

Supporting families under stress

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Australian National University

Together with Families
Family Services Symposium
November 24, 2023





Rebecca

Tim

Lawrie

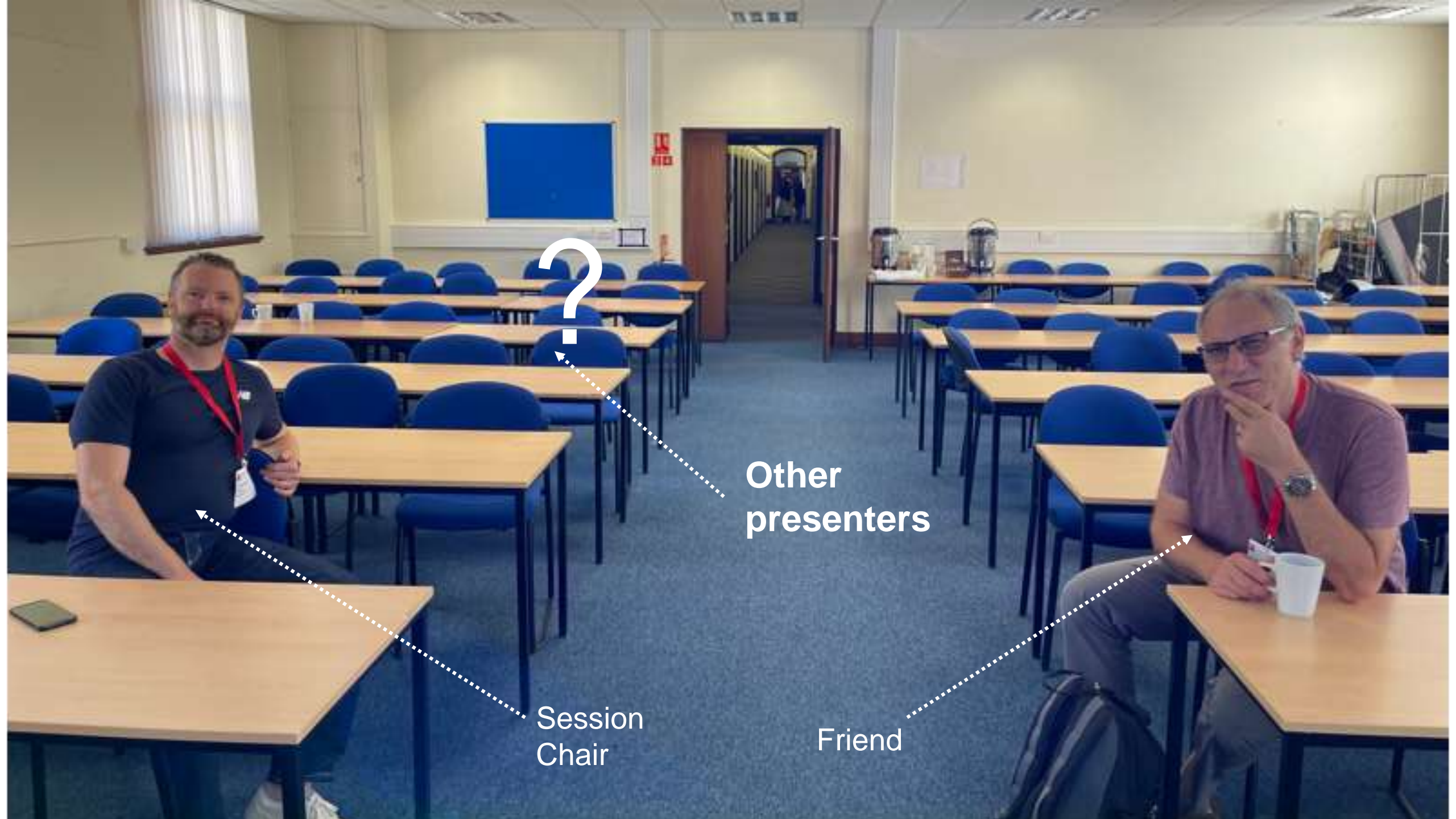
Steve

Leanne Prue

Lixia

John





?

