

# Addressing the Impact of Language, Biases, and Labels on Youth

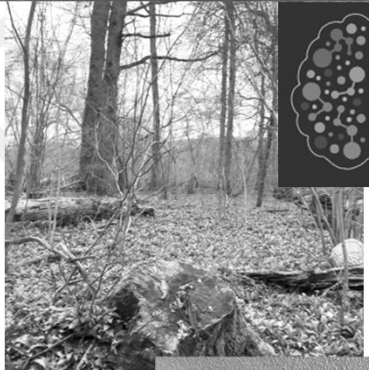


Anette Birgersson, [anette.Birgersson@mchs.se](mailto:anette.Birgersson@mchs.se)  
Christin Santiago, [christin.santiago99@gmail.com](mailto:christin.santiago99@gmail.com)

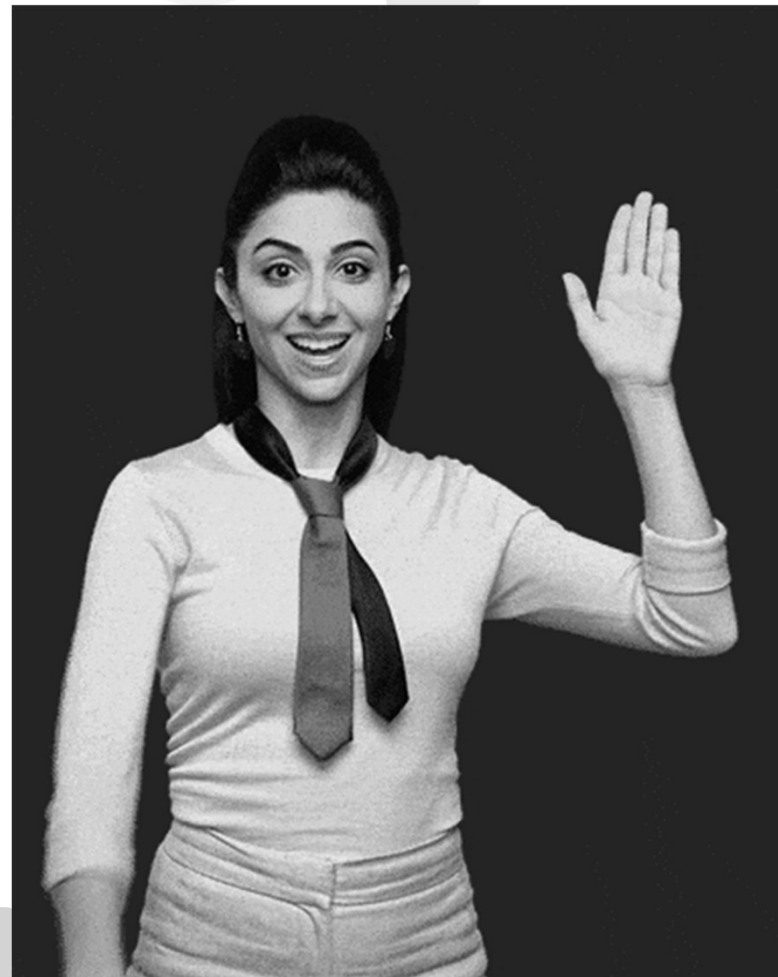
LinkedIn: Anette Birgersson  
Christin Santiago  
Facebook: Total team training



# This is us ...



# Activity



# Why This Matters

– Words are not neutral



- Language shape's identity and self-perception
- Labels influence behavior and engagement
- Create stigma
- Biases affect decisions and interventions
- Risk: reinforcing vulnerability instead of reducing it

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTn6qRohJNQ>

# The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy



- Labels → Identity → Behavior
  - Problematic → Hopelessness
  - Risky → Exclusion
  - Offender → Fixed Identity
- Youth internalize how they are described
- Can reinforce risk, shame, and isolation

