

Neurodivergence & Trauma in Care-Experienced Children and Young People

Jennifer Jones & Dr Libby Erin
Lead Occupational Therapist / Consultant Clinical
Psychologist, Service Lead
Enfys, Cardiff and Vale NHS



Who we are – Enfys and our work

Language

Our hope today is to generate thought and discussion and acknowledge all the hard work you do.

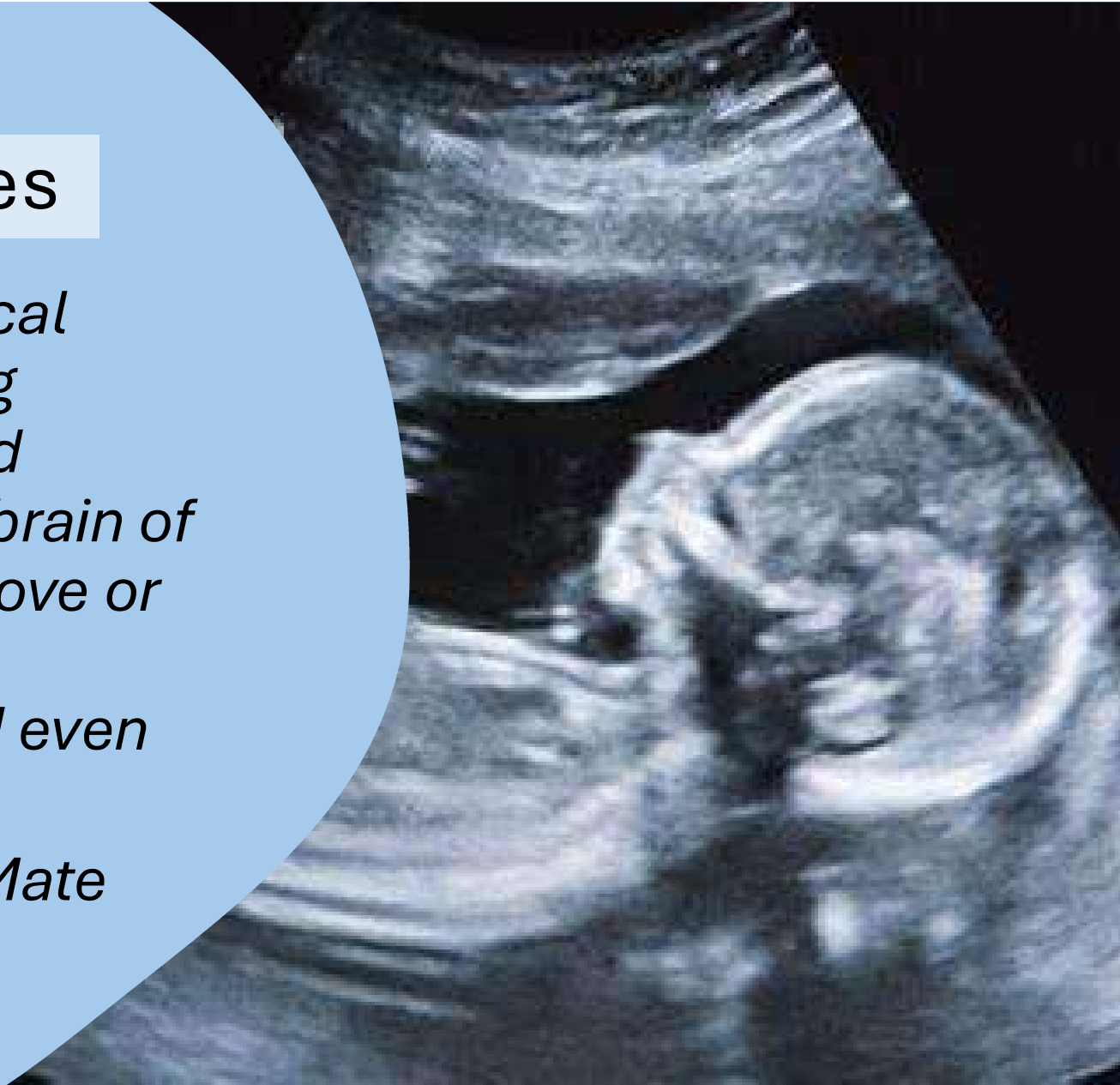
Plan

- Why it is important to think about our children's differences
- Trauma and the brain
- Science of safety
- What might help
- What can we do now?

