

Digital Addictions: A Family Guide to Prevention, Signs, and Treatment

Understanding the brain science, recognizing the red flags, and reclaiming balance in a digital world.



Based on insights from Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development

You Are Not Imagining This: The Digital Landscape

Many online platforms are expertly designed to encourage addictive use. Parents are not fighting a fair fight.



1/3

of teens report "almost constant" daily use of social media platforms.



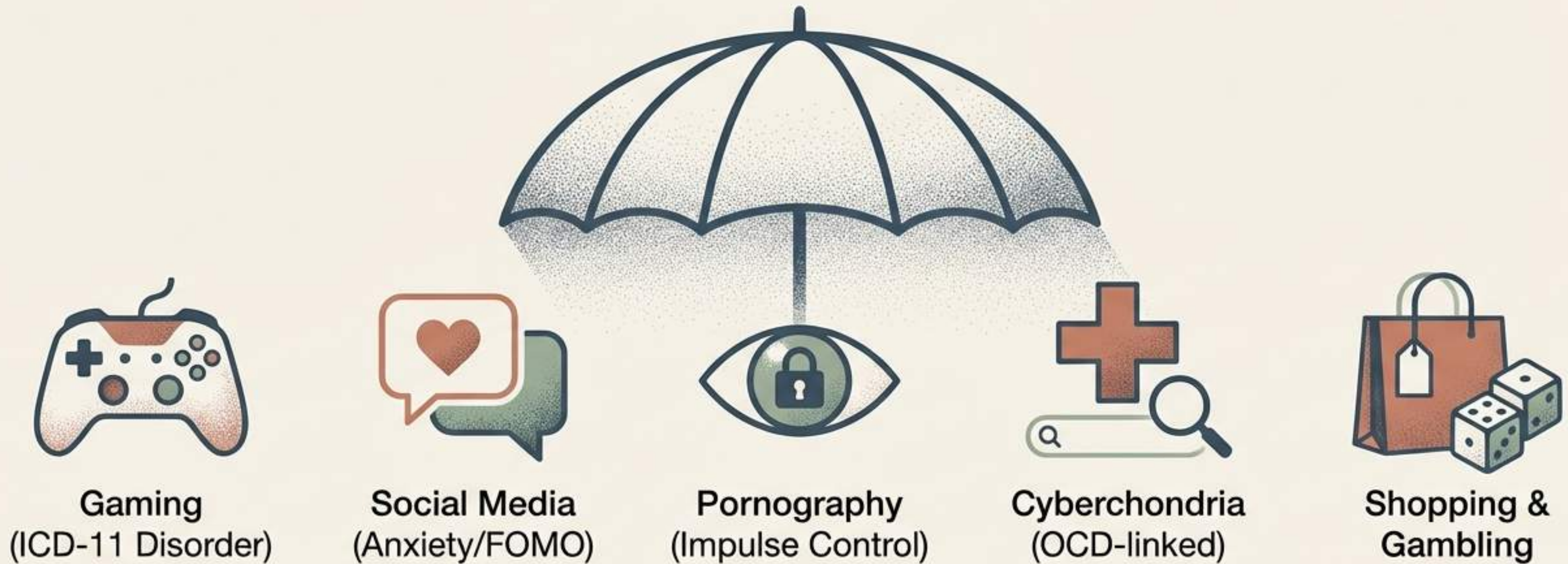
50%

of adolescents (ages 11-12) report losing track of time while using devices.



Defining the 'Umbrella' of Problematic Use

Digital addiction is a catch-all term for various behaviors where screens become problematic.



"It's an umbrella term... ranging from gaming to cyberchondria."
— Naomi Fineberg, Professor of Psychiatry.

