



# The Adult System Is the Intervention

Leadership, Regulation & Capacity-  
Building in Early Childhood

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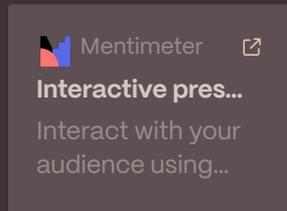
You cannot  
regulate children  
inside a  
dysregulated  
adult system.

INTERACTIVE

# Word Cloud

What word comes to mind when you hear that statement?

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*Scan to respond*



Leadership  
regulation sets  
the ceiling for  
every classroom.



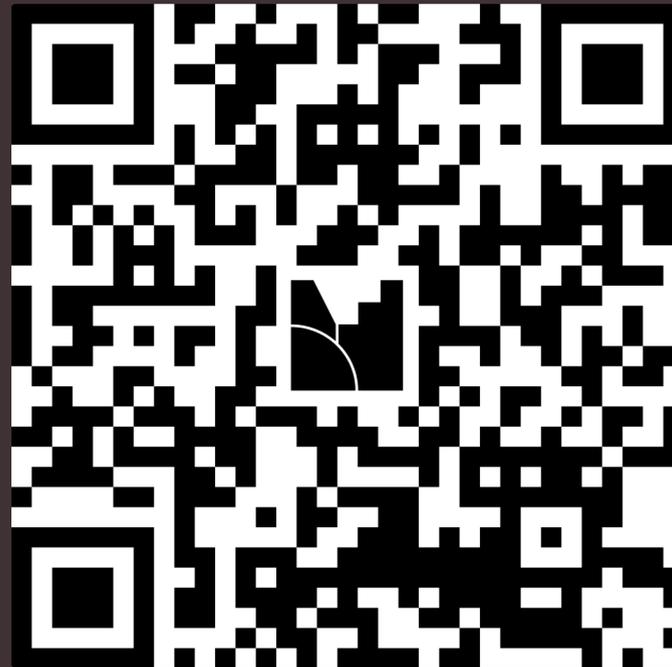


LIVE POLL

# A Question Worth Sitting With

Do behaviors feel more intense in your program than they did five years ago?

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*Scan to respond*

# Why It Feels Bigger

The intensity you're experiencing isn't imagined. It's the convergence of three systemic pressures reshaping early childhood.

## Post-Pandemic Dysregulation

Children lost critical developmental windows for co-regulation, social learning, and secure attachment during isolation.

## Workforce Destabilization

Chronic understaffing, constant turnover, and emotional exhaustion have eroded the consistency children need most.

## Stress Without Structure

Adult stress is climbing — but the systems to support adult regulation were never built in the first place.





THE EVIDENCE

# Research Snapshot

**46% of ECE teachers report high emotional exhaustion**

Yale Child Study Center, 2022

**Expulsion rates in preschool are 3.4× higher than K-12**

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights

**Teacher stress directly predicts child cortisol levels**

Hatfield et al., Early Childhood Research Quarterly



Behaviors aren't bigger  
because children are  
worse.

Behaviors are bigger  
because *stress is bigger.*

THE SCIENCE

# The Polyvagal Ladder

Every adult in your building lives somewhere on this ladder — and so does every child they serve.

## ● Ventral Vagal — Safe & Connected

Present, regulated, relational.  
This is where teaching happens.

## ● Sympathetic — Fight or Flight

Reactive, tense, scanning for threat. Control replaces connection.

## ● Dorsal Vagal — Shutdown

Numb, withdrawn, checked out. Survival mode. No capacity to co-regulate.





LIVE POLL

# Nervous System Color Check

Where do most of your teachers live by 3 PM?

 **Green**

Safe & Connected

 **Amber**

Fight or Flight

 **Blue**

Shutdown



 Mentimeter 

**Interactive present...**

Interact with your audience using real...

*Scan to respond*

EMOTIONAL CONTAGION

# Leadership Mood Is Infrastructure

Research shows that a leader's emotional state ripples outward — through directors, through teachers, and into every classroom. Your regulation isn't personal. It's organizational.



Your nervous  
system enters the  
room before your  
words do.





