

STRATEGIES FOR
HELPING
STUDENTS WITH
ACES



Every day, children enter classrooms hauling backpacks, pencils, paper—and their unique views of the world.



When children witness violence between their adult caregivers or experience abuse or neglect, they can enter the classroom believing that the world is an unpredictable and threatening place.



There is nothing new about the presence of traumatized children in our schools. Often without realizing it, teachers have been dealing with trauma's impact for generations.





But trauma researchers can now explain the hidden story behind many classroom difficulties plaguing our educational system.

Childhood trauma from exposure to family violence can diminish concentration, memory, and the organizational and language abilities that children need to function well in school.



“One in every four students currently sitting in American classrooms have experienced a traumatic event, and the number is even greater for those living in impoverished communities,” and, “Young children exposed to more than five adverse experiences in the first three years of life face a 75 percent likelihood of having one or more delays in language, emotional, or brain development.”

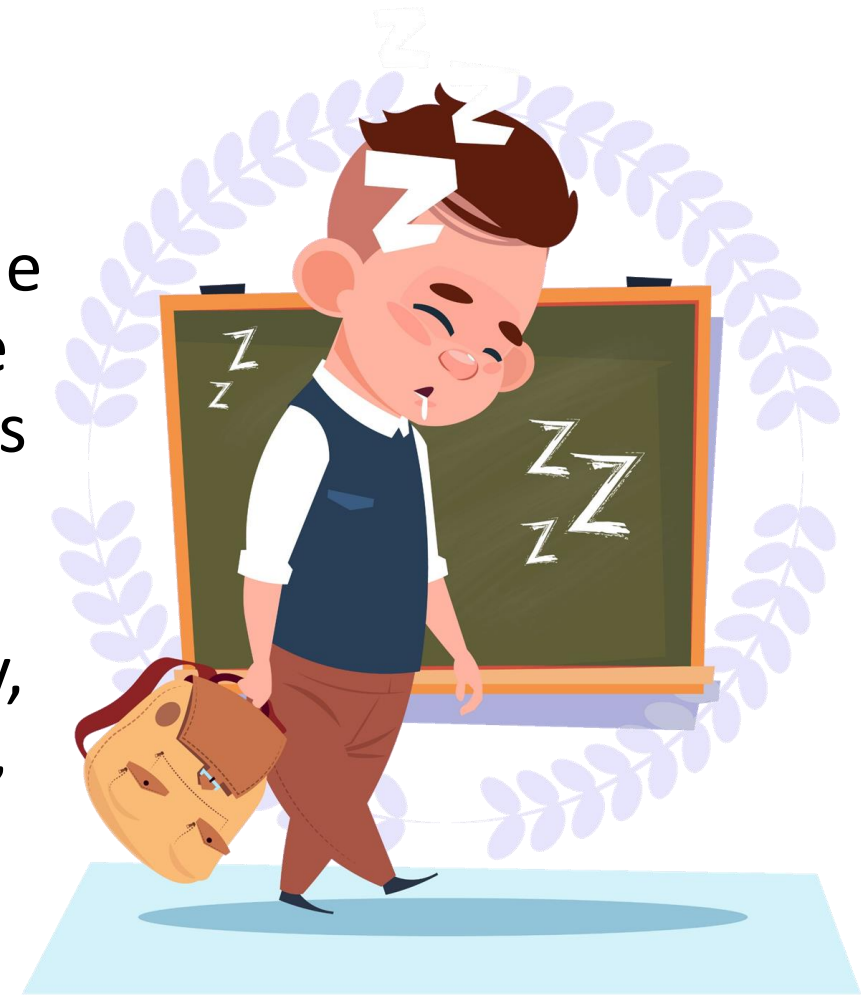
--Neena McConnico, Director of Boston Medical Center's Child Witness to Violence Project



Teachers can use their existing expertise more effectively when they understand that many of the academic, social, and behavioral problems of traumatized children involve such difficulties as failing to understand directions, overreacting to comments from teachers and peers, misreading context, failing to connect cause and effect, and other forms of miscommunication.



Children who witness violence often have trouble in the classroom because their post-traumatic stress can manifest itself as inattention, sleep dysfunction, distractibility, hyperactivity, aggression, and angry outbursts.



Alternately, these children may withdraw and appear to be unfazed by their trauma and thus blend in and their trauma can go unnoticed.

“These children are the children I worry about the most, the ones who sneak under the radar and don’t get the help they need.” --Neena McConnico



“Am I safe?”

A traumatized brain can be tired, hungry, worried, rejected, or detached, and these states are often accompanied by feelings of isolation, worry, angst, and fear.