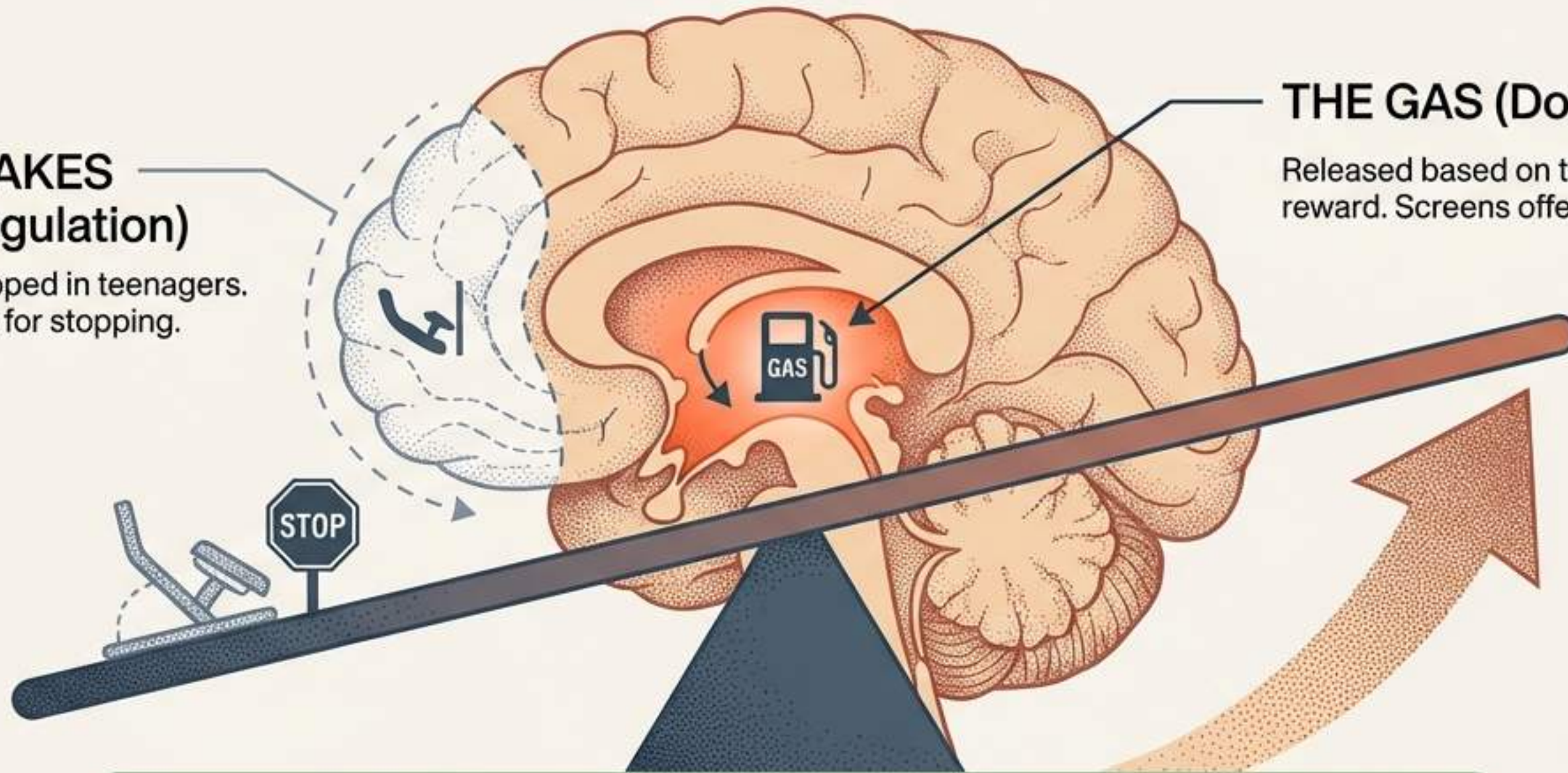
The Chemistry of Control: Dopamine vs. The Brakes

THE BRAKES (Self-Regulation)

Underdeveloped in teenagers.
Responsible for stopping.

THE GAS (Dopamine)

Released based on the SPEED of the
reward. Screens offer instant gratification.



Key Insight: When the brakes fail, the user keeps going. When finally stop, the brain is left in a state of "craving."

"Dopamine release is based on the speed at which we get what we want." — Dr. Clifford Sussman.

The Red Flags: When Heavy Use Becomes Addiction

Medical Checklist



Impaired Control

Unable to start or stop frequency and duration.
"You try to stop and you can't."

Medical Checklist



Neglect

Priorities shift. Social, academic, hygiene, and sleep breakdown.

Medical Checklist



Withdrawal

Agitation, moodiness, rage, or disrupted sleep when the device is removed.

Medical Checklist



Displacement

Escapism. Using screens to avoid real-life anxiety or difficult emotions.

"Look for the problems caused by the use, not just the use itself." — Dr. Clifford Sussman.

