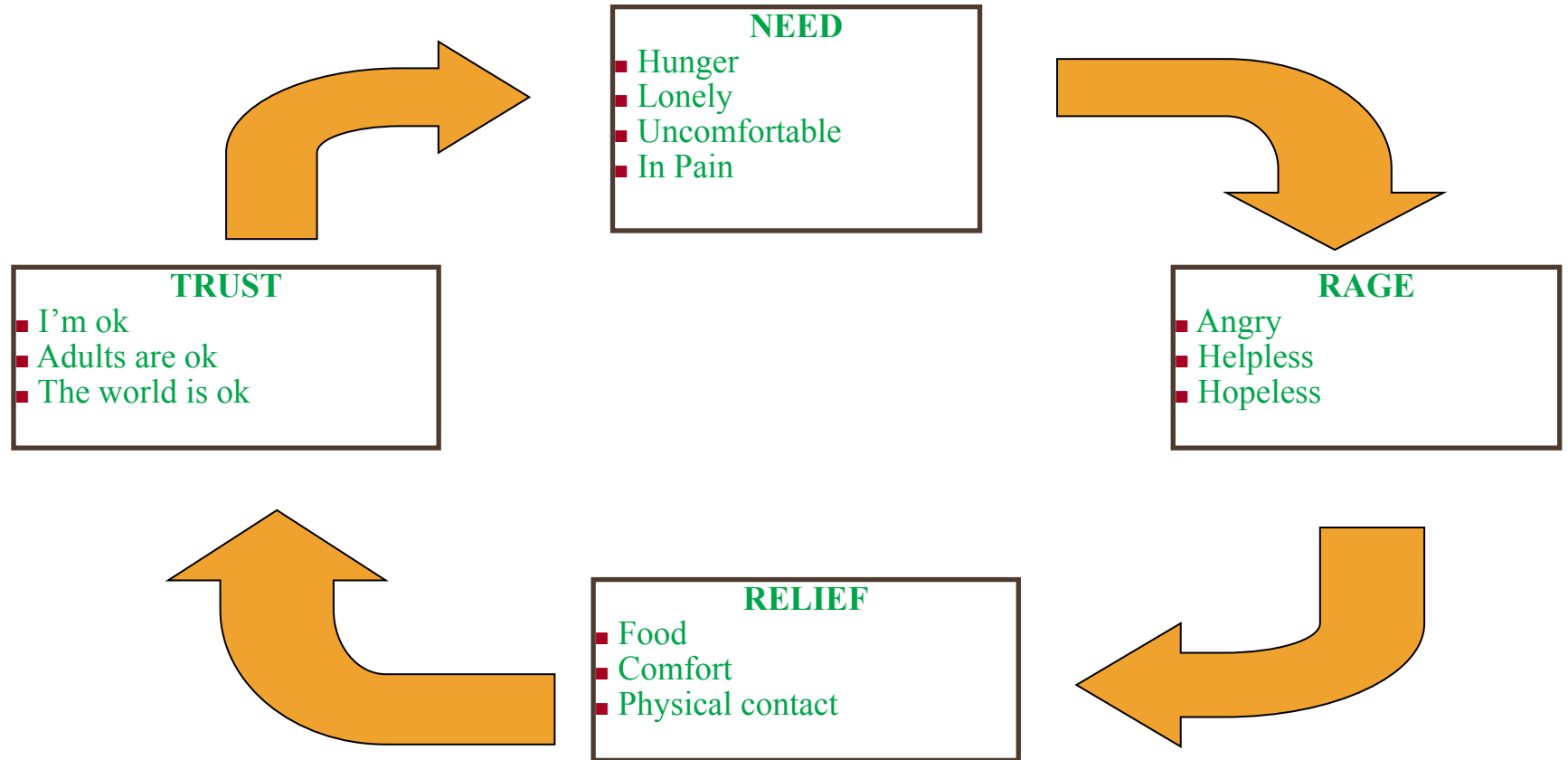
- Secure attachments support mental processes that enable the child to regulate emotions, reduce fear, attune to others, have self-understanding and insight, empathy for others and appropriate moral reasoning
- Sensitive and attuned caregiving
- Caregiver attends to and satisfies the basic needs of a child
- The child is not left to endure distress beyond their limits
- Able to trust and rely on others to meet their needs
- Confident to form meaningful relationships with others, to make the most of learning opportunities, to engage in productive activities