# The Burnout Crisis by the Numbers

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76%

**Burned Out**  
of employees  
experience burnout  
at least sometimes  
(Gallup)

2.6×

**More Likely to  
Leave**  
Burned-out  
employees are 2.6×  
more likely to  
actively seek a  
different job

\$4.6K

**Cost Per  
Turnover**  
Average replacement  
cost for one ECE  
teacher position



Burnout is rarely a  
resilience problem.  
It is almost always a  
*structure* problem.

Protection mode  
cannot build  
culture.





EXECUTIVE STORY

# When Behavior Was Quietly Running Our Organization

PERSONAL

# Why This Work Became Personal

*Abbie*

Autism

Brilliant. Wired differently. Changed how I see behavior.

*Allie*

ADHD

Brilliant. Wired differently. Changed how I see behavior.

*Both taught me how behavior really works.*



THE PATTERN

# The Escalation Flow

In most programs, behavior follows the same invisible current — always rising, never resolved at the source.

1

**Teacher**

Overwhelmed, isolated, reacting alone

2

**Director**

Absorbing crisis after crisis, no protocol

3

**Leadership**

Blindsided, firefighting, no systemic lens

4

**Crisis**

Expulsion, turnover, reputational damage



If behavior is affecting  
*retention*, it belongs at  
the executive table.

# Who Belongs at the Table

Behavior strategy cannot live in one office. It requires voices from across the system.

1

## Executive Leadership

Sets the tone, allocates resources, and holds the systemic vision for adult capacity.

2

## Site Directors

Translates culture architecture into daily rhythm, coaching, and classroom support.

3

## Lead Teachers

Brings the ground-level truth — what's working, what's breaking, and what's missing.



You cannot scale  
instability.



THE FRAMEWORK

# 4 Pillars of the Adult System

## Nervous System Leadership

Regulate yourself first

## Culture Infrastructure

Build what you expect

## Accountability Architecture

Clarity is kindness

## Capacity Loops

Grow through rhythm





PILLAR 1

# Nervous System Leadership

The most powerful intervention in your building is a regulated adult. It starts with you.

Take one deep breath.  
That is leadership.



PILLAR 2

# Culture Infrastructure

Culture isn't the feeling in the room. It's the architecture underneath it — the written systems, shared language, and predictable pathways that hold people steady when things get hard.

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## Escalation Pathways

Clear, written, and practiced — not improvised in crisis

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## Shared Language

A common vocabulary for behavior, regulation, and support across every room

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## Predictable Rhythms

Routines, check-ins, and rituals that create safety before stress arrives





LIVE POLL

# Escalation Reality Check

Are your escalation pathways:

**Written**

Documented, shared, and practiced

**Informal**

Understood but unwritten

**Tribal Knowledge**

Lives in one person's head



Mentimeter  
**Interactive presenta...**  
Interact with your audience using real-tim...

*Scan to respond*

PILLAR 3

# Accountability Architecture

Accountability isn't punishment. It's the structure that tells people exactly what's expected — and exactly what support looks like when they struggle.





Kindness without  
clarity creates  
resentment.

PILLAR 4

# Capacity Loops

One training won't change a system. Capacity is built through repeatable rhythms that keep adults growing — not just surviving.

## Observe

See what's happening without judgment

## Reset

Return to regulation and begin again



## Coach

Name what you see and offer a path forward

## Practice

Create space to try, fail, and try again





Training is an event.  
Capacity is a system.

How many hours a week do you spend  
managing behaviors



*Scan to respond*



BEHAVIOR INFRASTRUCTURE

# Behavior Is Leadership Architecture

# When the Adult System Is Designed

Behavior strategy stops being reactive crisis management and starts producing measurable, sustainable outcomes.

