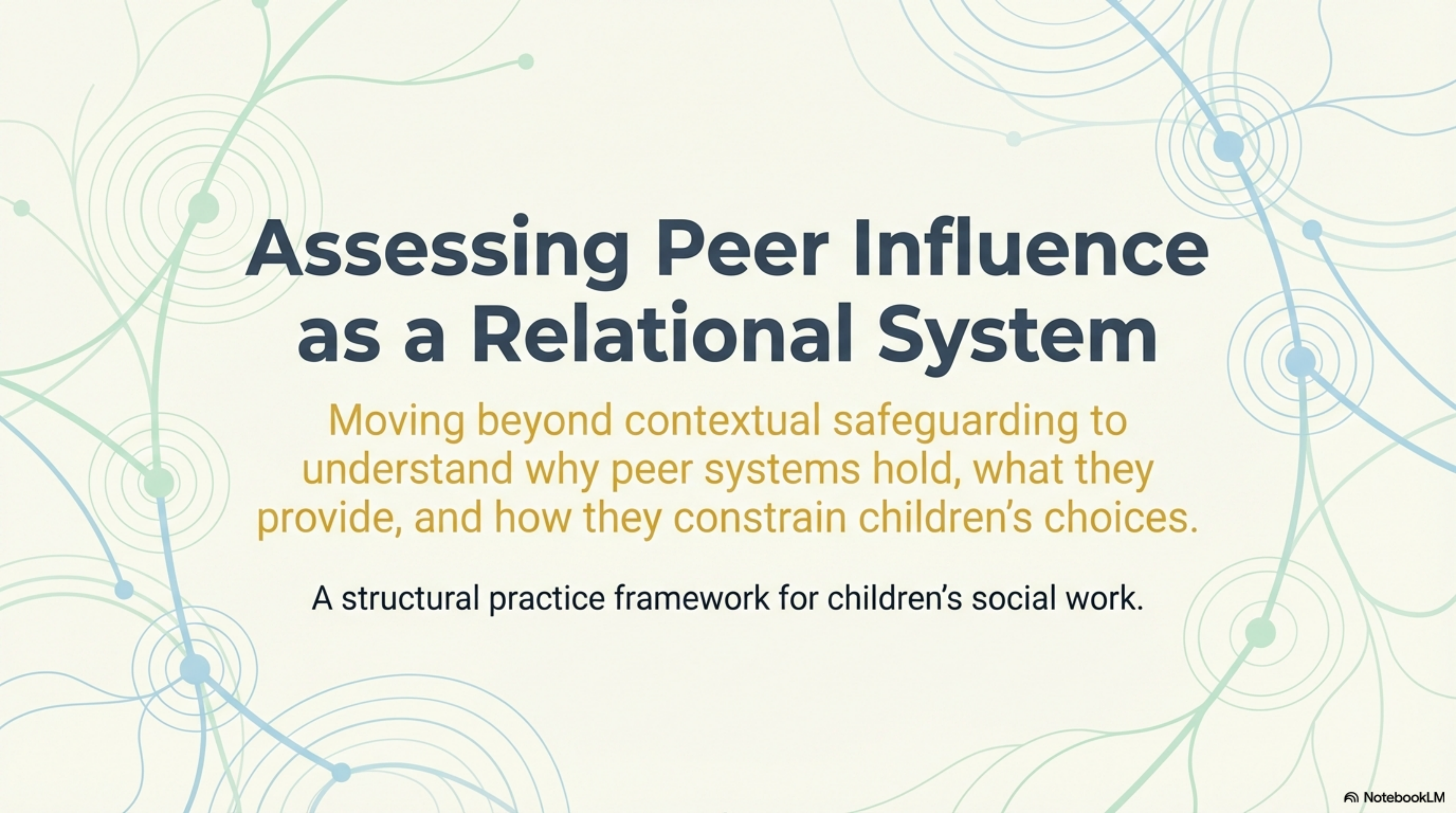




Assessing Peer Influence as a Relational System

Moving beyond contextual safeguarding to understand why peer systems hold, what they provide, and how they constrain children's choices.

A structural practice framework for children's social work.

The Unsolved Problem in Contextual Safeguarding

The Necessary Correction



Contextual safeguarding successfully shifted our focus to places and spaces (schools, neighbourhoods, online), challenging individualised, family-only narratives.

The Unexplored Essential



The child is still positioned merely as someone exposed to risk in places. We miss the child actively navigating relationships, loyalties, identities, and unmet needs.

Children are **not passive recipients** of exposure. We must ask not only where harm occurs, but **why** certain peer relationships hold such power, what they provide, and **what they cost the child**.

