

Emotional Wellbeing across childhood



Dr Leah Cronin & Dr Laura Kerr, Principal Clinical Psychologists

By invitation of Early Years Scotland and with thanks to Corra Foundation.

1. What is wellbeing?

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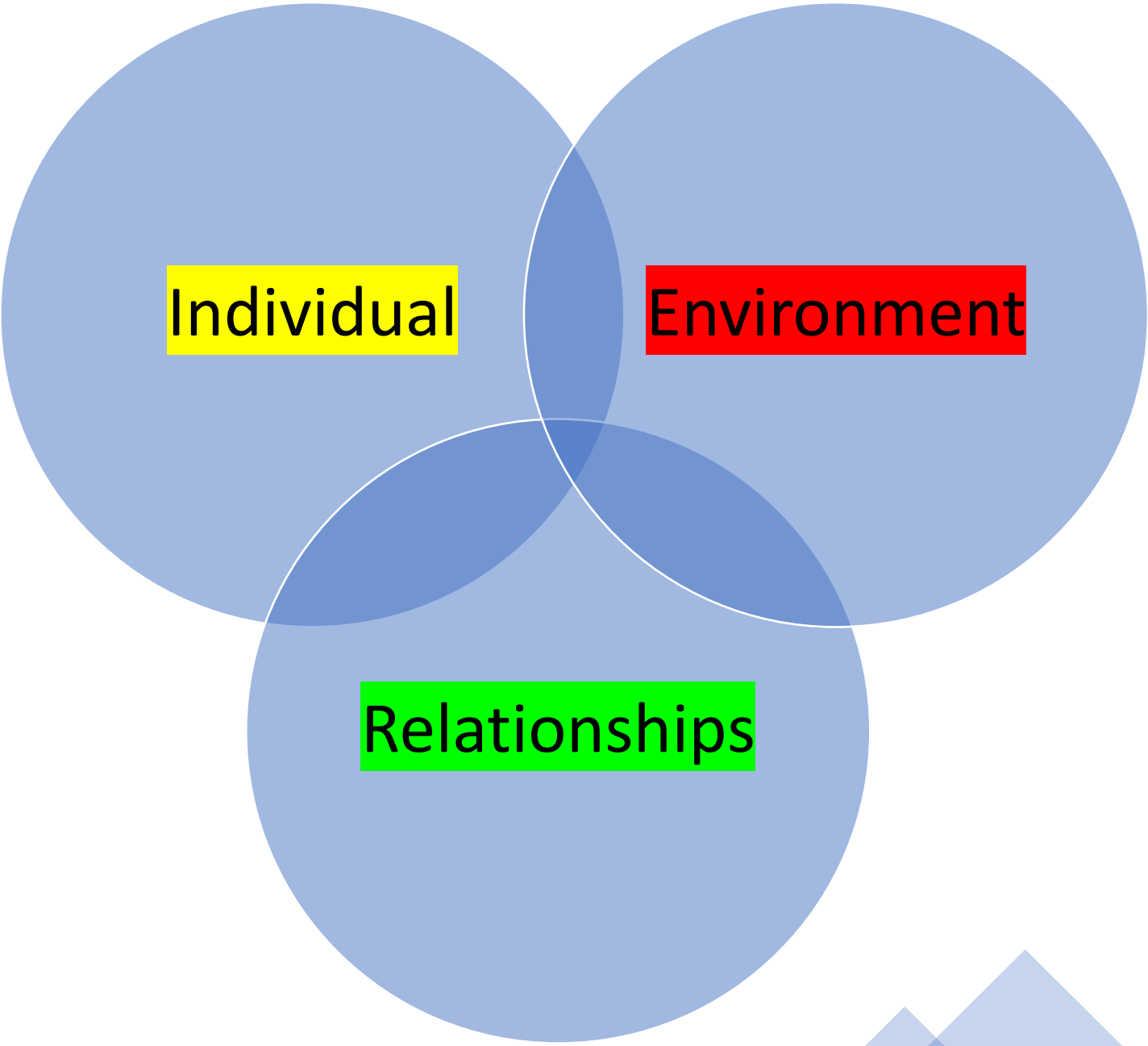
Oxford English Dictionary: *“the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy”*

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A teenager: *“I have good friends and a partner who treats me well, I’ve got choices about what I want to do in life and I have a flair for languages. My parents drive me up the wall but I can go to them about anything.”*

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- **A child:** *“I have the most bestest friend and Mummy and Daddy. I am very good at sharing and doing sums. I feel safe tucked up in my warm bed”*



Individual

A Venn diagram consisting of three overlapping circles. The top-left circle is labeled 'Individual' on a yellow background. The top-right circle is labeled 'Environment' on a red background. The bottom circle is labeled 'Relationships' on a green background. The circles overlap in various combinations, creating darker shades of blue in the intersection areas. The background is white with decorative geometric shapes in the corners: a blue diamond in the top-left, a yellow triangle in the top-right, and a blue triangle in the bottom-right.

Environment

Relationships

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2. What is emotional well-being?

What is emotional well-being?