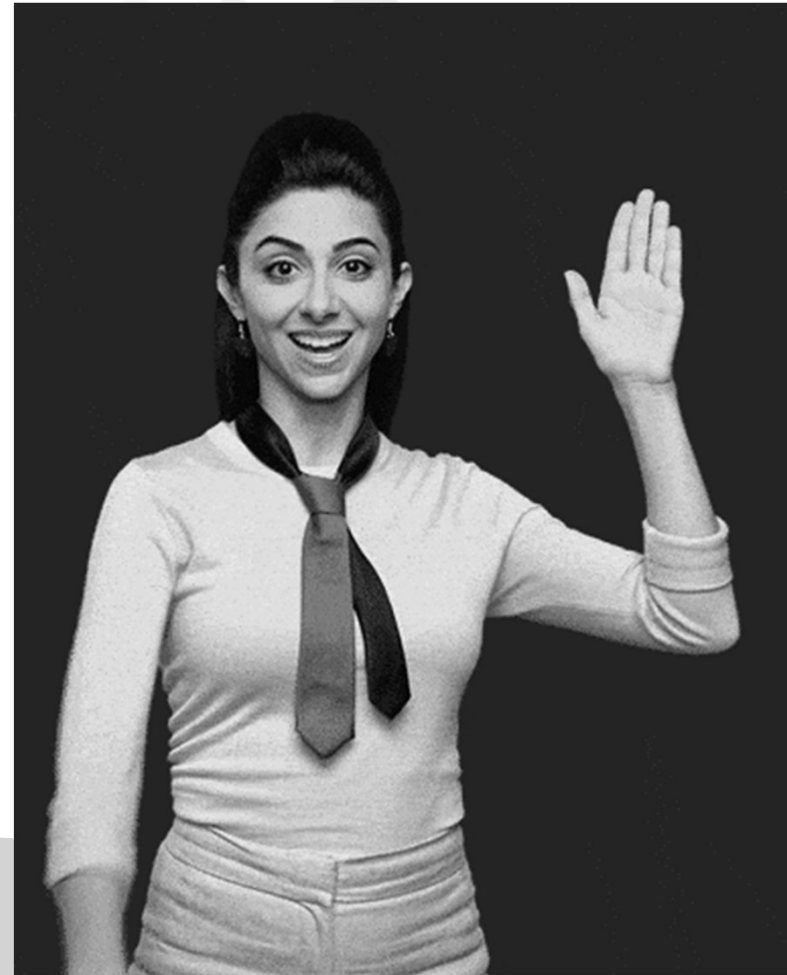
# Biases in Practice



- Implicit and explicit biases influence practice
- Affects assessment, expectations, interventions
- Bias can override curiosity

# Activity

What biases do you have?  
Do you regularly reflect over  
having biases and how they affect  
you?  
How do you keep them in check?  
Is this something you talk to  
someone about?



# Behavior as Communication

- Problematic behavior reflects unmet needs
- Trauma, dysregulation, developmental gaps
- Context matters

(Simons et al., 2013)

# What's behind the behavior?



# Trauma Symptoms

---

## Thoughts

- Rumination
- Flashbacks
- Concentration difficulties
- Fear of being retraumatized
- Difficulties sleeping

## Emotions

- Anxiety and fear
- Tense, irritated and angry
- Depressed
- Shame, guilt, bitterness
- Sense of isolation

## Body

- Rapid heartbeat
- Pressure on chest
- Tense muscles
- Tiredness, feeling of no energy
- Body aches
- Hypersensitivity

## Behaviors

- Avoidance
- Difficulty relaxing
- Avoiding being alone
- Drug/alcohol use
- Mood swings
- Rituals

