



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Síceolaíochta Oideachais
National Educational Psychological Service

Anxiety & Resilience in Children

Parteen NS
6th October, 2022

Dr. Richard Egan
Senior Educational Psychologist
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

Working Together to Make a Difference for Children





An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Síceolaíochta Oideachais
National Educational Psychological Service



The aims of this presentation are to:

- Outline NEPS and its role with the Department of Education.
- What is anxiety/emotional distress.
- Skills and tools for coping with emotional distress.
- How to prevent anxiety, build social and emotional strength/resilience.



What is National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)?



- NEPS is the psychological service of the Department of Education. It is a service **delivered in schools**
- NEPS provides a service to primary, post-primary and special schools.
- There are eight NEPS regions, this NEPS region is called the South West.
- In this region we cover Kerry, Clare, Limerick and North Tipperary we have 5 teams. We cover around 550 schools in the region.
- All schools in Clare have an assigned psychologist.



OBJECTIVE

NEPS' overall objective is..

...to provide an educational psychological service to all schools through the application of psychological theory and practice to support the wellbeing, and the academic, social and emotional development of **all learners**, having particular regard for learners with special educational needs or those at risk of educational disadvantage.



Role of NEPS

- NEPS also prioritises the promotion of the **wellbeing and mental health** of all pupils in schools.
- In common with many other psychological services and best international practice, NEPS has adopted a **consultative** model of service which focuses on **supporting teachers to intervene** effectively with pupils whose **needs** range from mild to severe, and transient to enduring.



How Common are Anxiety and Depression?

- Anxiety is the most common mental health concern for children and teenagers.
- 20% of preschool children show moderate to clinically significant levels of emotional and behavioural problems (e.g. Lavigne et al. 1996).
- 1 in 5 (20%) population experience significant emotional distress-increases with age (higher numbers for the elderly)
- Anxiety and depression are more prevalent than drug use, ADHD, or any other mental health problem.

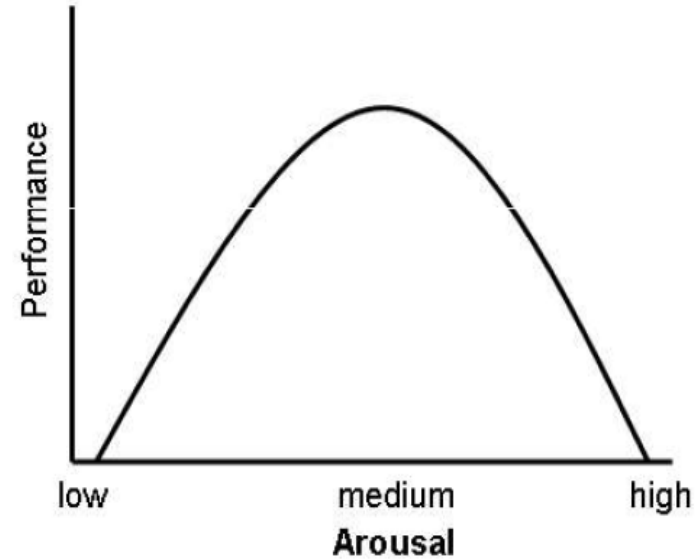
Anxiety

Anxiety is normal.

The basis of Survival because it prepares our bodies to cope with danger

In moderate amounts it helps to improve our performance

- Natural performance enhancing drug
- Adrenaline



Emotional distress is...

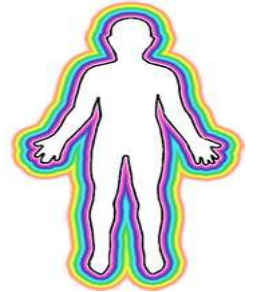


Cognitive/Thinking

Worry, negative thoughts, poor concentration, attentional biases.

Physiological/Body

Increased heart rate, muscle tension, perspiration, stomach aches, sleep difficulties, agitation.



