Blog Neuroplasticity

Why A Child's Behavior Is Not What You Think It Is

9 minutes read

Posted September 23, 2020

We've all seen it or experienced it: a child having a meltdown at a store, yelling, kicking, cryin and screaming at his mother. As parents, we cringe, worrying about what other people will th We feel embarrassed, knowing that others will likely judge us and think we are a bad parent. feel angry and sad, knowing that others will likely think we have a "bad" child who just needs better, stricter parenting.

Big sigh.

This is the reality of the world we live in. A world in which any so-called "bad" behaviors (aka intense emotional experiences) are immediately judged, shunned and thought of as just wron parents, caregivers and teachers we have often been taught that we must tame or get rid of t behavior. We end up going through life feeling anger, resentment and shame for not being ab control our own behaviors or those of our children.

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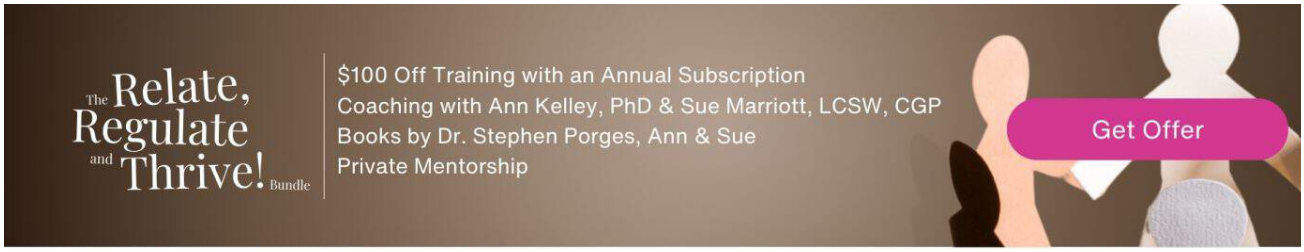
But how does this view help any of us? The truth is it doesn't. We have been conditioned to believe that bad behaviors happen due to purposeful intention, but when we really dig deeper look at the neuroscience behind these so-called "bad behaviors", we see something totally different: LACK OF SAFETY.

Everything I discuss going forward in this article is from the work of Dr. Mona Delahooke, auth Beyond Behaviors, and based on the groundbreaking findings of Unyte's Chief Scientific Advi Dr. Stephen Porges and the Polyvagal Theory.



What Behaviors Really Mean

We have all been taught and conditioned to think that negative behaviors of children are purposeful and intentional. Even if you don't believe this consciously, subconsciously many of have this programming and thus we react with anger or frustration when we see behaviors th go against compliance. Furthermore, we often move quickly to "fix" that behavior without real understanding the true meaning of it.

Based on new neuroscience, we know now that behaviors such as meltdowns, tantrums, hitt yelling, defiance, controlling, moving around when required to sit, annoying repetitive moveme and even stalling to go to bed (to name a few) are really an indication of what state the nervou system and body are in: STRESS.

When we can look at behaviors from this lens, then we can let go of the view that children are doing these behaviors on purpose, and instead of punishing, disciplining and disconnecting fi them, we can use a more connected approach to address the root cause of the behavior bei lack of safety in the body.

I must stress clearly that none of what I am saying is to shame or guilt parents, caregivers or anyone who works with children. We have all been conditioned to see behaviors as somethin fix, but we can use the science now to change the way we view behaviors and use more effe approaches going forward.

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In addition, I want to say that some behaviors may be intentional, but starting to ask the questions: "Is this a stress response?" or "Is this intentional?" can help us differentiate and tre the problem more effectively.

