



# COFFEE AND CHAT: Understanding Behaviour

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COFFEE AND CHAT:


## Understanding Behaviour

Bring to mind something  
you responded to this  
morning...

work or home, intentionally  
or unintentionally

What's your feeling  
about how you responded?

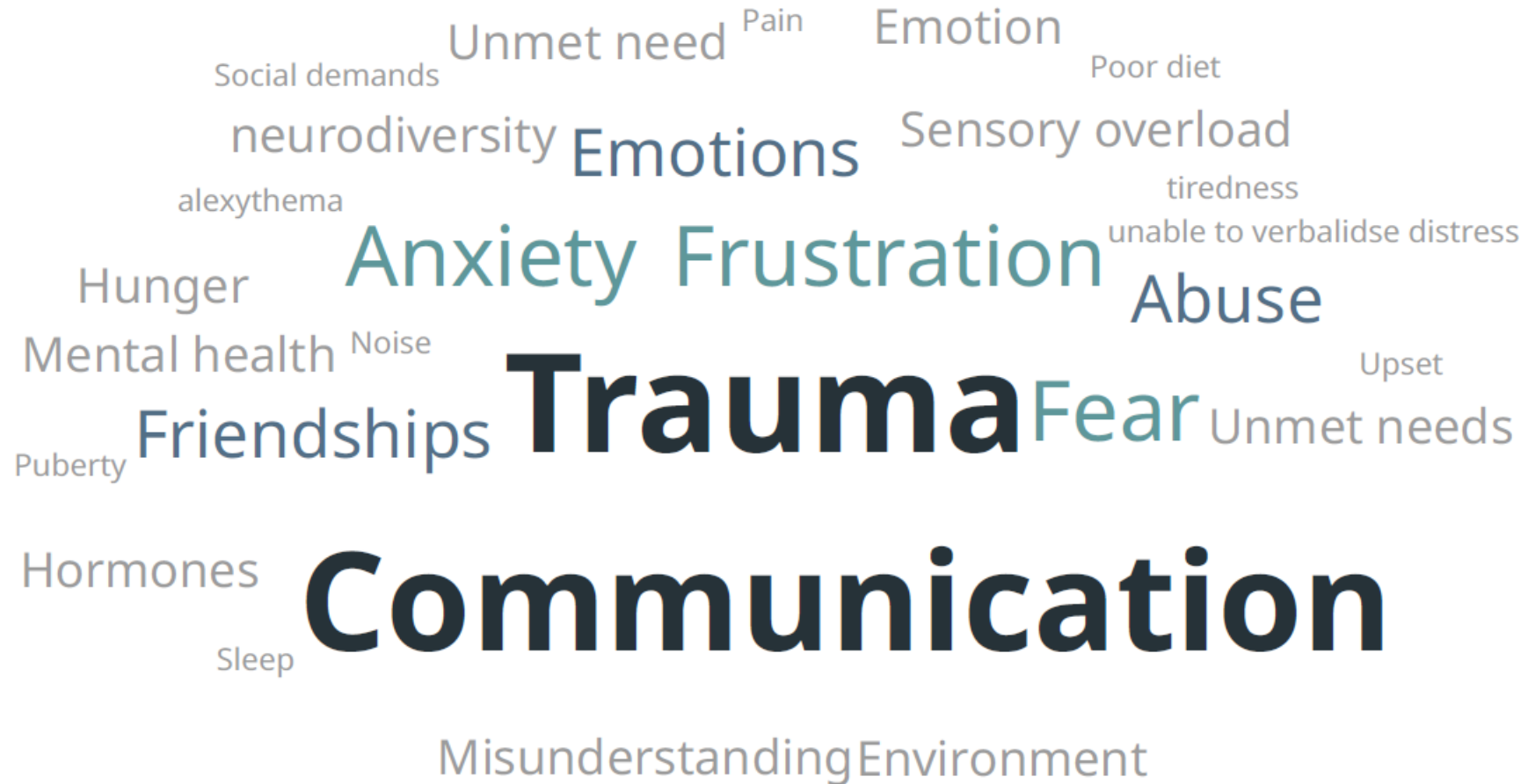
# AGENDA

- “Why I am rude”
  - Understanding Behaviour
    - *perspectives from the Child, the Practitioner, and the Setting*
  - Breakout rooms
    - *Behaviour and Under 10s*
    - *Supporting Young People’s Behaviour*
    - *Creating Guidelines and Policies that establish Boundaries and Nurture*
    - *Understanding more the Theory behind Behaviour*
  - Reflection
- 



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# What are some of the drivers behind behaviour?