Good Mental Health for All, NHS Health Scotland (2010-2016)

- develop emotionally, creatively, intellectually and spiritually
- face problems, resolve and learn from them
- cope with adversities, show resilience
- initiate, develop and sustain mutually satisfying personal relationships
- contribute to family and other social networks, local community and society
- empathise with others
- use and enjoy solitude
- play and have fun

Q? When does emotional wellbeing start

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A: in the womb!



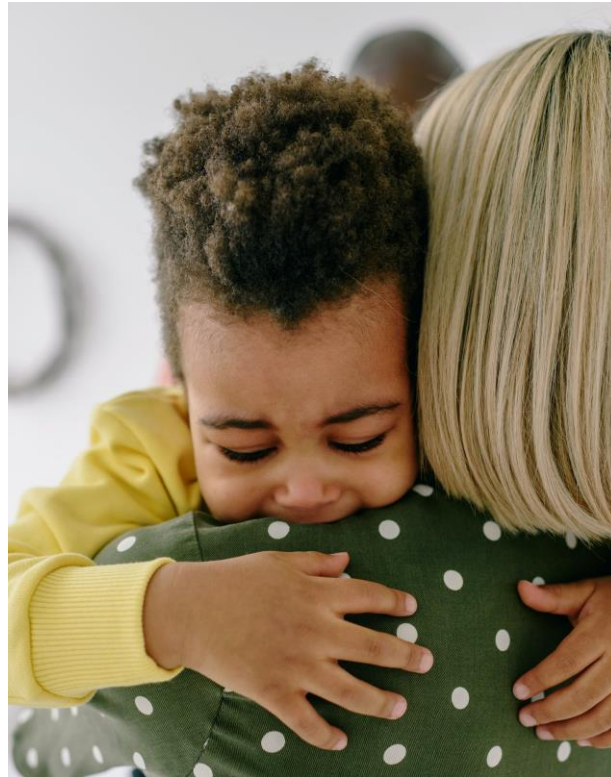
Definition of infant mental health:

‘the young child’s capacity to experience, regulate, and express emotions, form close and secure relationships, and explore the environment and learn [and]

*developing these capacities **is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development**”*

(Zero to Three, 2001, cited in Zeanah 2009)

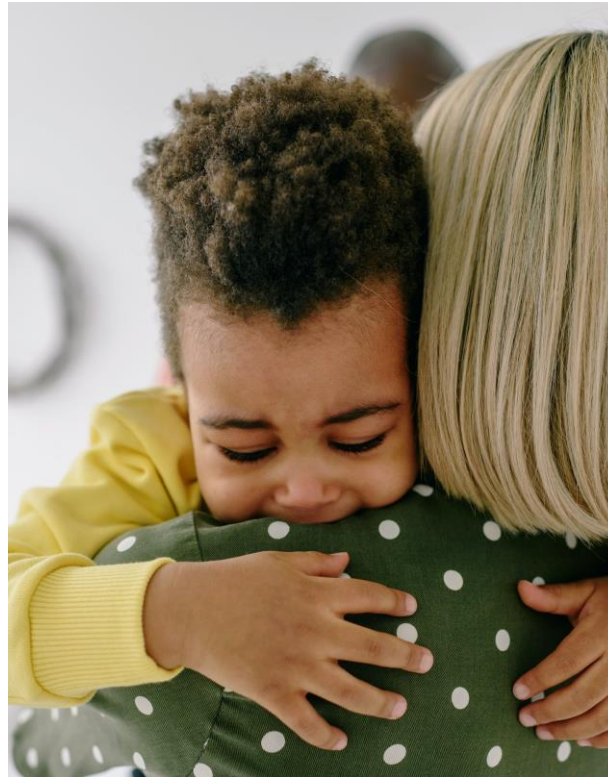
“experience, regulate, and express emotions”



- **Recognise:** What am I feeling?
- **Reflect:** Why am I feeling this?
- **Respond:** What can I do when I feel like this?

“experience, regulate, and express emotions”

