

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

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A
“LITTLE BIT”
ABOUT ME

Sarah Bernhardt is a licensed mental health therapist working in Scottsbluff, Nebraska at Options in Psychology. Sarah’s clinical interests and modalities involve healing trauma, play therapy, the role of attachment in parenting and relationships, Child Parent Psychotherapy, EMDR, and Circle of Security Parenting. Sarah has been in practice for over 13 years. Sarah is also a parent to 3 daughters who are now “grown and flown”.

OBJECTIVES

Where to start when addressing a mental health topic or question?

How to bring up tough topics or sensitive issues with children?

To learn more about mental health to assist you with your children.

TWO-PRONGED APPROACH

Prevention of crises with children
by increasing connection

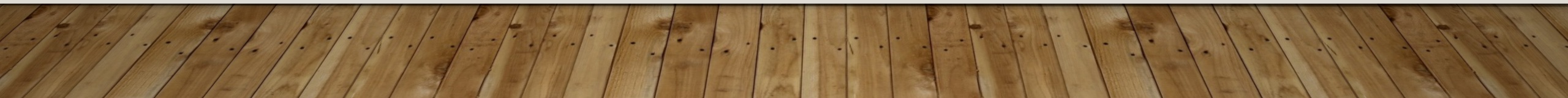
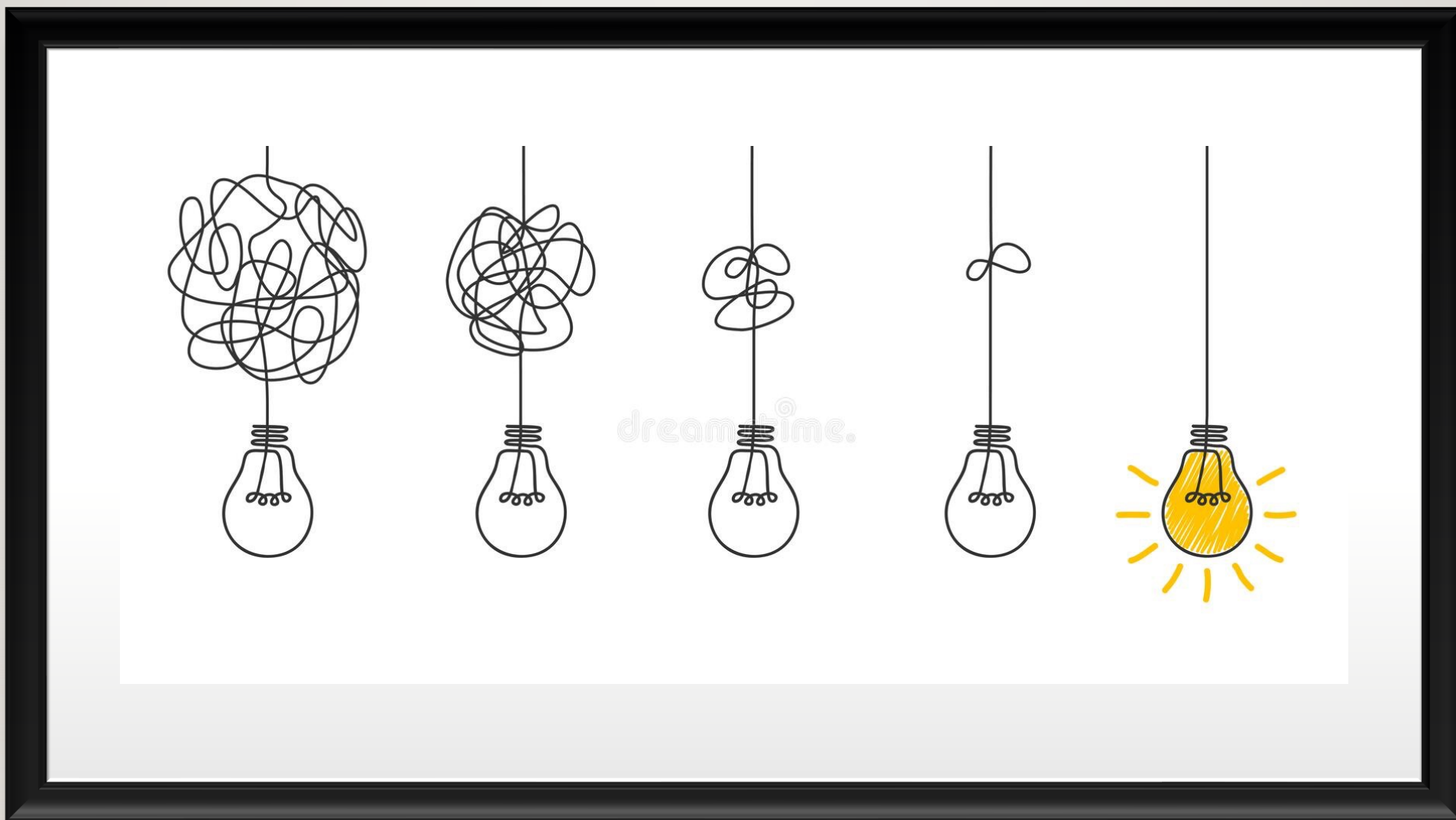


