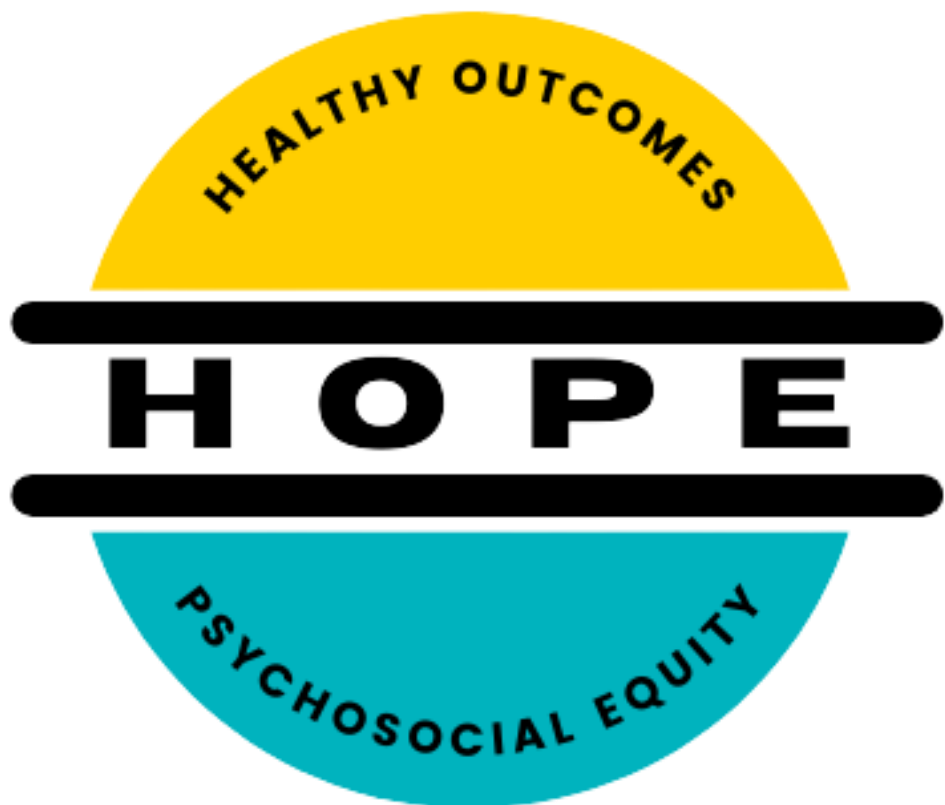


# Emotion Skills Building to Promote Resilience in People with Down Syndrome

Ruth Brown, PhD  
NDSC 2023





<https://hope.lab.vcu.edu/>



# Learning Objectives

1. How to empower your child by building a strong emotional vocabulary,
2. How to use emotion coaching to develop coping skills, and
3. Promote resilience through healthy mood-enhancing activities.

# Why We Need Emotion Skills



Because people with Down Syndrome aren't "always happy."

- Many are... many are not.
- Anxiety and obsessive/compulsive tendencies are common.
- Depression is common.
- Down Syndrome Regression is of increasing concern.

# Why We Need Emotion Skills

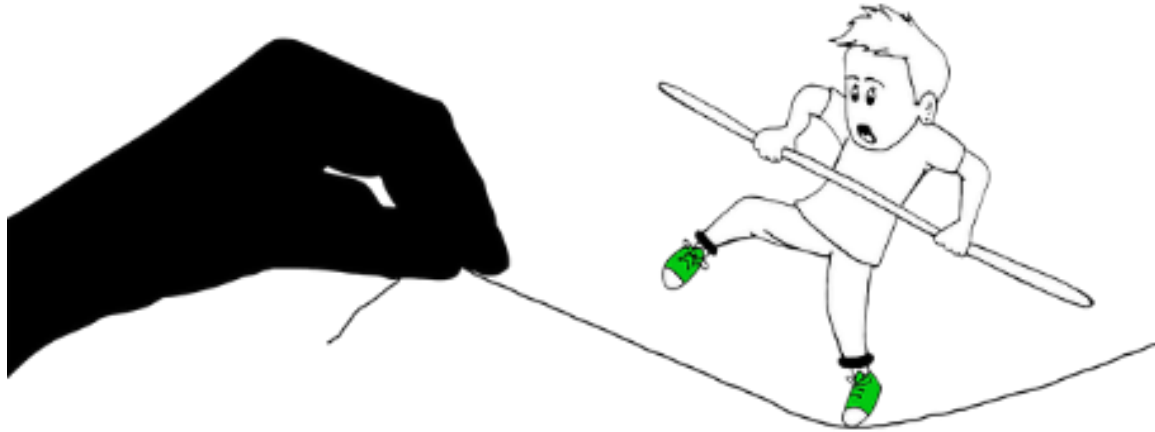


Better health.

Better relationships.

Better employment opportunities.

# When We Need Emotion Skills (the most)



## Negative or stressful event

- Loss of family member or loved one
- Divorce or family discord
- Job loss
- Injury
- Bullying

## Life transitions

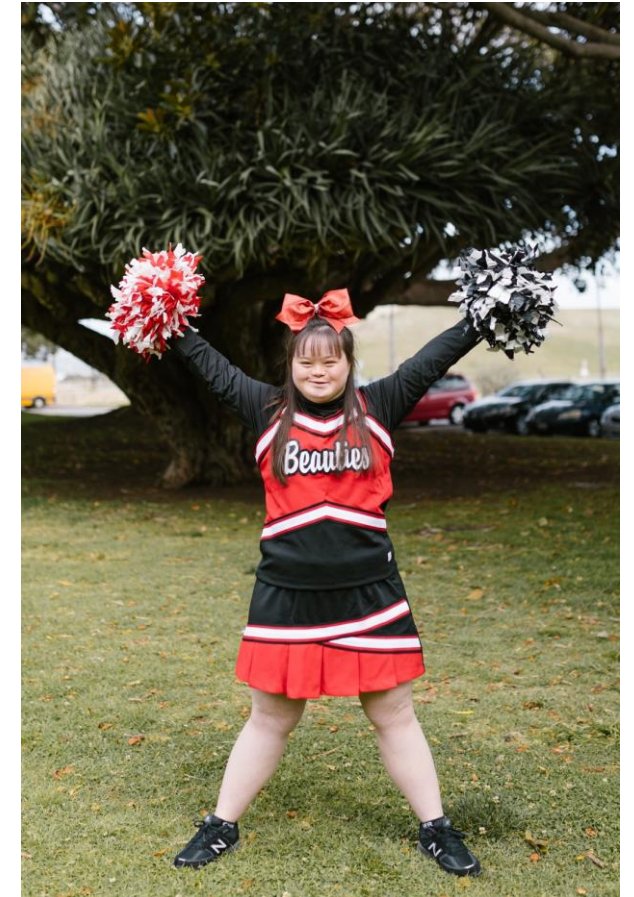
- School or occupational changes
- Transition to/from independent living
- Role transitions

# Emotion Skills Help Us Be Resilient

Recovering  
from stressful  
experiences.