Secure attachment

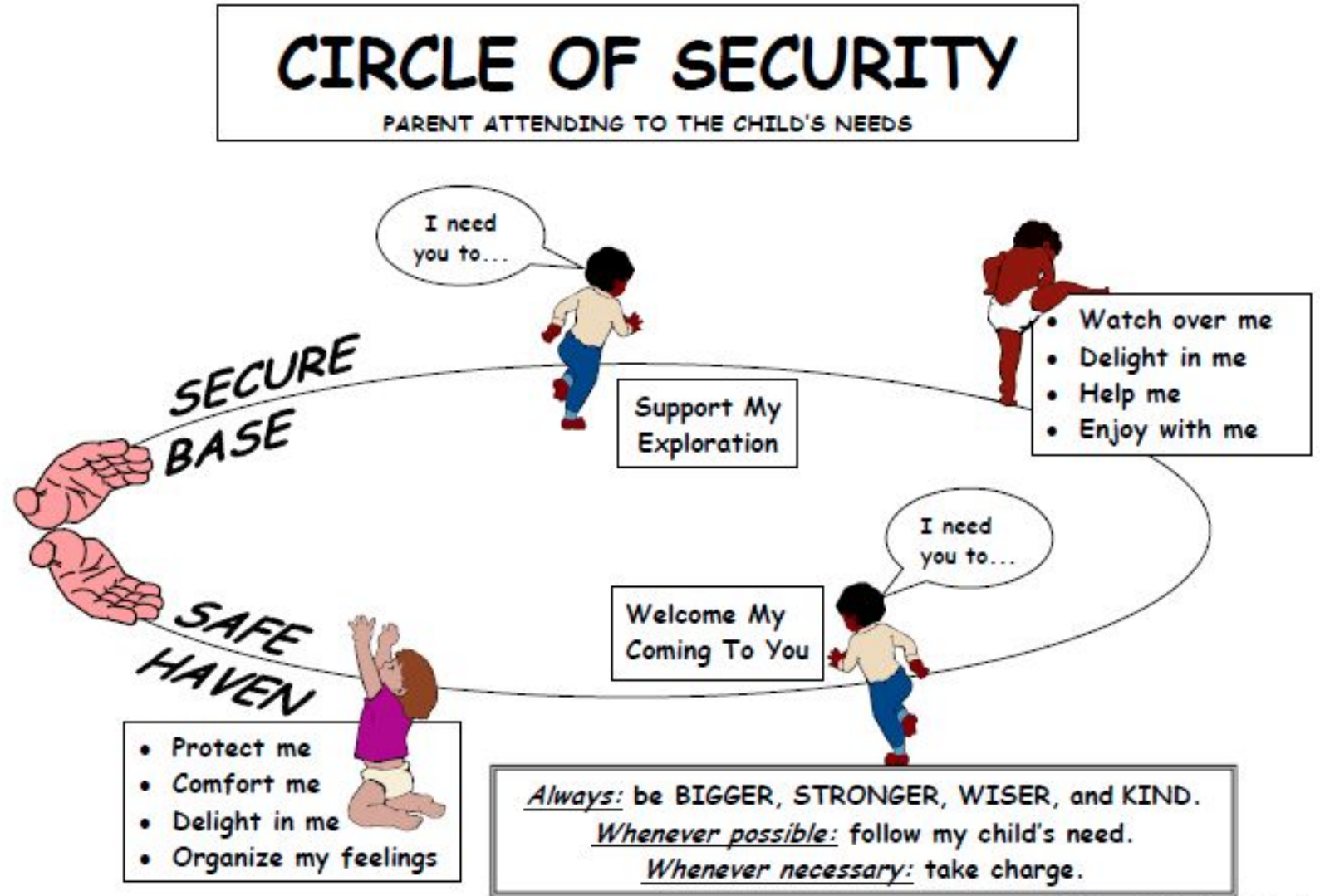


- Emotionally resilient and self-aware
- Acquired sense of security and confidence in the world
- Express a full range of emotions and understand those of others
- Manage/regulate their emotions, and to feel primarily calm and safe
- Flexible in thinking and able to cope with changes, disappointments, transitions and surprises
- Respond to praise, rewards and punishments

