

**Tips for Helping Kids Cope when the World Feels Scary:**

*Supporting Emotional Safety in an Uncertain World*

**Community Conversations with a Pediatric Psychologist**

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# What to expect today

- 15-minute talk – recorded for our website  
*Webinar format: audience not visible, no mics*  
*Drop questions in the chat – we'll answer them after the talk!*
- Resources at the end of the slides
- 30 minutes of Q&A – NOT recorded  
*Audience invited to be visible, mics can be turned on*

***Ask Me Anything!***

***Being a parent is hard – we could all use the ear of child psychologists, so we can ask our burning questions.***

# Scenario

*A parent is driving their child to school when a scary news story comes on the radio.*

*From the back seat, a small voice asks:*

**“Could that happen here?”**

**Or..**

**“Could that happen to me?”**

# What we do next matters...

Kids are picking up on ...

...What they hear

...What they see

...What the adults around them feel

Even when nothing is said directly...  
they're still making sense of it.

# In the moment...what helps?

- Pause → take a breath
- Answer only what they're asking
- Validate: "That makes sense to feel that way"
- Reassure: "You're safe. I'm here."

# What counts as “bad things”?

- Community violence
- Illness or death
- Deportation/immigration fears
- Bullying
- Racism/discrimination
- War

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# How Kids Experience Stress

- Not just emotional— stress is a whole body experience !
- Fight / flight / freeze
- Stress hormones (cortisol)