Other presenters

Session Chair

Friend



Life is full of fluctuating fortunes:

- One minute you're up; the next, you're down.



- And then you're up.



Imagine if we could go
back in time and hang
out with our younger
self









Easy Please
Living Room







Families are the great
shock absorber &
shock provider

‘The past affects us
much more than we
think’

What do children
'need'?

First, a clarification...

By 'need', do we mean:

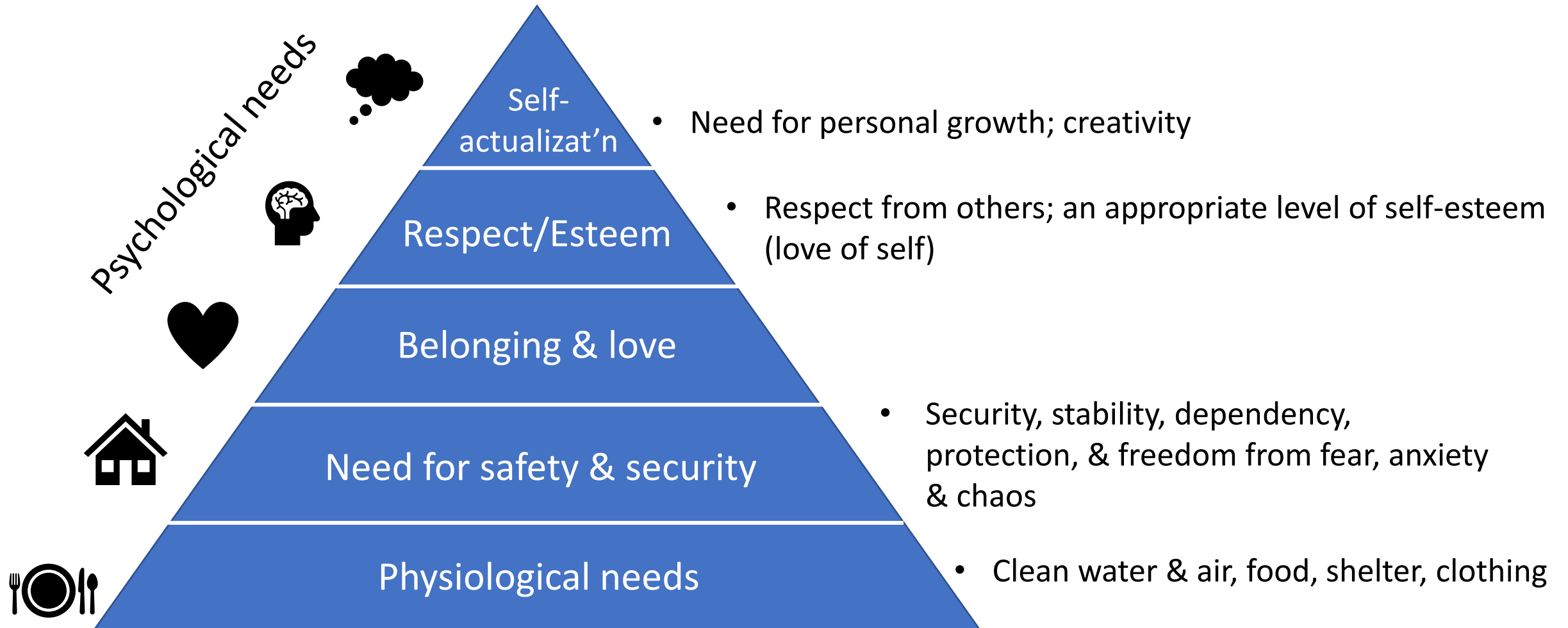
- need to survive,
- to thrive,
- to be resilient,
- to become happy, successful adults, or
- something else?

