



BRAVE BRAINS

RENEWING HOPE FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE

Trauma-Sensitive School Counselor Guide

GETTING STARTED

Wherever you are in your trauma-sensitive journey, BraveBrains resources are here to help! They are a wonderful addition to Compassionate Schools or Conscious Discipline initiatives that you may currently be employing.

If you haven't already, pull out your *Riley the Brave* books and read all the way through the "Afterword for Grown-Ups." I have woven in some brain-based essentials from my career working with developmental trauma. Also, be sure to download [Trauma-Sensitive Tips for Teachers](#). These quick reads lay the foundation for the paradigm shift that I have seen be so helpful in homes and schools around the world.

New books, games, and lessons are always in the works. Sign up for the BraveBrains newsletter to stay in the loop!

www.BraveBrains.com/EDU

   @JessicaSinarski

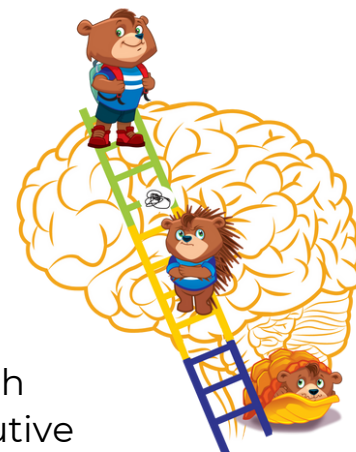


THE STAIRCASE OF THE MIND

If you've been in any professional development with me, you've heard me talk about the [house model of the brain](#), introduced by Dr. Daniel J. Siegel. In very simple terms...

- **The Upstairs Brain** helps us play, learn, and enjoy time with others. It also helps us solve problems and deal with big feelings. It is the home of logic, language, and executive functioning skills.
- **The Downstairs Brain** can help us stay safe in tough situations, but it also gets us in trouble sometimes! It prioritizes self- protection and quick reactions over pausing to think things through. Language is limited, and reasoning is in service of survival.
- **The Amygdala** is the alarm / traffic director. It decides in milliseconds if I am safe enough to use my calm, curious upstairs brain...or...DANGER! I need my survival instincts to react quickly and fight, run, or curl into my turtle shell.

Only one part of the brain can be in charge at a time. For the learning brain to be on, we need to build a strong "staircase." We need to nurture strong neural connections to the upstairs brain so that the downstairs brain doesn't feel like it has to take over.



BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION

You've probably heard the phrase before – the tricky part is figuring out what children's behavior is trying to communicate! This is especially difficult when dealing with the "invisible" effects trauma. Traditional behavior planning can run into problems since antecedents, or "triggers," are complicated and confusing. I highly recommend the YouTube video [ReMoved](#) to bring this to life. Remember, children often continue to practice defensive strategies long after they are in safe settings. Some of the kids (and staff) you're working with are still living in chronic stress and danger or dealing with the lasting impact of marginalization or intergenerational trauma. Let's give people the benefit of the doubt.



BECOMING A BEHAVIOR DETECTIVE

This doesn't mean that we should just let everyone do whatever they want. Let's get curious! When a student is sent to you because of an outburst in class, it's time to put on your detective cap.

- What was going on that might have set off the “downstairs brain” defenses?
- Pull out some cards from the **Thoughts and Feelings with Riley the Brave Card Game** and set them out to get the conversation going.
- Grab some stuffed animals and use your best story-telling voice to wonder aloud about what might have happened.

Remember, anything you can do to increase “felt safety” is likely to help students get back in “upstairs brain” mode. It is especially powerful to focus on any positive motivation or character strength the child demonstrated even if the actions weren't ideal. For example, if a child hit another student who was not being kind, muster some warmth in your eyes and say:

“Hey, kiddo, I love that you want to stand up for yourself. I think we can find another way to do it that doesn't hurt anyone. Your strong spirit is a gift! Can we work together on keeping you and your friends safe?”

