



# Emotional Development & Well-Being, Mental Health and Trauma

## PRESENTATIONS AT A GLANCE BY DR. DEBORAH MACNAMARA

Our children and adolescents emotional developmental and well-being have become urgent questions for parents, educators, and helping professionals. Too often, distress is understood at the surface—through behavior and symptom reduction—without making sense of what is driving it underneath.

Dr. Deborah MacNamara’s presentations draw on contemporary neuroscience, attachment science, and developmental psychology to understand emotional distress and trauma at their roots. They explore how the emotional system develops, how stress and adversity impact children differently across ages, and what conditions are necessary for healing, resilience, and healthy emotional maturation. With a strong focus on play, relationship, and adult leadership, this work offers a developmental pathway for supporting recovery, preventing future struggles, and helping children and teens grow well despite the challenges they face.

**“Deborah is one of those rare individuals where brilliance, oratory, playfulness and compassion mix in just the right proportions, whether delivering a keynote or serving as a healer.”**

— Dr. Gordon Neufeld

### FOUNDATIONS OF EMOTIONAL HEALTH

- Keys to Emotional Health and Well-Being
- Why Relationship Matters: Emotional Health, Resilience, and Healing
- How Play Restores Us: Emotion, Stress, and Resilience

### RELATIONAL REPAIR, PROTECTION AND PREVENTION

- Who’s in Charge? Dominance, Distress, and Emotional Well-Being
- Rethinking Bullying: What Works—and Why

### ALARM, TRAUMA, AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

- Making Sense of Emotional Challenges and Stuck Kids
- Making Sense of Anxiety
- Making Sense of Attention Problems
- The Continuum of Alarm: From Anxiety to Attention and Adrenaline-Based Issues
- Resilience, Trauma, and Emotional Stuckness in Children
- Making Sense of Resistance and Opposition in Children and Adolescents
- Making Sense of Frustration and Aggression in Children and Teens

Presentations can be adapted for keynotes, half-day, or full-day professional learning, and tailored to classroom, school-wide, or district priorities.

# Presentation Descriptions

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## MAKING SENSE OF MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH CHALLENGES TODAY

More than ever, we are being asked to make sense of rising levels of emotional distress and mental health challenges in children and youth. **Anxiety, attention difficulties, aggression, withdrawal, opposition, bullying, emotional overwhelm, and sensitivity are now commonplace in homes, classrooms, and clinical settings.** We search for causes—screens, social pressures, global instability, disrupted routines—but what is often missing is a coherent way to understand what is happening underneath the behavior and how to respond in ways that truly support growth.

The focus in all presentations is to offer an integrated, developmental approach to children and teen's mental and emotional well-being—one that looks beyond symptoms to the emotional roots of distress.

Rather than treating behavior as the problem, a developmental and relational approach helps parents, educators, and helping professionals understand what emotions are communicating, why a child or teen is stirred up, and what conditions are needed to bring them to rest in adult care.

All presentation address not only how to support children and teens when they are struggling, but how to foster emotional maturity, resilience, compassion, and healthy relationships over time. When adults take the lead, kids are better able to rest and grow.



### Why a Developmental Approach is Needed

Much of today's mental health framework borrows heavily from adult models of distress and trauma, often overlooking the unique developmental needs of children and adolescents. When we fail to consider age, dependency, attachment, and emotional maturation, we risk misreading children and teen's behavior and responding at a surface level. **A developmental lens asks different questions: What is the child's emotional capacity right now? What has been disrupted? What support is needed from the adults responsible for their care?**

Grounded in attachment science, neuroscience, and developmental psychology, the aim is to restore adults to their rightful role as steady leaders and sources of emotional safety. When kids can rest in relationship, emotional expression softens, behavior becomes more organized, and genuine growth becomes possible. **By working at the root—rather than counting symptoms—we create the conditions not only for recovery, but for lasting emotional and mental well-being.**



# Presentation Menu

The following presentations reflect Dr. MacNamara's most requested offerings for parents, childcare and helping professionals. Sessions can be tailored for keynote presentations, half-day, or full-day professional learning, depending on the needs of the audience.

**Selected presentations are listed below. Additional presentations are available upon request.**

There are three core areas of focus:

- **Foundations of Emotional Health**
- **Alarm, Trauma, & Emotional Distress**
- **Relational Repair, Protection & Prevention**

## FOUNDATIONS OF EMOTIONAL HEALTH

### 1. The Keys to Emotional Health and Well-Being in Kids

Emotional health lies at the heart of children's behaviour, learning, attention, stress responses, and mental well-being—yet it is often the least understood aspect of development. This presentation explores what emotional health truly is, how it develops over time, and how emotional distress shows up when growth is disrupted. Drawing on contemporary neuroscience, emotion science, and developmental psychology, participants gain insight into how emotions are meant to work, how stress and immaturity interfere with emotional well-being, and what conditions are necessary for resilience and recovery. The focus is not on managing symptoms, but on creating the relational and developmental conditions that allow children—and the adults who care for them—to grow toward emotional balance, flexibility, and full human potential

### 2. How Play Restores Us: Emotion, Stress, and Resilience

Play is often dismissed as frivolous or optional—something to be enjoyed once everything else is under control. Yet research in neuroscience, attachment, and developmental psychology tells a very different story. This presentation explores why play is essential to emotional health, resilience, and recovery from stress—for children and the adults who care for them. Participants gain insight into how play supports brain development, preserves emotional well-being, softens stress responses, and restores vitality during times of pressure and crisis. In a world where play is increasingly displaced by performance demands and screens, this talk reframes play as a biological and emotional necessity, offering a deeper understanding of why protecting play is one of the most powerful ways we can support growth, healing, and mental health.