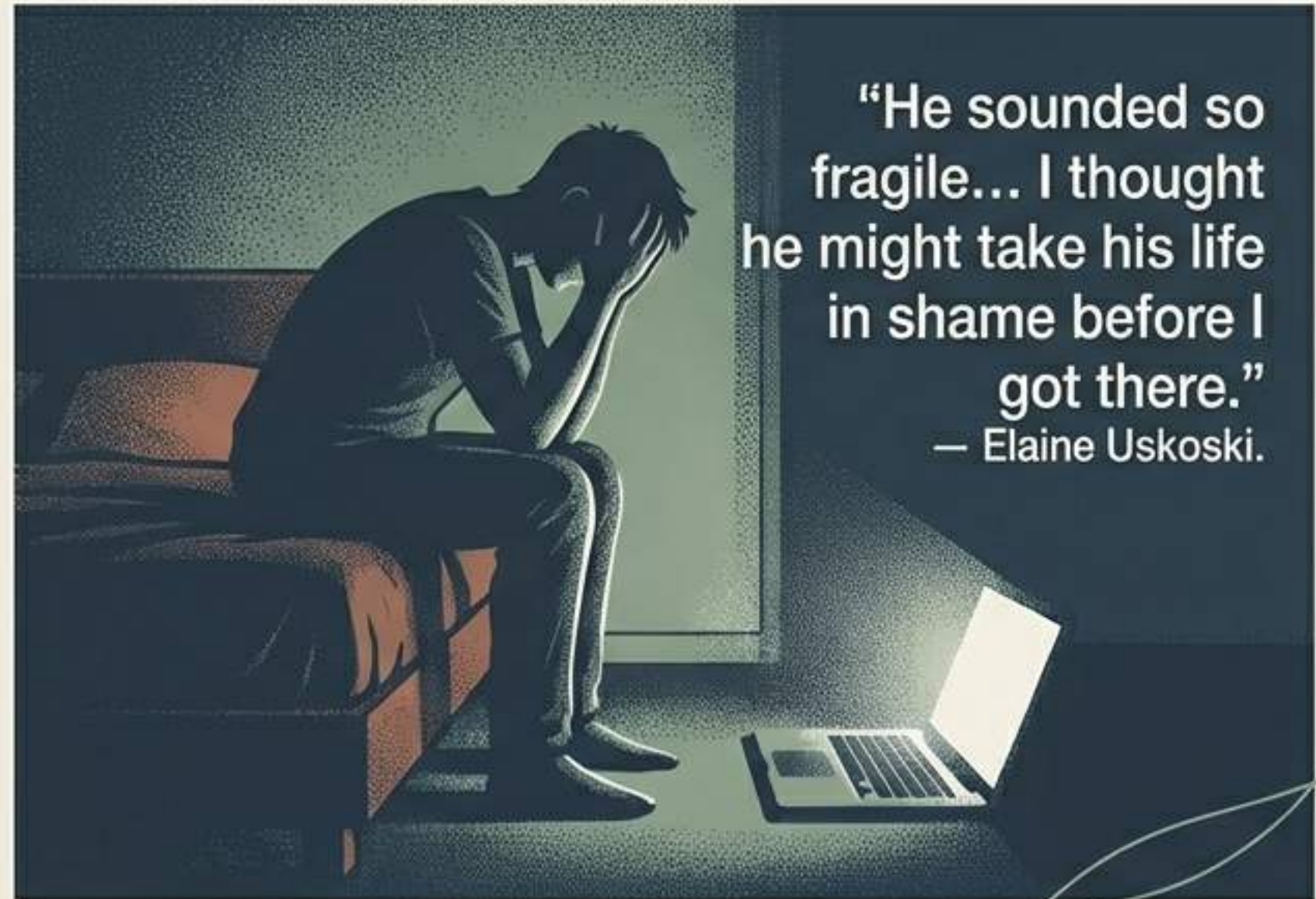
Case Study: The Descent

The Story of Elaine Uskoski and her son, Jake (Age 19)

The Spidey Sense: Grade 12 fatigue, slipping grades, sleeping all day.

The Crisis: An 'SOS Email' from university. Jake had stopped attending classes for two months, gaming 16 hours a night.

The Physical Reality: 127 lbs (severe weight loss), facial tics, tremors, dilated pupils, severe acne, and body odor.



“He sounded so fragile... I thought he might take his life in shame before I got there.”
— Elaine Uskoski.

Prevention: Building Immunity Before the Crisis



The Family Media Plan

Create screen-free zones (bedrooms, mealtimes). Establish guidelines with logical consequences, not just strict rules.



