

Play Therapy Strategies That Everyone Can Use

14th Annual Early Childhood Mental Health
Conference: We Can't Wait
September 28, 2023



Denise M. VonRotz, LMFT, RPT-S, IFECMHS, RPF II 2023

- Identify why play is an important tool for therapeutic intervention with young children
- Explore how connecting intention with a child's language of play can have a therapeutic impact
- Identify at least three play activities that anyone can use to be a therapeutic support to a child

Learning Objectives



Why might we need ideas on how to be therapeutic with young children?

Transitions

Anxiety

Trauma

Social Interactions

Defiance

Developmental Delays

Other...

Grief/Loss



Core Elements of Positive Developmental, Educational, and Therapeutic Experiences

(Perry, 2010)

- Relational (safe)
- Relevant (developmentally matched)
- Rhythmic (resonant with neural patterns / positive entrainment)
- Repetitive (patterned)
- Rewarding (pleasurable)
- Respectful (child, family, culture)



Adapted from Bruce D. Perry 2010





Introducing Andrew

<https://youtu.be/reJpo-GaopM>



- “Playing is how the child tries out his world and learns about his world, and it is therefore essential to his healthy development”
- “Play also serves as a language for the child – a symbolism that substitutes for words. The child experiences much in life he cannot as yet express in language, and so he uses play to formulate and assimilate what he experiences.”
- “Through the safety of play every child can try out his own new ways of being.”

Why Use Play?

Windows to Our Children ~ Violet Oaklander



- “When the parent and the child play together, the spontaneity and joy of the play may be therapeutic in itself”
- In Child-Parent Psychotherapy, “the basic assumption is that the most immediate and direct threat to the young child’s psychological well-being is an explicit or implicit parental message that the child is not good enough”

Why Use Play?

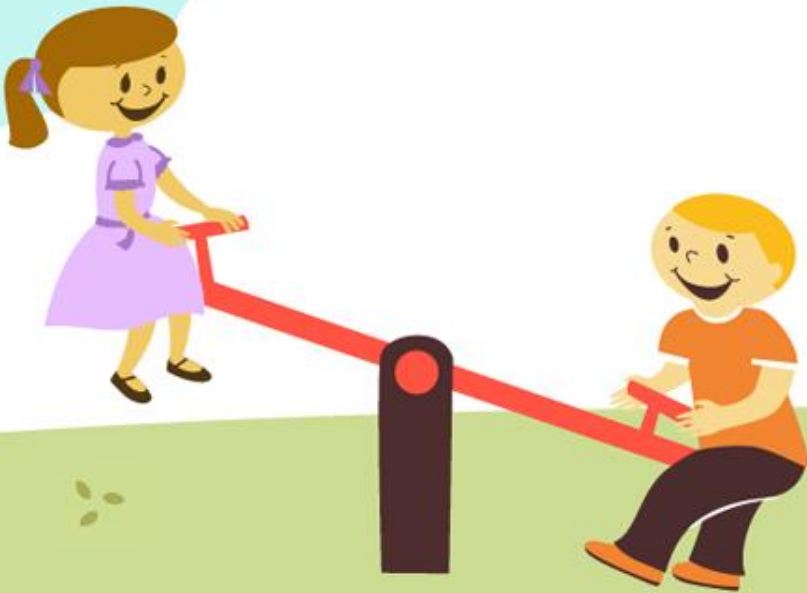
Psychotherapy with Infants and Young Children ~ Lieberman and Van Horn



Experiential Activity

Choose a partner (Person A / Person B)

Read instructions for your role for **Exercise One**
– Do not share your role with your partner



Reflections:

- What did you notice about the other person?
- How do you feel about what just happened?
- How do you feel about yourself as a result of this experience with the other person?
- How do you feel about the other person?



