



PART 4

Co-Regulation in Practice

ENVIRONMENT, RESPONSE, LANGUAGE & DE-ESCALATION

*What does co-regulation
actually look and sound like?*

1

Co-Regulation is a Daily Practice.



Co-regulation is a **daily practice**. It is not intended to be used only when a child or adolescent is already dysregulated.

When applied effectively, it is an ongoing, **proactive** process that supports the management of everyday stressors.

By consistently providing attuned, responsive interactions, adults help build a foundation of emotional stability that reduces the likelihood and intensity of future dysregulation.

To do this well, adults must be:

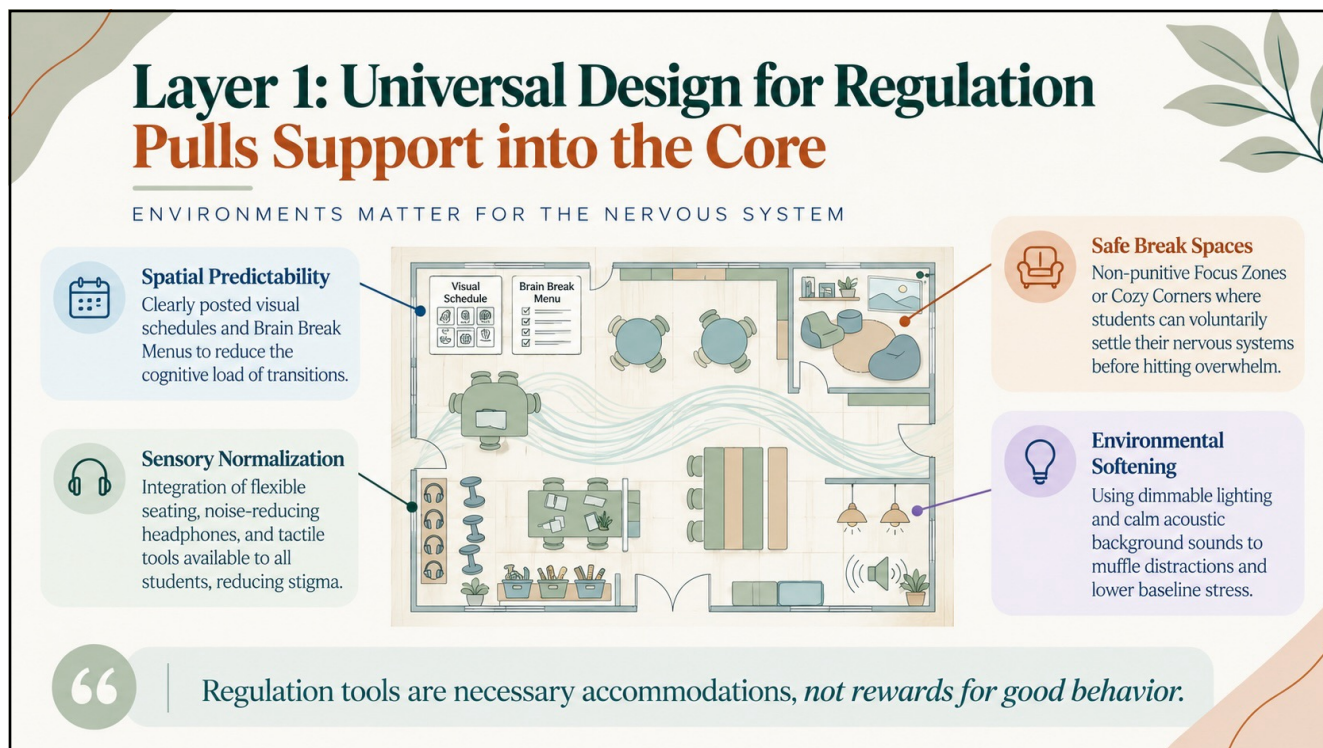
-  **Self-aware:** Able to recognize their own dysregulation cues.
-  **Reflective:** Willing to explore what might be happening for a student.
-  **Intentional:** Using their body, breath, tone, and language as regulation tools.

 **When these qualities come together**, educators move beyond managing behavior to creating the conditions in which students can return to regulation, reconnect with others, and re-engage in learning.

