

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.

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, 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*.

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.