

A Dyadic Approach with Playful Interventions



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Trauma in Developmental Terms:

Disruption of a Nervous System That Is Still Forming

Trauma disrupts **brain architecture**, **emotional regulation**, attachment formation, and memory encoding.



When body–brain–attachment integration → disrupted → the child learns to function in the world **under threat**.



Therapeutic Goal

Repair and restore disrupted developmental processes



Attachment



Integration

Nervous System

New Learning & Regulation



→ **Safety, regulation, and relational trust**

Pillars of Trauma-Informed Neurodevelopment



Hierarchical Brain Development (Nelson, Shonkoff)

The brain develops sequentially, bottom-up. Early threat disrupts structural foundations.



Trauma as Architectural Disruption (Perry, Lanius)

Chronic threat alters neural connectivity, locking the brain survival-based organization rather than learning.



Play as a Biological Engine (Panksepp)

The PLAY system is an evolutionary biological structure driving development flexibility and curiosity.



Regulation Through Attachment (Schore, Porges)

Physiological and emotional regulation develops exclusively within the container of secure relationships.



Dynamic Memory Reconsolidation (LeDoux)

Memory is dynamic; subject to update and reconsolidation via targeted prediction errors and new learning.

From Brain Development & Trauma Theory → To Clinical Intervention

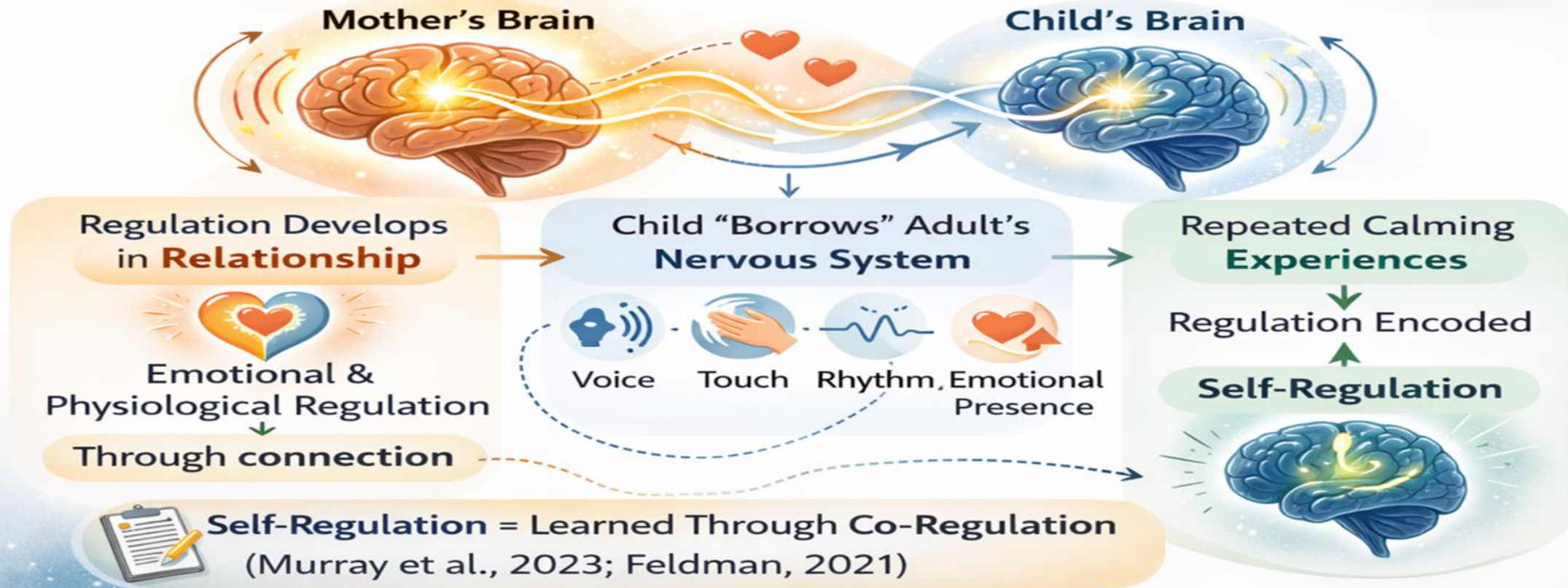


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Child and Youth

What is Co-Regulation?

