



Child and Adolescent Development

From Toddlers to Teens to Parenthood

PRESENTATIONS AT A GLANCE BY DR. DEBORAH MACNAMARA

Dr. Deborah MacNamara's presentations are grounded in developmental and relational science and focus on understanding the roots of behaviour rather than managing surface symptoms. Across all offerings, the emphasis is on how adults can create the conditions children need to grow into social, separate, and adaptive human beings—with caring, confident adult leadership at the centre.

Rather than providing strategies or prescriptions, these presentations restore clarity around the adult's role in helping children come to rest, grow emotionally, and reach their full human potential.

"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 HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Presentations that focus on the essential conditions children need to mature emotionally, socially, and psychologically.

- The Four Irreducible Needs of Kids
- Why Relationship Matters: Building Strong Connections with Kids
- Who's in Charge? Why Kids Need Caring Leaders
- The Science of Play: How Children Become Their Own Persons
- The Roots of Resilience and Resourcefulness
- Heart Matters: What to Do with a Child's Feelings?
- Building Attachment Communities to Raise Children In
- Holding Onto Kids in a Digital World
- Setting Kids Up for School and Learning Success: The Role of Home
- Sliding Into Sleep: Supporting Children to Come to Rest at Night
- Supporting Sensitive Kids in Flourishing

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Presentations that address the emotional roots beneath behaviour and restore adult confidence in leading through challenges.

- Heart Matters: What to Do with a Child's Feelings?
- When Peers Matter More than Adults: Peer Orientation & Social Pressures
- The Roots of Anxiety: Bringing Our Alarmed Kids to Rest
- Tears and Tantrums: Growing Children Through Frustration and Aggression
- Understanding Resistance and Opposition in Kids: "You're Not the Boss of Me"
- Sibling Conflict: Leading Through Feuds and Cultivating Relationship
- The Role of Discipline: Taking the Lead on Challenging Behaviour
- Who's in Charge? Dominance, Distress, and Emotional Well-Being
- Rethinking Bullying: What Works—and Why

Presentation Descriptions

EARLY CHILDHOOD, ADOLESCENCE, & PARENTHOOD

Presentations that make sense of development across key life stages—for children, adolescents, and the adults raising them.

- Rest, Play, Grow: Understanding the Early Years
- Cultivating Caring Children: The Roots of Social Responsibility
- What about Me? Becoming the Parent My Kids Need

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



CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR KIDS TO GROW UP WELL

Most adults want the same thing for the children in their care: that they grow into resilient, resourceful, compassionate human beings—able to adapt to change, face adversity, think for themselves, and form meaningful relationships without losing who they are.

Yet today, many parents, educators, and helping professionals find themselves spending far more time responding to problems than cultivating the conditions that allow children and adolescents to truly thrive. Screens, pressure, anxiety, peer influence, and the erosion of rest, play, and deep connection have quietly undermined the foundations of healthy development.

WHY SUPPORTING CHILDREN FEELS SO HARD RIGHT NOW

Many adults are deeply invested in helping kids grow up well—yet feel increasingly uncertain about where to place their energy. This uncertainty does not stem from a lack of care or effort, but from the conditions in which adults are parenting, teaching, and caring today. Two pressures are particularly influential:

1. An overwhelming and conflicting advice landscape: Parents and educators are surrounded by guidance—often fragmented, alarm-based, or trend-driven rather than grounded in development. Over time, this can erode confidence, leaving adults dependent on outside “experts” instead of supported in trusting their essential role in a child’s life.

2. Approaches that overlook developmental reality: Many models of behaviour, emotion, and mental health are adapted from adult psychology and applied to children who are still developing. When developmental differences are ignored, environments meant to support children can unintentionally work against healthy growth. Together, these pressures leave adults unsure how to respond—just as concerns about emotional health, screen use, peer influence, and resilience continue to rise.

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Presentation Descriptions

Why a Developmental–Relational Approach Matters

Supporting children well requires more than strategies or good intentions. It requires understanding how children are meant to grow—and how adults can create the conditions that allow that growth to unfold. This work rests on three essential foundations:

1. Developmental science that helps adults make sense of children

A developmental lens moves us beyond reacting to behaviour toward understanding where a child is in their emotional, social, and psychological growth. It helps adults distinguish between healthy unfolding and signs of distress or stuckness—supporting confident, appropriate responses.

2. Relationship as the context for growth: Resilience, emotional maturity, and adaptability emerge within relationship. When adults take the lead—providing safety, care, and orientation—children can rest, learn, and grow. The adult–child relationship is not a tool; it is the ground of development itself.

3. Insight that integrates science with instinct and lived experience: Rather than offering checklists or quick fixes, these presentations provide insight that restores confidence in the adult role. When adults know when to support, when to wait, and when to intervene, children can rest in their care—creating the conditions for development, resilience, and human potential to unfold.

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.

There are three core areas of focus:

- Foundations of Healthy Development
- Emotional Development and Challenging Behaviour
- Early Childhood, Adolescence to Parenthood



Presentation Menu

FOUNDATIONS OF HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

FOUNDATIONS OF HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT



1. The Four Irreducible Needs for Healthy Development in Kids

This presentation explores the four irreducible needs that form the foundation for children to grow into social, separate, and adaptive human beings. Rather than pushing development or focusing on outcomes, it helps adults understand how to create the conditions that allow growth to emerge naturally over time. Participants gain clarity about their vital role in providing rest, play, emotional safety, relationship, and confident adult leadership—cutting through common myths about independence, resilience, and readiness. The focus is on restoring caretaker confidence in what truly supports maturation and offering a clear, hopeful, and doable path forward for helping children reach their full potential.



