



Parenting Mindfulness Moment 3



Putting on the Manual Controls

The reactions of the survival state of the brain is an automatic response to stress and trauma triggers. It is the brain's natural reaction to promote survival in life-or-death situations and is an instinct that serves us well in most situations. When our brainstem or sympathetic nervous system becomes the dominant system when the situation is not actually life or death (as in, dealing with our children). It can be helpful to both notice this state, and then make moves towards putting on the 'manual controls.' When an airplane is on autopilot it can fly on a straight track indefinitely. When that plane is heading towards danger it must be taken off autopilot and the manual controls must be used to avoid the danger. When you recognize that you are heading into danger with your children and can see that your brain and nervous system are on autopilot here are a few techniques to get back into manual control.

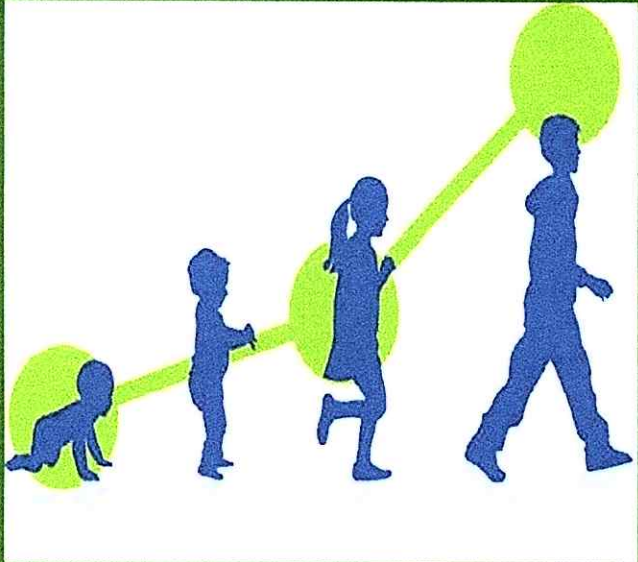
1. **Mindful Breathing:** When under stress, breathing becomes shallow and rapid. The purpose of this is to send large volumes of oxygen to the large muscle groups that become activated for fight or flight responses. When you recognize rapid, shallow breathing, take a moment to focus and take several deep cleansing breaths. Notice your stomach expand during the in breath and contract as you breathe out. Listen to the sound of the air entering and exiting your nose and mouth. Intentionally breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Use some imagery to visualize peace and calm entering through the nose, and stress and frustration exiting through the mouth. You can even try breathing in for three counts, holding for three counts, exhaling for three more, then resting the final three counts.
2. **Spreading the Hand:** The natural sympathetic nervous system response to stress includes clenching hands into fists. In addition to this contributing to the stress response, it can also be misinterpreted as threatening to children (especially children who have experienced adults striking children or other adults). Spreading out the hands sends the "all's clear" signal to the brain stem informing it that the higher levels of the brain have determined that the situation is not actually a threat. This triggers the parasympathetic nervous system to start the calming process within the brain and body.
3. **Brainstem Massage:** Noticing physical reactions to distress is a great first step. The brainstem is typically the first line of defense and becomes extremely active. Finding the divot at where the skull ends and meets the spine and giving a gentle massage can help give a physical and even cognitive signal to help you calm and relax in the midst of stress.

Classic Stages of Development (Erik Erikson)

| Age/ Stage | Task to Figure Out |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 0-2: Trust vs. Mistrust- | Am I Safe |
| 2-3: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt | Can I control my body |
| 4-5: Initiative vs. Guilt | Can I make choices |
| 6-11: Industry vs. Inferiority | Can I master something |
| Adolescence: Identity vs. Role Confusion | Do I know who I am |
| Young Adulthood: Intimacy vs. Isolation | Can I find love and belonging |

