

# Young children DO remember

Learning about regulation, memory, perception and how to help young children recall difficult events.

MNAFEE CONFERENCE: Anne R. Gearity, PhD. 14 April 2021



A time of carefree joy...

And short attention.



# Our wish for kids

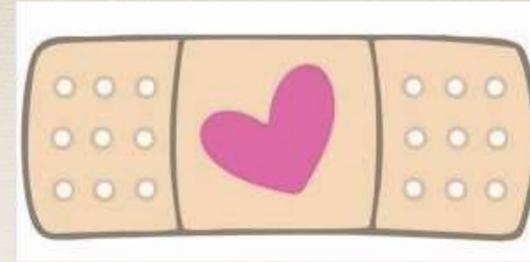
For a long time, we thought this was true: *that young children didn't remember, didn't hold onto stressful events. Or stressful events could be erased.*

*NOT SO...*

The power of a  
kiss, from  
someone who  
loves you



But with age (and wisdom) it takes  
more

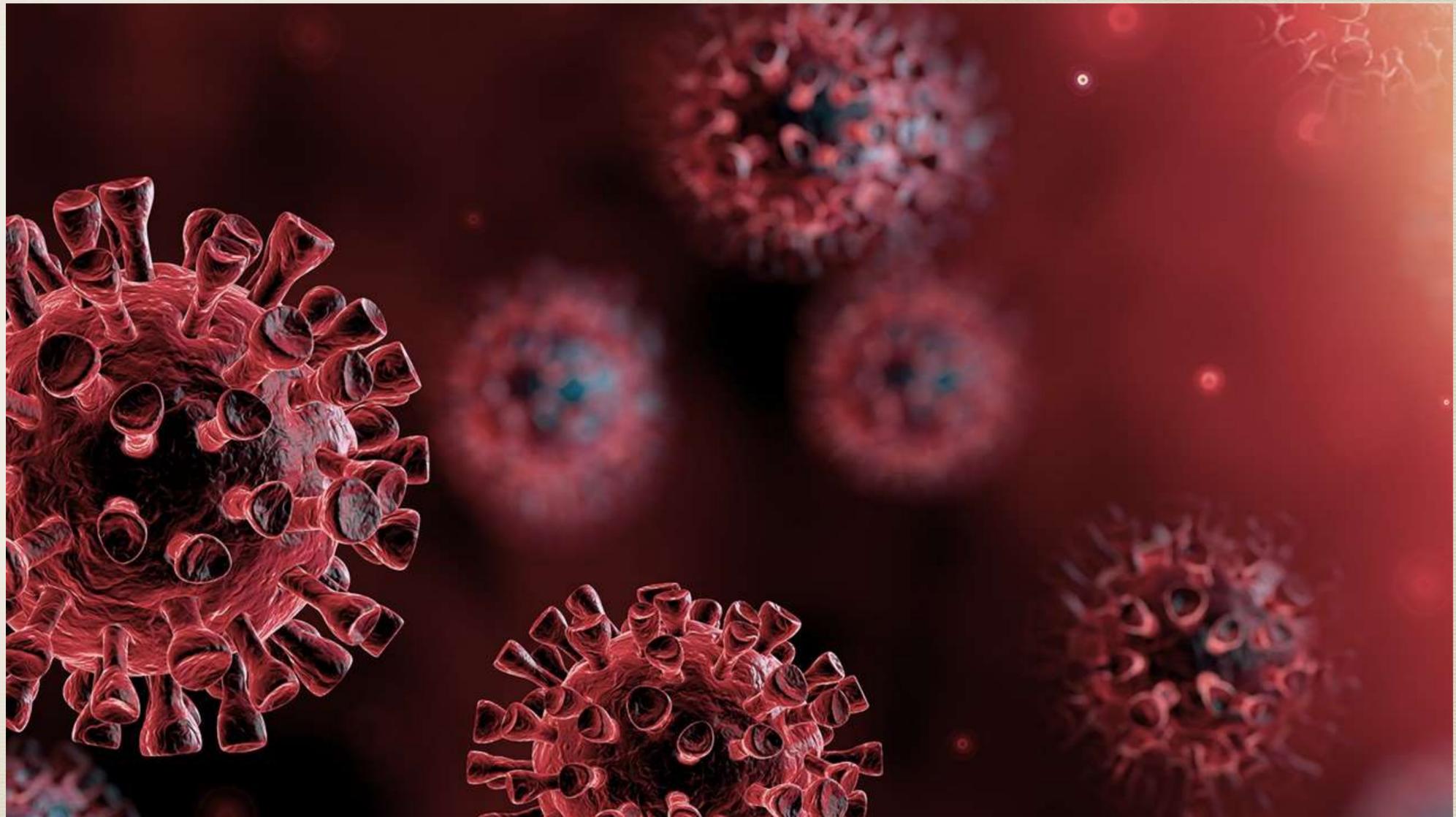


# But what happens when the danger is—

- \* Bigger than a cut?
- \* Feels overwhelming?
- \* Is changing how the child feels with their parent?
- \* Persists?

