

Improvisation in School Social Work

The History, Philosophy, and Efficacy of an Expressive Play-based
Approach to Work with Children

Today's Road Map

Where are we going?

- Orientation to the space and each other**

- Housekeeping
- Mindful moment
- Learn a bit about the presenter
- Learn a bit about each other

- Orientation to the topic**

- Learn a bit about improvisation
- Learn about the foundational history that the field of social work has had with improvisation dating back to work in Chicago's Hull House in the early 20th century

- Orientation to the research and practice**

- Getting oriented to learn about the philosophy and efficacy regarding improv techniques in social work practice
- Learn three different improv activities you can utilize in your work with students.

- Questions**

- Welcome throughout, and also at the end



Housekeeping

Things to know

- Exits
- Bathrooms
- Take care of your needs to stay engaged
 - Move
 - Stretch
 - Restroom
 - Etc.



Getting in the Room

Mindful Moment



This presenter

Getting to know me: Jeremy Lynch

- Lived in Chicago for 10 years and never took an improv class
- Part of The Teller's Garden playback theatre group in Portland, ME
- Six years as a School Social Worker and two as a Culture & Climate Coordinator (all at the elementary level)
- Live in Portland, ME with my wife, two children, and our dog Cooper



ROWE
Elementary School



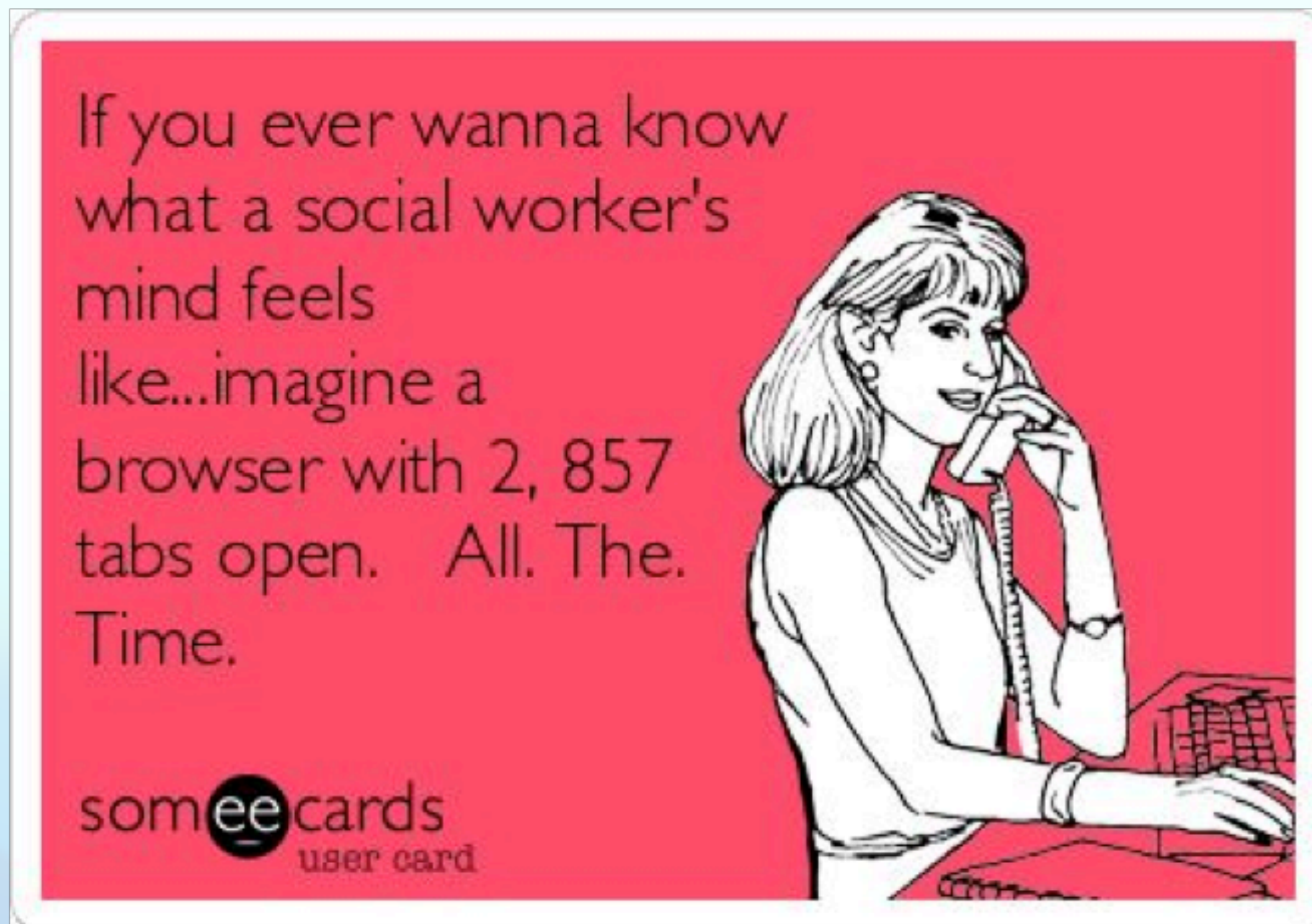
Ice Breaker

Getting to know each other

- Find one person you do not know
- Share:
 - Your name, workplace, role, years in the role
 - Your favorite thing about summer
 - A time that you had to improvise



You improvise all the time: You are social workers!



Improvising

What it is

- Etymology:
 - Latin improviso "unforeseen; not studied or prepared beforehand," ablative of improvisus "not foreseen, unexpected," from assimilated form of in- "not, opposite of" (in-) + provisus "foreseen," also "provided,"

**ONE CANNOT
PLAN FOR THE
UNEXPECTED.**

PictureQuotes.com

- Sir Aaron Klug

Improvising

What it isn't

- Comedy
- Sketch comedy
- People saying funny things on the spot
 - These can be results of improvising, but improvising is the method not the result
 - (Ironically, getting hung up on the result can undermine the process!)



David LaGrafte

Improv Teacher



Why History?

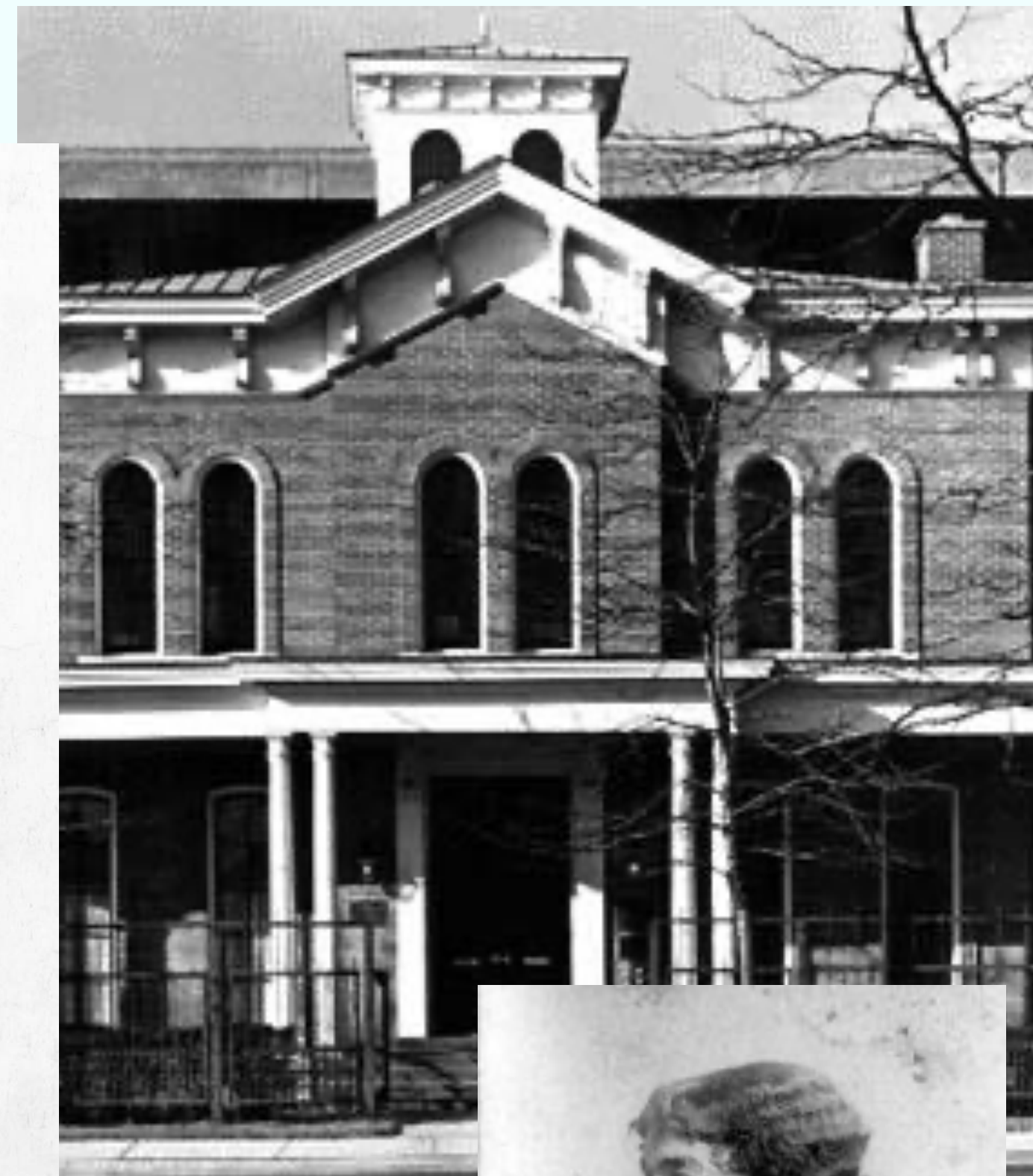
- So we don't reinvent the wheel
- Understand the forces that shape our work
- To ground us in our roots
 - (be radical)