Bouncing  
back.

Thriving in  
the face of  
adversity.



# What Do We Need to Be Resilient?



Our Basic Psychological  
Needs Met.



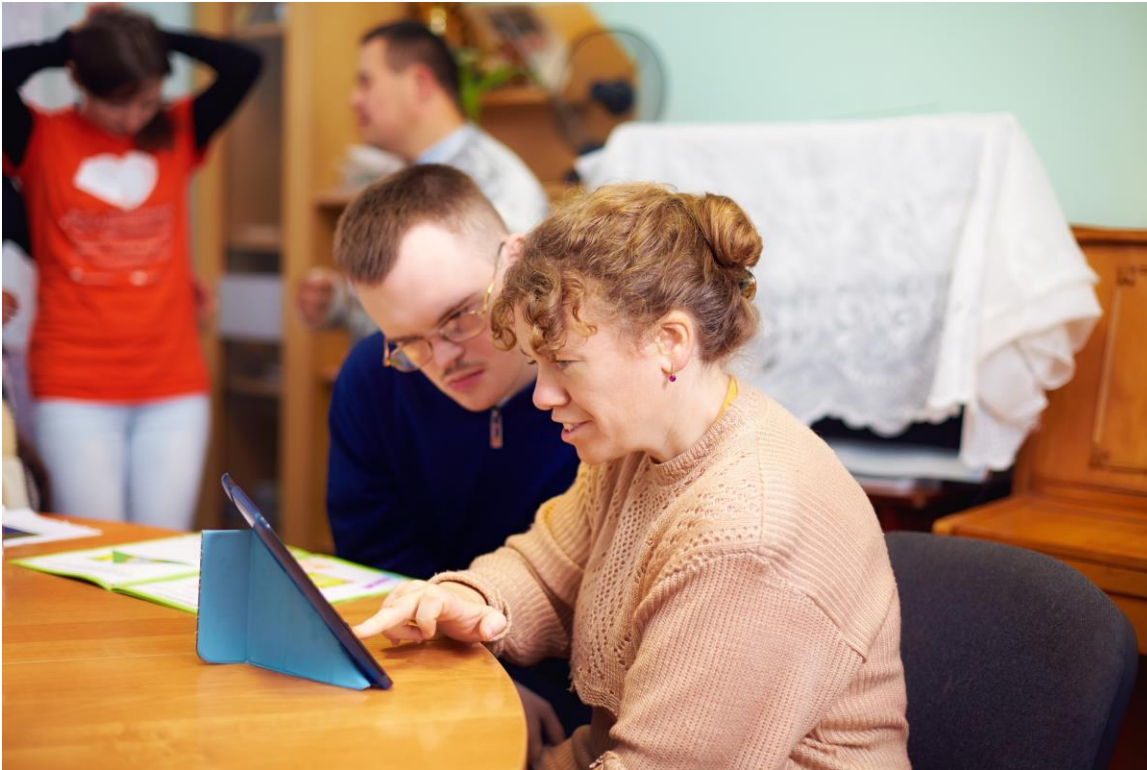
Understand Our Emotions.



Have the Tools to Respond  
to Our Emotions.



# Guess what? You can use these too!



Parenting/Caregiving can be hard!

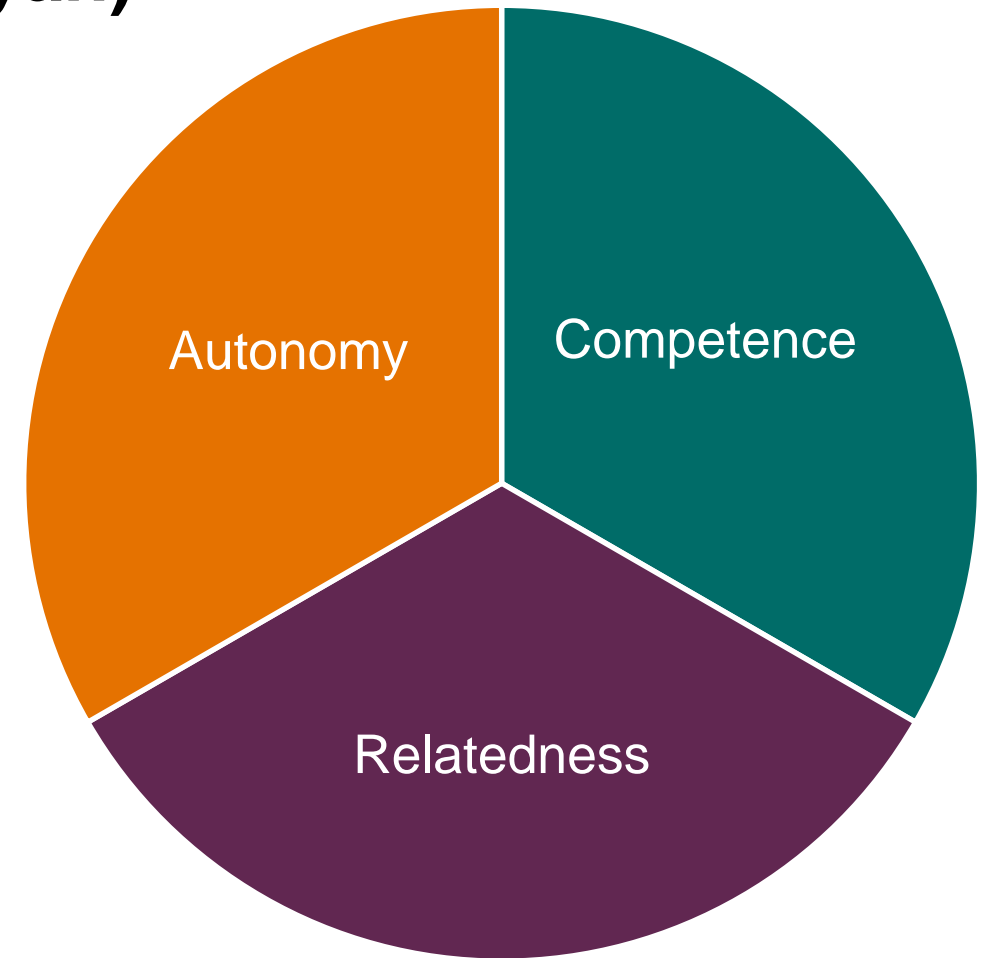
Studies show that parents who use or receive training in emotion regulation skills have less anxiety and depression.