# Why I am rude



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jED4ZxLcLB4>



# Understanding Behaviour in Children and Ourselves

...and how this knowledge can **profoundly change** our  
responses to babies, children and young people



# You are welcome

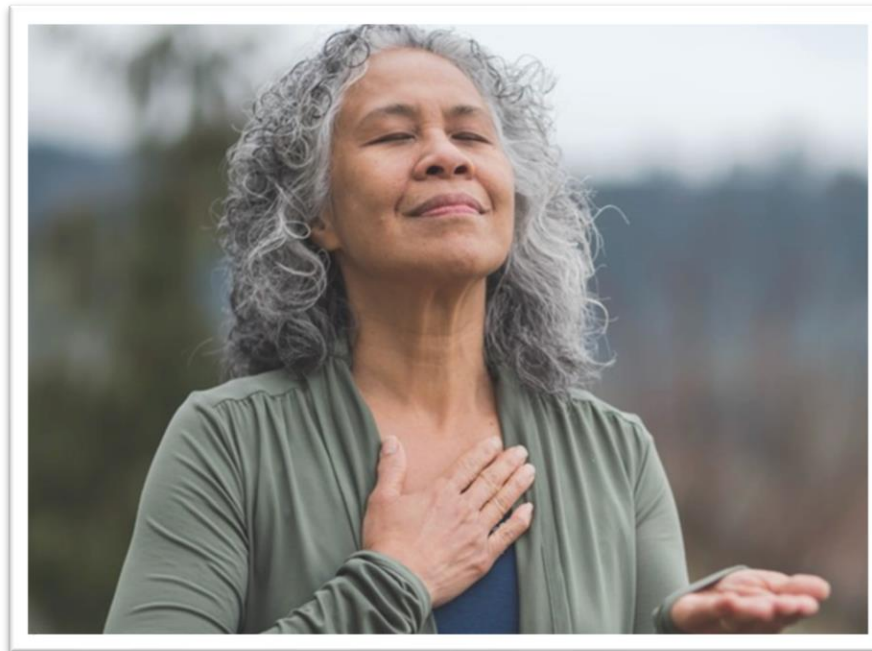
- If understanding behaviour is completely new
- If you are interested in learning new insights
- If what I share is familiar but can bring fresh ideas

Whatever your own circumstance,  
I hope there is something here for you



# Invitation to arrive and be present

- If you like, get comfortable, and perhaps put your phone on silent
  - If you like, make the intention to be present and engage fully
- If you like, take three breaths with me to calm your nervous system and be ready to learn:  
breathe in for 4 and out for 6





# Everything changes when...

Everything changes when...

**...we understand behaviours can be unintentional, adaptive and/or protective**

Everything changes when our response...

- starts with settling our own state
- is relationship based (co-regulation)
- has a primary aim for the child to FEEL safe



# Objectives

Understanding behaviour from different perspectives

- child's perspective
- practitioner's perspective
- setting perspective

Understanding the breadth and depth of behaviour

- physiological state, context and lived experience

Responding from a position of understanding behaviour

- with compassion, curiosity and co-regulation



# What is co-regulation?

Attuned connection between adult and child



# Start with ourselves

## How intentional is OUR behaviour?

- Who here knows that being well behaved, kind and gentle is not easy to keep up all the time?
- Who can remember a time earlier when they behaved in a way they hadn't planned towards a family member or a colleague and regretted it afterwards? Maybe your tone of voice, facial expression, body language, words or actions?
- Who can recognise the feelings they had in their body before or during the behaviour you remember?



# Child's perspective: Inside-Out

*When I behave in a particular way, I am experiencing bodily and emotional feelings inside me that are telling me:*

- I feel safe
- I feel under threat/unsafe
- I feel in danger



# Practitioner and parent's perspective: Outside-In

*When we see a child behaving in a particular way, we are seeing their affect and emotions shown through their behavior.*

*The behaviour is the tip of an iceberg*

- What do you see when looking at this child?
- What do you feel in your body in response?
- What do you imagine saying to them?



# Understanding behaviour: an invisible lion



# Practitioner and parent's perspective: Outside-In-Me\*

*“The inferences we make about other peoples’ behaviours, based on our own personal ‘inside-out’ experiences”*

What gets in the way of us understanding?