Settlement Movement

Hull House, Chicago

- Jane Addams & Ellen Gates Starr
- Shift from charity to social reform and advocacy
- Evolved from education efforts to meeting community needs



Viola Spolin

Mother of Modern Improv



Neva Boyd

“Play involves social values, as does no other behavior. The spirit of play develops social adaptability, ethics, mental and emotional control, and imagination.”

- Neva Boyd in her essay “The Theory of Play”



Improv Philosophy

“Yes, and...”

- A form of radical acceptance
- A form of mindfulness practice
- A playground for other ways to be
- An exploration of the plane of infinite possibility

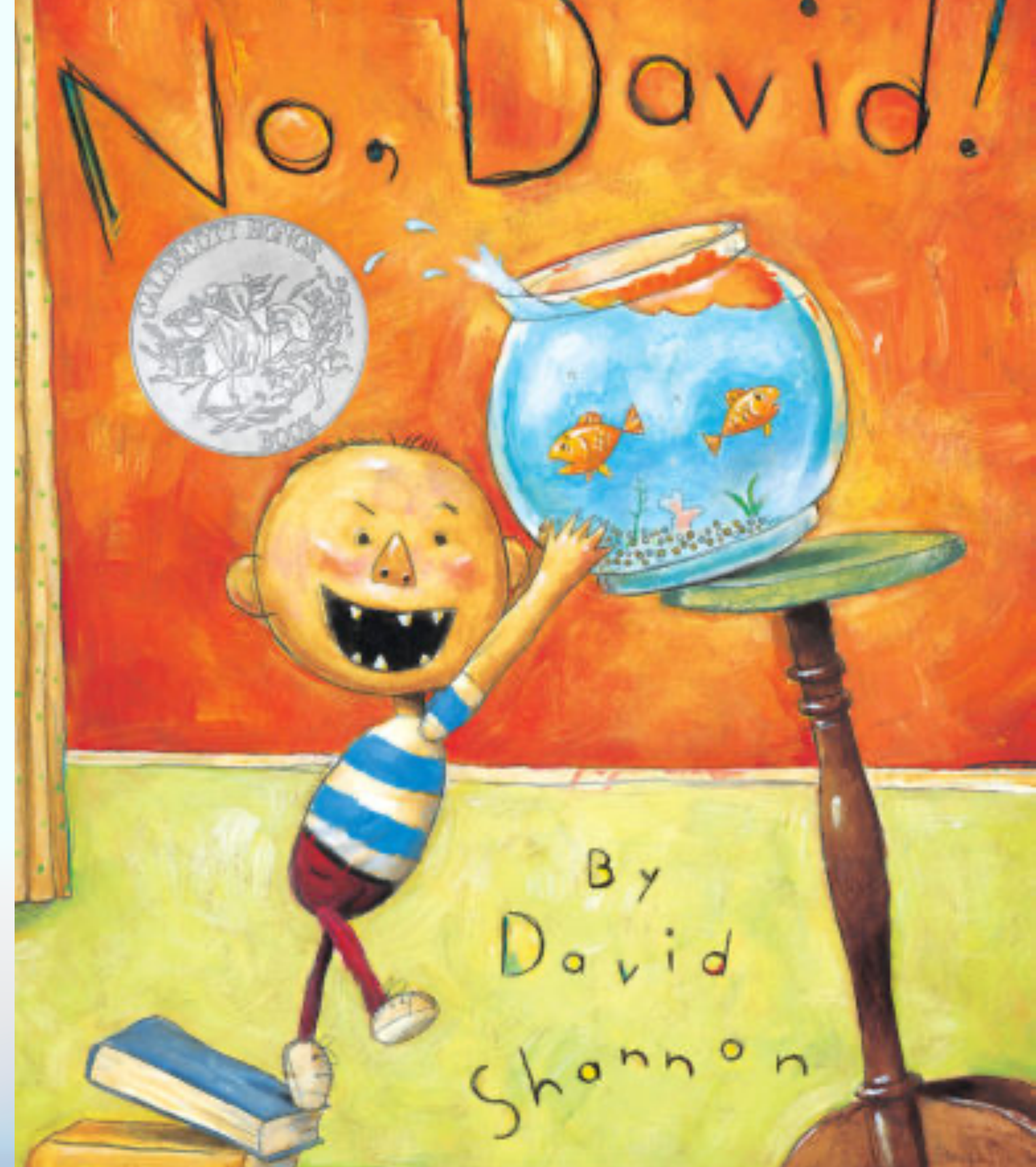


“There’s nothing you can do that can’t be done. There’s nothing you can sing that can’t be sung. There’s nothing you can say, but you can learn how to play the game. It’s easy.”

The Beatles “All You Need is Love”

A world of “No!”

The world children often inhabit



What does the research say?

Preliminary findings for improv interventions

- Increase tolerance of uncertainty
- Reduce social anxiety and fear of failure
- Improve ability to attune to others
- Develop divergent thinking
- Adapt to novel environments
- Strengthen self-esteem



Improv Interventions Research

Populations

- Adolescents with social anxiety
- Adults with intellectual disabilities
- Adults with Parkinson's
- Adults on the Autism Spectrum (mixed results)
- Children ages 10-12 in day treatment with anxiety and/or depression



Improv interventions

Caveats

- May have many of the same contraindications as drama therapy:
 - Active psychosis
 - Complex trauma
 - Severe social anxiety
 - Active substance use
 - Personality disorder



Learning 3 Activities

Explain. Show. Practice.

- No forced participation
- I'll provide participation options
- I encourage you to embrace some discomfort (as long as it's safe)

Zone of Proximal Development

Overwhelmed: Feels unsafe.

ZPD: Uncomfortable/challenging. Where growth and learning occur.

Comfort Zone: Go-to coping strategies

One Word Story

What and Why

- Participants co-create a story taking turns and adding one word at a time.
- Can help build:
 - Listening skills
 - Flexibility
 - Patience
 - Uncertainty tolerance



One Word Story: What It Looks Like



One Word Story

Let's Try It

- At your table, start a story with “Once upon a time...”
- Each person only adds one word at a time.
- If you are the only person at your table, join a table with at least one other person.
- Modifications:
 - If overwhelmed at the prospect, you can introduce a topic for the story before you start
 - If overwhelmed during the activity, you may say “pass” instead of adding a word