## **Fewer escalations reaching leadership**

Teachers have the tools and pathways to respond before crisis

## **Lower teacher turnover**

Adults who feel supported and clear on expectations stay longer

## **Reduced expulsion and suspension**

Children are met with regulation, not removal

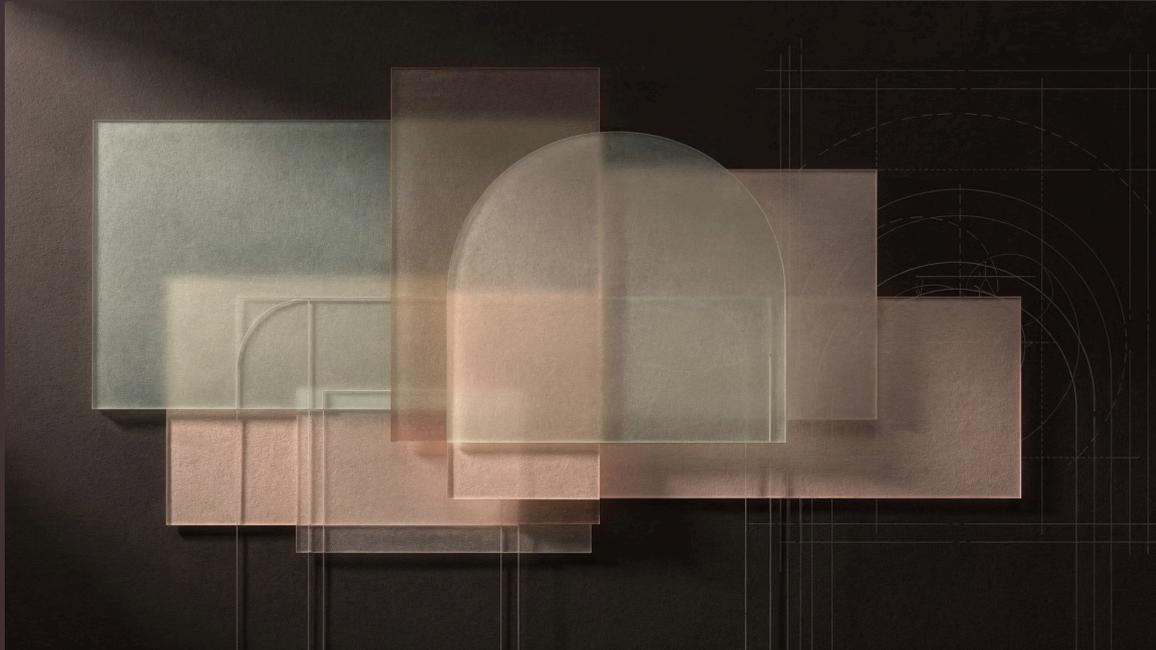
## **Stronger family trust and enrollment stability**

Consistency and calm are visible — families feel it



THE INTEGRATION

# Integrated Adult-Behavior Design



When adult systems and behavior systems are designed together — not bolted on separately — the entire organization shifts.

## Regulation becomes culture

Not a personal trait, but an organizational practice

## Behavior becomes data

Not a crisis, but a signal the system can read

## Leadership becomes design

Not firefighting, but architecture

TOOL 1

# The 90-Second Leadership Reset

Neuroscience tells us a stress response lasts roughly 90 seconds — if we don't feed it with story. This micro-practice rewires your default.

01

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## Pause

Notice the activation in your body.  
Name it without narrating it.

03

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## Choose

Respond from regulation, not reaction. You now have access to your prefrontal cortex.

02

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## Breathe

One slow exhale — longer than your inhale. Signal safety to your nervous system.





Regulated leaders  
create regulated  
rooms.



## TOOL 2

# Diagnose Before You Discipline

Before responding to behavior, ask the diagnostic questions that reveal what's actually happening underneath.



### Is this a skill gap?

The child or adult doesn't yet have the capacity for what's being asked.



### Is this a stress response?

The nervous system has taken over. Discipline won't reach a dysregulated brain.



### Is this an environment failure?

The structure, routine, or adult support around this moment is missing or broken.

Diagnose before  
you discipline.





### TOOL 3

# The Meeting Reset

Transform your leadership meetings from reactive debriefs into proactive system-design sessions.

- **Open with a regulation check-in**

Where is your nervous system right now? Green, amber, or blue?

- **Review behavior data as system data**

What patterns are emerging — not in children, but in adult support gaps?

- **Close with one design decision**

What one structural change will we make this week?

THE CLOSE

# Design > Reaction

Every system you lead was either designed on purpose or built by accident. The invitation is to choose design.





Behavior is not a discipline  
problem.  
It is a design problem.  
And design is leadership.

WHAT'S NEXT

# If You're Ready to Redesign — Not Just React



## Executive Site Visits

On-site assessment and strategic design for your adult system architecture.



## Leadership Training

Regulation-first training designed for directors and executive teams.



## Montana Immersion

A transformative adult system retreat in the Montana mountains.



## Ongoing Consulting

Sustained partnership to build, refine, and hold your system accountable.

*Because architecture cannot be installed in one hour.*



## Download your FREE Leadership Bench Map

*Scan to connect*