You can do it! You are competent. You can learn.

# What We All Need to Be Happy and Resilient

## Basic Psychological Needs (Deci & Ryan)

- **Autonomy:** having control of one's life; meaningful options and choices; having control of self (emotions and behaviors).
- **Competence:** having control of the outcome; experiencing mastery.
- **Relatedness:** Interacting and connecting with others; experiencing caring relationships.



Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan)

# Social and Emotional Development Across the Lifespan



	Infancy/Early Childhood	Middle Childhood and Adolescence	Adulthood
Autonomy	Control over movements, toileting, what to eat, wear.	Regulation of emotions. Finding value in activities, schoolwork, etc. Goal setting.	Living a valued life. Choosing what to do and with whom.
Competence	Learning to toilet, walk, communicate.	Mastery over schoolwork, hobbies, sports, and friendships.	Has variety of valued things they can do well.
Relatedness	Warm and responsive attachment to parents.	Increasing importance of peer relationship.	Meaningful relationships with peers. Meaningful contributions to community.

# What Happens When These Needs Aren't Met

	<b>Need is Met</b>	<b>Need is “Frustrated”</b>
<b>Autonomy</b>	Integrity, Authenticity	Pressured, Pushed in Unwanted Direction, Fear, Anger
<b>Competence</b>	Capable, Uses and Develops Skills	Ineffectiveness, Failure, Helplessness, Fear, Anxiety, Worry
<b>Relatedness</b>	Warmth, Bonding, Care, Connected to Others	Alienation, Exclusion, Loneliness

This can give us clues into what is going on...

	<b>When we see...</b>	<b>They may need...</b>
<b>Autonomy</b>	Fear, Anger, Stubbornness	Control, Choice, Safety
<b>Competence</b>	Ineffectiveness, Failure, Helplessness, Fear, Anxiety, Worry	Encouragement, Skills, Practice
<b>Relatedness</b>	Alienation, Exclusion, Loneliness	Connection, Friendship, Acceptance

# What Can Caregivers Do?

## Address Basic Psychological Needs

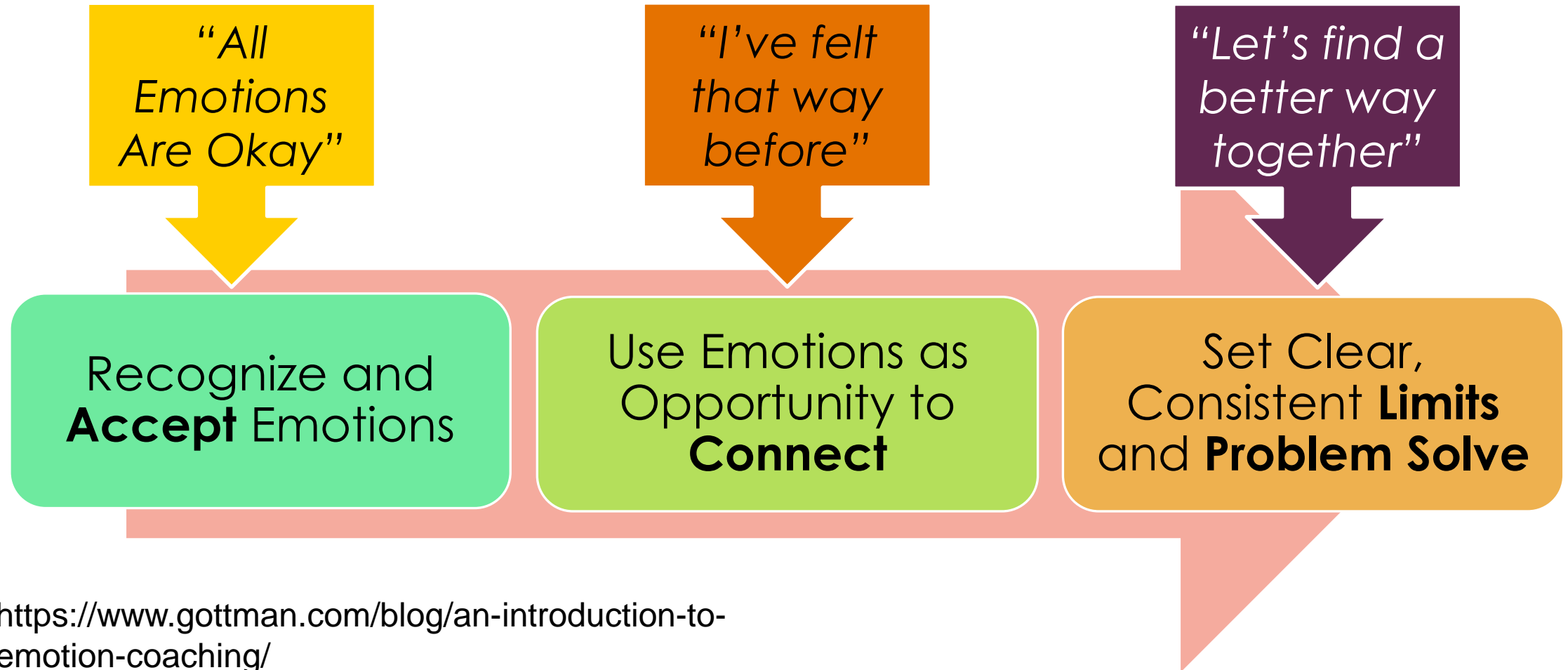
- **Autonomy:** Do they have opportunities to exercise meaningful choice?
- **Competence:** Do they have skills that are important to them? In what areas do they want?
- **Relatedness:** Do they have meaningful relationships with others?



