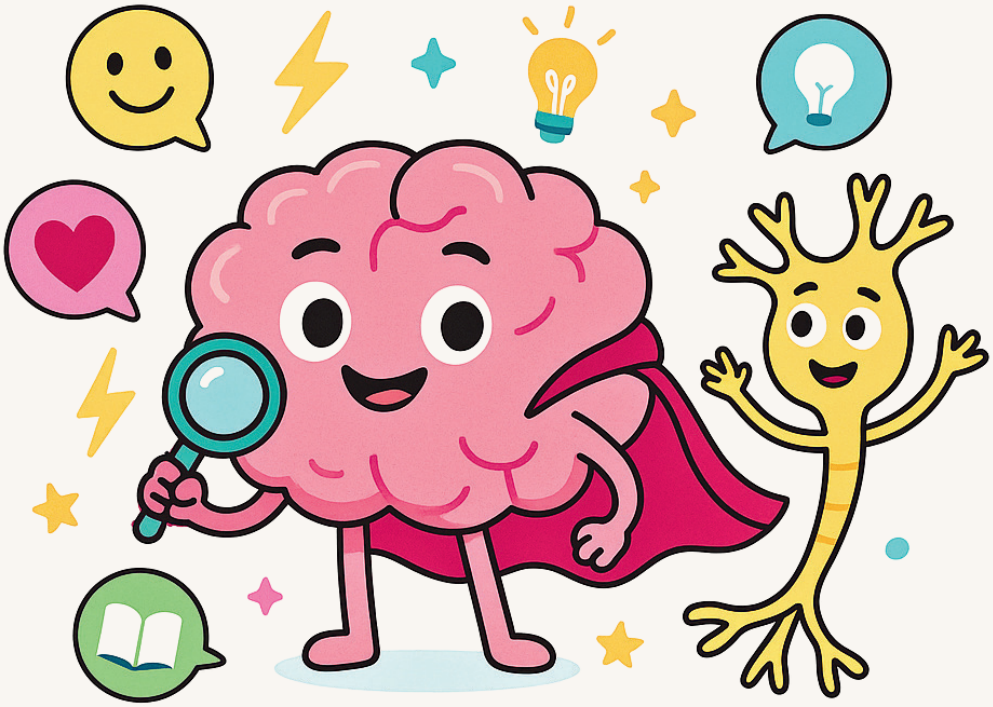
THE POLYVAGAL THEORY FOR KIDS



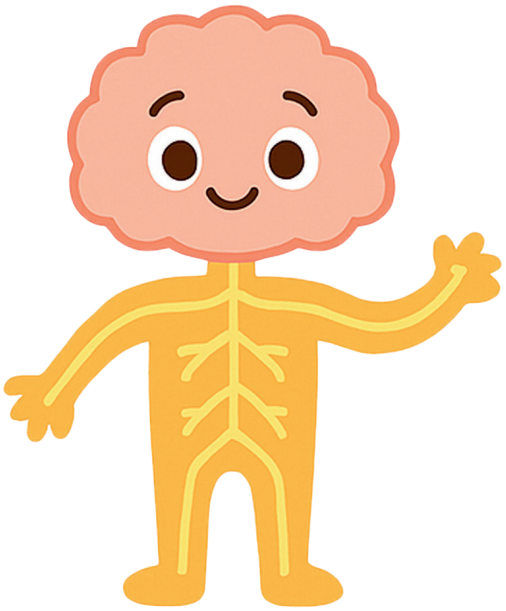
Calm Starts with Your Nervous System

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The Human Nervous System

Meet Your Brilliant Brain

Your brain is an amazing part of your body. It helps you think, feel, move, and grow every day. Working together with the nervous system, your brain sends and receives messages that help your body do everything — from breathing and running to solving problems and feeling happy. It's like the leader of a special team that keeps you safe, smart and ready for every adventure life brings!





Thinking
Making decisions. solving puzzles.



Problem-Solving
Figuring things out



Heart Beating
Keeps your heart pumping!



Breathing
Helps you inhale and exhale



Creating
Drawing, building, imagining



Running
Moving your legs fast!



