

# **Emotions and Behaviours: *Understanding and Supporting Children with Complex Needs***

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## **Introduction**

Children and young people with, or requiring an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) often navigate complex emotional and behavioural landscapes shaped by their unique biographies. Their lived experiences - marked by academic struggles, social challenges, and sensory sensitivities - profoundly influence how they perceive school and interact with their environment. Emotions are not just fleeting feelings; they are biological responses hardwired into our autonomic nervous system, triggered automatically by what we perceive in our environment or by memories of past experiences. For these children, school can often feel like a battleground of overwhelming emotions, where each day presents new triggers for anxiety, frustration, and shame.

This handout aims to provide parents and teachers with the tools to look beyond presenting behaviours, recognising how past experiences shape emotional responses and drive behaviour. By exploring key psychological theories, we aim to equip you with insights that will help you understand and support these children with empathy and targeted interventions. The quality of your relationship with the child plays a crucial role in helping them navigate their emotional world, fostering trust and creating opportunities for positive engagement.

## **The Importance of Understanding Emotions and Behaviours**

Emotions are not just fleeting feelings but powerful, automatic responses that guide how we respond to the world around us. 'Affects' are biological markers hardwired into our autonomic nervous system, meaning they are automatic responses that occur without conscious choice. When a child perceives something in their environment - whether it's a task at school, a social interaction, or a sensory experience - these affects are triggered instantly. By the time we experience an emotion positively or negatively, it has already been set in motion by the immediate stimulus or by thoughts and memories from previous experiences that are stored in the brain. These responses are not choices; they happen automatically, influencing how a child reacts to their surroundings.

### **Understanding Scripts:**

While affects are the immediate, biological responses to stimuli, scripts are the patterns of emotional responses that develop over time based on repeated experiences. Scripts are essentially the emotional "blueprints" that guide behaviour, formed from the child's past encounters with similar situations. For example, a child who repeatedly experiences failure in a particular subject may develop a script that associates that subject with distress and avoidance. These scripts can include deeply embedded thoughts like "I am stupid" or "I always fail," which shape how the child views themselves and the tasks they encounter.

### **Scripts as Behavioural Guides:**

Scripts act like a guidebook that directs a child's actions and reactions. Positive scripts, shaped by experiences of joy, interest, and success, guide children towards tasks and interactions that they find engaging and rewarding. Conversely, negative scripts, formed from experiences of shame, fear, or frustration, steer children away from challenging tasks or situations, fostering avoidance, withdrawal, and defensive behaviours. The interplay of these scripts significantly impacts a child's self-concept, motivation, and overall engagement in learning.

### **Affective Resonance and the Loop of Emotions:**

Affective resonance means that once one script is triggered, it can activate a cascade of related emotions, reinforcing negative beliefs and behaviours. For instance, a script triggered by a challenging task might bring up feelings of fear, followed by thoughts of inadequacy like "I can't do

this,” which then perpetuates the cycle of avoidance. This loop can be difficult to break, especially if the child feels misunderstood or unsupported by the adults around them. Without understanding the underlying affects and scripts, supporting adults may miss critical opportunities to disrupt these negative cycles.

### **Role of Adults in Breaking the Negative Loop:**

To break the loop of negative affective resonance, it is crucial that supporting adults understand the child’s emotional world. Disrupting negative scripts requires knowing enough about the child to engage them in ways that trigger positive affects, such as interest and excitement. This is where the quality of relationships plays a crucial role; supportive relationships built on trust, empathy, and understanding provide the foundation for positive interventions that can shift a child’s emotional and behavioural scripts towards more adaptive and positive patterns.

### **Fostering Positive Affects and Building a Growth Mindset:**

When adults actively work to engage children through activities that excite and interest them, they trigger positive affects that can help counteract negative scripts. Positive affects not only enhance engagement but also build resilience, helping children develop a “can-do” attitude and a growth mindset. When children feel reassured that they are supported by adults who understand and care about fostering their engagement and excitement in learning, they become more open to facing challenges and less likely to be held back by fear or self-doubt.