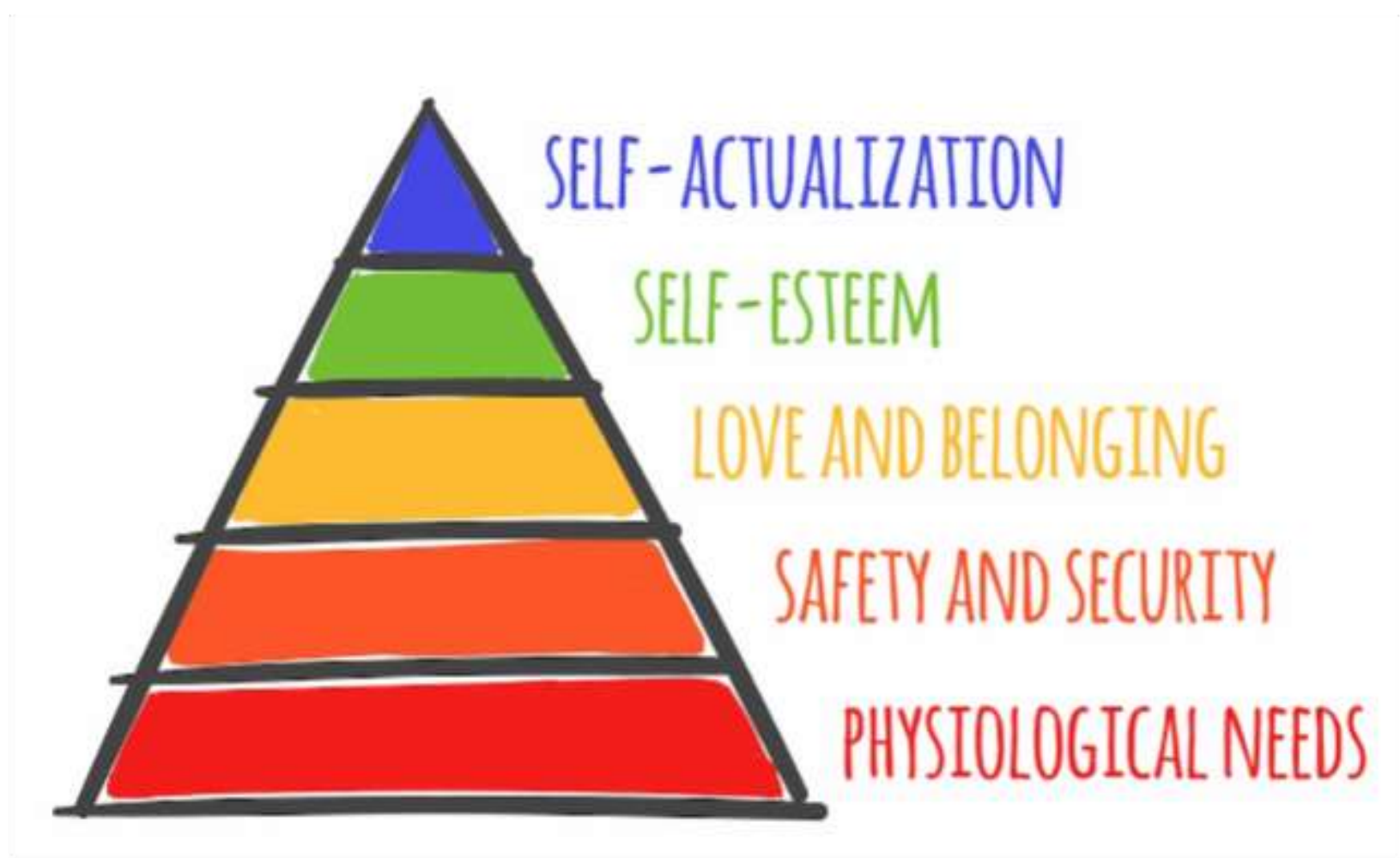
I use the word 'need' in the broadest sense to mean something that is important for children's wellbeing.

Children in perpetual state of development:

- physically,
 - psychologically,
 - socially,
 - developmentally,
 - emotionally,
 - academically, &
 - spiritually
- Their needs diverse & context dependent.
 - Some needs universally necessary for life; others are more discretionary.