Jumping
Using energy and balance



Playing
Learning and having fun!

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The Human Nervous System

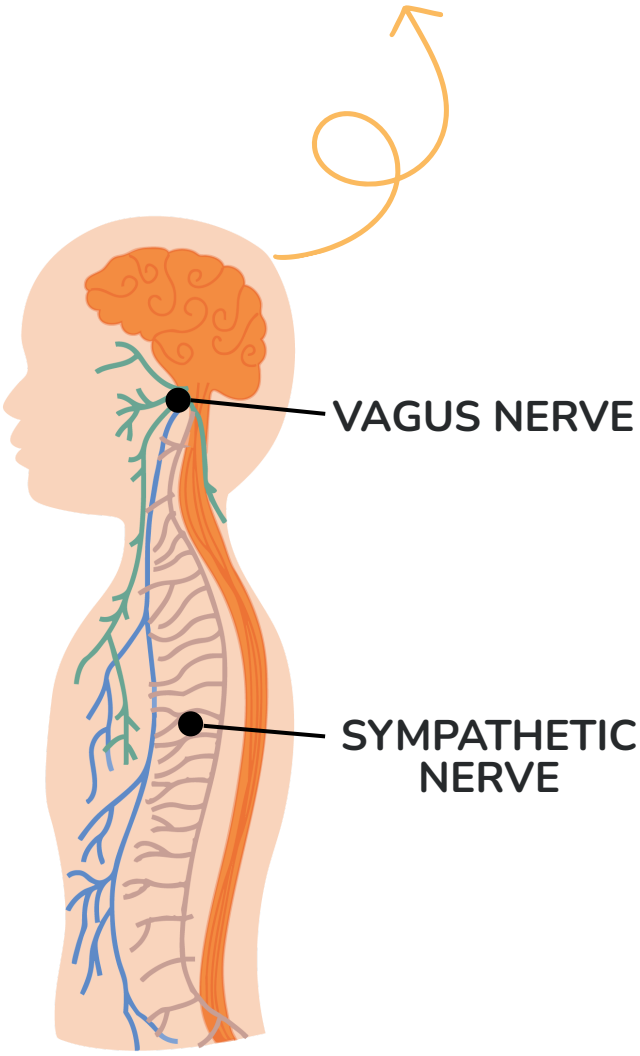
How Our Body Stays in Balance

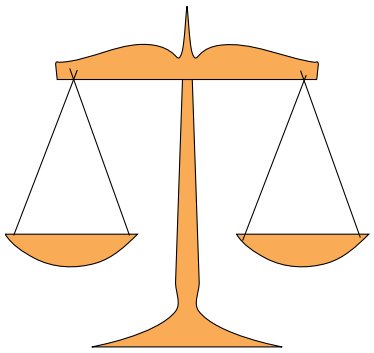
Today, let's learn about the **autonomic nervous system** — the part of your body that works on its own, without you even thinking about it! Two amazing helpers in this system are the vagus nerve and the **sympathetic nerve**. They help your body breathe, move and stay calm or alert when needed.



BRAIN STEM

These nerves begin in the **brainstem** and travel down the spine, sending important signals to your organs. Together, they help your body stay balanced by managing things like heart rate, breathing and body temperature.





This special balance is called **homeostasis** — it helps you feel "just right" inside!