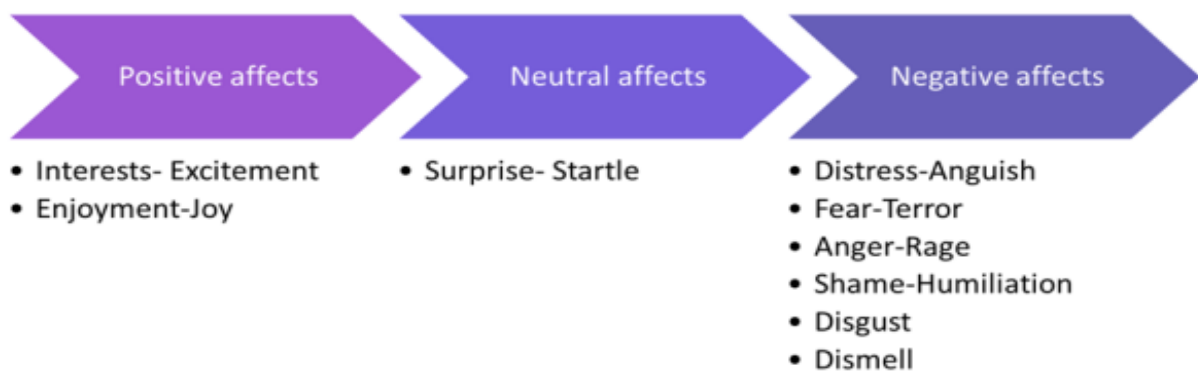
Understanding the biological basis of affects and the formation of scripts is essential for recognising the factors that drive behaviour. By appreciating the automatic nature of these responses and the powerful role of scripts in guiding actions, parents and teachers can create environments that foster positive emotional experiences, helping children feel motivated, engaged, and ready to learn.

### **Applying Tomkins' Theory of Affect Script**

#### **Overview of Tomkins' Theory:**

Following the foundational understanding of affects as automatic biological responses and scripts as learned guides of behaviour, Tomkins’ Theory of Affect Script provides a deeper categorisation of these emotional responses. Tomkins identified nine affect scripts, categorised into three groups: positive, neutral, and negative (see Figure 1 below). These scripts help explain how repeated emotional experiences influence behaviour, guiding children either towards engagement and connection or towards avoidance and withdrawal.

**Figure 1: Mapping Emotional Responses - The Nine Affect Scripts**



1. **Positive Affects:** Joy/enjoyment, interest/excitement.
2. **Neutral Affect:** Surprise/startle.

3. **Negative Affects:** Distress/anguish, fear/terror, shame/humiliation, dissmell/disgust, anger/rage, dissmell/contempt.

### **How Affect Scripts Manifest in Children's Behaviour:**

Children are naturally drawn to experiences that trigger positive affects, such as joy and excitement. These affects not only motivate engagement but also foster a sense of competence, connection, and a positive self-concept. However, persistent academic or social struggles can steer children towards negative scripts. For instance, a child who repeatedly encounters failure, social rejection, or overwhelming sensory experiences may develop scripts dominated by distress, shame, or fear. Over time, these negative scripts can lead children to anticipate failure and rejection, fostering hypervigilance, avoidance, and a deep sense of helplessness.

### **Formation of Scripts:**

Scripts are emotional patterns that develop through repeated exposure to similar experiences. For example, a child who consistently struggles with reading might form a script that links reading with feelings of failure, shame, and frustration. These scripts often include negative internal dialogues, such as "I am stupid" or "I can't do this," which influence how the child perceives themselves and their abilities. Affective resonance further complicates this by triggering a cascade of related negative emotions once a single script is activated, reinforcing harmful beliefs and behaviours.

### **Impact of Affective Resonance and the Role of Relationships:**

Affective resonance—the automatic triggering of related emotional scripts—can trap children in cycles of distress, shame, and avoidance, making it challenging to engage them positively. To break this negative loop, adults need to deeply understand the child's emotional triggers and work to foster positive affects that can disrupt these harmful patterns. This underscores the critical importance of quality relationships; without trust and understanding, children may mask their true feelings, further entrenching negative scripts.