2. Relationship Matters: Building Strong Connections with Kids

Relationship is the foundation of healthy development and the primary context in which children grow, learn, and mature. This presentation explores why strong adult–child relationships matter more than any strategy or program—and how connection supports emotional resilience, learning, and cooperation, especially when behaviour is challenging. Participants gain clarity about what healthy relationship looks like developmentally, why connection can falter under pressure, and how adults can preserve closeness while still taking the lead. Topics include attachment as a natural drive for connection, the protective role of shyness, everyday rituals that strengthen relationships, and how to maintain leadership through discipline without eroding trust. The focus is on restoring confidence in the adult’s role as the steady, caring presence children need to flourish.



3. Who’s in Charge? Why Kids Need Caring Leaders

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.

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FOUNDATIONS OF HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT



4. The Science of Play: How Children Become Their Own Persons

Play—the kind that supports emotional development, integration, and psychological growth—is becoming increasingly endangered. Academic pressure, over-structuring, screens, and performance expectations have crowded out the spontaneous, immersive play children need to mature. Drawing on developmental science, this presentation explores why play is not a luxury or a break from learning, but a primary pathway through which children develop emotional depth, flexibility, creativity, and a sense of self. Participants gain clarity on how to recognize true play, why boredom matters, and what gets in the way when children cannot access it. The focus is on the essential role adults play in protecting and restoring play so children can come to rest, grow from the inside out, and become their own persons.



5. The Roots of Resilience and Resourcefulness

Human beings are wired to adapt, endure adversity, and find creative ways forward—but this potential does not develop through instruction or training. It grows when the right conditions are in place. This presentation explores the developmental roots of resilience, including the often-misunderstood roles of frustration, vulnerability, and tears. Rather than trying to teach children to “be resilient,” adults learn how to create environments—at home and at school—where emotional strength can take root and deepen over time. The focus is on supporting children as they face disappointment, limits, and challenge without collapsing or erupting, helping them develop the inner resources they need to meet a world that will not always bend to their will.



6. Heart Matters: What to Do with a Child’s Feelings?

Emotion is now widely recognized as central to development and well-being—yet confusion about what feelings are, how they work, and how to support them has never been greater. This presentation brings clarity to the role of emotion in healthy development, addressing common misunderstandings around emotional intelligence, self-regulation, dysregulation, and emotional well-being. Participants explore how emotional capacity develops over time, why some well-intended responses can unintentionally interfere with that growth, and how the language we use to describe children’s emotional lives shapes how we respond to them. Drawing on developmental science, this presentation helps adults make sense of where we have taken wrong turns, what current research is revealing about emotion, and the critical role adults play—alongside broader relational and environmental factors—in supporting children to develop emotional depth, flexibility, and resilience.

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FOUNDATIONS OF HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

7. Building Attachment Communities to Raise Children In

Children were never meant to be raised in isolation. This presentation explores the essential role of attachment communities—the network of caring adults who help share the task of raising children across home, school, and community settings. Participants gain insight into how children develop a sense of belonging, safety, and “home” through relationships with trusted adults, even beyond their primary caregivers. The focus is on how adults—especially those in the home—can take the lead in intentionally cultivating these attachment infrastructures, transforming groups of unfamiliar or loosely connected adults into meaningful sources of care and guidance. Through practical attachment principles and simple relational rituals, this presentation offers a hopeful and attainable vision for creating home-like environments wherever children live, learn, and play.

8. Holding Onto Kids in a Digital World

Screens are now woven into every aspect of children’s lives, yet much of the conversation focuses on managing technology rather than understanding its impact on development. This presentation approaches digital life through a developmental and relational lens, asking a deeper question: how do screens affect the irreducible needs children require to grow well? Participants explore why screen struggles often signal unmet needs for relationship, rest, or guidance—and why screens can sometimes become a stand-in rather than the problem itself. Rather than prescribing rules or fueling power struggles, this talk restores confidence in the adult’s role as leader, helping parents and educators preserve attachment, guide digital use with care, and create conditions where children can engage with technology without losing what they need most to thrive.

9. Setting Kids Up for School and Learning Success: The Role of Home

Academic success is often measured at school, yet the foundations for learning are largely built at home. This presentation explores how parents and caregivers play a critical role in cultivating teachability—the emotional and psychological readiness to engage, adapt, and learn. Participants gain insight into how relationships, routines, emotional safety, and adult leadership prepare children to benefit from what school has to offer. The focus is on working in partnership with educators, helping children enter learning environments supported and ready, and navigating challenges such as learning differences, stress, or school struggles with confidence and care. Rather than asking schools to carry what they cannot, this presentation restores clarity around the home’s essential role in setting children up for learning success.

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FOUNDATIONS OF HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

* 10. Sliding Into Sleep: Supporting Children to Come to Rest at Night

Bedtime is often the most vulnerable part of the day—when adults are depleted and children need connection, reassurance, and guidance the most. This presentation explores why sleep can be so difficult for children and parents alike, and how separation, anxiety, and unmet attachment needs often intensify bedtime struggles. Drawing on developmental and relational science, Dr. MacNamara gently demystifies popular sleep advice such as “cry it out” and “self-soothing,” highlighting the emotional and relational costs of separation-based approaches. Participants gain insight into the role adults play in helping children shift into rest, preserve closeness, and feel safe enough to let go at night. Grounded in age-old wisdom and modern developmental understanding, this presentation offers a hopeful, humane path forward—helping families support sleep in ways that protect emotional well-being, attachment, and everyone’s sanity.

* 11. Supporting Sensitive Kids so they can Flourish

Some children experience the world more intensely—emotionally, socially, or sensorially—not because something is wrong, but because of natural differences in temperament and nervous system sensitivity. This presentation reframes sensitivity as a form of human diversity rather than a problem to fix. Participants explore the unique challenges sensitive children face in fast-paced, demanding environments and learn how stress, overload, and pressure can quickly derail their development. Through a developmental lens, adults gain insight into how to support sensitive children in finding rest, building emotional strength, and accessing the gifts that often accompany sensitivity—such as depth, empathy, creativity, and insight—while providing the leadership they need to grow well.