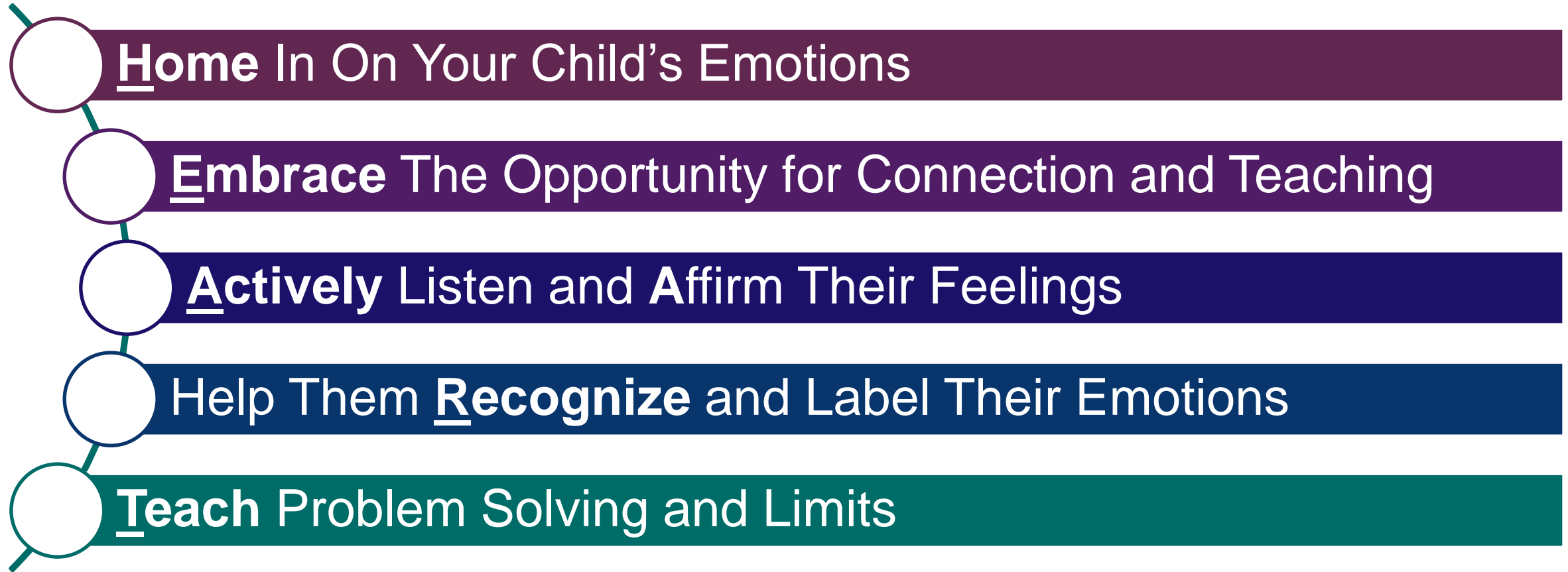
VCU

**HOPE**  
HEALTHY OUTCOMES. PSYCHOSOCIAL. EQUITY.

# Emotion Coaching

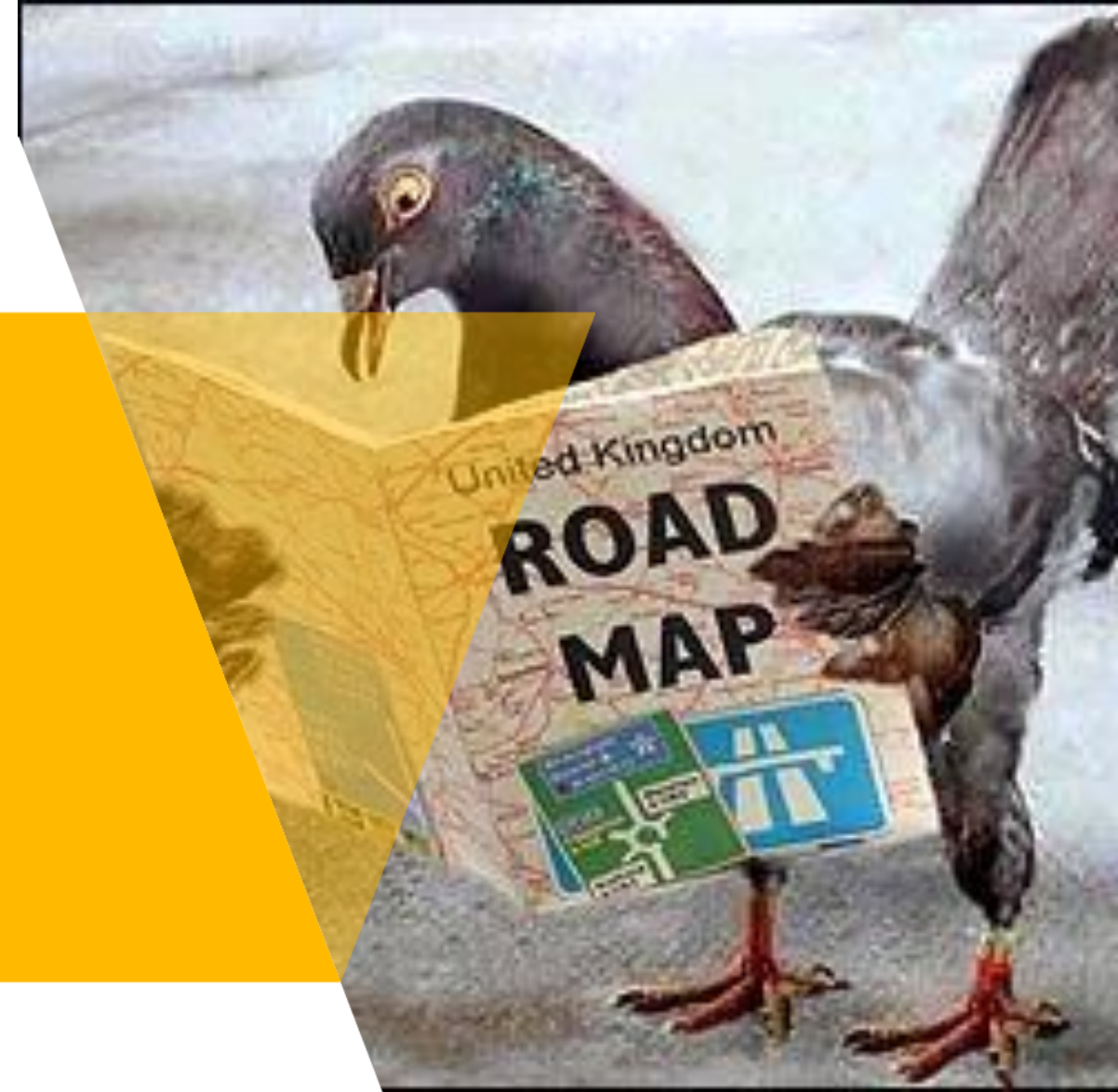


# 5 Steps to Emotion Coaching – HEART

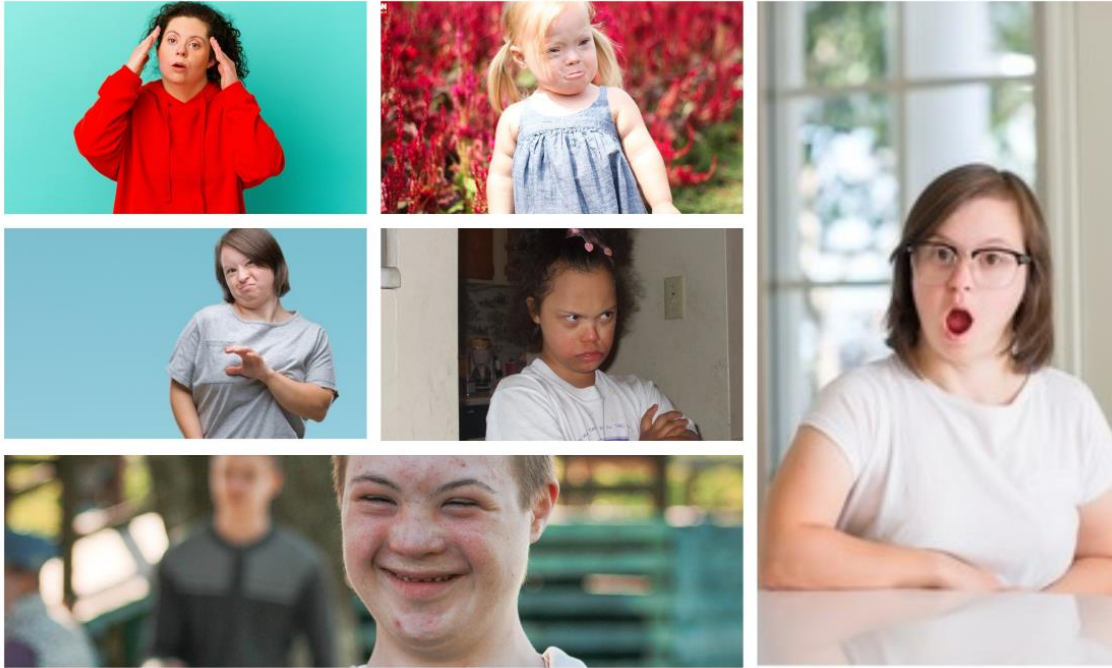
- 
- 1. Home In On Your Child's Emotions
  - 2. Embrace The Opportunity for Connection and Teaching
  - 3. Actively Listen and Affirm Their Feelings
  - 4. Help Them Recognize and Label Their Emotions
  - 5. Teach Problem Solving and Limits



# 1. Home In On Your Child's Emotions



# Homing In: Recognize and Accept Emotions



## All Emotions are Okay

- Emotions are not good or bad.
- We need emotions.
- We need to be comfortable with **our emotions.**
