

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO HAVE WITNESSED OR EXPERIENCED DOMESTIC ABUSE AND CONFLICT AT HOME ~ SOME THOUGHTS + IDEAS BY A YOUNG PERSON WITH FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCE...

This document will be most useful for the children in your school if it could be shared around for all teachers and staff to have a read. It would be great if we can all start to think about our experiences in terms of: “what has happened to us” instead of: “what is wrong with us?”

We know that sometimes what has happened to us impacts the way we are in school. We know that fiddling with our pencils or fidgeting with our feet or forgetting where we are and raising our voice at the wrong moments are not helpful for anyone in class. We don't want to stand out and if something bad happens at school it can change our mood or attitude for the whole week.

Hopefully the ideas below help you to explore things in a range of different ways with any children struggling with similar experiences to mine. It would be nice if other young people could have help to practice ways of overcoming obstacles and they can start to see themselves as having lots of strengths rather than being difficult, weak or in trouble.

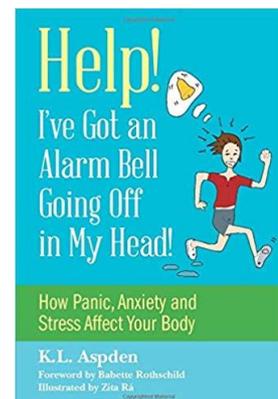
You might have heard about the ‘fight flight freeze flop’ theory.

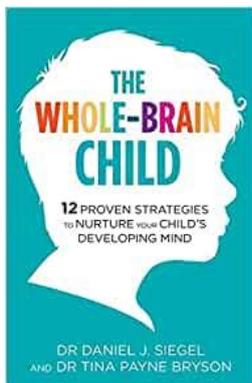
This is our in-built ‘survival response’ - an adaptive response which has evolved over many years. Our brains are really clever, and they are programmed to help us survive, by jumping into action for us sometimes. In some situations, this can be helpful, but our brains can also get confused or so used to switching itself on, that they do this any time that we perceive a threat (this could be a teacher shouting or someone dropping a heavy bag).

Our survival responses can be out of our control - sometimes we make conscious decisions about how we will act or respond, sometimes our brains make our next move for us (by jumping into action under pressure).

We have learnt that it can really help us if we understand a little bit about this theory. We can learn ways to support ourselves to spend less time in survival mode, and more time being able to learn, play and connect. With practice!

You can read more via: *“Help! I’ve got an alarm bell going off in my head!”* by KL Aspden or *Dan Siegel online and his book: “The Whole-Brain Child”*. Both share useful ways of understanding our behaviours more and exploring these with children and young people.





The PDFs [“How to Talk to Children about Flight, Fight and Freeze” by Billy Brodovsky and Kate Kiernan \(2017\)](#) and a [“Self-help work booklet for people experiencing PTSD” by Rotherham, Doncaster and South Humber NHS](#) are also helpful practical guides – we can share copies of these with you or click the links.

1. Sometimes I don't know what I feel because I have so many different big emotions bouncing around inside, that I feel overwhelmed and can't make sense of what is going on.

What might you see?: You might see me throw something or shout out. This is because I go in to 'FIGHT' mode (my brain jumps into action and thinks I need to 'attack' in order to stay safe). I might: shout at people; threaten people; swear; kick or punch a wall, furniture or someone close to me.

Other children can experience:

'FLIGHT' mode ('run away' to stay safe): run off; be fidgety; keen to get away; big darting eyes looking for the escape route; have a raised heartbeat.

'FREEZE' mode ('stay still to avoid/ hide from danger' to stay safe): lose their words; say “I don't know” a lot; feel like they are stuck or can't move; distant; withdraw from connection.

'FLOP' mode ('play dead' to stay safe): physically collapse; fall to the ground; slump in the chair; faint; seem distant/ out of their body.

What might help me? We are all different so it would be best to ask each child to help you make a list that might work for them. There are some really cool ideas out there for helping us regulate, why not try them:



- having something to fiddle with in our bag/ on our desk
- bouncing a ball on the floor or a wall
- spelling our name backwards
- noticing 3 blue things around us
- 5-4-3-2-1 *

*(picking out 5 things you SEE - 4 things you HEAR - 3 things you touch - 2 things you SMELL – 1 thing you TASTE)

Some young people need help to let school know when they are needing to have some time for one of these activities. I like that my school and I made a plan together. They let me have a notebook on my desk, so that I can distract myself for five minutes with drawing and writing. This helps everyone in the end because once I have had a place to put some of the thoughts and feelings, I can focus on class again.