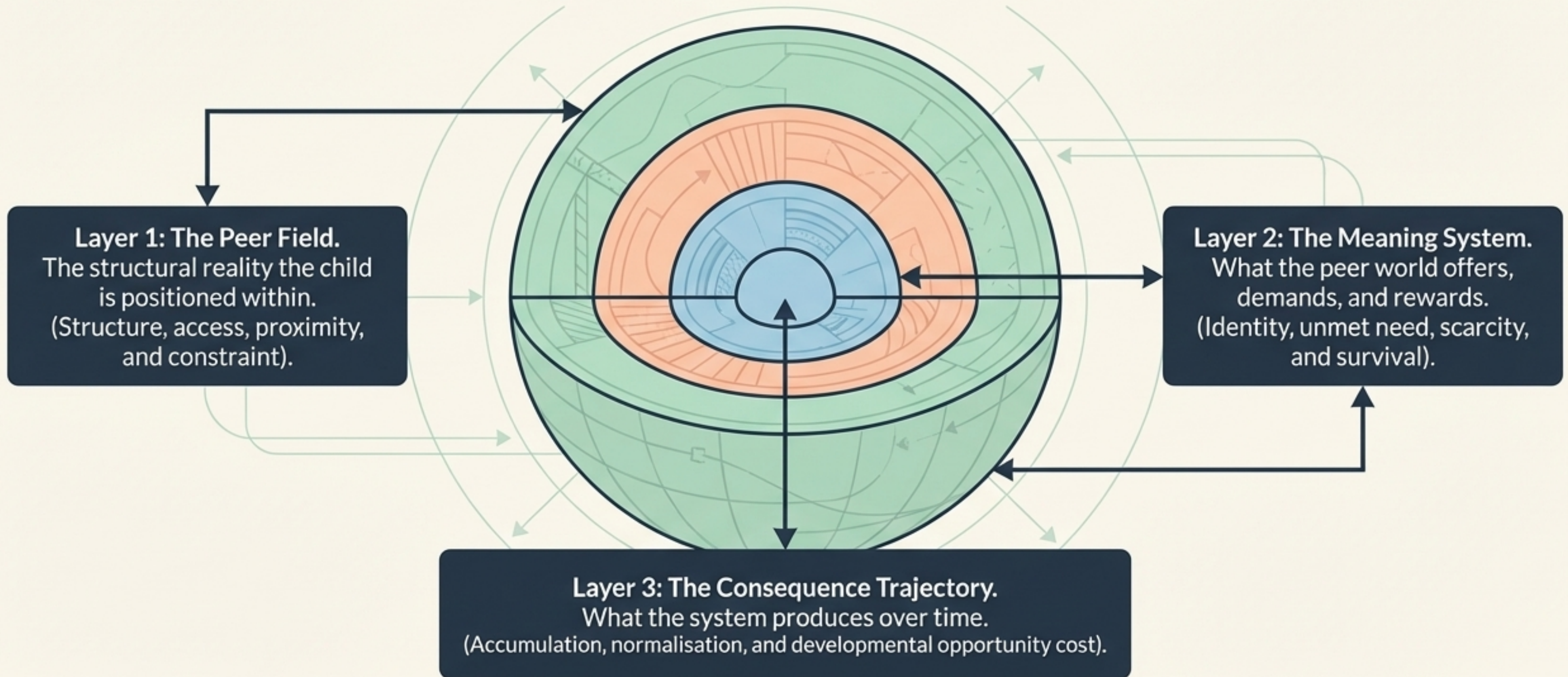
The Analytical Blindspot in Social Work Practice

How Social Work Sees Peer Influence

The Dominant Framework	The Analytical Blindspot
Historical Dominance of Family	We map intergenerational trauma carefully, but treat peer relationships as peripheral or transitional friendship issues.
Selective Developmental Theory	We use development to explain attachment, but miss that peers are the primary mirrors and regulators of adolescent behaviour.
Narrowed Identity Work	Identity is conceptualised as transmitted from adults (heritage), ignoring how it is actively tested and rewarded among peers.
Misframed as 'Choice'	Peer influence is treated as voluntary, obscuring the realities of systemic coercion, debt, and severe exit friction.
Family-Centric Risk Frameworks	Tools evaluate parenting capacity; they are not designed to analyse social contagion, networks, or power within peer systems.

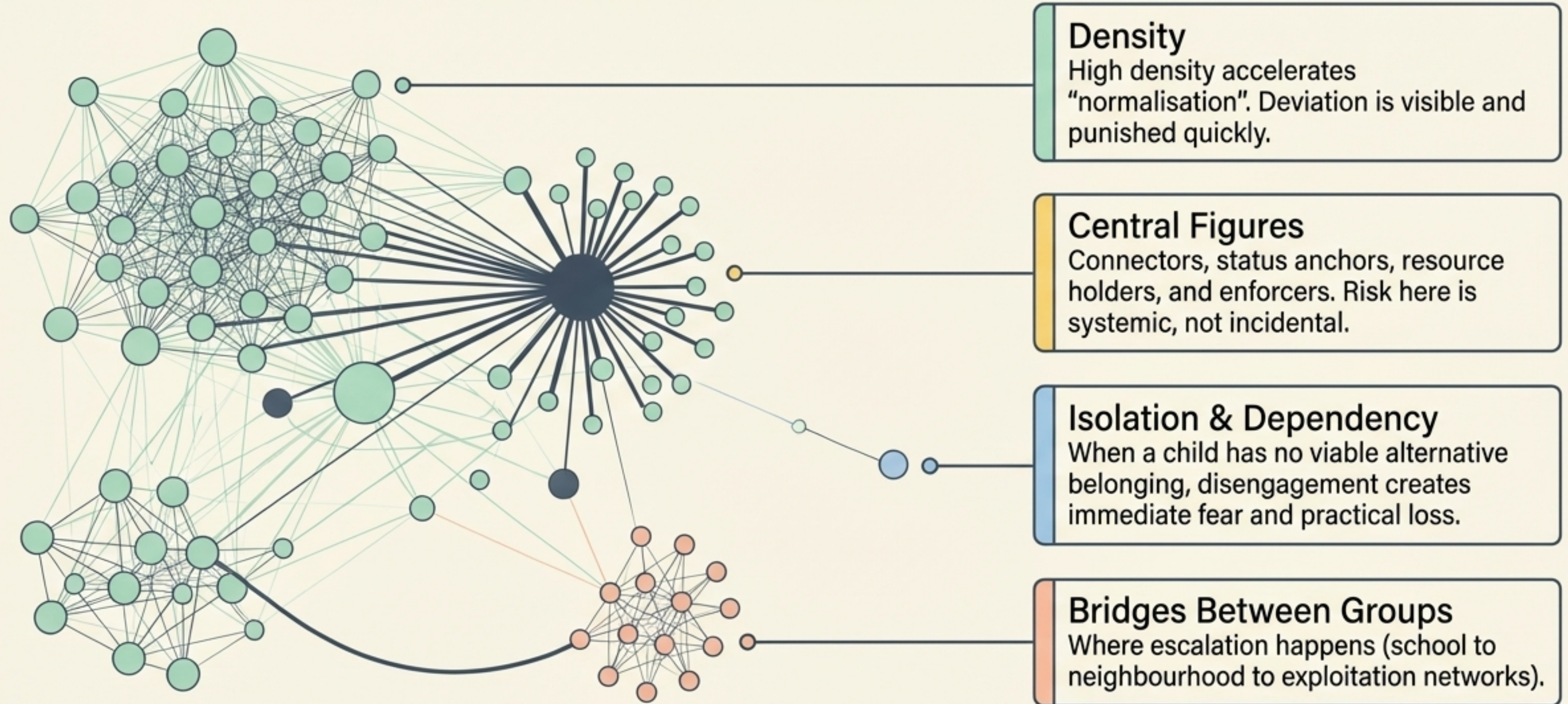
“Children do not ‘fall into’ peer influence. They are positioned within it.”