Behavioural/Actions

Flight (escape or **avoidant** behaviours)



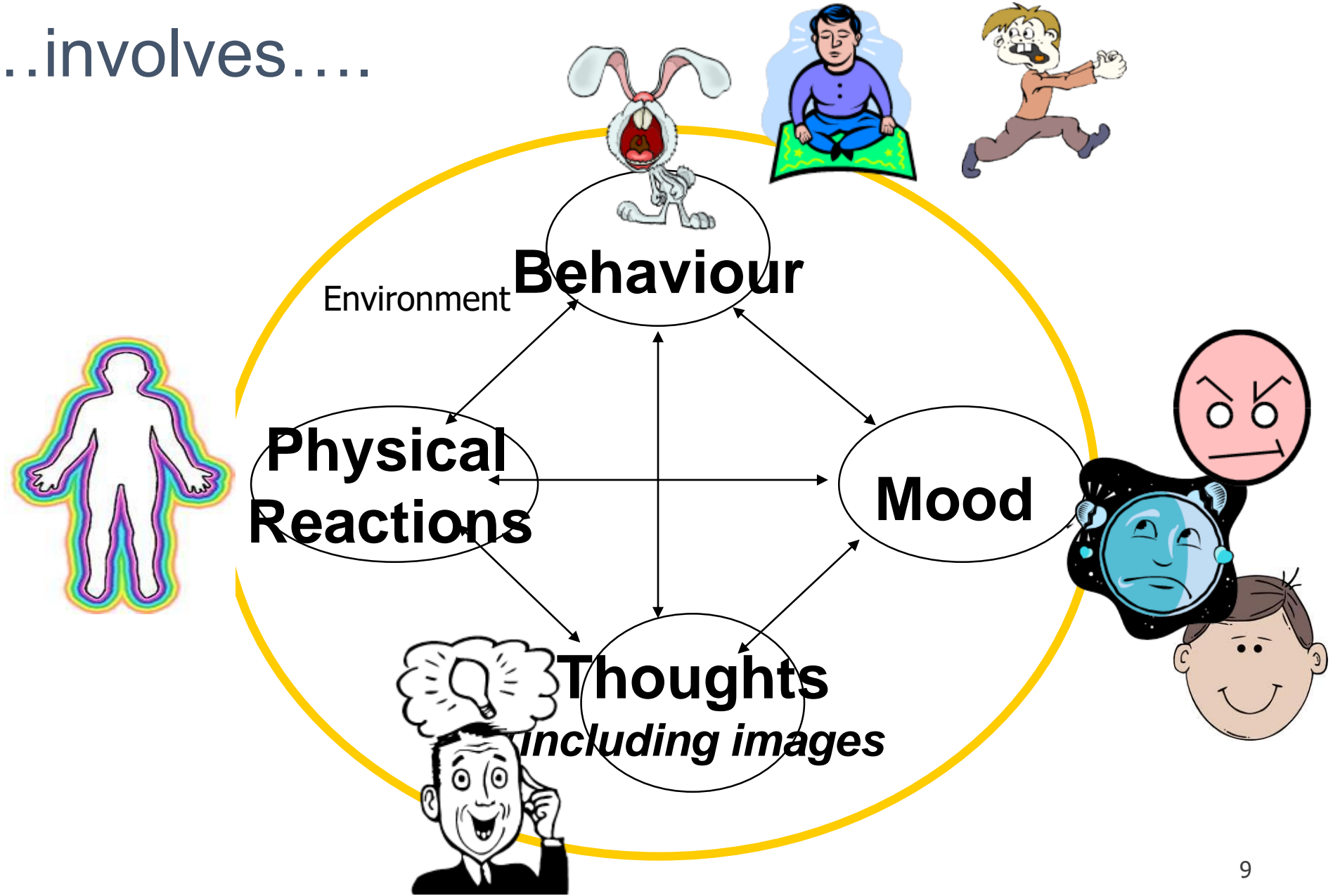
Fight (**aggressive** behaviours)



Reassurance seeking



Emotional distress ...involves....



Anxiety is normal

- **Infant anxiety - loud noises, unexpected events and unfamiliar people.**
- **Children - loss or separation from parents and specific fears**
- **Pre-Teens - death, danger and natural disasters**
- **Adolescents - social comparisons [failure, criticism, physical appearance]**



Emotions become challenging when...

- they have a significant impact on your life
- they are beyond developmental appropriateness
- they cause significant distress
- they have been present for long periods
- they cause significant interference



Barriers that prevent us from thinking in helpful ways and paying attention to positive things around us.

What are the signs of excessive worry?