Adaptive responses to children
when the big issues arrive in
your world



MINDFUL MOMENT

- Take a moment to call your child into your mind.
- Hold in your mind what your child might be doing right now.
- As you do you this, notice what you feel.



SAFETY PROVIDED BY CONNECTION

Think of a person from your
childhood or youth who made
you feel especially safe or cared
for. Think of a person who
delighted in you.

A visual reminder of what Ruby Bridges faced
every day and why what she did was so
powerful



INTENTIONALLY
OR
UNINTENTIONALLY

“Anthropologists and developmentalists working cross-culturally have long maintained that parents deliberately cultivate the skills needed by their children for the kinds of lives they expect them to lead.”

Cultural Influences on Parenting; Paul Spicer. Zero to Three. March 2010

The Peace of Wild Things

BY WENDELL BERRY

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

HOW WE ARE MATTERS AS MUCH
AS WHAT WE DO

WHAT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES
ARE YOUR CHILDREN FACING
EVERYDAY?

SHARE IN THE CHAT

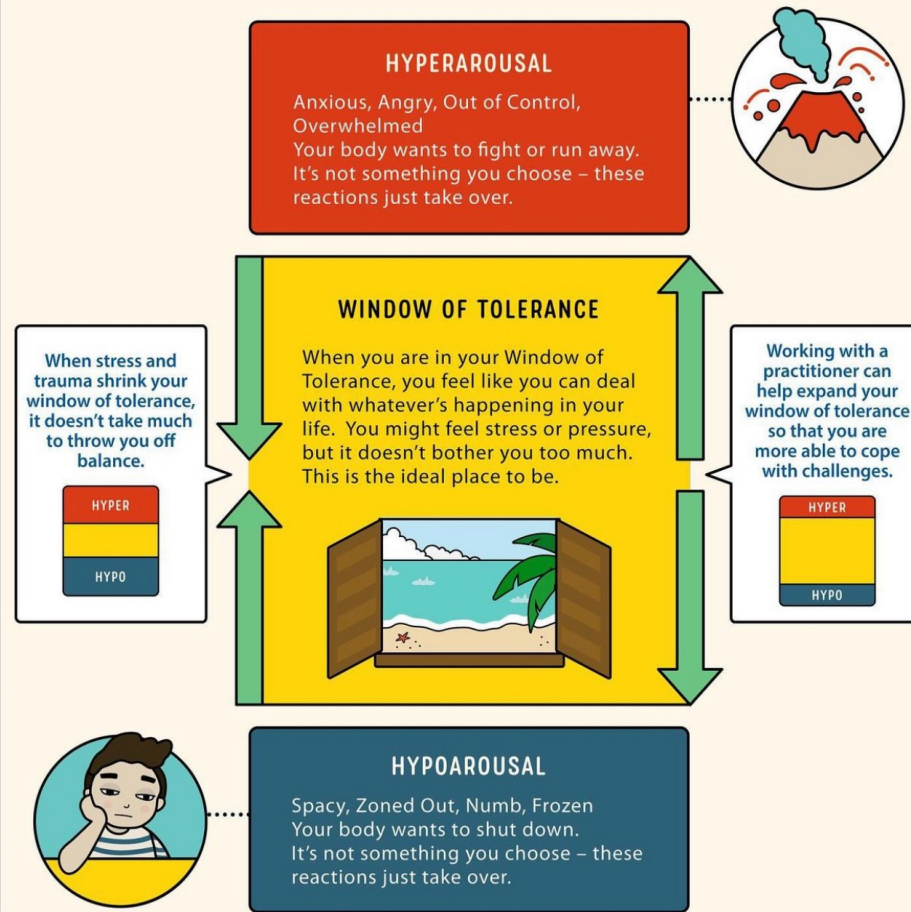
WHAT ISSUES ARE YOUR CHILDREN FACING EVERYDAY THAT IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH?