Regulation Develops in **Relationship**

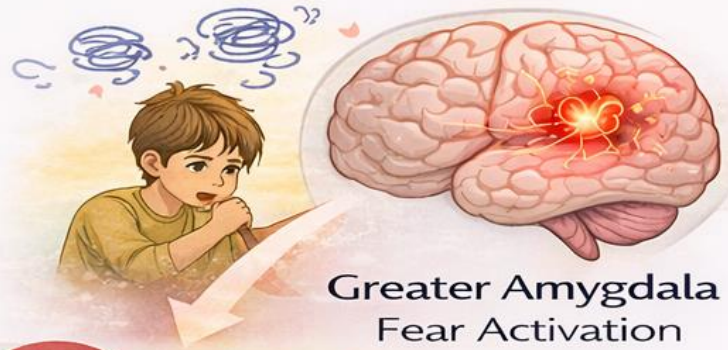


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Parental Presence Reduces Fear Reactivity in Children — — Neural Evidence —

Parent Absent



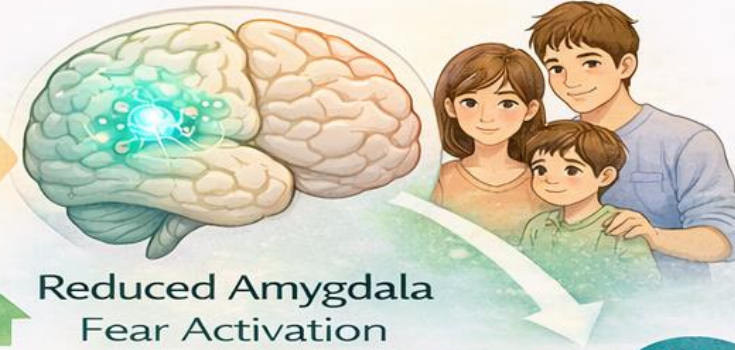
Greater Amygdala
Fear Activation



Reduced mPFC
Regulation

Parental presence
buffers threat reactivity

Parent Present



Reduced Amygdala
Fear Activation



Improved mPFC
Modulation



- ✓ When parents are **present**, children show reduced amygdala activation, a neural signature of lower fear reactivity.
- ✓ There's improved modulation in prefrontal regions, suggesting better regulation with parental co-presence.
- ✓ Parental presence acts as a **social buffer** for **stress** responses.

Abramson, L., Callaghan, B. L., Silvers, J. A., Choy, T., VanTieghem, M., Vannucci, A., Fields, A., & Tottenham, N. (2024). The effects of parental presence on amygdala and mPFC activation during fear conditioning: (Referenced in Dolan, E.W., PsyPost, May 16, 2024) *Developmental Science*.

Parental Emotion Regulation as a Buffer in War Contexts

Key Research Findings

- **Higher parental PTSD symptoms**
- **greater child difficulties**
(emotional + behavioral problems)
- ✓ **Adaptive Interpersonal Emotion Regulation (IER):**
 - Without co-regulation, this negative relationship is stronger and parental PTSD has a deleterious effect.
 - **IER buffers the impact of parental PTSD** on children's resilience in war

Implications

- ✓ Teach adaptive co-regulation strategies
- ✓ Support parental mental health
- ✓ Encourages healing, benefits **children**

How Parental Regulation Buffers Anxiety

- ✓ Helps children stay within their “**window of tolerance**”
- ✓ Reduces emotional overwhelm during exposure to threat
- ✓ Promotes:
 - Emotional safety
 - Co-regulation



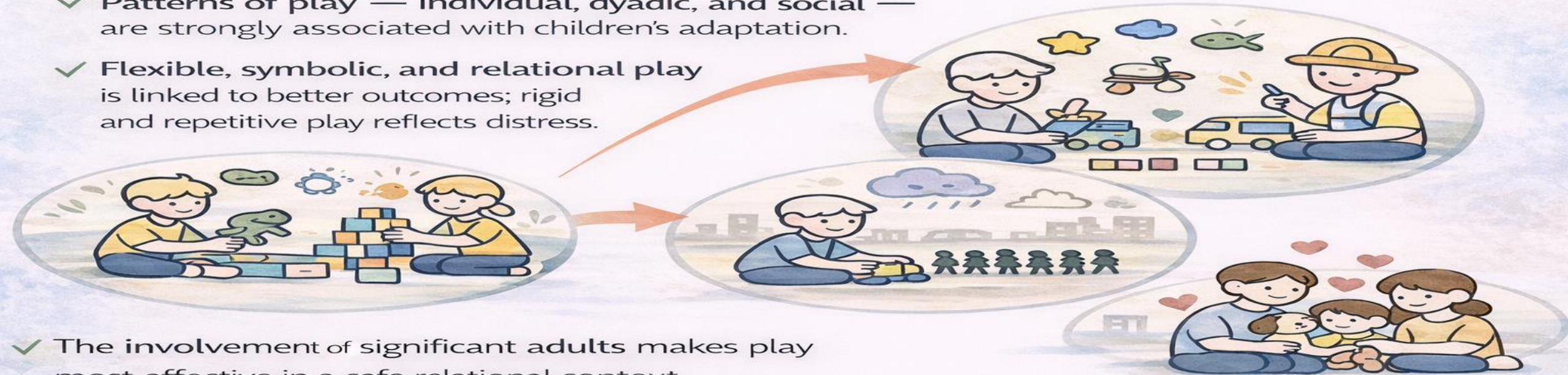
Co-regulation and adaptive coping help lower child anxiety and improve adjustment even in high-stress war environments.