- We need to be comfortable with **our child's emotions.**

# Emotions Tell Us About Our Needs and Values

I need help

I need to feel safe

I need support

I value routine

I need to learn how to do this

I need a break

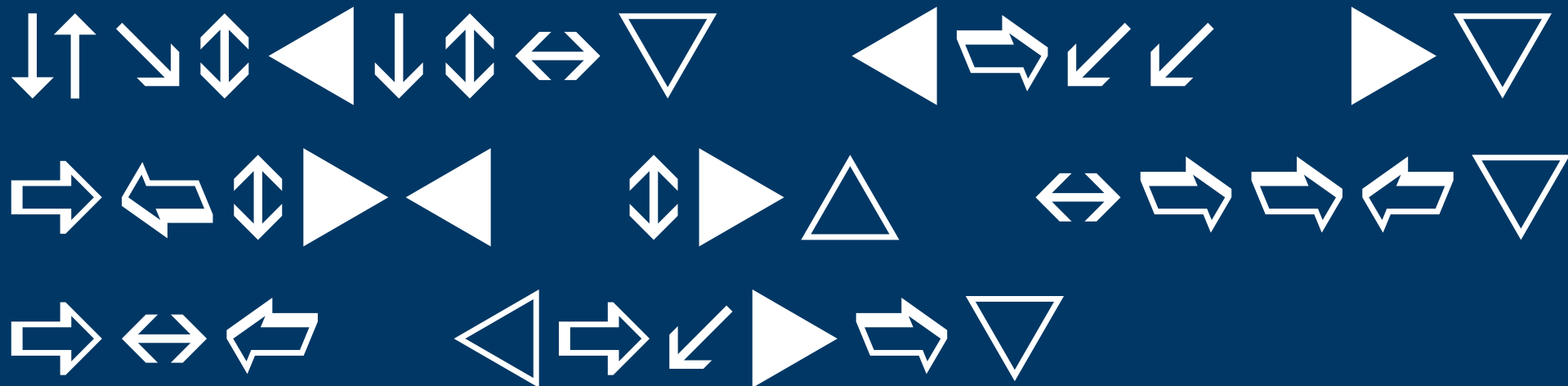
I need a choice

I value connection

I need a friend

I value choice

But... We have to learn to decode them



# What Are Emotions and Feelings?

## Event

What is happening:

- Environment
- Memories
- Discomfort/Pain

## Emotion

What is happening in our body:

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze

## Feeling

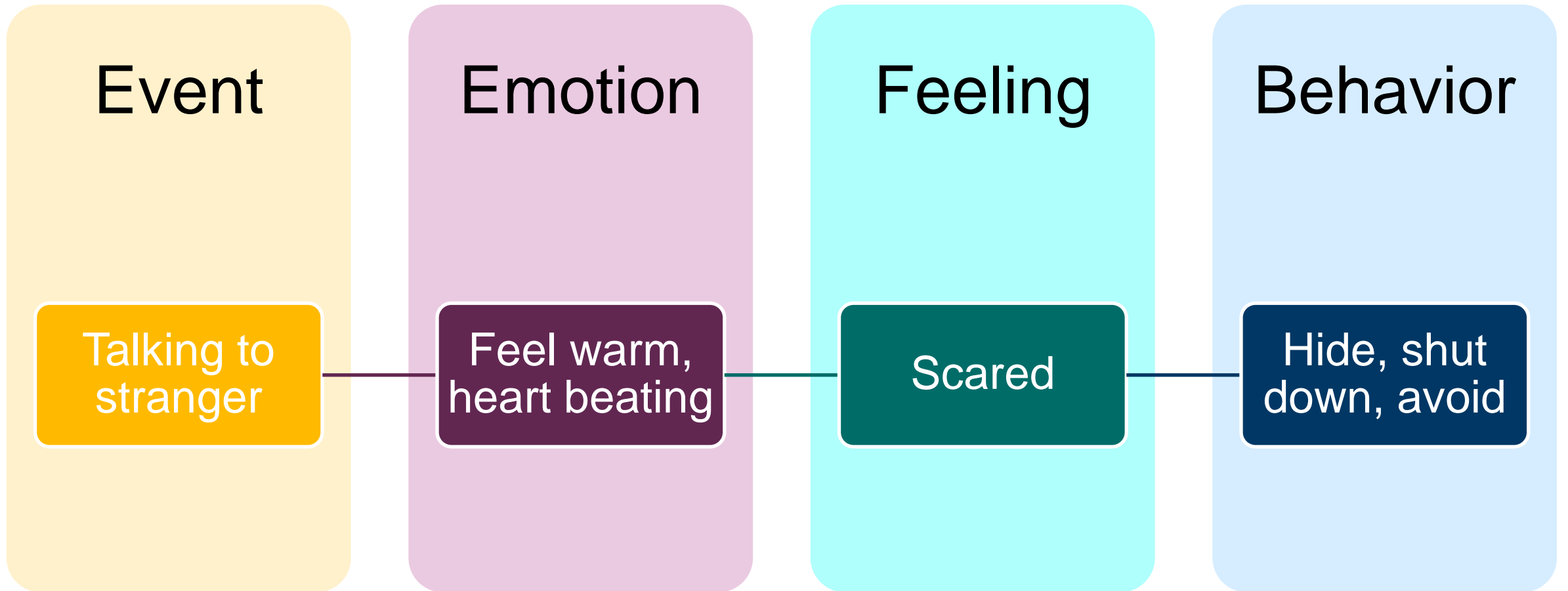
What we think about what is happening in our body.