- Self-protection
  - we are tired, overwhelmed, and with our own unresolved painful or traumatic life experiences
- Socio-cultural norms
  - avoiding distress or pain in others is how our society is organised
  - children should simply ‘know how to behave better’



The Lion is invisible: we cannot yet understand and need imagination, patience and kindness to find out



# Setting perspective

- Social and cultural expectations held by our organisation in relation to children's behaviours
- Policies about acceptable behaviour

*“By this age you should be old enough to...”*

But what does this mean when each child is different: how does this relate to equity?



# Understanding the depth and breadth of behaviour

## physiology, context and lived experience

What is the **physiological state** of this child's body?

- *i.e. is their nervous system in a state of safety, threat or danger **in this moment** (polyvagal lens)*

What is the **context**?

- *e.g. hungry, tired, unwell, bored, in need of movement and stimulation*

What is this child's **lived experience**?

- **Development:** where is this child on their own developmental journey? (*attachment style, age, social and emotional development*)
- **Individual differences:** how does this unique child experience themselves, their relationships and physical environments? (*sensory processing, additional needs, disabilities, poverty, ACES, dimensions of exclusion*)
- **Past experiences:** what stress or unresolved trauma may have overwhelmed this child's capacity to cope and triggered this current behaviour? (*toxic stress, trauma, intergenerational issues*)

# Polyvagal Theory - An Intro

## Ventral Vagal

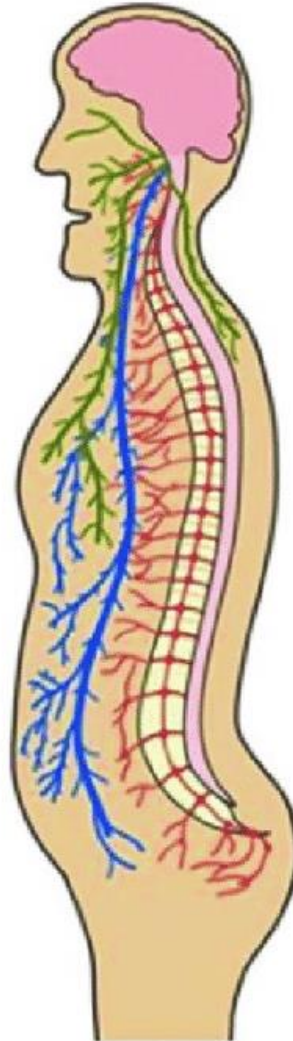
- Social Engagement Network
- Location: Face, throat, chest
- Ability to talk, engage, co-regulate, self-soothe and remain calm
- Top of the regulatory and evolutionary ladder

## Sympathetic

- Fight & Flight (Mobilization)
- Location: Along the spinal cord
- Mobilize the body to fight, or run away from danger
- Increased heart rate, tense muscles, fast shallow breathing
- Middle of the regulatory and evolutionary ladder

## Dorsal Vagal

- Freeze, Collapse, Dissociate (Immobilization)
- Location: Diaphragm, heart, gut
- Shut off from the threat, when can't fight or flight
- Decreased heart rate, low energy, depressed, numb, shut down
- Bottom of the regulatory and evolutionary ladder



Introduction to the  
polyvagal lens



# Where are you on the ladder?



## Safety and Connection - Ventral Vagus

SAFETY AND CONNECTION LOOKS LIKE:  
feeling grounded, settled, calm, in the moment,  
wanting to hang out and just 'be' with friends  
and family, affectionate, playful

Digestion, Vital functions, Immune system are optimally functioning,  
increase in Muscle tone, facial expression increases, tone softer



## Sympathetic Nervous System (Fight / Flight)

FIGHT / FLIGHT CAN LOOK LIKE:

FIGHT: Running towards others, irritable,  
defensive, aggressive, angry, rage.

FLIGHT: Running away from others,  
anxious, worried, avoidant, anxiously pursuing others

Heart rate, breathing, blood pressure increasing, blood moving out to  
limbs, increase in cortisol levels, decreased immune functioning,  
stomach cramps



## Freeze - Dorsal Vagus

FREEZE CAN LOOK LIKE:

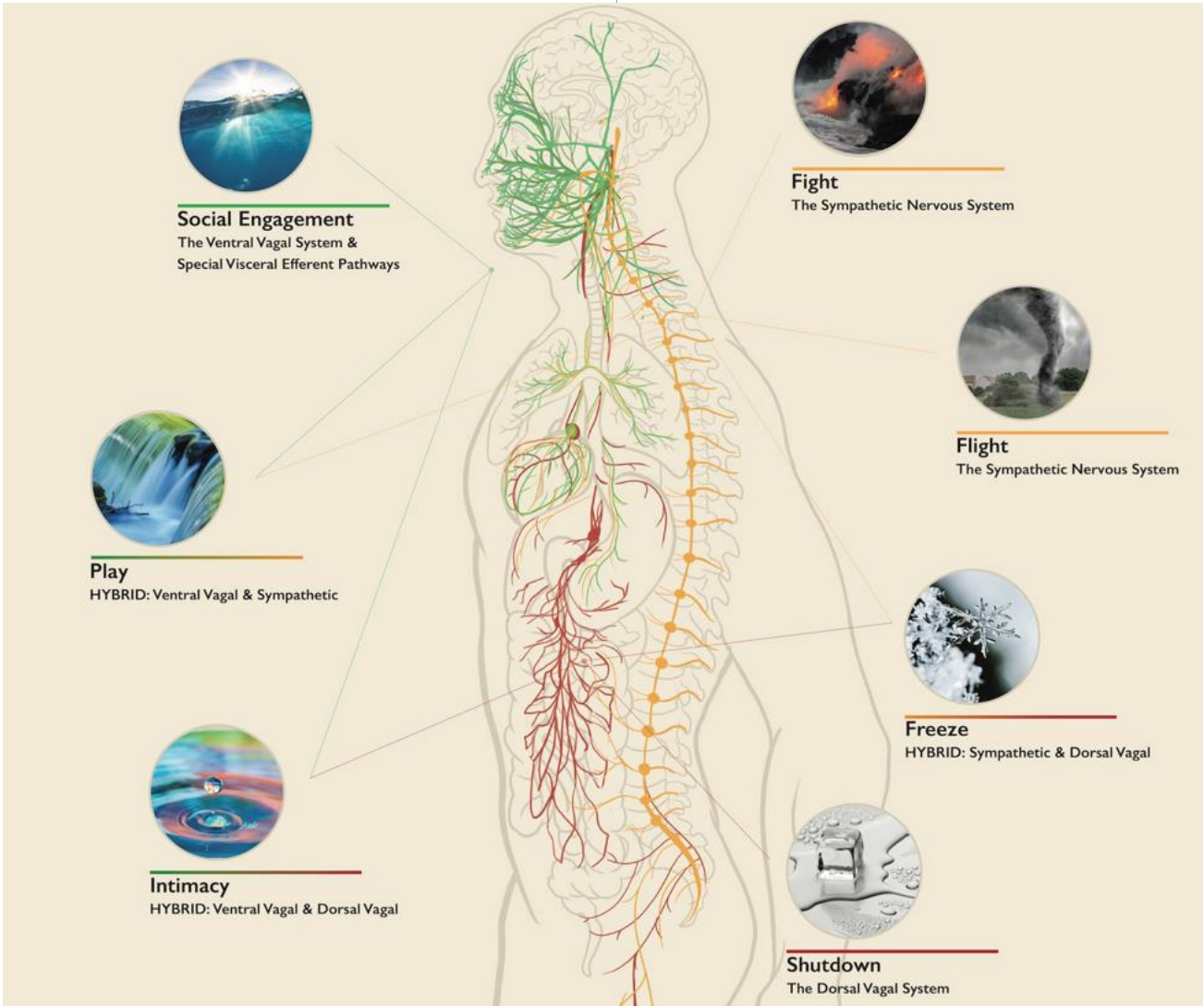
Overwhelmed, Shutting down, sluggish, numb,  
disconnected from the body, depressed,  
tired, hopeless, helpless, dissociation

Heart rate, breathing, blood pressure decreases, muscle tone, facial  
expression decreases, endorphins help to numb, reduced immune  
functioning.

# Introduction to the polyvagal lens



# Introduction to the polyvagal lens



# Understanding behaviour in a nutshell

*“Through a Polyvagal lens, we understand that **actions (behaviours)** are **automatic** and **adaptive**, generated by the autonomic nervous system well **below the level of conscious awareness**. This is not the brain making a cognitive choice, these are autonomic energies moving in patterns of **protection**. And with this new awareness, the door opens to **compassion**.”*