Chronic activation of the fear response can damage those parts of the brain responsible for cognition and learning.



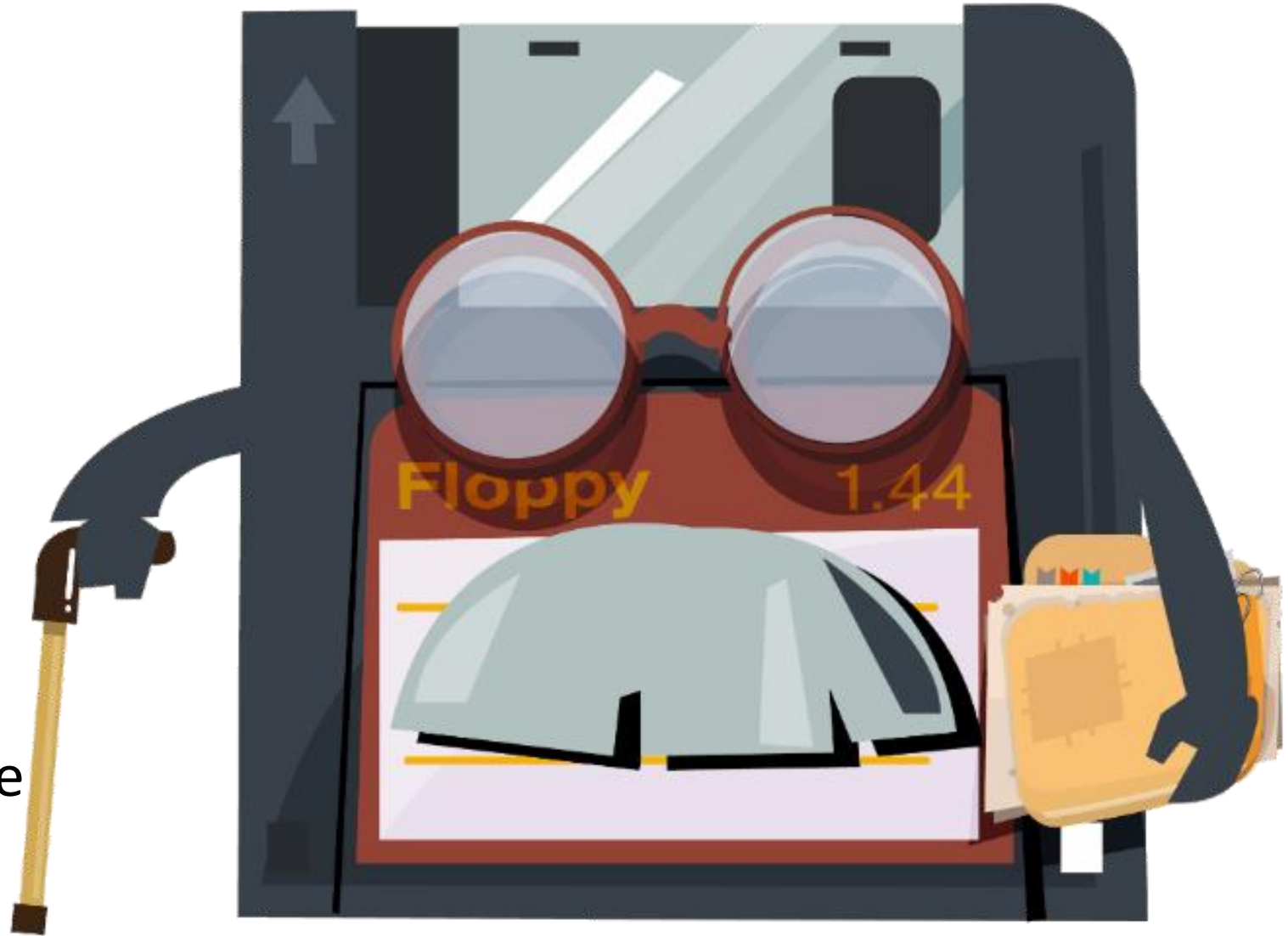


“Can I trust you?”

Many children and adolescents come to school with a deep mistrust of adults because they have never formed healthy attachments. These young people have brains in a constant state of alarm.

Can't delete it

When the brain has experienced significant adversity, it becomes fundamentally reorganized. Past experiences can live on in the body and may be experienced again as flashbacks, memories, or repetitive thoughts about the painful event.



A silent epidemic

Childhood adversity is invisible — it usually takes place behind closed doors or within the impenetrable family bubble. But skyrocketing chronic health problems, prison populations, mental illness, high school discipline and dropout rates show clearly that most humans are suffering the short- and long-term effects of toxic stress.