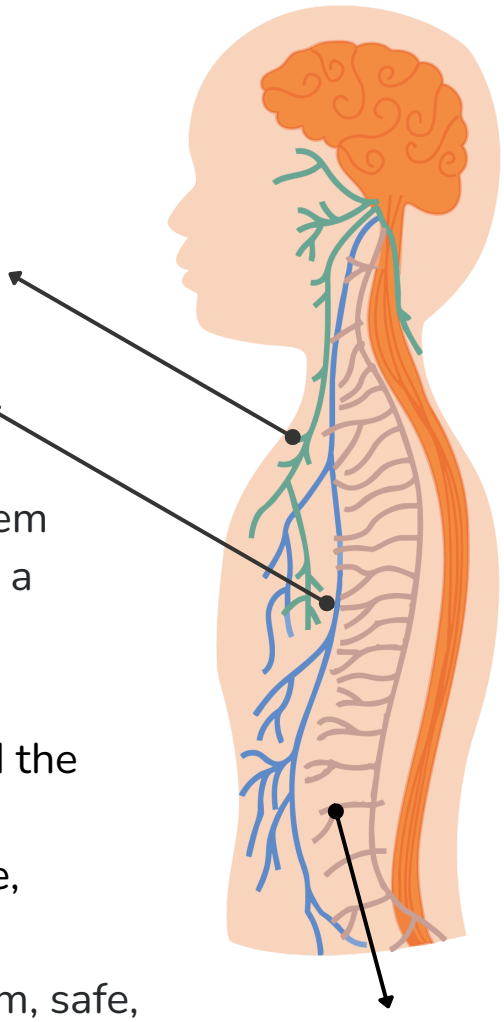
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The Polyvagal Theory

How Our Body Feels Safe and Calm

Back in the 1990s, a scientist named Dr. Stephen Porges shared something amazing — the **vagus nerve** helps us feel safe, calm and connected. He found that this nerve has two branches.

Each one has a special job in helping our body and mind stay balanced.



These parts of the nervous system are close together and work like a team.

The **ventral vagus nerve** works with the **sympathetic nerve** and the **dorsal vagus nerve** to help us manage our emotions, heart rate, and stress.

This teamwork helps us feel calm, safe, and in tune with ourselves and others.

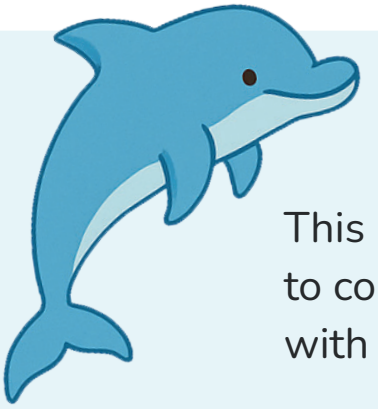
When we understand how these nerves work, we can take better care of our bodies and feel more connected inside.

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The Polyvagal Theory

Dolphin, Fox, and Bear Brain

Let's imagine your nervous system as a team of animals — each one helps your body feel calm, alert or protected depending on what's going on around you.



DOLPHIN BRAIN

(Ventral Vagal Nerve)

This part helps you feel calm, safe and ready to connect with others. Like a dolphin swimming with friends, you feel joyful, playful and relaxed.

FOX BRAIN

(Sympathetic Nerve)

When something feels tricky or unsafe, this part jumps into action. Like a clever fox, it helps you move fast, stay alert and protect yourself.





BEAR BRAIN

(Dorsal Vagal Nerve)

Sometimes, things feel too big or scary. This brain helps you slow down. Like a bear going into hibernation, your body rests and stays safe until it's ready again.

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Ventral Vagus Nerve

DOLPHIN BRAIN

Below is a picture showing how we feel when we're in our dolphin brain — calm, connected and full of curiosity. This is when our body feels safe and our mind is ready to learn, play and connect with others.

FEELING STATES TO INCLUDE

FOCUSED MIND

Present
Curious
Engaged in learning
Increased focus

EMOTIONAL CALM

Open, caring heart
Calm
Grounded



STRONG SOCIAL SKILLS

Joyful
Able to connect
Good at communicating

HEALTHY BODY SIGNALS

Deep breathing
Rested heart rate
The body feels warm

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Sympathetic Nerve

FOX BRAIN

Alert, Quick and Ready to React

When your fox brain is active, your body gets ready to protect itself. You may feel jumpy, tense or full of energy, like a clever fox noticing something unusual and preparing to move fast.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

FAST BREATHING

FEELING JUMPY

RACING HEART



QUICK TO REACT

TIGHT MUSCLES

YELLING OR ARGUING

READY TO RUN

IMPULSIVE

ANGRY OR WORRIED

HARD TO SIT STILL

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Dorsal Vagus Nerve

BEAR BRAIN

Slow, Quiet and Protecting You

When your bear brain takes over, it's like your body wants to curl up and hide. This happens when things feel too big or too much. Your body slows down to protect you — like a bear resting in its cave.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

- LOW ENERGY
- SHAME OR HOPELESSNESS
- HEART BEATS SLOWER
- FEELING STUCK
- HARD TO TALK OR MOVE
- WANTING TO HIDE
- DISTANT OR DISCONNECTED
- FROZEN OR NUMB



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The Polyvagal Theory

DOLPHIN, FOX AND BEAR BRAIN

Now that we've met the dolphin, fox and bear brains, let's play a game! Read each situation below and decide — is the person using their Dolphin, Fox or Bear brain?

