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# Introduction

Knowing how to manage big emotions will help children throughout their lives. The goal isn't to eliminate all feelings but to lean into them, figure out where they are coming from, and then learn to manage them. These skills take a long time to learn, but the learning path can be filled with safe and positive relationships that help students build resilience.

This Managing Big Emotions curriculum is tailored for 2nd through 8th graders and consists of ten to twelve thirty-minute lessons to help students learn how to navigate overwhelming feelings. The goal is to help students learn emotional regulation skills that lead to regulated nervous systems, stronger and safer relationships, and greater resilience. This curriculum recognizes the unique ways in which each student learns, emphasizing that there's no singular 'correct' way to embrace these ideas. Just as each lesson is individualized to cater to diverse learning styles, the curriculum remains flexible, ensuring that every child can engage, understand, and practice these essential regulation skills.

The strategic design allows students to empathize, connect with others, and translate their new knowledge into practice. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA®)-aligned curriculum contains an introductory lesson, ten core lessons, and a final closing lesson. Facilitators have the flexibility to include the initial and final lessons as part of the core sessions if they have extra time.

You'll find a range of essential resources in the book's concluding pages. These consist of permission and completion letters, attendance logs, a group expectation form, and a certificate of completion. You'll also find pre- and post-group surveys to measure the success of the programming and templates to share the results with interested parties. Moreover, this workbook provides a comprehensive small group action plan that will integrate effortlessly into your ASCA® evaluation document and facilitate a seamless transition from planning to assessment.

Practical and applicable, the activities provided are suitable for small and large group instruction and require no additional materials. You do not need to bring supplies beyond pencils, markers or crayons, and scratch paper; you won't need to spend hours prepping materials before meeting with your students. Everything you need is included!

**See page 79 for information on Downloadable Resources.**

## What's Included?

**Managing Big Emotions** offers a comprehensive ten-lesson program and accompanying materials for facilitating group sessions. Following each detailed lesson outline, you'll find practical resources for establishing a small group within your school environment.

**Mind Map:** Provides an illustrated diagram of the regulation skill that can help students make connections between the regulation concept and other concepts. Students should begin each lesson by considering the meaning of the specific regulation skill. It is optional to write these, but visuals are helpful for many students. Some have found it helpful to draw the Mind Map on the board, or you can draw a tree with the concept written on the trunk and the related words on the fruit on the tree.

**ASCA® Standards:** Each lesson includes success criteria for the learning target.

**Lesson Introduction:** At the start of each lesson, we will introduce a concept and explain it to provide clarity for the upcoming story.

**Circle Time Questions:** This section has three optional questions for the facilitator to start the conversation. These questions allow students to deepen their understanding of the topic and build community by discussing and sharing their experiences.

**Story Time:** Provides stories related to the concept that should be read aloud to help children understand the concept.

**Coloring Sheets:** Allow students to visualize the concept. Students can color the sheet while the facilitator shares the initial story after the lesson is complete or take it home with them.

**Discussion Questions:** Students can discuss the questions posed to help them process their beliefs on the subject.

**Skill Practice:** Using the round-robin method, go around the table and ask students how they would practice that skill, giving each a chance to answer one question.

**Additional Activities:** Provides activities to help students practice and apply the concept.

**Closing Considerations:** Is an opportunity to review the concept and ask students to reflect on their new experience with the material.

**Would You Rather? Game:** Provides an opportunity for students to consider what they would “rather” do related to the lesson’s topic. The facilitator can cut out the cards and let students discuss or read aloud while moving from one side of the room to the other to communicate their preferred answer.

## Accompanying Group Documents

**Small Group Action Plan Guide:** Provides the necessary information required to complete the ASCA® National Model’s Small Group Action Plan.

**Permission Form:** The permission form is used to gain the permission of the student’s caregivers for the child to attend the Managing Big Emotions group. Be sure to send this home about two weeks before the group starts.

**Group Expectations:** These provide basic expectations for the group process. The form has space for the facilitator and group to collaborate on adding additional expectations to fit their group.

