



THE HAPPY CORE™ PROGRAM PILOT AT THE DEPAUL SCHOOL FOR DYSLEXIA

A multimodal after-school pilot advancing emotional regulation, attention, and self-esteem in neurodiverse learners.

PURPOSE & OVERVIEW

Empowering students to calm their minds, build focus, and rediscover confidence.

This six-week after-school pilot explored how embodied, neuroscience-based emotional-regulation training can improve focus, confidence, and learning readiness among students with ADHD, dyslexia, and anxiety.

Rooted in *The Happy Core™* Framework, the program integrated movement, guided imagery, breathwork, art, and cognitive reframing to teach self-regulation through direct experience.

Rather than addressing "behavior," sessions cultivated *nervous-system literacy*—helping students understand what their brains need to feel safe, focused, and capable. The pilot also examined how early emotional-education initiatives may serve as Tier 2 preventive supports aligned with SEL and MTSS frameworks.

RATIONALE – WHY EMOTION COMES FIRST

Current ADHD research increasingly views attention not as a fixed deficit but as an **emotion-dependent state**.

As emerging longitudinal studies (e.g., MTA Follow-Up 2023; Sonuga-Barke et al., 2024) and mainstream syntheses (Tough, 2025) suggest, long-term outcomes improve most when interventions address **self-regulation and environmental fit** rather than symptom suppression.

In students with dyslexia or ADHD, anxiety often precedes inattention. Heightened arousal narrows cognitive bandwidth; until the limbic system calms, executive function cannot engage.

The Happy Core™ therefore begins not with instruction but with physiological regulation, teaching children to shift from “Caveman Brain” (amygdala reactivity) through “Legs Brain” (flight impulse) into “Boss Brain” (prefrontal control).

This sequence operationalizes the principle that emotion precedes cognition—a cornerstone of effective learning for neurodiverse minds.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN – THE HAPPY CORE LEARNING CYCLE

Arrival Reset – Movement & Dance (8–12 min)

Students transition out of school mode with playful, low-stakes movement (including Balloon Dance). Purpose: discharge residual arousal, synchronize group rhythm, and signal a new learning context.

Non-Verbal Check-In – Reading the Room (2–3 min)

Silent “show-don’t-tell” status cues (cards/gestures/placement on a feelings board). Purpose: build interoceptive awareness, teach social cue recognition, and normalize states without performance pressure.

Mini-Lesson via Craft/Build – Learn by Making (20–25 min)

Short concept, tools and strategies taught through hands-on creation.

- Glitter Jar → Feelings Come and Feelings go. → Calming breathwork.
- 25 Lessons we can learn from slime → resilience
- Purpose: encode concepts somatically and visually; reduce cognitive load through making.

Sharing Circle – Language & Belonging (10–12 min)

Brief, opt-in reflections on what was made/learned; peers “notice & name” strengths. Purpose: practice self-advocacy, perspective-taking, and safe disclosure without coercion.

5) Brain Gym – Prime the System (8–10 min)

Cross-lateral patterns and spatial orientation drills (e.g., Lazy 8s, Space Buttons). Purpose: ready the nervous system for stillness and focused imagery; improve bilateral integration.

6) Guided Hypnosis – Rehearsing Calm & Choice (12–15 min)

Short, child-friendly guided visualization (e.g., Control Room/Magic Remote) embedding one tool of the week.