In Utero Experiences

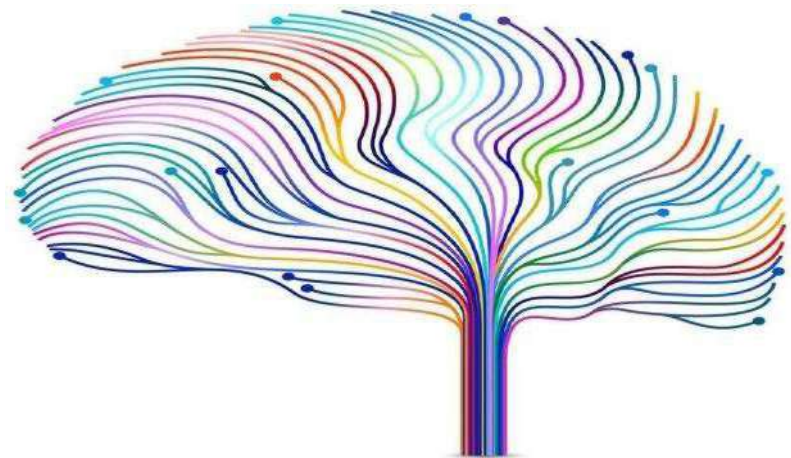
"The emotional and physical states of the mother during pregnancy have a profound impact on the developing brain of the foetus. The biology of love or the biology of stress is programmed into the child even before birth."

Gabor Mate



The Brain

- The child is developmentally stuck in their brain stem and very little information can get passed up to the higher parts of the brain.
- Parts of the brain responsible for survival stay activated.
- Long-standing research on the impact of neglect and abuse on the brain (Ireton et al 2024).



Developmental Trauma

Developmental trauma is the term used to describe the impact of early, repeated trauma and loss which happens within the child's important relationships, and usually early in life.

Professor Van Der Kolk talked about how early trauma creates an 'assault' on child development.