- Uncertainties of post-COVID experiences
- Social change (Identity)
- Harsh political climate
- Global political concerns
- Environmental concerns
- Uncertainty of Professional/Career Choices
- Safety at School
- Changing family structure
- Social media
- Bullying

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

- Adolescent brains are wired to prioritize connection with peers over parents.
- Adolescent brains are wired to perceive social slights or missteps as devastating, dangerous, and frightening experiences.
- Primary socioemotional task at prepubescence is industry v inferiority.
- Primary socioemotional task at adolescence is identity v identity diffusion.
- Cognitive development is shifting from concrete thinking to formal operational thinking.

How Trauma Can Affect Your Window Of Tolerance



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HOW OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM RESPONDS TO STRESS

FLIPPING your lid



You lose access to your prefrontal cortex, your "thinking brain." Your amygdala activates the fight, flight, freeze response, and you operate from a place of fear.



Since all of the parts of your brain are working in harmony, you feel calm, balanced, and alert yet relaxed.



INTEGRATION OF YOUR OWN STORY

Integration of your own story is a predictor of how your children will come to understand themselves.

This helps you regulate self when managing difficult situations.

Children know your state of mind.

FOUNDATIONS WHEN
COMMUNICATING
ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH
TO YOUR CHILDREN

What are your hopes and expectations?

Connect, then Redirect (Dan Siegel, MD)

Relationship must come first (Rules without Relationships
= Rebellion)

Establish curiosity about their lives (What do you think
about...)

Trust and allow separation

Allow closeness

FOUNDATIONS WHEN
COMMUNICATING
ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH
TO YOUR CHILDREN

Listen to their stories about other kids. They will often tell you about others first, but might be talking about self.

Lecture Less and Listen More

WAIT (Why Am I Talking)

Notice and Wonder: "I've noticed....., and I wonder...."

Sometimes it's okay for kids to believe they are right

Let kids educate you

DIFFERENCES YOU MAY HOPE FOR IN YOUR CHILDREN

- Feel less anger at parents
- Turn to parents for help when in trouble
- Get along better with friends, with siblings
- Enjoy more happiness with parents
- Solve problems with friends
- Have higher self-esteem
- Trust that good things will come their way
- Know how to be kind to those around them
- Have lasting friendships

**Circle of Security International 2018 Chapter 1 Handout*

QUESTIONS TO ASK KIDS THAT WILL GET THEM TO TELL YOU MORE

- If there was a zombie apocalypse, which teacher would you choose to get you to safety and why?
- Which kid in your classroom needs a time-out?
- What are the different cliques in your school?
- What is the most embarrassing thing I do?
- What's your favorite song? Can you play it for me?
- What's the funniest thing that happened today?
- How clean is the school bathroom?
- What is your favorite class?
- How long do you plan to live?

**MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS :
SAFETY COMMUNICATION**

What is their experience of felt safety in classrooms, in the school, among peers, on social media?

What is their experience of communication on social media?

What is their experience of self or others being bullied on social media?

What is their experience of requests, receiving, or sending of sexual photos on phones?

**MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS :
SAFETY COMMUNICATION**

Sex trafficking: What is their experience of this with peers or self? Catfishing, Posting personal information, Be wary of too good to be true

Relationship red flags – jealousy, control, isolation, blaming

Sexual abuse from peers or adults

MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS :
KINDNESS

What is their experience of loneliness for self or peers?

Encourage compassion – understanding others' struggles

Encourage empathy

Model the kindness and compassion you want your children to have for others

MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS :

SELF/PEERS

Mood struggles – anger
or sadness

Friendships/relationships

Gender identity

Self-harm

Suicidal thoughts

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE COMMUNICATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Establish rituals for regular family communication

Rose, Bud, Thorn

Feeling charts

Scrabble tile magnets – feeling word of the day

Create a "crash cart" with coping skills (with your kids)

Join with them in their interests – tv shows, video games, apps – find examples of mental health topics in their interests (Tik tok)

Use apps or memes to share feelings

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE COMMUNICATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Learn to sit with feelings
(Be VWith)

Regulate self first

Avoid talking kids out of
their feelings (suck it up,
don't worry, it's not that
bad, cheer up)

Explore values that are
developing – why do
they feel the way they
feel? Insights?

Problem-solving comes
after feelings are held
and managed

Ask - What do you want
to do? How are you
thinking about it now?
Let's think together
about what's next.

RESILIENCE THROUGH THE HARD MOMENTS

Encourage various forms of social connection or involvement

Look for moments of beauty and awe to share with your children

“Houston?” They will disappear, but they will re-establish communication again

Stay connected with their social media moves

When they invite you into their world, JOIN them

Delight in them in visible ways

Notice when they are not doing well



SELF-HARM

- An expression of internal turmoil released through creating pain in the body
- Increases in middle school aged children
- Can be a behavior to gain belonging with peers
- Not necessarily suicidal behavior
- Say: “I think you’re showing me how much you are hurting” or “I think you want me to know how sad, hurt, scared you feel”.
- Alternatives to self-harm: ice cubes, rubber bands, red pens

SUICIDAL IDEATION

- What kinds of thoughts have you had?
- Have you thought of a way to end your life?
- Do you have a means or access to achieve your plan?
- When you think about your death, how do you feel?
- Talking about suicidal thoughts is a good sign