Not just 'them'

Even those without ACEs are affected by health costs, prison costs, workplace costs and increasing poverty. This is an epidemic. A sickness that affects us all. The good news is that we can do something about it

SICKNESS



For the 25 percent of American children who experience trauma at home, school [and other outside programs] may be their only harbor from that tempest, and teachers represent so much more than purveyors of facts and figures.

To these kids, teachers offer reassurance that not all adults are harmful, that even if they are not made to feel worthy at home, there are people in the world who will value, support, and love them.





We are fundamentally emotional and social creatures. The role of emotion in education is gaining increased attention as neuroscience demonstrates what good teachers already know: emotions affect student performance.

When a student is anxious, stressed, and emotionally reactive, the amygdala responds by blocking the absorption of sensory input. Under those circumstances, information taught cannot enter long-term memory.



RESEARCH BASED STRATEGIES

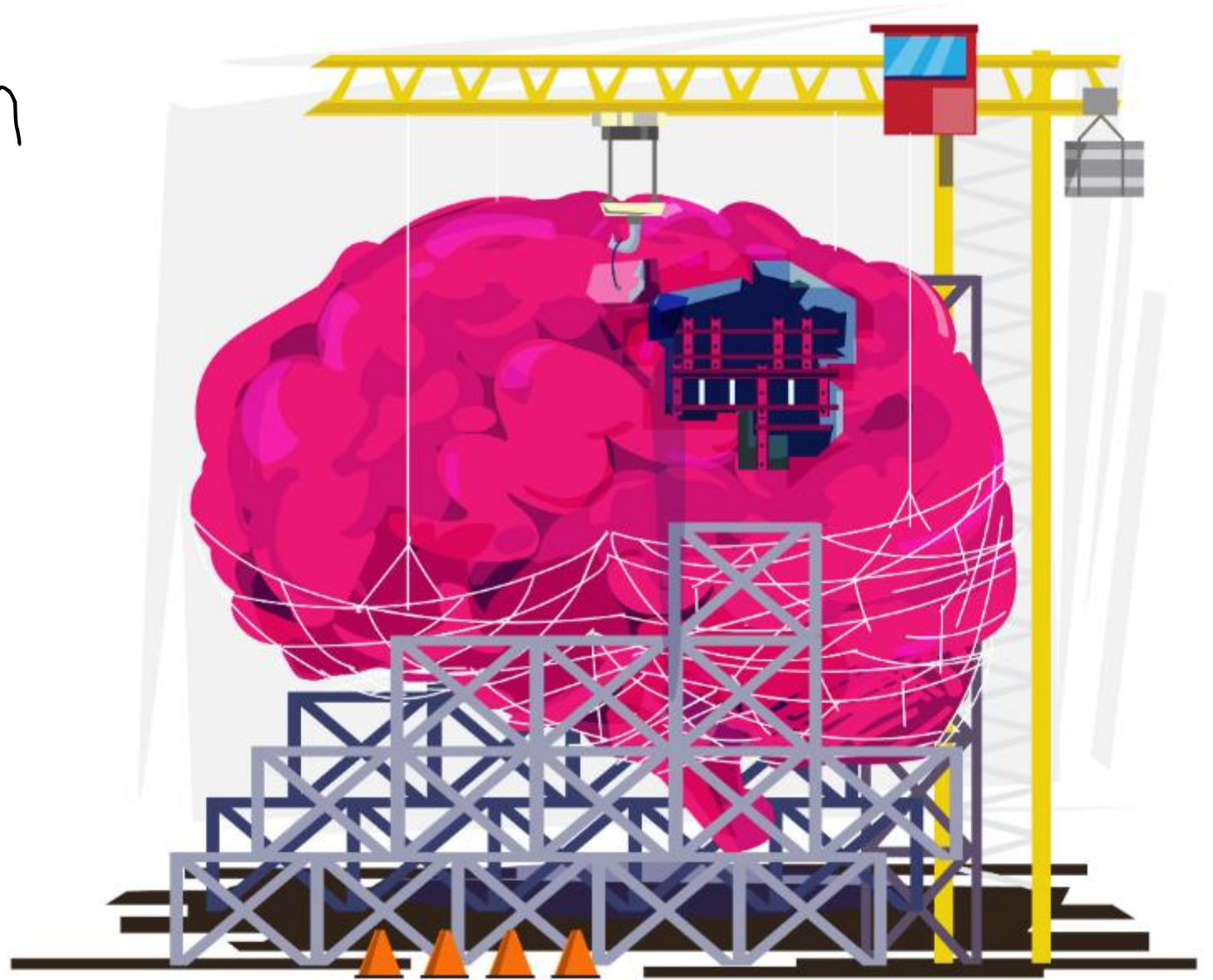




Though this seems counterintuitive, the students who seemingly deserve the most punitive consequences we can deliver are actually the ones who most need a positive and personal connection with the teacher. Often when they act out, they are letting us know that they are seeking a positive connection with an adult authority figure and that they need that connection first, before they can or will focus on academic content.