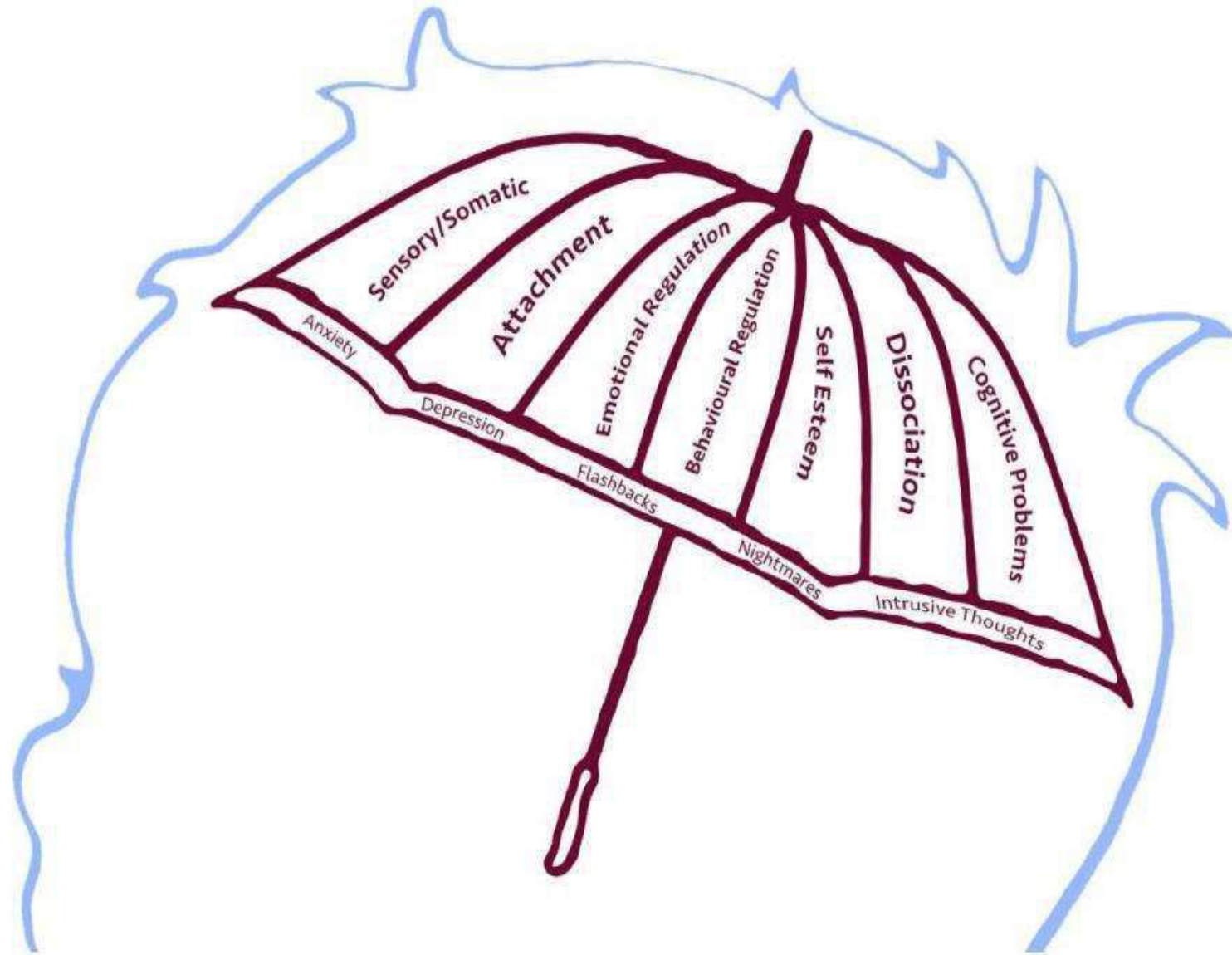
These experiences can be very confusing and/or overwhelming for a child's brain and body. A child who does not feel safe lives in their survival states to respond to real or perceived threat and danger.

When a child transitions into a safe environment, the survival responses do not turn off.

Neurodivergence may increase vulnerability to trauma. Trauma can look like neurodivergent and/or sensory challenges (Peterson et al., 2019).



Developmental
trauma is an
umbrella term
(Beacon House, 2019)



The 7 Domains of Impact: Bottom-Up



What does this look like at **home** and/or in **school?**

- Difficulty concentrating
- Trouble keeping still
- Struggles to listen
- Making and keeping friends is hard
- May be withdrawn/isolated
- Struggle with eye contact
- Struggle with change or unpredictability
- Dislike touch
- Repetitive behaviours/ intense interests (as self-soothing/escape from reality)
- Flat tone / facial expression
- Emotional difficulties
- Poor social skills
- Creating chaos
- Lying, stealing

