

Speak Softly:

Language that Calms & Connects

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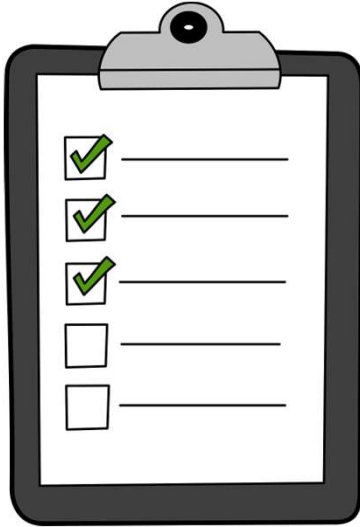


The West Virginia Behavior/Mental Health Technical Assistance Center is proud to be a collaboration between the West Virginia Department of Education and the West Virginia Autism Training Center at Marshall University.

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Agenda



- The Power of Words
- Modeling Self-Regulation (Calm)
- Phrases that Calm and Connect
- Plan B Conversations
- Video Reflection

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The Power of Words

“Words are free. It’s how you use them that may cost you.”

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The Impact of Language on Emotions

In classrooms and staff rooms, words can either soothe or stir. A sharp phrase said in frustration can ignite defensiveness. A calm, validating sentence can bring someone back from the edge.



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When little people
are overwhelmed
by big emotions,
it's our job to share
our calm, not join
their chaos.

L. R. Knost



**a dysregulated
child cannot be
comforted by a
dysregulated adult**

DR ALLISON MARK

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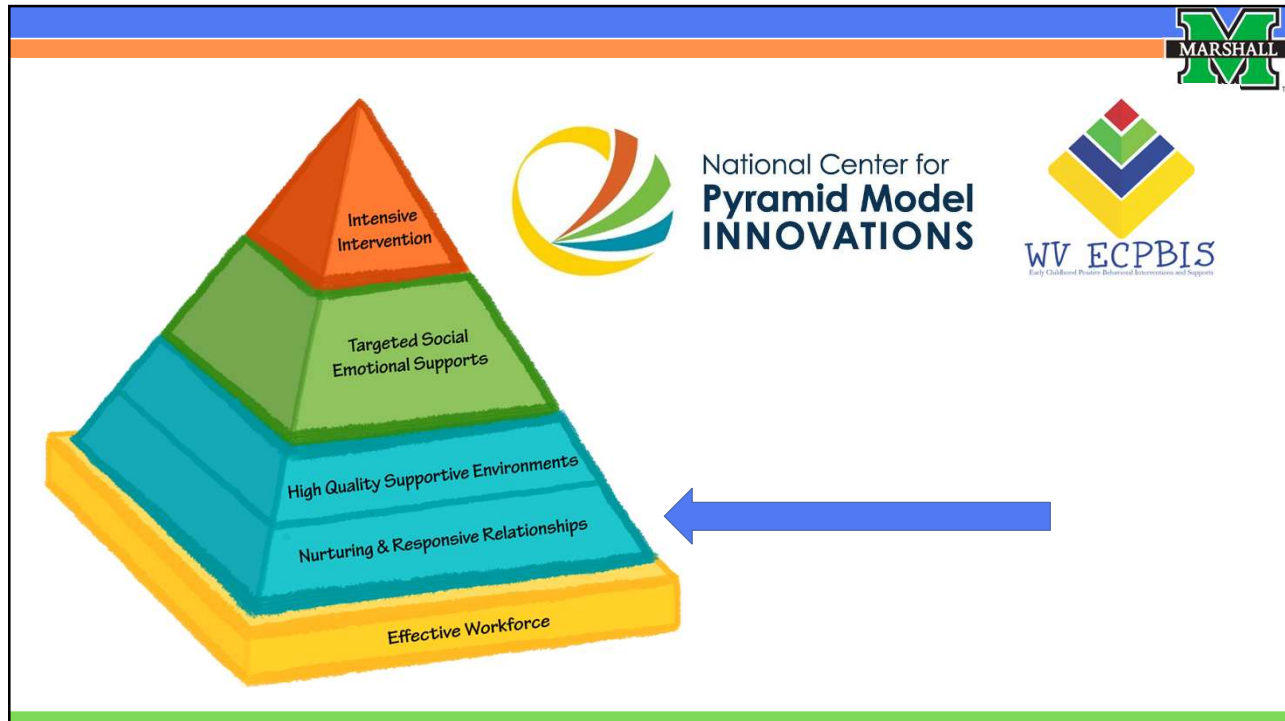
THINGS THAT
MATTER