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EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Presentations that address the emotional roots beneath behaviour and restore adult confidence in leading through challenge.

1. Heart Matters: What to Do with a Child's Feelings?

Emotion is now widely recognized as central to development and well-being—yet confusion about what feelings are, how they work, and how to support them has never been greater. This presentation brings clarity to the role of emotion in healthy development, addressing common misunderstandings around emotional intelligence, self-regulation, dysregulation, and emotional well-being. Participants explore how emotional capacity develops over time, why some well-intended responses can unintentionally interfere with that growth, and how the language we use to describe children's emotional lives shapes how we respond to them. Drawing on developmental science, this presentation helps adults make sense of where we have taken wrong turns, what current research is revealing about emotion, and the critical role adults play—alongside broader relational and environmental factors—in supporting children to develop emotional depth, flexibility, and resilience.

2. When Peers Matter More than Adults: Peer Orientation & Social Pressures

Peer relationships are a natural part of growing up, but when children and adolescents begin to orient primarily toward their peers for guidance, belonging, and identity, adults can quickly lose influence—often without realizing it. This presentation explores peer orientation as a developmental dynamic rather than a behavioural problem, helping educators and parents understand how peer-driven attachment can undermine teachability, increase emotional and behavioural challenges, and contribute to anxiety and disengagement from learning. Rather than battling surface behaviours, participants gain insight into how adult leadership, connection, and relational authority can be restored—reclaiming their role as trusted guides and creating conditions where children and teens can once again receive direction, support, and care from the adults who matter most.

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EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT & CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

3. The Roots of Anxiety: Bringing our Alarmed Kids to Rest

Anxiety is now the most common mental health challenge affecting children and adolescents, shaping behaviour, learning, relationships, and emotional well-being. It can quietly shrink a child's world—limiting curiosity, flexibility, and confidence—while bringing alarm into homes and classrooms alike. This presentation explores anxiety through a developmental lens, helping adults recognize its many faces, from worry and avoidance to rigidity, aggression, and perfectionism. Participants learn how alarm becomes stuck, how anxiety can be both protective and problematic, and how adults can play a critical role in softening alarm rather than simply managing symptoms. The focus is on understanding roots, restoring emotional safety, and knowing when additional support is needed—so children can come to rest and re-engage with life.

4. Tears and Tantrums: Growing Children Through Frustration and Aggression

Frustration is a powerful and unavoidable part of being human—but when children cannot mature through it, it often spills out as aggression, withdrawal, or emotional eruptions. This presentation explores frustration as a central developmental force and examines how tantrums, defiance, self-attack, or attack on others emerge when frustration overwhelms a child's capacity. Rather than trying to eliminate frustration, adults learn how to support children in growing stronger through it—so frustration does not turn into destructive energy. Participants gain insight into what is developmentally appropriate across childhood and adolescence, how maturity unfolds over time, and how adult responses can either escalate aggression or support emotional growth and resilience.

5. Understanding Resistance & Opposition: "You're Not the Boss of Me"

Resistance and opposition don't just contribute to behavioural problems—they are expressions of a deeply rooted emotional system that activates when children feel controlled, pressured, or overwhelmed. This presentation explores resistance (often experienced as refusal, defiance, or non-cooperation) as a protective instinct with an important developmental purpose. Participants learn why resistance shows up differently at home, at school, and with peers, what happens when it becomes entrenched, and how adult reactions can unintentionally intensify it. Through a developmental lens, adults gain guidance on how to lead through resistance without power struggles—preserving relationship, restoring influence, and helping children remain open to care and guidance.

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EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT & CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

6. Sibling Conflict: Leading Through Feuds and Cultivating Relationship

Few things exhaust parents more than ongoing sibling conflict—especially when frustration, jealousy, and aggression erupt between children who matter deeply to one another. This presentation explores sibling conflict as a relational and developmental challenge rather than a problem to be managed away. Participants gain insight into why siblings so often collide, how loyalty binds and emotional immaturity fuel conflict, and why adult neutrality alone is rarely enough. The focus is on how adults can lead through conflict in ways that reduce escalation, protect relationships, and support long-term emotional maturity—so siblings are not simply kept apart, but guided toward healthier ways of relating over time.

7. The Role of Discipline: Taking the Lead on Challenging Behaviour

Discipline is not about control it is about adult leadership in the face of immaturity. This presentation explores how the way adults respond to challenging behaviour shapes development, preserves relationship, and supports a child’s capacity to grow up well. Drawing on developmental science, participants gain insight into how discipline can compensate for immaturity, guide children through moments they cannot yet manage themselves, and “buy time” for development to unfold. Attention is given to the role of play, emotional safety, and confident adult presence in leading children through difficulty without eroding trust or connection. Rather than focusing on techniques, this presentation restores clarity around the adult’s role in helping children grow toward responsibility, self-control, and emotional maturity.

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Feedback from Participants

-  *“New approach to know the roots and different strategies to deal with frustration and aggression not just in school but home too. The session was very informative.”*
-  *“Dr Macnamara is awesome- I feel this is useful for a wide variety of people, her passion for attachment is clear and the idea of having our kids hearts is incredible.”*
-  *Deb is always inspiring, with so many valuable takeaways as a teacher and a parent. I could listen to her forever.”*
-  *“I found this very informative and a very real / practical topic for teachers and parents. I very much appreciate how the interventions she suggests were evidence-based practices, supported through research. ”*

Presentation Menu

EARLY CHILDHOOD, ADOLESCENCE, DEVELOPMENT AND THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

Presentations that make sense of development across key life stages for children—and for adults raising them.