Embrace Boredom

Allow children to be bored. Creativity and imagination are born in the gaps between entertainment.



Role Modeling

Parents are being watched. If you are on your phone at dinner, your child will prioritize screens too.



Financial Controls

Keep credit cards for adults only. Use gift cards to limit 'loot box' spending.

Intervention: How to Talk So They Will Listen

The Head-On Attack

Dictating the problem.

Accusatory language
("You game too much").

Result: They run the other way.



Motivational Interviewing

Ask questions to help them identify the problem.

Connect on emotion ("I miss our time together").

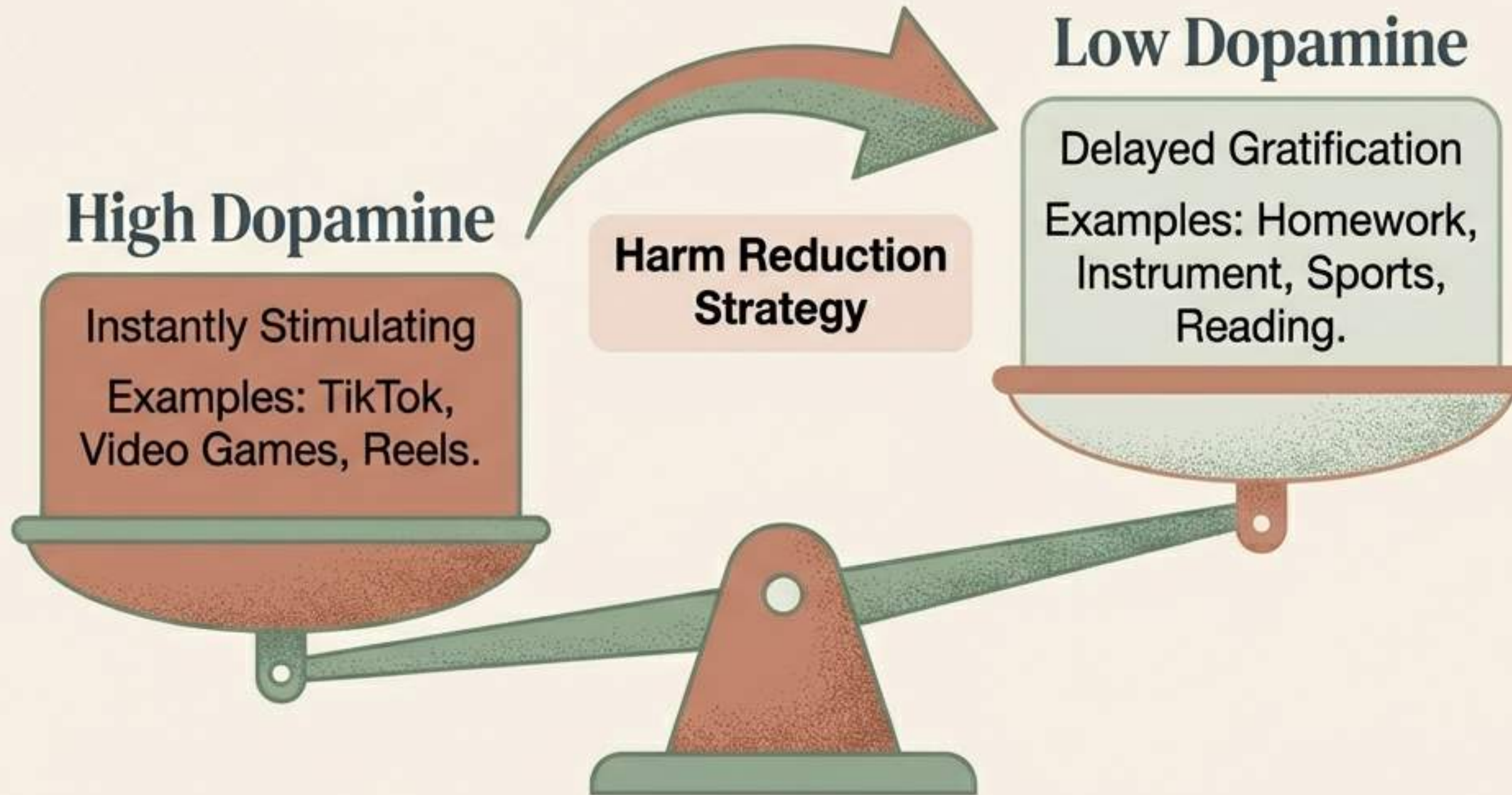
Result: Building a parent-child alliance.