THINGS YOU
CAN
CONTROL

WHAT YOU SHOULD FOCUS ON

BEHAVIOR | GAP

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Types of Relationships

- Teacher and student
- Teacher and families
- Staff and staff
- Student and student

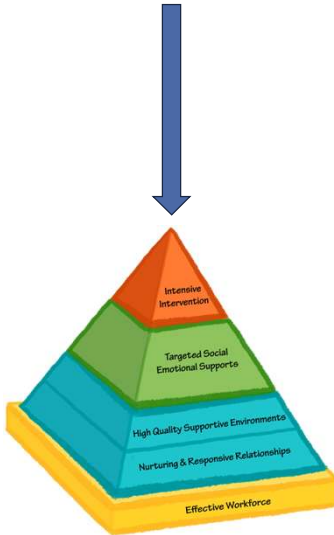
Speaking softly matters in ALL of these relationships!

The top photograph shows a teacher sitting on the floor, interacting with a young child in a classroom setting. The bottom photograph shows a group of four adults (staff) sitting around a table, engaged in a meeting or discussion.

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How it's Used in Tier 3



- In **intensive individualized behavior support plans**, calm speech helps to **de-escalate** and prevent further dysregulation.
- It's used to **coach children through emotional experiences**, helping them feel heard and co-regulate.
- It builds **consistency and predictability**, which are essential for children receiving Tier 3 supports.
- What we do universally with all children *is often the same work that supports the most intensive needs* — just applied with greater intention and frequency.

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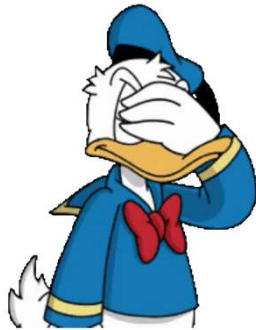
Modeling Self-Regulation (Calm)

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Reacting

can escalate situations and damage relationships.



Responding

models self-regulation, strengthens trust, and teaches students how to manage their own behavior.



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The Power of Pausing

- Deep breaths
- Count to five
- Silently acknowledge your emotions before speaking
- Take a break
- Leave the situation momentarily



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TRY

When I feel stressed by behavior that pushes my buttons, I will

- **T** – Take a deep breath
- **R** – Reflect on my emotions, reflect on the meaning of the child's behavior
- **Y** – I will think, You got this. You can be calm to support the child to be calm.



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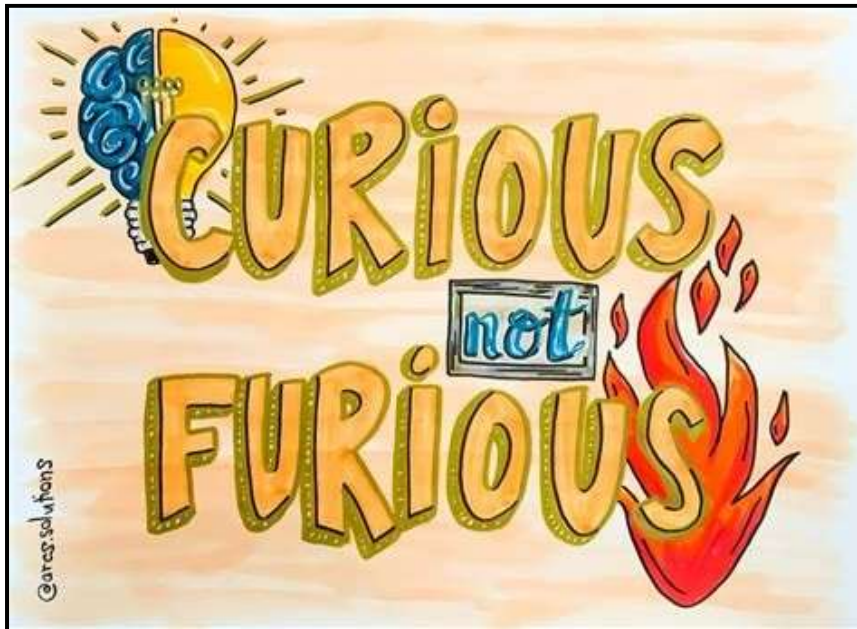


Developing Neutralizing Routines

- Identify the behaviors that push your buttons
- Develop a routine that:
 - Includes an if-then
 - **If** I feel tired, overwhelmed, or agitated by the child's behavior, **then** I will...
 - Is brief
 - Is clear
 - Is doable
 - Interrupts the chain of events
- Plan for your response ahead of time



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Active Listening



- Active listening isn't just about hearing—it's about reflecting back what you've heard with empathy.
- For example, instead of jumping to a solution or correction, try saying, *"It sounds like you had a really tough morning. Want to talk about it?"*
- This approach helps regulate emotions and primes the brain for problem-solving.