References:

- Gadasi, R, & Cohen, E, (2018), Parent and child co-regulation in coping in ongoing violence: Relations to emotional adjustment and Practices. *Hebinko, M.*
- Kelyinko, M, Cohen, N, Gadassi-Polack, R., et al. (2025). Parental PTSD and children's well-being during war: The role of interpersonal emotion regulation. *International Journal on Child Matreatment.*

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN HELPING CHILDREN PROCES TRAUMA

- ✓ **Play** is a central mechanism through which children cope with and process traumatic experiences.
- ✓ **Patterns of play** — individual, dyadic, and social — are strongly associated with children's adaptation.
- ✓ **Flexible, symbolic, and relational play** is linked to better outcomes; rigid and repetitive play reflects distress.



- ✓ The involvement of significant adults makes play most effective in a safe relational context.

Cohen, E, & Gadassi, R. (2018). Parent-child co-regulation and trauma adaptation in contexts of ongoing stress.

Playfulness is the Biological Antidote to Anxiety

High anxiety physically impairs the ability to be playful.

Playfulness inherently lowers anxiety levels.



The Window of Tolerance



Physiological Regulation



Expansion of the Window of Tolerance



Memory Reorganization

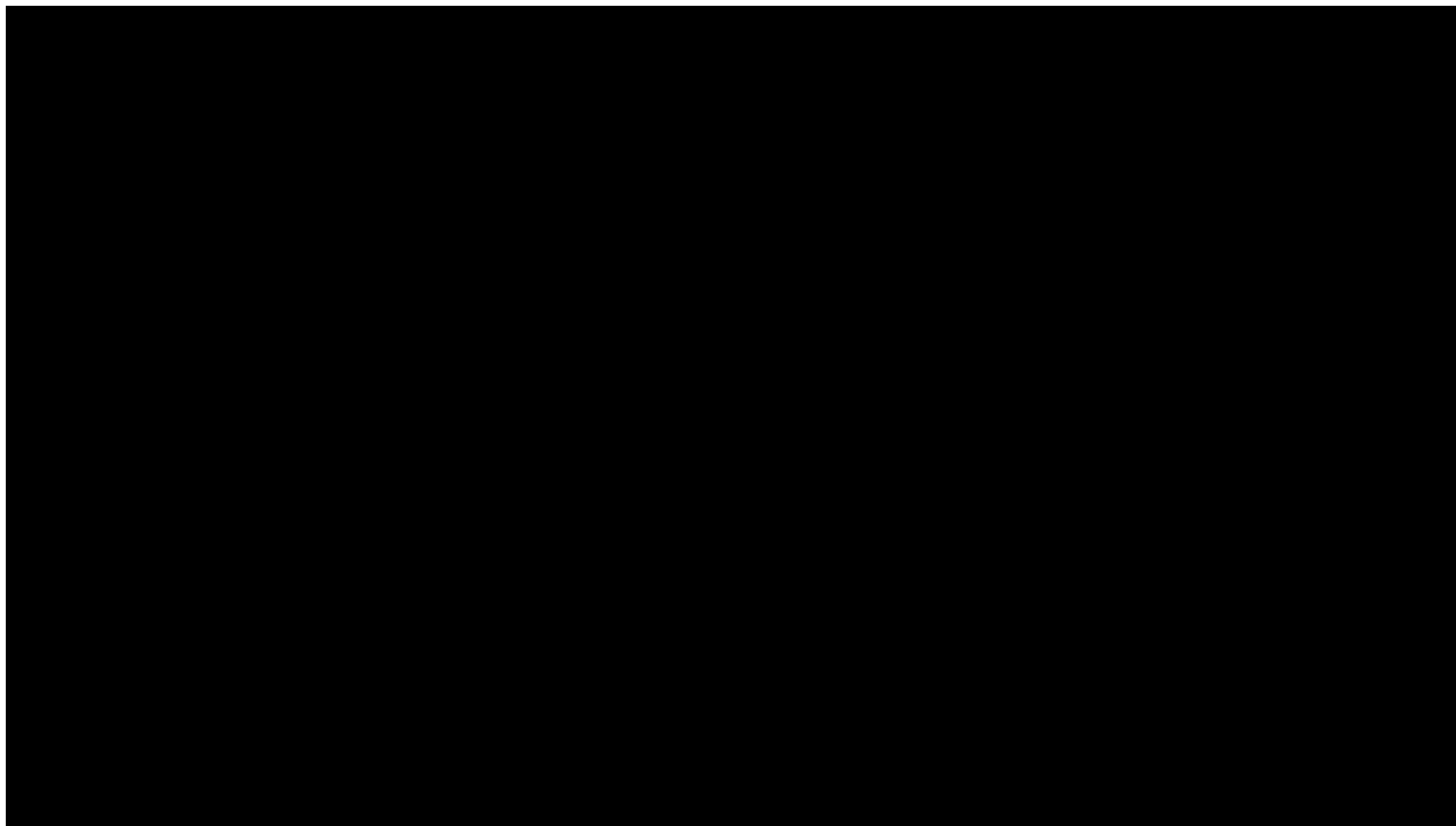


Renewed Adaptive Updating



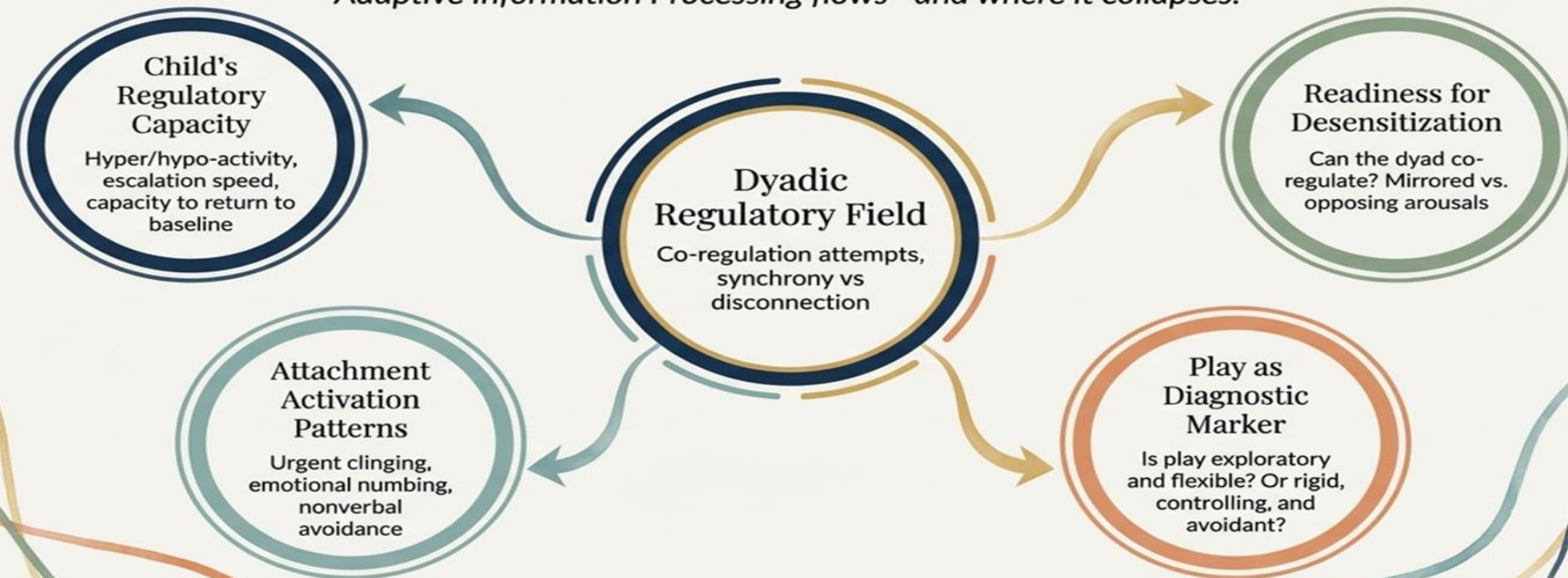
Return to Curiosity and Learning

Playing BOOM



Phase 1: Mapping the Dyadic Regulatory System

We are not mapping an isolated event. We are mapping where Adaptive Information Processing flows—and where it collapses.