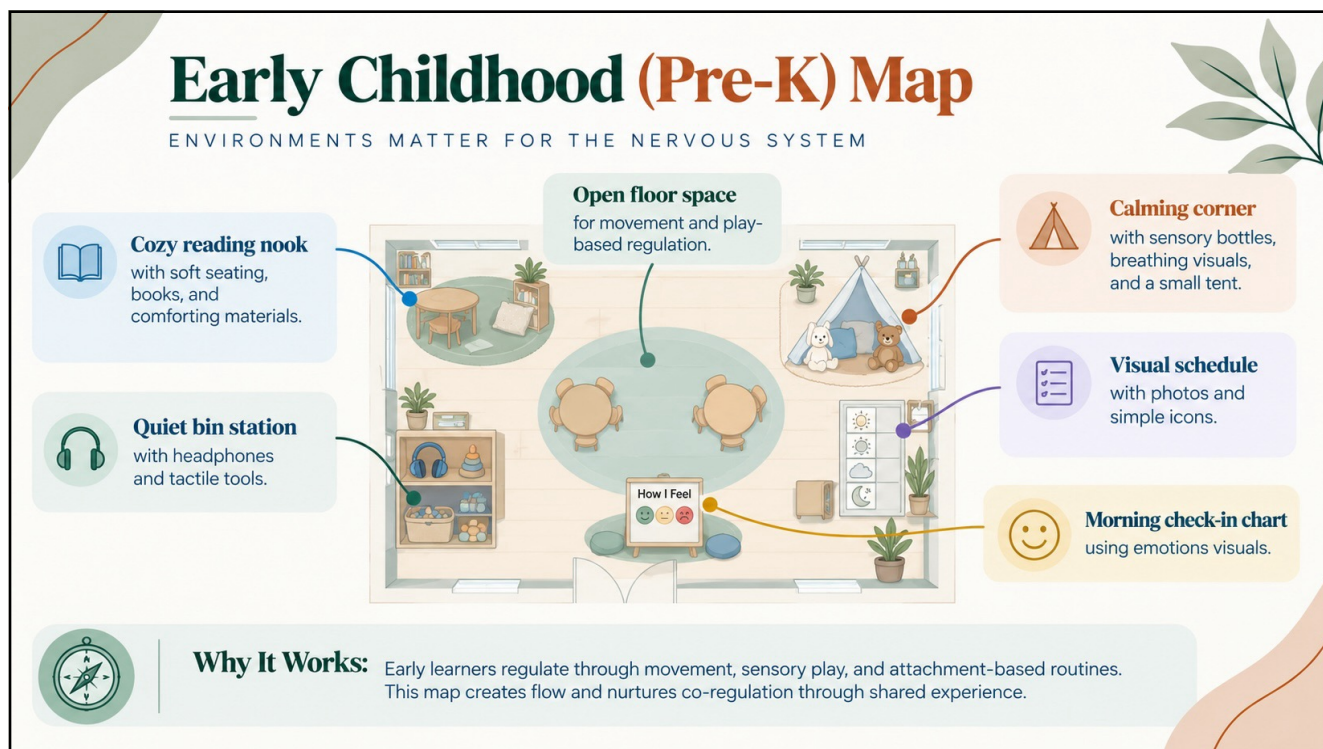
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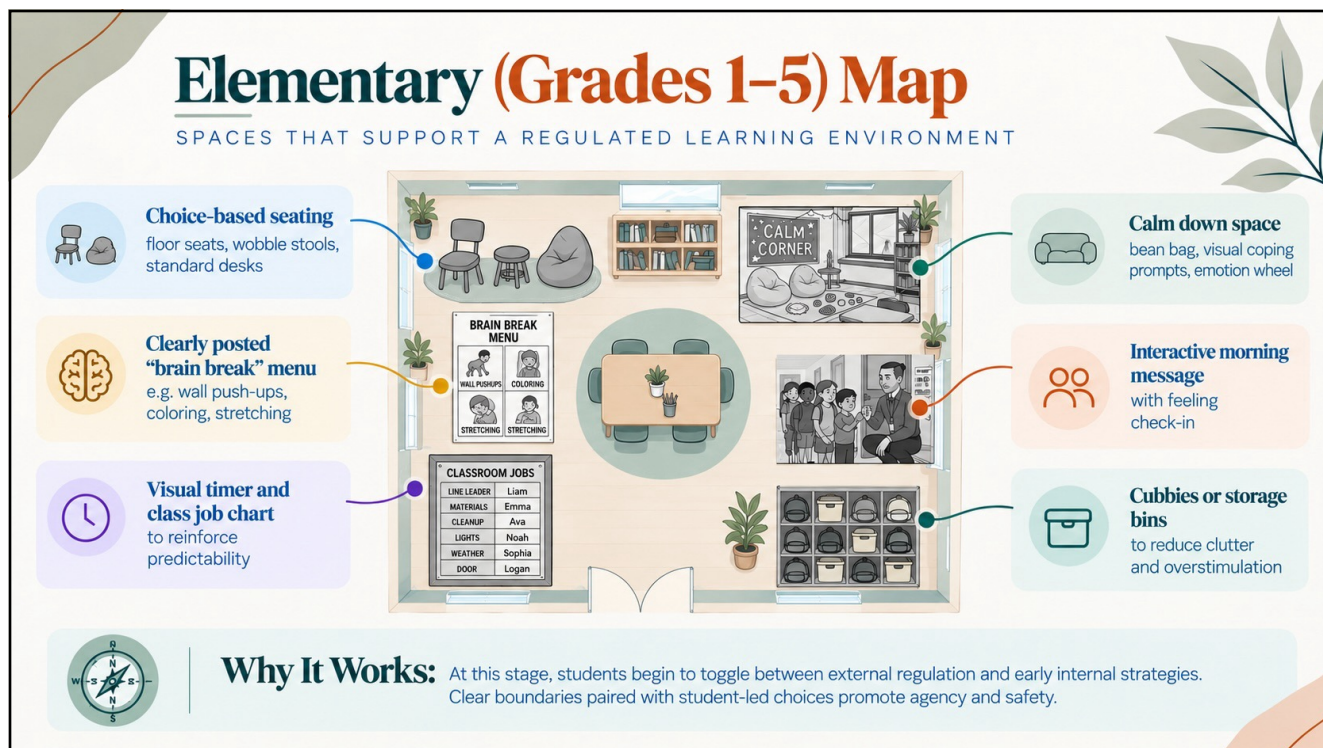
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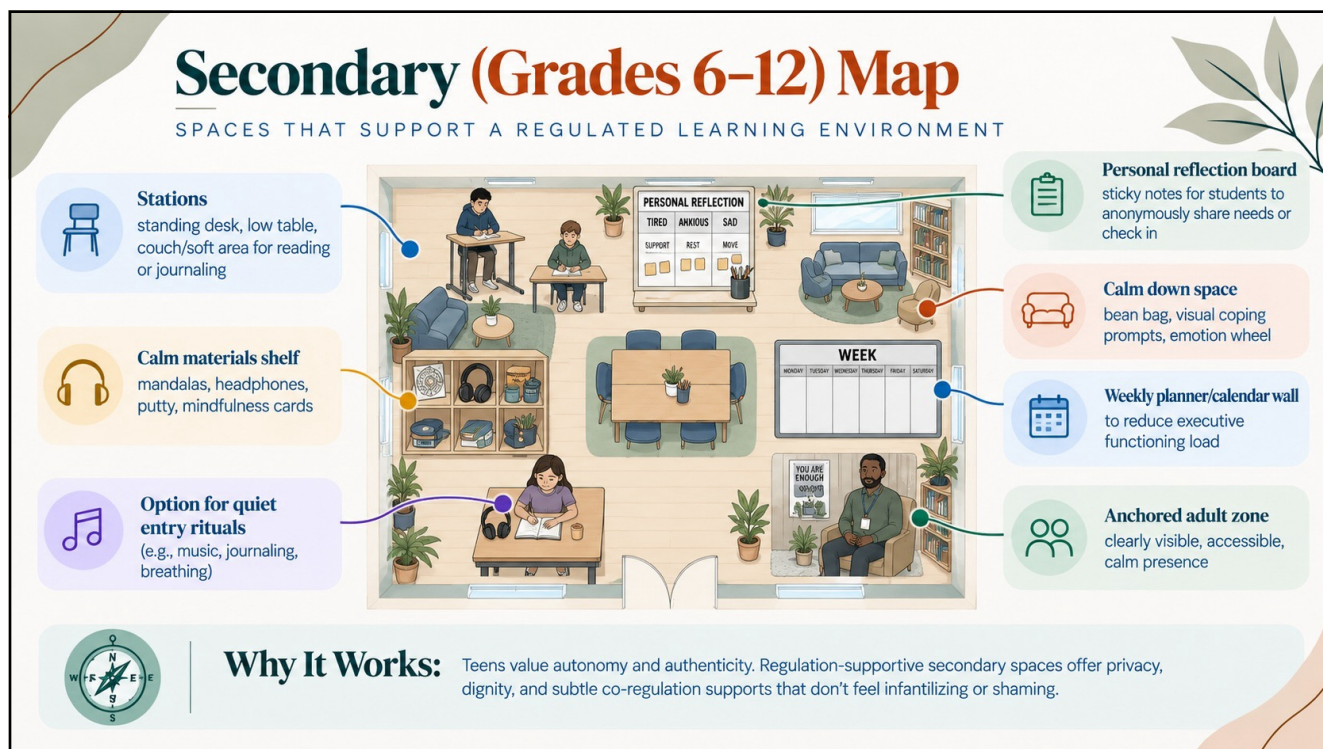
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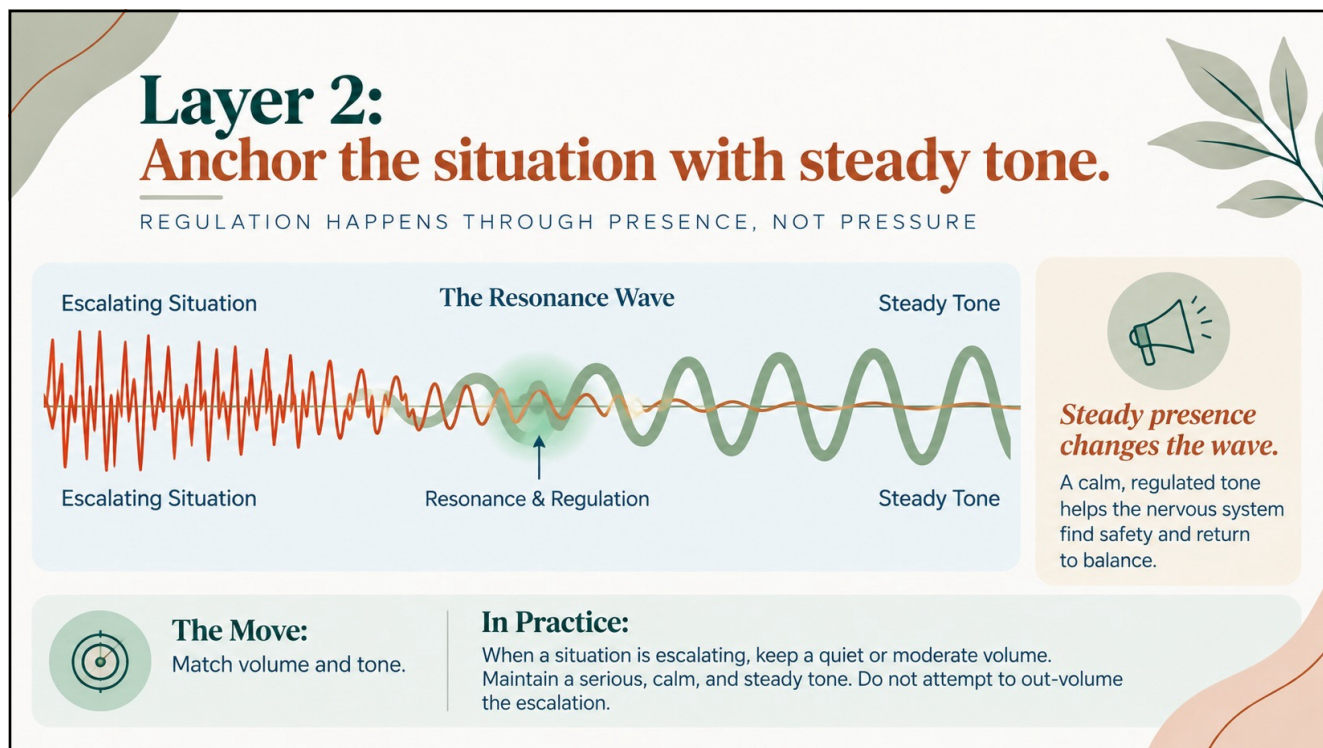
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8