## Behavior

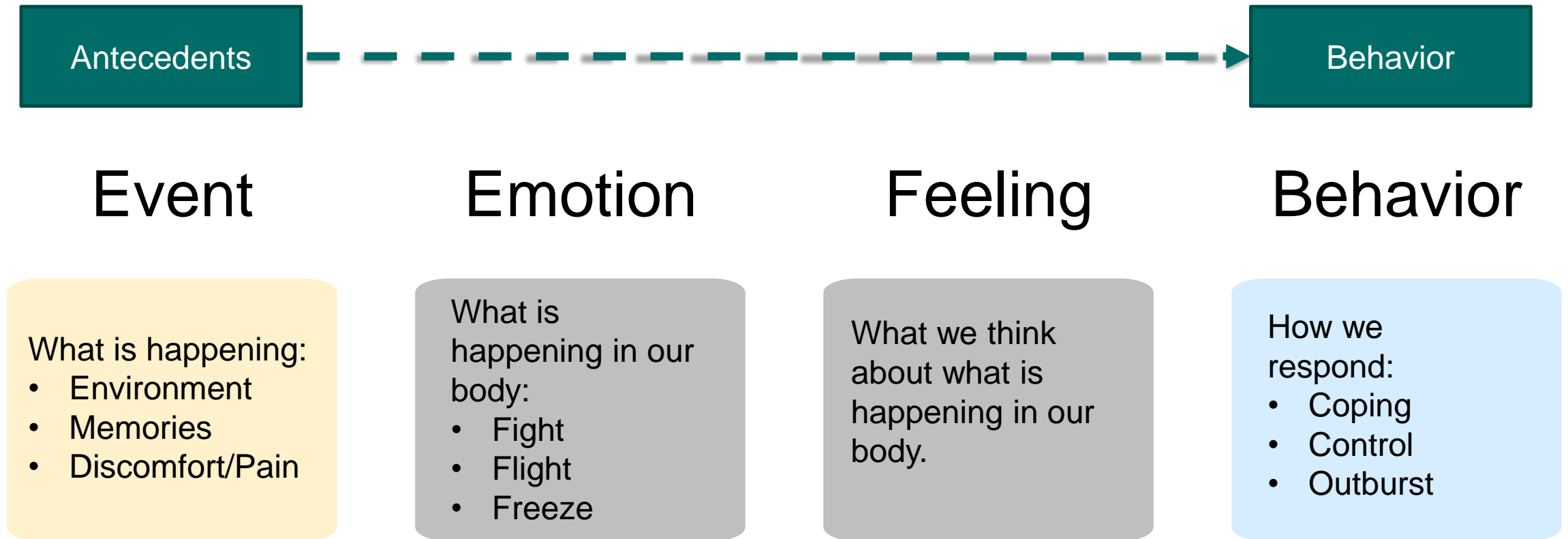
How we respond:

- Coping
- Control
- Outburst

# Emotions and Feelings



Many behavior-based approaches leave out the emotion processing that occurs between the event (antecedent) and behavior.



# What Happens When We Don't Learn Emotion Skills



WE ARE CONFUSED  
BY OUR EMOTIONS.



WE ARE AFRAID OF  
OUR EMOTIONS.



WE TRY TO CONTROL  
OR SUPPRESS OUR  
EMOTIONS.



WE REACT TO OUR  
EMOTIONS.

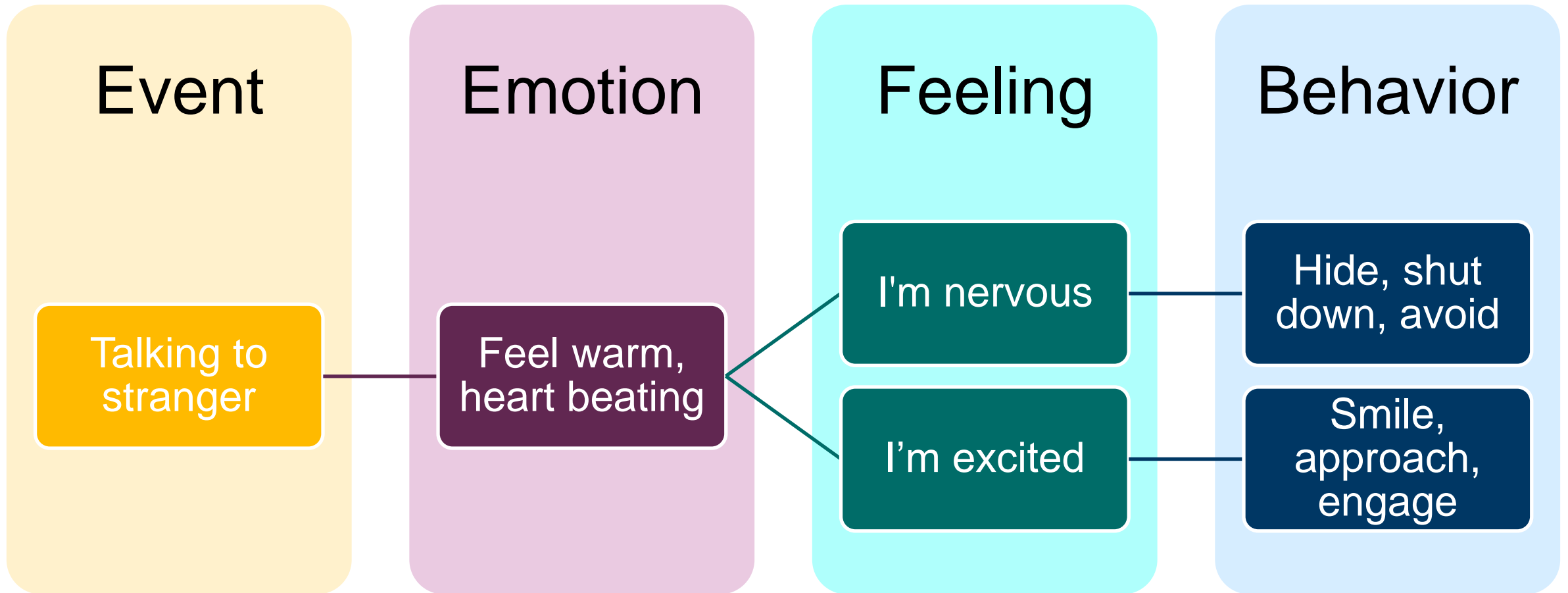


# Remember: All Behavior Is Communication



- Lack of ways to communicate feelings can lead to behavior problems.
- Help your child Identify and Express feelings in healthy way.