Goal: Stop making every conversation about the addiction. Build the relationship first.

Treatment: Retraining the Dopamine Pathways

The goal is not just stopping screens, but relearning patience.

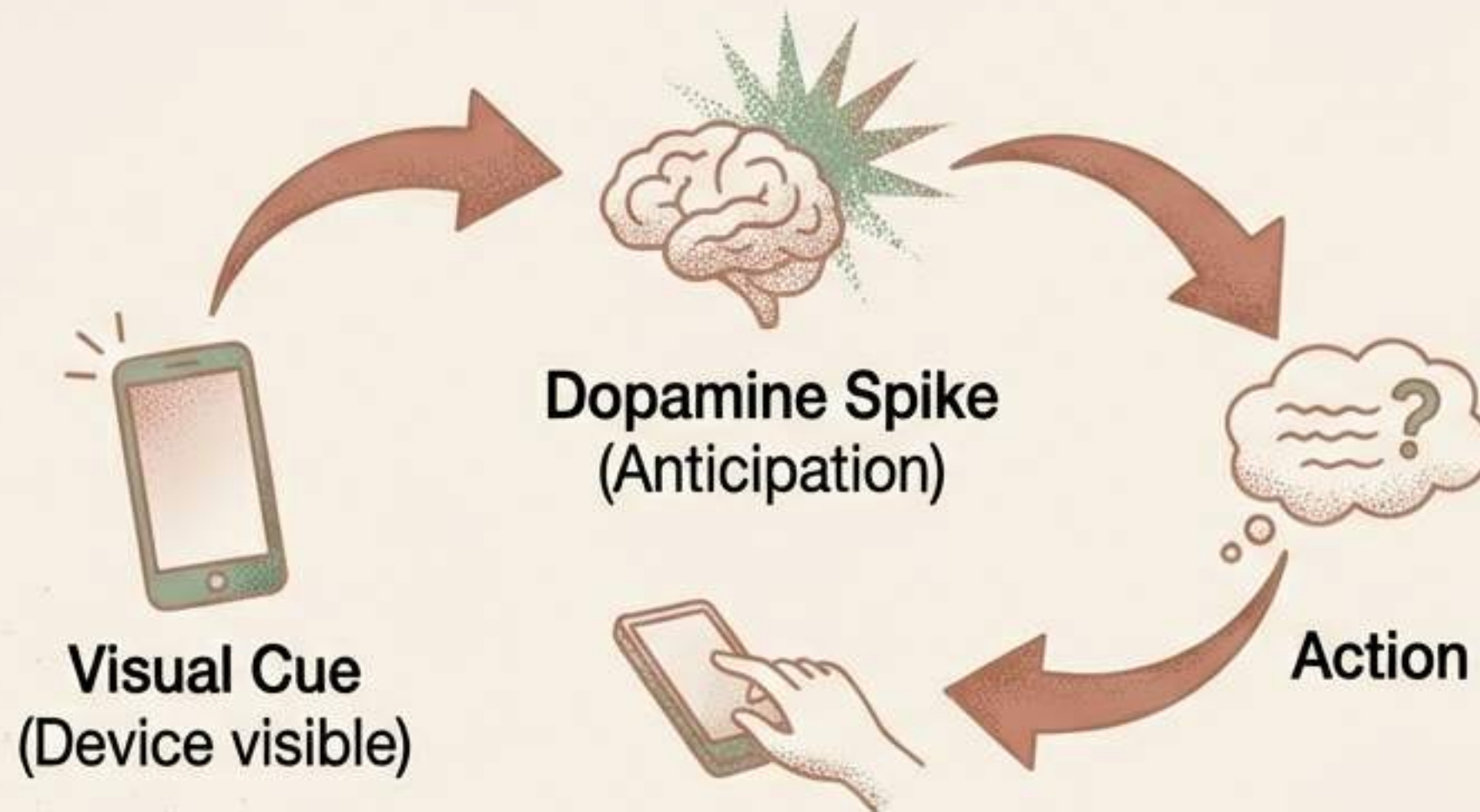


Note: Not all screens are 'High Dopamine.'

Creative coding or making PowerPoints can be 'Low Dopamine' activities that require effort and patience.