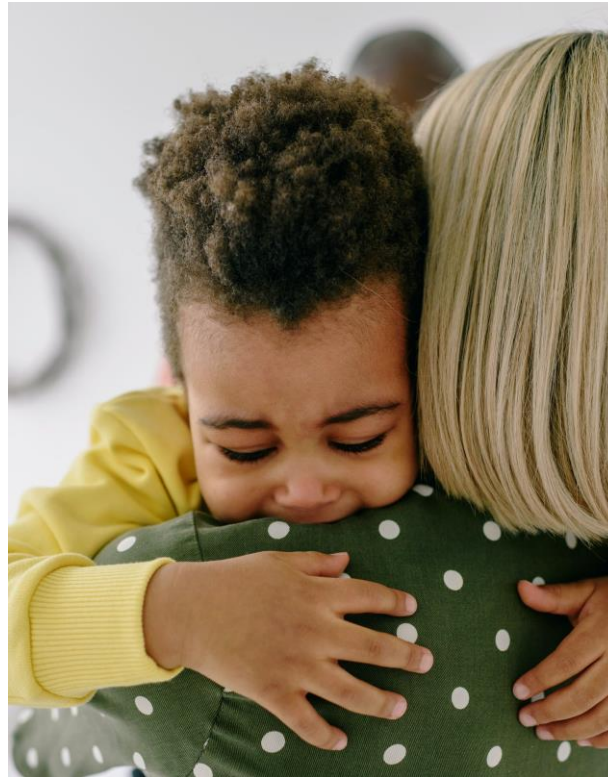
Co-Regulation



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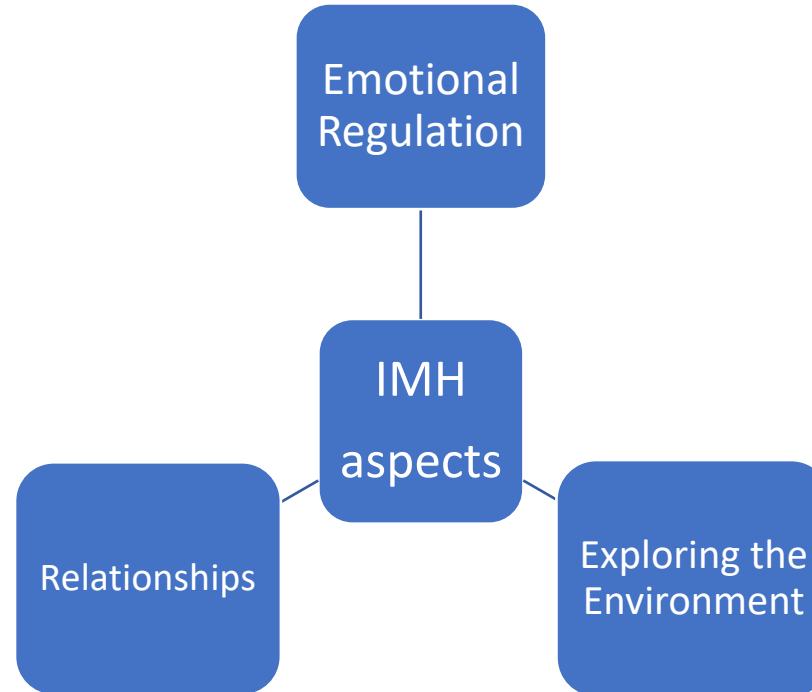
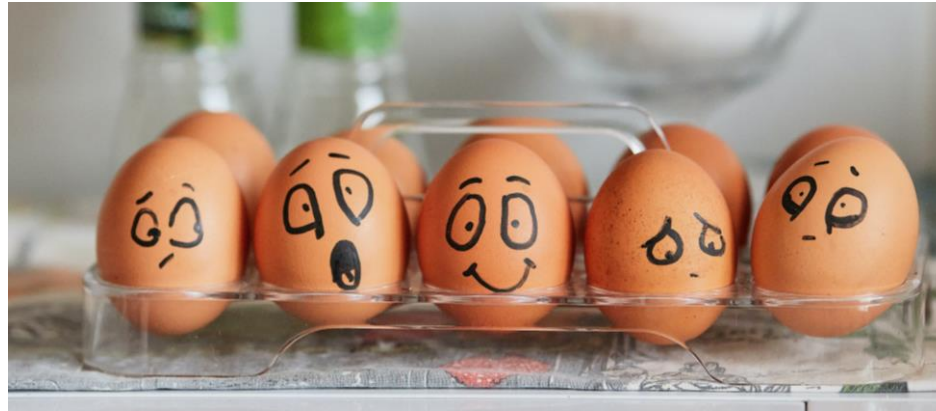
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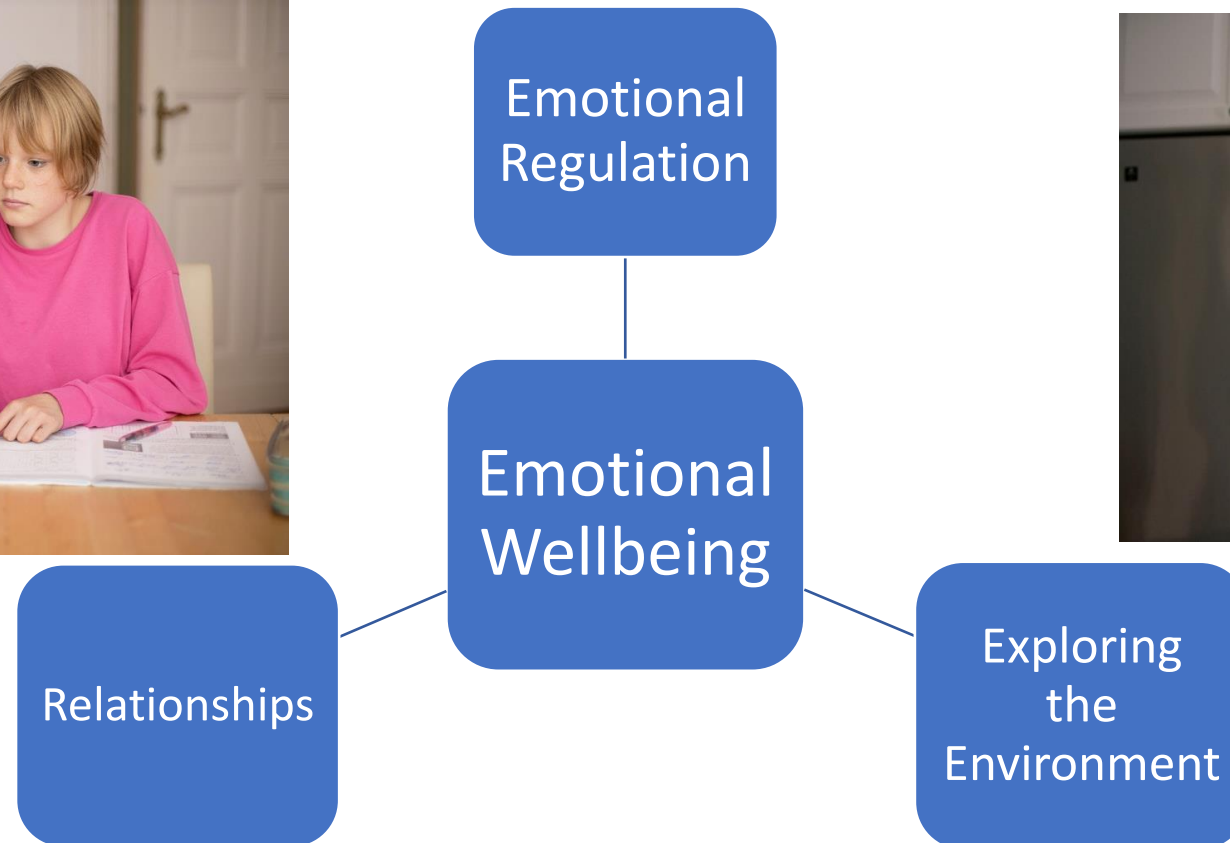
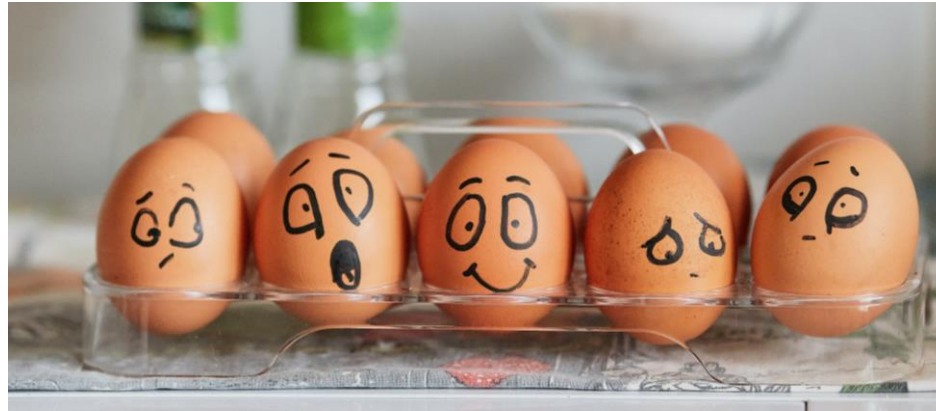
“Form close & secure relationships”