Another young person has agreed that if they put a red pen on their desk, the teacher knows they are struggling and can let them have some time out of class, without needing big conversations in front of everyone else which might make things escalate.

Remember that we can train our brain to make changes, but it takes time and practice. Nothing changes over night! Repetition helps us learn!

2. Sometimes I might be really quick to get angry

What might you see?:

- Shaky
- Clenched jaw and teeth
- Red cheeks
- I feel really stressed and tense
- Shout, Threaten, Swear
- Kick out, punch or throw
- Get myself in to difficulties with my friends
- Sometimes I walk off, including when I am meant to stay in class
- I get headaches



What might help me?: This could also be linked to the idea of me being in ‘fight’ mode - like we talked about above. I am used to having to get myself or my mum and brother out of dangerous situations, so my brain is wired up ready to fight back from any potential danger. Seeing, hearing and experiencing fighting was part of my daily life in my early years of growing up, so some of these ways of responding are learnt behaviour too. I can change this, but it takes time and confidence and patience! Try some of my ‘cooling down’ ideas:

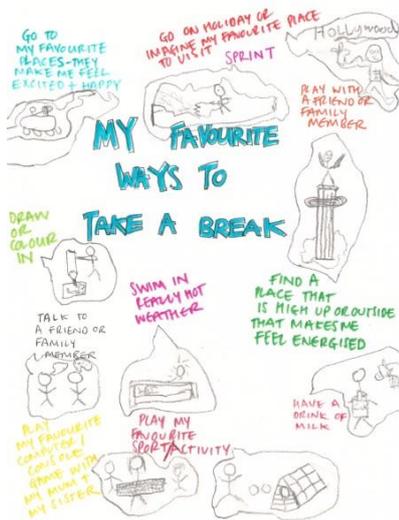


- Have something to fiddle with on my desk
- Sing /Play a song over in my head
- Draw
- Listen to music
- Know that if I need to, I can go to a safe space that we have agreed on
- Square breathing (Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFdZXwE6fRE>)
- Belly Breathing (Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PcCmxEW5WA>)
- Looking at the exercises in the book: *“There’s a volcano in my tummy”*, by Margot Sunderland.

3. Most days I find it hard to stop lots of thoughts in my head and I am full up with big feelings. I think about: the past; how I don’t feel like I have a dad; how my mum is sad and stressed; how I feel alone and different

What might you see?:

- Sometimes I daydream and I think this might be to stop the horrible thoughts
- I can get really sad – I cry or I find it hard to be interested in what’s going on around me
- I can worry about the smallest of things, like getting things right in class, needing to ask to go to the toilet or getting stuck on whether my friends will give my things back
- Even though I know it’s no one else’s fault, I know that sometimes I can take my anger out on others



- Sometimes I hide away. Hiding away might mean literally avoiding people, but it can also mean when I am physically there in class but not staying focussed.

What might help me cope at different times?:

Making a list of ideas with me, for helping me get my thoughts and feelings out – Some of these might be good to try:

- Having a named person that I can talk to if I need to - when I can talk about the difficult things, or just know there is a space for this if I need it, helps me concentrate on other things more
- Expressing my feelings, not bottling them up! Having paper on my desk if I need to draw; having a diary I can have at home; having a 'worry jar' (or another agreed place – like an email or a txt for older children) where I can put my worries in to, that a trusted adult can read and then give me a choice of whether I want to talk to them about it

- Grounding ideas, like the “5-4-3-2-1” senses activity
- Activities that help me get into my body and out of my thoughts – sport; dance; fidget toys
- Help with my bedtime routine – regular bedtimes; ways to wind down and clear my head; Bedtime Yoga (Try: <https://youtu.be/4lfjNAXGPzA>) / Mindfulness (Via: <https://youtu.be/T5ut2NYdAEQ>) / Calming music (this might be good for during the day too!: <https://youtu.be/N7ESSn0SdGc>)

****FOR MORE ACTIVITIES + RESOURCES, VISIT: www.riseuk.org.uk/resources****

We would love to hear how you get on!

RISE Child + Young Person’s Therapy Service

counselling@riseuk.org.uk
November 2020