



# BRAVE BRAINS

RENEWING HOPE FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE

## Trauma-Sensitive Tips for Teachers

### THE POWER OF THE BRAIN

**Brain anatomy impacts every aspect of our lives.**

By now you may be familiar with Dan Siegel's house model of the brain. If not, take a quick look at the afterword of *Riley the Brave* for an intro to "upstairs brain" and "downstairs brain." My hope is that this becomes common language in every school and home. It helps us make sense of behavior, and as you've probably heard, behavior is communication.

When children are in their "downstairs brain" or survival mode (i.e. irritable, defiant, withdrawn, aggressive), they often need a safe adult to help them find their way back to their "upstairs brain."

Unfortunately, a brain that's in survival mode isn't very good at figuring out who is safe and how to get help (see "safety blindness" in the afterword for more on that). So a student may continue to lash out even as you offer help. This leaves caring adults hurt, frustrated, and sometimes even hopeless.

**Riley the Brave and his animal  
friends are here to help!**



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Isn't Riley just angry and 'acting out' when he's brave like a porcupine or brave like a tiger?

Why talk about negative behavior in terms of bravery?

These are great questions!

Scientists are finding that early experiences lay a powerful neurological foundation for future behavior. Children who are loved and nurtured in utero and early childhood are able to trust others to take care of them. This frees their minds up for exploration and learning. They form the robust pathways to their "upstairs brains" that make self-regulation, self-reflection and positive relationships possible.



Unfortunately, early trauma and toxic stress teaches the opposite. Babies who experience abuse and neglect lay down strong automatic pathways to their "downstairs brains." Their ability to control their environment and disconnect from their deep need for others helps them survive. Children (and adults) living in poverty, systems of oppression, and chronic stress often have to protect themselves in similar ways. It's quite strong and adaptive, but it can create some challenges in a safe setting like a healthy classroom. We may continue

to see the defenses that helped them survive coming out against people who are being kind and caring.

**It's a challenging cycle,  
but we can break free!**



## THE POWER OF STORY

Stories have a way of reaching protected parts of our minds and making difficult topics safe. Using a story-telling tone of voice can disarm defenses and engage the “upstairs brain.” *Riley the Brave* gently introduces several challenging topics through its sweet story. Let’s take a look at a few:

- **BRAVERY:** A wise little first-grader said, “At the beginning of the story, how he was brave...it was different because he didn't have anyone to protect him. At the end, he had the elephants.” Remember, kids demonstrate tremendous strength and courage as they keep themselves alive and safe in dangerous circumstances. Let’s celebrate that strength even as we encourage the shift away from those behaviors. During that transition, it is important to see the courage that it takes Riley to do “simple” things like ask for help, play with others, and trust adults.
- **FAMILY:** As we know, families come in all shapes and sizes. Here's a little language tip from years in the child welfare field – keep the child first. It’s a child in foster care, not a “foster child” or a child by adoption instead of an “adopted child.” Many families have children by birth and by adoption (not “real kids” and “adopted kids”). This way of speaking can help normalize the diverse families in our school communities.
- **GENDER:** The elephants in the story are purposely gender-neutral. This makes it easier on the kids with two dads or two moms and others in the LGBTQ+ community. They also are specifically not called parents since there are families led by grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other caring adults. Readers can assign whatever gender they would like to these “safe big critters.”
- **FEELINGS:** After several readings, one astute kindergartener said, “It’s really a book about feelings, isn’t it?” Yes, yes it is! This can create opportunities for social emotional learning. Jorge the frog looks pretty scared when Riley is having a porcupine moment, but they are still friends. Sounds like the start of a wonderful class discussion or journal writing assignment!



## THE "PROBLEM CHILD"

It's not uncommon for kids to know who the "Riley" is in their class. Before discussion starts to turn to what other kids do wrong, I suggest setting the rule for the group that we can only talk about our own tiger or porcupine moments. *Riley the Brave* is a great tool for helping students develop empathy for others and compassion for the root of bad behavior, but openly discussing someone else's "downstairs brain" tendencies in a group setting is probably not helpful.