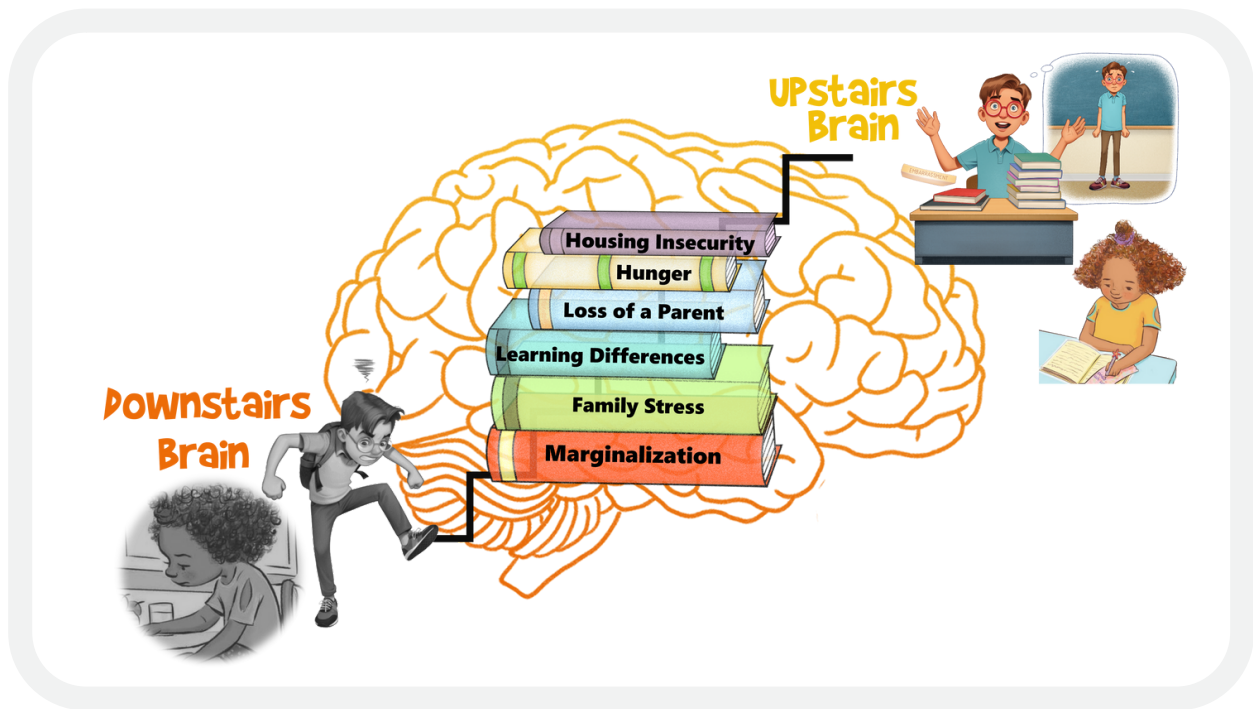
This builds the sense that you hear and understand and might be able to help! Only then is there a chance that you can steer toward more “brave like a cub” or upstairs brain moments.

THE INVISIBLE BACKPACK

Have you ever felt weighed down by stressful circumstances or heavy feelings? Science has clearly shown that, on top of the emotional impact, chronic stress and trauma can have intense physical consequences. I've put that concept in picture book format for upper elementary students.

Your Amazing Brain, What's Inside Your Backpack? and *Hello, Anger* have a cast of characters that kids can relate to, while giving counselors, teachers, and other caring adults the words to talk about tough topics, including having had a parent who has not acted in safe ways!