# Biological and Contextual Vulnerabilities

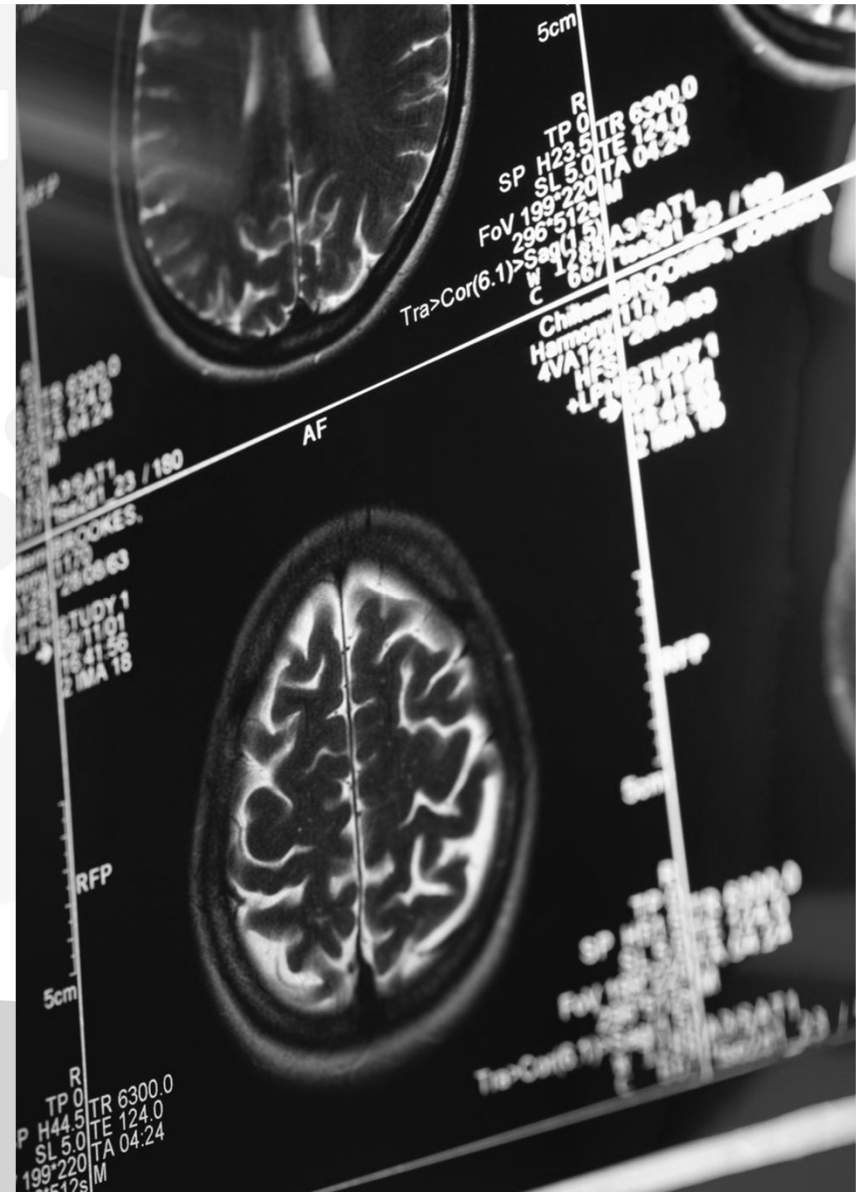
## Difficulties for Caregivers:

- Mental health issues, psychiatric and neuropsychiatric diagnoses
- Capacity for caregiving, social network
- Cultural differences between the family, child, and society
- Substance abuse, violence, aggression problems

## Vulnerabilities of the Child:

- Trauma
- Mental health issues, psychiatric and neuropsychiatric diagnoses
- Deficiencies in emotional regulation and relational skills
- Attention problems, concentration difficulties, learning difficulties

Trew & Russel, 2024; Vines et al., 2025



# NEEDS AND VULNERABILITIES AWARENESS



## **BASIC NEEDS**

Eat  
Drink  
Sleep Hygiene  
Connection



## **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF**

Exercise  
Hygiene  
Medications



## **HIGHER LEVEL CARE**

Recreation  
Self-Care  
Self-Value  
Diagnosis Awareness



## **RELATIONSHIPS**

Touch  
Connection/Attachment  
Communication  
Feeling Valued

# Trauma and the Brain

The brain develops from bottom to top, back to front, left to right

How Trauma Impacts Brain Development:

- Reduced integration of hemispheres'
- Thinner Corpus Callosum
- Info recall/storage, generalization
- Increased stress response
- Right hemisphere driving the train
  - Rhyme, rhythm, movement

## TRAUMA BRAIN PROCESSING

### The brain regularly scans for real or perceived threats

Information is filtered through the limbic system, where we instinctively react with "fight, flight, or freeze."