One Word Story

Reflections and Adaptations

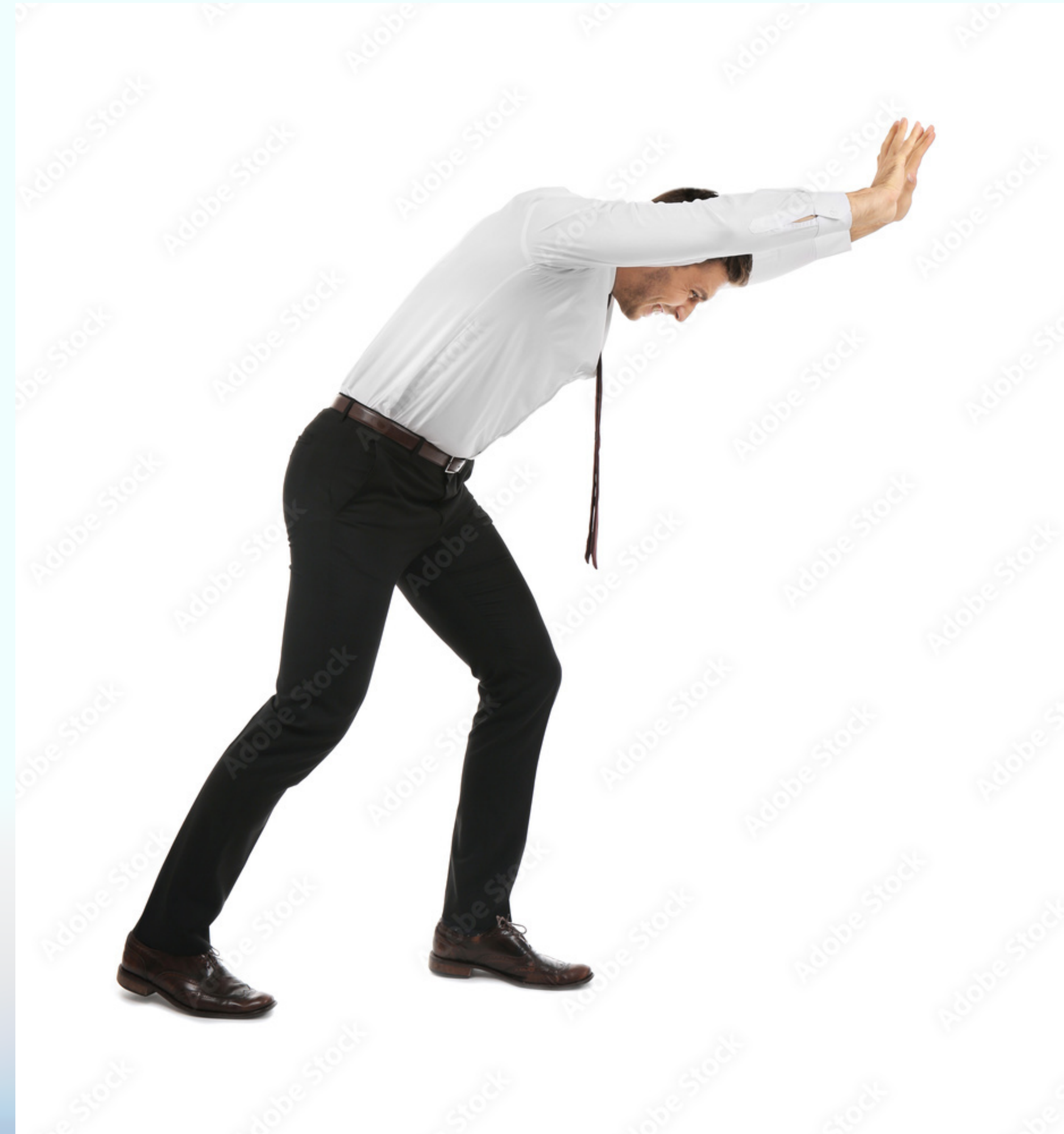
- What was your experience?
- How might you adapt this for your students?
- What questions do you have?



What Are You Doing?