1. Rest, Play, Grow: Understanding the Early Years

Preschoolers may look impulsive, contradictory, intense, and emotionally unpredictable—but these behaviours are not signs of pathology or poor parenting. They reflect a unique stage of human development that is often profoundly misunderstood. This presentation helps adults make sense of young children through a developmental lens, clarifying why preschoolers behave the way they do and what they truly need to grow well. Drawing on Dr. Deborah MacNamara's bestselling book *Rest, Play, Grow*, participants gain insight into the developmental agenda of the early years—why children must first rest in care, then play deeply, to grow. With greater understanding of attachment, frustration, impulsivity, and the essential role of play, adults leave better equipped to normalize behaviour, reduce unnecessary alarm, and provide the conditions that give young children their strongest footing for the years ahead.

2. Cultivating Caring Children: The Roots of Social Responsibility

We all want children who are caring, considerate, and guided by an inner sense of responsibility—but these qualities cannot be taught through instruction, rewards, or consequences. This presentation explores how empathy and moral responsibility grow naturally when the right developmental conditions are in place. Drawing on developmental science, it helps adults understand how caring emerges from healthy attachment, emotional maturity, and a child's capacity to hold others in mind without losing themselves. Participants gain a clear roadmap for nurturing empathy and preserving a child's caring spirit—so children grow into individuals who can act with integrity, think twice, and do the right thing even when no one is watching. The presentation also draws on Dr. MacNamara's children's picture book *The Sorry Plane*, which gently teases out these dynamics and illustrates how a caring heart is restored, protected, and sustained as children grow into socially responsible human beings.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD, ADOLESCENCE, DEVELOPMENT AND THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

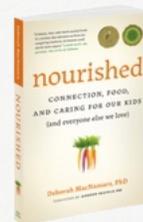
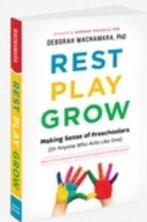
Presentations that make sense of development across key life stages for children—and for adults raising them.

3. Making Sense of Adolescence

Adolescence is the great bridge between childhood and adulthood—a necessary crossing that can feel especially daunting in a world shaped by screens, peer pressure, and social media. As young people reach for independence and identity, it can seem as though they are pulling away from the very adults they still need most. This presentation helps parents and professionals understand adolescence not as a problem to manage, but as a purposeful developmental passage with clear emotional and relational needs. By making sense of the rites of passage, the push for autonomy, resistance, and emerging sexuality, adults can learn how to remain a steady, guiding presence—holding on without holding tight—so teens can cross this bridge with support, dignity, and confidence, rather than confusion or disconnection.

4. What About Me? Becoming the Parent Our Child Needs

Becoming a parent is not a role we master through skills or instruction—it is a profound developmental transition that reshapes who we are. There is no manual for this work. This presentation explores how adults grow into the parents their children need, not by doing more, but by developing confidence, clarity, and emotional capacity over time. Drawing on developmental and relational science, it addresses the big questions parents quietly carry: What is my most important role? What do I do with my own strong emotions, doubts, and missteps? How do I parent under stress, uncertainty, and within the diverse realities of modern family life? This presentation normalizes the struggle and the growth inherent in caring for children, restoring trust in the remarkable development that occurs in us when we take responsibility for those who depend on us. Parents leave feeling supported, oriented, and reminded that they are not failing—they are becoming. And that they are, indeed, their child's best bet



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.



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

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.

Presentation Menu

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

KID'S
BEST
BET



"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)*
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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.

Creating School Communities Where Students and Educators Thrive



Presentations at a Glance by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

Presentations are grounded in **developmental and relational science** and focus on helping educators make sense of behaviour, learning challenges, and emotional distress at the root level. Rather than offering strategies in isolation, this work supports adults in creating the conditions for students to grow well—emotionally, socially, and academically—through strong relationships, confident leadership, and healthy school cultures.

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

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Presentations that address the emotional roots beneath behaviour and restore adult confidence in leading through challenge.

- Heart Matters: What to Do with Student's Feelings?
- When Students Push Back: Understanding Resistance and Opposition
- Understanding Anxiety in Students: A Developmental Lens on Emotional Safety & Resilience
- Understanding Attention Problems in Students: What's Beneath the Lack of Focus?
- Cultivating Resilience and Resourcefulness in Students
- Understanding Frustration and Aggression in Students
- Understanding Adolescence: Supporting Engagement Through a Critical Developmental Stage
- Bullying: What Actually Helps—and the Role of Adults

LEARNING, STUDENT-EDUCATOR RELATIONSHIPS & SCHOOL CULTURE

Presentations that strengthen relational leadership, teachability, and school-wide conditions for learning.

- The Teachability Factor: Why Learning Is Getting Harder
- What Students Need Most from Educators to Flourish
- Why Relationships Matter in Cultivating a Positive School Culture
- Cultivating Relationally Focused & Trauma-Sensitive Schools
- When Peers Matter More Than Teachers: Reclaiming Our Students
- School, Stress & Resilience: How Culture Shapes Emotional Health
- Setting Kids Up for Learning Success: The Role of Home

LEADERSHIP AND SYSTEMS LEVEL WORK

For administrators, leadership teams, and district-wide initiatives.

- Building Culture, Connection & Leadership in School Communities

Presentation Descriptions

MAKING SENSE OF THE CHALLENGES FACING EDUCATION TODAY

As more students arrive at school anxious, distracted, or disengaged, educators across classrooms, schools, and communities are working harder than ever to support learning. Alongside this effort is a quieter concern: how to support students who are doing well—without pushing them toward burnout, pressure, or disconnection.

The strain many educators feel is not a reflection of diminished care or competence. Rather, it reflects the erosion of the developmental conditions in children’s lives that support learning, attention, resilience, and emotional well-being.

Today’s schools are being asked to carry emotional and developmental challenges they were never designed—or resourced—to hold on their own. While teaching has always required patience, creativity, and skill, the scale and intensity of anxiety, disengagement, aggression, attention difficulties, and social strain arriving in classrooms today is unprecedented.