Stages of Cognitive Development (Jean Piaget):

| Age & Stage | Ability | Typical Functioning |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| 0-2 Sensory Motor- | Experiencing the world through senses | Object Permanence Stranger vs. Familiar face recognition |
| 3-6 Preoperational- | Able to represent things using words or objects | Imaginative play Egocentric thinking |
| 7-11 Concrete Operational | Logical and concrete thinking. Facts | Law of conservation of mass. Reversibility |
| 12-Adulthood Formal Operational | Abstract and hypothetical thinking. | Moral reasoning, anticipation of consequences of actions |



CONCEPT 3

The Developing Child

Knowledge about the typically developing child may help to set reasonable expectations and may also help to identify areas of lagging skill or deficit.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Children placed in foster care

There is a bit of variability when considering brain, body, and psychological development even among typically developing children. When children have been exposed to abuse, neglect, or other significant life challenges, development becomes relative to life experiences and the time periods the challenges occurred. Some experts suggest that children who have experienced significant life challenges may appear up to half of their chronological age. In other ways children may have developed far beyond their chronological age and present more adult-like skills or attitudes.

Having a basic framework and awareness of milestones may help understand areas that your child may be ahead of or behind the curve of typical development. This knowledge is not meant to shame or label children, but instead to help adults in their empathy and understanding of the difficulties a child may be experiencing.

OUT-OF-SYNC

Tending To Trauma-Impacted Development

When development has been disrupted by trauma it is likely that some of the basic building blocks may have been impacted or possibly missed entirely. Here are a few of the important elements of development that may need reintroduction when parenting a child who has missed out on specific developmental tasks.

Serve and Return: The process, beginning in infancy, when a child reaches out for the attention of a caregiver followed by the attentive response of the caregiver. Forms the basis for all attachment and many structures of the brain. Children have an innate need for attention and will seek it out the best way they know how. The process of adults responding to these bids for attention in positive ways forms functional and healthy patterns of relating to others.

Attachment Cycle: Similar to the serve and return response, an attachment cycle is completed when a child feels a need, expresses the need, then has their expression heard and attended to by a caregiver. When felt needs are not attended to over time, the result is insecurity in attachments.

Executive Functioning Skills: Skills that emerge in early childhood and are honed throughout the lifespan. Executive functioning includes the ability to focus, attend, predict, perceive time, plan, prolong gratification, and control impulses. These skills are conspicuously missing in very young children, and emerge differently for different children based on a variety of factors.

Teen Brain: Dr. Dan Siegel explains in his book *Brainstorm* (Siegel, 2015) the unique and explosive period of growth and brain development during adolescence. He goes on to describe how much of this phenomenon is mistaken for increase in hormones. Although hormone

and brain chemistry do change, there are far more explanations when looking at brain change during this period. The downstairs areas involved in experiencing and expressing emotions far exceed the upstairs thinking brain during this period. Reward centers in the brain are stronger than any other period of growth, making teens more susceptible to engaging in risk taking activities, pleasurable activities, or seeking peer approval. Creativity, flexibility, and learning new concepts may also be stronger during this period than any other time of life.

Interdependence: The push and pull often experienced during adolescence. Often a confusing balance between desire for independence and need for help and connection with caregivers.

BRAIN-BASED INTERVENTIONS

From the Experts

Here are just a few strategies introduced by Dr. Dan Siegel (Siegel & Bryson, 2012) to help meet children where they are in a way that is sensitive to brain and emotional development. Understanding what a child may or may not be capable of doing in the moment of emotional crisis helps to respond in more effective and proactive ways that communicate connection and help build new skills.

Connect and Redirect: Identifies when a child may be stuck in their right brain and needs attempts to connect in ways that communicate empathy and understanding of the emotions. Once the right brain feels understood, calming often follows. At that point efforts can be made to redirect through more logical and language-based strategies.

Engage don't Enrage: Recognizes a child's "flipped lid" and engages with the lower brain by communicating calm, safety, and understanding in order to prevent further fight, flight, or freeze behaviors. Your calm is often borrowed by the child in an escalated state. The same is also true about your own escalated state.