### When a threat is perceived

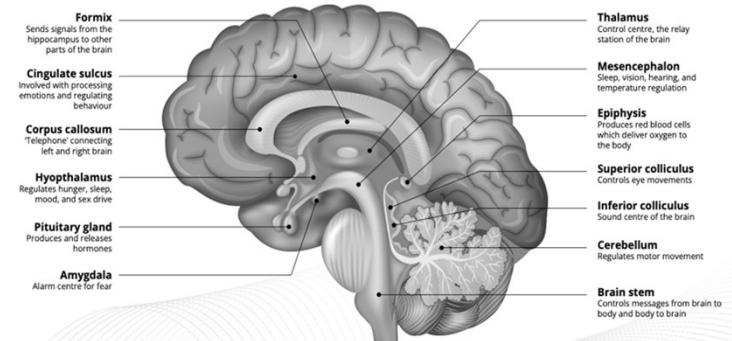
The amygdala alerts the hypothalamus to release stress hormones and alarms the sympathetic nervous system to fight, flight, or freeze.

### Reaction to the 'Fight, Flight, or Freeze Response

Fear, frustration and heartache influence the mind, resulting in unrelated decisions, choices, and reactions.

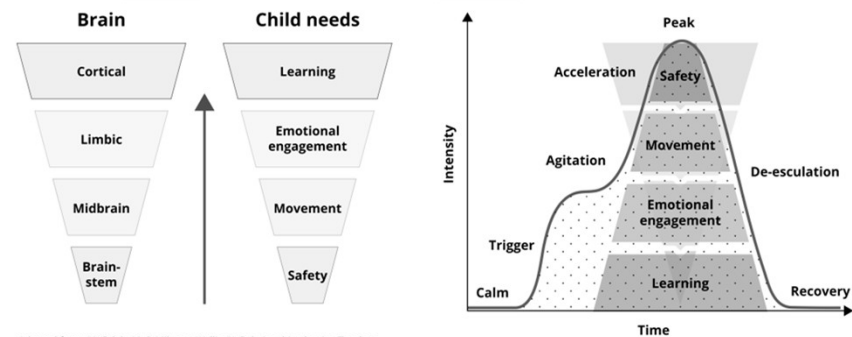
### Prior childhood trauma and adult trauma increases the brain-body response

The parasympathetic nervous system is automatically activated, resulting in numbing or dissociating.



# Needs and Vulnerabilities

- Understand emotional, relational, and contextual needs
- Identify skill deficits and trauma history
- Without this, interventions miss the target



Adapted from: McCaleb, M. & Mikaere-Wallis, N. Relationship-shaping: Teacher consistency and implications for brain development. *The First Years/Anga Tau Tuazahi: New Zealand Infant and Toddler Education*, 7 (2), 21-25

# Shift Focus

## - from problem behaviors to needs and skills



Understand and describe the problem behaviors



Replace deficit language with strength-based language



Language can open or close possibilities



Understand and describe the needs those problem behaviors meet



Vulnerabilities, Developmental level, Diagnosis, Trauma



Comfortable being Uncomfortable



Skills deficits and strengths

# So - Shift the Lens in Practice

From: What is wrong?

Start asking:

- What need is this behavior meeting?
- What skill is missing?
- What vulnerability is being expressed?
- How can I respond in a way that builds capacity?

Focus on vulnerabilities, needs, skills, and context

# WORK WITH SYMPTOMS TO REACH THE BEHAVIOR CHANGE



## WHAT DO WE SEE

- Avoidance
- Restlessness
- Impulsivity
- Anxiousness
- Aggressiveness



## TRAUMA

- Concentration
- Hypervigilance
- Control
- Depression
- Irritable/tense



## NEUROPSYCHIATRIC DISORDER

- Concentration
- Restlessness
- Difficulty with changes
- Difficulty understanding
- Irritable, Angry, scared



## AGE TYPICAL

- Depending on age
- Anxiousness
- Irritable
- Overly assertive
- Social anxiety

# Increasing Buy-In

- Understanding → Validation → Engagement → Change
- Youth engage when they feel understood
- Me problem versus you problems
- Psychoeducation
- Working with and against barriers
- Formal and informal
- Managing expectations
- 24/7 perspective