We can no longer assume students arrive ready to learn in the ways they once did. Curiosity, emotional resilience, flexibility, confidence, playfulness, and the capacity to engage with challenge—the foundations of learning—are increasingly fragile or missing. When these capacities are underdeveloped, behaviour and emotional distress often take their place, making teaching harder and learning more difficult for everyone.



A Developmental–Relational Lens for Moving Forward

This work approaches the challenges facing schools through a developmental and relational lens—one that helps educators understand behaviour, learning, and emotional well-being at their roots rather than reacting to what appears on the surface.

We consider where children and adolescents are developmentally and emotionally, what capacities are present, and what still needs time and support to grow. Central to this approach is the understanding that adults must lead. Schools are relational environments—not democracies—and students learn best when they can rest in the care, confidence, and authority of the adults responsible for them.

When adults work together to provide emotional safety, clear boundaries, and consistent leadership, behaviour settles, engagement increases, and both struggling students and high-capacity learners are better able to move forward.



Presentation Menu

The following presentations reflect Dr. MacNamara's most requested offerings for school communities. Sessions can be tailored for keynote presentations, half-day, or full-day professional learning, depending on the needs of your audience. A brief conversation can help determine the best fit for your school or district.

These presentations explore how educator–student relationships, adult leadership, and school culture shape learning, behaviour, and emotional well-being across classrooms and communities. There are three core areas of focus:

- **Social and emotional development**
- **Learning, Student-educator relationships and school culture**
- **Leadership and systems-level work**

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT



1. Heart Matters: What to Do with Student's Feelings?

Emotions are now widely recognized as central to learning and well-being—yet many educators are left unsure how to respond when feelings overwhelm students or disrupt classrooms. Despite good intentions, approaches aimed at calming, regulating, or redirecting emotions often fall short, leaving both students and adults frustrated. Drawing on developmental science, educators learn how emotions grow, why some students struggle to manage feelings, and what helps build emotional capacity over time. The focus is on practical, relationship-based responses that support students' emotional lives without minimizing feelings or losing adult leadership—helping classrooms become places where emotions no longer derail learning but are held in ways that support growth.



2. When Students Push Back: Understanding Resistance and Opposition

Resistance and opposition are common—and often misunderstood—responses in children and adolescents, particularly when they feel pressured, controlled, or overwhelmed. While these reactions can be developmentally normal and even protective in certain circumstances, their expression in the classroom can significantly disrupt engagement, cooperation, and learning. Educators gain insight into why students may refuse, oppose, shut down, or push back—and how adult responses can either intensify or soften these dynamics. Through a developmental and relational lens, we consider how to respond in ways that preserve the relationship, reduce escalation, and restore movement, while still holding our role as leaders in the classroom.

Presentation Menu

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT



3. Understanding Anxiety in Students: Cultivating resilience and courage

Anxiety is now the most common mental health challenge among children and adolescents, affecting learning, behaviour, and emotional well-being. Yet anxiety often presents in confusing and indirect ways, including avoidance, rigidity, aggression, obsessions, and physical symptoms. This presentation offers a developmentally grounded, relational approach to understanding and defusing anxiety. By exploring its many faces and underlying roots, participants gain clarity about what drives anxious behaviour and how well-intended responses can sometimes intensify distress. Rather than focusing on symptom management alone, educators and parents are supported in finding a clearer path forward—one that fosters emotional safety, resilience, and readiness to learn.



4. Understanding Attention Problems in Students: Why the lack of focus?

Attention and agitation challenges are increasing at alarming rates among children and adolescents, significantly impacting learning and behaviour at school and at home. Educators and parents alike often feel overwhelmed and unsure how to help a child who cannot seem to focus, settle, or sit still. This presentation offers a developmentally grounded understanding of attention problems, helping participants recognize how well-intended efforts to manage symptoms can sometimes intensify the issue. By exploring the two most common developmental roots of attention difficulties, educators gain clarity about what helps children come to rest and what supports sustained engagement and learning.



5. Cultivating Resilience and Resourcefulness in Students

Education depends on students being able to adapt, endure frustration, and find their way through challenge. Yet these capacities cannot be assumed—and in a time of rising anxiety and fragility, they are increasingly fragile themselves. Resilience and resourcefulness do not develop through encouragement or skills alone, but through experiences that are supported, contained, and guided by the adults responsible for student's care. This presentation explores the developmental roots of resilience, with particular attention to the role of frustration, vulnerability, and tears in emotional growth. Educators gain clarity about how their everyday interactions, limits, and relational presence shape students' capacity to cope, adapt, and persevere. The focus is on how adults can hold students through challenge in ways that strengthen emotional stamina and support long-term well-being—without rushing children or teens past feelings or shielding them from the realities of learning and life.

Presentation Menu

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT



6. Understanding Frustration and Aggression in Students

Frustration and aggression can quickly take over classrooms—erupting as tantrums, defiance, withdrawal, peer conflict, or sudden emotional outbursts, particularly when students face challenge, competition, or difficult relationships. When these behaviours escalate, learning stalls and educators are left managing disruption rather than teaching. This presentation helps educators understand the developmental roots of frustration and aggression and why these responses often intensify under pressure. Rather than focusing on surface behaviour, participants learn how frustration is meant to be processed and what happens when children lack the emotional capacity to do so. Educators gain guidance on how to respond in ways that reduce escalation, preserve authority, and support lasting change—helping students build the emotional strength needed to face challenge, engage with peers, and stay open to learning.



7. Understanding Adolescence: Engaging Teens and Supporting Development

Adolescence is one of the most misunderstood stages of development in schools. As students become more resistant, self-focused, emotionally intense, or disengaged, educators are often left wondering what normal, what signals growth, and what indicates that a student is becoming stuck. This presentation explores the developmental purpose of adolescence and the key emotional and relational changes unfolding during this stage. Educators gain insight into the natural push for autonomy, shifts in motivation, identity formation, and increased sensitivity to peers. Importantly, the presentation helps distinguish between healthy developmental rites of passage and signs that an adolescent is struggling. Participants leave with a clearer understanding of what adolescents' need from adults to remain engaged in learning—and how to support reluctant learners without escalating power struggles or disengagement.