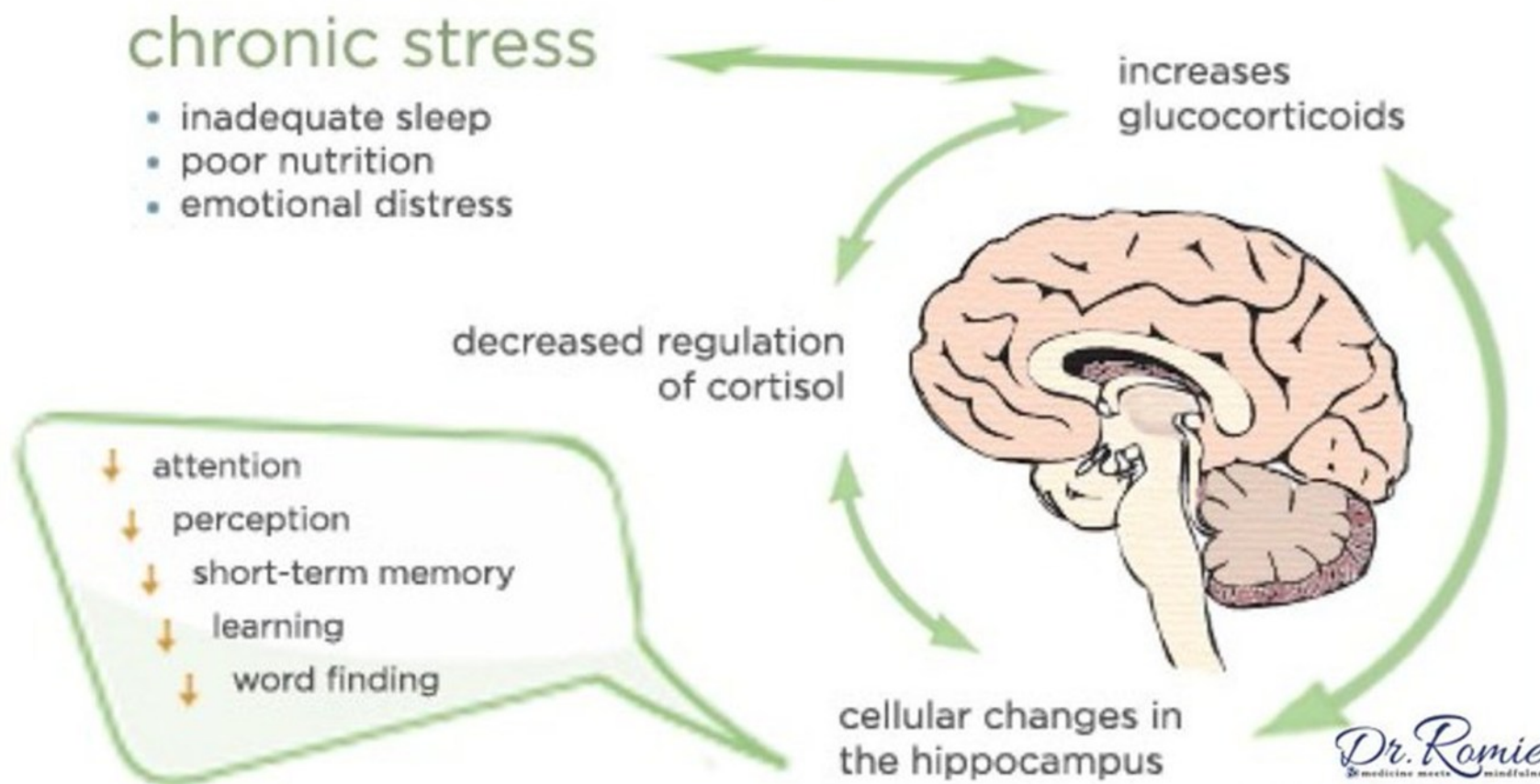
# Acute vs. Chronic Stress

Acute: one event (e.g., shooting, death)

Chronic: ongoing uncertainty (e.g., racism, immigration fears)

# STRESS & YOUR BRAIN

## The stress-brain loop



# Impact on Kids

Emotional:

Anxiety, sadness, irritability

Behavioral:

Clinginess, aggression, withdrawal

Physical:

Sleep problems, headaches

# Impact on Learning & Functioning

- Attention and concentration ↓
- Memory ↓
- School performance ↓
- More behavioral disruptions

# What Kids Need Most

- Safety
- Honesty (developmentally appropriate)
- Connection

👉 Core message:

“I’m here, I’m listening, and we can face this together.”

# How Parents Can Respond (Framework)

1. **Pause & regulate yourself**
2. **Ask what they know**
3. **Validate feelings**
4. **Provide simple, truthful information**
5. **Reassure safety (when possible)**

# Development Matters

- Young children (3–7):
  - Concrete, literal
  - Magical thinking
- School-age (7-12)
  - More awareness, still need reassurance
- Teens: (12-18)
  - Abstract thinking
  - Justice-focused, emotionally intense

# What NOT to Do

- ✗ Avoid the topic
- ✗ Give too much detail
- ✗ Dismiss feelings (“you’re fine”)
- ✗ Over-reassure unrealistically