The Three Layers of Peer Influence

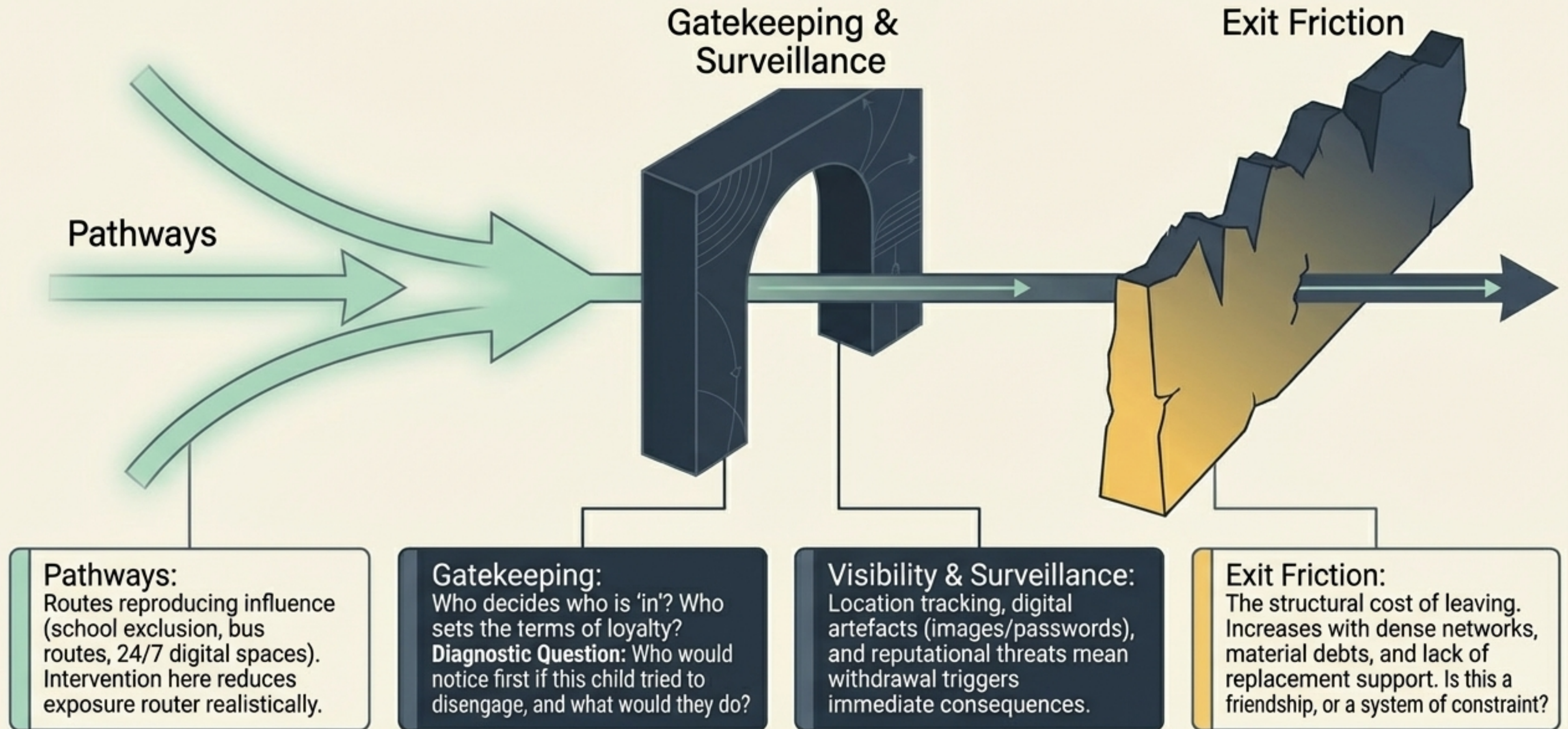


Layer 1: The Architecture of the Peer Field

A list of names tells us nothing. We must understand the architecture of the peer world to know who holds power and how influence travels.



Layer 1: Pathways, Surveillance, and Exit Friction



Layer 2: The Meaning System (Function & Identity)

Context: Insight does **not equal disengagement**. Children remain because the system meets essential, non-negotiable needs.

Belonging as Protection

A substitute for inconsistent caregiving; an antidote to humiliation or racism. Disrupting this without an alternative displaces risk.

