

Hello Bristol!

Safe enough to learn. Strong enough to care.

The neuroscience of learning, the biology of stress. Caring for children, and caring for yourself.



Sharon Gray OBE · Wholehearted Learning



& my best friend



getting stuck in!

Before we begin...

Let's land here, together

4

Breathe in

Feet flat on the floor. Notice the chair holding you.

2

Pause

A soft, gentle hold. Nothing to do. Nowhere to be.

6

Breathe out

A longer out-breath tells your body: you are safe.

A little about me

Why I do this work

Children, young people, and the grown-ups who walk alongside them.



we built go-karts!



circles, not rows



dreaming big



getting messy



together we can



learning together

Before we begin

Today touches tender places. Please look after yourself, and each other.

Notice

Check in with your own internal state as we go

Step out

Take a break whenever you need one, no explanation needed

Be kind

There are no experts here. We find our way through together



Try it now · 1 minute

Where is your inner weather right now?

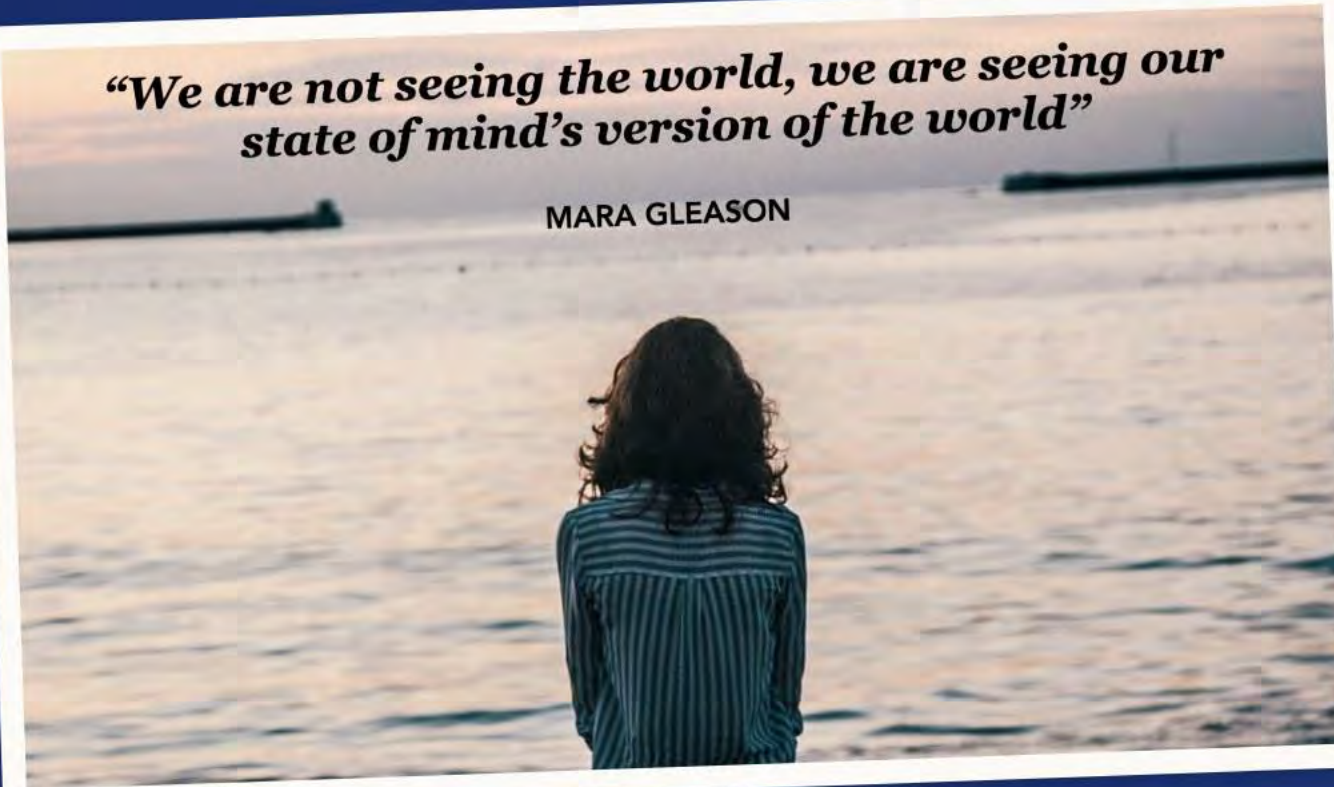
Silently pick a number from 1 to 10.