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Non-Verbal Communication

Body language: open, nodding, on their level

Facial expressions: smile and eye contact

Tone of voice: calm and slow



“What happened?” example

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Phrases that Calm and Connect

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Words that Soften vs. Words that Escalate

Escalating Language	Calming Language
"You never listen."	
"Why would you do that?"	
"Calm down!"	
"That's not acceptable."	

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Empathy & Validation

- Acknowledge the emotions of others without judgment
- Validate the feeling behind the words
- Supports emotional literacy development

It looks like you
are feeling really
mad right now.

You are feeling left
out—that hurts,
doesn't it?

That feeling when
your toy broke—
that's called
frustration.

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Curiosity

- **Always, never, and should** language registers as a threat in the brain.
- Validating feelings and inviting collaboration soothes the nervous system and builds trust.
- Avoid judgement and try not to correct or ask for compliance!

Hmmm...I wonder what made that so hard right now?

What would help your body feel safe right now?

It's tricky to find words when feelings are big. Want to practice now together?

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Using "I" Statements

- Reduce blame and shame put on the child
- Shifts the energy from "you vs. them" to "we're in this together"
- Shift from the child being "bad" to expressing your experience
- "I" Statements preserve the relationship even when setting limits

I feel worried when toys get thrown because someone might get hurt.

I'm feeling a little overwhelmed, so I'm going to take a deep breath.

I need to keep everyone safe, so I can't let you hit.

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Plan B Conversations

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Three Ways to Respond to Challenging Behavior

A	Impose your will
B	Solve the problem collaboratively
C	Drop or reduce the demand

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Examples of Plan A, B, C Language

A child is not following expectations or a request made.

"You have to or you will have a consequence."

"I noticed you aren't..... I'm not mad. What's up?"

Let it go for now.

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Examples of Plan A, B, C Language

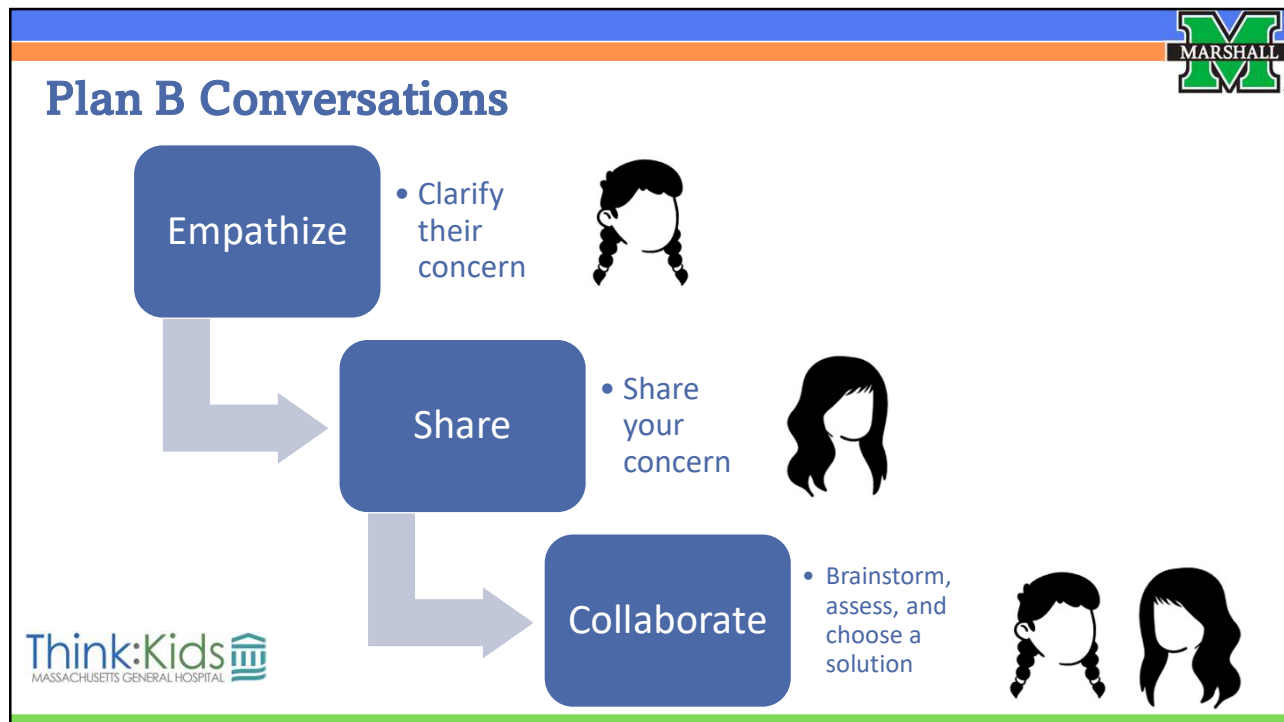
A child is having a meltdown and is shutting down.