When a friend bumps into Charlie, he yells and jumps back, ready to defend himself.

Which brain is Charlie using?



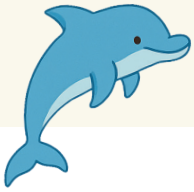
◯ Bear



◯ Fox

Henry meets someone new and suddenly feels small and wants to hide.

Which brain is Henry using?



◯ Dolphin



◯ Bear

Sonya is exploring a new game and feels happy and curious. She's smiling and asking questions.

Which brain is Sonya using?



◯ Fox



◯ Dolphin

Jack feels overwhelmed by homework and hides under a blanket. He stops moving and feels frozen.

Which brain is Jack using?



◯ Fox



◯ Bear

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My Nervous System

Let’s explore your nervous system! In the spaces below, write what helps each brain show up. Then, think about what it feels like when you're in your Dolphin, Fox or Bear brain.



DOLPHIN BRAIN

Calm + Connected

What helps my Dolphin Brain come out? (Example: Being outside, hugs, quiet time, playing with a friend)

_____

_____

_____

What does my Dolphin Brain feel like? (Example: Safe, happy, relaxed, focused, warm)

_____

_____

_____

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My Nervous System

Let's keep exploring! In the spaces below, think about what brings out your Fox Brain and how it feels. This brain helps you act fast when you feel unsafe or unsure.



FOX BRAIN

Alert + Ready to Protect

What makes my Fox Brain come out? (Example: Loud noises, unexpected changes, feeling left out)

_____

_____

_____

What does my Fox Brain feel like? (Example: My heart races, I want to yell or run, I feel jumpy)

_____

_____

_____

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My Nervous System

Let's keep going! In the boxes below, write what brings out your Bear Brain and what it feels like. This brain helps your body slow down or shut down when things feel too big.



BEAR BRAIN

Shutdown + Protect

What makes my Bear Brain come out? (Example: Too much noise, feeling overwhelmed, getting embarrassed)

_____

_____

_____

What does my Bear Brain feel like? (Example: Tired, frozen, quiet, like I want to hide or disappear)

_____

_____

_____

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The Polyvagal Theory

How Fox, Bear and Dolphin Brains Work Together

Each of our fox, bear and dolphin brains has an important job. When something feels unsafe, the fox and bear brains step in to protect us and the dolphin brain takes a break. Let's look at what happens when danger is near and the dolphin brain is not in charge.

When the Fox or Bear Brain Is Working Alone





Spider, loud noise, scary face

1



The Fox Brain takes over (You feel alert, ready to act fast)

2



The Dolphin Brain goes quiet

1



You feel frozen, stuck or too sad

2



The Bear Brain takes over (Your body slows down or wants to hide)

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The Polyvagal Theory

How the Fox, Bear and Dolphin Brains Work Together

Our fox and bear brains help protect us from danger. But sometimes, they turn on even when there's no real threat. That's why we need to keep our dolphin brain strong—it helps us feel calm, safe and in control!

When the Dolphin Brain works with the Fox or Bear Brain

Danger Shows Up

1



A loud sound, a scary thought, or a stressful moment

2



The Fox Brain reacts quickly (You feel jumpy or ready to run)

3



The Dolphin Brain joins in (It says, "Let's pause and check—is this really dangerous?")

4



The Bear Brain slows down (You take deep breaths, your body feels less tense)

5



The Dolphin Brain helps you feel safe again (You feel calm and clear—"I'm okay now.")

