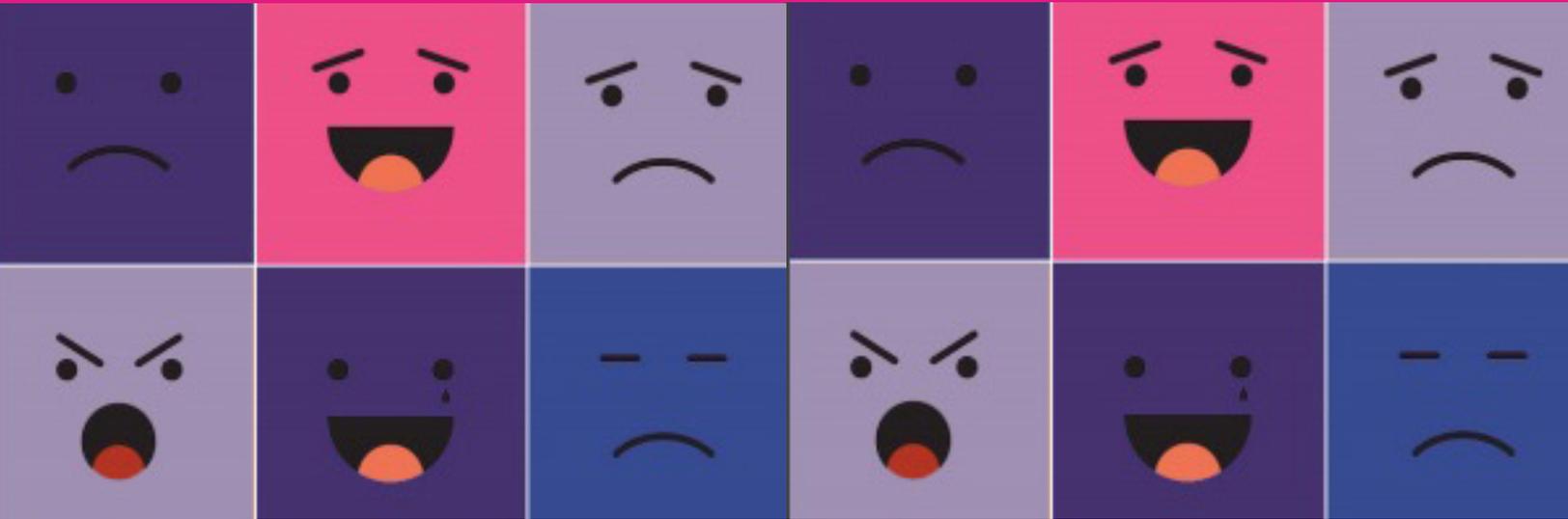


Understanding emotions & regulating behaviour

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Introduction

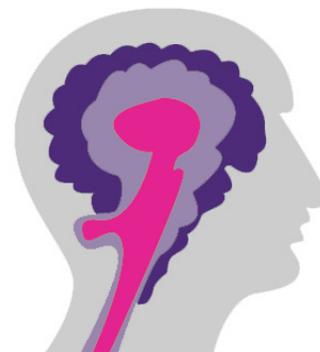
The brain relies on intricate wiring to process and transmit information. However for people who experience developmental difficulties, including those with autism, the brain works differently leading to communications between brain cells which can result in the person behaving in ways which are difficult for others and themselves to manage.

This help sheet describes a model for understanding how the brain operates and the way in which we use this knowledge to help people with developmental difficulties.

Parents and carers who look after children, young people and adults with developmental difficulties, including autism, may find the information helpful in understanding the person they look after, why they may behave in the ways in which they do and how they may help the person acquire a more adaptive way of doing so.

The areas of the brain

The brain consists of three major areas which go in a developmental sequence.



Firstly what is often referred to as the **reptilian brain** includes the brain stem and cerebellum and controls the most basic functions like the need to eat, drink, sleep and reproduce.

Next is the **emotional brain or limbic system** which controls basic emotions including the fight or flight response. It contains the thalamus, hypothalamus, amygdala, and hippocampus.

The **neocortex** is involved in higher functions such as thinking and language.

Brain development

During the normal course of development the higher parts of the brain gradually acquire increasing ability to regulate the lower parts of the brain. We learn to control our basic instincts and emotions through our experiences and acquiring thinking skills. We learn to use language to problem solve and this helps us to regulate our behaviour.

Where the normal course of development does not occur as a result of a developmental disability, neglect or abuse this learning may not take place easily, or may become disturbed. In this case the lower parts of the brain take charge more often. As a result we see what seems like extreme emotional reactions and behaviours in situations where this would not usually be expected. The higher brain is being easily hijacked by the lower parts.

These extreme emotional reactions occur due to poor problem solving skills. It is difficult to stop and think when the lower parts of the brain have taken over or the higher parts have not developed positively. The resulting behaviour can then contribute to low self-esteem as the person receives negative feedback about the way in which they have behaved. These feelings may worsen the situation as they trigger reactions from the lower parts of the brain.

Using reflective thinking

In order to help a developing child acquire problem solving skills and learn from their experiences we use 'Reflective Thinking'. The visual aids opposite support 'Reflective Thinking'.

We use all the 'Reflective Thinking' icons opposite as a tool to work through with the children and young people that we support. A familiar staff member will sit and ask questions after an event has happened such as 'Who', 'Where', 'When' and 'What Happened'. Additional visual aids are then used to assist in identifying emotions and the associated feelings, for example where in the body the feeling occurs and how the event made them feel - happy, excited, frightened or sad etc. The staff member will offer more or less support in the process depending on ability.

This exercise helps the child or young person to understand why something has gone right, or wrong, and a plan of how to manage the situation in the future is then made. By using 'Reflective Thinking' in situations which have gone wrong, new ways to solve problems can be learnt. And by using it in situations which have gone right self-esteem is boosted.

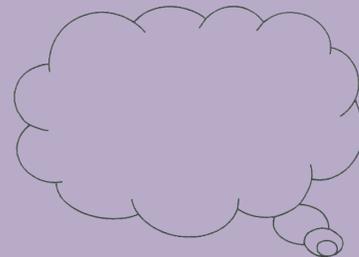
'Reflective Thinking' helps the higher brain develop the language and thinking strategies needed to manage the lower parts. It encourages a set of thinking skills which can, over time, be applied to a variety of situations and helps the person to acquire a more adaptive way of thinking.

Using visual aids and structured questions supports those who are less able or skilled at using language to think. The structure helps to support the development of a thinking strategy and vocabulary with which to think in the future, helping the development of problem solving skills.



Happy Calm Ready to learn Feeling good	Excited Silly/Wobbly Annoyed Frustrated	Frightened Angry Upset Hurt	Sad Sick/ Poorly Tired Bored
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