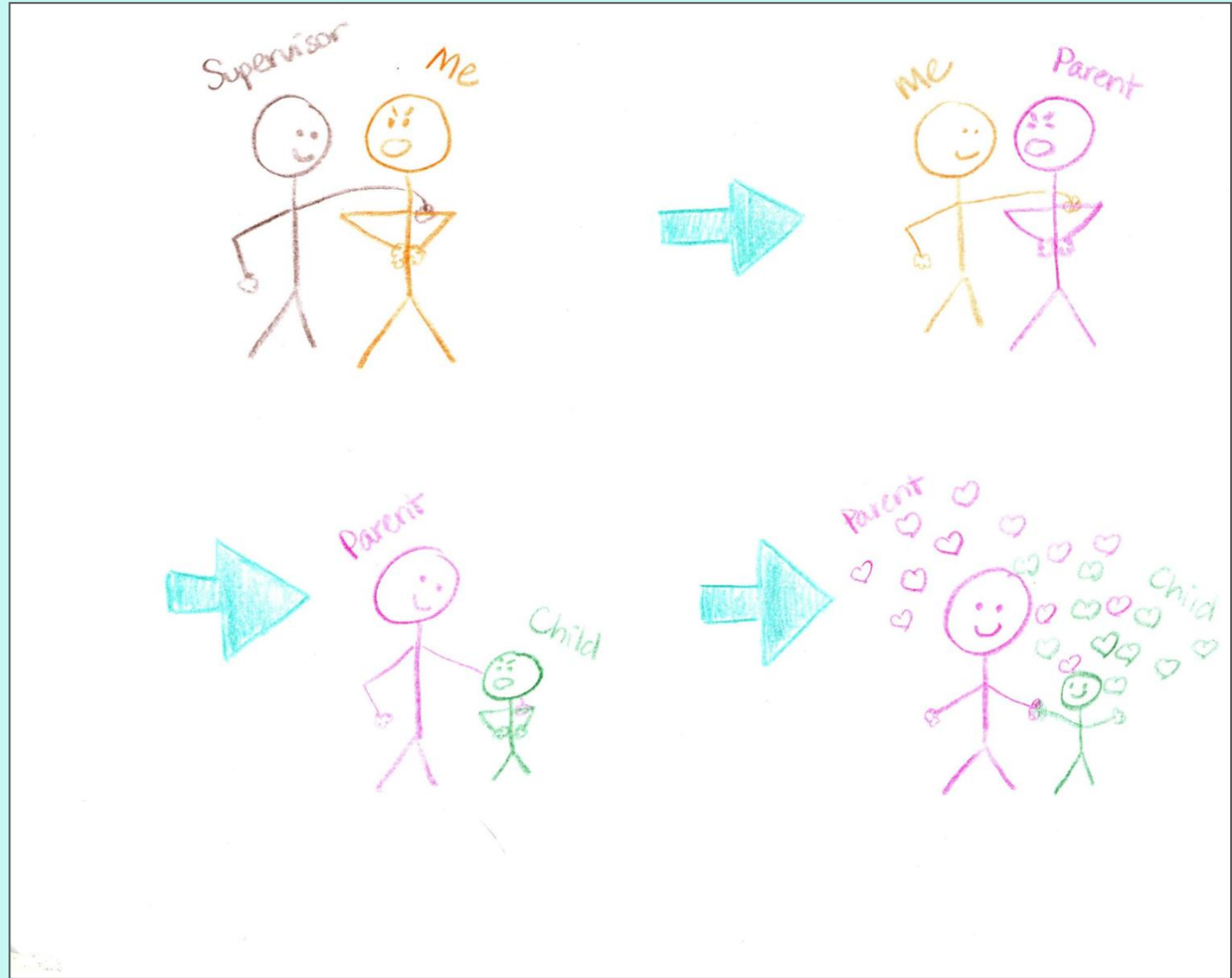
Hmmm

...