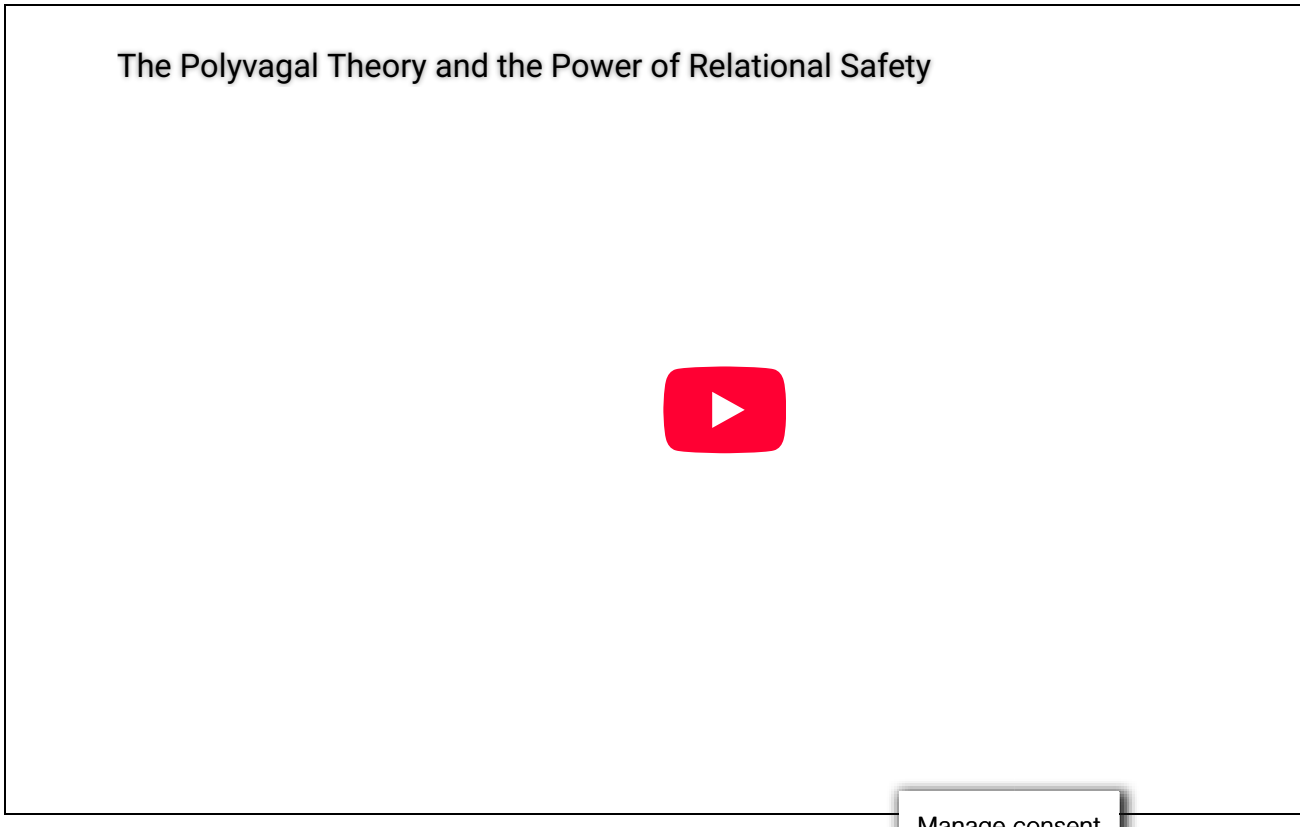
Connecting Behaviors To The Stress Response & The Neuroscienc Safety

Thanks to Dr. Stephen Porges' groundbreaking founding of the Polyvagal Theory, we underst the nervous system so much better and the implications of the states of the nervous system behaviors.

To understand negative behaviors, such as a tantrum or meltdown, or perhaps even your ow anger or rage as a parent and adult, we need to have a quick review of the three states of the Autonomic (meaning automatic) Nervous System (known as the ANS).

Dr. Mona Delahooke uses the colors green, red and blue to describe the different states or pathways of the nervous system's response to life and stress.

You can also watch Dr. Delahooke's in-depth video on the below here.