Attunement Versus Technique

IT'S THE RELATIONSHIP, NOT THE SCRIPT



Attunement means **accurately noticing** and responding to another person's emotional state while remaining **grounded** ourselves.



It is different from simply following a protocol.



One statement may feel deeply **comforting**.

Two adults may say exactly the same words:

“I can see that you’re upset.”

The difference is not the script—it is the **relationship** and the **authenticity** behind it.



The other may feel **dismissive** or **mechanical**.

Attuned adults:



notice subtle changes in behaviour



adjust their expectations to the student's current state



remain flexible



communicate genuine curiosity



respond rather than react



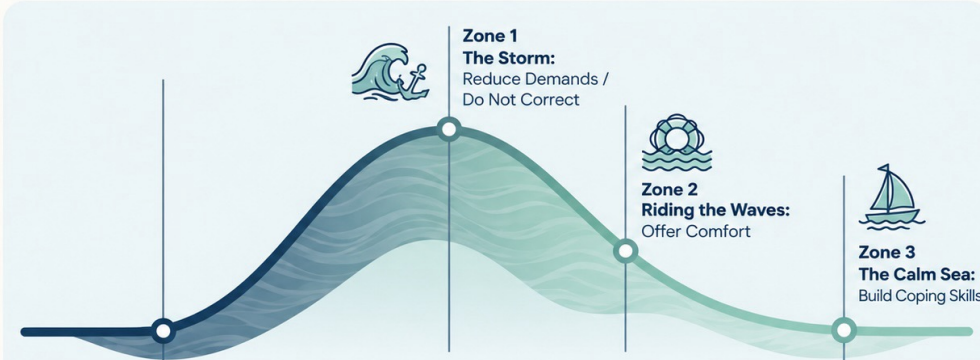
Students do not need perfect adults.

They need adults who are emotionally present enough to notice them.

9

Mapping the Emotional Storm

YOU CANNOT TEACH A CHILD WHILE THE STORM RAGES
Your goal is to survive the peak and wait for the calm.



The Emotional Wave Chart



Calm meets calm.

The adult's grounded nervous system absorbs and neutralizes the child's dysregulation.

10

Regulation Before Expectation

SUPPORT THE NERVOUS SYSTEM BEFORE RAISING THE BAR

The Trap: Traditional Sequence



Demand

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Increased Distress

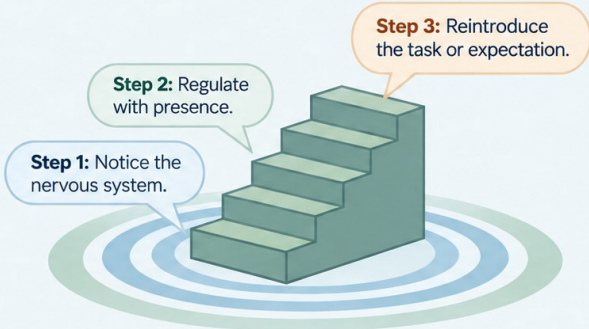
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Escalation

↓

Consequence

The Scaffold: Trauma-Informed Sequence



Step 1: Notice the nervous system.

Step 2: Regulate with presence.

Step 3: Reintroduce the task or expectation.

 **This isn't permissiveness; it's prioritization.**
We are not lowering the bar; we are scaffolding the ladder.

11

The Pre-Response Pause



Be calm and grounded before responding.

 **You cannot co-regulate a student if you are dysregulated.**
The deliberate pause is where the strong posture is maintained.

12

The Educator's Pause: A Diagnostic Tool

WHEN CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR OCCURS, HIT PAUSE AND ASK YOURSELF:

- 1 What might this child be **communicating** through this behaviour?
- 2 Is this child giving me a **hard time**, or having a hard time?
- 3 What **need, emotion, or skill deficit** might be contributing to this situation?
- 4 How can I maintain the **boundary** while strictly preserving the relationship?
- 5 What **specific support** does this child need to be successful right now?

Pause to respond with purpose.

13

The Anatomy of a Regulated Presence

AWARENESS, CALM, AND CONNECTION IN ACTION

Mind (Awareness):
Self-reflective. Willing to explore what might be happening rather than jumping to consequences.

Body (Posture):
Soft posture, relaxed shoulders. Non-threatening proximity.

Lungs (Breath):
Slow, steady breathing. (Children borrow the adult's calm.)

Face (Expression):
Receptive, relaxed facial muscles. (Students constantly scan environments for cues of safety.)

Voice (Tone):
Speaking slowly and warmly. Tone of voice is often more powerful than the words chosen.

Co-regulation doesn't happen in a manual.
It happens in the hallway, the classroom, the cafeteria line.

14

Processing Non-Verbal “Cues of Safety”

MIRROR NEURONS SCAN FOR NON-VERBAL “NEUROCEPTIVE” CUES.
These cues of safety help a student’s nervous system feel safe enough to regulate.

1 AUDIBLE BREATHING

Making breathing visible and audible gives mirror neurons a rhythmic pattern to lock onto.



-  Slow, visible inhales and audible exhales signal safety.
-  Rhythmic breathing helps the nervous system downregulate.
-  Your calm breath becomes contagious calm.

2 OPEN BODY LANGUAGE

Relaxed facial muscles, a warm tone of voice, and an open posture signal safety to be mirrored.



-  Relaxed face and soft eyes
-  Warm, calm tone of voice
-  Open posture (unclenched, unthreatening)
-  Friendly, approachable presence

 These non-verbal cues are biological signals of safety that the student’s brain can mirror.

3 PROXIMITY & POSTURE

Kneeling beside a student or using parallel regulation communicates support, not threat.