**Group Attendance Form:** This is a blank form that allows the facilitator to track which students attended each session and what topics were discussed.

**Group Attendance Form (Example):** This form is an example of how to best utilize the group attendance form.

**Pre- and Post-Group Survey:** Provides an opportunity for students to share what they know of the concepts before and after they’ve completed the curriculum.

To measure the progress of students who participate, use the same assessment for both the pre-group

and post-group survey. Administer the pre-group survey at the start of the instructional period, followed by instruction and practice opportunities for measured skills or knowledge.

At the end of the instructional period, administer the post-survey and compare the results of both surveys to identify areas of improvement and areas that need further instruction. Then calculate the average score of the pre-survey and post-survey and determine the percentage of improvement by subtracting the pre-survey average from the post-survey average and then dividing the result by the pre-survey average. Use this pre-survey average improvement to measure the students' progress effectively.

**Percentage of Improvement Formula:**

$$(\text{Post-Group Total} - \text{Pre-Group Total} / \text{Pre-Group Total}) \times 100 = \text{Percentage of Overall Improvement}$$

**Example:**

$$(31 \text{ Post-Group Total} - 19 \text{ Pre-Group Total} / 31) \times 100 = 63.15\% \text{ Overall Improvement}$$

Look at your data to determine who should attend your group. Review conduct referrals, attendance data, and achievement metrics and look for students with deficits. Consider also tracking students' academic achievements, absences, and discipline referrals. You can better see the impact of your small groups when strategically selecting students and closely monitoring their academic, attendance, and conduct metrics. Be sure to share the results of your intervention with your advisory council.

**Post-Group Survey Results:** The survey shows one way to share your data with your interested parties. Remember, we want to make sure that we use graphs and charts as they show our data, which is often more impactful than a paragraph of text. Use whatever platform you prefer to show your data but be sure to complete the data following the group and then share with your interested parties.

**Post-Group Survey Results (Example):** The survey shows what your data might resemble following the completion of the groups. You can use this form to share your data.

**Certificate of Completion:** Present students with a certificate to congratulate them on completing the curriculum.

**Managing Big Emotions Group Completion Letter:** Letter written to the caregivers/guardians of students following the completion of the group. Provide students with their certificate and their group review letter during the last session.

**Additional Materials:** We promised to provide everything you need in this workbook, and we have. However, you will need to make copies of the pre- and post-group assessment surveys and print the coloring pages. You might also print and cut the "Would You Rather?" game or facilitate that activity verbally. We recommend having crayons or colored pencils readily available on the table for those who wish to complete the coloring sheet. It might also be helpful to have some fidgets accessible for your students during their group session.

**Good luck with your group! We hope you have a fantastic experience!**



# Introductory Group Session

## Directions & Overview

Conduct this introductory session before starting the regular lessons. This initial meeting will acclimate students to the program's structure, expectations, and foundational tools. They will learn the brain model and check-in process that will be utilized in each subsequent session.

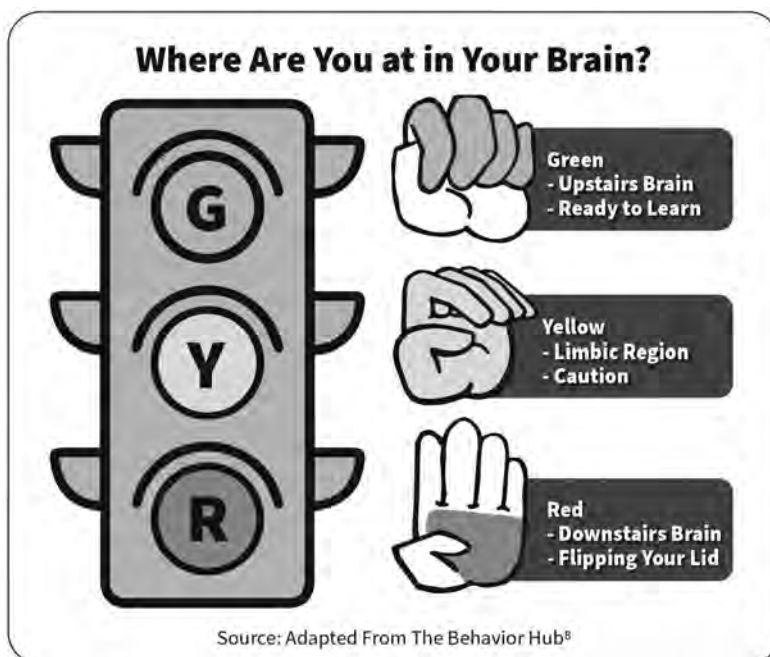
**Directions:** Begin by extending a warm welcome to all participants. Communicate the group's objectives and generate enthusiasm for learning and collaboration.