Identity Scripts

Narrowed roles the child must perform (toughness, loyalty, gendered scripts, racialised survival scripts).

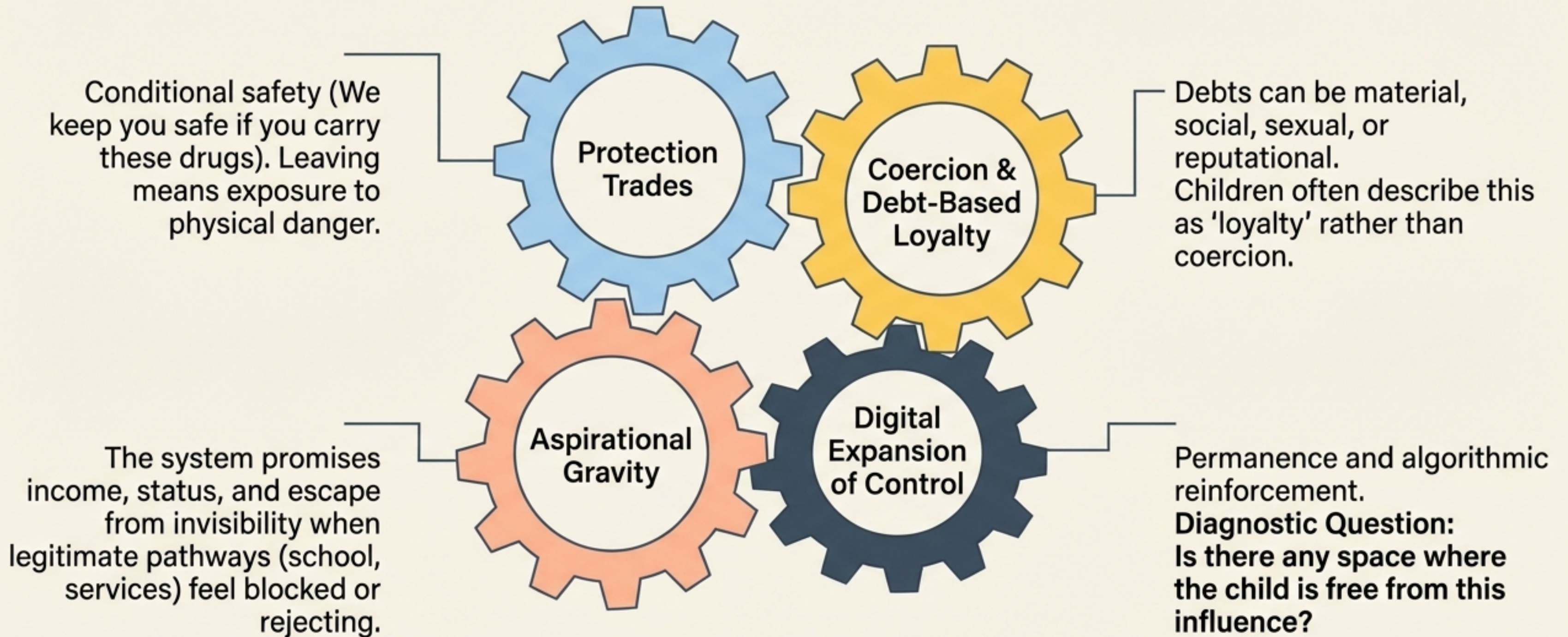
Norm Transmission

Recalibrating what is 'normal' (violence, exploitation, secrecy) as a condition of belonging.

Status & Shame

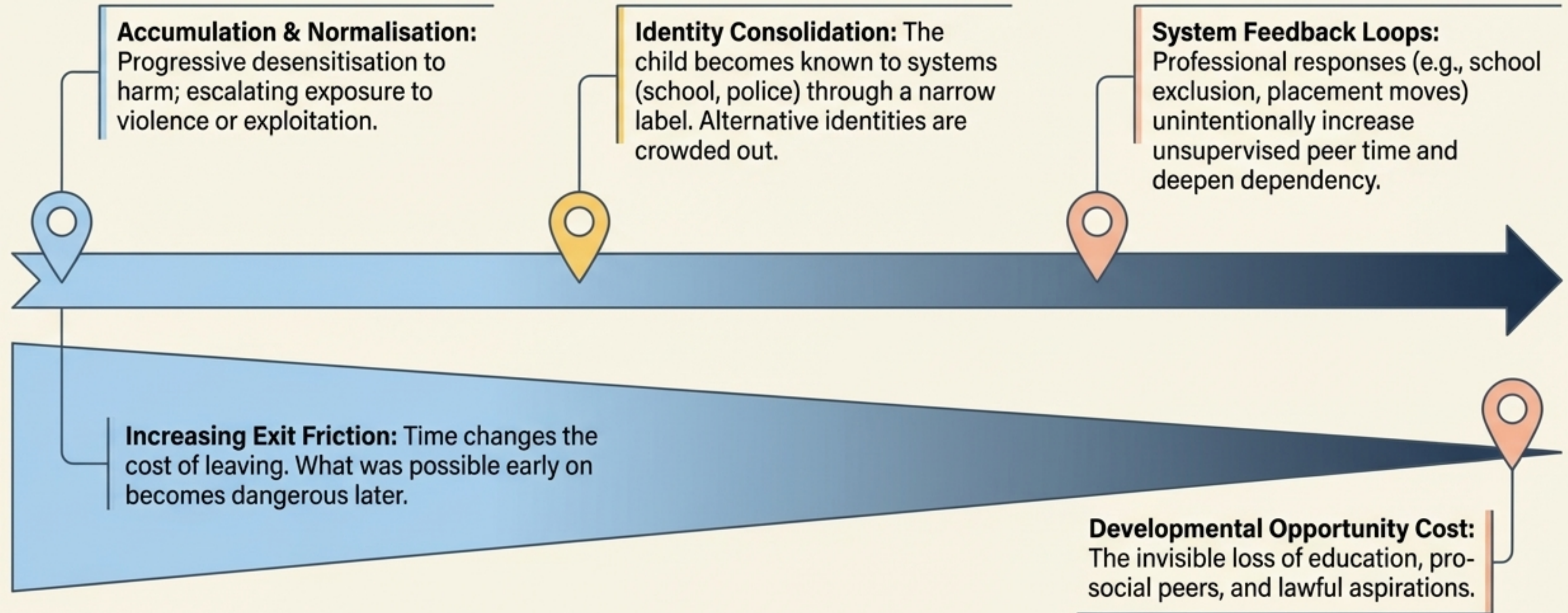
The internal economy of social rewards and reputational destruction that regulates behaviour more effectively than adult sanctions.

