

# Upstairs Brain vs. Downstairs Brain

While the brain is complex, we can look at it as 2 basic parts: "upstairs" responding and "downstairs" reacting. People who experience repeated trauma may get stuck downstairs and not have access to upstairs skills.

*"Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies"*

- Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, Psychiatrist



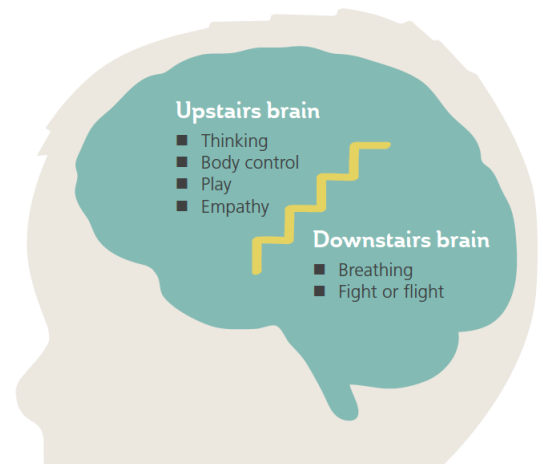
## Upstairs "thinking" skills:

- Recognizing the **ACTUAL** level of current threat
- Considering others' perspectives
- Body control
- Join in with play/fun/relaxation
- Adaptability to change
- Answer: *"What did you do?"*



## Downstairs "adrenaline" actions:

- Keeps us alive/alert/awake, responding to perceived threat by fight, flight, or freeze
- Looks like:
  - being easily triggered/upset
  - being non-compliant
  - poor resilience, poor behaviour control, arguing, substance misuse
- Answer: *"What happened to you?"*



Source: DJ Siegel & TP Bryson, *The whole-brain child: 12 revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*, Scribe, Brunswick, Vic., 2012

## STRATEGIES

- **Self:** notice 3 things you see, hear, touch, smell; focus on your breath; look at how others are acting/reacting; reach out to a safe person
- **Other:** help the person think through consequences; identify triggers in the person's environment