Green (SAFE) Calm, focused, happy, joyful, socially engaging and connecting with others (kn as the ventral vagal state).

A child in this state is more compliant, happy and playing, as he/she is feeling safe and regula emotionally and in body.

Red (NOT SAFE) Fight or flight state. This is the stress state. Jaw clenches, the body tighten feeling anxious, the body is getting ready to mobilize, move or fight (known as the sympatheti arousal state).

A child in this state does not feel safe and is feeling threatened (stressed). Behaviors exhibited be tantrums, meltdowns, screaming, hitting, defiance, and not-so-obvious pre-Red state behaviors are repetitive body movements, not sitting still, annoying behaviors, and stallir bedtime tactics.

Blue (NOT SAFE) Shut down. Immobilized. Can't focus, eyes looking down, face is blank, shut off, numbed out (known as the dorsal vagal state). This is a more severe state of stress.

A child in this state will tune out, look down, seem numb or frozen, and won't talk. Children w tend to be in state often can get overlooked because they come across as compliant, but the may be in shut down so it's important to look at the behaviors for cues.

When we start to perceive stress (or threat) in our environment, our first 'go to' is the Green response to try to help ourselves; if this doesn't work, then we move into Red and if that does work then we shut down into Blue. This is the evolutionarily built-in process of our nervous system's response to threat (stress).

One of the main things to understand is that these different states are all AUTOMATIC respon to perceived threats in the environment. They are BODY responses that happen really fast (ar not in conscious, higher thinking brain awareness) due the process of neuroception (coined b Stephen Porges), which is the automatic, subconscious nature of our nervous system consta scanning for threat. Some people's (and kids') nervous systems are wired for more heightene neuroception and sensitivity to threat.

Entering A Paradigm Shift

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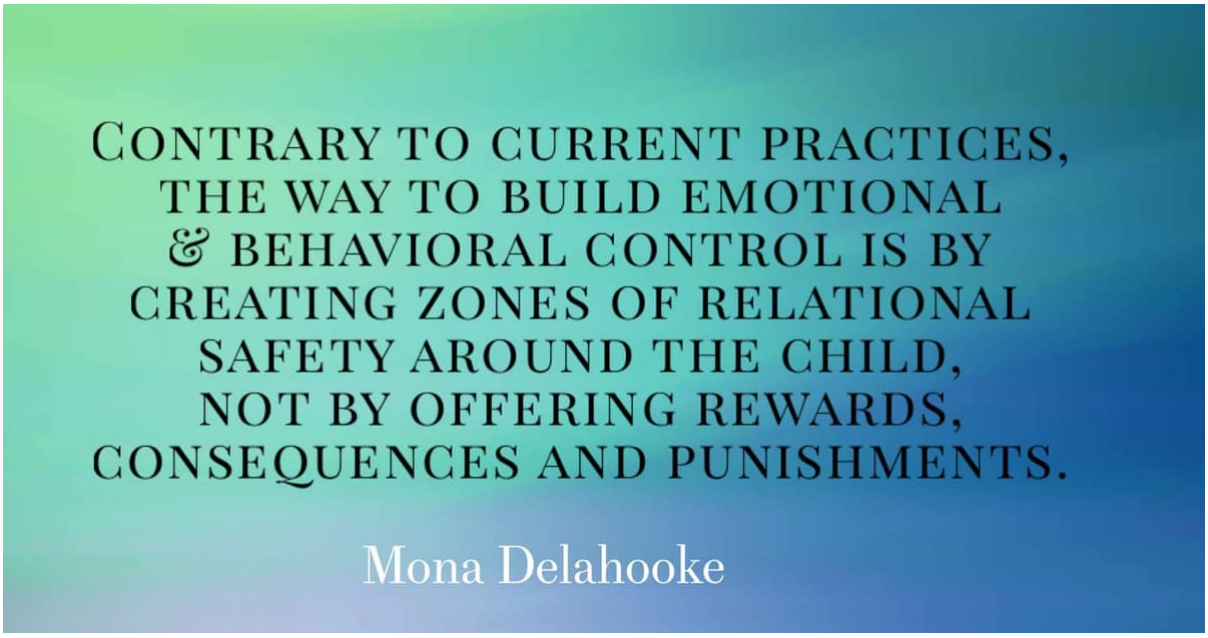
Knowing all of the above, we can shift the lens through which we see behaviors from "What's wrong with you?" (implying the child consciously chose to misbehave that way), to "What's happening with you, inside your body, that is causing you to feel unsafe and react this way?"