- **Worry (anticipatory)**
- **Avoidance**
- **Attention to threat/ hyper vigilance**
- **Fast and sustained physiological arousal**
- **Psychosomatic complaints**
- **Difficulty in resting and going to sleep**
- **Shyness**
- **Social withdrawal**
- **Perfectionism**
- **Appetite changes**



**NB: Will vary
across culture
and individuals**

Risk Factors & Protective Factors

Risk
Factors



Protective
Factors

Risk Factors

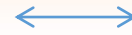


Factors associated with a vulnerability for one to experience severe emotional distress

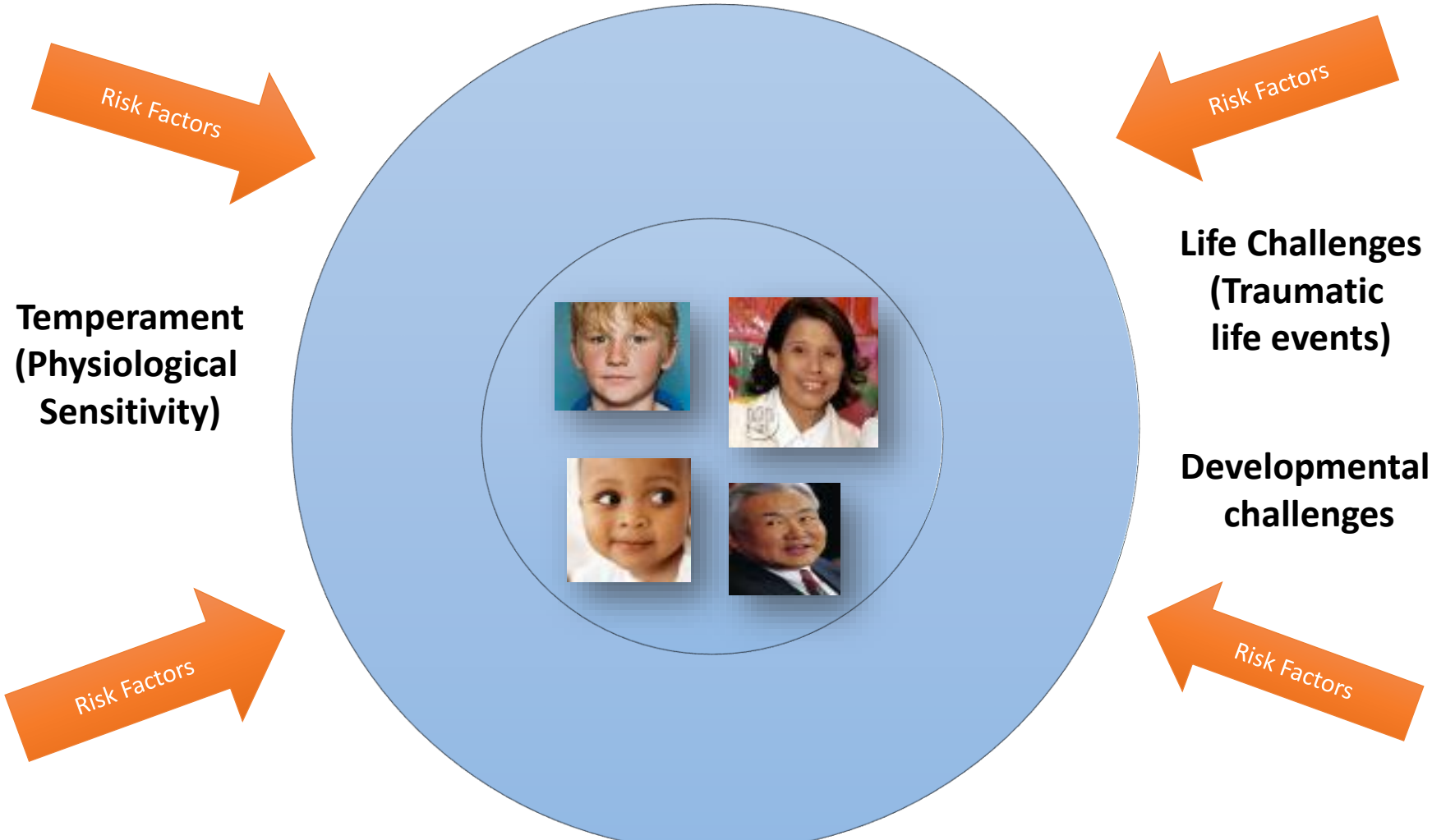
- **Temperament** - Sensitivity/low thresholds for stress
- **Traumatic experiences**
- **Developmental challenges**

Theoretical Model

Anxiety/Depression Prevention



Resilience Building



Temperament
(Physiological
Sensitivity)

Life Challenges
(Traumatic
life events)