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Window of Tolerance

Strengthening Our Dolphin Brain

Our goal isn't to get rid of our fox or bear brains. They're here to protect us. But we do want to strengthen our dolphin brain —because when it's strong, we feel safer, calmer and more ready for life's ups and downs.

Dr. Porges calls this strength our "window of tolerance." When we're in this window, we feel balanced, connected and able to handle challenges without getting too overwhelmed or shut down. It's like our comfort zone for staying steady.



When our dolphin brain is strong, our window gets bigger —we stay calm and bounce back more easily. But if that window shrinks, it's easier to slip into fox or bear brain. By growing our dolphin brain, we make space to feel, think and act with more balance.

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The Polyvagal Theory

Window of Tolerance

Sympathetic State
Fight or Flight

- Tense or jumpy
- Heart beating fast
- Muscles tight
- Feeling anxious, irritated or on edge
- Hard to sit still or focus

Fox Brain

Alert and Ready



This is your fox brain trying to keep you safe from danger. It uses extra energy to act quickly.

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Dolphin Brain

Calm and Connected

Ventral
State – Safe Zone

- Calm and clear
- Kind and patient
- Feeling safe, loved and able to listen or speak
- Able to rest and focus
- Balanced energy



This is your dolphin brain, helping you stay in your window of tolerance — your comfort zone for handling big emotions.

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Dorsal State Freeze
or Collapse

- Feeling frozen, quiet or stuck
- Numb or low energy
- Disconnected or wanting to hide
- Sad, helpless or ashamed

Bear Brain

Shut Down and Hide



This is your bear brain taking over when something feels too big or too hard to handle.

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

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Strengthening the Dolphin Brain

Practicing Co-Regulation + Self-Regulation

Regulation is how we bring our **dolphin brain** back to help balance our **fox** and **bear brains**. It's a skill—like riding a bike or learning to float—that gets easier with practice. The more we practice regulation, the stronger our dolphin brain becomes... and the safe we feel.

There are two ways to help our dolphin brain

CO-REGULATION

This happens when someone else helps you feel safe. You borrow their calm — like holding a parent's hand or getting a warm hug.



When someone you trust is using their dolphin brain, you can feel it too!

SELF-REGULATION

This happens when you notice you're not calm and do something to help — like breathing slowly, stretching or using kind thoughts.



You're learning to bring your dolphin brain back on your own!

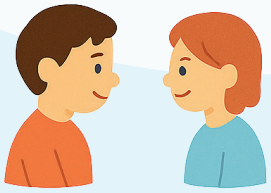
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Co-Regulation

Finding a Safe Person

When we talk about co-regulation, the first step is finding someone who helps you feel calm and safe — like a dolphin helping you swim back to steady waters.

LISTEN WITH CARE



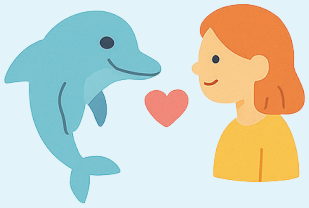
They hear you without rushing or fixing

STAY KIND AND PATIENT



Even when you're having big emotions

RESPECT YOUR FEELINGS



They don't try to change how you feel

LOVE YOU AS YOU ARE



They don't expect you to be perfect

SUPPORT YOUR GROWTH



They help you feel stronger, not smaller

SAY SORRY WHEN NEEDED



They take responsibility when they make mistakes

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Co-Regulation

A Safe Person

Now it’s your turn! In the bubble below, draw or write words that describe what a safe person feels like to you — someone who helps you find your dolphin brain again.



My safe person makes me feel...

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Co-Regulation

My Dolphin Circle

Some people help your dolphin brain feel strong — they make you feel safe, calm and accepted.

This person helps me feel...

In the boxes below, write the names and draw pictures of four people who help you feel safe, seen and supported.

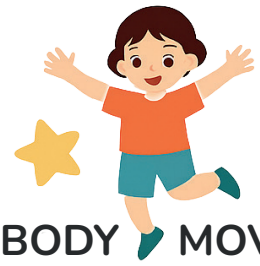
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Strategies for Regulation

Strengthening Your Dolphin Brain

There are many ways to **strengthen your dolphin brain** through **regulation**. On the next pages, you'll find calming tools and fun activities to help you feel safe, steady and strong. You can try them on your own or with a **safe person** who helps your dolphin brain swim strong.