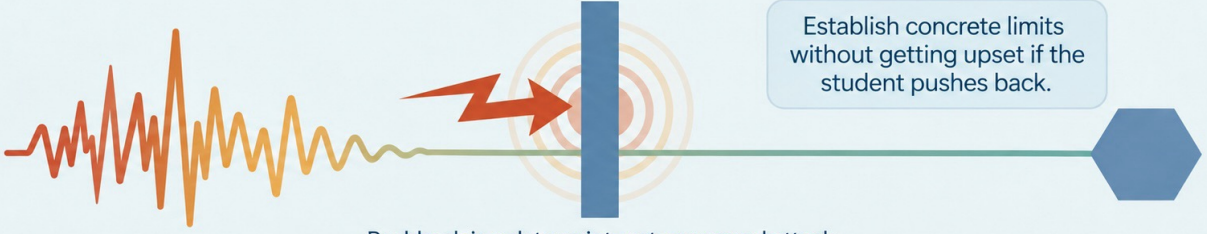


-  Sit or kneel beside (not across) to reduce power imbalance.
-  Parallel regulation (side-by-side) feels safer than face-to-face.
-  Proximity communicates: “I’m here with you.”

 **Mirror neurons are always watching.**
Your non-verbal cues of safety help the student’s brain know: “I am safe.”
When they feel safe, their thinking brain can come back online.

15

The Grounded Pushback Response



Pushback is a data point, not a personal attack.
Manage the environment through co-regulation rather than emotional reaction.

Establish concrete limits without getting upset if the student pushes back.

 **You cannot co-regulate a student if you are dysregulated.**
The deliberate pause is where the strong posture is maintained.

16



Individual Reflection Question

Being the Thermostat

Your steady presence helps create a calmer tomorrow.

The Thermometer



A **thermometer** reflects the room's temperature (it reacts to the student's emotional state).

The Thermostat



A **thermostat** sets the temperature (brings a calming presence to defuse stress).

Your Reflection:
Describe a situation where a student's emotional temperature was high, but you successfully remained the thermostat.

- 1 What happened?
- 2 How did you keep your posture intact?

17

Redefining your Role during a dysregulation

It is **not** to investigate, lecture, determine consequences, or force accountability in the moment.



Investigate
"What happened?
Who started it?"



Lecture
"You should have....
You need to..."



Determine consequences
"There will be a consequence."



Force accountability
"You need to take responsibility now."

Different timing.
A different purpose.
A better outcome.

During escalation: Focus on safety, regulation, and connection.



Safety
Ensure safety for everyone.



Regulation
Help the student calm and co-regulate.



Connection
Maintain or rebuild connection.



Regulate first.
The rest can wait.

Later: Once regulated, it's the time to reflect, repair, and support growth.



Reflection
Explore what happened (without blame).



Repair
Rebuild trust and strengthen the relationship.



Accountability
Support the student to take responsibility when ready.



Learning
Identify strategies for next time.



A calm conversation today builds a stronger tomorrow.

18

Clear the decks by removing all demands

Take away instructions, questions, and pressure until the child settles.

Instructions



Questions



Pressure





Crucial Rule:

Do not teach or correct the child while they are upset.

19

Layer 2: The Anchor Protocol for in-the-moment crisis.



1 Stop & Regulate Self

You are the anchor. Take three slow breaths, drop your shoulders, and unclench your jaw before you intervene.

2 Reduce Demands

The thinking brain is offline. Immediately remove instructions, questions, and pressure.

3 Match & Slow Breathing

Model steady breaths audibly. Lower your voice and speak in a steady, warm, and moderate tone.

4 Stay Close (With Choice)

Use a proximity slider approach. Offer comfort (space, parallel presence, or a physical tool) but do not force it. Kneel to balance power.

5 Name the State

Wait for their body to calm. Validate the physiological state without judging the external behavior.



Co-regulation creates the conditions for calm to return.

When adults regulate, children can regulate.

20

The Three Nervous System Responses

DIFFERENT SURVIVAL STRATEGIES. THE SAME NEED FOR SAFETY.

FIGHT

When a threat feels unsafe and needs to be confronted.

HOW IT MAY LOOK

- yelling
- arguing
- aggression
- throwing objects
- verbal refusal

WHAT THE NERVOUS SYSTEM NEEDS

- reduced threat
- emotional containment
- calm leadership
- physical and emotional safety

HELPFUL RESPONSES

- Speak slowly and quietly.
- Give the student appropriate personal space.
- Reduce the audience whenever possible.
- Acknowledge the emotion without escalating.
- Maintain clear, respectful boundaries.

“I can see you’re really angry. I’m here, and we’ll work through this together.”

FLIGHT

When a threat feels overwhelming and escape seems like the only option.

HOW IT MAY LOOK

- leaving the room
- hiding
- avoiding work
- frequent bathroom requests
- shutting down through escape

WHAT THE NERVOUS SYSTEM NEEDS

- a sense of safety
- reduced pressure
- opportunities for movement
- gradual re-engagement

HELPFUL RESPONSES

- Offer a calm break before distress escalates.
- Provide access to a designated regulation space.
- Walk alongside rather than directing from a distance.
- Reduce demands until regulation improves.
- Offer structured choices instead of ultimatums.

“Would it help to take a short movement break before we continue?”

FREEZE

When a threat feels inescapable and the body shuts down.

HOW IT MAY LOOK

- silence
- staring
- inability to respond
- emotional numbness
- appearing “checked out”

WHAT THE NERVOUS SYSTEM NEEDS

- patience
- connection
- gentle reassurance
- minimal demands

HELPFUL RESPONSES

- Sit quietly nearby.
- Avoid repeated questioning.
- Use grounding strategies.
- Allow additional processing time.
- Reassure the student that they are safe.

“You don’t have to talk right now. I’ll stay with you.”

Different behaviors. The same biology.
All behavior is a form of communication, and all behavior is an opportunity for connection.

21

The De-Escalation Architecture

A FOUR-PHASE PATH TO CALM AND LEARNING

Phase 1: Assess

Identify Freeze, Flight, or Fight. Diagnose the nervous system state before acting.

Phase 2: Anchor

Establish your baseline. Regulate your own physical geometry, energy, and affect.

Phase 3: Intervene

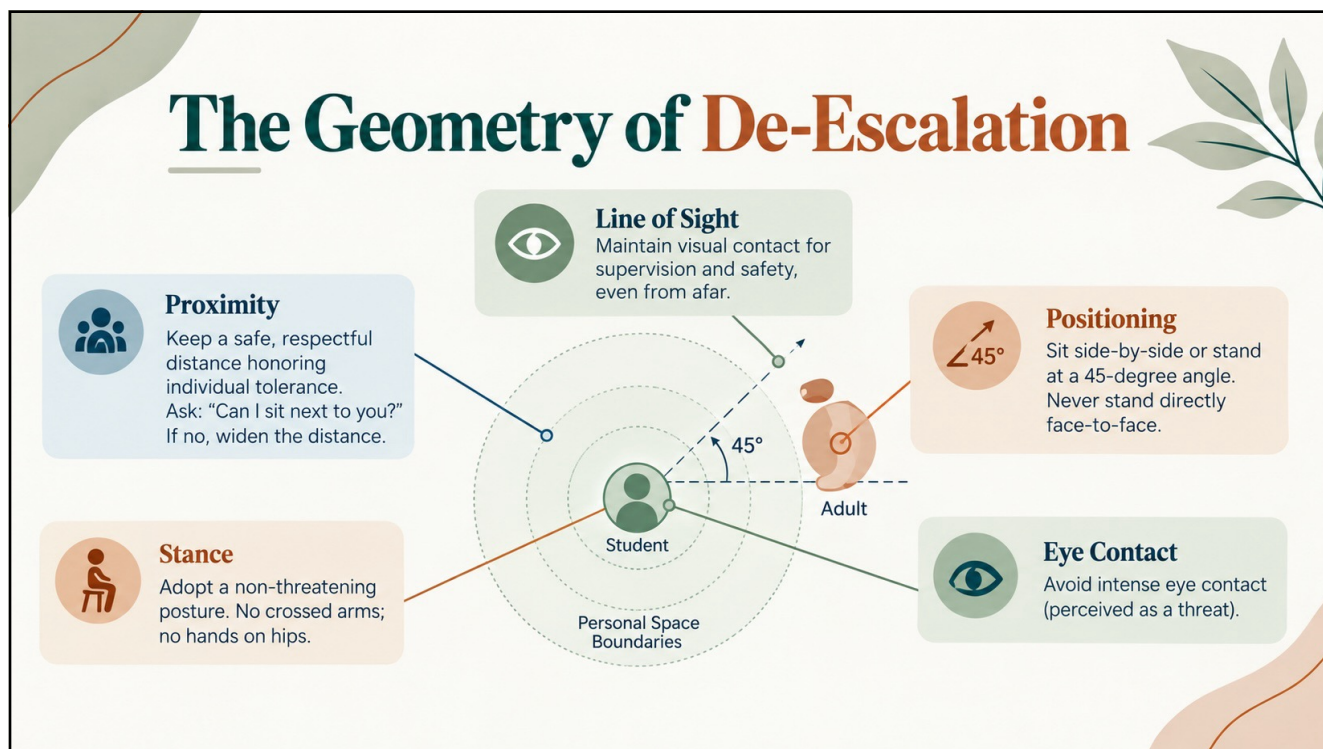
Deploy active listening, strategic silence, and safe options to co-regulate the student.

