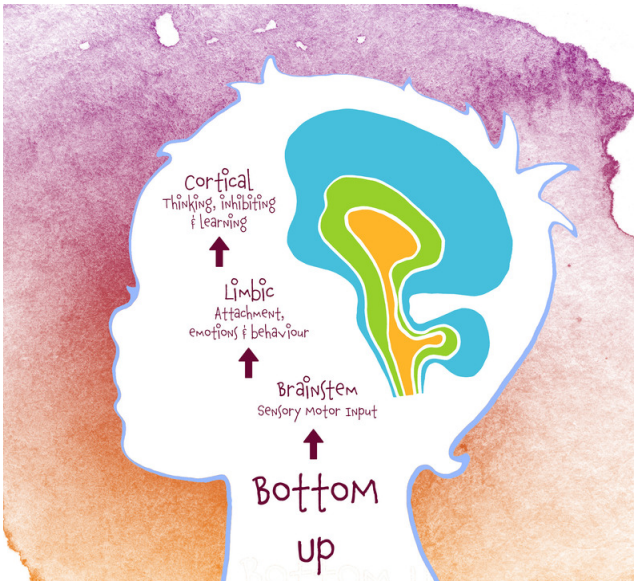
Beacon House
Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team

Brainstem Calmers

A psychiatrist, Dr Bruce Perry, has developed something called the 'Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics', which is a framework that helps us to know how to help children who have suffered early trauma and loss.

Children's brains organize from bottom to top, with the lower parts of the brain (brainstem aka "survival brain") developing earliest, and the cortical areas (thinking brain) much later. Traumatised children's brain become stuck in the brainstem, and they therefore swing between their survival modes of fight/flight/freeze/collapse.



One of the most helpful ways to move children from these super-high anxiety states, to their calmer 'thinking brain', is patterned, repetitive rhythmic activity

Creating a therapeutic web of relationships around the child together with regular brainstem calming activities can, over time, help a child's brain and body to learn that they are safe.

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Brainstem Calmers

Brainstem calming activities need to be:

Relational (offered by a safe adult)
Relevant (developmentally-matched to the child rather than matched to their actual age)
Repetitive (patterned)
Rewarding (pleasurable)
Rhythmic (resonant with neural patterns)
Respectful (of the child and family)

Below is a list of brainstem calming activities which could be offered across home and school, with the above "R" principles in mind. Examples of how you can translate this into practice are offered.

The best way to use these activities is to weave them into the child's daily routine so that they have them little and often, every day. Many of them can be offered as part of a whole-class activity.

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Brainstem Calmer Activities

WALKING

Individual

- Being asked to do regular jobs so that there are walking breaks in between tasks
- Being ask to show visitors where things are in the school

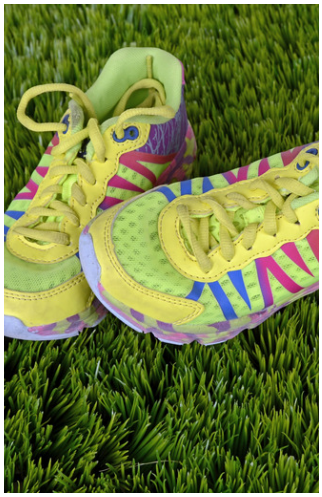
Whole Class

- Being given information whilst walking
- A walking mindfulness exercise

DANCING

Whole Class

- During P.E.
- A morning tutor group energy boosting movement minute
- A whole class song with actions in between tasks
- As part of a club



RUNNING

Whole Class

- During P.E.
- A morning tutor group energy boosting movement minute
- Periodic movement breaks during a lesson such as running round a hall
- As part of a club

Trampoline and skipping are also helpful repetitive movements

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Brainstem Calmer Activities

DRUMMING

Individual
- Formal or informal lessons
- Formal or informal therapy

Whole Class
- As a playful activity in between tasks

TAPPING

Individual and/or ***Whole Class***

- Self tapping on knees (left/right) to think of good or positive things
- Self tapping whilst breathing
- Self tapping whilst engaged in something fun

SINGING

Individual
- A safe adult singing during 1:1 time

Whole Class
- Having a CD in the background of smooth, 'motherese' tones

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Brainstem Calmer Activities

BREATHING

Individual

- Trusted adult partnership breathing (child matches adults breathing using an agreed non verbal cue)

Whole Class

- Blowing things as a focussed activity (with the primary aim to do deep breathing)
- Post lunch body scan meditation
- Make it a classroom tradition to take 3 deep breathes, held for 3 seconds, before starting a new piece of work.

MOVEMENT

Individual

- Reading on a rocking chair

Whole Class

- Singing to songs with movement
- Simple pre-lunch yoga sequence
- Tension stretch at the end of the school day
- Chair Aerobics

MUSIC

Individual

- Using headphones to listen to the music privately

Whole Class

- Having a CD in the background with rhythmic beats (short bursts throughout the day)
- Writing, singing and creating music for rap songs