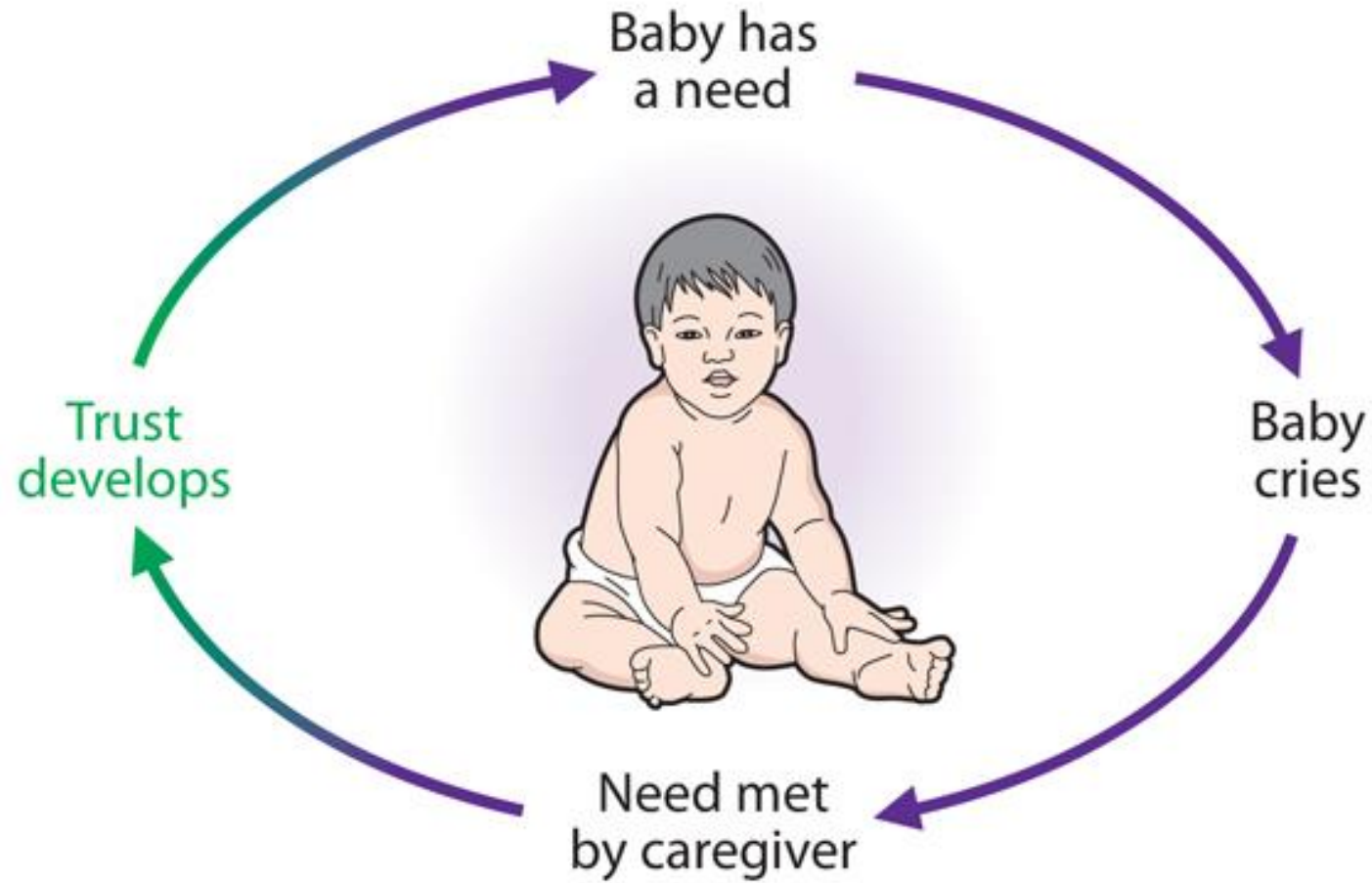
Positive and
Nurturing
Relationships



Parallel Process

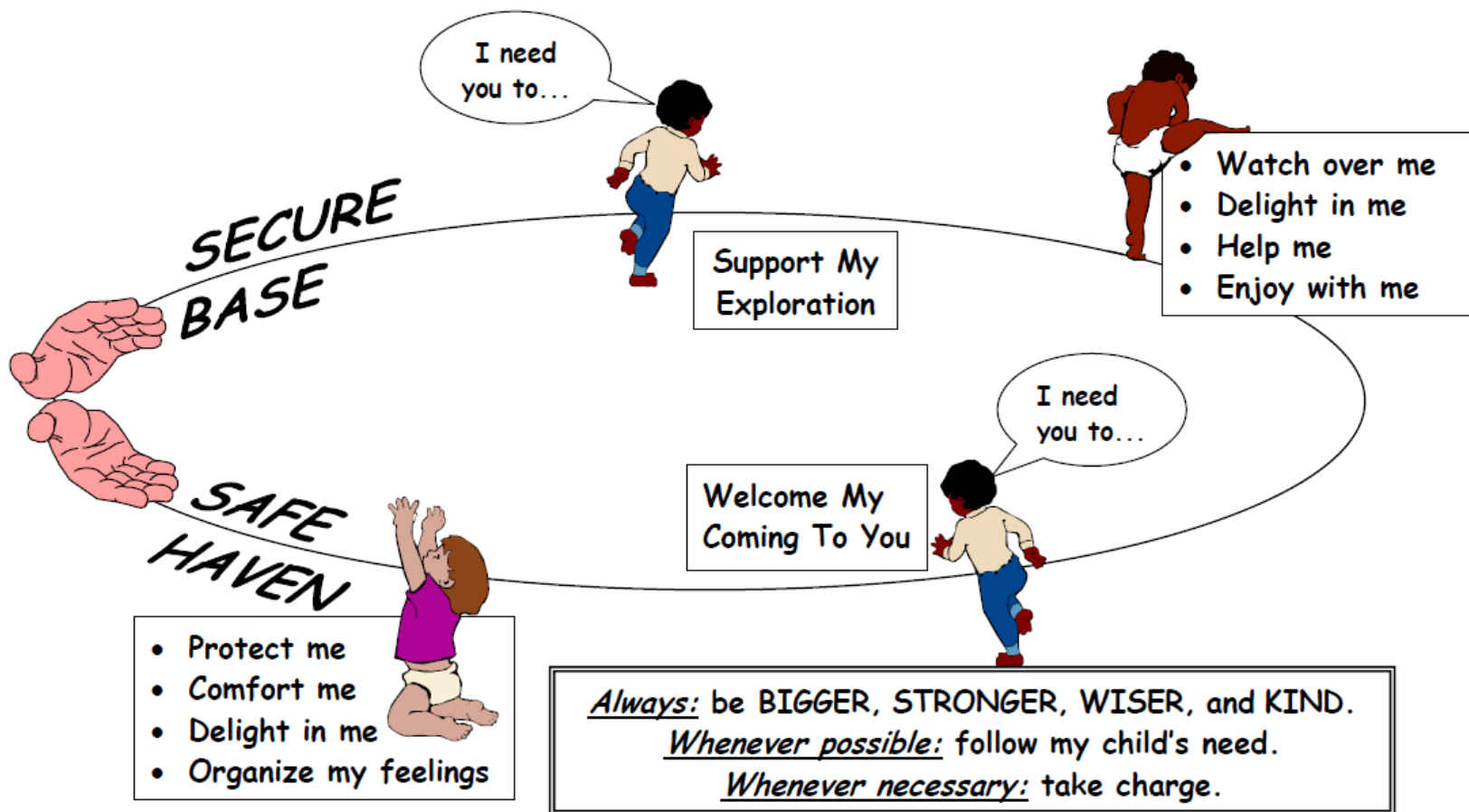


Infant Attachment Cycle



CIRCLE OF SECURITY

PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS



© 1998 Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin, & Powell
circleofsecurity.org

The Core Concepts of Theraplay

(Booth & Jernberg, late 1960s)