- Deb Dana -



# Understanding different behaviours through a polyvagal lens

## Dysregulation

**automatic behaviours** in response to felt sense of state of threat or danger, e.g. shouting

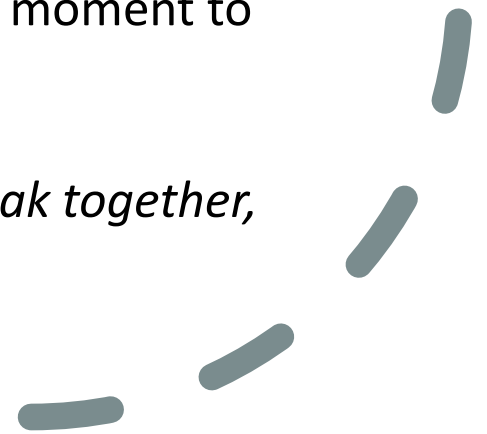
## Auto-regulation

**adaptive or protective** behaviours, e.g. tipping chair back and forth; rocking; humming; singing; touching/tapping other children

## Self-regulation

**intentional** behaviours, e.g. wearing headphones to reduce the noise level; taking a moment to breathe; going outside to move

*We can offer **co-regulation** to help a child feel safe and calm again, e.g. taking a break together, playing together, finding what works for this child together*



# How do we respond effectively to behaviours

## Four foundation stones

- **Calm** ourselves first
- **Curiosity:** a willingness to reflect on what we are seeing  
*Can we let the distress in the child communicate to us?*
- **Compassion:** a willingness to be with the suffering of others and feel it in our bodies – and this requires us being in touch with our own suffering (Gabor Mate)  
*Let kindness to the child and to yourself be your North Star*
- **Co-regulation:** move towards shared regulation as your aim  
*Removing warmth and human connection is punitive and damaging for children and doesn't work*





# How to respond effectively to behaviours

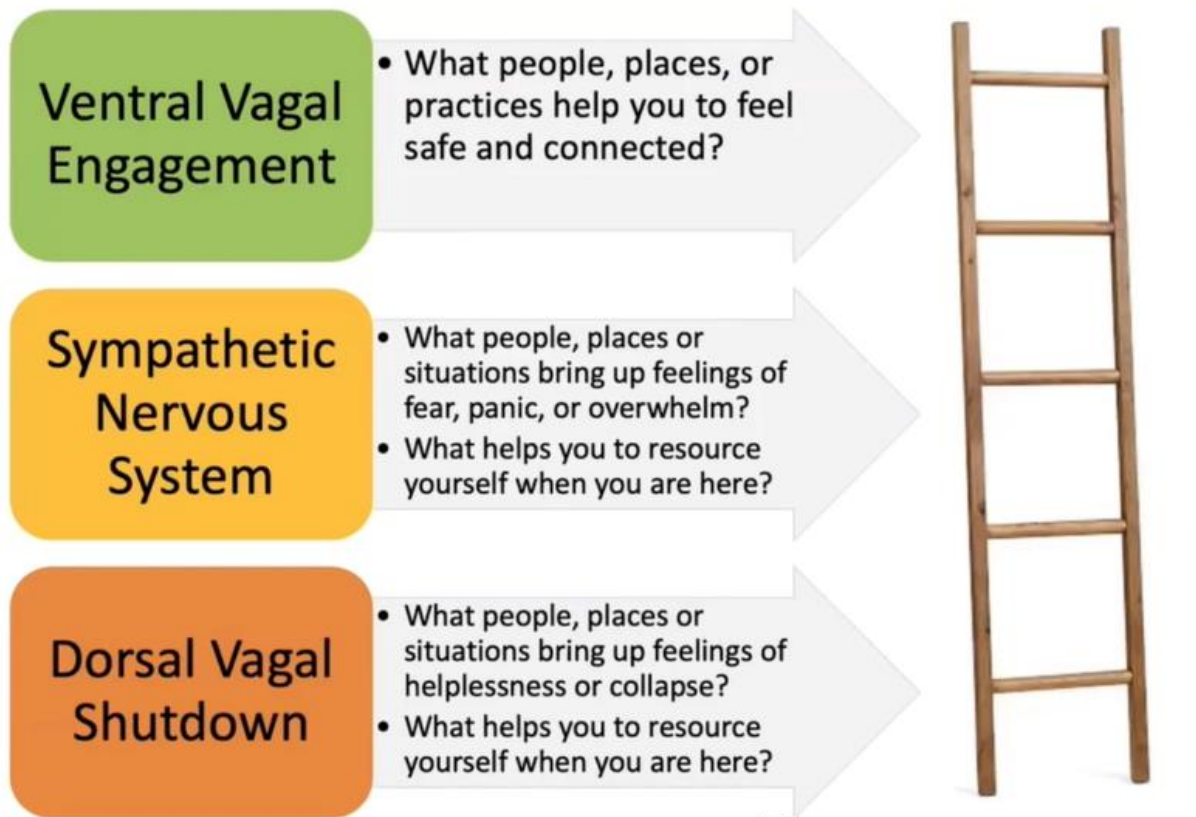
## Four stages – Deb Dana

- What state am I in?
- What do I need in order to get back to a regulated state?
- What state is the child in?
- What do they need in order to get back to a regulated state?