No Quick Solution

It takes repeated efforts to re-wire the brain to experience and manage feelings more consciously so that the thinking part of the brain can come into play.





Take the time

When it comes to classroom-management, there are no exotic new consequences that teachers can use to get students on task.

The most effective classroom management comes in the form of strategies that prevent acting out before it occurs. And those strategies arise primarily from assuming the best about our students.

Assume the best about me!

Assume that our students want to be here, want to participate, and, specifically, want to learn good behavior. When we internalize and act from this assumption, our students behave better and learn more, and it changes our interactions with them.





Craving Safety

Traumatized people need to find a sense of safety within their own bodies.

Younger children need our help to do that—to process that lump in their throat, that rapid heartbeat, or that sensation around their eyes when they are about to cry.

A Safe Space

The best approach, according to research, is to acknowledge the negative reactions by giving these students a safe place for a few minutes, allowing the brain and body to calm down.



Two by Ten

With this strategy, teachers focus on their most difficult student. For two minutes each day, ten days in a row, teachers have a personal conversation with the student about anything in which the student is interested (as long as the conversation is appropriate for school). Researchers found an 85% improvement in that one student's behavior. In addition, the behavior of all the other students in class improved.





The “Invisible Contract”

“Whenever students walk into the classroom, assume they hold an invisible contract in their hands, which states, ‘Please teach me appropriate behavior in a safe and structured environment.’ The teacher also has a contract, which states, ‘I will do my best to teach you appropriate behavior in a safe and structured environment.’”

Soft, yet firm!

The bottom line is that when students test us, they want us to pass the test. They are on our side rooting for us to come through with safety and structure, so that they can learn the behavior they need to learn to be happy and successful.



Use Volume, Tone, and Posture



Face the student squarely, use a softened voice and lowered tone. Knowing that [the student] is committed to both learning appropriate behavior and wanting to look good in front of his/her friends, do not publicly humiliate him/her.

This shift in volume, tone, and posture will firmly but softly communicate what is expected, deescalating possible tension.

And if the student says something under his/her breath, it's okay to let them have the last word. It's a way of saving face as he/she refocuses on learning content.



Break things into steps

Just as students often need complex math problems broken down into small, digestible lessons, so they need small, manageable steps when it comes to learning behavior and classroom procedures.



And walk them through it

Instead of throwing up our hands and saying, "These kids don't care" or "These kids can't succeed," we should assume they are committed to success in both content and behavior. We can then put our energy into breaking down the behaviors we want to see into simple steps so that students clearly understand what we expect of them.



Use Behavior Rubrics

Rubrics work great for content—and equally great for procedures and classroom behaviors such as lining up, appropriate voice volumes, settling down to learn, and getting ready for dismissal.

Use Visuals

If, for example, students have difficulty getting their textbooks and homework on their desks when the bell rings at the beginning of class, use visuals to clarify exactly what is expected.