Managing the Environment: Removing the Cues

The Addiction Loop



The brain releases dopamine at the sight of the cue, before the activity starts.

Action Plan

- **Reduce Visibility:** Remove screens from shared spaces and bedrooms.
- **Financial Cues:** Remove stored credit cards.
- **Structured Routine:** Eliminate “unstructured time” where cravings thrive.

Handling Conflict & De-Escalation

Aggression often comes with the territory. Have a plan before the fight starts.

Avoid Physical Intervention



Do not physically wrestle for a device. Step away if aggression rises.

The Contextual Approach



Never unplug a console mid-game. This severs social connections and triggers explosions.

Negotiate the End-Point

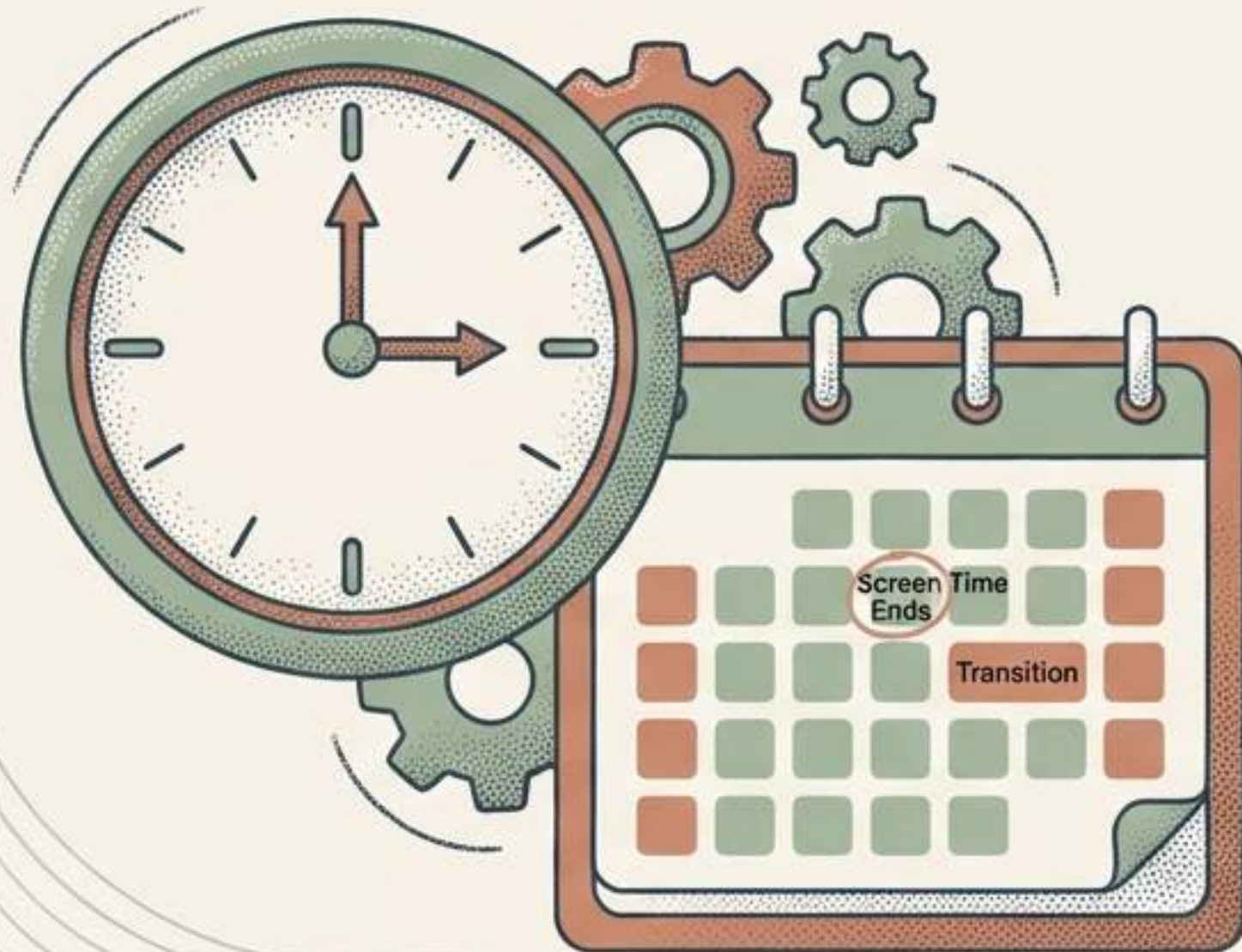


Instead of "Stop Now," use "Finish this level." Respect the cycle of the activity.