On three, show it on your fingers. Share only as much as you like.

No right answer. Just noticing.

***“We are not seeing the world, we are seeing our
state of mind’s version of the world”***

MARA GLEASON



Thinking · feeling · behaving

How we think

shapes how we feel

How we feel

shapes how we think

Both together

shape how we respond or react

Self-awareness is fundamental.



same ride... different experience

Watch · spot the difference

Two friends. One ride.

Watch each face closely. What is each of them experiencing?

[Play the clip on YouTube](#)

Our experience
comes from the
inside out 100%
of the time



Reflect

**When have you felt
excited about
something a friend
dreaded?**

What was going on inside each
of you?

*Now picture two children in the
same lesson.*

A small, black, rectangular projector sits on a stack of three books. A bright light emanates from the lens, and a beam of light projects the text "Our mind is like a projector" onto a blurred background. The text is in a white, cursive font. The entire scene is framed by a white border.

Our mind is like a projector

Our mind is like a projector

Old films

We replay past experiences onto new situations

What we look for

Focus on positives and we tend to find them

What we expect

Children read our belief in them, and in ourselves

Talk: what old film might be playing when you meet your most challenging child?

You carry the stories.

The disclosure at ten past three on a Friday.

The child who didn't come in today.

The phone call you replay on the drive home.

...and your body keeps the score.

The question for today...

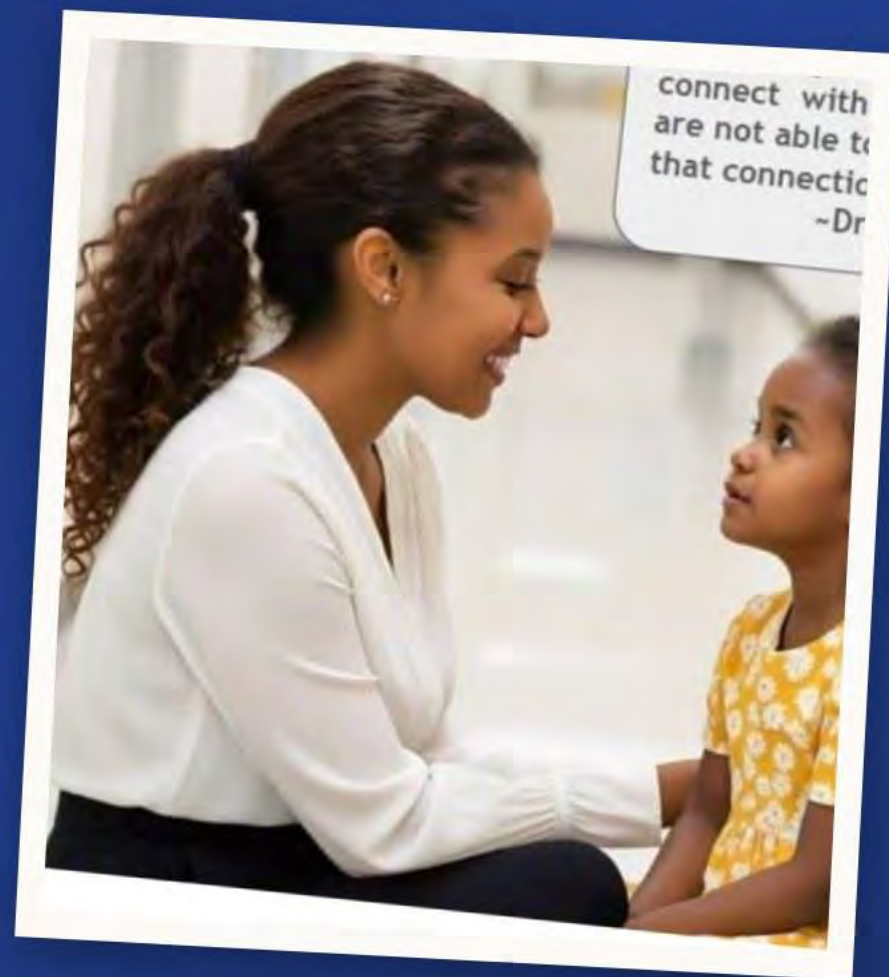
Who safeguards the safeguarder?