“explore the environment and learn”



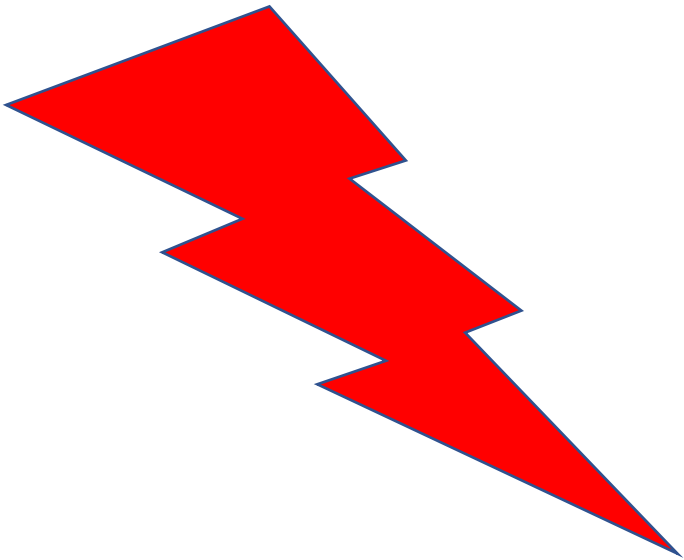




3. What can we do as adults to promote emotional wellbeing in infants, children and adolescents?

Attachment Theory: John Bowlby (1969)

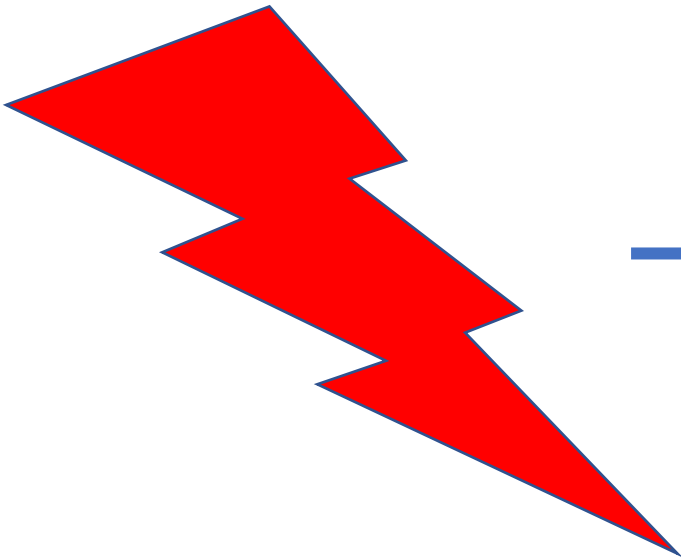
Actual or Perceived Threat
or increased anxiety