### **Role of Adults in Supporting Positive Scripts:**

Supportive adults play a pivotal role in helping children reframe negative scripts into positive ones. By creating learning environments that engage a child's strengths and interests, adults can trigger positive affects, encouraging the child to participate, take risks, and succeed. Trust, empathy, and a genuine understanding of the child's needs are the cornerstones of these supportive relationships. When adults provide consistent, empathetic support and actively engage children through activities that resonate with them, they help disrupt negative scripts and promote resilience and a growth mindset.

### **Triggering Positive Affects to Break Negative Cycles:**

To effectively help children move out of negative affective loops, adults need to focus on fostering positive affects like interest and excitement. This can be achieved by tailoring learning experiences to the child's strengths and preferences, creating an environment where they feel understood, valued, and motivated. Triggering positive affects not only increases engagement but also builds emotional resilience, helping children to develop a "can-do" attitude. When children feel secure in the support of understanding adults, they are more willing to confront challenges and are less likely to succumb to self-doubt.

### **Developing a Growth Mindset through Support and Engagement:**

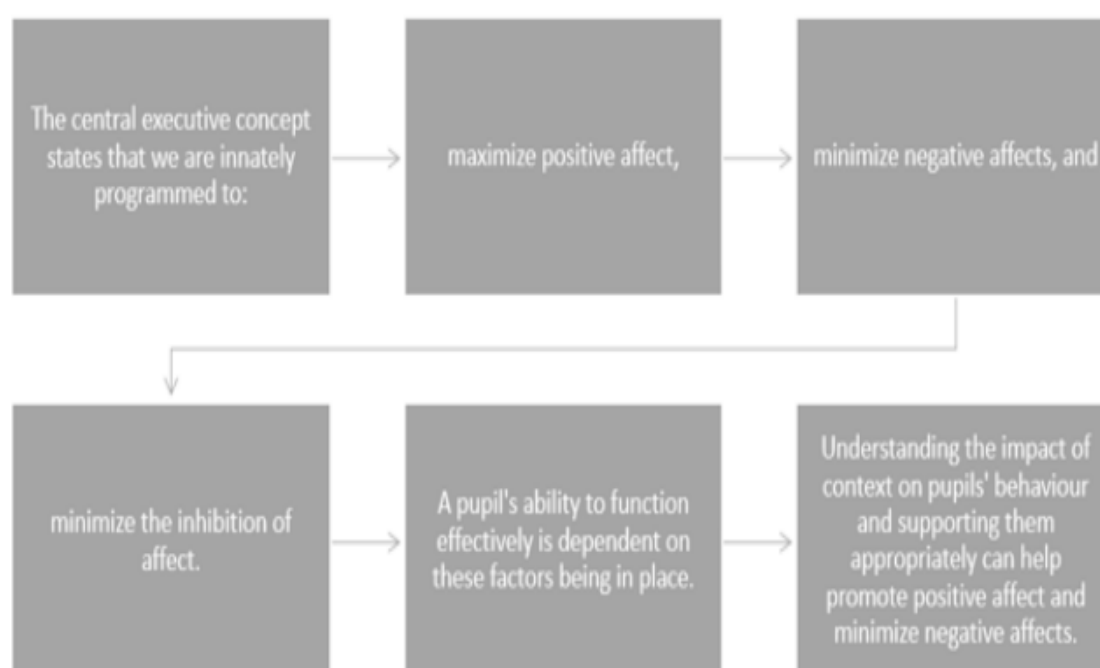
A child who feels consistently supported and understood is more likely to believe in their capacity to overcome obstacles. The reassurance provided by a caring, empathetic relationship fosters a mindset of "I can try" rather than "I can't." This shift is vital, as it transforms the child's approach to learning from one of avoidance to one of active engagement and exploration. By focusing on what excites and engages the child, adults can help them build the confidence needed to tackle challenges, ultimately reshaping their educational journey from a cycle of avoidance to a path of growth and discovery.