KCSIE 2026

Mental health concerns can become safeguarding concerns.

Your role

You need time and support to do it well. KCSIE says so.



**No child is born
switched off.**

Something switches them off.

And if we're honest... that something
could well be **us**.





Next...

The brain that builds itself

From the bottom up, through relationships

Built from the bottom up

Think · cortex

learn, plan, reflect, imagine

Feel · limbic

emotion, attachment, the alarm

Survive · brainstem

heart, breath, temperature, sleep

Regulate → Relate → Reason

We can only reach the learning brain **through** the lower brain. Calm the body first, connect second, then we can teach.



*never argue with the lizard
brain!*

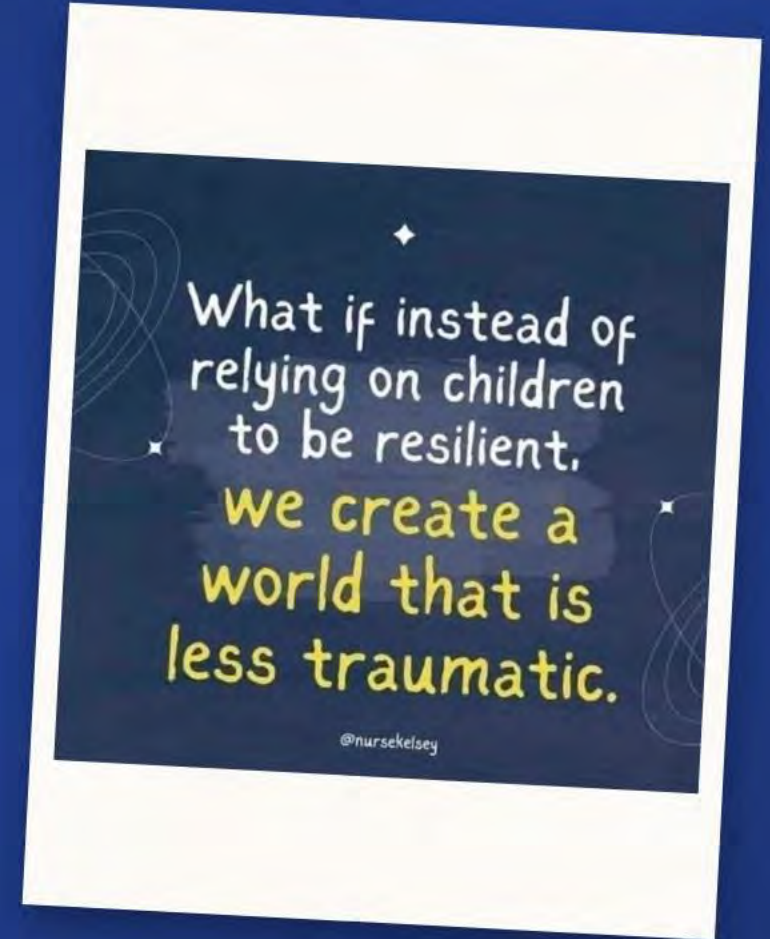
Neurodivergence · curious, not furious

Some nervous systems are working harder, all day.

Autistic children and ADHDers often have a more sensitive nervous system:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 A smaller window of tolerance | 2 Tipping faster into fight, flight or shutdown |
| 3 More time and support to return to calm | 4 A heightened stress response |

*The friction is in a world built for neurotypical brains.
So we reduce the barriers.*



Practical · 6 minutes · grab a mirror!

The Star and the Mirror

- 1** Prop up the mirror. Hide your drawing hand from direct view.
- 2** Looking only in the mirror, trace the path between the two star lines.
- 3** Your partner times you, with a running commentary: "Come on, it's easy." "Everyone else has finished."
- 4** Swap. This time, your partner only encourages.