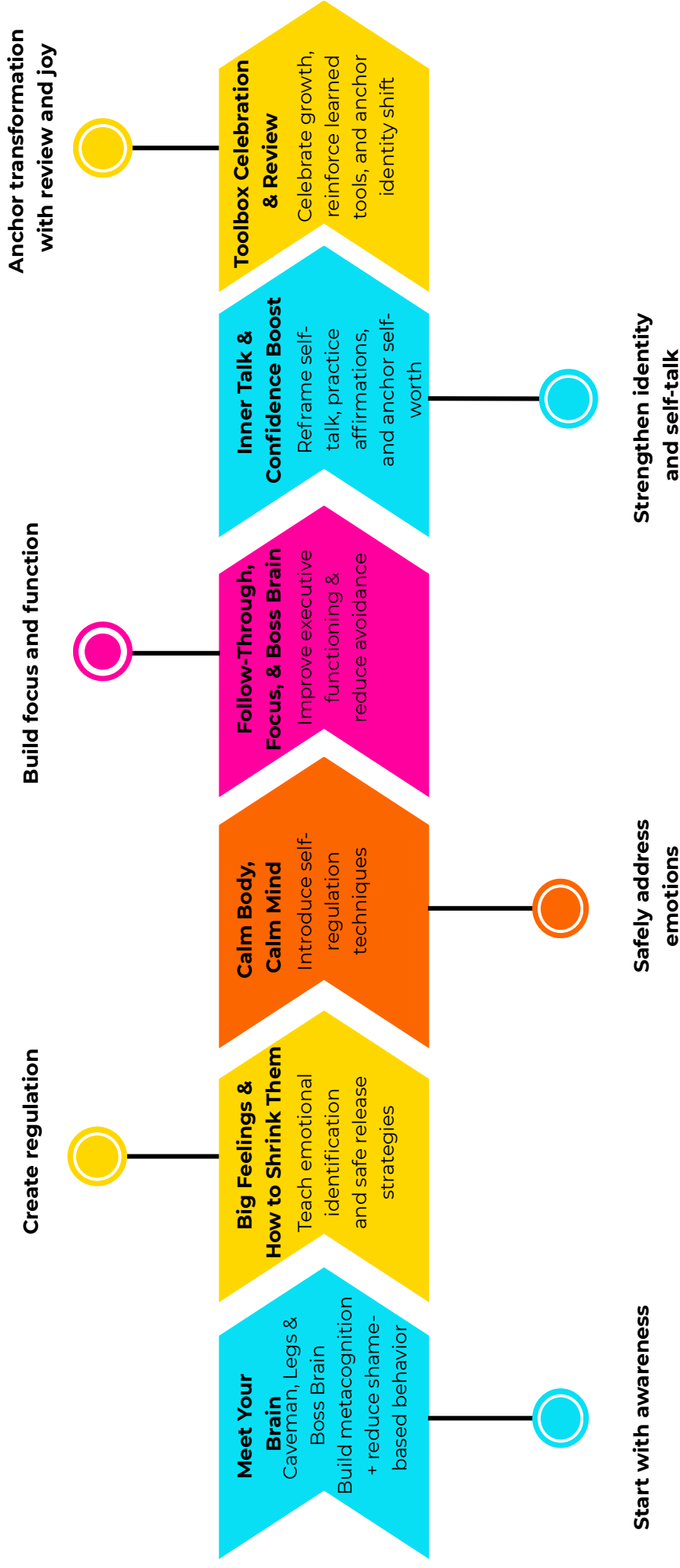
Purpose: pair physiological down-shift with mental rehearsal to strengthen retrieval in real contexts.

7) Closing Ritual – Sticker to Canvas (5–7 min)

Each student receives that day's Tool Sticker Set and places it on their personal Anchor Canvas. Purpose: visible progress marker, positive reinforcement, and memory cue for home transfer.

Design logic: The sequence moves from gross-motor discharge → nonverbal awareness → concrete making → prosocial language → sensorimotor priming → imaginal encoding → ritualized consolidation. This layering supports multiple neural pathways for retention and generalization.

BUILD FOCUS - Turn Emotion into Action



MEASURES & EVALUATION

Design. Pre/post mixed-methods.

- **Quantitative (6-week):**

- (a) Brief SEL competency scale (self/teacher),
- (b) Teacher observation rubric (regulation latency, independent tool use, task initiation, peer cooperation).

- **Qualitative:**

- (a) Student "brain check-ins" (Which brain showed up? What helped?),
- (b) Parent notes on home carryover (bedtime, homework, mornings).

Primary outcomes. Reduced time-to-regulation; increased self-initiated tool use; improved on-task starts; warmer self-talk, less anxiety.

Secondary outcomes. Fewer transition incidents; higher peer-to-peer empathy language; increased help-seeking without masking.

ADAPTATIONS & OUTLOOK

- **Spring 2026 return** with an expanded cohort at dePaul
- **New groups added:** upper elementary 5th grade and early middle 6th grade
- **Age-appropriate upgrades:** peer-led de-escalation cues, multi-step task-ignition routines, and self-advocacy scripts for rotating teachers
- **Continuity of learning:** track maintenance and growth from the current pilot into the new grade bands
- **Comparative insights:** analyze outcomes across cohorts (elementary vs. upper elementary/middle)
- **Staff collaboration:** invite teachers/counselors to refine routines and language for each grade's demands
- **Ongoing evaluation:** same brief metrics (regulation latency, tool initiation, on-task starts, peer support) for longitudinal data

SAFEGUARDS & ETHICS

- Identity-affirming, neurodiversity-positive language; no pathologizing labels in front of peers.
- Opt-in participation; parent consent; students may pass on any activity.
- Tools taught as options, not compliance demands; students keep agency over selection and timing.

CONCLUSION

- Anxiety-mediated attention is highly trainable when children first feel safe, then practice tiny, repeatable EF moves inside that safety. By pairing body-based regulation with identity-affirming language, the Happy Core™ After-School Club aims to prevent the slow-burn identity injuries that come from chronic misattunement—moving students toward calmer bodies, clearer focus, and kinder self-stories.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Additional pilot materials—including sample Missions from the Secret Society worksheets, theoretical references, and framework overview—are available online for professional review.

Access:

www.the-happy-core.com |

QR Code → Supplementary Resources