**Survey:** Before proceeding, read the pre-group survey instructions aloud to the students and have each student complete the form. Carefully examine the completed forms to verify that all questions have been answered.

**Introductions:** Foster a sense of community by encouraging students to share their names, something about themselves, and what they wish to learn in the group. Share that they will be asked to do the "brain stoplight check-in" during each session. Explain how it works and practice that check-in now. (It is important to demonstrate the hand model of the brain before teaching the check-in.)

When the hand is closed in a gentle fist with fingers over the thumb, it represents a calm and flexible brain where we can make good decisions even if we are upset. Notice how the fingers touch the thumb. This means the top part of the brain is helping control emotions. Sometimes, those feelings get so big that we flip our lid. The fingers shoot straight up. Notice how the fingers no longer touch the thumb. Our upstairs brain can't help us control our emotions, and now our feelings control us until we can back down the lid.

- **Green:** "My brain is good to go; I can listen, participate, and learn."  
Hand sign: gentle fist with fingers over the thumb.
- **Yellow:** "Caution/slow down; I am unsure how I feel; I may need help."



Hand sign: The thumb is tucked with fingers horizontal and flat over the thumb.

- **Red:** “I feel dysregulated (sad, angry, frustrated, out of sorts, or something else). I need help.”

Hand sign: Fingers are vertical and extended, and the hand is open.

If a student expresses that they are “yellow,” it is appropriate to briefly share with the entire group that it is ok to not always feel “green.”

We create a safe space to feel whatever we feel in the group. You don’t need to fix the “yellow” feeling; just acknowledge it. Implement a co-regulation strategy such as your warm presence to soothe the student(s) and let them know you “see” them. Validate their feelings and continue with the lesson.

If a student says “red,” assess safety issues and check to see if the student can and would like to stay in the group (receiving your co-regulating presence through the lesson) or needs something more. Check to see if you can support and discuss the issue after the group so the student can stay in the group. If the student needs one-on-one support, refer them to someone in the building who can give that focused attention while the group continues, assuring safety for the student feeling “red.” This will model what we do when someone is in red for all students. During scheduled group time, ensure there is always a backup person to help a student who feels “red” and cannot stay in the group. Be sure to follow up with the student feeling “red” after the group.

**Explain the Group Format:** Explain where and how often you will meet. Share the list of topics. Explain that, in each meeting, you will discuss one of the topics together, then read the Story and answer questions. Discuss the logistics of what they’ll do while you are reading; they’ll be eating (if it is a lunch group) or completing their Coloring Sheet. Explain that they’ll have time to work in pairs for the Skill Practice portion and play a “Would You Rather?” game. Finally, explain that at the end of each session, they’ll be asked to give a one-sentence overview of what they’ve learned and how they plan to practice that lesson topic throughout the week.

**Review Group Expectations:** Print a copy of the Group Expectations. Review the expectations together with the students and answer questions as they arise. Collaborate with your group to determine whether you need to modify or add expectations.