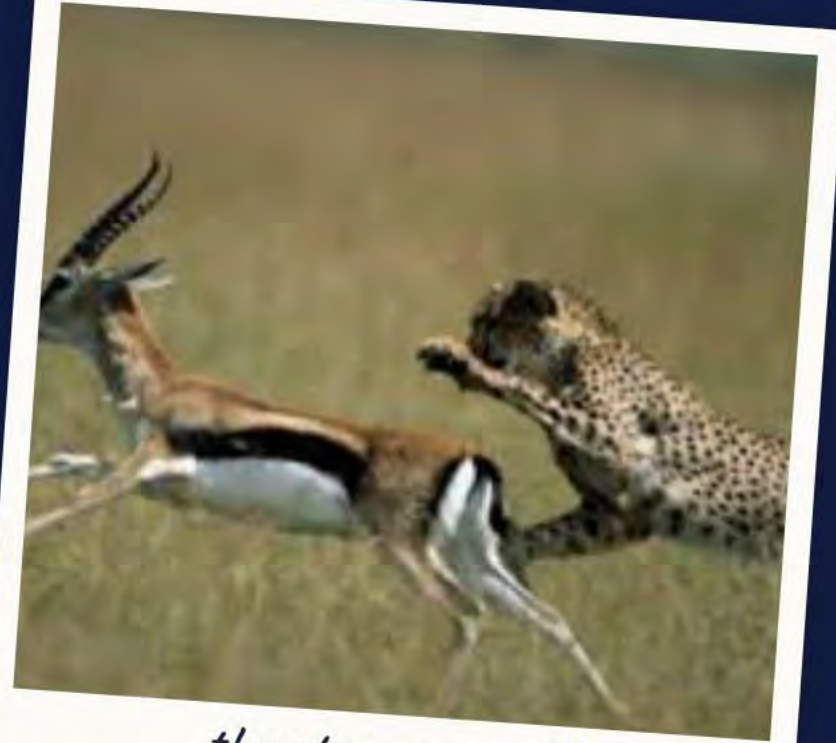
What did your body do? What made you want to give up?



Next...

The biology of stress

What happens in the body when the alarm sounds, and when it never switches off



the alarm goes off!

Try it now · 3 minutes

Uh oh... you've forgotten your passport!

Bags packed. You're in the check-in queue, and you reach into your bag...

Body: what is your body doing?

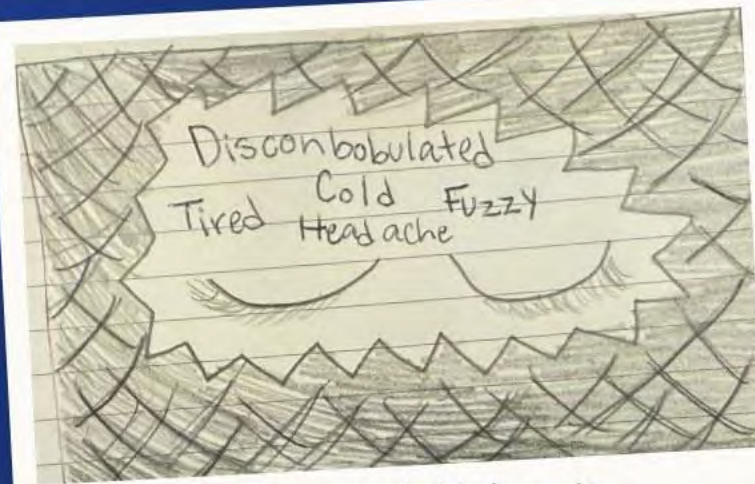
Feelings: what washes over you?

Behaviour: what would the queue see?

Now... how do you get yourself back?



the holiday of a lifetime...



how one child drew it

The window of tolerance

Too much · hyper-aroused

Fight, flight, shouting, running, panic

The window · regulated

Calm enough to think, connect, play and learn

Too little · hypo-aroused

Shut down, numb, far away, "can't be bothered"



Trauma narrows the window, for children and for the adults who carry their stories.

New from WHO Europe, October 2026

Adverse childhood experiences

68.9%

of young adults had at least one ACE

22.8%

had four or more

With four or more, **76%** needed mental health support last year, against 37% with none.