Name It to Tame It: Becoming the external narrator of your child's experience. Your child borrows your language processing skills and upstairs brain when they are at a loss and may be overwhelmed by their own emotional state. (Access to green brain thinking)

**IMPACTS OF
TRAUMA ON
DEVELOPMENT**

**EARLY CHILDHOOD
AGE 0-5**

| | Developmental Milestones | Effect of Acute Trauma |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Physical | Sit up Crawl Stand Walk/run Talk/write Sleep gradually gets organized into a day-night schedule Potty Training | Sleep disturbances Eating problems Going back to earlier, younger behaviors (e.g., baby talk or bedwetting) |
| Cognitive | 0 – 1: Develop knowledge that something continues to exist, even when it is out of sight (Object Permanence) 3 – 6: Beginning to develop skills to problem solve, work with others, and manage impulses | Cognitive regression (e.g., poor impulse control, problem solving) |
| | Developmental Milestones | Effect of Acute Trauma |
| Self and Other | 0 – 1: Develop trust and security when basic needs are met (Attachment); self-soothing; emotional regulation 1 – 3: Autonomy and independence (e.g., learn to feed and dress themselves); safe exploration of the world | Feelings of helplessness Unusually quiet or agitated General fearfulness (e.g., afraid of being alone, going to sleep) |
| Behavioral | 1 – 2: Clinginess, crying, difficulty being soothed by another adult (Separation Anxiety), usually dissipates by age 2 1 – 5: Temper tantrums at times; plays side-by-side with other children (Parallel Play); begin to develop the ability to share; initiate play with other children as he/she gets closer to school-age | Separation Anxiety/clinginess returns, often fears parent will not return Increased power struggles Temper tantrums more frequent and extreme |

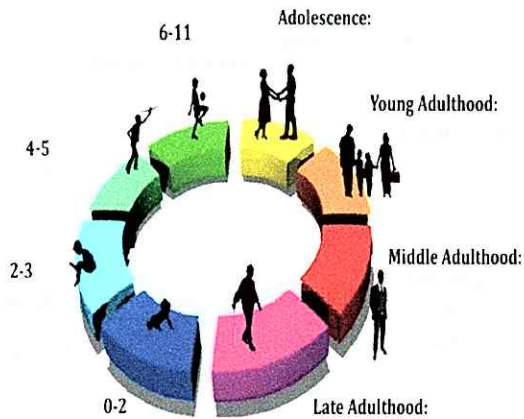
**IMPACTS OF
TRAUMA ON
DEVELOPMENT**

**SCHOOL AGE
AGES 6-12**

| | Developmental Milestones | Effect of Acute Trauma |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Physical | Fewer physical changes – growth spurts begin later in this stage Develops muscle coordination Should get about 10 hours of sleep a night | Sleep disturbances and nightmares Eating problems Somatic complaints – headaches, stomach aches, etc. |
| Cognitive | Focus on academic skills Continues to develop ability to read and write Understands cause and effect | Poor concentration and learning disturbances Misperception of information |
| Self and Other | Ability to manage impulses more effectively Self-esteem develops Sense of responsibility develops Spends more time with friends Attaches to adults other than their parents | Feelings of being responsible for the trauma Fears the trauma will happen again Reactions to reminders of the trauma Fears being overwhelmed by feelings Irritability, mood swings |
| Behavioral | Able to engage in established routines (e.g., bedtime, mealtimes, etc.) with few verbal reminders Children question parents more Expanding curiosity | Altered behavior – aggressive, withdrawn, disorganized Repetitive play of the traumatic event(s) Regression (e.g., bed wetting, thumb sucking) |

From *Understanding Traumatic Stress in Children* (Bassuk, Konnath, & Volk, 2005)

ACTIVITIES



Current Development: Think about your child or children. What stages best define where they are currently? Does this represent on-track, behind, or even ahead of the norm development? What factors do you think contribute to this.?

Developmental Trauma: As much as you know your children's story, at what stage might they have experienced the most trauma? What might they have missed out on? What tasks or skills might have been delayed by these traumas?