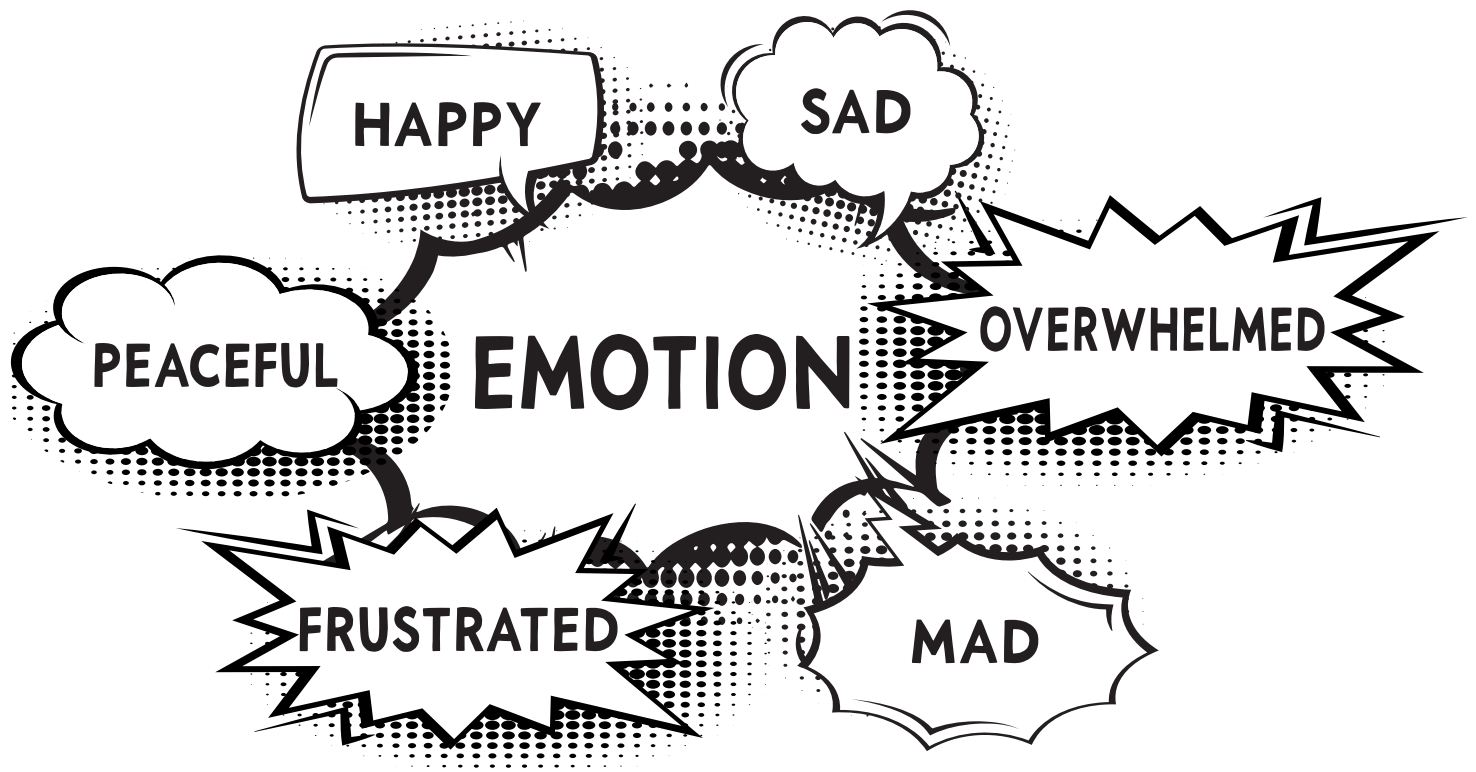
**Group Conclusion:** Ask each student to summarize the information they learned from this session into one sentence. Students may share with their partners or the group.

**Note to Facilitators:** You can customize the material to fit the needs of your group. If your students are not yet readers, you can read the “Would You Rather?” game questions aloud and request that students move to different sides of the room to show their answers. If you’re working with reticent students, they can write their responses to questions instead of sharing them aloud or break into smaller teams to discuss. Some facilitators may incorporate traditional games into the lessons if they have longer session times. Remember, the workbook is just the framework, but you will bring it to life!

# MY UPSTAIRS AND DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN

## MIND MAP

On the board, draw a mind map and ask students to consider the meaning of *emotion*.