# Emotions and Feelings



# It Can Be Hard to Tell How Our Loved Ones are Feeling



Be Curious.

Be Empathic.

Assume misbehaviors are the result of an unmet need.

Instead of...	Consider...	Potential Interventions
Attention-seeking	Unmet need for connection.	Schedule more time for positive attention.
Escape from task demands	Unmet need for competence.	Build frustration coping skills. Increase support.

## 2. Embrace The Opportunity for Connection and Teaching



# Embracing Emotions

Pause and Breathe – What are YOU feeling?

Reframe – “They are struggling right now. This is an opportunity to be there for them and help them.”

# Embracing Emotions

”I feel that  
way  
sometimes,  
too.”

- **Empathize.** Even if the reaction seems out of proportion to the event.
  - When was the last time you had that emotion?
  - When was the last time you felt out of control or helpless?

### 3. Actively Listen and Affirm Their Feelings



# Active Listening And Affirming

“It is okay  
to feel  
sad, mad,  
excited,  
etc.”

- **Normalize** the emotion.
- **Accept** the emotion.



## 4. Help Them Recognize and Label Their Emotions



# Helping Them Build an Emotion Vocabulary

Helps them understand what's happening.

Provides a way to communicate and connect with others.

Normalizes having emotions and talking about emotions.

# Simple Strategies for Building an Emotion Vocabulary

- Talk about feelings often
  - Use books, TV, movies and talk about how the people in the stories feel and behave
  - Talk about your own emotions
  - Describe their behaviors and ask about emotions



# Emotion Games

Emotions coloring pages

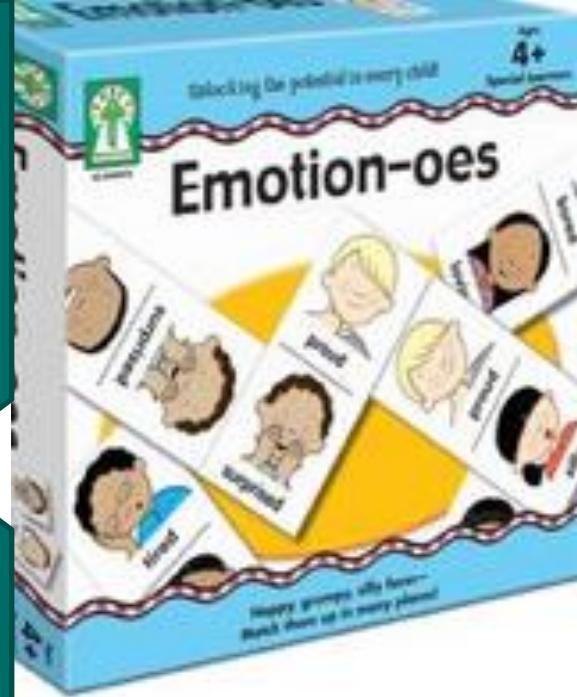
Emotion Charades

- Take turns acting out emotions on the cards and guessing the emotion

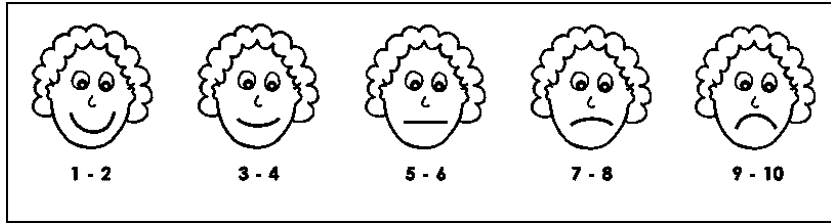
Ask follow-up questions:

- Tell me about a time you felt that way.
- What can you do when you feel that way?

Check teacher supply stores for other fun games



# Strategies for nonverbal communicators



Label emotions for them as much as possible.

- Expressive language  $\neq$  Receptive language

Use signs/gestures.

Use pictures.

Start with simple, basic emotions.

Many helpful free resources at:  
<https://do2learn.com/activities/SocialSkills/index.html>

## 5. Teach Problem Solving and Limits



# Teaching Problem Solving and Setting Limits

“It isn’t okay to  
”  
...

- Set clear consistent limits on behavior. All emotions are okay, but not all behaviors.

“Let’s find a  
better way.”

- Problem solve together. Ask for suggestions, offer options, allow choice.

“What else  
could you do?”

- Encourage them to come up with potential alternatives. Explore potential consequences.

# Fill Their Toolbox

## Relaxation skills

- Deep breathing
- Muscle relaxation
- Mindfulness
- Listening to calming music
- Positive affirmations

## Pleasant Activity Skills

- Spending time with friends
- Hobbies
- Sports
- Exercise
- Dancing!

## Problem Solving Skills

- Social skills
- Communication skills
- School/work skills



# Deep Breathing and Mindfulness Activities

## Blowing pinwheel

Slowly blow pinwheel until calm.



## Finger Breathing

Slowly breathe in and out on each finger count.



## Five Things

Look around the room and name five things you can see. Repeat if needed.



# Create a calming space for relaxation

Also called Positive Time Out, Cool Down Space, etc.  
Stock with favorite sensory items and prompts.

- Examples: pinwheels, bubbles, balloons, bubble wrap, stress balls, glitter jars.
- Visual supports: pictures of them using the items.  
Visual menu of activities.
- Pictures of happy memories, favorite places, etc.

Spend positive time practicing in the space together.

Invite, don't order, them to use the space when needed.  
(We want them to autonomously choose it).

Praise them for using the space.

“You used your space! You seem so much calmer now. I bet that feels good!”



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)

# Role Play Challenging Situations

1. Choose a time when everyone is calm.
2. Describe the situation and talk about how they feel during the situation.
3. Identify how they want to feel instead.
4. Brainstorm some coping tools they might use.
5. Choose from tools that are already practiced. Let them choose one or two to practice.
6. Role-play the situation using the coping tools. Consider role-reversals.
7. Talk about how it went.
8. Praise effort! Make it fun!