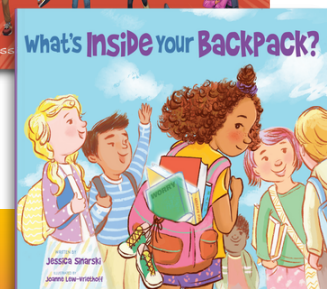
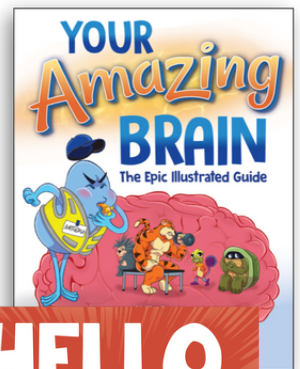


SETTING ASIDE WHAT WE'RE NOT MEANT TO CARRY

It's easy to see how the staircase of the mind can get cluttered! When books pile up, the downstairs brain is more likely to kick in with quick, defensive reactions. While you can't necessarily take a child's heavy books away, you can help them learn how to "feel and deal," how to walk through difficult situations and emotions in ways that will nurture those upstairs brain powers.

For upper elementary students and beyond, this can be a helpful visual metaphor. What "books" might students be carrying in their invisible backpacks? When a teacher comes in to vent, what books are weighing them down? One teen I was working with found it helpful to think about "clearing the stairs."

Try pulling out the **What's Inside Your Backpack?** printable or **Become a Backpack Detective** activity and get curious about the heavy books that are underneath big, angry feelings and disruptive behaviors. Don't forget to check in with the kids who might be curling up into their turtle shells or hiding like chameleons. The freeze response can go unnoticed but is just as important to pay attention to as big, angry behaviors.



CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

This is a paradigm shift. It's confusing to think of "bad behavior" as misplaced brave moments and might feel counter-intuitive to honor anger. Interpersonal Neurobiology has shown us just how effective and powerful it can be, especially for students overcoming Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). As a school counselor, you are perfectly placed to help change the conversation, and BraveBrains is here to help!

☞ The Riley content added to the facts was top tier. Everything was helpful.
-Teacher, Florida



If you haven't already, place your order for the [Trauma-Informed Elementary Counselor Toolkit](#),

which includes:

- > 4 books
- > 4 posters
- > Riley the Brave plush
- > Stickers and coloring pages
- > Thoughts & Feelings card game

☞ This is EXACTLY what we needed!
-School Counselor, Arizona

NEXT STEPS



PLUS, you'll receive these classroom and counseling-ready SEL tools

- > Over 120 pages of easy-to-use lessons, activities and counseling resources
- > Video, notes, and communication guides for parents & guardians
- > 60-minute professional development video with reflective questions
- > SEL application activity to do with staff
- > 36 unique emotion regulation mandalas
- > 5 author read-aloud videos for students

☞ Informative. Detailed. Everything was wonderful!
-Interventionist, Missouri

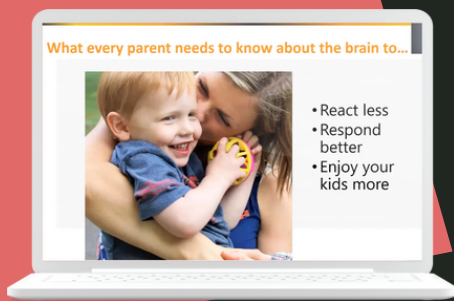


Questions?

Email info@BraveBrains.com

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

This is a paradigm shift. It's confusing to think of "bad behavior" as misplaced brave moments and might feel counter-intuitive to honor anger. Interpersonal Neurobiology has shown us just how effective and powerful it can be, especially for students overcoming Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). As a school counselor, you are perfectly placed to help change the conversation, and BraveBrains is here to help!



At the beginning of the year, lay the foundation for parents and guardians with the ["It's A Brain Thing!" webinar](#). I have included **BraveBrains Better Together** notes in this resource bundle to foster open lines of communication between home and school.

Instead of sending home traditional behavior slips, switch to the **Building Brave Brains Together** note for younger students and the **BraveBrains Home-School Communication** form in upper elementary.

- When students have "tiger" or "squirrel" moments, teachers and other school personnel will have an easy way of communicating with parents about these behaviors.
- If there is a child who is really struggling, pick some "brave like a cub" or "upstairs brain" qualities and pre-write them for busy teachers to circle.

The more we support each other, the more we can be brain builders instead of behavior punishers.

I'm so glad we're in this together!

Warmly,

Jessica Sinarski



www.BraveBrains.com

   @JessicaSinarski