# COVID

- \* A good example of a danger that impacted everyone.
- \* Many young children heard about covid and made up ideas about what this meant.



# Let's talk about perception, memory and why children need adults.

- \* First, perception is sensory — babies feel their world and try to make this reliable.
- \* Reliable = what we try to do for young children/ predictable care, predictable schedules, expectations, patterns they can count on.
- \* This is for two reasons:
  - \* Reliable allows for babies and young children to **know how their world works.**
  - \* Reliable also **makes adults trusted partners/** organizers of the world.

Young children perceive parents as—



# And lucky that they do.

- \* Parents form the foundation for how the larger world works.
- \* But when something goes wrong, we are also the cause— powerful goes both ways.
- \* Children gradually realize that we are “sort of” powerful— and while we cannot make everything safe, we can mediate because we help them regulate.

Co-regulation lead to...



It Takes Two to  
Tango

(and Self Regulate)

# What is self regulation?

- \* Self regulation is the neurobiological AND neuropsychological capacity to maintain and regain balance in the face of stimulation, change and intense feelings.
- \* Our human attachment experience is about helping babies and young children enter the experiential “software” that permits self regulation.
- \* This “software” happens from the hundreds and hundreds of experiences with parents, where balance is regained and all is well again. We call this “co-regulation” because **we do it with** our child.

They need us and we need them to parent.