## The Central Blueprint Rules of Tomkins' Affect Theory

### Understanding the Central Blueprint:

Tomkins' Central Blueprint outlines four fundamental rules that guide emotional regulation, emphasising the importance of managing automatic emotional responses to shape scripts positively. These rules are essential for understanding how to support children's emotional well-being, particularly for those who have experienced repeated negative triggers. Each rule plays a vital role in managing affects—those automatic, hardwired emotional responses—and in influencing the development of scripts, which guide a child's behaviour over time.

**Figure 2: The Central Blueprint of Emotional Regulation: Maximising Positive and Minimising Negative Affects**



### The Four Rules of the Central Blueprint:

#### 1. Maximise Positive Affect:

This rule focuses on creating environments and interactions that trigger positive affects, such as joy and excitement. Engaging the child's interests, strengths, and preferences is crucial in promoting positive scripts that encourage active participation and learning. By maximising positive affect, adults help disrupt the cycle of negative emotional scripts, fostering resilience and a sense of competence. Positive affects not only make tasks more enjoyable but also serve as powerful motivators, drawing children towards activities that build self-esteem and confidence.

#### 2. Minimise Negative Affect:

Reducing the triggers of negative affects, such as fear, shame, or distress, is essential in supporting emotional regulation. This rule underscores the proactive role of adults in identifying and modifying environmental factors that contribute to negative emotional responses. For instance, reducing pressure, offering manageable challenges, and providing clear instructions can help minimise feelings of overwhelm. By actively working to decrease negative stimuli, adults can prevent the formation of harmful scripts and support the child in feeling safe and understood.

#### 3. Minimise Inhibition of Affect:

Suppressing emotions, particularly negative ones, can be detrimental to a child's emotional and

behavioural development. This rule advises against forcing children to mask or hide their true feelings, as suppression can lead to a build-up of unresolved emotions that may later manifest as behavioural outbursts or internalised distress. Instead, children should be encouraged to express their emotions in safe and constructive ways. Providing outlets for expression, such as talking, drawing, or other creative activities, allows children to process their emotions and prevents the deepening of negative scripts.

4. **Maximise Expression of Affect:**

Expressing emotions - whether positive or negative - is crucial for emotional growth and self-regulation. This rule encourages adults to create safe spaces where children feel free to express their emotions without fear of judgement or punishment. Open expression helps children better understand their feelings, and it allows adults to provide the support needed to navigate these emotions constructively. By maximising the expression of affect, adults can help children develop healthier scripts and build the emotional resilience needed to face challenges.

**Connecting Blueprint Rules to Affects and Scripts:**

These four rules collectively guide how adults can manage the automatic emotional responses (affects) of children, shaping their emotional scripts over time. By consciously working to maximise positive experiences and reduce negative triggers, adults play a proactive role in influencing the emotional landscape of the child. Each interaction becomes an opportunity to reinforce positive scripts that build confidence, promote engagement, and foster a growth mindset.