Special Considerations: Neurodiversity (ADHD/ASD)

Clinical Empathy

Neurodiverse youth require extreme predictability to feel safe and avoid power struggles.



Action Plan

- **Explicit Schedules:** Define exactly how much time is allowed and what happens when it ends.
- **The 5-Minute Warning:** Essential to bridge the transition gap.

“Let them know ahead of time... exactly how much time they are going to get.”

— Dr. Sussman

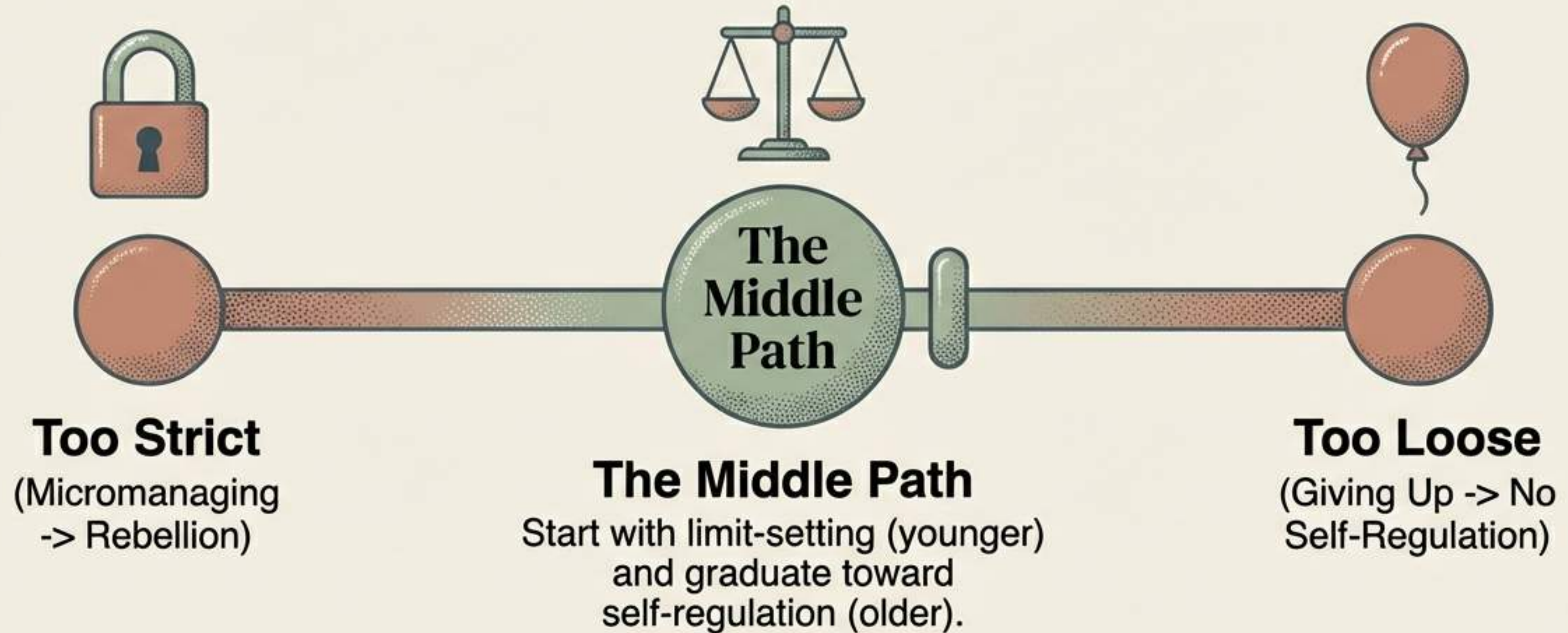
Case Study: The Road to Recovery

Clinical Empathy

Recovery was not a straight line. It required replacing the online community with a real-world community.



Finding Balance in Parenting



The goal is a lifestyle that is well-balanced for the whole family.

Resources & Next Steps

When to seek professional help: If the problem feels bigger than you can handle.



First Point of Contact: Pediatrician or Primary Care Doctor.



Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development.



Family Media Plan: Online tools for setting household guidelines.

Insights drawn from Dr. Clifford Sussman, Dr. Jason Nagata, Naomi Fineberg, and Elaine Uskoski.