ACEs are not destiny.

Trusted adults in childhood were linked to better mental health, at every level of adversity.

Use ACEs to understand a child, never to score or label one.



Next... my favourite

Wired for connection

Relationships and safety are the foundation of learning



my step mum: co-regulation in
action!

Co-regulation comes first

A calm adult nervous system is the most powerful intervention we have.

Face

Soft eyes, warm, open expression

Voice

Low, slow, gentle and rhythmic

Body

Side-on, lower, unhurried

Words

Few. Name it to tame it.

Our own Still Face · with a colleague · 5 minutes

Relate, rupture, repair

In pairs. One of you talks about something that really matters: a person, a place, a child you will never forget.

60 SECONDS

Relate

Listen with everything you've got. Warm, attuned, present.

30 SECONDS

Rupture

On my signal: still face. No nod.
No smile. Nothing.

30 SECONDS

Repair

Come back. Reconnect, warmly.
Say sorry if you need to.

What does our face say to a child at the end of a long Friday?

Next... turning the lens, gently

The cost of caring

Everything we've said about children's brains is true of ours too.



Naming it is protective

What caring can cost us

Secondary traumatic stress

Trauma symptoms caught from others' stories. Can come on suddenly.

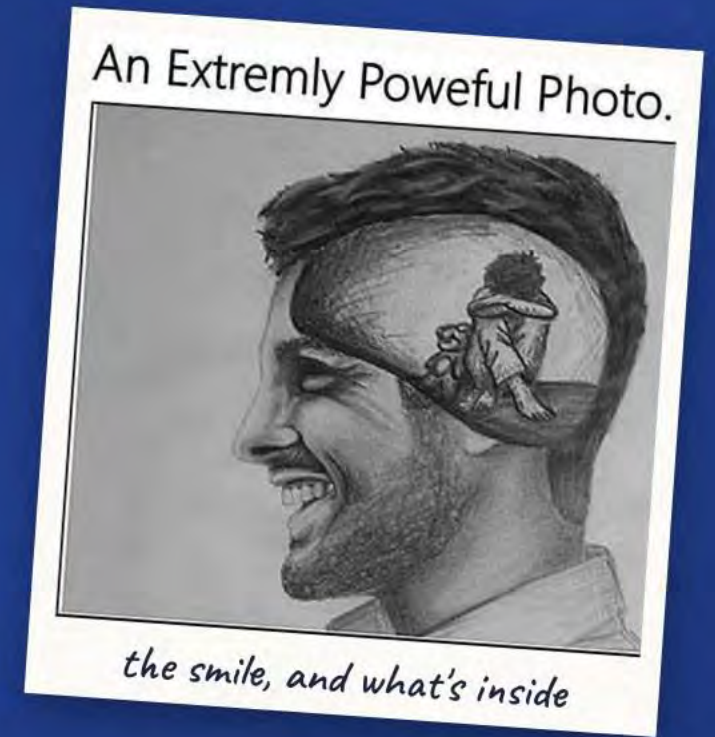
Vicarious trauma

Slower and deeper: a shift in how we see the world.

Compassion fatigue

Exhaustion that wears down our capacity to care (Figley).

And burnout? That comes from workload and systems. Many of us carry both.



