

S O M E N T É

The Three Pillars of Practice

*The developmental conditions behind Somenté's approach,
and what each one looks like once it takes root.*

Every meaningful shift in a child's development begins before any strategy is introduced. It begins with the conditions their nervous system is offered.

Across our work with neurodivergent children and their families, one pattern holds steady: lasting change doesn't come from isolated techniques, behaviour plans, or reward systems. It comes from the relational, psychological, and neurobiological architecture surrounding a child: the conditions that allow development to take root on its own.

Three pillars sit underneath everything we do at Somenté: Safety & Connection, Self-Efficacy, and Autonomy. They are not strategies to apply. They are developmental conditions to build.

Individually, each represents a distinct domain of a child's growth. Together, they form the foundation lasting change is built on.

Safety & Connection comes first, always. Self-efficacy and autonomy can only take root once it's present. This guide follows that order.

P I L L A R O N E

Safety & Connection

A child's nervous system has to register safety and connection before it can learn, regulate, or stretch into anything new. This isn't a preference or a nice-to-have. It's a prerequisite. Until safety and connection are present, a child's system stays oriented toward protection, not growth.

W H Y I T M A T T E R S

When we ask what a behaviour means, we're really asking what the nervous system is responding to. A child who is bracing, avoiding, shutting down, or escalating is not choosing to be difficult. Their system has assessed the moment as unsafe or disconnected, and it's responding accordingly. Correction and consequence can't reach a nervous system in that state. Only safety and connection can bring it back to a place where learning becomes possible again.

W H A T T H I S L O O K S L I K E I N P R A C T I C E

In practice, this means connection comes before correction, rhythm and predictability are treated as regulation tools in their own right, and a child is met where their nervous system actually is, not where the situation seems to call for. Some children learn to mask distress in order to keep the connection they need, appearing fine right up until they aren't. Reading for the nervous system state underneath the behaviour, rather than the behaviour on the surface, is what safety and connection asks of the adults around a child.

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WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE ONCE IT'S PRESENT

A child who has this pillar in place can attempt new or difficult things without bracing for correction first. They can be upset without the relationship feeling at risk. They recover from dysregulation with support, rather than needing to manage it alone. And they don't need to hold it together, or mask, in order to stay connected to the people around them.

PILLAR TWO

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a child's internal belief that they are capable of acting on the world around them. It's one of the strongest predictors of whether a child will attempt something new, persist through difficulty, problem-solve, or recover after a setback. When a child believes "I can," their brain approaches a task with curiosity rather than fear, and the likelihood of success rises accordingly.

WHY IT MATTERS

Self-efficacy isn't surface-level confidence or wishful thinking. It's a readiness state. When a child expects competence, their attention stabilises, their movements become more efficient, and their stress response settles. As this belief strengthens, a child's nervous system shifts from guardedness into possibility: from fear of getting it wrong toward openness and engagement.

Children often begin rehearsing a new skill mentally the moment they watch someone they trust do it. Paired with a felt sense of safety, that kind of modelling sends a clear internal message: I can see how this works. This feels reachable. Encouragement, co-regulated practice, and predictable scaffolding do the rest. Small, embodied wins that accumulate into belief.

WHAT HELPS THIS TAKE ROOT

Self-efficacy grows fastest when a child is given a clear, predictable pathway toward a task, rather than being expected to find their own way through trial and error. Step-by-step guidance, scaffolding that moves from full support toward independence, and a steady adult presence during the attempt ("you can do this, and I'm here while you try") give a child's brain both a map and an emotional template to follow.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE ONCE IT'S PRESENT

Self-efficacy becomes visible when a child begins a task without needing reassurance first. They persist through early mistakes and stay regulated rather than guarded. They stop checking in for confirmation, because the belief is already internal: I can.

Self-efficacy is usually the first shift families notice: the quiet move from "I don't know if I can" to "maybe I can." Once it's present, the next pillar becomes possible.

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Autonomy

Autonomy is a child's developing ability to express their needs, make choices, and act with increasing self-direction. It doesn't emerge from a world that is naturally predictable or safe. The real world rarely offers that. It develops when the adults around a child deliberately build predictability, clarity, and emotional safety into daily life, so the child has somewhere safe to practise choosing.

WHY SCAFFOLDING, NOT OPEN-ENDED FREEDOM

Boundaries and guided options, not unlimited freedom, are what make autonomy possible. Two outfits laid out in the morning. A visual plan for the afternoon. A predictable sequence for a transition. These containers reduce overwhelm rather than adding to it, and it's inside them that a child has enough safety to actually choose.

Within that structure, a child starts to recognise their own preferences, communicate their needs, and follow through on small choices. Children also tend to mirror the emotional steadiness of the adults they rely on. When an adult stays clear and settled, choices feel tolerable rather than threatening, and small risks become possible to take.

WHAT HELPS THIS TAKE ROOT

Autonomy is built through structured choice within clear boundaries: "this or that" options, child-led sequencing where it's appropriate, and steering that guides without controlling. The aim is a child who can express a preference and follow through on it, inside a frame that keeps things safe.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE ONCE IT'S PRESENT

Autonomy shows up when a child states what they want without hesitation, and takes the lead on parts of an activity without being asked. Rather than freezing or shrugging at a choice, they engage with a clear sense of ownership. Their choices become purposeful rather than avoidant: the shift from "I'm not sure" to "I know what works for me."

Autonomy depends on self-efficacy, the belief that choosing is even possible, and both depend on safety and connection being present first. None of the three works in isolation.

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THE FOUNDATION

Why these three, together

These pillars aren't a checklist, and they don't build in a strict sequence the way a program might. They're conditions, and they build on each other: safety and connection come first, always. Without them, a child's system stays oriented toward protection rather than growth. Self-efficacy and autonomy can only take root once that foundation is in place.

This is the framework underneath every session, every plan, and every conversation we have with your family: not a set of techniques to apply, but the conditions we work to build, together.

If you're not sure where your child's development is being held back, whether it's safety and connection, self-efficacy, or autonomy, a Parent Clarity Session is where that conversation starts.