NotebookLM

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Case Assessment: Amir (Age : 6)

War Exposure and Dyadic Regulation

Case Summary

Amir was born during wartime and exposed to air-raid sirens and explosions.

Symptoms: separation anxiety, fear of sirens, sleep difficulties, strong startle responses.

Therapeutic focus: observing regulation between Amir and his mother.

Coherent Narrative

- Mother describes Amir as "sensitive"
- No clear link between war exposure and current fears.

Responsiveness

- Mother offers verbal reassurance but struggles to regulate Amir when he becomes frightened.

Emotional Referencing

- Amir looks to his mother when startled.
- Mother becomes tense, increasing anxiety.

Attuned Response

- Mother redirects instead of helping Amir process fear.

Emotional Communication

- Strong proximity seeking and eye contact.
- Connection disrupted under stress



Key Observation: When Amir becomes dysregulated, the mother's sense of helplessness increases.



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Amir – Preparation Phase Playful Dyadic Intervention

1. Body-Calming Play

- Rhythm games with tactile BLS
- Tapping on a ball
- Rolling a car back forth



2. Noise-Away Game

- Make rhythmic noises to scare away "Scary Sounds"
- Clap hands, stomp feet
- Blow toy trumpet



3. Emotion-to-Action Play

- Transform fear into action (draw the sirens, then send them away together)
- Tear up the scary siren drawings with his mother



4. Outcome

- Strengthens co-regulation
- Builds sense of safety
- Mother less overwhelmed



* **Goal:** Help Amir find emotional safety through playful connection with his mother

Dyadic Playful EMDR: From Regulation to Processing

Dyadic Regulation (Preparation)

Building the Regulatory Field

Ball rolling → shared rhythm
Mother matches → then slows
Child follows → synchrony emerges

What is happening

Co-regulation established
Dyadic synchrony
Physiological stabilization
Bilateral stimulation through rhythm

Regulation before processing



→ Regulation before processing

Trauma Activation in Play



Spontaneous Activation

- Mother names: “sirens, bombing”
- Child shifts play → “Boom! Everything breaks!”

Clinical Meaning

- Trauma network activated
- Play = access to memory system

➤ Do not stop — regulate **THROUGH**



→ Do not stop — regulate **THROUGH**

Playful Desensitization (Phase 3—4)

Dyadic Processing

- Continue ball (BLS maintained)
- Therapist introduces **titration**:
→ “Make it a little less scary”
- Siren sounds → reduced intensity

Symbolic Transformation

- Draw the siren
- Fold → paper airplane
- Fly it away repeatedly



What changes

- Sensory → symbolic → action
- Passive fear → active control

Integration

- “Not so scary now”
- “Mom helped”

Closure



🔑 Processing does not begin with trauma — it begins with **regulation in relationship**.

Clinical Implications – What Do We Learn from Amir's Case?



1. Regulation must be co-created, not assumed.

Amir could not sustain regulation on his own—but within the dyadic interaction, regulation became possible.



2. Play is not a technique – it is the medium of processing

Through play, Amir was able to approach, transform, and reorganize a traumatic experience without becoming overwhelmed.



3. The caregiver is not an observer, but an active therapeutic agent.

Amir's shift was not only due to exposure or symbolic transformation—but to the experience of his mother as a regulating, supportive presence.



4. Bilateral stimulation becomes embedded within relationship.

Rather than a separate technique, it is woven into rhythmic, interactive play—supporting integration while maintaining connection.



5. The therapeutic target expands:

We are not only processing traumatic memory—we are strengthening the child's capacity to regulate within **relationship**.