You'll explore six types of activities to help your dolphin brain and nervous system feel better:



BODY MOVEMENT

Moving your body helps release big feelings and build strong, steady energy.



TRAUMA RELEASE

These gentle activities help your body feel safe again after something scary or upsetting.



BILATERAL MOVEMENT

This means using both sides of your body — like tapping, walking, or rocking — to help your brain feel connected.



SOOTHING SOUNDS

Some sounds naturally calm your body. Humming or listening quietly can help your dolphin brain feel safe.



BREATHING

Calm breathing is like fuel for your dolphin brain. It helps you slow down and feel balanced again.



GROUNDING

Grounding helps you notice what's around you so you can stay in the moment and feel safe in your body.

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Body Movement

Move Your Body, Calm Your Brain

SIDE STRETCH



Lift your arms overhead, lock your fingers and gently stretch to one side... then the other. Helps you feel balanced and flexible.

HEAVY WORK



Push something safe and heavy — like a basket of toys or laundry. Helps your body feel strong and steady.

WALL PUSH-UPS



Lean on a wall and do 10 gentle push-ups. Take a break if needed! Helps your body feel secure and powerful.

SCRIBBLE DRAWINGS



Hold a marker in each hand and scribble however you want fast, slow, wild or calm. Gets your energy moving in a fun way!

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Body Movement

Move like animals, feel your energy shift!

ANIMAL POSES



Stomp like an elephant or stretch like a cat! Pretend to be your favorite animals. This helps your body feel strong, playful and energized.

HUMMING OR SINGING



Hum a soft tune or sing a favorite song. Change the speed or volume as you go. This helps you feel calm and centered.

SILLY STORIES



Read a story aloud with silly voices. Add sound effects or switch up the rhythm. This helps you feel playful and connected.

DRUMMING



Tap a steady beat with your hands or objects. Let the rhythm guide your breath. This helps your body feel calm and safe.

Somatic Sounds

Sound + Movement for Calm

OCEAN BREATH + WHOOSH



Breathe in like you're filling up a bubble... then exhale with a big “whoooosh!” It helps your dolphin brain feel strong and flowing.

BUTTERFLY HUG



Cross your arms and gently tap your shoulders — right, then left — like flapping wings. Helps you feel safe and cozy.

TREE SHAKE



Stand tall, reach up high and shake your arms and legs like leaves in the wind. Lets your body drop stress and feel free again.

EXPAND AND CURL



Stretch out wide like a wave, then curl into a ball like a shell. Repeat slowly. Helps you feel relaxed and safe inside.

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Bilateral Movement

Moving Both Sides to Reconnect + Regulate

SQUEEZE + RELEASE



Grab a pillow or stuffed animal, hug it tightly, then slowly let go. Feels like a big breath for your muscles.

STOMP + ROAR



Pretend you're a dinosaur! Stomp one foot, then the other and make a sound like a roar or growl. This helps you feel strong and powerful.

CLAP + TAP RHYTHM



Clap your hands, then tap your right leg and left leg in a pattern. This rhythm helps your brain feel calm and connected.

SWINGING



Find a swing and soar! Let your body feel the rhythm of back and forth. Helps your dolphin brain return to balance.

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BILATERAL MOVEMENT

Repetitive Rhythms for Calm



ROCKING

Gently rock in a chair, swing, or even side-to-side on your feet. This soothing rhythm helps your dolphin brain feel calm and connected.

GROUNDING

Feel Safe in the Here and Now



SELF-HUG

Wrap your arms around your body, give a gentle squeeze, and take a deep breath. Helps you feel safe and comforted.

GROUNDING

Feel Safe in the Here and Now

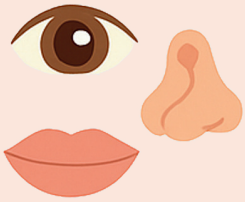


HEART HUG

Place your hands over your heart, breathe in and imagine filling up with warmth. Helps your body feel steady and loved.