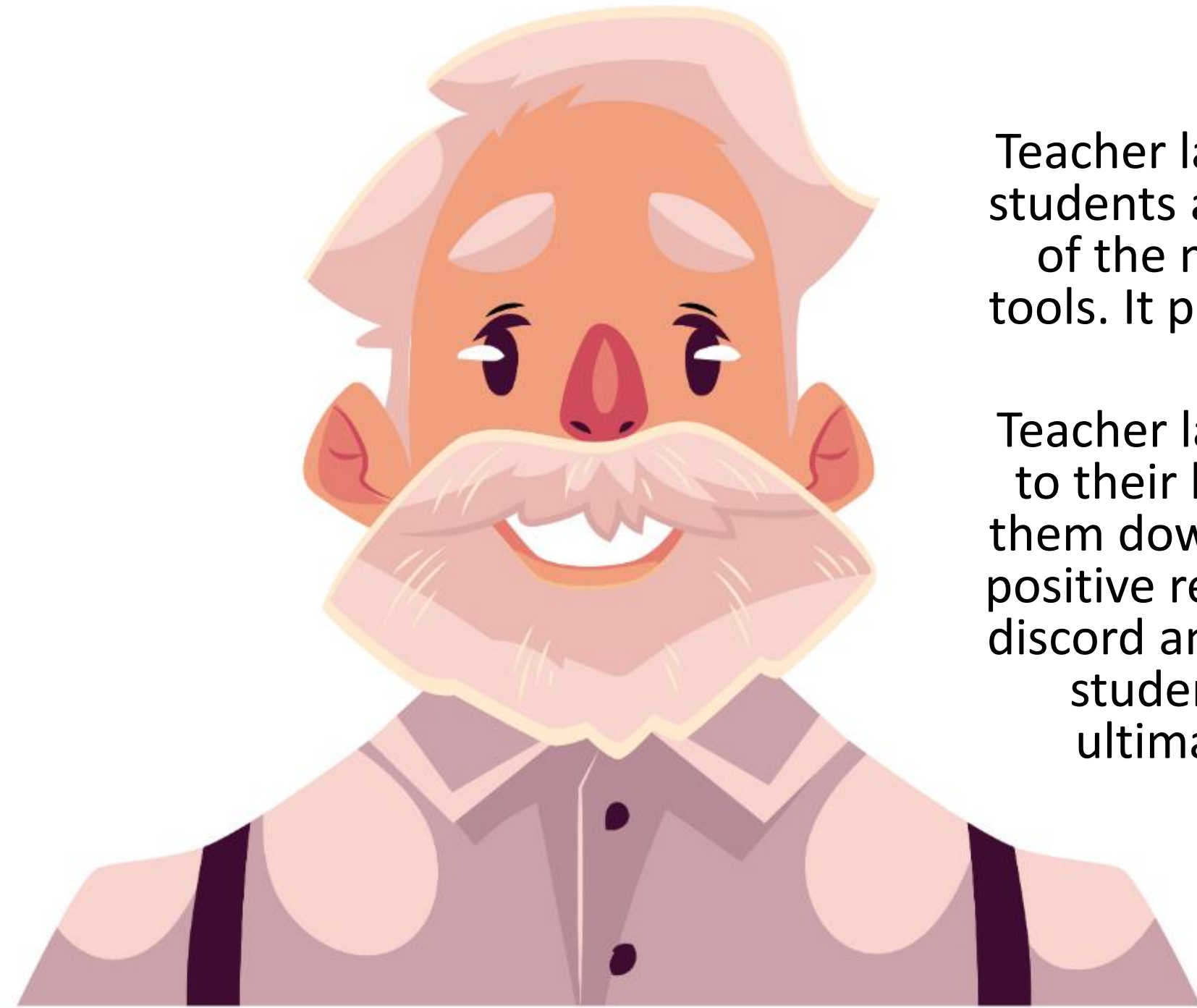
Ex. Use a diagram, drawing, or photograph of the surface of the desk, with the textbook open to the proper page and the homework on the upper left-hand corner of the desk. At the start of class, using PowerPoint or an overhead, flash the picture on the board or screen in front of the room, giving the students "17 seconds to be ready to start." Visuals work well for such activities as setting up labs, putting supplies away, and clarifying the school dress code.



Power of Positive Language

Because these children may not have experienced many positive relationships with other adults, the student-teacher bond can be the most important gift educators have to offer. Teachers who are reliable, honest, and dependable can offer the stability these students so desperately need.





Teacher language—what is said to students and how it is said—is one of the most powerful teaching tools. It permeates every aspect of teaching.

Teacher language can lift students to their highest potential or tear them down. It can help them build positive relationships or encourage discord and distrust. It shapes how students think and act and, ultimately, how they learn.

Teachers' words shape students as learners by affecting students' sense of identity.



The Responsive Classroom approach

This approach offers language strategies that enable elementary teachers to help students succeed academically and socially. Strategies range from asking open-ended questions that stretch students' thinking to redirecting students when behavior goes off-track. These strategies are based on the following five general principles.

First. Be Direct

When we say what we mean and use a kind, straightforward tone, students learn that they can trust us. They feel respected and safe, a necessary condition for developing self-discipline and taking the risks required for learning.





Indirect Language can damage

Comparative language can damage students' relationships. By holding certain students up as exemplars, the teacher implies that the other class members are less commendable. This can drive a wedge between students.

Sarcasm hurts

Sarcasm, another form of indirect language, is also common—and damaging—in the classroom.

Sometimes teachers use sarcasm thinking it will provide comic relief; other times out of exhaustion, and it often slips in without the teacher knowing it.

Sarcasm causes embarrassment, diminishes trust, erodes authority, and is the currency of insult.





Second: Convey Faith In Students' Abilities and Intentions

When words and tone convey faith in students' desire and ability to do well, students are more likely to live up to the teacher's expectations of them.