8. Bullying: What Actually Helps—and the Role of Adults

Bullying remains one of the most challenging issues facing school communities. While policies and programs aim to stop bullying behaviours, many educators are left frustrated when interventions don't seem to create lasting change or when harmful dynamics re-emerge in new forms. This presentation reframes bullying through a developmental and relational lens, helping educators understand the emotional dynamics that drive both bullying behaviour and vulnerability. Participants explore what helps protect those being targeted, what reduces aggressive behaviour over time, and why adult leadership—not peer-based solutions—is critical. The focus is on how schools can create conditions that interrupt bullying patterns, support healthy peer relationships, and reduce harm—while moving beyond common myths about what “should” work.



Presentation Menu

LEARNING, EDUCATOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS AND SCHOOL CULTURE



1. The Teachability Factor: Why Learning Is Getting Harder

Many educators sense that teaching has become more difficult, even as expectations continue to rise. Teachability is one of the most important—and least understood—factors in learning success, and many of its foundations are shaped long before children enter the classroom. This presentation explores the concept of teachability through a developmental lens, examining why students may struggle to engage, attend, or tolerate challenge. Participants gain insight into the emotional and developmental foundations that make learning possible—and what happens when these foundations are fragile or missing. The focus is on restoring conditions that support curiosity, resilience, and readiness to learn.



2. What Students Need Most from Educators to Flourish

As learning, behaviour, and emotional well-being become increasingly intertwined, educators are being asked to support far more than academic outcomes alone. This presentation explores what children and adolescents need most from the educators who care for them to learn, grow, and flourish. Drawing on developmental science, it reframes behaviour and translates it as a signal, highlighting the relational conditions that support engagement, resilience, and teachability. Educators leave with a renewed understanding of their role as leaders in students' lives and greater confidence in how to create environments where students can thrive.



3. Why Relationships Matter in Cultivating a Positive School Culture

School culture is shaped less by individual effort and more by the relational patterns that exist across a building. This presentation examines why relationships are foundational to learning, behaviour, and emotional well-being—and how relational breakdowns can undermine even the best educational intentions. Through a developmental lens, educators gain insight into how connection supports authority, reduces behavioural escalation, and fosters a sense of belonging for students and staff alike. The focus is on restoring relational leadership and creating school cultures where students can rest, engage, and learn.

Presentation Menu

LEARNING, STUDENT/EDUCATOR
RELATIONSHIPS AND SCHOOL CULTURE

4. Cultivating Relationally Focused & Trauma-Sensitive Schools

This presentation offers a comprehensive, developmentally grounded framework for understanding student behaviour, emotional distress, and learning challenges through a relational and trauma-sensitive lens at the classroom, school, and systems level. Rather than focusing on isolated strategies, participants explore how emotional safety, adult leadership, and school culture work together to support maturation and resilience. Educators and administrators leave with a shared language, a deeper understanding of trauma and stress, and practical guidance for creating school environments that support both vulnerable students and the adults who care for them.

5. When Peers Matter More Than Teachers: Reclaiming Our Students

Peer relationships have always mattered, but when peers replace adults as the primary source of guidance, motivation, and belonging, learning and authority can suffer. This presentation explores peer orientation and its impact on classroom behaviour, engagement, and emotional well-being. Educators learn how peer-driven dynamics can undermine teachability and why restoring adult leadership is essential for healthy learning environments. The goal is to help students re-orient toward the adults who can best support their growth.

6. School, Stress & Resilience: How Culture Shapes Emotional Health

Stress and overwhelm are increasingly present in school communities, affecting both students and staff alike. This presentation examines how school culture can either amplify stress or support resilience. Through a developmental and relational lens, educators explore how emotional safety, predictability, and adult leadership help buffer stress and support well-being. Participants gain a clearer understanding of how everyday interactions and structures contribute to resilience at both individual and community levels.

7. Setting Kids Up for Learning Success: The Role of Home

This presentation explores the psychological foundations that support a child's capacity to learn, many of which are ideally cultivated in the home. Participants gain insight into the role parents play in preparing children for learning and supporting them through the inevitable ups and downs of school life. Moving beyond test scores and academic performance, this presentation reframes success around the realization of human potential and helps educators and parents work together to support children's readiness for learning.

Presentation Menu

FOR ADMIN, LEADERSHIP TEAM &
DISTRICT INITIATIVES



1. Building Culture, Connection & Leadership in School Communities

Healthy school cultures do not emerge by accident—they are shaped by leadership, relationships, and shared understanding across a community. This presentation supports school leaders in cultivating cultures that foster connection, coherence, and confidence across all roles within a school.

Drawing on developmental science, research, and case examples from elementary and secondary schools, this presentation examines the conditions that support lasting culture change. Rather than focusing on programs or initiatives in isolation, participants explore evidence-informed practices that strengthen adult alignment, relational leadership, and everyday interactions—practices shown to support student well-being, staff collaboration, and sustainable change over time.

School leaders leave with a clearer understanding of where time, energy, and leadership attention make the greatest difference in shaping learning environments where both students and adults can thrive.

Feedback from Participants



"It was simply a pleasure to have you here. I'll be looking for you at a future conference—and I know we'll have you back!" — *Acting Superintendent, School District #91 (Nechako Lakes), BC*



"Outstanding! One of the best sessions I have ever attended." — *Senior School Educator*



"Deb is always inspiring, with so many valuable takeaways as a teacher and a parent. I could listen to her forever." — *Parent & Educator*



"Having the language to identify and work with what I see in the classroom—like 'counterwill'—will be immensely helpful moving forward." — *Elementary School Teacher*

Dr. Deborah MacNamara has worked with public, Indigenous, independent, and faith-based school communities across Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.