- Interactive and Relationship Based
- Direct Here and Now Experience
- Guided by the Adult
- Responsive, Attuned and Empathic
- Preverbal/Social/Right Brain Level
- Multi-sensory including Touch
- Playful

Attachment Interventions: Theraplay Activities

- **Structure** (organize child's world so that child feels safe and secure and knows what to expect)
- **Engagement** (play and have fun with child)
- **Nurture** (caring for child so that the child feels loved and feels good about self)
- **Challenge** (help the child to learn new things)



www.theraplay.org



- Organize child's world so that child feels safe and secure and knows what to expect
- Relieves the child of the burden of maintaining control of interactions
- The adult sets limits, defines body boundaries, keeps the child safe, and helps to complete sequences of activities

Structure



- Play and have fun with child
- Establish and maintain a connection with the child
- Focus on the child in an intense way
- Surprise and entice the child into enjoying new experiences

Engagement



- Care for the child so that the child feels loved and feels good about self
- Reinforce the message that the child is worthy of care and that adults will provide care without the child having to ask

Nurture

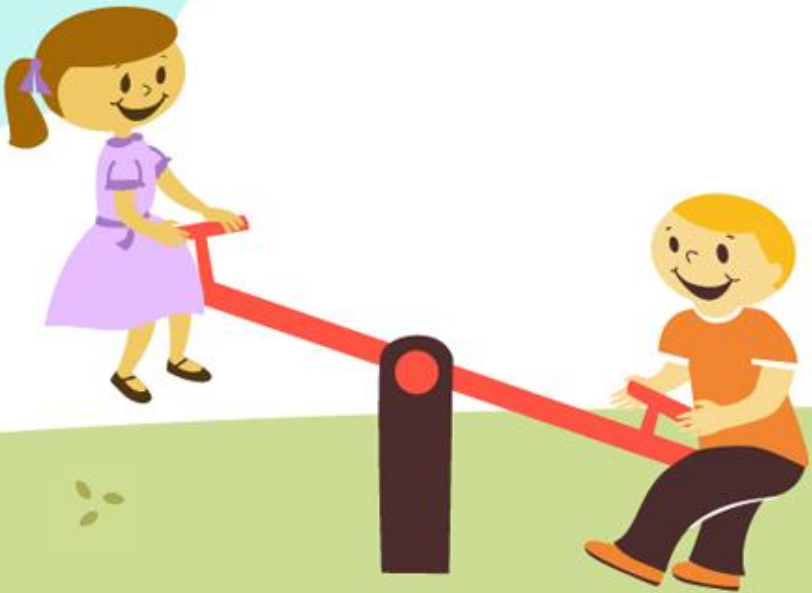


- Help the child to learn new things
- Help the child feel more competent and confident by encouraging the child to take a slight risk and to accomplish an activity with adult help

Challenge



Experiential Activity



Attachment Interventions: Theraplay Activities

- **Structure** (organize child's world so that child feels safe and secure and knows what to expect)
- **Engagement** (play and have fun with child)
- **Nurture** (caring for child so that the child feels loved and feels good about self)
- **Challenge** (help the child to learn new things)