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## EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING



### 3. Why Relationship Matters: Emotional Health, Resilience, and Healing

Relationship is fundamental to emotional health, resilience, and healing—yet it is often overlooked in how we support children and teens in distress. As societal changes, peer orientation, and technology reshape how children relate, connecting to caring adults has become less automatic, with significant implications for emotional well-being at home and at school. This presentation explores why a relational lens is essential for fostering emotional maturity, supporting recovery from stress and trauma, and helping children grow strong, confident hearts.

Drawing on developmental science, emotion theory, and neuroscience, participants gain clarity about how emotions develop, why they matter, and how relationship provides the context for emotional expression and regulation. Common misconceptions about “managing” emotions are addressed, and the role of play as a vital bridge between relationship and emotional healing is explored. The presentation brings coherence to the often-confusing messages surrounding emotional health, offering a grounded, hopeful framework for creating the conditions children need to heal, grow, and thrive.

## ALARM, TRAUMA, and EMOTIONAL DISTRESS



### 1. Making Sense of Stuck Kids and Emotional Challenges

Many children and teens struggle because their emotional development has become stuck. This presentation offers a developmental and relational framework for understanding a wide range of emotional and behavioural challenges—such as anxiety, withdrawal, reactivity, aggression, and resistance—by looking at what has been disrupted underneath the surface. Drawing on neuroscience, attachment science, and developmental psychology, participants learn how emotional distress interferes with adaptation, learning, and behaviour, and what children need from the adults who care for them to regain movement and growth. The focus is on restoring conditions of safety, relationship, and emotional processing that allow children to soften, recover, and resume healthy development.

# Presentation Menu

## ALARM, TRAUMA, and EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

### 2. Making Sense of Anxiety in Children and Teens

Anxiety is the most common mental health challenge of childhood and adolescence, showing up in many forms—from worry, avoidance, and panic to perfectionism, irritability, shutdown, and puzzling behaviours. This presentation offers a developmental and relational framework for understanding anxiety as a state of heightened alarm in the nervous system rather than a weakness or coping failure. Drawing on neuroscience, attachment science, and developmental psychology, participants gain clarity on how anxiety disrupts learning, attention, and emotional processing, and why many well-intended strategies can intensify distress. The focus is on restoring conditions of safety, relationship, and support that allow anxiety to soften and healthy emotional development to resume.

### 3. Making Sense of Attention Problems

Attention and agitation difficulties are increasing at alarming rates among children and adolescents, often disrupting learning, behaviour, and daily life at home and at school. These challenges are frequently treated as behavioural problems, yet attention issues have multiple underlying roots that are easily overlooked. This presentation offers a developmental and relational framework for understanding what drives restlessness, distractibility, and difficulty focusing—and why many well-intended strategies can unintentionally intensify the problem. Participants gain clarity on how emotional stress, developmental immaturity, and unmet needs can hijack attention, and how adults can bring children to rest in their care, restoring the conditions necessary for focus, learning, and healthy adaptation.

### 4. The Continuum of Alarm: From Anxiety to Attention and Adrenaline-Based Issues

Anxiety, attention problems, agitation, and adrenaline-driven behaviours are often treated as separate concerns, yet they may arise from a common source: a chronically activated alarm system. This presentation introduces a developmental and relational framework for understanding how heightened alarm can express itself in many different ways—sometimes with worry and fear, and other times without obvious signs of anxiety at all. Drawing on neuroscience and developmental insight, participants learn how stress and alarm interfere with emotional processing, attention, learning, and behaviour, and why symptom-focused approaches often miss the mark. By understanding how alarm takes hold, adults are better equipped to restore safety, bring children to rest, and support recovery across a wide range of emotional and behavioural challenges.

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## ALARM, TRAUMA, and EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

### 5. Resilience, Trauma, and Emotional Stuckness in Kids

Children's resistance, shutdown, anxiety, and emotional intensity are often signs of a nervous system under strain—not misbehavior or defiance. This presentation explores how stress responses function as protective mechanisms in children and teens, and what happens when those responses become stuck. Rather than focusing on managing symptoms, participants learn how to understand resistance, opposition, and emotional withdrawal as signals of unmet developmental needs. Drawing on neuroscience, emotion, and developmental psychology, this talk offers a relational approach to helping children recover resilience, soften resistance, and return to emotional health—by restoring the conditions that allow the stress response to settle and growth to resume.