**Practical Application:**

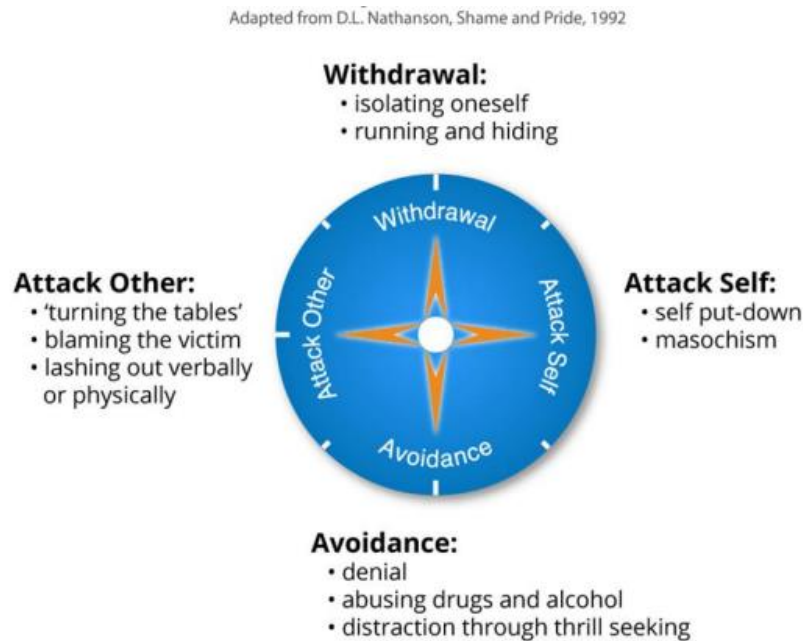
- **Engage Interests:** Incorporate activities that the child finds exciting and enjoyable, using these moments to trigger positive scripts of joy and interest.
- **Reduce Negative Triggers:** Identify situations that commonly cause distress and modify them to be more manageable for the child, helping to minimise negative affect.
- **Encourage Emotional Expression:** Provide consistent opportunities for the child to express their emotions in ways that feel safe and supported, such as through conversations or creative outlets.
- **Support Open Communication:** Build trusting relationships where the child feels comfortable expressing both positive and negative emotions, knowing that they will be met with understanding and empathy.

**Nathanson's Compass of Shame**

**Understanding the Compass of Shame:**

Nathanson's Compass of Shame expands on Tomkins' Affect Theory by specifically addressing how individuals respond to feelings of shame - a particularly powerful and interpersonal negative affect. Shame is an automatic emotional response that often arises from past experiences of failure, rejection, or unmet expectations. For children, especially those with additional needs, shame can be a frequent and deeply impactful emotional trigger, shaping how they interact with their environment and perceive themselves.

**Figure3: Navigating Shame: Understanding the Four Responses to Shame**



#### **The Four Shame Responses:**

Nathanson identified four common responses to shame, each representing a script that children may adopt as a way of managing overwhelming feelings of unworthiness:

1. **Withdrawal:** The child retreats into themselves, avoiding tasks, social interactions, or any situation that might trigger further shame. This response often manifests as school avoidance, isolation, or emotional withdrawal, as the child seeks to protect themselves from additional negative affect.
2. **Avoidance:** To escape the discomfort of shame, the child may engage in distractions or behaviours that divert attention away from their perceived flaws. This can include excessive daydreaming, avoidance of responsibilities, or over-reliance on screens and other escape activities.
3. **Attack Self:** Some children turn their shame inward, blaming and criticising themselves. This internalised script may include self-deprecating thoughts like "I am stupid" or "I can't do anything right," severely impacting their self-esteem and reinforcing a fixed ability mindset.
4. **Attack Others:** Alternatively, the child may direct their shame outward, becoming aggressive or blaming others for their discomfort. This defensive response often serves as a shield to protect a fragile sense of self, deflecting attention from their own perceived inadequacies.

#### **Linking Shame Responses to Scripts:**

These shame responses are not conscious choices but automatic reactions shaped by past negative experiences. Each response represents a learned script that guides the child's behaviour in moments of vulnerability. For example, a child who frequently hears criticism may adopt the "attack self" response, internalising shame and feeling perpetually inadequate. Recognising these scripts as automatic helps adults understand that these behaviours are deeply rooted in the child's emotional experience and are not simply acts of defiance or misbehaviour.

#### **Impact of Shame on Behaviour:**

Persistent shame not only damages self-esteem but also creates a cycle of avoidance, self-attack, or aggression that becomes difficult to break. These shame-driven scripts can lead to learned helplessness, where the child feels powerless to change their circumstances, and a fixed mindset,

where they believe they are incapable of success. Understanding the automatic nature of these responses is crucial in supporting the child effectively.

### **Intervention through Understanding and Empathy:**

Supportive adults play a critical role in disrupting shame scripts and fostering healthier emotional responses. Recognising and validating the child's feelings of shame, without judgement, helps the child feel understood and safe. This empathetic approach can break the negative loop of shame, allowing the child to express their emotions constructively and develop more adaptive coping strategies.