Layer 2: Binding Forces and Aspirational Gravity



Layer 3: The Consequence Trajectory

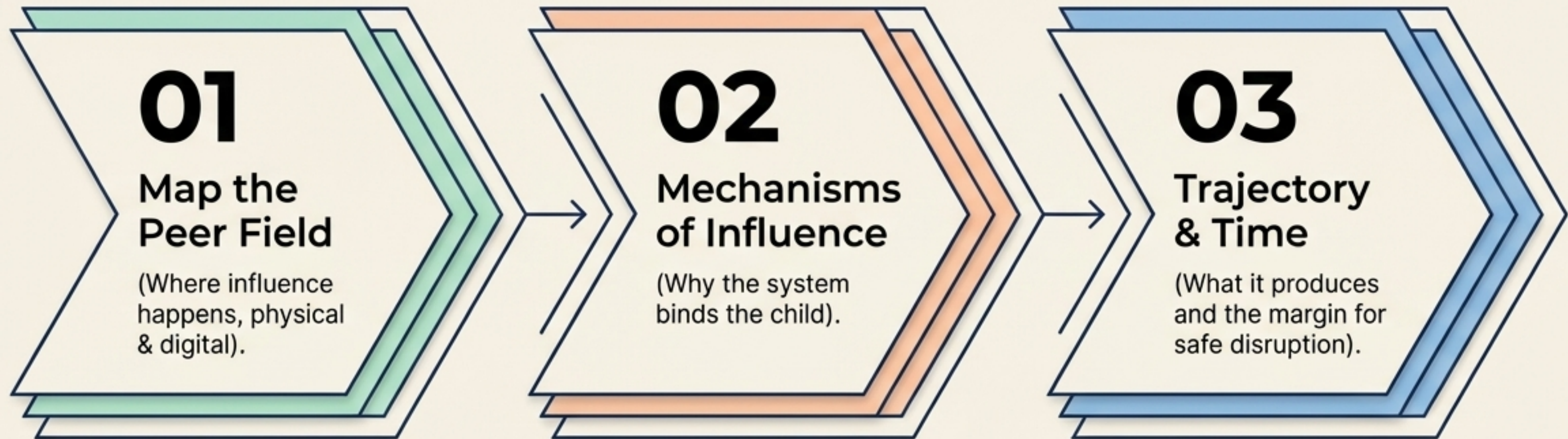
Context: Harm is rarely instantaneous. It is cumulative, trajectory-shaping, and measured on the child's developmental timescale.



The Peer Influence Assessment Tool

A Three-Step Practice Tool for Frontline Application

Translating the three-layer model into a structured, practice-ready method.
This sequence prevents moralising ('poor choices') and prevents drift ('no significant incident yet').