Take a moment to notice

Take the time to notice and comment on positive behavior, being quite specific, "You're trying lots of different ideas for solving that problem. That takes persistence." Such observations give students hard evidence for why they should believe in themselves.



Third. Focus on Actions, Not Abstractions

There is a place, of course, for such abstract terms as *respectful* and *responsible*, but we must give students plenty of opportunities to associate those words with concrete actions. Classroom expectations such as "treat one another with kindness" will be more meaningful to students if we help them picture and practice what those expectations look like in different situations.

Focus on the action

Focusing on action also means pointing to the desired behavior rather than labeling the learner's character or attitude.

It is more helpful in such situations to issue a positive challenge that names the behavior we want, "Your job today is to record five observations of our crickets. Think about what you'll need to do before you start."

This moves the focus to what the student can do.



Four: Keep it Brief!

Students understand more when we speak less.



It is hard for many young children to follow long strings of words like this:

“When you go out to recess today, be sure to remember what we said about including everyone in games, because yesterday some kids had an issue with not being included in kickball and four square, and we've talked about this. You were doing really well for a while there, but lately it seems like you're getting kind of careless, and that's got to change or ...”



Simply asking, "Who can tell us one way to include everyone at recess?" gives them an opportunity to remind themselves of positive behaviors.

Five: Know when to be silent!

The skillful use of silence can be just as powerful as the skillful use of words. When teachers use silence, we open a space for students to think, rehearse what to say, and sometimes gather the courage to speak at all.