### **Practical Application:**

- **Create a Shame-Free Environment:** Avoid language or actions that could inadvertently trigger shame. Focus on effort, growth, and positive reinforcement rather than on shortcomings.
- **Validate Emotions:** Acknowledge the child's feelings of shame and provide reassurance that their worth is not defined by their mistakes or struggles.
- **Encourage Positive Scripts:** Engage the child in activities that highlight their strengths and interests, helping to counterbalance the negative effects of shame and promoting a positive self-concept.
- **Model Healthy Coping:** Demonstrate ways to handle mistakes and setbacks constructively, showing the child that it is okay to fail and try again.

Nathanson's Compass of Shame provides a valuable framework for understanding how children respond to negative emotional triggers. By recognising these responses as automatic scripts, adults can intervene in meaningful ways, supporting children to move beyond shame and towards resilience and a healthier self-view. Through empathetic engagement, adults can help rewrite shame scripts, fostering a supportive environment that encourages positive emotional growth and behavioural change.

### **Practical Scenarios and Strategies**

This section provides practical scenarios that demonstrate how understanding affects and scripts can inform effective strategies to support children's emotional and behavioural needs. Each scenario illustrates how adults can intervene by recognising automatic emotional responses and reshaping scripts to foster positive engagement and a growth mindset.

#### **Scenario 1: Classroom Task Avoidance**

##### **Situation:**

A student frequently avoids participating in reading aloud during class, displaying signs of anxiety and avoidance behaviours. This avoidance is driven by a negative script formed through past experiences of failure or embarrassment, triggering shame and fear.

##### **Strategy:**

- **Recognise the Affect and Script:** Understand that the child's avoidance is an automatic response triggered by past negative experiences, not a deliberate refusal to engage.
- **Supportive Intervention:** Offer alternative ways to participate, such as reading in pairs or pre-reading at home, to reduce the stressor and minimise negative affect.
- **Reinforce Positive Affect:** Celebrate small successes, such as reading a short passage or answering a related question, to trigger positive affects of joy and achievement, helping to rewrite the negative script.

## Scenario 2: Aggressive Behaviour at Home

### Situation:

A child reacts with anger and aggression during homework time, expressing frustration with tasks they find difficult. This behaviour is tied to an internalised script of self-criticism and feelings of inadequacy.

### Strategy:

- **Identify the Shame Response:** Recognise that the child's aggressive behaviour is a manifestation of the "attack others" shame response, where anger is directed outward as a defence against feelings of failure.
- **Intervention through Empathy:** Validate the child's feelings by acknowledging their frustration and offering support rather than punishment. Use statements like, "I know this is hard, but I'm here to help."
- **Break Tasks into Manageable Steps:** Simplify the homework into smaller parts, allowing the child to experience manageable successes, thereby triggering positive affects and building confidence.

## Scenario 3: Emotional Withdrawal During Social Activities

### Situation:

A child consistently withdraws during group activities, often sitting on the sidelines or refusing to join in. This behaviour is linked to a script of social rejection and fear of being judged by peers.

### Strategy:

- **Understand the Script:** Recognise that the child's withdrawal is driven by past negative experiences in social settings, triggering distress and avoidance.
- **Encourage Gradual Participation:** Start with low-pressure opportunities for the child to engage, such as participating as a helper or observer, to slowly build their comfort and reduce the impact of negative affect.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Praise the child's efforts to join in, even in small ways, to foster positive scripts of social competence and belonging.

## Scenario 4: Perfectionism Leading to Task Refusal

### Situation:

A child refuses to start a drawing assignment because they believe they can't do it perfectly. This behaviour is rooted in a script of fear of failure and shame.

### Strategy:

- **Acknowledge the Affect:** Identify the underlying shame and fear of not meeting expectations that drive the refusal to engage.
- **Model Imperfection:** Show examples of imperfect work and discuss how mistakes are part of learning, helping to minimise the negative affect associated with failure.
- **Encourage Creative Expression:** Provide praise for effort, creativity, and trying something new, focusing on the process rather than the outcome to disrupt the perfectionism script.