Hierarchy of needs



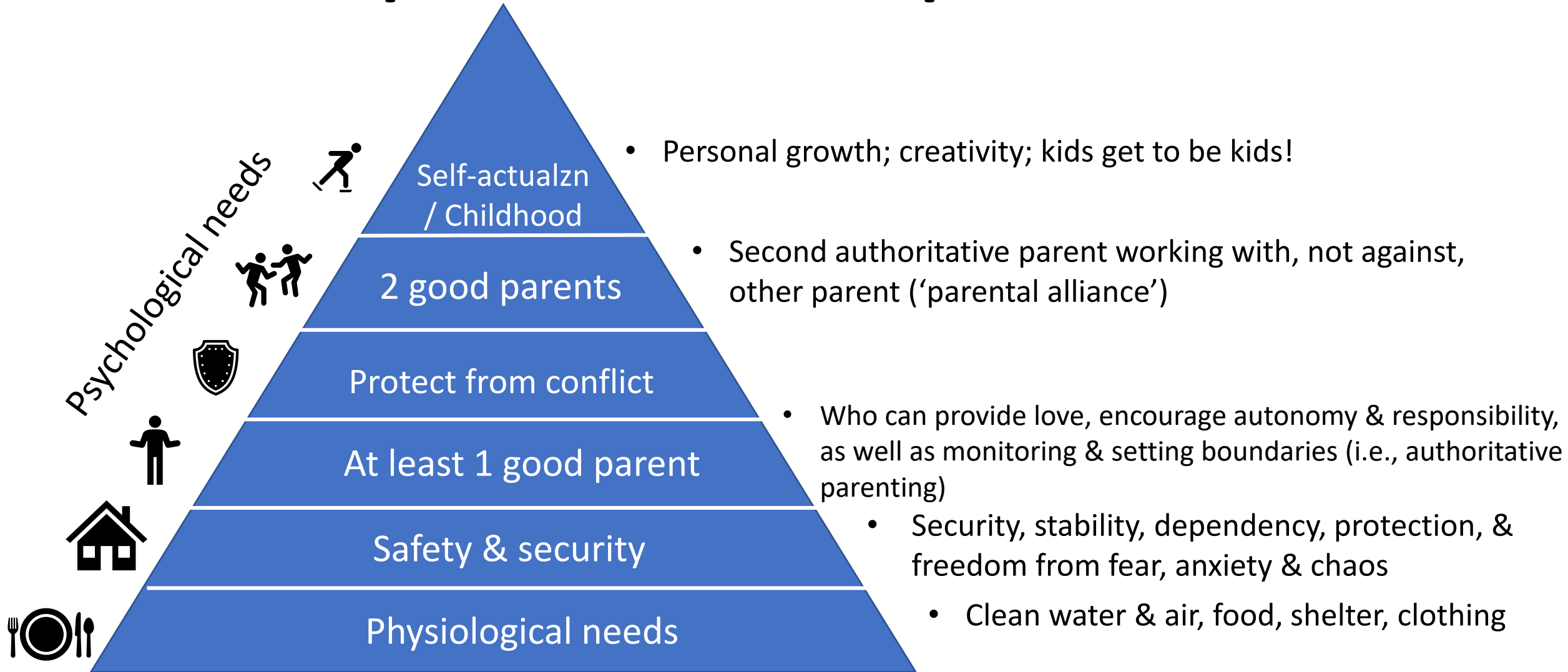


Before higher-level needs can be perceived, lower-level needs must be more or less satisfied [e.g., food over safety; love over respect & esteem]

But...

- Poverty has a way of impeding higher-level needs, especially for children.
- Factor most likely to lead to poor child outcomes is *persistent poverty*.
- Also well known: parental separation is both a leading cause & correlate of child poverty

After parental separation



At the apex

- ability for children to have a childhood
- Where they can simply be children, play freely, learn, & develop at their own pace
- be protected from the demands of an adult world – particularly economic, political, and sexual interests

Psycho-developmental frameworks

- a predictable, supportive, low-stress, warm environment
- personal & relationship safety [including protection from interparental conflict and family violence]
- ability of children to express their feelings and views
- being supported to internalise 'moral, cultural, religious' values
- taught a healthy range of emotional responses to manage stress & adverse events
- provided with support for developing 'stage-appropriate independence, autonomy, and important relationships beyond the immediate family'.