Symptoms are the Tip of the Iceberg



Trauma Can Mimic or Mask Neurodivergence



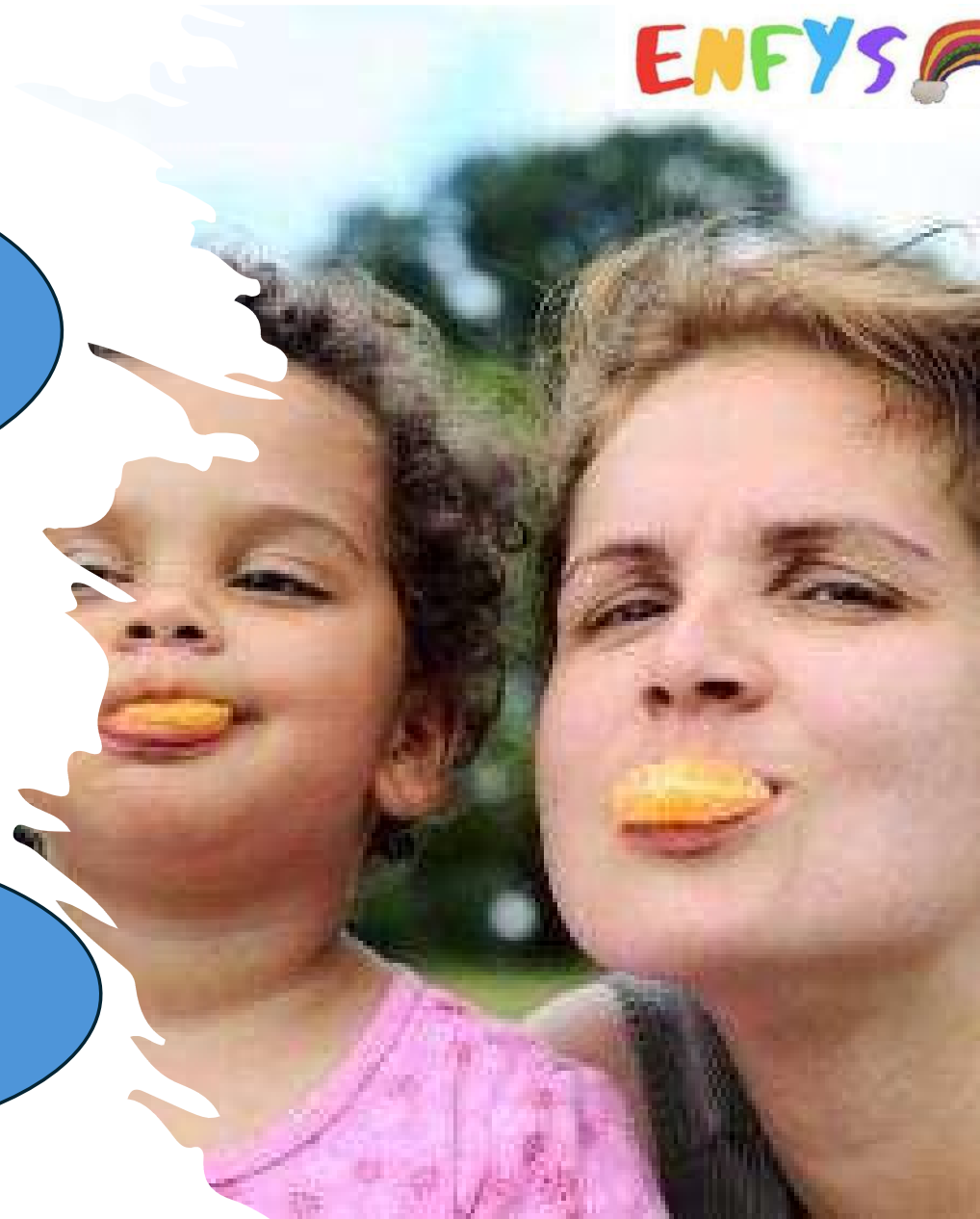
**Shutdown
dissociation**
→ mistaken for
autism (social
withdrawal, flat
affect)

Hypervigilance →
looks like
ADHD (restless,
impulsive,
distractible)