www.theraplay.org

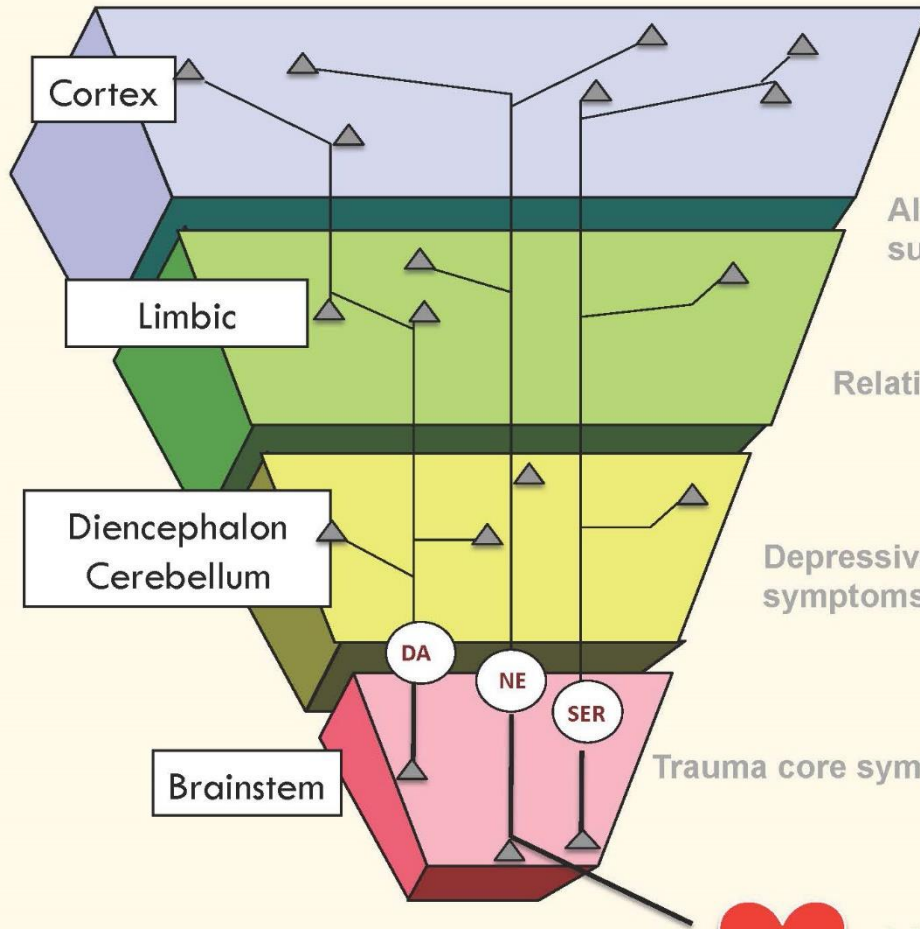


Cognitive

Emotional

Motor-
Vestibular

State



Guilt Shame

Alcohol -
substance abuse

Relational difficulties

Depressive & affect
symptoms

Trauma core symptoms

Abstract thought

Concrete Thought

Affiliation/reward

"Attachment"

Sexual Behavior

Emotional Reactivity

Motor Regulation

"Arousal"