Cycle of secure attachment



Circle of security in secure attachments

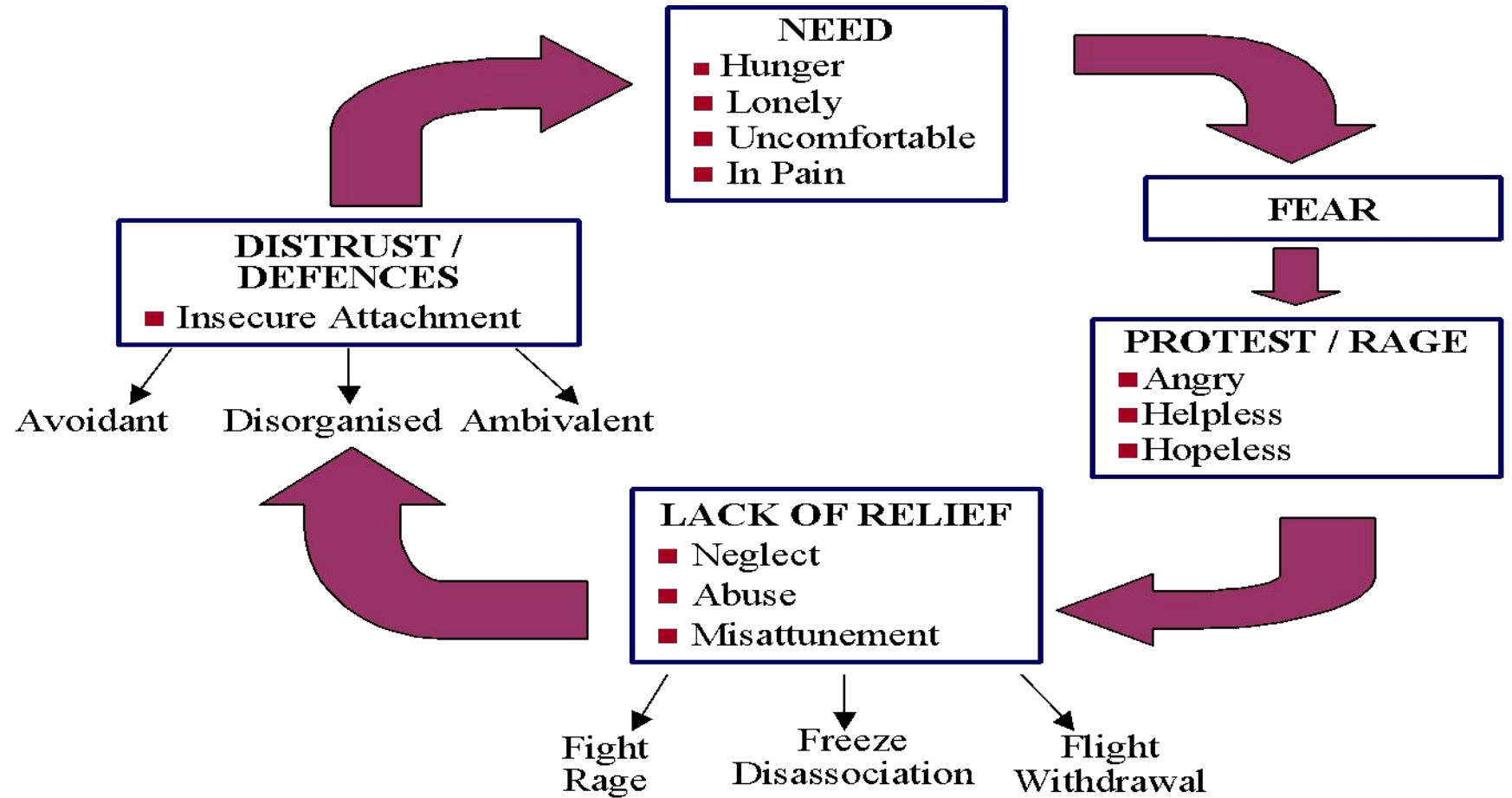


Insecure attachment



- A child struggles to rely on an adult to respond to their needs in times of stress, keep them safe, and respond consistently to their needs
- Unable to learn how to soothe themselves, manage their emotions and engage in reciprocal relationships
- Templates and beliefs form in children's minds based on what they saw or experienced in the past, they then use these templates to guide them on how to form new relationships or do different things in the future

Cycle of insecure attachment



Insecure avoidant attachment

- Insensitive, intrusive or rejecting caregiving
- Appear to be independent of others and seek to meet their needs on their own as they have not been able to trust or rely on their caregiver
- Task-orientated, self-reliant and high achieving in some aspects but are generally socially uncomfortable, exhibit indifference and avoid close relationships
- May find it difficult to seek help, have limited creativity and may be prone to sudden outbursts