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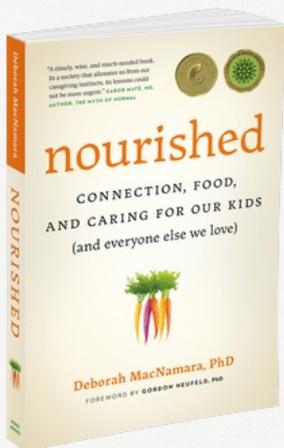
If you’d like to explore possibilities, availability, or fee information, please visit macnamara.ca/contact.

Gather to Eat

Attachment, Food, and Caretaking

Presentations by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

When feeding children becomes fraught with pressure, worry, and power struggles, something essential has been lost—despite our best intentions to nourish and care well. The key is in understanding how food serves us best when it serves togetherness.



In *Nourished*, Dr. Deborah MacNamara shows us how feeding is part of the caretaking relationship and cannot be separated from it. Informed by attachment science, developmental psychology, neuroscience, and research on human emotion.

Awarded Gold from Nautilus and Living Now for best parenting and health and wellness book in 2024.

Food was never meant to stand alone. Across human history, feeding has been one of our most powerful ways of conveying love, safety, and belonging. Yet today, eating has become increasingly depersonalized—focused on nutrients, outcomes, and control—often severed from the relational context in which nourishment is meant to unfold.

Drawing on Dr. Deborah MacNamara's award-winning, research-informed work in ***Nourished: Connection, Food, and Caring for Our Kids (and Everyone Else We Love)***, these presentations invite parents, educators, childcare providers, and helping professionals to reconnect food with relationship. Through a developmental and relational lens, they explore how feeding, emotion, attachment, and care come together—or fall apart—in homes, schools, and communities.

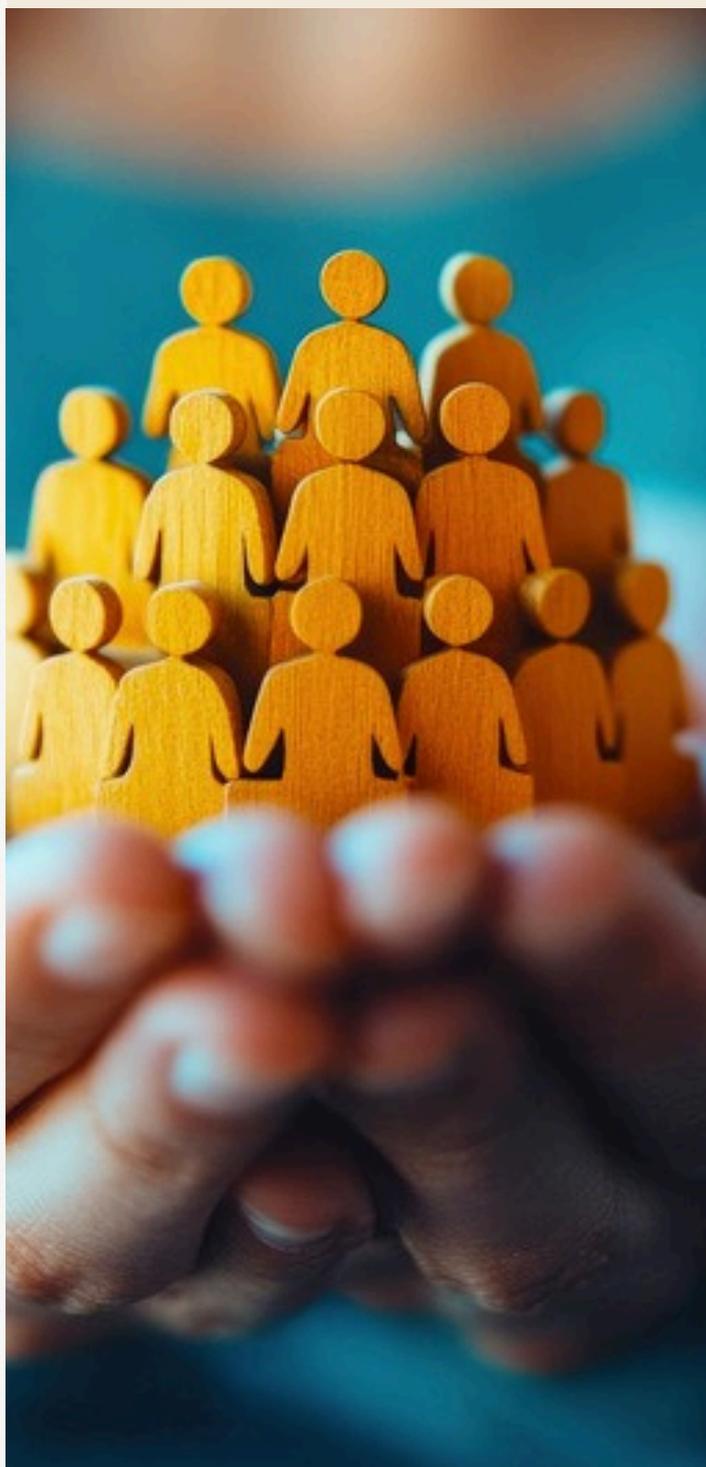
Rather than offering techniques or prescriptions, this work restores confidence in the adult's role as nurturer—helping adults use food as it was always meant to be used: as a powerful expression of care that strengthens connection, supports well-being, and helps children (and those who care for them) come to rest.

Why a Developmental- Relational Lens for Feeding and Eating Matters

Many feeding and eating challenges are approached as behavioural problems or nutritional concerns, disconnected from the emotional and relational conditions in which eating unfolds. A developmental-relational lens starts from a different place.

Eating is not just about what children eat, but who feeds them, how they are fed, and whether they feel safe enough to be receptive. When pressure, stress, alarm, or disconnection enter the feeding relationship, eating can become stuck showing up as picky eating, power struggles, refusal, digestive distress, or rigid patterns around food.