Both trauma and
ND affect attention,
connection, and sensory
processing

**Sensory
defensiveness**
→ sensory
overload often
seen in both
trauma & ASD

**Repetitive play or
routines** → soothing
strategy, not always
a 'symptom'



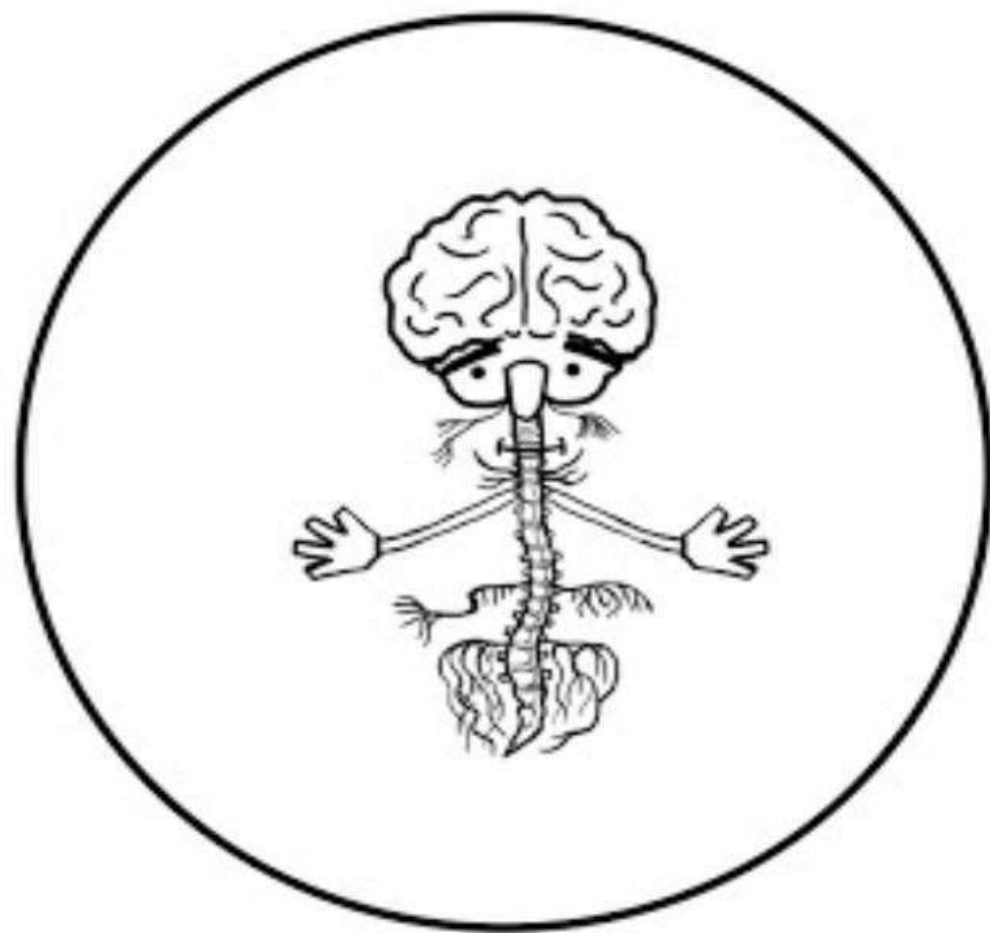
Polyvagal Theory

The Science of Safety

Polyvagal Theory
Emphasises the role that the autonomic nervous system - especially *the vagus nerve* - plays in regulating our health and behaviour (Stephen Porges).