Simpler list

- Security, stability, structure, consistency
- Flexibility & ability to have needs anticipated/intuited
- Love & emotional support
- Education & positive role models

Children's needs change with age & stage

- **Infants** (birth to 18 months) need nutritional diet, low-stress environment, an appropriate level of stimulation & movement, & a 'secure' attachment to a parent or caregiver so their brain, nervous system & muscles can develop
- **Toddlers** need monitoring & boundary setting to learn self-control as they seek to explore the world & control it
- **Pre-schoolers**, with their focus on play & imagination, need their innocence protected so they can enjoy childhood; they also need friends for fun & to learn pro-social behaviour

Children's needs change with age & stage

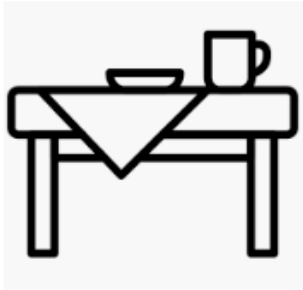
- ***School-aged*** (6–12) main focus: learning (reading, writing, arithmetic).
 - 2 developmental periods: early school-age (6-8 years); late school-age (9-12 years).
 - Sport = give & take, working as a team. Play = relax and balance. Regulate emotions.
- ***Adolescence*** (13-18) – breaking away; independence and relatedness (secure base: staying connected by letting go); experiment with different things.
- ***Extended adolescence/‘young adult children’*** (19-30): increasingly living at home due to cost-of-living crisis, rising cost of education, ‘credential creep’, challenges to entering the workforce, and housing affordability.

The importance of 'home'

- Fehlberg, Natalier, Campo & Smyth study
- Critical site for many of the needs just noted.
- Closely linked with family
- Typically seen by family members as a multifaceted space 'constituted through meaningful relationships, shared experiences, comfort, predictability and a sense of safety

Which physical objects do
you think children value most
in their home?

- Kitchen table + couch important sites of connection according to children



- Money provides the ability to create a 'home' and have housing stability
- But the quality of relationships within the home matters more