### 6. Making Sense of Resistance and Opposition in Children and Adolescents

Resistance and opposition are among the most misunderstood challenges in childhood and adolescence, often experienced as personal, provocative, and exhausting for the adults who care for children. This presentation offers a developmental and relational understanding of resistance through the lens of counterwill—the instinctive, defensive reaction that arises when children and teens feel pressured or controlled. Participants gain insight into why resistance is a normal and necessary part of development, why it is especially pronounced in toddlers and adolescents, and how power struggles and behaviour-management strategies can unintentionally intensify opposition. The focus is on responding in ways that preserve relationship, dignity, and adult leadership—restoring conditions in which children can relax, cooperate, and grow.

### 7. Making Sense of Frustration and Aggression in Children and Teens

Frustration and aggression are among the most distressing challenges adults face with children and teens, showing up as tears, tantrums, hostility, verbal or physical attacks, and escalating emotional intensity. This presentation offers a developmental and relational framework for understanding aggression not as a behaviour problem to control, but as a signal that frustration is not being processed in a child's emotional system. Drawing on neuroscience, attachment science, and developmental psychology, participants gain insight into why traditional behaviour-management approaches often intensify aggression, how frustration is meant to be worked through developmentally, and what children need from adults to stay within relationship while strong emotions move through. The focus is on restoring safety, leadership, and limits in ways that reduce attack, support emotional growth, and help children learn they can withstand life's inevitable frustrations.

# Presentation Menu

## RELATIONAL REPAIR, PROTECTION & PREVENTION



### 1. Who's in Charge? Dominance, Distress, and Emotional Well-Being

An increasing number of children and adolescents are presenting as dominant, demanding, and controlling in their relationships with adults—at home and in the classroom. When the tables turn and children assume positions of dominance, the child–adult relationship becomes strained, learning becomes harder to sustain, and both adults and children can feel stuck in exhausting power struggles. This presentation helps parents and educators make sense of why this shift is happening, why many well-intended strategies inadvertently intensify it, and what children are communicating through dominant behaviour. Through a developmental and relational lens, participants gain clarity about how adults can reclaim their leadership role with warmth, confidence, and care—restoring conditions in which children can relax, receive guidance, and grow toward their full developmental potential.



### 2. Rethinking Bullying: What Works—and Why

Bullying cannot be effectively addressed until we understand what drives it beneath the surface. Many prevailing approaches treat bullying as a behavioural or social-skills problem, intervening only once harm has occurred and often missing the emotional dynamics at play. This presentation reframes bullying through a developmental and emotional lens—making sense of both the vulnerability that fuels bullying behaviour and the impact it has on those targeted by it.

## Feedback from Participants

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BEST  
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*"Anxiety is decoded in a scientific and heart-based way."*



*"Thank you to Dr. MacNamara for her presentation filled with great insights and helpful resources for families - and her added humour to help connect with her audience and buffer the tough moments of parenting."*



*"I'm an Infant Development Consultant and I'm always recommending these parent education sessions to the families. I work with. Deborah MacNamara is one of my favourite speakers - her messages are clear and thoughtful. The virtual session works well for families that can't get way to attend a session in a venue."*



*"This was excellent! So informative, and really did a great job of framing frustration and also how to deal with futile things that can't change. Useful as an educator and as a parent and a friend or spouse."*

# About Dr. Deborah MacNamara



Translating developmental science into everyday practice for parents, educators, childcare and helping professionals.

“Deborah is one of those rare individuals where brilliance, oratory, playfulness and compassion mix in just the right proportions, whether delivering a keynote or serving as a healer.” Dr. Gordon Neufeld

Dr. Deborah MacNamara is an award-winning researcher, author, counsellor, developmentalist, and educator with over 25 years of experience supporting parents, educators, childcare providers, and helping professionals in making sense of children’s behaviour, emotional well-being, development, and feeding challenges. She has presented internationally including the *United Nations*, *Dalai Lama Center for Peace & Education*, and the *Neufeld Institute*.

Deborah is known for her ability to take complex challenges—such as anxiety, disengagement, aggression, and learning difficulties—and trace them back to their developmental roots, offering clear orientation and a grounded way forward.

Deborah is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute and teaches educators, counsellors, and school communities nationally and internationally, translating developmental science into meaningful, real-world application.

## Books

- *Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (and Anyone Who Acts Like One)*
- *Nourished: Connection, Food, and Caring for Our Kids (and Everyone Else We Love)*
- *The Sorry Plane (children’s picture book)*

**Nourished** received a Nautilus Gold Award for Parenting (2024) and a Living Now Evergreen Gold Medal for Health & Wellness (2024). Both books are published in more than 15 languages.

*Bulk book orders or a book table are available (books at 20% listed discount).*

## Want to Work Together?

Every school community is unique, and professional learning is most meaningful when it reflects that context. Presentations can be shaped to meet the needs of your educators, students, and school or parent community—from keynote presentations to half-day or full-day intensives.

If you’d like to explore possibilities, availability, or fee information, please visit [macnamara.ca/contact](http://macnamara.ca/contact).