Phase 4: Resolve

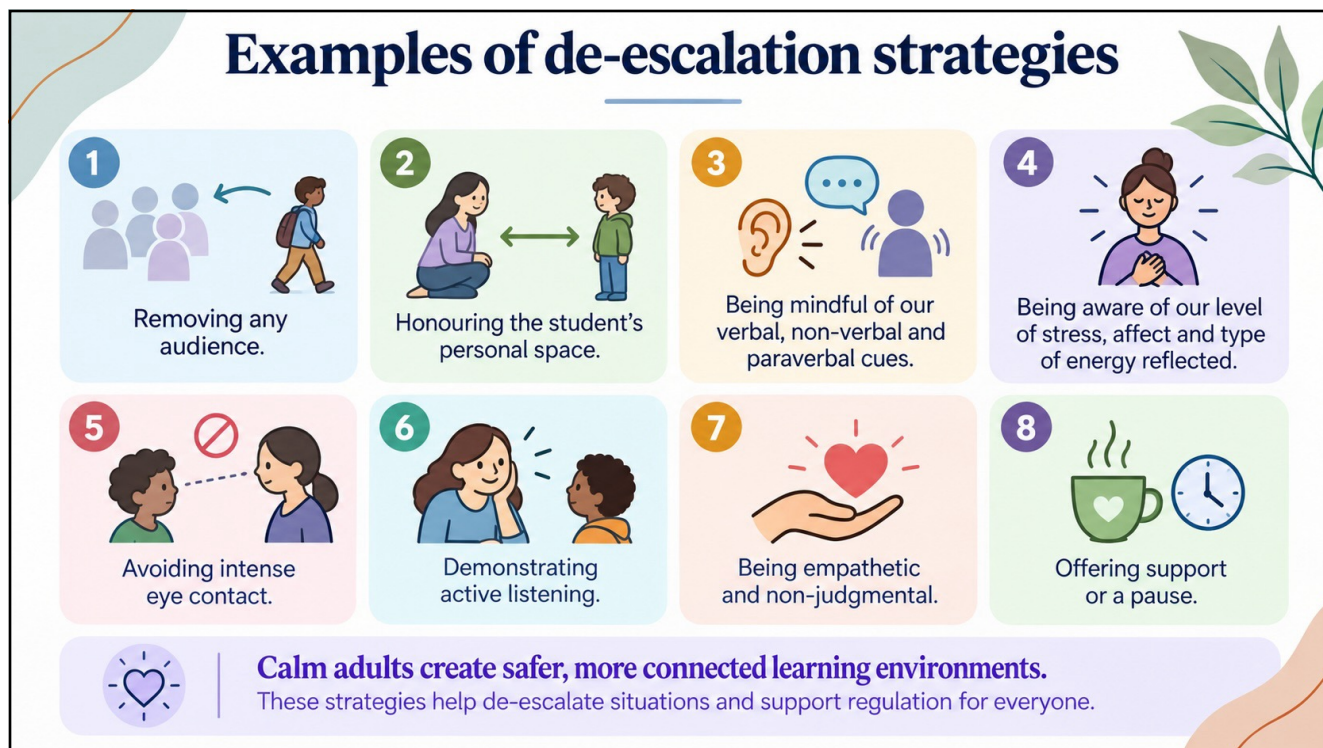
Debrief, review tier-specific guidelines, and update safety plans for continuous improvement.

Calm adults create the conditions for calm to return.
When adults regulate, children can regulate.

22



23



24

Examples of de-escalation strategies

- 

1 Avoiding getting caught in a power struggle.
 - 

2 Moving away from trying to teach a lesson or reason with the student.
 - 

3 Setting simple, concise, and realistic limits.
 - 

4 Allowing time/space for decision making (not pressuring for an immediate response).
 - 

5 Coming alongside the student's frustration, by naming and validating it.
 - 

6 Not taking it personally; being careful to not overreact.
 - 

7 Having another adult support or step in if the situation is not defusing. It's okay for the adult to tap out if they are being triggered.
-  **Calm adults create safer, more connected learning environments.**
These strategies help de-escalate situations and support regulation for everyone.

25

Emergency Protocol Caveat

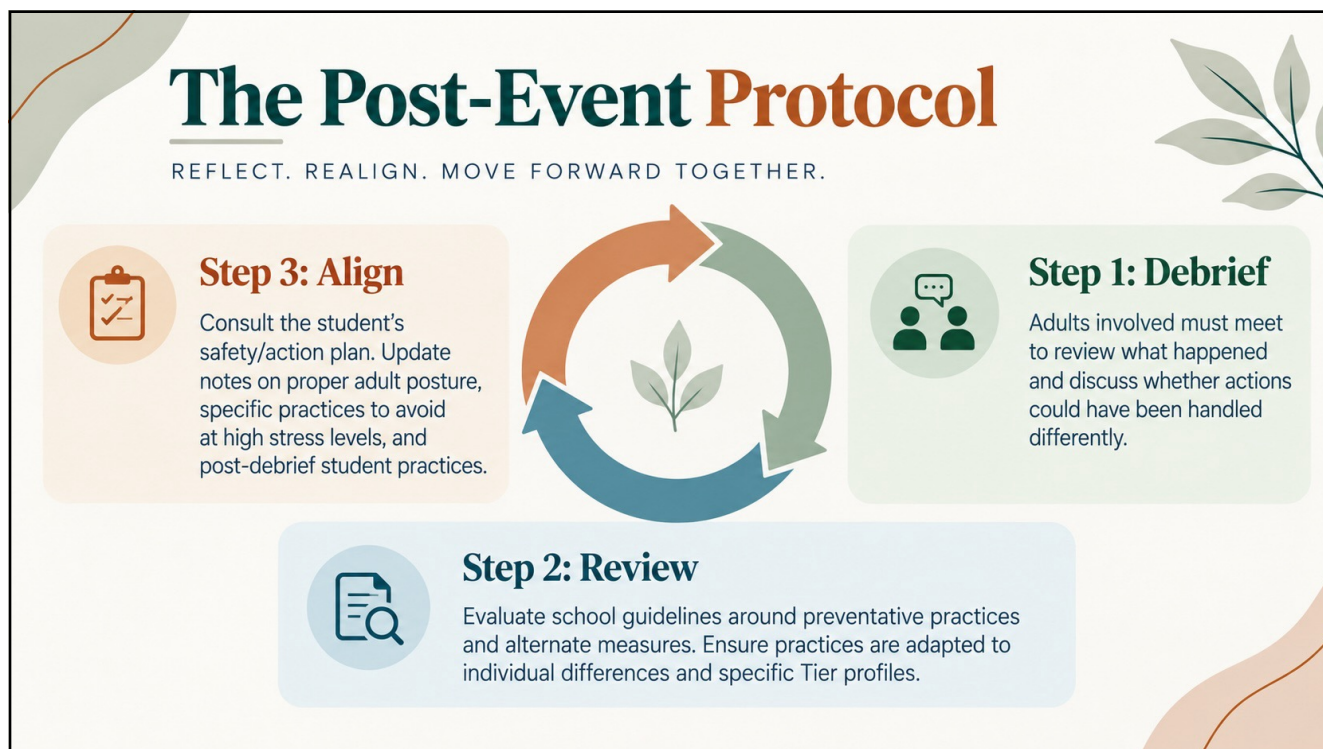
Physical holds are strictly a control measure of absolute last resort.