What

- Person A starts with an action of something they are doing (e.g. brushing their teeth, tying their shoe, jumping on a pogo stick etc.)
- Person B asks person A “What are you doing?”
- Person A answers with an action that they are not doing (e.g. if they are brushing their teeth they might say “looking through binoculars” or any number of things except what they were actually doing).
- Person B then has to start doing the action that person A just said.
- Person C (if there are more than 2 people) then asks person B “What are you doing?” And they go through the process.



What Are You Doing?

Why

- Can help build:
 - Listening skills
 - Flexibility
 - Acceptance
 - Executive functioning

**WHATCHA
DOIN'?**



What Are You Doing?

What It Looks Like

What Are You Doing?

Let's Try It

- Let's divide into three groups:
 - A group of folks who are willing to do the exercise and do not mind if people observed them
 - A group of folks who are willing to do the exercise but don't want any outside watchers
 - A group of folks unwilling to do the exercise who can watch the first group

A neon sign with the text "What are you doing?" is mounted on a dark brick wall. The sign is illuminated with a rainbow gradient, with "What" in yellow, "are" in orange, "you" in blue, "doing" in purple, and the question mark in green. The sign is slightly out of focus, giving it a soft, glowing appearance.

What are
you doing?

What Are You Doing?

Reflections and Adaptations

- What was your experience?
- How might you adapt this for your students?
- What questions do you have?



Ah-So-Kah

What

- People stand in a circle
- They use the gestures and associated sounds “Ah” (right or left hand at throat level, parallel to the ground), “So” (right or left hand above the head, also parallel to the ground), and “Kah” (clap both hands in front of you pointing at a specific person across the circle) to indicate whose turn is next.
- The sequence is always “Ah”, then “So”, then “Kah”.
- Inevitably someone will mess up (it’s tricky!) and when they do, everyone cheers and the person takes a bow. (Alternate choice: in place of cheering and bowing, everyone could make a nasal voice and say “You are out of this circle!” And then the person would run around the circle and back to their spot).
- The person who made the mistake begins the next round.



Ah-So-Kah

Why

- Can help build
- Comfortability with failure
- Understanding that mistakes are part of learning
- Listening skills



Ah-So-Kah

What It Looks Like



Ah-So-Kah

Let's Try It

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Ah-So-Kah

Reflections and Adaptations

- What was your experience?
- How might you adapt this for your students?
- What questions do you have?



Joy

Can be powerful

- Counter deficit narratives
- Fuel hope
- Foster connection
- Especially important to create space for joy for those in marginalized communities



Questions?

References

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Per request: Practical Resources

Note: These are general references for learning about improv and improv exercises and aren't necessarily vetted for clinical use.

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Improv Class (Portland, ME area):

- Improv for Everyone with Geep Amara. I believe his next class starts in January. You can reach out to him at geepamara@gmail.com to inquire.



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Per request: Practical Resources

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Resource	What it offers / strengths	Notes / how best to use it
Improv Encyclopedia	A huge, free online “encyclopedia” of improv games and exercises (500+ entries, categorized) Improv Encyclopedia	Great for browsing by theme (warmups, trust, verbal, etc.). You can also download the content as a PDF. Improv Encyclopedia
ImprovDB	A searchable database of warmups, short-form games, long-form formats, lesson plans ImprovDB	Useful when you want to filter for number of players, time, or “game type.”
Improvitorium	A mix of games, exercises, formats, plus related articles and video examples Improvitorium	Helpful when you want inspiration with context (not just rules)
ImprovGames.com	Games with descriptions, teacher/leader tips, videos Improvgames	Good for practical use in workshop or classroom settings
Impromat.app	A workshop builder + a large library of improv exercises, searchable by tags Impromat	Excellent if you want something that helps you <i>assemble</i> a session
Easy Improv (easy-improv.com)	A curated set of games with accessible descriptions and estimated time lengths Easy Improv	Especially good for jumping in with something simple
Spolin Games Online	A video library of games and exercises by Viola Spolin / Spolin-style exercises Spoli Games Online	Useful if you like seeing the game in action rather than just reading a script
One Rule Improv – Video Library	Focused video demonstrations + facilitation scripts for short-form games One Rule Improv	Good when you want ready-made, polished versions you can “plug into”



Jeremy Lynch

School Culture and Climate Coordinator
School District



Help me improv(e)