Attachment Theory: John Bowlby (1969)

Actual or Perceived Threat
or increased anxiety

Child seeks proximity to carer



Attachment Theory: John Bowlby (1969)

Parent/Carer/Worker
recognises need, comforts,
child accepts comfort



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Child feels safe and able to
explore again



Attribution theory (Heider 1958).

The cause/reason/meaning we **attribute** to the behaviour of others will encourage us to feel and act a certain way in response.

Attachment Theory: John Bowlby (1969)

Parent/Carer/Worker
recognises need, comforts,
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Child feels safe and able to
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Minds and behaviour of others



Behaviour
associated
with the
attribution
- a
comforting
hug

Minds and behaviour of others

Attribution: He's
just looking for
attention.



Attribution: He's a
bit old for this
carry on.

Minds and behaviour of others

Attribution: He's just looking for attention.



Attribution: He's a bit old for this carry on.

Behaviour associated with the attribution – rebuked or ignored?

These repeated experiences of relationships give us a sense of what to expect from:

- Ourselves
- The world
- Other People

Expectations as an infant

"I'm a nice person who is liked and love, regardless of the feelings I show"



**Self-
Esteem**

Expectations as an infant

"I'm a nice person who is liked and love, regardless of the feelings I show"



**Self-
Esteem**

"The world is a pretty safe and predictable place"



**World
view**

Expectations as an infant

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Self-Esteem

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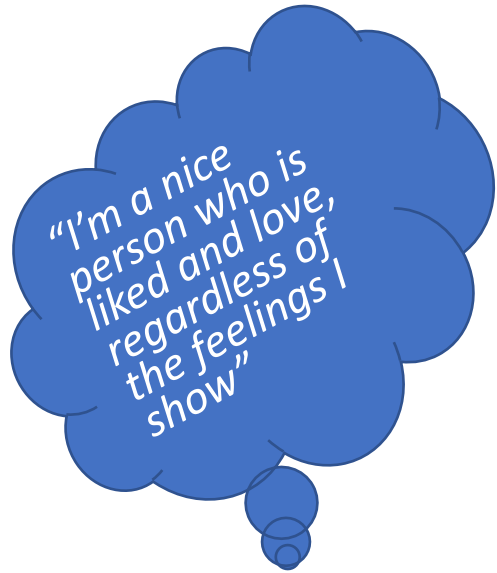
World view

"It feels good to be around other people - they can help me"