Gather to Eat presentations explore feeding challenges at their roots—where food, emotion, attachment, and development intersect. By understanding what disrupts receptivity and what restores it, adults can create the conditions that support competent eating, emotional well-being, and stronger relationships, returning food to its rightful place as a source of nourishment and care.





Presentation Menu

Gather to Eat presentations provide a developmentally grounded orientation to feeding and eating through the lens of relationship, emotion, and human development. They can be offered as keynotes, workshops, or half-day or full-day learning experiences, and tailored to parents, professionals, educators, and community audiences.

For professionals and communities seeking continued learning and application, extended professional development is available through the signature Gather to Eat course. Learn more at gathertoeat.com.



1. Gather first, then eat: How food, emotion, and attachment come together

We have never known more about food—yet feeding and eating struggles continue to rise. This presentation reframes nourishment as a relational and emotional experience, not a nutritional task alone. Participants explore what has been lost as food has been separated from caregiving, and how restoring the relational context of eating supports receptivity, emotional well-being, and resilience.



2. From Picky Eating to Power Struggles: A Developmental Lens on Eating Difficulties

From selective eating and food refusal to mealtime battles and control struggles, feeding challenges can leave adults feeling anxious and unsure how to proceed. This presentation helps participants understand eating difficulties as stress responses rather than behavioural problems, and why pressure and outcome-focused approaches often intensify resistance. The focus is on restoring receptivity and trust over time.

Gather to Eat Presentations



3. Gut Feelings: How Emotion and Stress Shape Digestion, Feeding, and Eating

Digestive discomfort, feeding, and eating challenges are increasingly common in children, often showing up as stomach aches, constipation, reflux, appetite changes, or distress around meals. This presentation explores the powerful connection between emotion, stress, and digestion, helping participants understand how alarm and nervous system strain can interfere with eating and digestion based on new gut-brain research. The focus is on creating conditions that support digestive ease and eating receptivity through emotional safety and caretaking.



4. The Wisdom of Eating Together: The Secrets of the Table and Why Shared Meals Matter

Across cultures and history, eating together has played a central role in human survival and belonging. This presentation explores why shared meals support emotional well-being, relational bonds, and resilience—and what gets in the way today. Rather than prescribing idealized family meals, participants are helped to reclaim the meaning and purpose of gathering to eat in realistic, compassionate ways.



5. Reclaiming Nourishment: Why Food Cannot Nourish Without Relationship

When food becomes separated from relationship, it loses its capacity to truly nourish. This presentation invites participants to rethink nourishment altogether moving beyond nutrients, schedules, and strategies to consider how care, intention, and emotional presence transform eating into a deeply human experience. Adults leave with renewed confidence in their role as providers and caretakers.

The Nourished Circle

The **Nourished Circle** was created to support parents, professionals, and communities who want to explore *Nourished* together—in **book clubs, professional reading groups, school communities, and caregiving teams.**

Nourished Circles are designed to invite reflection, conversation, and lived understanding—honouring feeding as one of our oldest and most relational ways of caring.



Nourished Circles can stand alone or be paired with a presentation, offering a way to deepen learning, strengthen connection, and keep the conversation alive long after an event ends.

Your Nourished Kit includes:



Bulk books are available to order within Canada and international locations including United States, Australia, NZ and Europe at 20% reduced price.

Each Nourished Circle Kit includes:

- A favourite recipe from the book *Nourished*
- Mint and moringa tea for each participant (Canada), inspired by a story in Chapter 1
- A printable discussion guide with three core questions to support meaningful dialogue
- A shared group exercise that brings the ideas to life
- A welcome video from Dr. Deborah MacNamara
- An invitation to a complimentary 30-minute live Q&A session with your group

Contact us: <https://macnamara.ca/contact/>

About Dr. Deborah MacNamara



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Dr. Deborah MacNamara is an award-winning researcher, author, developmentalist, counsellor, 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*.

Through her clinical work and teaching, Deborah has worked extensively with families and professionals responsible for caring for and feeding children—both within homes and in early learning, childcare, educational, and community settings.

Her work brings together food, emotion, attachment, and development, helping adults understand how eating challenges often reflect stress, disconnection, or unmet developmental needs rather than behavioural problems alone.

Deborah is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute and teaches nationally and internationally, translating developmental science into practical, relational care. Drawing on her experience as a teacher, counsellor, and educational administrator, she emphasizes adult leadership, emotional safety, and relationship as the foundation for healthy development.

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.

Reflections from Participants

-  *"The biggest thing getting in my way, was society's desire for "healthy eating", "good manners", "fuel for your body". I have had to re-wire my brain and it has been the best for my own stress levels (as the behavioural lens never felt good to me), and for my relationship with my children."*
-  *"Most importantly, I have let go of my wired desire to have my kids "finish their plate" or "eat three more bites". I am more focused on the caring nature and calm energy that I bring to the table instead of what goes into their mouths."*
-  *"Picky eating isn't about the food! Resonates with my situation perfectly with my step-daughters.. I feel finally more support that i am not doing it wrong."*
-  *"I didn't quite realize that before the course, and letting go of the nagging, and talking about food, and worrying about what she used to eat and doesn't anymore (often in her presence) has been life changing."*
-  *"What has resonated with me most deeply, is the way in which you've not only applied theoretical truth and understanding about the nature of human development (for child and adult alike, for all of us), but also, the way in which you've gone about this work is, in itself, relational! I feel as though you've been speaking personally to me."*

Want to Work Together?

Every community is unique, and learning is most meaningful when it reflects the people and context it serves. Deborah is happy to explore the needs of your school, organization, or parent community and how this work might best support it—whether through a keynote, half-day or full-day learning experience, or a longer-form series.

To begin a conversation please visit:
<https://macnamara.ca/contact/>