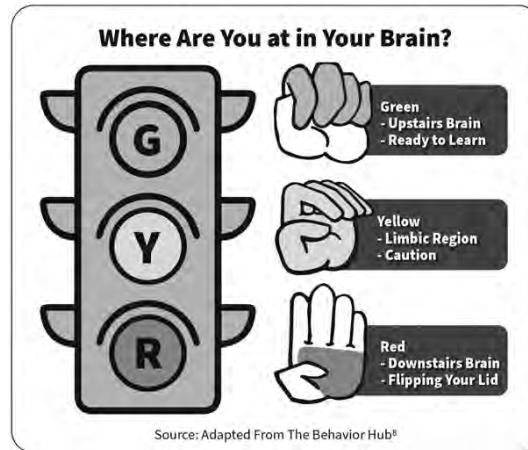


## ASCA® STANDARDS

- **B-LS 4.** Self-motivation and self-direction for learning
- **B-SMS 2.** Self-discipline and self-control
- **B-SMS 10.** Ability to manage transitions and adapt to change
- **B-SS 4.** Empathy

## DIRECTIONS

In a small group format, complete the “brain stoplight check-in,” which will be used each week to discuss whether they are in their upstairs or downstairs brain or somewhere in the middle. Point to the brain stoplight graphic for visual support. The following is a review; for a more in-depth explanation, please see the introductory lesson.



- **Green:** “My brain is good to go; I can listen, participate, and learn.” (I am in my upstairs brain).  
Hand sign: gentle fist with fingers over the thumb
- **Yellow:** “Caution/slow down; I am unsure how I feel; I may need help.” (I may be moving from my upstairs to my downstairs brain.)  
Hand sign: The thumb is tucked with fingers horizontal and flat over the thumb.
- **Red:** “I feel dysregulated (sad, angry, frustrated, out of sorts or something else). I need help” (I am in my downstairs brain).  
Hand sign: Fingers are vertical and extended, and the hand is open.

If a student expresses that they are “yellow,” it is appropriate to briefly discuss with the group that we won’t always feel “green.” That’s okay. Sometimes, we just need to feel what we feel without fixing it! Your attuned presence will be soothing for “yellow” feelings. Validate their feelings and continue with the lesson.

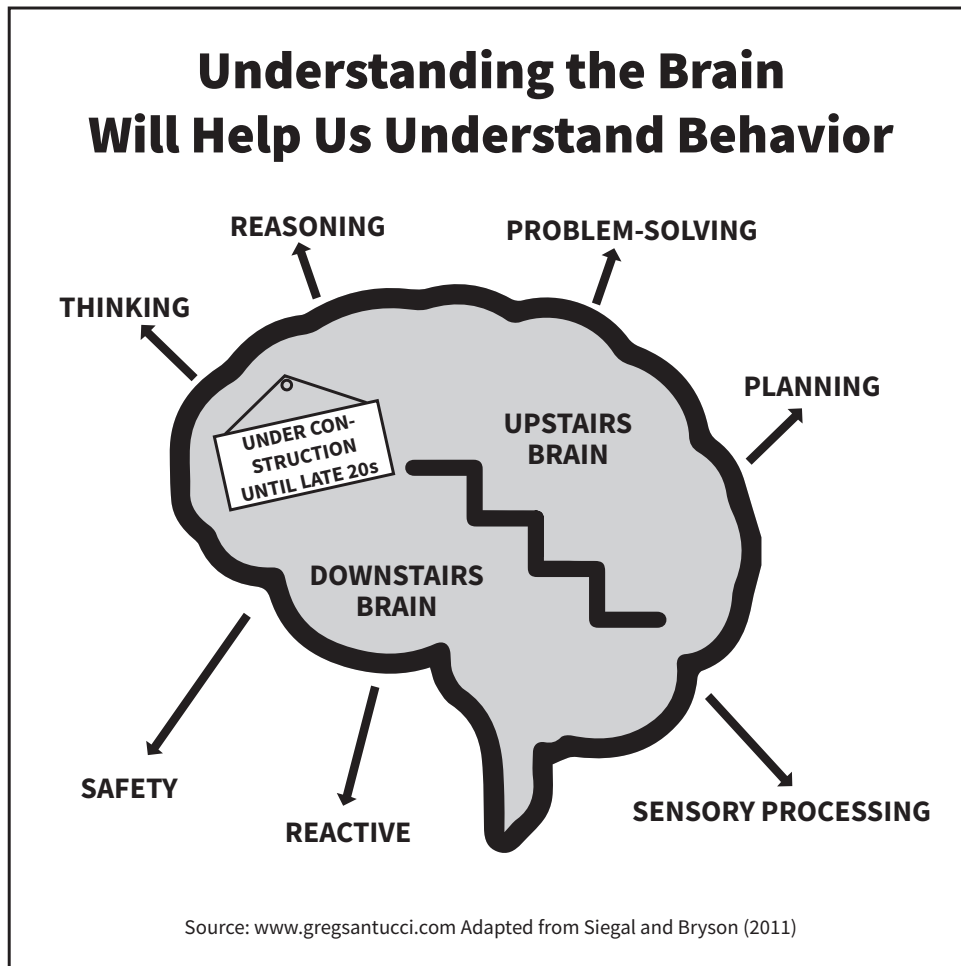
If the student says “red,” assess safety issues and check to see if the student can and would like to stay in the group (receiving your co-regulating presence through the lesson) or needs something more active and supported. Check to see if you can support and discuss the issue after the group so the student can stay in the group. If the student needs one-on-one support, refer them to someone in the building who can give that focused attention while the group continues, assuring safety for the student feeling “red.” Be sure to follow up with the student feeling “red” after the group.