Learning New Skills

As you take some time to reflect on the skills that may be missing and pivotal moment of development that may have been impacted by trauma or general life disruptions, begin to brainstorm ideas as to how to help your child build these skills. Remember the paradigm "while others were thriving, your child may have been just surviving" and use this as a place of empathy when helping your child learn skills that may have been missed. Take a look at the following components of development and consider how you may help your child improve in these areas. Think about concrete plans as well as general attitudes of compassion and kindness while he or she is learning new things.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Serve and Return <i>Attending to bids for attention.</i></p> | |
| <p>Executive Functioning Skills <i>Organizing, planning, thinking</i></p> | |
| <p>Social Skills <i>Relating to others, understand-</i></p> | |
| <p>Identity Development <i>Fostering healthy sense of self,</i></p> | |

ACTION STEPS PART 1

Over the next week take a few steps towards better understanding your child's developmental state and developmental needs. Taking a few practical steps may help not only to understand your child, but may also help to build some of the skills that may be lagging or missing. Try at least one of the following, but feel free to do them all if you have the chance.

Serve and return activity: Schedule a play-date or outing with your child. If your child is younger make sure the activity is something that he or she likes. For older ones, maybe a trip for ice cream, go for a walk or a hike. Intentionally place your phone on airplane mode or leave it at home. Spend time paying 100% attention to your child and what he or she is into. Take some time to reflect on how your child tries to get your attention and how easy or difficult it is to attend.

Executive skills activity: The thinking and planning game. Work with your child to plan an event for the family. It could be as simple as a family movie night or dinner, or as complicated as a family outing. Have your child brainstorm all necessary items, guess at how much time certain things would take, and what might be the outcome of the event. Notice what is positive and what may be challenging for your child.

Identity Activities: Dreams list. Have your child identify a list of things that he or she has always wanted to do. Look for some items that relate to the near future and some that are lifetime dreams. As you work on this list, think about what this tells you about your child's identity. What is important? What hopes does he or she have for life.? What is seen as possible or impossible.

ACTION STEPS PART 2

Over the next week make some efforts to intervene in positive and brain-based ways as described in Dan Siegel's intervention strategies. When you notice high emotions or big responses to stress make some effort to connect with your child. He or she may be limited in their ability to self-identify feelings, self-manage, and self-regulate. They may need to borrow your fully developed executive functioning from your own frontal lobe while theirs are still developing. Write down any instance when you attempted the following strategies. What was the response?

Name it to tame it: Become the narrator and place verbal labels on your child's experience.

Example: "It looks like you are feeling disappointed that this did not go the way you hoped it would."

Your example

Connect and Redirect: Prior to giving consequences or moving into the logical, problem solving elements of intervening with your child, first connect with their feelings about the situation. Then move into the redirect part.

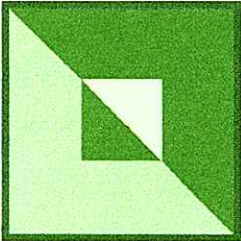
Example: "I can tell that you are feeling really left out and you might be thinking that I am being a little unfair that I said no about the sleepover. I can see how that would be really hard for you... and I would really like for you to..."

Your example

Engage don't enrage: When you recognize your child's flipped lid and explosive behaviors, make efforts to establish calm and safety. Monitor your tone, body language, and physical presence to demonstrate that your child is safe and is free from perceived danger. For children who are used to adults who have been out of control, you may have to exaggerate the sensation of peace and calm. They will be able to borrow your calm when you engage with them from a calm and regulated state.

Example: When child is laying on the floor crying and shouting, bending down to his level, talking in soothing, rhythmic and hushed tones. Giving reassurance in any way possible that he is safe and that you care for him. Monitoring of parental facial cues and safe eye contact.

Your example



Positive TIPS

Understanding Your
Child

Concept 3:
The Developing Child

Pay attention to your child's attachment and respond from a place of security.

(Learn to overlook offense. Don't take it personally.)

Pay attention to bids for attention to build relationship and brain functioning. (Serve and Return)

Try to reframe challenging behaviors, attitudes, and actions through the lens of development.

Intervene through brain and attachment based strategies. "Connect & Redirect," "Engage Don't Enrage," and "Name It to Tame It."