Insecure ambivalent attachment

- Inconsistent and largely unresponsive caregiving
- Easily frustrated and may present as both clingy or rejecting of adults as they seek comfort but are unable to be comforted by adults
- May present as immature, fussy, helpless, passive or whiney or they may be angry
- May also present as “attention-seeking”, hyperactive and have difficulty recovering from being upset

Insecure disorganised attachment

- Upbringing within the context of neglected and/or abusive caregiving
- May feel confused by others and/or experience them as frightening
- Often highly vigilant, easily distracted, have a strong sense of fear, panic, or helplessness
- May present with unpredictable or distressing behaviour, which may be difficult to manage
- Sensitive to criticism and easily overwhelmed

Trauma and adverse childhood experiences

- Traumatic incidents are any events in a child's life where their physical or emotional safety was compromised
- Experiences of trauma are very common and often have a lasting impact
- Developmental trauma can lead to a higher likelihood of insecure attachments

Trauma and adverse childhood experiences

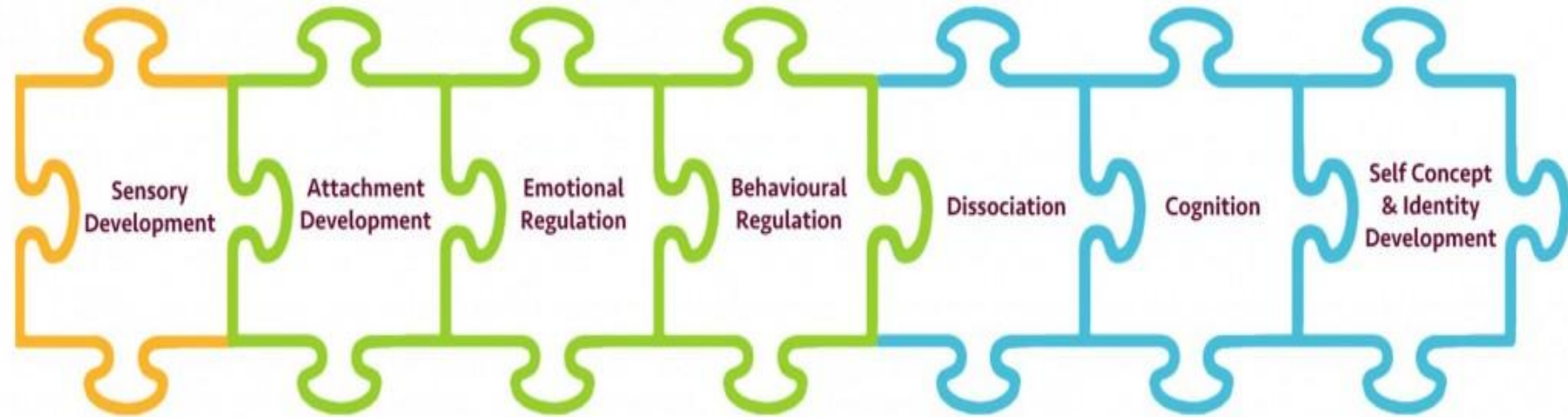
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-8jTTIsJ7Q&t=4s>

Impact of trauma

Difficulties with:

- Emotional regulation
- Processing sensory experiences
- Memory
- Building a self-identity and making sense of the world
- Managing relationships
- Negative self-image or low self-esteem
- And more...

Impact of trauma



Parenting approaches



- The still face experiment:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leHcsFqK7So>
- Utilising engagement, providing attention, offering responses with physical presence and facial expressions

Parenting approaches

- Various approaches and strategies for emotional regulation can be helpful – see previous presentation!
- Connection before correction: gain a comprehensive understanding of how the child feels and help them make sense of it as well
 - Also “name it to tame it”, labelling then validating emotions
- Emotion tuning – notice the emotion, clarify with a question, reflect on the emotion, locate the emotion in the body, empathise, explore further
- Understanding why they are feeling how they are, and what might help
- Warm, supportive interactions and being available
- Relate to the child when they are struggling, utilising empathy

Parenting approaches

- Model emotional literacy skills for the child, so that the child can mirror, imitate and learn from these
- Step into the child's shoes to get a sense of how they see the world
- Speak with children about what happened and utilise reasoning/problem solving, only after the incident occurred when the child is calm and no longer overwhelmed by emotions
- Be sensitive to the child's needs: attending to them, interpreting what they mean, and providing appropriate and timely responses
- While you contain your child's emotions, your emotions can benefit from being contained as well
 - What are your own sources of support?
- Parental self-care