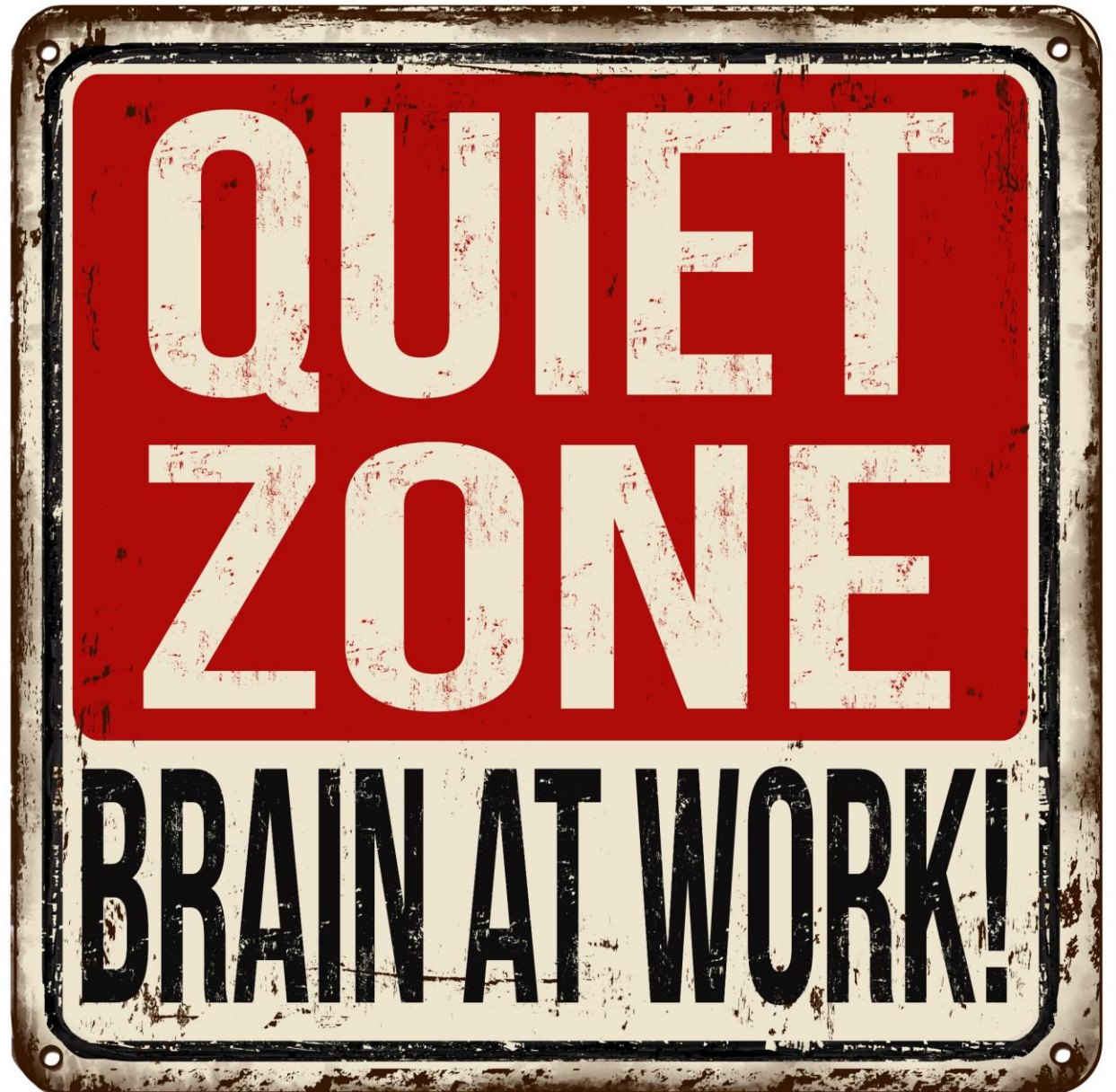
Count to Five

Researchers have found that when teachers wait three to five seconds, which can feel uncomfortably long at first, more students respond, and those responses show higher-level thinking.



Model it!

Model thoughtful pausing by waiting a few seconds to respond to students' comments. Remaining silent allows us to truly listen to students and requires us to resist the impulse to jump in and correct students' words or finish their thoughts.





Truly Listening

A true listener tries to understand a speaker's message before formulating a response. When we allow students to speak uninterrupted and unhurried, we help them learn because speaking is an important means of consolidating knowledge

Identifying Trauma Exposure

Remember, young children do not always have the words to tell what has happened to them or how they feel. Behavior is a better gauge and sudden changes in behavior can be a sign of trauma exposure.



Recovery takes time

Some children, if given support, will recover within a few weeks or months from the fear and anxiety caused by a traumatic experience.



However, some children will need more help over a longer period of time in order to heal and may need continuing support from family, teachers, or mental health professionals.

Anniversaries of the events or media reports may act as reminders to the child, causing a recurrence of symptoms, feelings, and behaviors.

How Personnel Can Help Traumatic Grief

Inform administration and school counselors/psychologists about your concerns regarding the student. Your program, school district, or state may have specific policies or laws about dealing with emotional issues with children.





Be their Advocate!

If you feel a student could benefit from the help of a mental health professional, work within your school or program's guidelines and with your administration to suggest a referral.

Tips for Practitioners

Maintain usual routines. A return to “normalcy” will communicate the message that the child is safe and life will go on.

Regaining a Sense of Control

Give children chances to make choices. Often traumatic events involve loss of control and/or chaos, so you can help children feel safe by providing them with some choices or control when appropriate.





You're so good at that!

Discover their passions, strengths, talents and interests and build on those. Everyone has something that gives a sense of joy, happiness, strength, and confidence. Spend time discovering what that is for each child and encourage their development in that area.



Make a safe space!

It can be an actual place or a portable tool kit, but create a place where the child can go whenever he or she wants with no repercussions.

If children start to feel overwhelmed, triggered, overstimulated or lost, they can go to their safe place to calm down and regulate themselves again.

Anticipate challenges and provide support

Many kinds of situations may be reminders. If you are able to identify reminders, you can help by preparing the child for the situation. For instance, for the child who doesn't like being alone, provide a partner to accompany him or her to the restroom. Warn children if you will be doing something out of the ordinary, such as turning off the lights or making a sudden loud noise.