# The Importance of Empowerment

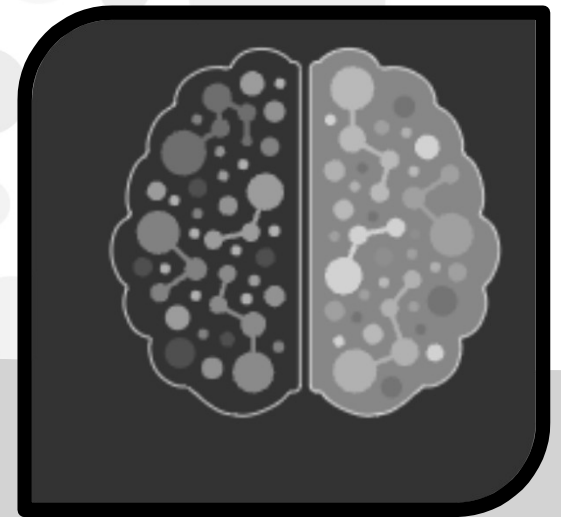
- Empowered people:
  - Are more resilient
  - Are more collaborative
  - Are better problem solvers
  - Are more confident
  - Have better academic achievement
  - Have a sense of agency
  - Feel worthy

# How do we Empower

- Choices
- Allow for self-advocacy
- Allow for risk taking and making mistakes
- Teach body safety
- Sharing feelings

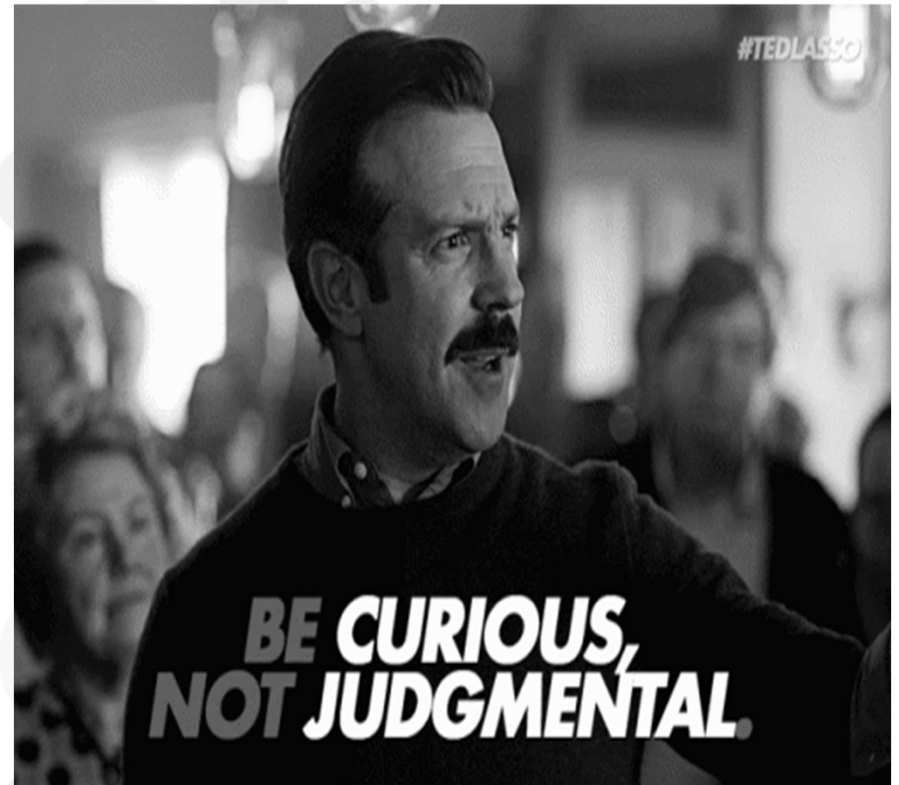
# Wizard Skills: Putting the Pieces Together

- Strengths focused
- Concrete/Practical
- Hemispheric Integration/brain rewire
- Confidence and Competence
- Choice
- Problem solving/flexible thinking
- Safe Failure
- Adapted DBT Skills
  - Relationship Skills
  - Emotional Regulation
  - Mindfulness



**So, what do we  
do?**

**We get curious!**



# Key Takeaways

- Language shapes identity
- Labels can harm or help
- Behaviour reflects needs
- Validation and empowerment drive change

# Empowerment through Understanding

– The Impact of Language, Biases and Labels on Vulnerable Youth



Contact Info: [Anette@abirgersson.se](mailto:Anette@abirgersson.se)

[Christin.santiago99@gmail.com](mailto:Christin.santiago99@gmail.com)

[www.wizardskills.org](http://www.wizardskills.org)

LinkedIn: Anette Birgersson

Christin Santiago

Facebook:

Leg. Psykoterapeut Anette Birgersson

Total Team Training

Instagram: [the\\_wizardskills1](https://www.instagram.com/the_wizardskills1)