Developmental
challenges

Risk Factors

Risk Factors

Risk Factors

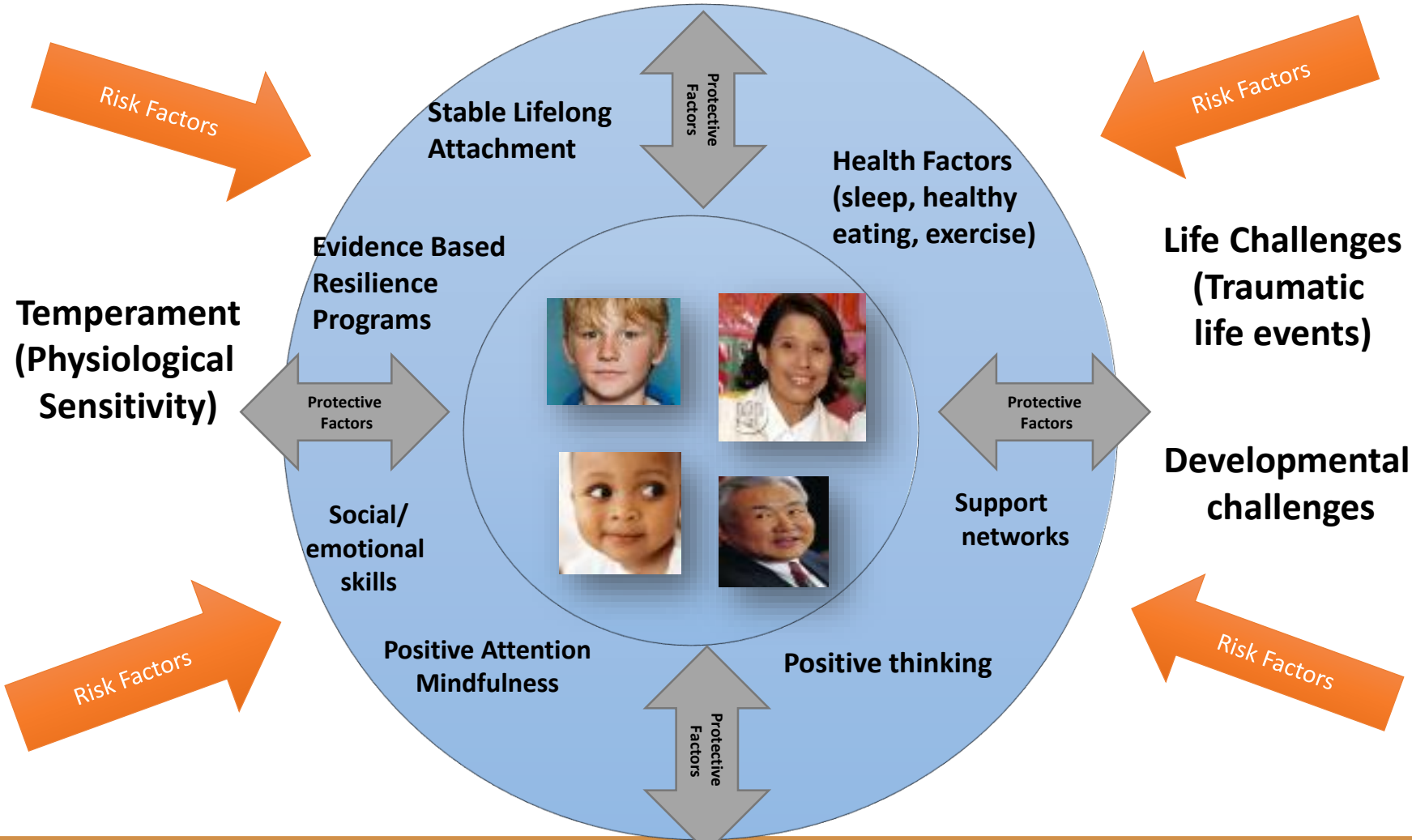
Risk Factors

Theoretical Model

Anxiety/Depression Prevention



Resilience Building



Protective Factors

Scientific proven resilience skills



- **Attachment/Affection**
- **How we pay attention**
- **Positive thinking style**
- **Support networks** (extended family, community and friendships)
- **Health factors** (sleep, daily physical activity, healthy eating)
- Skills taught in **evidenced based prevention programs** (FRIENDS programs)

ATTACHMENT

Attachment is the number one predictor of positive wellbeing

- *Unconditional love is the most important thing regardless of intelligence, financial resources, environment etc.*
 - *Use attachment skills as often as possible in daily interactions*
1. Physical and psychological connection
 2. Facial expressions
 3. Feelings of security are circular
 4. Differentiate between unconditional love and the behaviour of your loved one
 5. Praise children for trying their best, not just for outcomes



Some of the important gifts you can give your children...