Silent Suffering

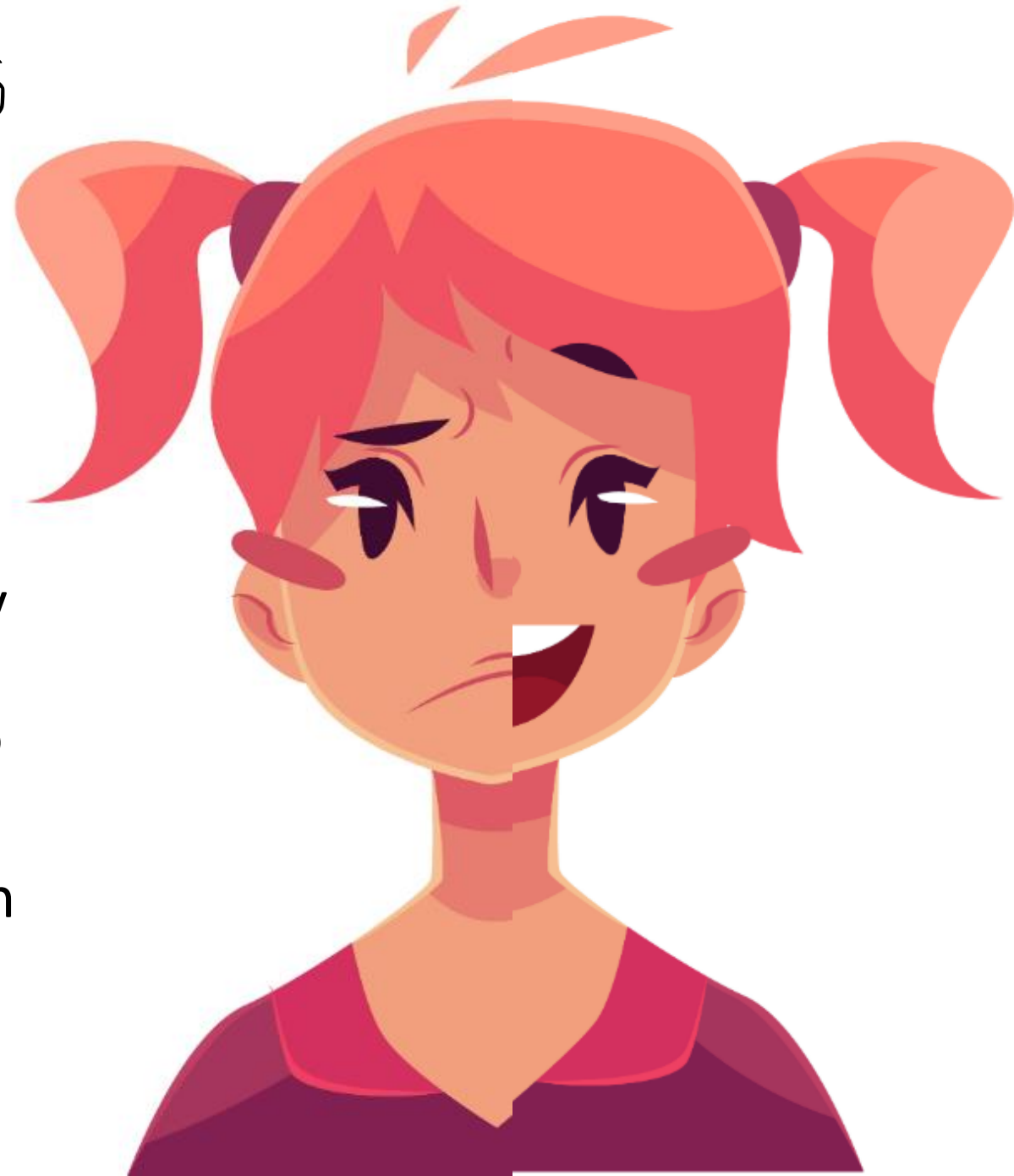
“It is important to be aware of both the children who act out and the quiet children who don’t appear to have behavioral problems. These children often “fly beneath the radar” and do not get help.



Good Days and Bad Days

One of the most confusing aspects of working with children who have undergone trauma is that their abilities vary almost daily. Some days they will seem to be doing great and understand everything you teach, but other days they will seem completely shut off, or regress years in their ability. This is normal and to be expected.

Focus on teaching to where they are at on any particular day, or moment.





“I’m here”

A simple phrase that can have a powerful impact. This is one of the most important things you can offer, yourself. But don’t just say it, do it. Be there for the child. Fully and completely. No matter what the child throws at you, no matter how hard some days are, be there, and come back the next day ready to try again.

It’s hard, but it’s worth it.

Live it so they'll learn it

It's so important for these children to learn that there are adults in their lives that will show up. That will be there for them. That are reliable and consistent. People that believe in them and are supportive, no matter what. Adults that quite simply live the motto: I'm here."



Get help

When reactions are severe (such as intense hopelessness or fear) or go on for a long time (more than one month) and interfere with a child's functioning, give referrals for additional help—don't feel you have to be certain before making a referral.





Use Music

The evidence to date supports music's positive role in helping traumatized children, particularly in therapeutic and classroom settings, manage their emotions, activate brain pathways, and learn new cognitive and emotional information.

How?

Teachers are seldom music therapists, and very few of them are trained musicians. How can they add music to classroom experiences for children with PTSD?



Ideas some classrooms use

- Start the day with three to five minutes of classical music as a soothing and attention-focusing tool.
- Learn math using “Math Songs”
- Practice reading with music and movement.
- Classical music such as that of Mozart, Haydn, Vivaldi, Bach, or Handel can help students concentrate.
- Debussy’s or Ravel’s is suggested for creative assignments.
- Popular music and jazz, as long as they possess predictable rhythms and dissonant notes are not used, can also aid attention, emotional regulation, and memory.