GROUNDING

Feel Safe in the Here and Now



5 SENSES CHECK-IN

Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell and 1 you can taste. Brings your mind back to the present moment.

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GROUNDING

Feel Safe in the Here and Now



LEGS UP + REST

Lie down and gently raise your legs on a wall or cushion. Helps your body feel heavy, calm and safe—like floating in a tidepool.

BREATHING

Your Body's Calm Superpower

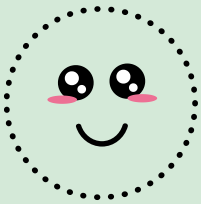


BIRTHDAY BREATH

Breathe in deep like you're getting ready to blow out birthday candles. Then exhale with a big whoosh. Releases stress and brings relief.

BREATHING

Your Body's Calm Superpower



SHAPE TRACING BREATH

Pick a shape and trace it slowly with your finger. Breathe in going up, breathe out going down. Helps focus your brain and quiet your thoughts.

BREATHING

Your Body's Calm Superpower

BUBBLE BREATHS

Imagine blowing a big bubble. Breathe in gently... then breathe out slowly so the bubble doesn't pop!
Slows your body down and helps you feel soft and steady.

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My Fox Brain

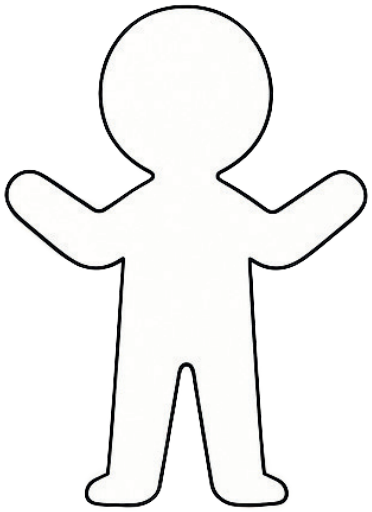
Understanding What I Feel and What Helps Me

Let's put it all together! In the spaces below, draw or write about what brings out your fox brain, how it feels in your body and how you bring your dolphin brain back to calm.

MY FOX BRAIN TRIGGERS

What makes your fox brain come out? (Examples: loud noises, someone yelling, feeling rushed)



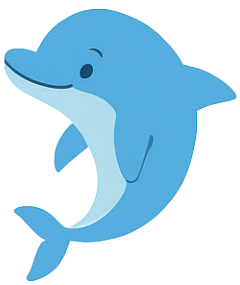


HOW MY FOX BRAIN FEELS

Draw or color how your fox brain feels in your body. (Where do you feel tight, hot or buzzy?)

HOW I BRING MY DOLPHIN BRAIN BACK

Draw or write what helps you calm down. (Examples: deep breathing, hugging a plushie, walking outside)



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My Bear Brain

What Brings It Out + How I Come Back to Calm

In the bubbles below, write or draw about your bear brain—when you feel shut down or frozen—and how you bring your dolphin brain back to calm and connection.

MY BEAR BRAIN TRIGGERS

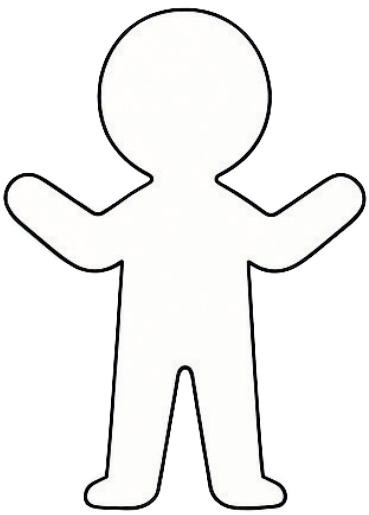
What makes your bear brain come out? (Examples: feeling alone, too many big feelings, being yelled at)





HOW MY BEAR BRAIN FEELS

Draw or color how your bear brain feels in your body. (Do you feel heavy, quiet, tired or frozen?)



HOW I BRING MY DOLPHIN BRAIN BACK

Draw or write what helps you feel better and safe again. (Examples: snuggling, deep breathing, talking to someone you trust)





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