

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · GRADES 1–6

# The Brain Under Stress

Classroom application

## A simplified model

Bruce Perry, a child psychiatrist whose research shaped much of trauma-informed practice, uses a simple metaphor: the brain has three layers, developed in the order they need to function. • **BRAINSTEM** (the bottom) — survival, breathing, heart rate, fight/flight/freeze • **LIMBIC SYSTEM** (the middle) — emotion, attachment, memory, threat detection • **CORTEX** (the top) — reasoning, language, planning, complex thought When a child is dysregulated, the lower layers come online and the cortex GOES OFFLINE. They literally cannot reason in this state. Asking a child in fight-flight-freeze to 'use their words' or 'think about their choices' is asking them to use a part of their brain that isn't currently available.

## The three states

<p><b>Calm (cortex online)</b></p> <p>Body relaxed, breathing slow, eye contact possible, can listen and respond. Reasoning works. Learning happens. This is the state for teaching.</p>	<p><b>Activated (limbic dominant)</b></p> <p>Heart rate up, body tense, attention narrowed, scanning for threat. Reasoning weakens. Emotion surges. Verbal access reduces. This is the state to AVOID escalating.</p>
<p><b>Survival (brainstem dominant)</b></p> <p>Fight (aggression), flight (running, hiding), freeze (shut-down), or fawn (over-pleasing). Cortex offline. No language access. No memory laid down properly. Cannot 'reflect' on what they're doing.</p>	

## Why standard discipline fails in survival state

When a child is in survival state, common teacher responses make things WORSE: • 'STOP THAT' — heard as more threat, escalates further • 'WHY DID YOU DO THAT?' — cortex offline,



can't answer • 'LOOK AT ME' — eye contact under stress is threatening, not calming • 'COME OVER HERE' — being approached can feel like a threat • 'YOU'RE GOING TO LOSE BREAK' — future-thinking requires cortex, which isn't available • 'YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN' — they CAN'T, and being told to is dysregulating None of these work because they're aimed at the wrong part of the brain.

## What helps in each state

State	What helps
CALM	Engage. Teach. Reason. Discuss. Reflect. Give choices.
ACTIVATED	Co-regulate. Slow voice. Quiet presence. Reduce demands. Predictability. Time.
SURVIVAL	Safety only. Lower voice. Slow movements. Few words. No questions. Wait for the wave.

## Perry's sequence — regulate, relate, reason

Perry's clinical model offers a sequence for working with dysregulated children: 1. **REGULATE FIRST.** The child's nervous system has to come down from survival/activation. This takes time — often 20-30 minutes from peak. Co-regulate, don't reason. 2. **RELATE NEXT.** Once they're more regulated, connect. Sit nearby. Quiet presence. Maybe a simple acknowledgment. Re-establish safety in relationship. 3. **REASON LAST.** Only when the cortex is back online. This might be hours later. Sometimes the next day. The reflective conversation, the consequence discussion, the 'what could you do differently next time' — all of this requires the thinking brain to be available. Most school discipline tries to skip straight to reason. It's like trying to start a car engine that's been disconnected from the battery.

## Practical implications

- DON'T TRY TO TEACH A DYSREGULATED CHILD.** Their cortex isn't online. Wait until they're regulated. Then teach.
- CO-REGULATE.** Children regulate by borrowing the calm of an adult. Be calm yourself. If you can't, get someone who can.
- REDUCE DEMANDS.** When a child is activated, this isn't the time for more. Reduce, slow down, simplify.
- DON'T DEBRIEF IMMEDIATELY.** After a meltdown, don't go straight into 'now let's talk about what happened.' Wait — sometimes hours, sometimes overnight.
- EXPECT MEMORY GAPS.** Children genuinely may not remember details of what happened during peak dysregulation. Don't accuse them of lying when they say 'I don't know why I did it.' They might genuinely not.
- RESPECT THE LONG GAME.** Children with chronic dysregulation are working their nervous systems UP from survival to calm — often over years. Slow gains. Don't expect transformation in a term.