Resorting to a hold is only permissible for safety purposes in a situation of eminent danger. If a hold is utilized, staff must immediately and rigorously follow the specific steps listed in the school board's protocol on control measures.

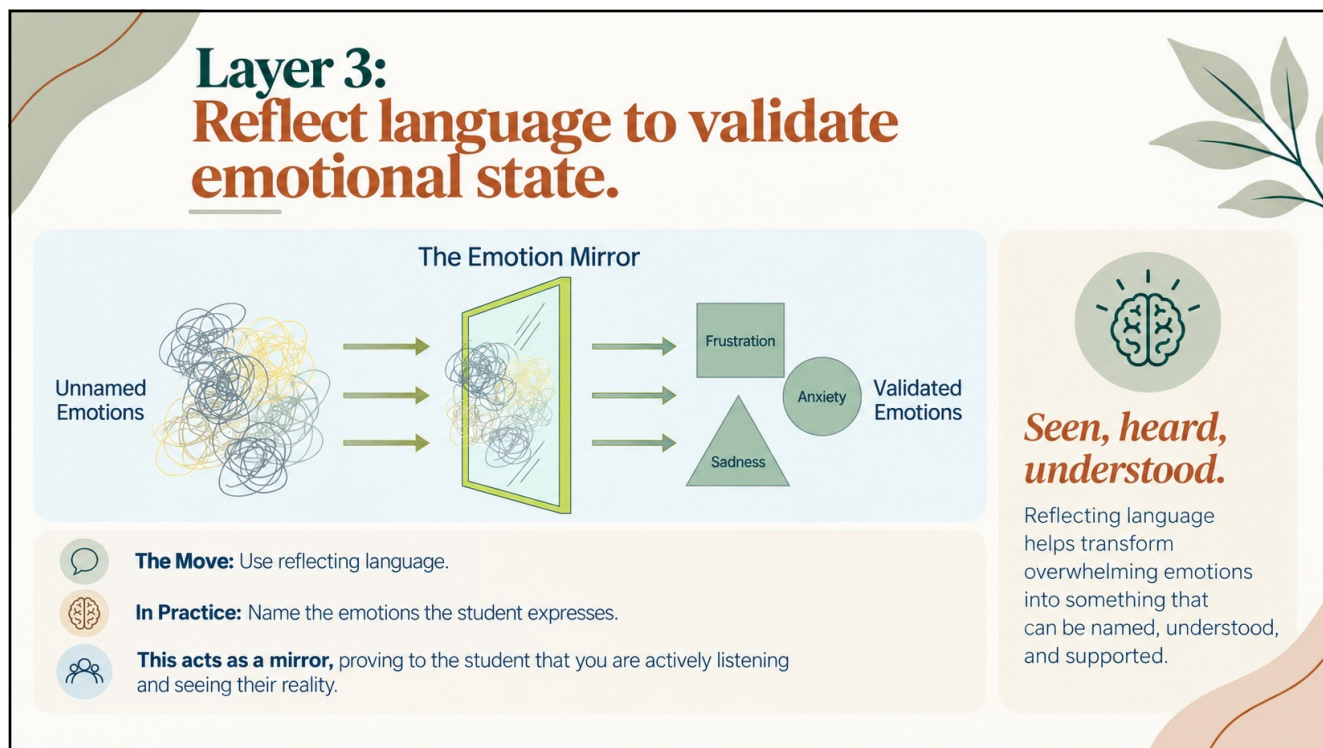
Safety first. Always.

Careful, consistent adherence to protocol protects both students and staff.

26



27

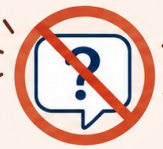


28

Narrate, Don't Interrogate.



*Different words.
A calmer tomorrow.*

- 1** 
During dysregulation, avoid questions that require reflection or explanation.
 Questions like "Why did you do that?" can increase pressure and escalate distress.
- 2** 
Instead, try narrating what you observe:
 - "I can see your body is working really hard right now."
 - "Something feels really overwhelming."
- 3** 
Observation reduces pressure while communicating understanding.

29

Name the emotional state, not the external behavior

Speak slowly and simply. Short sentences work best. Naming the feeling helps them feel understood.



Focusing on Behavior

- Stop yelling
- Calm down right now
- Why are you doing this?



Naming the State

- You are feeling overwhelmed.
- This feels too much for your body.



Feelings make sense.

When we name emotions, we help students feel seen, heard, and supported.

30

Validate the Emotion.



A SAFE SPACE FOR ALL FEELINGS

Feelings Make Sense

KINDNESS

CONNECTION

BRIGHTER TOMORROWS

All feelings are welcome here.

- 1 Validate the Emotion.**
Validation tells students: *"Your feelings make sense."*
Examples include:
 - "That was really disappointing."
 - "I can understand why you're frustrated."
 - "Anyone might feel overwhelmed in that situation."

Validation does not mean approving inappropriate behaviour.
It simply acknowledges the emotional experience before teaching alternative responses.
- 2 Help Students Find Words.**
Many children experience emotions before they can describe them. Adults can gently help by saying:
 - "It sounds like you felt left out."
 - "I wonder if that felt unfair."
 - "Your body looks frustrated."

Naming emotions helps organize the nervous system.

31

Separate Feelings from Behaviour.



All feelings are okay.

Not all behaviours are okay.

Big feelings. Better choices. Brighter futures.

Same child. Different choices. A brighter tomorrow.

- 1 All emotions are acceptable.**
Children need to hear that all emotions are okay, even the difficult ones (e.g., anger, sadness, frustration).
- 2 Set clear limits on behaviour.**
"It's okay to feel angry. I'll help you express that feeling."
"It's okay to feel angry. I'll help you express that feeling. It isn't okay though to hurt someone when you're angry. So instead, let's..."
- 3 This distinction reduces shame**
while maintaining clear expectations and teaching more appropriate ways to express emotions.

32

The language we use matters.

The words we choose can either escalate distress or support connection, safety, and co-regulation.



Language shapes safety.
Calm, respectful, and curious words help the nervous system feel seen, heard, and supported.

Instead of:	Try:
"You need to calm down."	"I'm here with you. Let's take a breath and figure this out together."
"That's not appropriate."	"Let's talk about a different way to handle this."
"You're being disruptive."	"It seems like something's up. Do you want to talk or take a break?"

33

Offer Grounding Statements.

Simple words can make a big difference.

"I'm here."

"You're safe."

"We'll figure this out together."