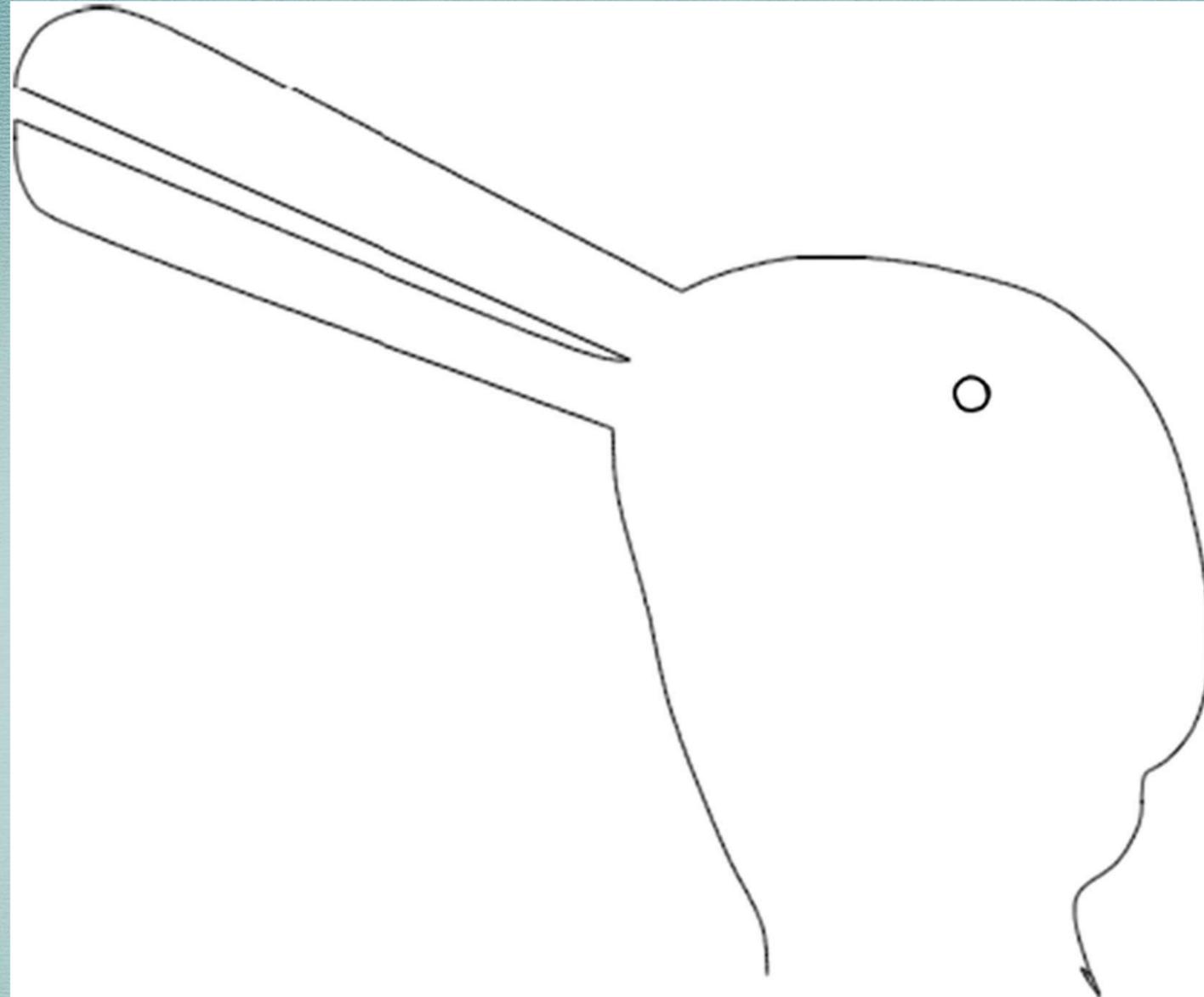
Single Slices / Peter Kohlsaat

I have to spend quality  
time with my parents  
or they'll become dysfunctional.



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# Perception

Duck or rabbit?

# Perception is individual

- \* We all “see” our experiences with unique perceptions — colored by context.
- \* This is why culture, race, past experiences are so important: we come to new experiences with biases.
- \* Sometimes bias influences our perceptions of others, including our own children or students. Attributions is a form of bias.

# Perception is impacted by sensations

- \* Young children feel — and hold onto that feeling as guidance for what happened?
- \* As parents, we must pay attention to what our child might be experiencing, different from what we are.
- \* We call this joining — being willing to shift out of our perceptions, and see how it is for our child. Without this help, they stay confused.
- \* Our generosity helps children know their bodies and feelings, and eventually know their perceptions.

# What is memory?



# Memory is how we keep things.

- \* We encode experiences so that these are kept in our archive of things that are important. We don;t keep everything, and probably strong emotions increase the chance of holding on to something.
- \* We store memories in categories— things that are similar. This is why patterns are so important.
- \* And when something happens in the present, we retrieve memories from the archive to help us know what to do now.

# But memory is not simple.

- \* Memories are often sensory — and different sensory experiences/ fragments can merge.
- \* Memory is not precise or “honest” — we condense experiences and form recall that may (or may not) be objectively accurate.
- \* Memory is also selective — what one person remembers may be different from another / the problem for siblings.

# Memory may seem in my mind...

- but it is stored in many places in my body.
- My body is often how I “realize” more about memory.
- For young children, bodies are the primary location of memory.



# Another wrinkle

- \* There are two memory systems— explicit and implicit.
- \* Implicit memory is more about how things work — and is held in body feelings, sensations, non-verbal recall.
- \* Experiences that are highly stressful — (and experiences without words)— are stored implicitly.
- \* Implicit memory is accessed through similar sensations and patterns.

# For young children

- \* Implicit memories are the rule—they lack the capacities for reliable explicit recall.
- \* Their memories are formed in collaboration with their bodies— as they make sense of *what happened?* This is why patterns are so important.
- \* Their memories are also informed by the care they experience. When adults soothe, their memories are more soothing.

# One last tidbit

- \* Memories are constantly changing. Opening a memory allows new information to be incorporated.
- \* Young children collect memories in categories — birthday parties, times with dad, etc. while older children (and adults) revise and build on memories with new experiences. We help younger children revise memories.



Stressful events

# #1 idea

- \* Children do experience stressful events. They are not immune.
- \* In fact, because they lack language they cannot mediate an event with a story. They actually feel things MORE intensely.
- \* They don't forget, their bodies remember. (This is for survival).
- \* The more stressful an event, the more heightened senses and emotions are activated: the more young children encode this as important.

# # 2 idea

- \* We supplement young children's brains: we provide the words and the soothing effect of words.
- \* We construct stories that explain *what happened* —and the more our words resonate with their bodies' experiences and NAME that, the more the child can breathe a sigh of relief.
- \* What is in the naming? 1) soothing experience of your talking about what is hard and 2) lending words that they can use, borrow.