# Responding to behaviour with a polyvagal lens

## The Polyvagal Ladder (Deb Dana)



# Everything changes when...

**Everything changes when we understand that...**

**...behaviours can be unintentional, adaptive and/or protective**

Everything changes when our response...

- starts with settling our own state
- is relationship based (co-regulation)
- has a primary aim for the child to FEEL safe

**When we focus on compassion and connections with children,  
engagement and learning can follow**



Here is some writing by John O'Donohue, which chimes beautifully with using a polyvagal lens to understand behaviour in children and in ourselves.

He talks about our heart, which for the purposes of today, speaks of our nervous system, and how safe we feel to engage with life and with each other:

**The state of one's heart inevitably shapes one's life; it is ultimately the place where everything is decided.**

**A courageous heart will go forth and engage with life despite confusion and fear.**

**A fearful heart will be hesitant and will tend to hold back.**

**A heavy heart will make for a gloomy, and lived life.**

**But:**

**A compassionate heart need never carry the burden of judgement.**

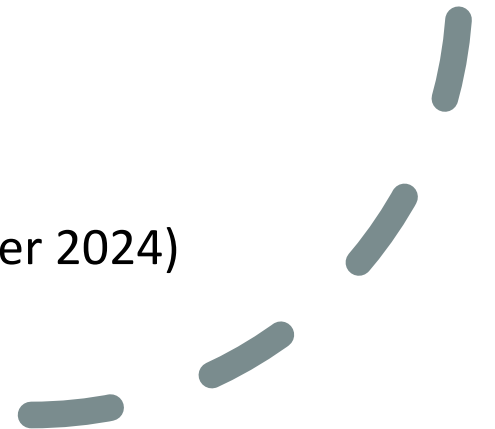
**A forgiving heart knows the art of liberation.**

**A loving heart awakens the spirit to possibility and engagement with others.**



# References and resources

- Mona Delahooke, Clinical Psychologist [www.monadelahooke.com](http://www.monadelahooke.com)
  - Beyond Behaviours: using Brain Science and Compassion to Understand and Solve Children's Behavioural Challenges
  - Brain-Body Parenting: how to stop managing behavior and start raising joyful, resilient kids
- Deb Dana, Clinician [www.rhythmofregulation.com](http://www.rhythmofregulation.com)
  - Anchored: how to befriend your nervous system using polyvagal theory
- Benjamin Fry, Therapist and Founder of Khiron Clinic
  - The Invisible Lion: how to tame your nervous system and heal your trauma
- Stephen Porges [www.polyvagalinstitute.org/pvicourses](http://www.polyvagalinstitute.org/pvicourses)
  - E.g. Body and Brain Brilliance: a one-day summit for educators (16<sup>th</sup> November 2024)





COFFEE AND CHAT:

**Understanding Behaviour**



**Breakout rooms**

# Breakout rooms

- **Behaviour and Under 10s**

*We'll be exploring the feelings that drive behaviours, how to spot them, strategies to support the child, and the importance of your well-being to underpin your work.*

- **Supporting Young People's Behaviour**

*Personal self-awareness is one of the most important assets for those seeking to understand young people's behaviour. How can we develop greater understanding of our response to situations and use these insights to positively support young people's behaviour?*

- **Creating Guidelines and Policies that establish Boundaries and Nurture**

*Creating a culture where children and young people flourish in safety and dignity should be at the heart of any organisation. A behaviour policy is the starting point for laying out this vision and is one of the important ways an organisation's culture is communicated to children, staff, parents and carers. How does this work in practice?*

- **Understanding more the Theory behind Behaviour**

*A further exploration around the theory behind behaviour, and understanding how we can think about this in our own setting.*





# COFFEE AND CHAT: Understanding Behaviour





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**What are some of the drivers behind behaviour?**

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**How has your understanding of  
behaviour changed?**

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**What's your takeaway / what are you going to understand/do differently?**

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**On a scale of 1-10, how has this session helped develop your knowledge and understanding of behaviour?**

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**If we were to run another Coffee and Chat on behaviour, what would be helpful to cover?**



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