- **Unconditional love/Positive, stable attachment**
- **Paying attention to the positives**
- **Positive thinking style (green thoughts)**
- **Time to be children/unstructured, creative, outdoor, active play**
- **Resilience skills**



Resilience

Resilience = to spring back, or rebound



Oxford Dictionary

Ability to overcome adversity; achieving good outcomes regardless of life events or circumstances.

The benefits of resilience:

“Children who are emotional and socially skilled are more successful at school (Durlak et al., 2011)

What can we do to build children's resilience?

- There is a growing recognition of the important contribution schools make to the psychological wellbeing and emotional health of children (Stallard, 2010)
- Parents and Schools can have a key role in the prevention and early intervention for childhood anxiety

Emotional and Social Skills necessary for resilience

Ability to form and maintain positive and
stable attachments

- Self regulation
- Self soothing
- Empathy



- Friendship skills
- Self and Social awareness

The FRIENDS Programs

The FRIENDS programs range from children of 4 years right through to adults/elderly. Each program is similar in content however are all age appropriate and have additional techniques for each stage of development.



Fun Friends (4 to 7 years)



Friends for Life (8 to 11 years)



My Friends Youth (12 to 15 years)



Resilience for Life (16+)

F = FEELINGS

Talk about feelings

Talk about other people's feelings



- Introduction to Group
- Recognising their own individual body clues
- Understanding link between thoughts, feelings & behaviour
- **Working on feeling happy, brave and confident**

R = RELAX

This step teaches children to learn and practise a variety of relaxation techniques. Why? We find it hard to think straight if we are not calm

'Milkshake Breathing ' - Slow deep breathing

- Breathing slowly helps us relax our body, our heart beat slows down and we feel less tense and worried

Muscle Relaxation

- When we tense and relax our muscles our body releases happy chemicals (endorphins) which makes us feel relaxed

Visualisation

- Imagining a peaceful, happy relaxing place can help us to feel calm

Quiet Time

- Activities that make yourself feel happy and relaxed

Fun activities with the family is a way of relaxing and feeling good



I = I can try! (helpful thoughts)

This step teaches children to tune into their self-talk. This is an important skill as thoughts influence feelings and behaviour.

There are two main steps:

1. Awareness of red thoughts (negative self-talk)
2. Replacing with green thoughts (positive self-talk).

'I can be the boss of my thoughts'

Mindfulness.... Being fully aware of your senses, your thoughts, your actions (parents and children) (e.g. when your child is having a tantrum!)



Inner Thoughts...



Thoughts

Affects
→
Controls



Feelings

+



Behaviours

The way we **THINK** influences
the way we **FEEL** and **BEHAVE**

Red THOUGHTS vs. Green (POWERFUL) THOUGHTS

“I’m dumb”

“I’m ok at lots of things”

“I give up”

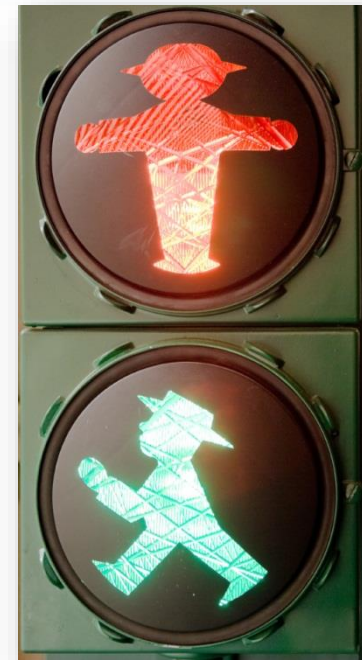
“If I try I’ll get better.”

“I hate my sister/ brother”

**“I find my brother/ sister annoying sometimes,
but other times they are fun to play with”**

“I have no friends”

“I have 2 people I play with and my dog is my friend”



- Green, helpful thought=GO!



- Red, unhelpful thought= STOP!



The yellow light reminds us to SLOW DOWN!



Unhelpful Red Thoughts

I can't do it

I'm going to make a fool of myself

Why do I even bother

I give up

I hate Irish!

I'm hopeless

This is stupid

I don't want to

What's the point?