Appetite/Satiety

Sleep

Blood Pressure

Heart Rate

Body Temperature

Cognitive

Emotional

Motor-
Vestibular

State



ANS - body



Fight or Flight

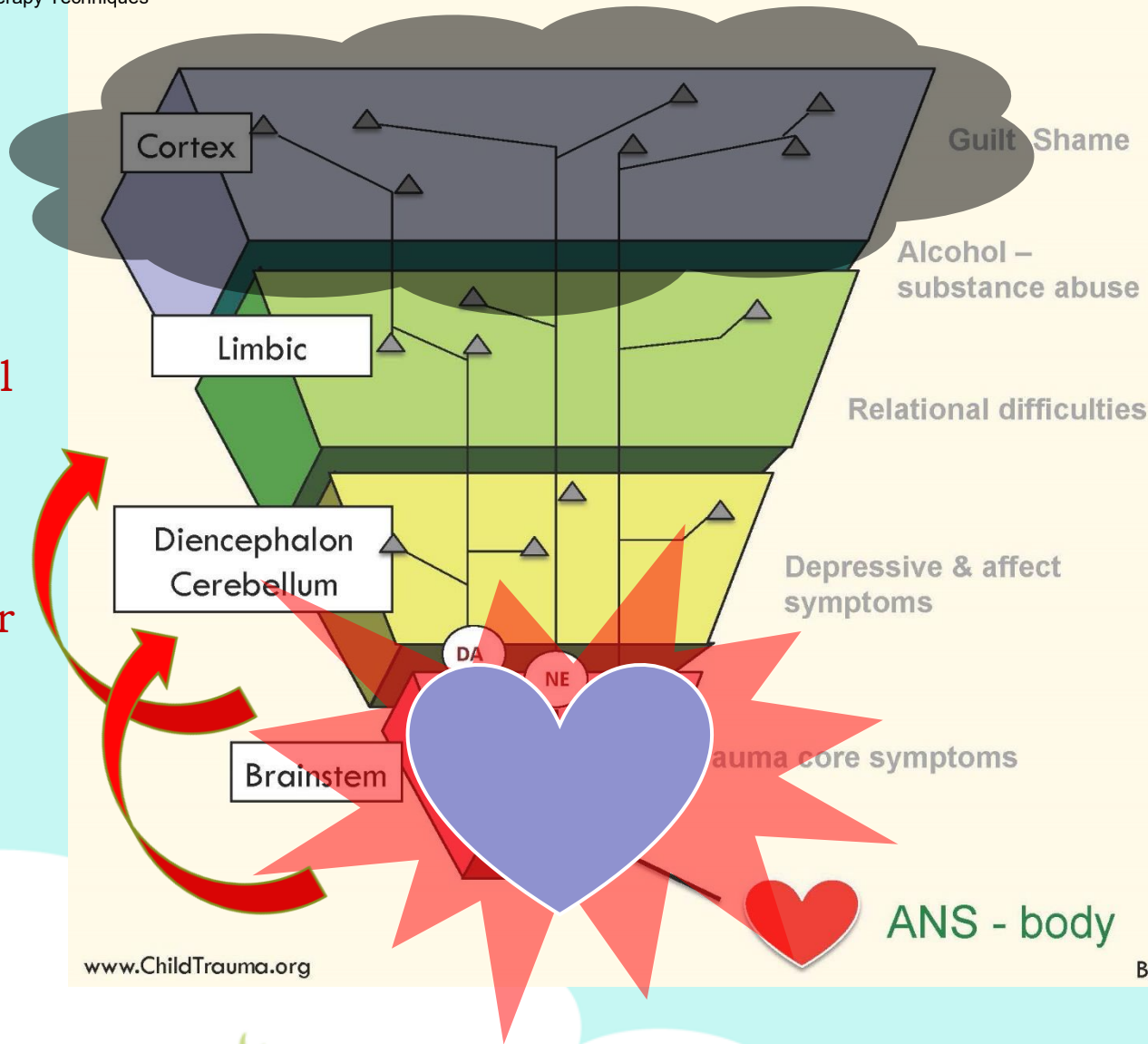


Cognitive

Emotional

Motor-Vestibular

State



Guilt Shame

Alcohol - substance abuse

Relational difficulties

Depressive & affect symptoms

Trauma core symptoms

ANS - body

- Abstract thought
- Concrete Thought
- Affiliation/reward
- "Attachment"
- Sexual Behavior
- Emotional Reactivity
- Motor Regulation
- "Arousal"
- Appetite/Satiety
- Sleep
- Blood Pressure
- Heart Rate
- Body Temperature

Cognitive

Emotional

Motor-Vestibular

State



Be Present and
Encourage
Emotional
Expression

Inside Out – Disney Pixar 2015



- Infant games/nursery rhymes
 - Touching
 - Games: fast/slow, small/large movement
- Sensory stimulation
 - Water/sand/clay play
 - Shaving cream
 - Making cookies
 - Songs/stories/nature sounds
 - Smelling/tasting for identification
 - Texture bags
 - Looking at pictures/paintings
- Pacification in child's sensory modality
 - Rocking/gliding/swinging/holding
 - Touching/stroking
 - Massage/relaxation techniques
 - Grooming
 - Cuddling
 - Feeding
 - Lullabies/songs
 - "Motherese"

Brain Stem Activities



Attachment Interventions: Theraplay Activities

- **Structure** (organize child's world so that child feels safe and secure and knows what to expect)
- **Engagement** (play and have fun with child)
- **Nurture** (caring for child so that the child feels loved and feels good about self)
- **Challenge** (help the child to learn new things)



www.theraplay.org





Questions