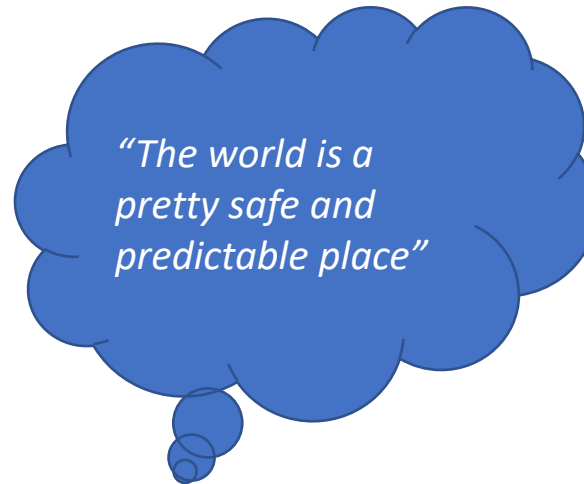


How I feel and act in relationships

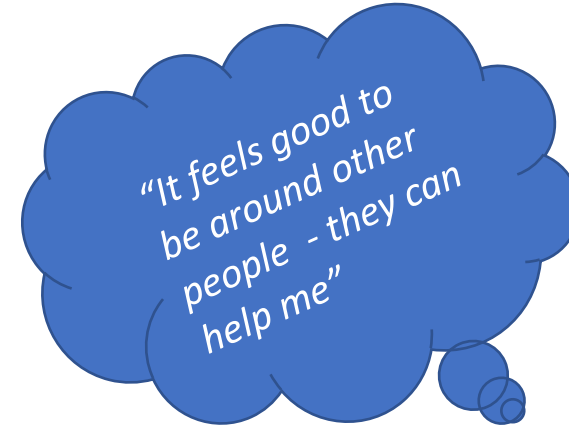
Expectations as a child



Self-Esteem



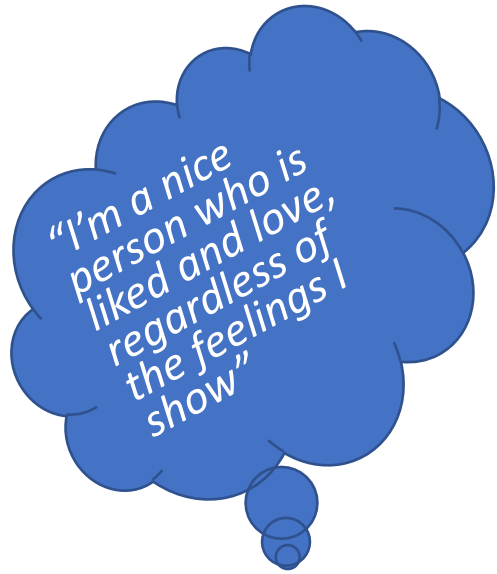
World view



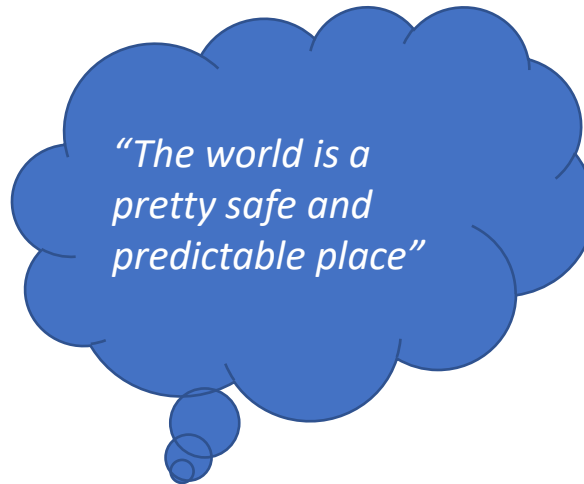
How I feel and act in relationships



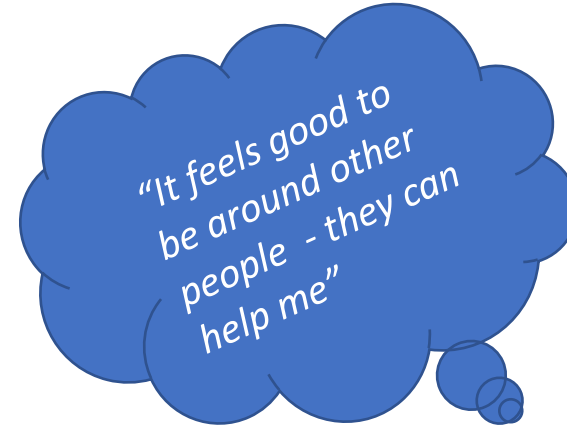
Expectations as an adolescent



**Self-
Esteem**



**World
view**



**How I feel
and act in
relationships**



A red flag flies on a pole against a dramatic, cloudy sky. The sky is filled with dark, swirling clouds, and the bottom of the image shows a dark, calm sea. A large, light-colored circular graphic is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

4. What are some signs
that a child or young
person is struggling
emotionally?

Red Flags

Changes in their usual presentation or behaviour

- Physically- appetite, sleep, pain
- Emotionally- more or less reactive than usual
- Within relationships- more close or more distant

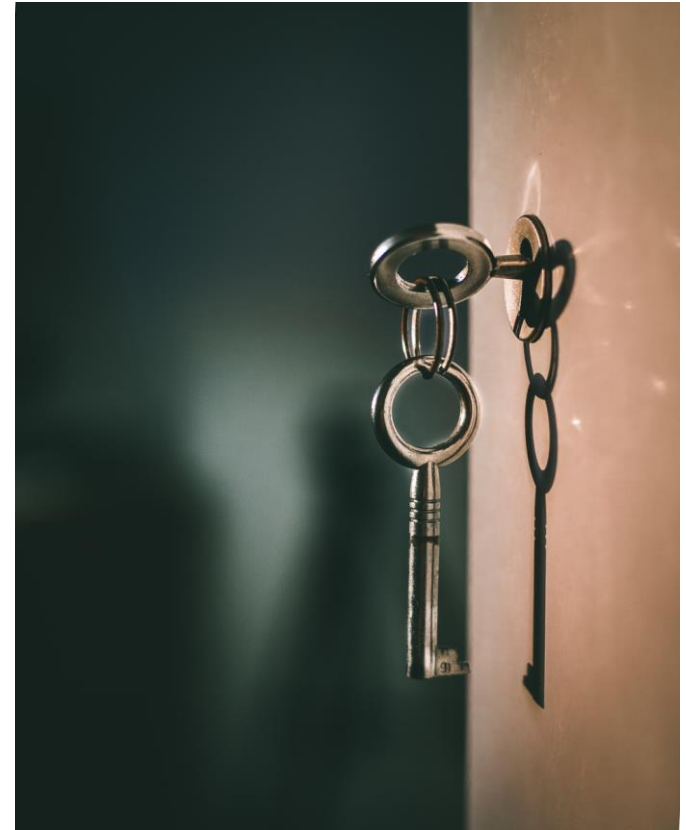


Relationships are KEY to emotional wellbeing

We all want to feel liked, seen,
understood and thought about.

We all want to matter to the people who
matter to us.

We all want to feel like we are
worthwhile and have value.