Review the Group Expectations before reviewing the Mind Map. Then, read the Lesson Introduction and ask the Circle Time Questions before reading the Story and the Discussion Questions. Students can work in pairs to craft their responses or share with the whole group. Complete the Skill Practice, “Would You Rather?” game, and Additional Activities as time allows. Be sure to complete the Closing Considerations with each lesson.



## LESSON INTRODUCTION

We can learn to manage our big emotions by recognizing how we feel and by noticing sensations. That ability is located in our upstairs brain. The top or upstairs part of our brain helps us handle challenges and overwhelming feelings. When we feel unsafe and out of control, we are in our downstairs brain or the bottom part of our brain.



## CIRCLE TIME QUESTIONS

Ask students to reflect and share their answers to the following questions with the group. Larger groups may need to be broken into smaller groups to give students ample time to share their answers and deepen the conversation.

- Have you ever felt “in the zone” or in your upstairs brain where you were happy and could do your best? If you feel comfortable, share with the group (speak, draw, or act it out, if time allows).
- Can you think of a time when you were in your downstairs brain and you “flipped your lid?”
- Everyone flips their lid (quickly going from upstairs to downstairs). Can you think of ways in which you were able to get your lid back down after it was flipped and move back to your upstairs brain?

## STORY TIME

Hand out coloring sheets and crayons or markers to younger students while the facilitator reads the story, if desired.

### *I Can Manage My Feelings*

Chaos erupted in Ms. Mallory's classroom. Instead of the usual chatter, there were wide eyes and a few anxious whispers. Ms. Mallory had announced a fire drill, but not everyone was happy about it!

Olivia, usually the class chatterbox, was visibly nervous and began to cry. Matthew, unsure what to do about Olivia's crying, bolted out of the room.

Ms. Mallory stayed calm. She turned on soothing music, and everyone grabbed their spelling lists for a quick practice...everyone except Olivia. Ms. Mallory asked Jessie, Olivia's best friend, to sit with Olivia while Ms. Mallory went to find Matthew.

"Hey," Jessie whispered, concerned. "What's wrong?"

Olivia's voice trembled. "Remember when my mom burned dinner, and the fire alarm went off? LOUDEST, SCARIEST, SOUND EVER! I don't wanna hear it again!"

Jessie said, "Maybe you can wear headphones during the drill? They can give you noise-canceling superpowers!"