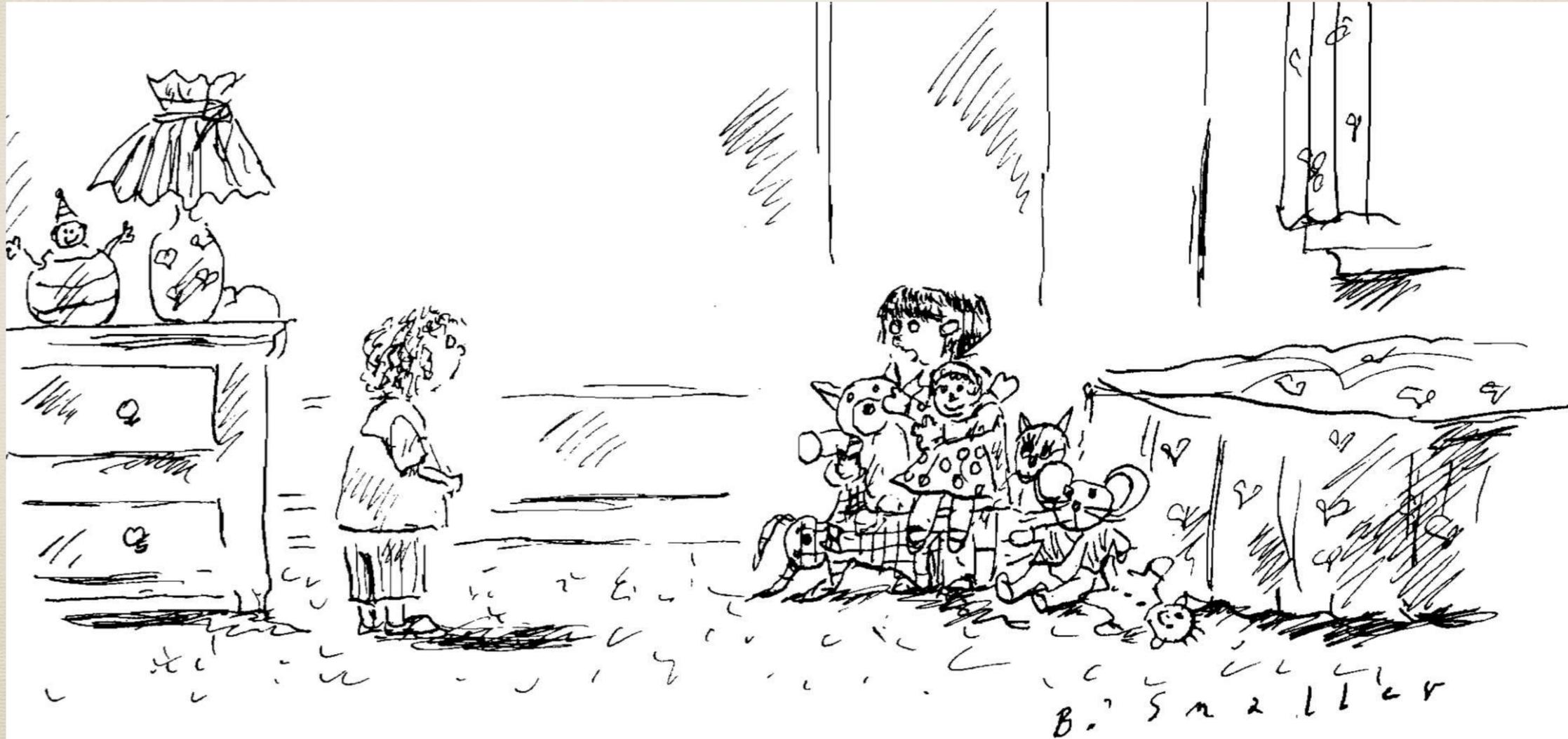
We provide protection that eases  
distress.