The Environment

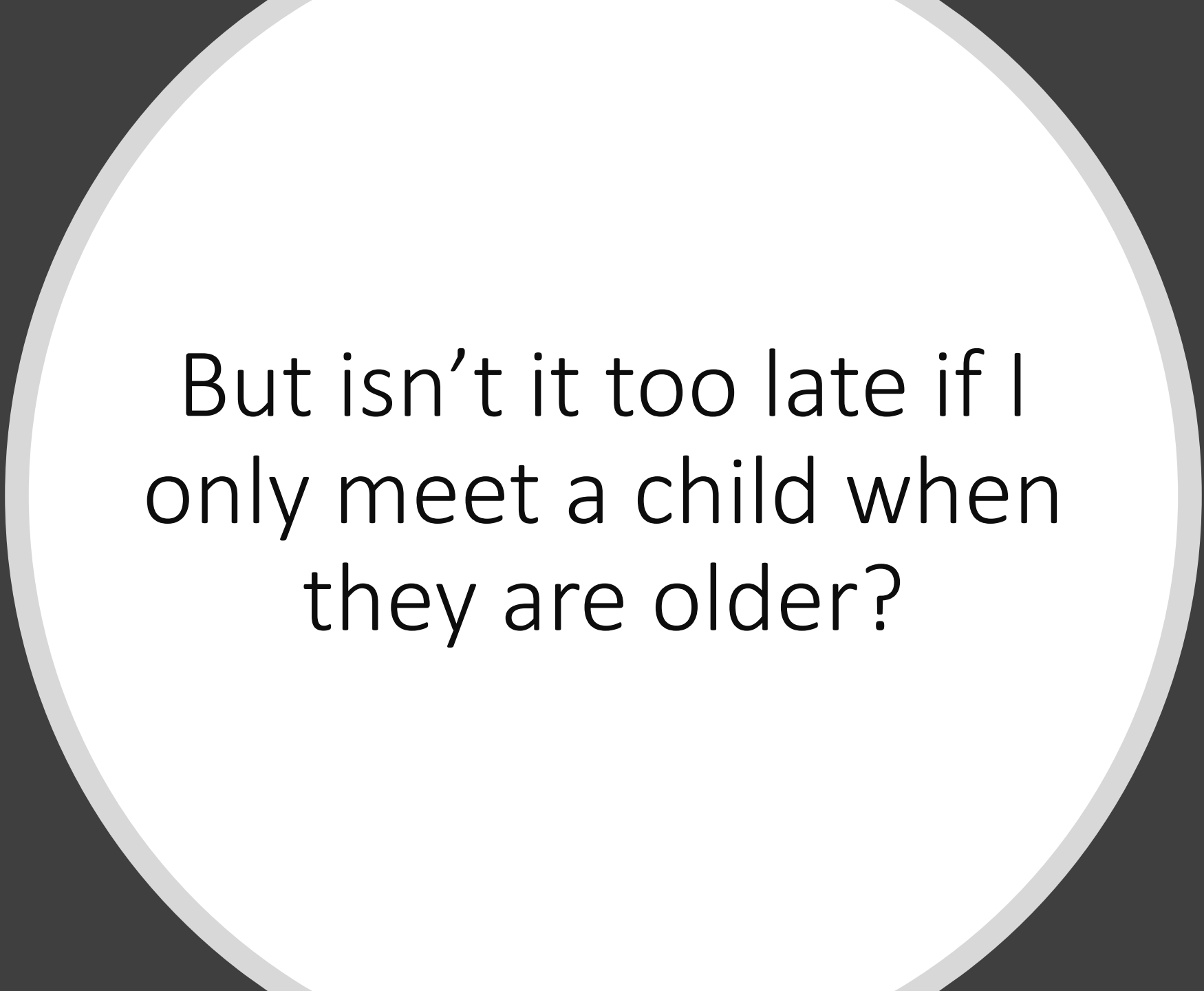
- Poverty: adversity in childhood (ACES) are highly correlated with socioeconomic disadvantage **in the first year of life** (Marryat & Frank, 2019).
- Lack of certainty/stability (housing/employment)
- Social Isolation
- Unmet parental mental health needs (including antenatal perinatal mental health for mums, dads and carers)
- Physical health difficulties
- Relationship difficulties including Intimate Partner Violence
- Community Violence
- Abuse & Neglect

Relationships really are restorative

- A relationship with one trusted adult during childhood can mitigate the impacts of ACEs on mental and physical wellbeing (eg **'angels in the nursery'** Lieberman et al. 2005).
- This can be true even in the case of the most trying and over-burdening adversity.
- Individual resilience matters.