Notice, don't share

Notice the signs in yourself

Body

Poor sleep, tension, always tired

Feelings

Numb, irritable, cynical, guilty

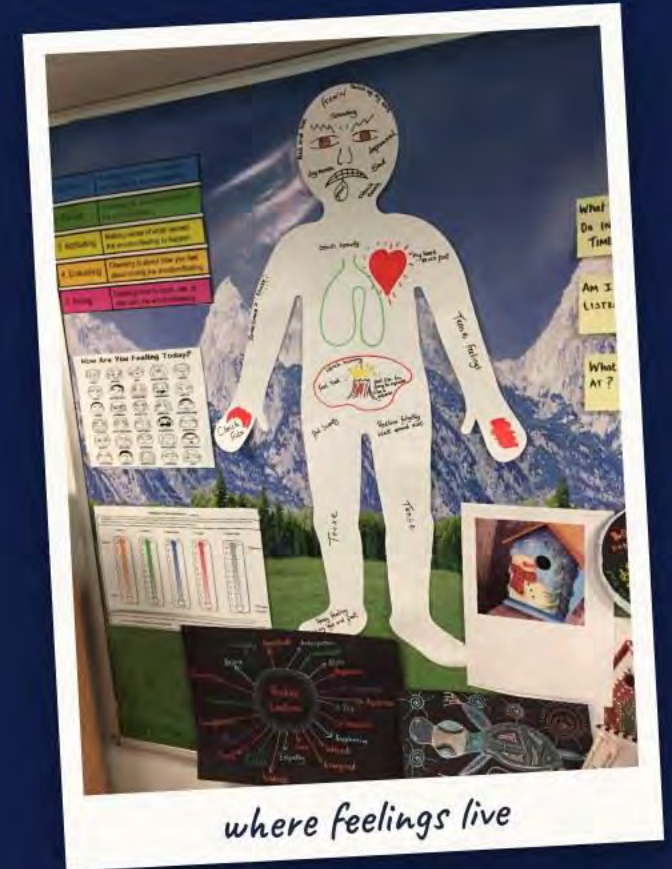
Mind

Intrusive images, can't switch off

Behaviour

Checking CPOMS at night, withdrawing

Your behaviour is communication too.





Looking after yourself is not a luxury.

It is a safeguarding act.

A scenic landscape featuring rolling green hills under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. A dirt path winds through the hills, bordered by a traditional stone wall. Several sheep are grazing on the grass. In the foreground, a person with a backpack is seen from behind, walking along the path. To the right, a river flows through the landscape, with a large, leafy tree standing prominently on the bank. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and rural.

Finally... the most practical part

Replenish and protect

Tools to protect your own wellbeing, so you can keep caring

None of this is complicated

Small, sustainable, every day



sensory joy is for grown-ups too

In the moment

Long out-breath. Feel your feet. Name it to tame it.

Every day

A closing-the-door ritual. Move. One moment of joy, on purpose.

Every week

Restorative supervision. Debrief together. Boundaries.

Write them down. Say one out loud.

Three promises to take home



For a child

One small, concrete thing I'll do differently on Monday

For my team

How we'll look after each other

For me

The most specific one: "I will leave by 5pm on Wednesdays"

Where next?

REACH

One journey, with every adult alongside.

It takes a village to raise a child.

REACH · working title

The REACH road map

"It takes a village to raise a child."

One journey, with every adult alongside: where to start, where to stop for fuel, and who helps when a car needs a service, some extra support, or stops at the side of the road.



Pit stops and check-ins
Supervision and Holding the whole team

REACH Foundations 6

The front door: one day for every adult

The REACH road 2

Two good lanes of care and boundaries; our highway code

The Champion Programme 3

Sixteen sessions across a year

Leading REACH 7

The REACH MOT and your inclusion strategy

The Trainer Route 8

So that REACH can travel

For children 5-11

Driving Your Body Car, and Link Up for Years 5 to 8

Steady 4

The adult's inner world, and the Steady MOT

The MOT

Once a year, even when it seems fine

Roadside recovery

After an incident, with PACE



A service, and extra support
Targeted and specialist help when a car needs more

ALONG THE WHOLE ROAD

The village

Nobody raises a child alone.



Families

REACH for families: one story at home and at school



Young people

Nothing about us without us



The passport

What helps me, travelling with me



Communities

When a community is hurting



The road ahead

Ten next steps to world-leading (folder 10)



Somewhere amazing

Every child seen, safe and learning, growing towards **Standing Alongside**.

*No child is born switched off. Something switches them off... and that something
could be*

useful

**You are a brain-changer. That is the literal truth of
neuroplasticity.**



look at her now

**No child is only the
worst thing that has
ever happened to them.**

And no safeguarding lead should ever carry the
weight alone.

*A different tomorrow always begins with
us.*

"He was warm and kind, he took an interest in me, he made me feel that I was worth something.

He was bothered, and I felt that in my very core."

Jonny Benjamin, on the stranger who saved his life



Thank you, Bristol

Thank you for all that you carry.



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*refill your tank, even if it gets
messy!*