# The Power of Modeling

**Kids read your emotions more than your words**

**Calm ≠ no emotion**

**Show:**

- o **Regulated feelings**
- o **Coping strategies**



# Coping Strategies for Kids

## Helping Children Manage Stress



Deep breathing



Drawing/writing



Play

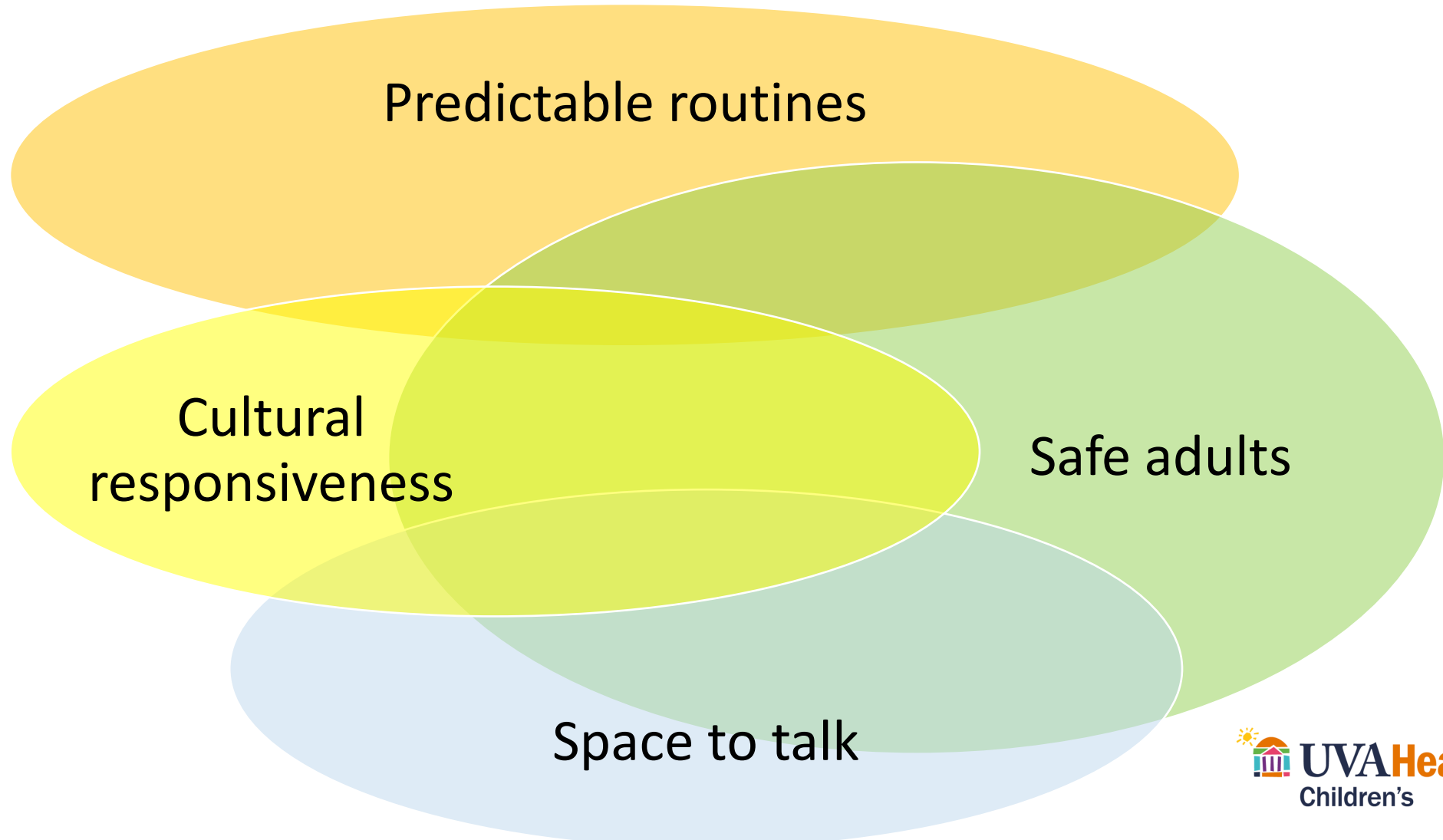


Routine



Limiting media exposure

# Role of Schools & Community



# Summary

- Start with *listening*, not explaining
- Keep it *simple, honest, and age-appropriate*
- Reassure safety—but don't overpromise
- Name and validate feelings
- It's okay not to have all the answers

## **Bottom line:**

*Your calm, presence, and openness matter more than perfect words.*



***“I’m here, I’m listening, and we can face this together.”***

# Resources for Parents & Caregivers: Guidance on Talking to Kids about Difficult Events

- **Sesame Workshop – *Sesame Street in Communities***

Free videos and tools to help young children cope with trauma, big feelings, and stressful events

 [Explore resources](#)

- **American Academy of Pediatrics:** Guidance on talking to kids about tragedies and difficult news events  <https://www.healthychildren.org>

- **Child Mind Institute:** Practical articles on anxiety, trauma, and what to say in the moment  <https://childmind.org>

- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network:** Parent-friendly guides for helping children cope with trauma and stress  <https://www.nctsn.org>

- **When the World Feels like a Scary Place: Essential Conversations for Anxious Parents and Worried Kids**  <https://abigailgewirtz.com/about-the-book>