**So what changes is not just the memory –
but the system that holds the memory.**

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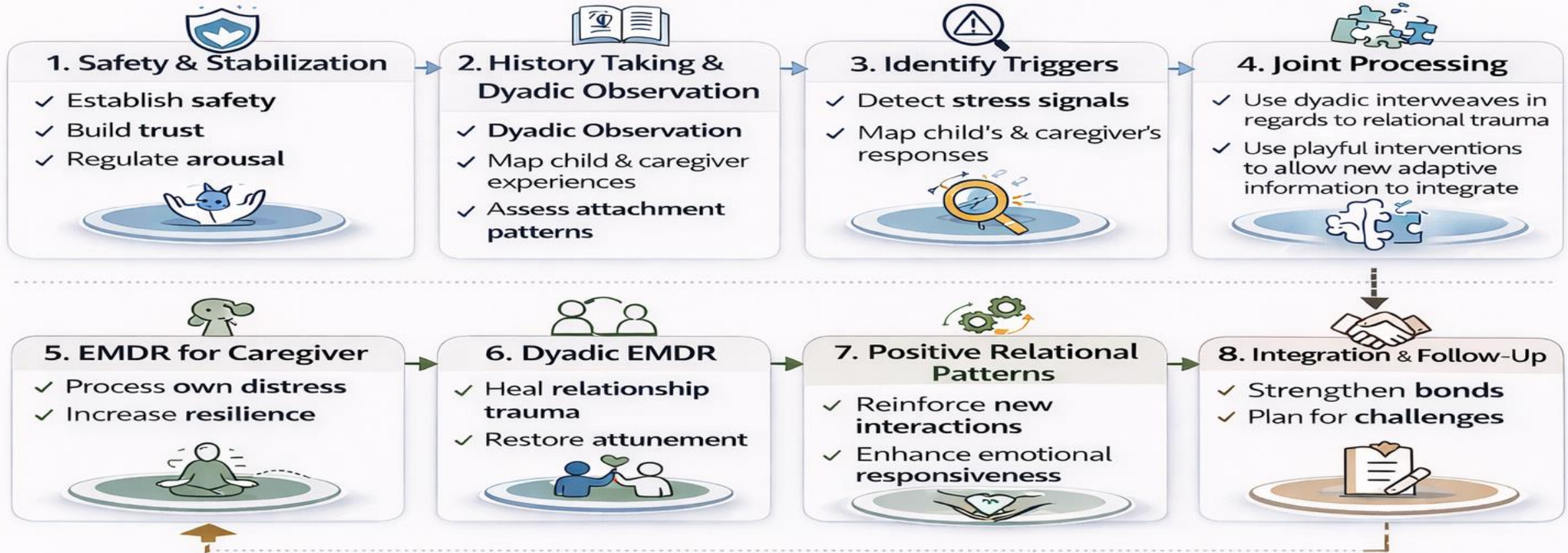
Child and Youth



EMDR in Dyadic Work – A Phased Approach



8 Phases to Assess and Strengthen the Shared Window of Tolerance

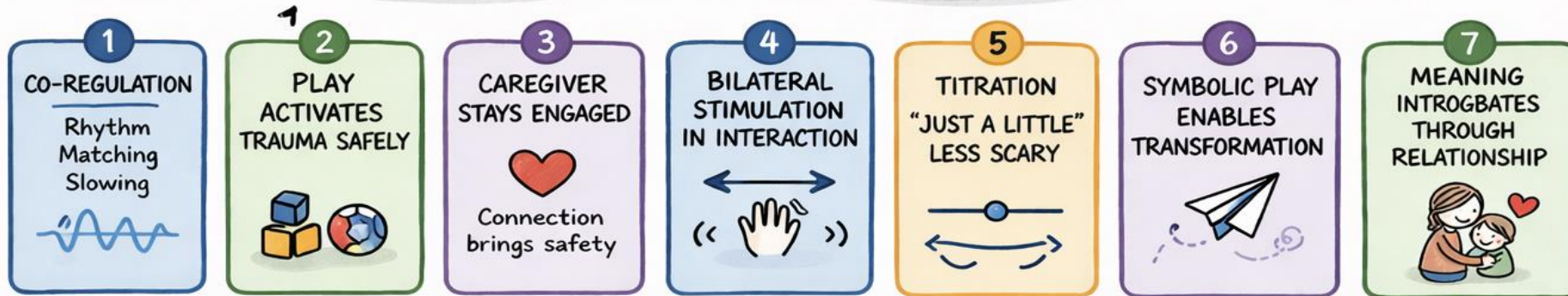


Goal: A Secure Base for Regulation, Connection & Growth

Thank You for Listening!

Supporting Healing Through **Dyadic Playful EMDR**

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Together, We Heal. 