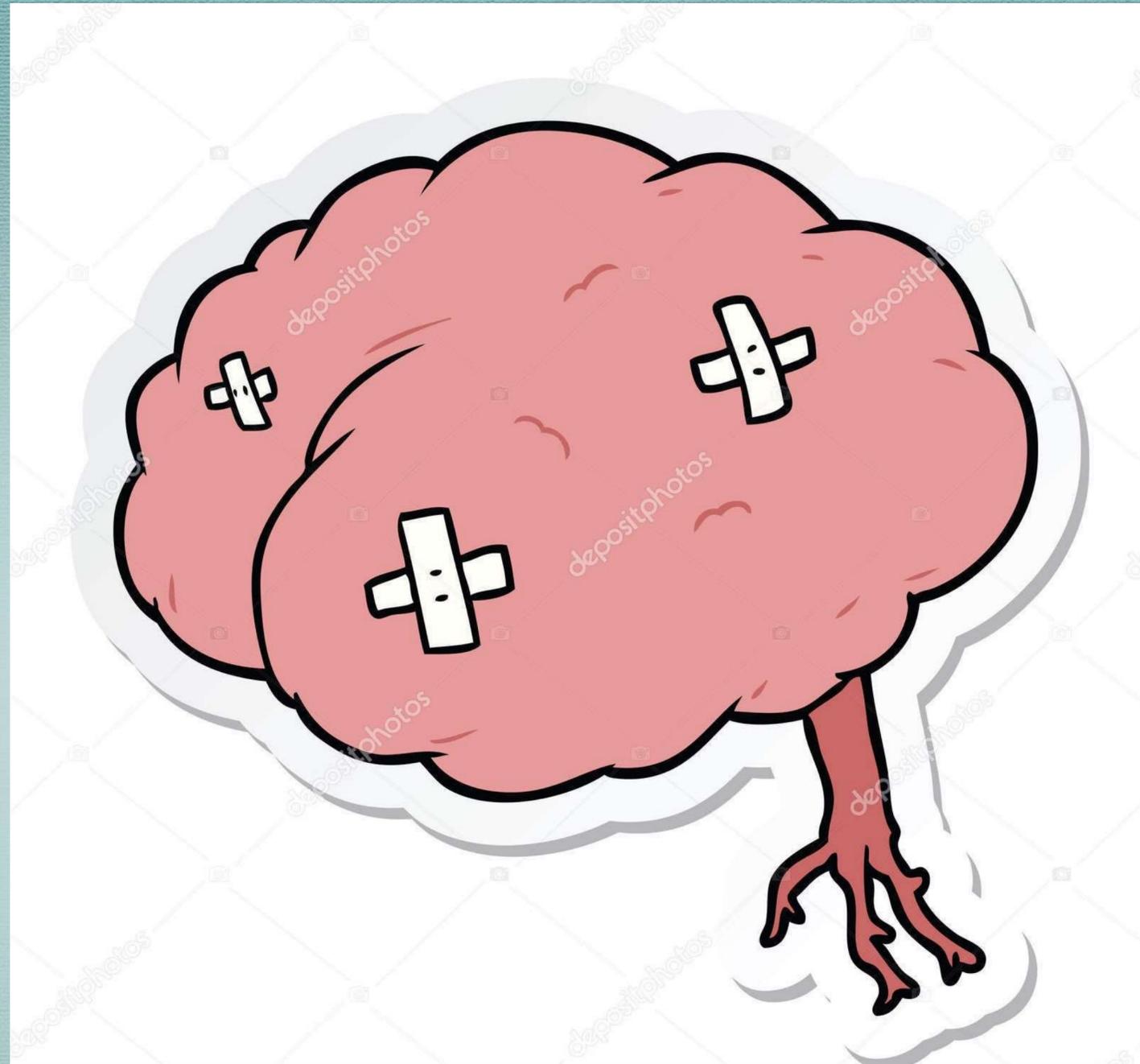
# #3 idea

- \* Name it and tame it.
- \* We name development transitions.
- \* We also name scary things that can be known, more controlled, more managed.
- \* Stories are important ways that we manage hard and difficult times. Stories move us to we did it! and also give us the chance to manage better in recall. This is how we achieve mastery.

# Influence of development



*"I would share, but I'm not there developmentally."*



# Hiding stress

Don't do it...

# COVID taught us...we cannot hide.

- \* Be honest with children: this helps their brain sort what is happening. Deception makes things worse — they lose us.
- \* Without clarity, their bodies will remember and carry experiences without knowing why, what to do.
- \* Making stories is how we help them — and their brains.

# We also know

- \* When you are afraid, stressed, fearful? You don't need to lie/ be honest about what is happening — and your words will relieve your child.
- \* Children are “egocentric”= *it's all about me*. Knowing it is about something else allows kids to feel less scared.
- \* Company is the most effective way to reduce fear arousal. Your company is what young children need. Your company calms their bodies.

# Lest we forget...

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I have to spend quality  
time with my parents  
or they'll become dysfunctional.



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# Resilience for young children

NOT about reaching the top

# Resilience is about keeping on growing...

- \* As we manage covid and all the other stressors, we hope for resilience for everyone.
- \* Harvest delight, joy, curiosity, pleasure.
- \* Your job as parents, as educators, is to make sure there is space, time and chances to keep growing. Don't get stuck in fear. And talk about what is happening, will happen.

CHOOSE

*Kindness*

Best advice for parenting.