SUICIDE HOTLINE



SOCIAL MEDIA DIAGNOSIS

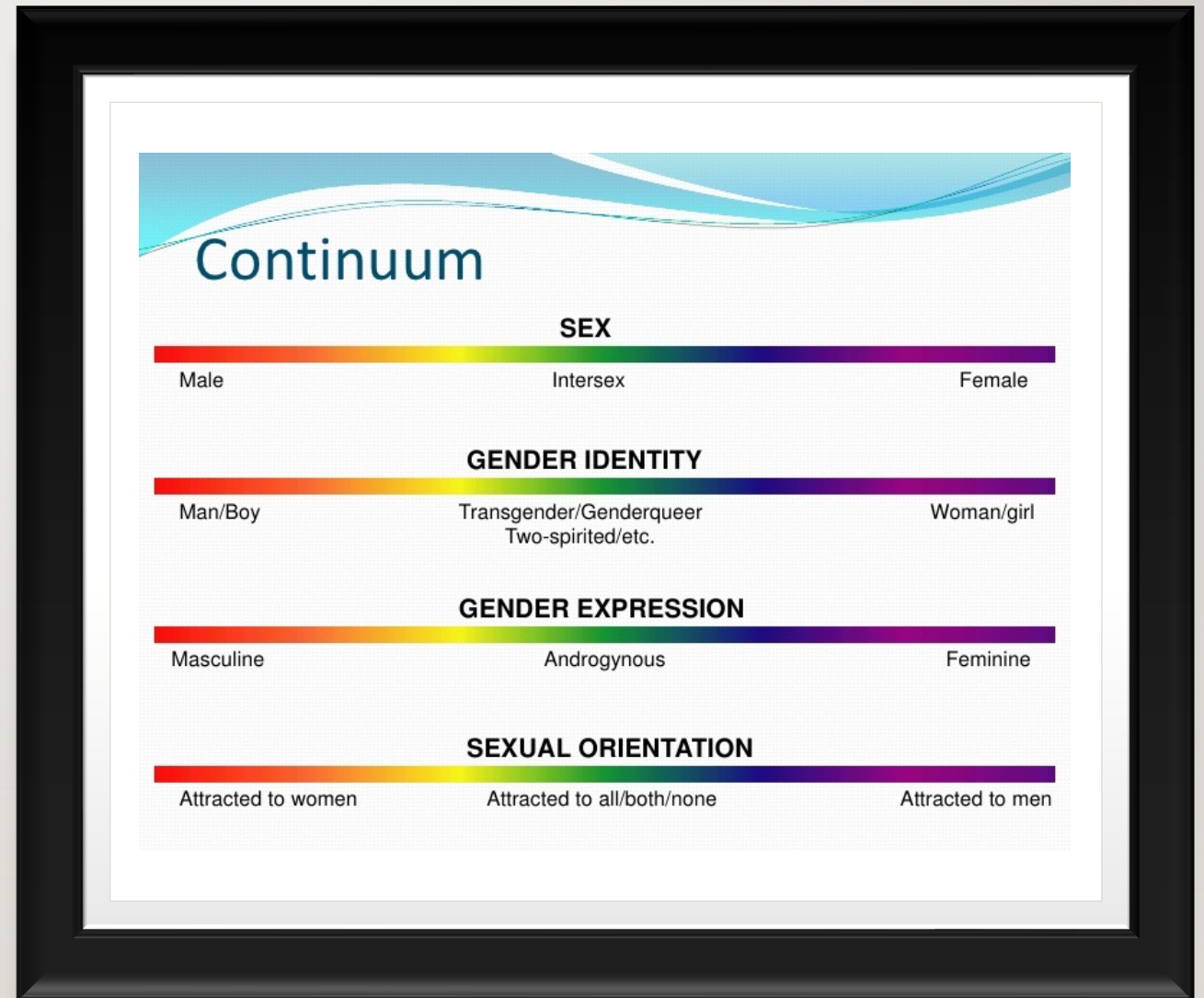
Increase in social media
information about mental health

Pros – reduces stigma, starts
conversations

Cons – misdiagnosis and desire
to fit in

LGBTQ+ TERMS

- Gender Expression
- Cisgender
- Transgender
- Binary or Non-Binary
- Gender Fluid



Behind every
child
who believes in
themselves is a
parent
who believed first

RESOURCES

Connect and Redirect Refrigerator Sheet

- https://www.ssdmo.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=930&dataid=28066&FileName=connect_redirect.pdf

Hand Model of the Brain & The Adolescent Brain – Dr. Dan Siegel

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CIJ74Oxw>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO1u5OEc5eY>

RESOURCES

That's not love campaign

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JYyHa03x-U&list=FLZnNGvLFVGvowhbIR7f8Vlg&index=2>

Just Breathe

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVA2N6tX2cg>

Benevolent Experiences Scale

- <https://loulebentz.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ACE-Resilience-Questionnaires-Derek-Farrell-2.pdf>

RESOURCES

Calm Ball

- <https://www.calm.com/breathe>

Blobs