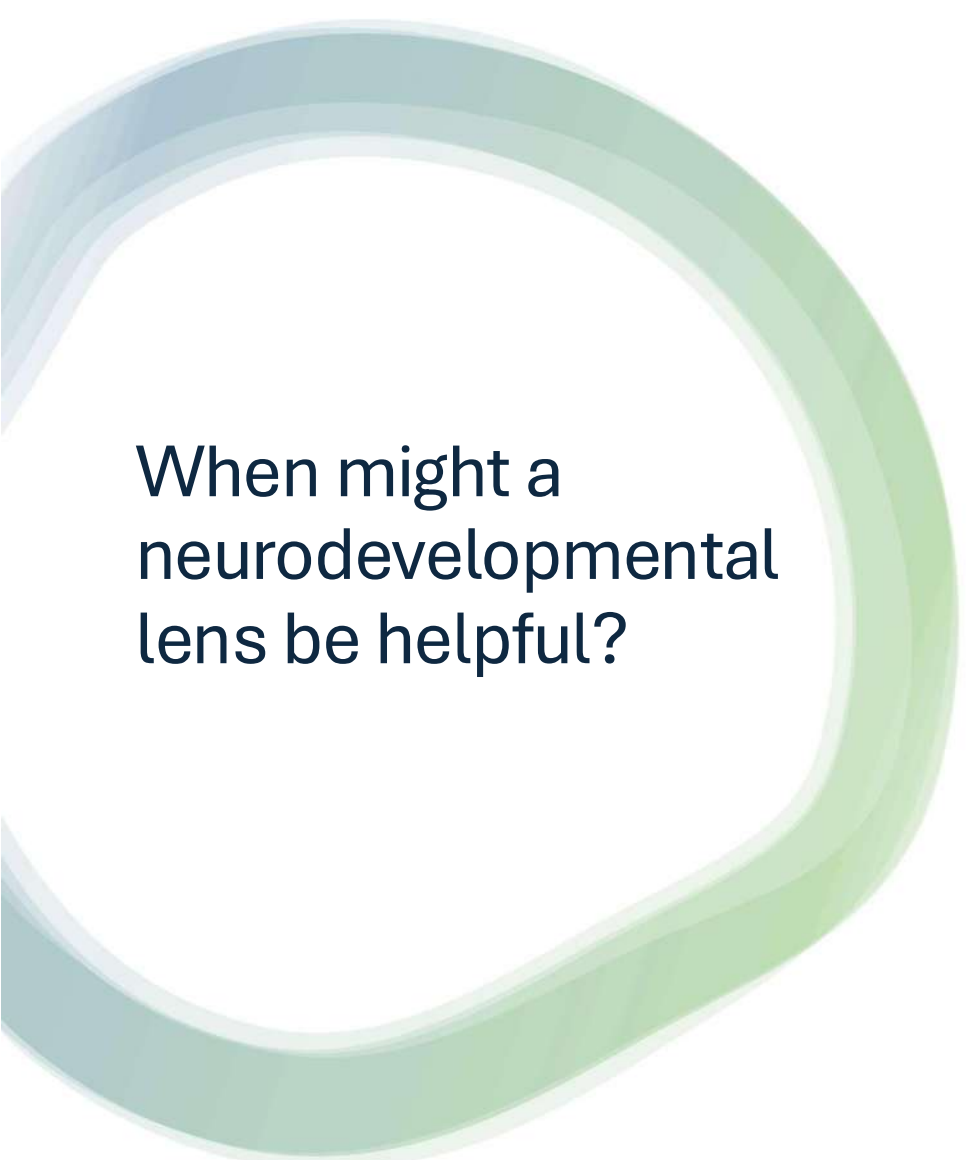
- Motorway analogy of 3 states:
- Safe and social (green)
- Fight / Flight (red)
- Freeze (blue)
- Children move between these states depending on cues of threat or safety



The Science of Safety

- To understand our children, we first need to think about what has happened to them and how this has impacted on their body and brain.
- **Feeling safe is the foundation for healing, learning, and connection.**
- Felt safety is created through consistent, calm and empathic care.





When might a neurodevelopmental lens be helpful?

May want to pursue exploration of differences when:

- The child's needs persist across safe, stable, supportive therapeutic settings
- Sensory ,cognitive and motor differences are significant and consistent
- Trauma-informed support alone is not enough
- There are no longer environmental triggers, and the child is supported by good co-regulators.
- The child themselves asks for help in understanding themselves

How We Respond Matters Most

"Children regulate their emotions through the nervous systems of the adults they trust."

Dr. Bruce Perry