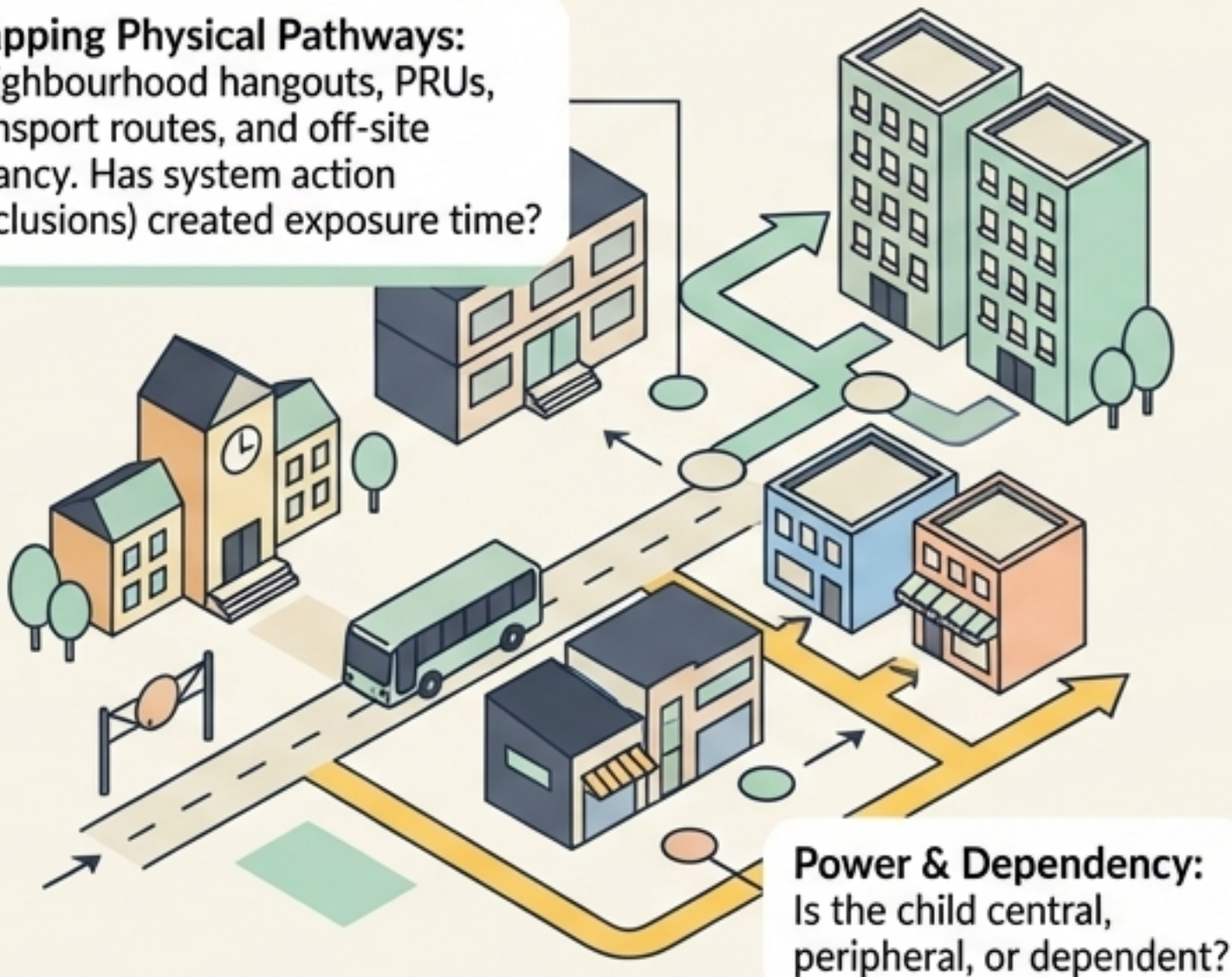


Step One: Mapping the Peer Field

Rule: Do not filter for risk yet. Map the system. Treat digital spaces as authentic peer spaces.

Physical Mapping

Mapping Physical Pathways:
Neighbourhood hangouts, PRUs, transport routes, and off-site truancy. Has system action (exclusions) created exposure time?



Power & Dependency:
Is the child central, peripheral, or dependent?

Digital Mapping

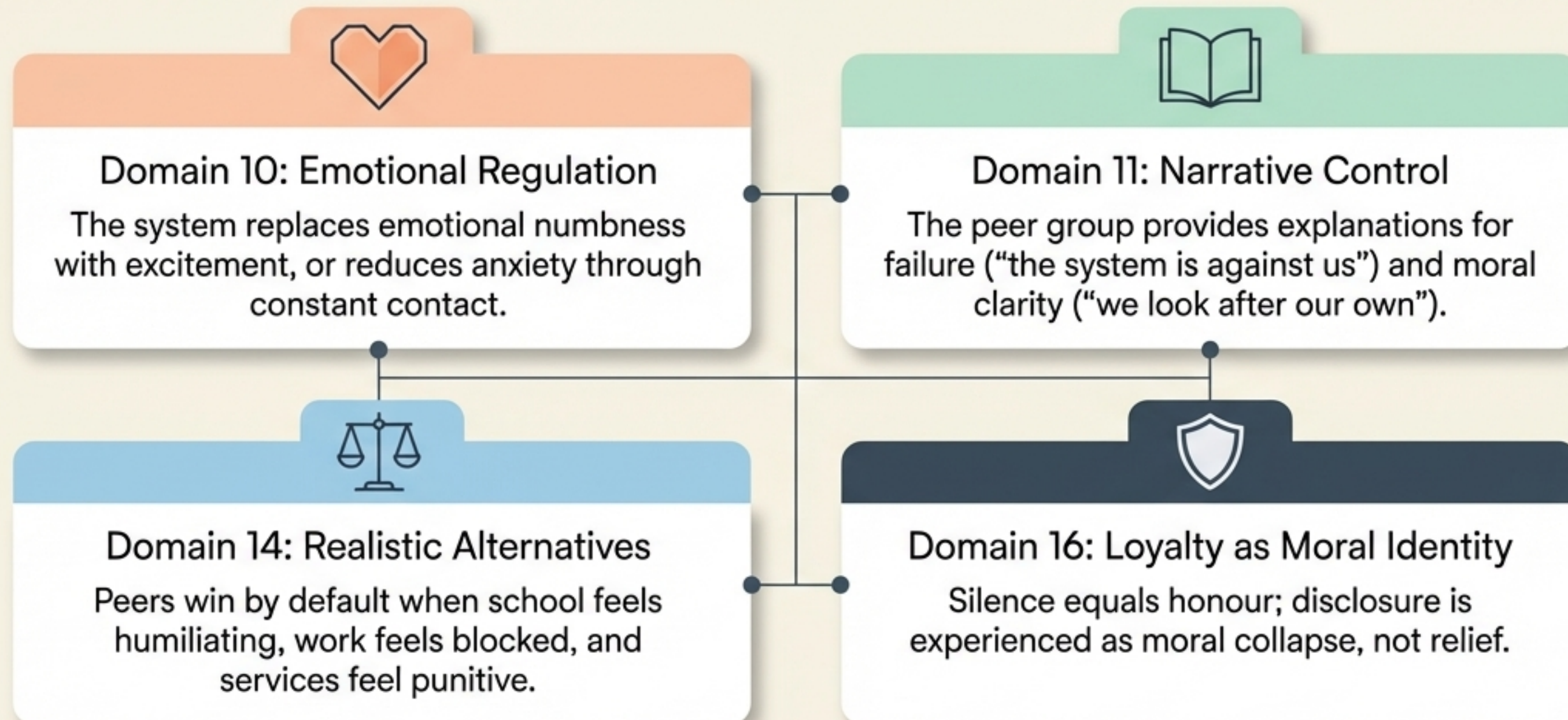
Mapping Digital Spaces:
Constant group chats, shared passwords, location surveillance. Is there any space where the child is unreachable?