"Stop right now."

"I see that this situation has really upset you. Can you fill me in?"

"You don't have to do it. You will not get a consequence."

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M
MARSHALL

“I noticed you’ve had a hard time during our listening center lately. What’s up?”

“It’s ok. You’re not in trouble. I just want to understand what you are thinking.”

“Tell me more. Why don’t you like the pages?”

“Oh, you can’t turn the pages. Is it all the books or just certain ones?”

“So you are frustrated that you can’t turn the thick pages—is that right?”

(shrugs)

“The pages are dumb.”

“Because I can’t turn them- they stick together.”

“Big page books. Like this!” *(holds book up)*

“Yes!”

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M
MARSHALL

"My concern is that you haven't been able to enjoy the stories and see the pictures like your friends."

"I wonder if there's a way we can address your concern about not being able to turn the thick pages so you can enjoy the stories that your friends are enjoying that matters to me."

"Do you have any ideas?"


"It's ok. Take your time. Can you think of a way?"



(stares at the teacher blankly)

"I don't know."

"Well, I could go to a different center and not have to read those dumb books."




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M
MARSHALL



"Ok. Let's think about that. If I let you skip the listening center you wouldn't have to worry about turning the pages. That's true. My worry about you not being able to enjoy the story and see the pictures would still bother me. Can you think of another idea that will help both of us?"


"Oh! Let's think about that. If we made the pages easier to turn, you wouldn't have to worry about the pages and I would know you had the opportunity to enjoy the story."

"Let's give it a try for a few days and see how it goes!"



"Well, we could put something on the pages so they are easier to turn. Like a piece of paper or a stick."



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Video Reflection

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Reflection Questions

- What specific words, tone, or body language did the teacher use that may have contributed to escalating the student's behavior?
- What alternative language or strategies could the teacher have employed to de-escalate the situation?
- How might these alternatives changed the outcome?

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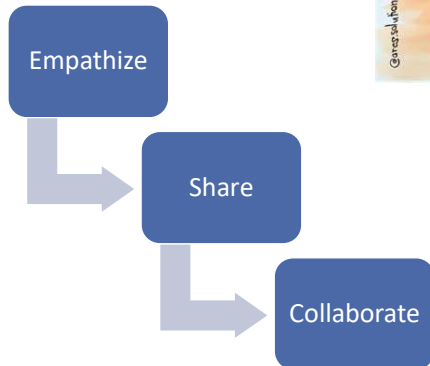


Conclusion

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Summary



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Self-Reflect: What's happening now?

- How do I typically respond to student misbehavior or frustration?
- Do I use calming language consistently across all students or only with some?
- What words or phrases do I commonly use when a student is upset? Do they help de-escalate or increase tension?
- Do I pause and regulate my own emotions before addressing a challenging behavior?

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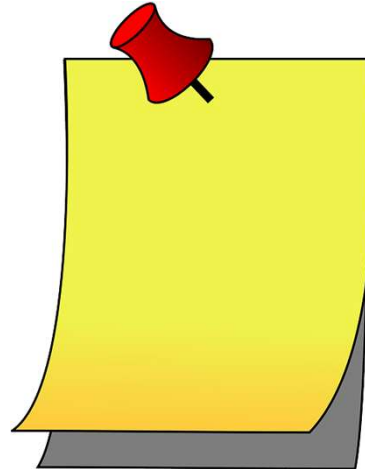


Set a Goal

What do I want to achieve and why is it important?

What specific steps will I need to take to reach this goal?

How will I know I'm making progress or have achieved it?



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Thank you!

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Session Evaluation: Fill out for your chance to win a prize! Each submission is an additional entry to win!

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