What if I make a mistake

This is too hard

I'm no good at this

Helpful Green Thoughts

I can try my best

I'm sure everyone finds this challenging

I'm going to give this a shot

I'll get there in the end

I can find a solution

I will be ok

This won't be so bad

This could be fun

This is something different

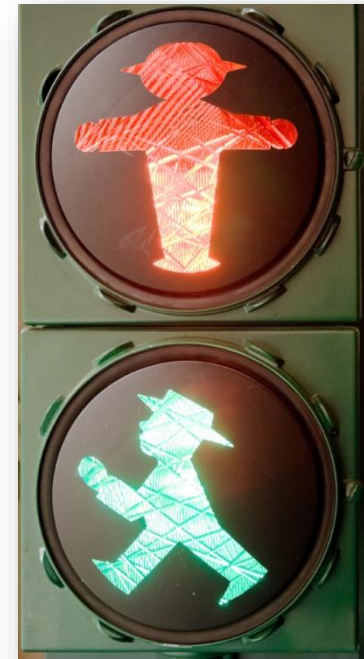
It doesn't matter what anyone thinks

I can cope with this

Red THOUGHTS vs. Green (POWERFUL) THOUGHTS

**It's okay to have red thoughts – everyone does!
But, we want to have less of them.
What is important is, what we do with them!**

**Also green thoughts need to be realistic.
They may not make use feel good straight away,
But, they make us feel better!**




E = Explore Solutions & Coping STEP PLANS

- Problem Solving Skills
- 6 Block Problem Solving Plan
- Coping Step Plan
 - **Overcoming a fear,**
 - **Preparing for an upcoming event**
 - **Learning a new skill**
 - **Trying something new**
 - **Completing a task**
 - **Achieving a goal**

The Coping Step Plan

Reading aloud in class

- 
1. Read one page of the book in your head
 2. Read one page of the book on your own in front of the mirror
 3. Read one page of the book to your Gran
 4. Read one page of the book in front of your best friend
 5. Practice reading one page of the book in front of two friends in the classroom at lunch
 6. At the beginning of the class, use my relaxation strategies and think helpful thoughts! Read one paragraph aloud slowly and clearly

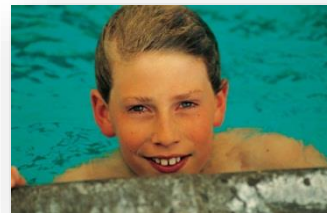
Now reward yourself. You've done your best!

- Understanding that it is effort towards success that is important not success
- Use of rewards for trying hard
- Support Teams



Stay calm and talk to your support networks!

- **Setbacks may occur** from time-to-time, this is to be expected.
- Importance of staying calm in a difficult situation
- Spend time with people who make us feel happy & good about
- ourselves



Questions from Parents 1

- My child suffers from anxiety when doing new activities. He is fine once he gets over the initial fear but it can take a long time. Any idea of how we can help?
- Any advice on bedtime? My child won't go to bed unless my husband or I stay with him and he's 11. He gets anxious if we leave him.
- My child finds it hard to share her friends with others. They can get angry when they play with other kids.
- My child is in 6th class and is getting quite anxious about secondary school. What could we be doing to help her?
- What can be done to support children presenting with school refusal/avoidance? Schools seem to have very little understanding of how debilitating it is for the young person, how much trauma it causes a family and most importantly how much support is required to gently ease a child back into school . It seems to be just left to parents to figure it out.

Questions from Parents 2

- What is causing all the anxiety we are seeing in young people?
- My child spends hours at night worrying about all kinds of catastrophes. We have been helping them analyse the fear and rationalise it but it just takes over some evenings, and bedtime goes on for hours. What can we do?
- How can a parent differentiate/determine between what is nervousness in a child, and what is anxiety?
- Is resilience merely learnt coping mechanisms? Or is resilience built from life experience only?
- How much anxiety is “normal” for a child to experience?

Referrals for Outside Support

- HSE CAMHS – Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services, based in Ennis. Referral by GP or other health professional.
- HSE Primary Care Community Psychology Services – Clinical psychology service to children and young people based in Ennis – self referral through link below:
<https://www2.hse.ie/services/disability-support-and-services/childrens-disability-services/get-a-referral-for-childrens-disability-services.html>
- Many other support services at a voluntary or commercial agencies.
<https://www.ispcc.ie/guided-digital-programmes/>
<https://www.heysigmund.com/>
- Some Literature: ***‘Helping My Anxious Child’*** by Rapee et al.; ***‘The Opposite of Worry’*** by Lawrence J. Cohen.