## Quick-Reference Guide for Parents and Teachers



This quick-reference guide provides practical strategies to help parents and teachers support children by understanding their emotional responses, managing automatic affects, and positively influencing scripts. Each strategy is designed to align with the principles of fostering positive affects, disrupting negative scripts, and building supportive, trusting relationships.

### **1. Leverage Strengths and Interests to Maximise Positive Affect**

- **Why It Works:** Engaging a child's strengths and interests triggers positive affects such as joy and excitement, helping to break negative scripts associated with avoidance or failure.
- **How to Apply:** Incorporate the child's interests into learning activities. For example, if a child enjoys art, use drawing as a tool for storytelling or problem-solving tasks.

### **2. Create a Safe and Trusting Environment to Minimise Negative Affect**

- **Why It Works:** Reducing triggers that cause distress or anxiety helps prevent the formation of negative scripts and supports the child in feeling secure and understood.
- **How to Apply:** Maintain consistent routines, provide clear instructions, and offer choices to give the child a sense of control. Be mindful of sensory sensitivities and adjust the environment to reduce stressors.

### **3. Encourage Open Emotional Expression to Maximise Expression of Affect**

- **Why It Works:** Allowing children to express their emotions freely helps them process feelings constructively and prevents the build-up of negative affect.
- **How to Apply:** Encourage the child to talk about their feelings, use journaling or art as emotional outlets, and validate their emotions without judgement.

### **4. Avoid Suppressing Emotions and Encourage Healthy Coping**

- **Why It Works:** Suppressing emotions can lead to maladaptive behaviours, such as outbursts or withdrawal. Healthy coping strategies help children manage emotions without negative impacts on behaviour.
- **How to Apply:** Model healthy emotional expression by sharing your own feelings appropriately and guiding the child through calming techniques like deep breathing or mindfulness activities.

### **5. Focus on Effort, Not Just Outcomes, to Develop a Growth Mindset**

- **Why It Works:** Emphasising effort and progress rather than just results helps the child build resilience and a belief in their ability to improve and learn.
- **How to Apply:** Praise the child for their effort and perseverance, especially when tasks are challenging. Highlight what they did well and discuss what can be learned from mistakes.

### **6. Build Strong, Supportive Relationships to Disrupt Negative Scripts**

- **Why It Works:** Trusting relationships are crucial in helping children feel understood and supported, reducing the likelihood of masking and avoidance.
- **How to Apply:** Spend quality time with the child, listen actively, and be consistent in your support. Demonstrate empathy and patience, showing the child that you are there to help them through difficulties.

### **7. Provide Clear, Manageable Steps to Minimise Overwhelm**

- **Why It Works:** Breaking tasks into smaller, manageable steps reduces the likelihood of triggering negative affects like fear or frustration, making tasks feel achievable.
- **How to Apply:** Simplify instructions and check in regularly to ensure the child feels comfortable with each step. Use visual aids or checklists to help guide them through the process.

#### **8. Use Positive Reinforcement to Encourage Positive Scripts**

- **Why It Works:** Positive reinforcement helps solidify new, healthier scripts by associating positive experiences with desirable behaviours and efforts.
- **How to Apply:** Reward small achievements with praise, stickers, or a favourite activity. Reinforce positive behaviours consistently to encourage repetition.

#### **9. Recognise and Validate the Child's Feelings to Counteract Shame**

- **Why It Works:** Validation helps counteract feelings of shame and inadequacy, supporting the child in developing a more positive self-concept.
- **How to Apply:** Acknowledge the child's emotions, even when they are difficult. Statements like "I understand why you feel that way" help the child feel seen and heard.

## Recommended Resources

### 1. Books:

- Nathanson, D. L. (1992). *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Tomkins, S. S. (2008). *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition*. Springer Publishing.

### 2. Websites:

- National Autistic Society: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)
- MindEd: A resource for parents and teachers on children's mental health [www.minded.org.uk](http://www.minded.org.uk)

## References

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