"I'm staying with you."

"Take your time."

"We'll solve this when your body is ready."

- 

Use simple, calming statements.
During moments of distress, fewer words are often more effective.
- 

These brief statements communicate safety more effectively than lengthy explanations.

34

The language we use matters

WORDS THAT SUPPORT CO-REGULATION

Moment	Co-Regulation Language
 Student throws item	"You're having a hard time. Let's pause. I'm staying right here."
 Student refuses to participate	"You don't have to talk right now. I'll be here when you're ready."
 Student shuts down completely	"It's okay to need some quiet. I'm going to sit near you for a bit."
 Student begins to escalate	"Let's take a few breaths together. We can handle this."
 After a dysregulation moment	"That was a lot. I'm proud of you for getting through it. Let's talk."



Calm words create safety. Compassionate, clear, and curious language helps the nervous system feel seen, heard, and supported.

35

Firm Care



Boundary

"The answer is still no."

"You can't have the iPad right now."

"That language is not okay."

"You need to stay in the classroom."



Regulation

"I'm going to help you through the no."

"I know it's hard to wait. I'm here with you until it's time."

"I won't let you use that language. Let's find a calmer way to say it."

"I see that you don't want to go. I'll walk with you and help you get started."

36

TIER 1: Universal Practices

The goal is to proactively support the nervous system before dysregulation occurs.

*Support today.
Stronger tomorrows.*

- 1

Predictable Routines
Consistency helps decrease anxiety. This includes morning meetings, daily check-in slides, and clearly posted visual schedules.
- 2

Safe Break Spaces
Non-punitive areas, such as “cozy corners” or “Focus Zones,” equipped with sensory tools like weighted pads or noise-reducing headphones where students can voluntarily go to settle their nervous systems.
- 3

Somatic Practices
Integrate movement and breathing exercises into the regular school day. Examples include finger tracing, box breathing, or scheduled movement breaks.
- 4

Check-In Tools
Use non-verbal methods, such as “Feeling Check-In” posters or the Zones of Regulation framework, to help students identify and name their emotional states.
- 5

Co-regulation Language
Explicitly teach and use supportive phrases such as, “Let’s take a breath together,” or “I’m staying right here while you have a hard time.”

37

TIER 2: Targeted Practices

The goal is to help students, who require additional support, in managing their emotions and building regulation skills beyond what is provided universally.

*Targeted support today.
Greater confidence tomorrow.*

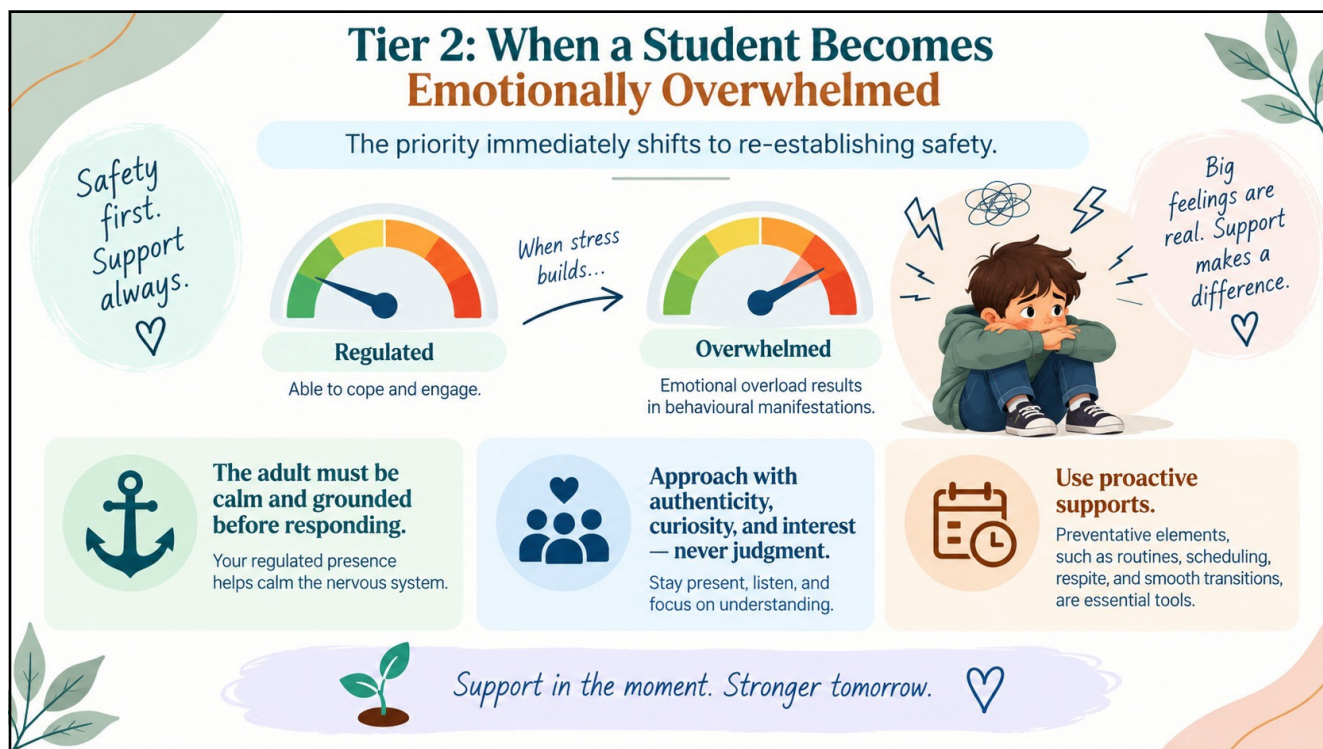
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Targeted Somatic Practices
Students might receive a little extra help during the week to practice specific calming strategies and build confidence in handling big feelings.
- 2

Strategic Scaffolding
Use pre-taught procedures for calming the brain, offering 2–3 specific choices (e.g., a two-minute stretch or using a quiet zone) to help students manage through a challenging moment without entering a power struggle.
- 3

Relational Coaching
During conflicts, use narrative coaching by talking through your own regulation process (e.g., “My body is getting tight; I’m going to take two breaths”) to model the behaviour for the student in real time.

38



39

Student Preventive Action Plan

A proactive tool to support student success.

Identify needs
Understand triggers and challenges.

Plan ahead
Use proactive strategies and supports.

Promote success
Build safety, confidence, and independence.

STUDENT ACTIVE PREVENTION/SAFETY PLAN (giving priority to prevention) – **in Elementary**

Student name: _____ DOB: _____
 School/Board: _____ Grade Level: _____ Homeroom Teacher: _____

Student's needs/challenges/triggers	Specific objectives* related to the needs/challenges/triggers	Best practices/approaches** related to the objectives	Selected tools/support measures related to the practices
Plan B for a difficult time or activity		Plan B for a difficult day	