Olivia's face lit up. "Headphones! That's brilliant!"

Ms. Mallory returned with Matthew. "Sometimes," she explained, "when we're scared, our brains get stuck downstairs, all panicky. But we can take a deep breath, hold it for a couple of seconds, slowly let it out, ask for help, and use our upstairs brains to think clearly and figure out what to do next."

Suddenly, fire drills didn't seem so scary anymore. Olivia could wear her headphones, and Matthew learned a new way to settle his downstairs brain. Having tips for managing big, scary feelings made everything seem easier to handle.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do we know that Ms. Mallory was in her upstairs brain?
- How do we know that Jessie was in her upstairs brain?
- Why did Matthew run out of the room?
- Did Olivia and Mathew do anything wrong?
- Do you think Ms. Mallory and Jessie are always in their upstairs brains?
- If you were in the room, what do you think you would have done?

## SKILL PRACTICE

Using the round-robin method, go around the table and ask students how they would practice each skill, giving everyone a chance to answer one question. You can adapt Skill Practice to allow students to respond in pairs or write their answers on paper.

- Identify where the upstairs brain is on the hand.
- Identify where the downstairs brain is on the hand.
- What does the hand look like when you feel peaceful and creative?
- What does the hand look like when you feel overwhelmed and distracted?
- Give an example of an upstairs brain moment and show using the hand model.
- Give an example of a downstairs brain moment and show using the hand model.
- Share why learning the hand-brain model is helpful with managing big emotions.

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Have students act out different versions of downstairs brain moments. Ask students how to shift the downstairs brain moment into an upstairs brain moment by asking, “What could you do instead?” (Examples could be: failing a test, falling hard off their skateboard, forgetting to prepare for a performance, or losing their favorite t-shirt.)
- Have students take turns acting out the following big emotional moments while pretending they are robots. Ask them why this is extra challenging.
  - Finding their puppy after it was lost.
  - Seeing someone bullying your best friend.
  - Discovering a treasure chest full of gold.
  - Hearing that someone said something mean about you behind your back.

## CLOSING CONSIDERATIONS

Downstairs brain moments are normal! We aren’t meant to be robots. Feelings are just feelings; they aren’t good or bad. They are there for a reason. We can regain balance and control. We often need help to do this, so it’s important not to feel bad when things seem too hard to solve on our own.

Ask students to summarize the content of this session’s lesson in one sentence.

Ask students to recognize both upstairs brain and downstairs brain moments in themselves and others this week. Then, encourage them to notice what helps others and themselves get back into balance and go back upstairs when they are downstairs.

## “WOULD YOU RATHER?” GAME

Playing the “Would You Rather?” game is a fun and engaging activity for students to develop their critical thinking skills. Students will reflect on their experience, evaluate their options based on their preferences, and reflect on the opinions of others, providing a different perspective and strengthening their sense of connection to one another.

# WOULD YOU RATHER?

Copy and cut out the questions for small groups to discuss, or have each person stand in the center of the room and move towards one side or the other to show their vote for either option as the facilitator reads the questions aloud.

WOULD YOU RATHER ASK FOR HELP WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER A PROBLEM OR TRY SOMETHING YOURSELF FIRST?