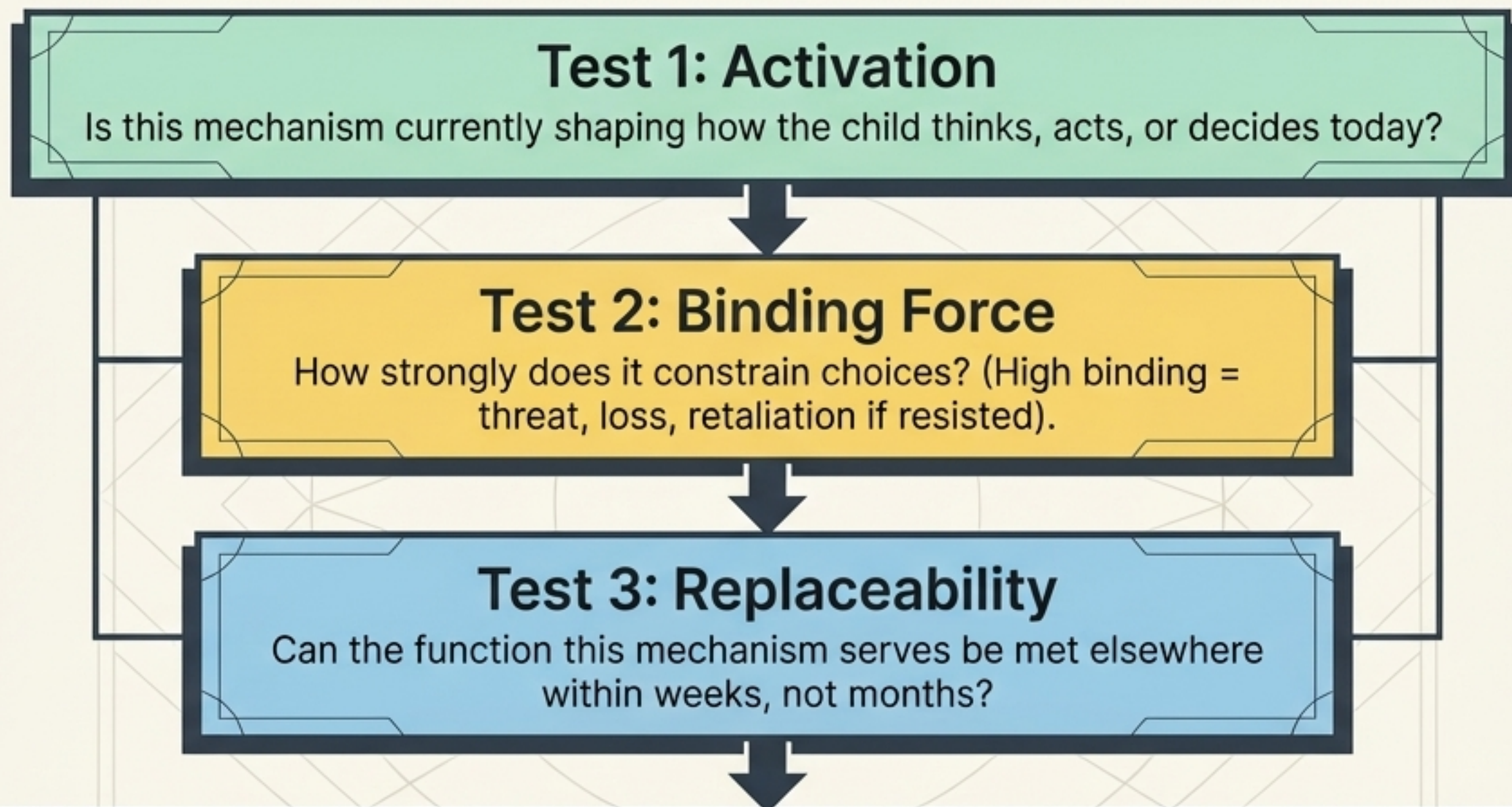
Exit Friction:
Assess the social, material, or reputational costs to stepping away.

Step Two: Mechanisms of Influence (Domain Analysis)

Context: Spanning all seventeen domains of influence, we must identify how the system aligns with trauma and unmet need. Key examples:



Step Two: The Three Tests Tool & Constraint Profile



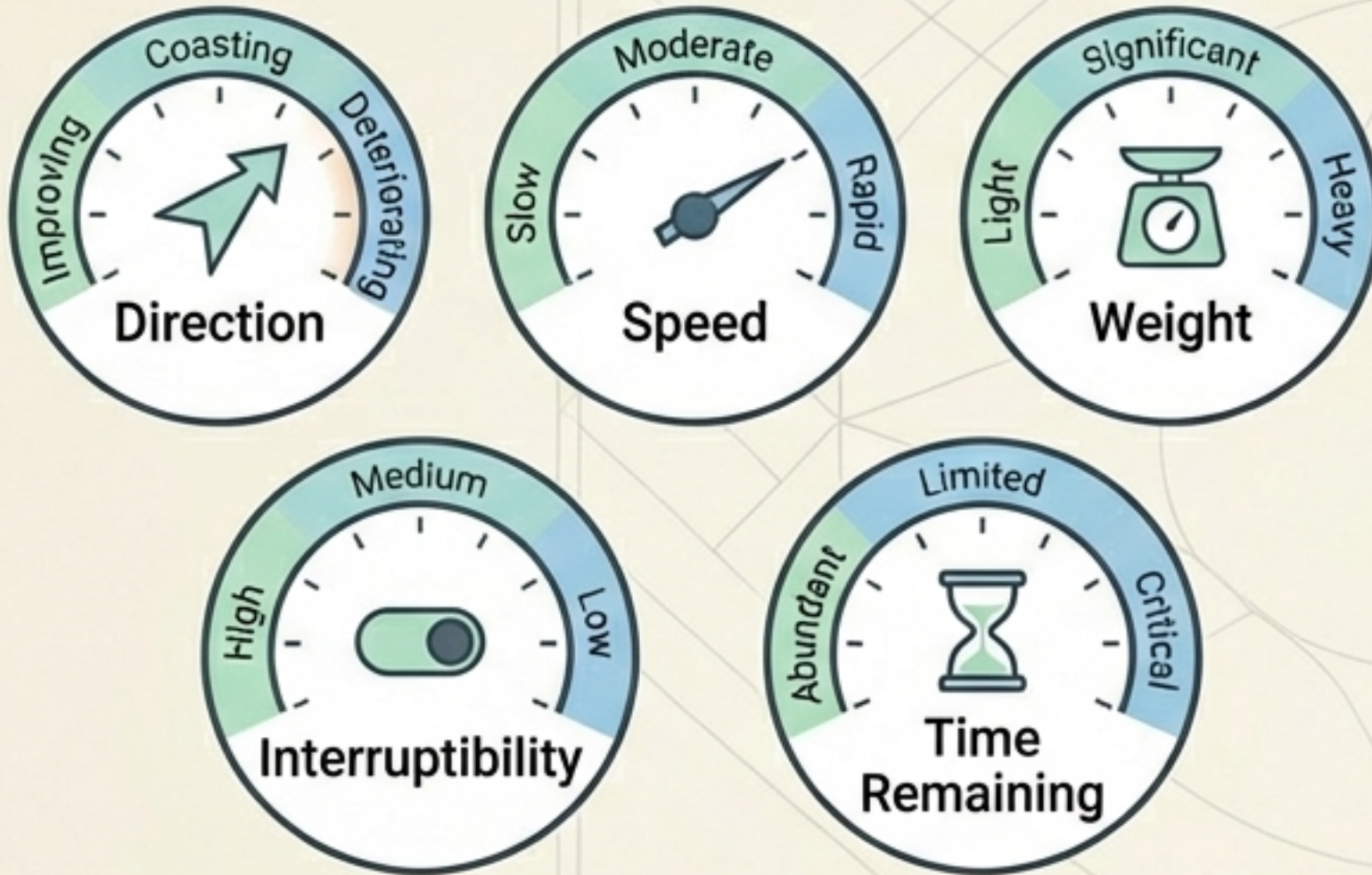
The Constraint Profile (Output)

Synthesis formula: "The child's behaviour is best understood as constrained by [X mechanisms], which currently limit their capacity to act differently without significant cost."

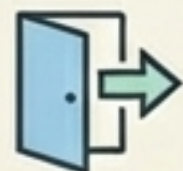
Step Three: Trajectory, Time, and Consequence

Principle: Risk is not defined by an isolated event, but by what becomes harder to undo over time.

Assessment Elements



 Accumulation/
Normalisation

 Exit Viability

Trajectory Assessment

-  **Improving:** expanded alternatives
-  **Deteriorating:** narrowing exits
-  **Coasting:** calm without structural change. Coasting still forecloses futures.

Forecasting



Core Forecasting Question: If this peer system remains intact, what is the most likely future for this child on their current trajectory?
(A demand for responsible anticipation, not prediction).

The Contextual Supervision Framework

Stop asking "How is the child doing?" Start asking "How is the peer system operating, and have our actions changed it?"

Traditional Supervision

How is the child doing? What's the plan?

Contextual Supervision Checks

1

Check 1: The Peer Centrality Test

Has peer influence been quietly downgraded to 'background context'?

Red flag: Plans rely on the child just 'choosing differently.'

2

Check 2: The Mechanism Fidelity Check

Are we targeting the mechanism or just the behaviour?

Rule: If the mechanism still operates, behaviour change won't hold.

3

Check 3: The Digital-Physical Continuity Check

Are we falsely separating online/offline?

Are digital artefacts sustaining control offline?

Contextual Supervision: Time and Recording

Continuing the 7-Step Check Sequence...

Check 7: The Child Timescale Integrity Test



Are we acting at the speed this peer system requires?



What must change in 7-14 days?



If nothing changes, what is the ethically required next step?

Case File

Supervision Recording Example

Supervision focused on peer influence as the primary safeguarding concern. We re-tested dominant mechanisms, digital-physical continuity, trajectory, and exit capacity.

The peer system remains [more/less] binding because [reasons]. The agreed actions target [specific mechanisms] within [timescale]. If change is not evidenced, escalation will be [specified].

Responsible Anticipation

Children are rarely harmed only by isolated moments, they are also harmed by patterns that persist while adults hesitate... Peer influence becomes dangerous not when it exists, but when it becomes the most reliable system in a child's life.

We must intervene when time itself has become the risk, rather than waiting for harm to announce itself as crisis.

When we ask why a child does not walk away, we often reveal to the child that we have not yet understood what is holding them there. That itself, is the failure, not the child not walking away.

S. Keri, Peer Influence Assessment, A Practice Tool, 2026.