- Many felt like they had 1 home



- Smaller group felt like they had 2 homes



- Small number felt like they had no home



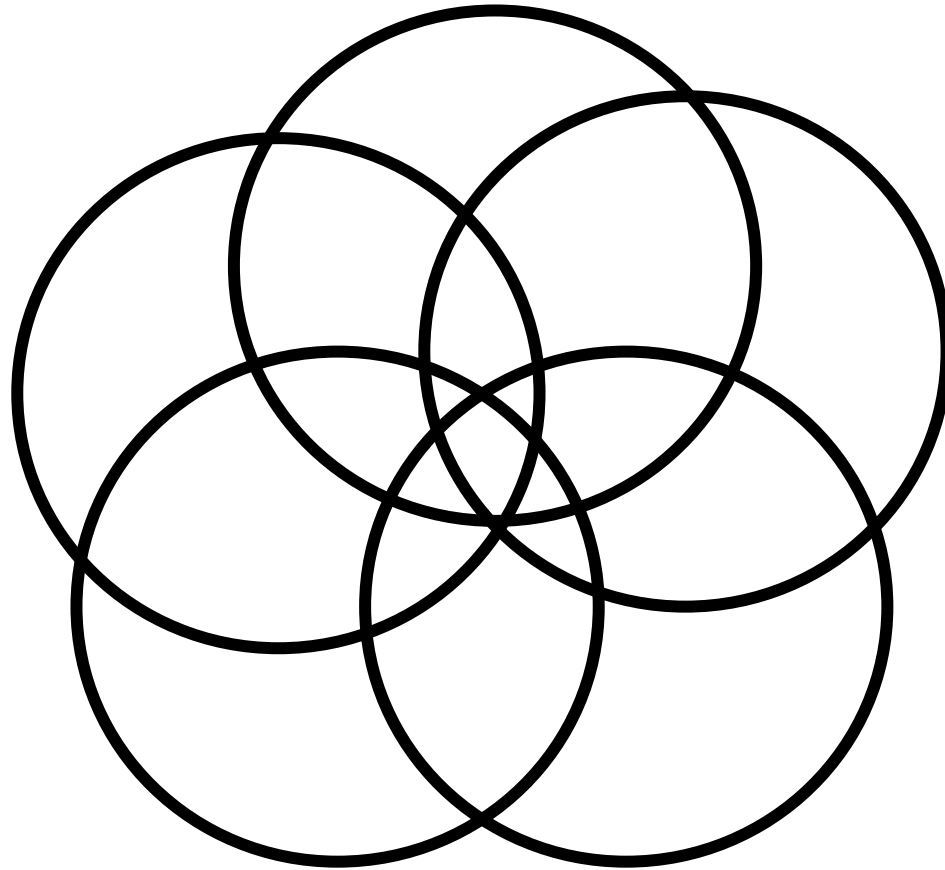
Contemporary challenges



Relationship
breakdown & the legal
system

Family violence
and coercive
control

Substance &
alcohol abuse



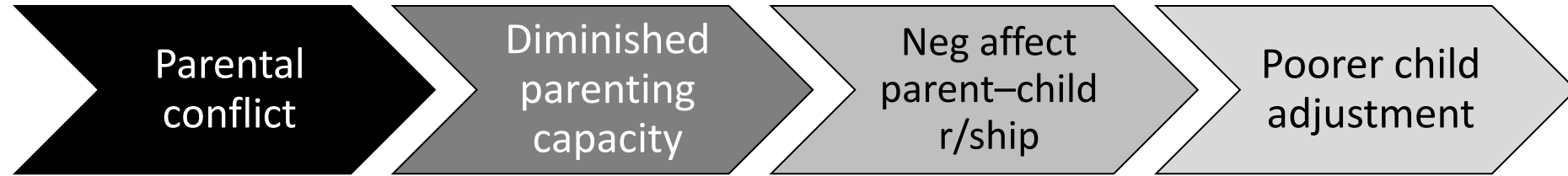
Mental health
issues (including
PDs)

Ideological
beliefs & values

The intersection of multiple mutually reinforcing areas of complexity

Children don't witness
conflict— they experience it

Link b/w conflict & child wellbeing



- At least 3 least options for children caught and used in parents' conflict:
 - take sides with on or both (parental alignment → resist/refuse) 'chameleon child'
 - tell-it-like-it-is
 - duck beneath the conflict (quietly turn inwards → invisible)
- Good parent-child r/ship can help to buffer some conflict

High impact questions

- What kind of a dad/mum do you want to be?
- How would you like to be remembered by your children?
- What does 'home' mean to your children?
- How can you help them make a 'home'?
- How can you use your time together to make a connection?
- What message do you think the use of together time will send to your children?
- How can you help your children hold on to their childhood?

‘Kindness is a language the
blind can see and the deaf
can hear’

‘What most people need is a
good listening to’

–Mary Lou Casey

The gift of a values-based approach

- Empathy
- Kindness
- Respect
- Understanding
- Patience
- Willingness to help

Foundations for positive and meaningful interactions

Getting harder to find? Time – give connection / message

What's the difference
between a flower and a
weed?

Meeting someone where
they're at



here am I
send me
Isaiah 6:8

One day's burden,
is enough for one day

Matthew 6:34

Parting reflections ...

- Times are hard for many families, and will always be hard for some families. What provides hope?
- Poverty big problem in Australia, esp for children
- Cost-of-living crisis, shadow COVID, housing crisis, & wars → much suffering. Now especially hard time of year.
- How do we look after ourselves while supporting others?
- No matter how big the umbrella, sometimes rain gets in.
- What glimmers bring joy each day?
- Importance of celebrating small gains. Small can be BIG.

Thanks for letting me
celebrate the amazing work
you do, which so often goes
unrecognized.

Questions?
Comments?