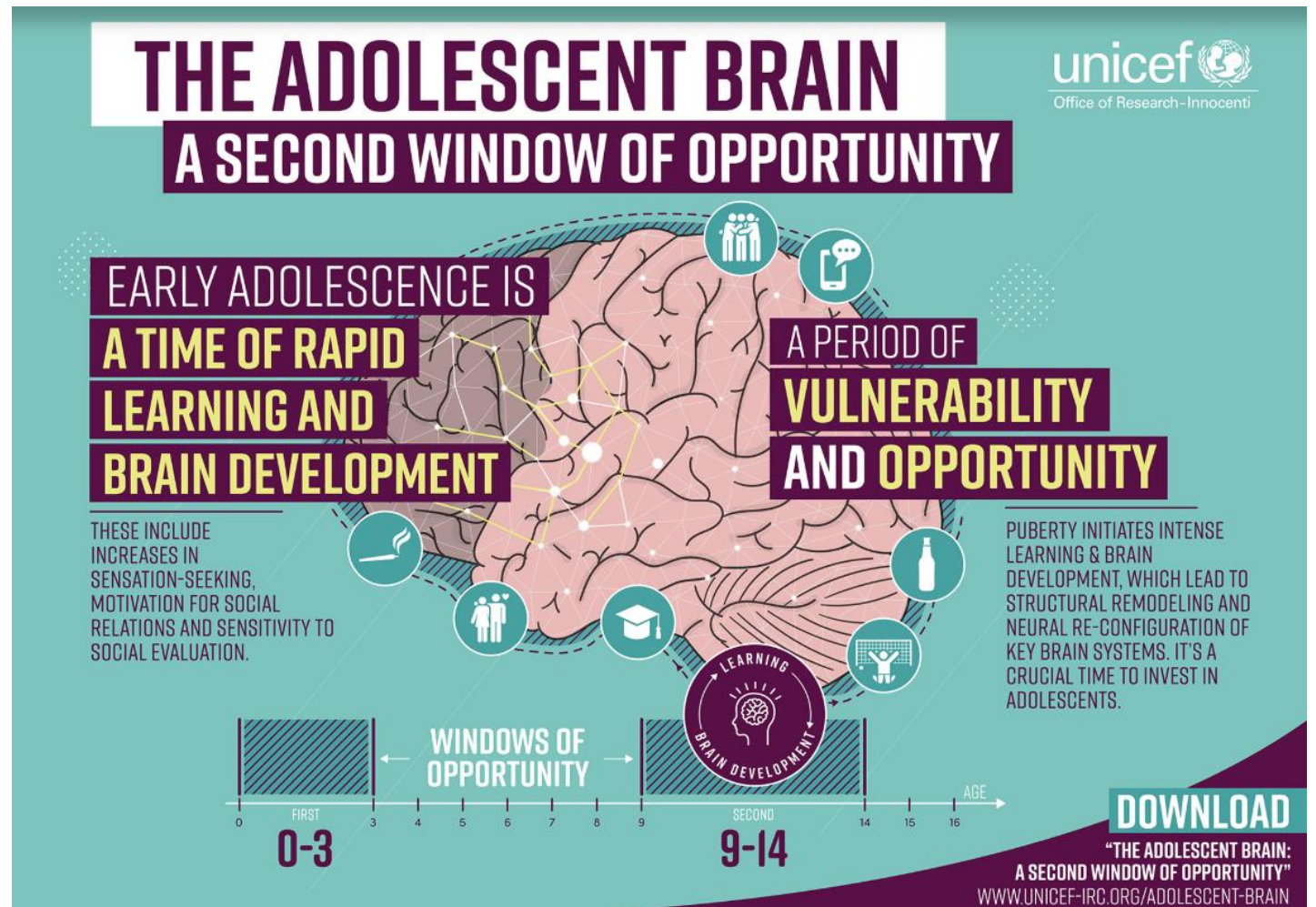
5. What key things should we keep in mind for emotional wellbeing?



But isn't it too late if I
only meet a child when
they are older?

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<https://www.unicef-irc.org/article/1750-the-adolescent-brain-a-second-window-of-opportunity.html#:~:text=Advances%20in%20neuroscience%20reveal%20that,their%20second%20decade%20of%20life.>



Your **relationship with them** is your most powerful tool for emotional wellbeing

1. **Let them know they matter** – we all need to feel seen and held in mind.
2. **Acknowledge when difficult things are happening** and look for help in finding developmentally appropriate words.
3. **Think about how you are making sense of them and your developmental expectations** - this will impact on your response to them.
4. Allow **space for difficult feelings** when difficult things are happening.
5. Allow them to try and fail – **praise their efforts, energy & creativity** and not just when they succeed or win.
6. Help them **find ways to manage their stress and distress** – in the context of supportive relationships

Attachment Theory: John Bowlby (1969)

Parent, carer, worker
recognises need, comforts,
child accepts comfort



Child feels safe and able to
explore again



This is **really** hard to do if
you are stressed, scared,
overburdened yourself

Parents and carers need support too

- Supporting parents supports children's' wellbeing
- Ask what parents need, including their own physical and mental health and safety
- Allowing space for their fears and worries while bringing hope for change – there is so much we can do if we have the right support.



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- Ask what parents need, including their own physical and mental health and safety
- Allowing space for their fears and worries while bringing hope for change – there is so much we can do if we have the right support.
- **We need to be taken care of too. Our work is difficult and it takes energy to be curious about the thoughts and feelings of ourselves and others.**



References

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Thank you and please do get in touch...



- Dr Leah Cronin:
cronin.leah@gmail.com
- Dr Laura Kerr:
laurafkerr85@gmail.com