# Remember...



In order to **autonomously** choose healthy coping skills – they must feel **competent** in those skills.

# Practice, Practice, Practice

Coping skills, like all skills, require practice.

- Practice builds competence.

Practice in calm states.

- We can't initiate new skills when we are upset.

Add coping skills to their daily routine. Use the Groove!

- Morning dance party while they brush their teeth.
- Hobby time after chores.
- Deep breathing and muscle relaxation at bedtime.

# Encouragement and Affirmations Become Self-Talk

The more you use affirming and encouraging emotion coaching...

The more they internalize the phrases...

The more they learn to coach themselves through self-talk!

# Goal: Integrative Emotion Regulation

Healthy autonomous emotion regulation.

- Aware of their emotions.
- Accept emotions, whether good or bad.
- Choose how to respond to their emotions.

# Examples of Emotion Coaching in Action

**“I’m sorry that you are feeling.[Name emotion]. It’s okay to feel that way. I feel that way too sometimes.”**

- Accept and connect

**“What would help you feel better right now?”**

- Giving them the opportunity to share what they want helps to build autonomy and mastery

**“Would you like to know what helps me when I feel that way?”**

- Asking before telling encourages autonomy.



# More Emotion Coaching Resources

Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood, PBS (show, app, and music).

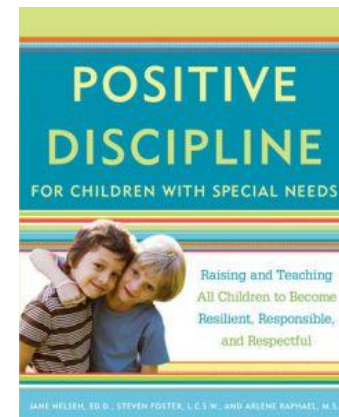
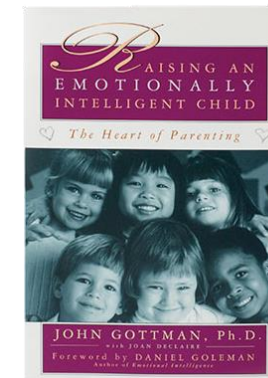
- <https://pbskids.org/apps/daniel-tigers-neighborhood--big-feelings.html>

The Heart of Parenting (John Gottman):

- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/an-introduction-to-emotion-coaching/>

Positive Discipline for Children with Special Needs (Jane Nelsen)

- <https://www.positivediscipline.com/products/positive-discipline-children-special-needs>



# You Don't Have to Be Perfect

- You won't always have the time, energy, emotional reserves to engage in emotion coaching.
- Give yourself and others grace.
- Try again next time.

# Help us learn more about Emotional Health of people with DS



## RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

People with Down syndrome and their parents are invited to participate in a research study on emotional and behavioral health.

PARTICIPATE ONLINE @  
[http://tiny.cc/LEAF\\_DS\\_VCU](http://tiny.cc/LEAF_DS_VCU)

### CONTACT

Principle Investigator:  
Ruth Brown  
804-464-7806  
[LEAFstudy@vcuhealth.org](mailto:LEAFstudy@vcuhealth.org)



### WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

- People with Down Syndrome, aged 12 - 45
- Parents with a child with Down Syndrome who is aged 12 - 45

#### Do parents and children both participate?

- Adults with Down syndrome who sign their own medical or legal documents are welcome to invite a parent or legal guardian to participate with them or they may choose to participate on their own.
- Children under the age of 18 or adults with Down syndrome who have a legal guardian must have a parent or legal guardian participate with them.
- If the child or adult with Down syndrome is unable to participate, a parent can participate alone.

### WHAT'S INVOLVED?

#### Online Surveys

-Parents and/or person with Down syndrome are asked to answer several standardized questionnaires about emotions and behaviors. Surveys take about 30 minutes to 1 hour.

#### Emotional Health Interview

-An online interview with the parent and/or person with Down syndrome about symptoms like anxiety or depression. The interview takes approximately 1 hour to complete.

#### DNA Cheek Swab

-The person with Down syndrome will be asked for a DNA sample using a painless cheek swab sent through the mail.

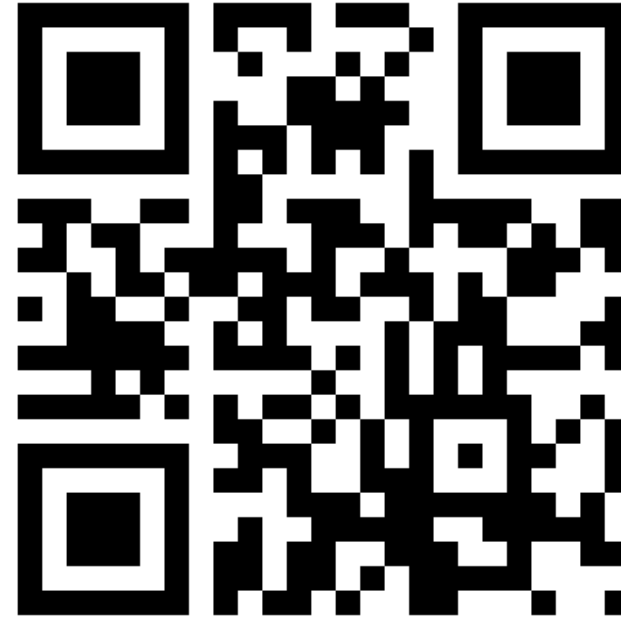
#### Compensation

-Children and adults with Down syndrome may receive \$15 and parents may receive \$10 for participation.

### PARTICIPATE ONLINE

-Participate from the comfort of your own home! The online surveys are self-paced and can be completed any time, and we will schedule the online emotional health interview at a time convenient for you.

Participate Online at:  
[http://tiny.cc/LEAF\\_DS\\_VCU](http://tiny.cc/LEAF_DS_VCU)



<https://hope.lab.vcu.edu/research/leaf/>

This study is funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development under the title "Depression, Stress, and Down Syndrome: A Multimethod Approach to Assessment and is being conducted by Ruth Brown, PhD, Virginia Commonwealth University, 800 E. Leigh St., Richmond, VA 23219

Version 6.7.2020



# Thank you!

National Down Syndrome Congress  
DS-CONNECT

NIH

Families and Self-Advocates

Dr. Colleen Jackson-Cook

Dr. Ananda Amstadter

Dr. George Capone

Dr. Nicole Baumer

HOPE Lab

Questions?

Ruth Brown, Ph.D.

Email: [ruth.brown@vcuhealth.org](mailto:ruth.brown@vcuhealth.org)

Copies of slides and handouts:



[http://tiny.cc/NDSC\\_emotions](http://tiny.cc/NDSC_emotions)