## CREATING A CULTURE OF SAFETY

Some of your "Rileys" are in safe homes but dealing with the aftermath of early trauma. Unfortunately, some are still living with poverty, systemic racism, housing instability, or even abuse and neglect. They might be dealing with the death of a family member or a stressful event like parents getting divorced. This means they will be trying to transition from their protective "downstairs brains" at home into "upstairs brain" mode in the classroom to learn. This makes creating a culture of safety at school extremely important!

**BraveBrains is here to help YOU  
light up the learning brain!**

Find tips, strategies, and trauma-sensitive activities in *Riley the Brave Makes It to School*, *Riley the Brave's Sensational Senses*, and *Riley the Brave's Big Feelings Activity Book*!





## INTERACTING WITH THE "RILEYS" IN YOUR CLASS

Trauma breeds trauma (literally, on a neurological level). The adult brain's natural response to prickly porcupine behavior is to get defensive! It's a brain thing! Luckily, we can be the boss of our brains. Here are a few tips to help you and all the brave cubs in your class

- **Be a team!** You probably already do this as a class – try to seek out your “Rileys” and have a special team name with each of them.
- **Incorporate safe touch and friendly eye contact** whenever possible. Remember that a stern face and “teacher voice” may be triggering for a child who is operating from survival mode.
- **Unpredictability is scary**, and transitions can be especially challenging for stressed brains. Try to provide extra support, incorporating play, movement, or rhythm when possible.
- **Consider each student’s emotional age**, not just chronological age.
- **As you incorporate brain-building practices** that encourage self-reflection and stillness, recognize that the “Rileys” in your class will struggle. Often these kids live in “fight / flight / freeze” mode, so calm is unfamiliar and scary.
- **Many children with a history of early trauma also have sensory processing difficulties.** Consider recommending a thorough occupational therapy evaluation if a child is frequently dysregulated.
- **We are always looking for progress, not perfection.** As your little Riley gains some “felt safety” and spends more time in their big, beautiful “upstairs brain,” you may notice that behavioral challenges grow less frequent, less intense, and shorter in duration. Celebrate those improvements! Did Riley stop talking *before* swearing at you? Did they just threaten to throw the chair but not actually do it this time? That’s progress – we’re all working on growth mindset, right?
- **Be prepared for setbacks.** Keep communication lines open with parents and caregivers so you can be aware of additional stressors, people coming and going or other things that might be extra challenging for Riley.





# NURTURING YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN

Adults have “downstairs brain” moments just like kids. Have you ever felt like a grumpy porcupine when your alarm goes off Monday morning? Of course you have! When you notice yourself “having a moment” at school, use it as an opportunity to model a healthy practice like breathing before responding or taking a break in the cozy corner.

Set some healthy rhythms for yourself and take breaks when needed. Many schools are finding success with implementing a “tap out” system. When stress is high, educators can take a few minutes to get their upstairs brain back in charge before re-entering the classroom.

When part of your job is embracing porcupines and helping tigers retract their claws, you need strong supports and healthy habits. They are actually sweet, brave cubs, but their porcupine and tiger brains get very protective, making it *feel* like there is a wild animal in your classroom. Seek out good training on these topics to make the days less stressful. And whether it’s a morning run, coffee with a close friend, or mindful practices built into your day, taking care of yourself is a job requirement!

## NEXT STEPS

- > Equip elementary counselors and teachers with our [resource bundles](#).
- > Empower your team with [dynamic professional development](#).



**Great content. Great delivery. Very pertinent & well organized.**

–Principal, Canada



**Knowledgeable; creative; inspiring; engaging; genuine; and spot-on with the brain research and recommendations!**

–Training Director, Oregon

## Questions?

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