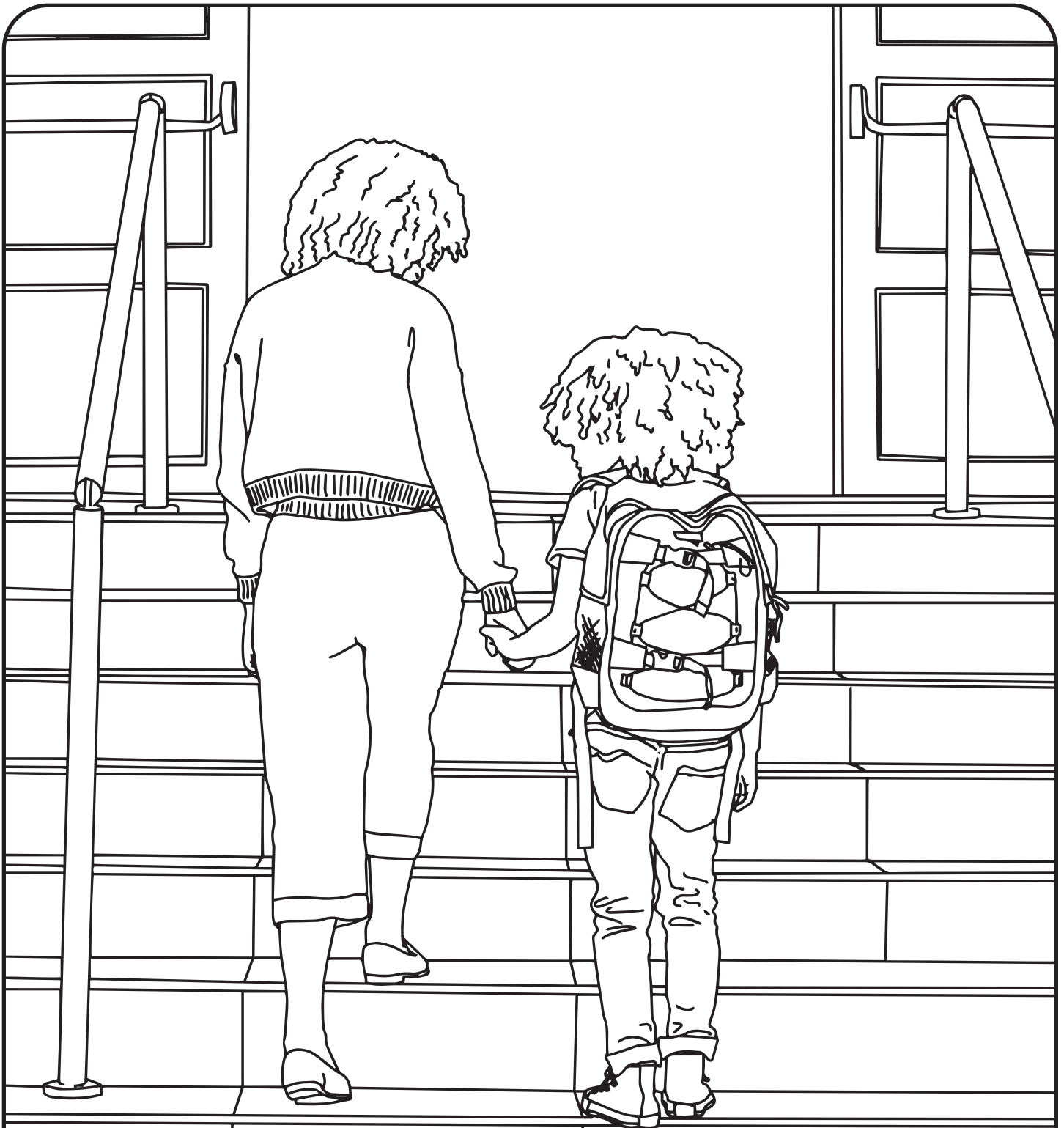
WOULD YOU RATHER ALWAYS BE IN YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN OR BE ABLE TO HELP SOMEONE STUCK IN THEIR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN?

WOULD YOU RATHER GO THROUGH LIFE WITHOUT PROBLEMS OR LEARN AND GROW FROM YOUR TRIALS?

WOULD YOU RATHER BE A ROBOT WHO NEVER MESSES UP OR BE A PERSON WHO MAKES MISTAKES THAT CAN BE FIXED?

WOULD YOU RATHER FIGURE OUT HOW TO HELP A FRIEND IN THEIR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN OR HOPE SOMEONE ELSE HELPS THEM?

WOULD YOU RATHER IGNORE UNCOMFORTABLE FEELINGS INSIDE YOU, HOPING THEY GO AWAY OR TALK TO SOMEONE ABOUT THEM?



***We all have downstairs brain moments!  
We can ask for help and avoid getting  
stuck downstairs.***