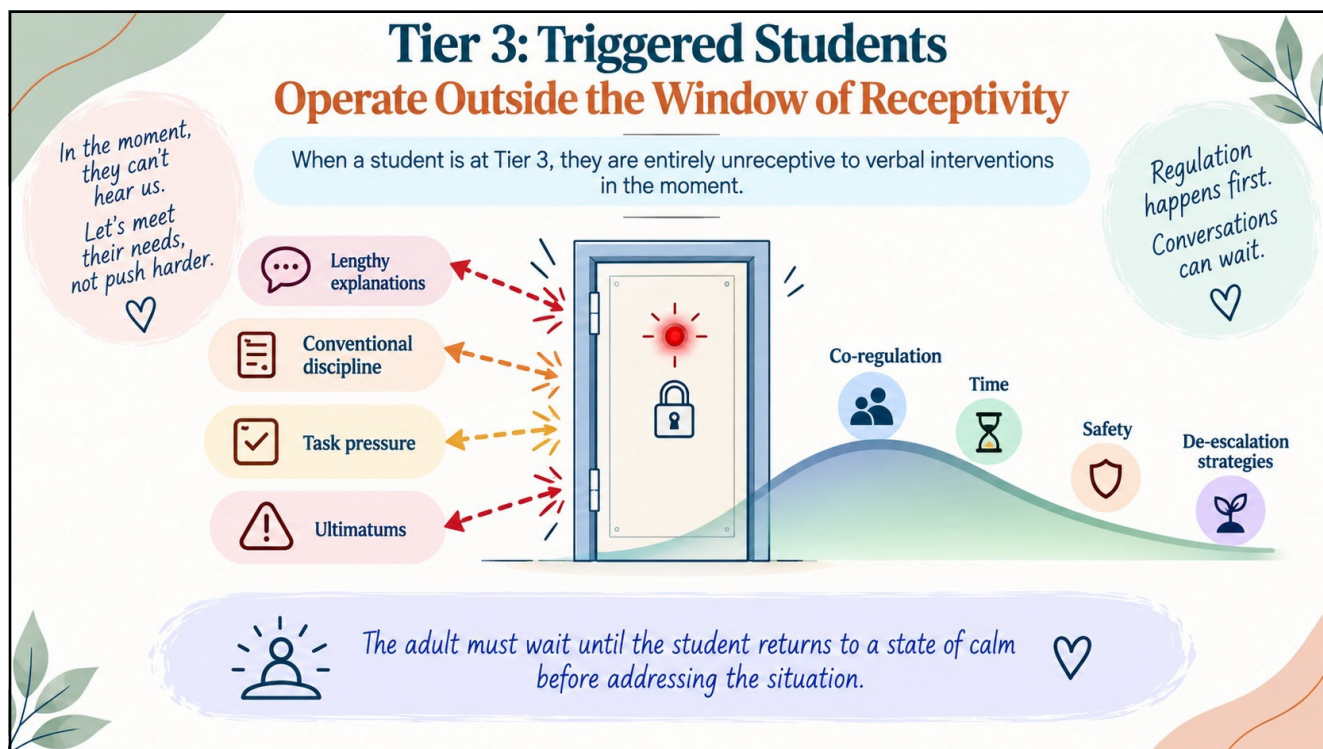
* The objectives are meant to be anchored in the adult posture and the selected support measures to scaffold/compensate for the needs and challenges
 ** The practices are meant to be preventive/proactive rather than waiting for the problem to arise to intervene. The division of adult roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined

Prevent challenges. Build brighter days.

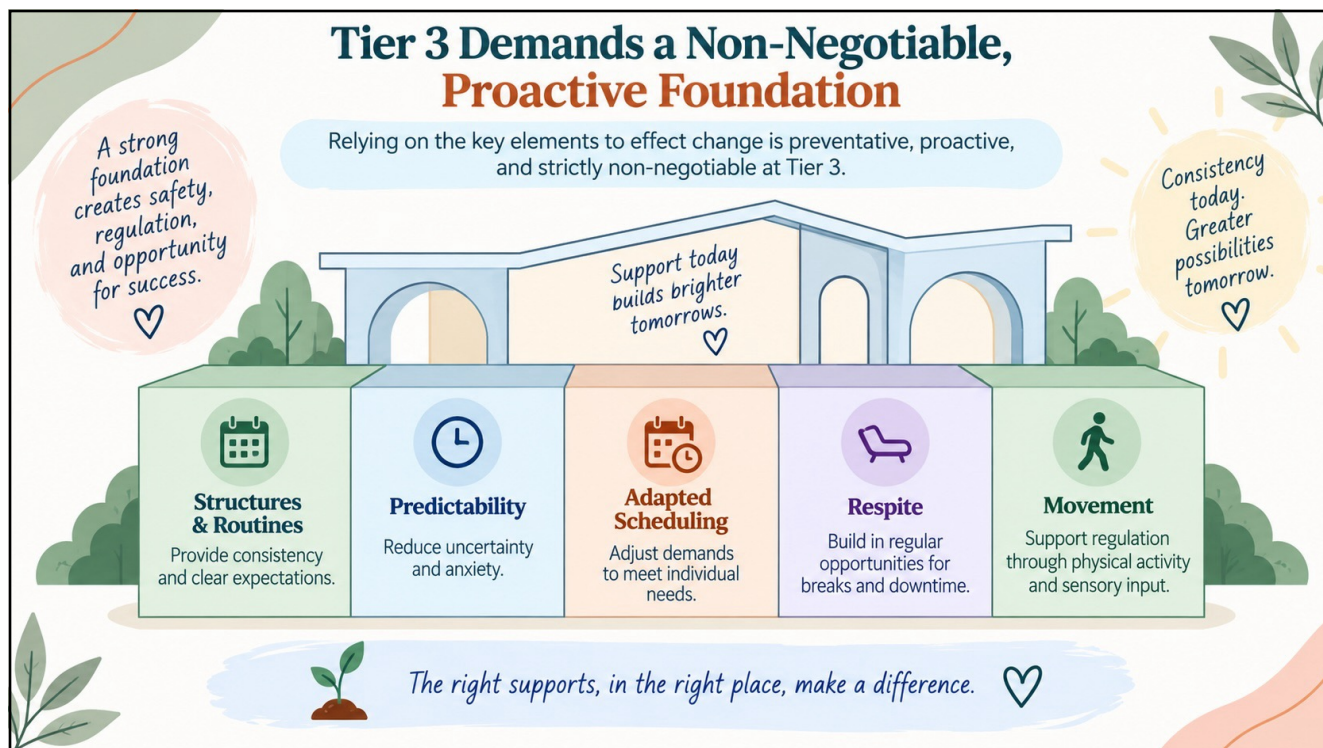
Same template. Greater possibilities.

Access the template here:
<https://www.cebm.ca/tier-2-targeted-practices>

40



41



42

TIER 3: Intensive/Individualized Practices

The goal is to accompany students with complex needs with more highly individualized and often specialized supports.

*More support today.
More possibilities tomorrow.*

- 1

Individualized Regulation Plans

Often co-created with special education teachers and related service providers (e.g., OTs or SLPs) to address the specific sensory, communicative, or emotional roots of a student's behaviour.
- 2

Intensive Adult Presence

The adult provides full co-regulation, offering direct and consistent support because the child cannot yet regulate without active intervention.
- 3

Restorative Practices

When significant ruptures occur, the focus shifts to intensive repair and restorative conversations rather than punitive measures, helping the student re-establish safety and connection within the school community.

43

Student Safety Plan

A proactive tool to support safety, regulation, and success.

Plan for success
Identify early signs and triggers.

Use proactive strategies
Support regulation before challenges escalate.

Keep it collaborative
Involve the student, family, and school team.

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STUDENT ACTIVE PREVENTION/SAFETY PLAN – in Elementary

Student name: _____ DOB: _____

School/Board: _____ Grade Level: _____

Homeroom Teacher: _____

TEMPLATE DOCUMENT

Student stress level	Observable signs	Adult posture and practices <i>suggested</i>	Adult posture and practices <i>to avoid</i>
When the student is regulated, engaged, and receptive			
When the student appears to be tense, annoyed, or frustrated			
When the student's stress response or frustration level is activated and beginning to escalate			
When the student's stress response has fully escalated and is disorganized. No longer receptive towards the adult.			
Post-intervention – following an acting-out episode			

*Safety today.
Brighter tomorrows.*

Support growth at every stage.

Access the template here:
<https://www.cebmmember.ca/tier-3-individualized-practices>

44