Dr. Mona Delahooke says that when we see negative behavior, we can first ask ourselves: Is t an intentional response or a stress response?

This is a paradigm shift because it is looking at behavior from not only a top-down (conscious higher thinking brain, intentional) causality point of view, but a more holistic mind-body conne point of view that many of these negative behaviors are due to the automatic body (bottom-u reactions to stress that then send signals to react in an attempt to get to safety. Behaviors like your child not sitting still while at dinner can be seen as a body adaptation to move in order to soothe the nervous system back to safety.



How would you treat your child differently if you saw his behavior as a stress response? Woul you discipline and punish him? Would you get angry or agitated with him? Or would you perh choose to soothe that stress response, knowing intuitively that when you are stressed and someone is compassionate towards you that helps you to feel much calmer and better able t handle the stressor?

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Let's look at an example to understand this on a practical level. Your child is stalling at bedtim asking for yet another book. You tell her it's time to go to bed, tuck her in and leave the room child gets out of bed and comes to your room to see you. This is a sign the child is entering a stress state and is using the Green pathway (social engagement and connection) to calm her nervous system stress response. You get upset with her and send her back to her room. She moves into the Red pathway and starts to cry and scream (fight/flight). You tell her she must s in her room and go to sleep. Eventually, after enough failed attempts, she moves into the Blue pathway, shuts down, and eventually falls asleep.

If you knew her attempts to not go to sleep were a stress response, a lack of feeling safe, hov would you have helped that child differently?

Getting Back To Safety By Changing Your Response To Behaviors

Understanding behaviors as a body response to stress can allow us to shift the way in which react to our children's behaviors.

Knowing that the Green pathway leads to calm, compliance and better behavior, wouldn't it b best to use this pathway to help our children's behavior?

As humans, we heal through love and connection, not anger, discipline and punishment. We change when someone believes in us as it mirrors what's possible for us. Social development emotional regulation happen in relationships, not alone on your own to figure it out while in a t out.

As parents, we can choose social engagement, safety, connection and compassion to help c children get back to the Green pathway, feel safe, and be better able to conquer their stress a fears. By doing this, we can help to re-tune a child's nervous system as well.

How To Change Your Reactions

As a parent or person who works with children, I invite you to enter this paradigm shift (basec cutting-edge neuroscience) of adopting a new view of behaviors.

Should you choose to accept it, your mantra to embody going forward is:

1. I see my child's behavior as a result of a lack of feeling safe (vs. he's e and misbeh

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2. I respect and value my connected relationship with my child (more than her listening to me and obe
3. I prioritize relational safety for my child (vs. rewards and punishments).
4. I let go of unrealistic expectations of behaviors that I know my child cannot attain while in the unsafe the Red and Blue ANS pathways, and based on his/her emotional development stage (not age).
5. I see "annoying" behaviors as adaptive responses to stress (vs. purposeful, intentional responses). I look to "fix" the behavior, but first, understand it better.
6. I choose a compassionate response in order to maintain connection and safety.

How To Help Your Child

If you want your child to develop better behaviors and more resilience in life, then helping you child to get back to the safety needs to be your top-of-mind goal. From a place of safety, a ch has so much more opportunity for growth and development in terms of behaviors.

The ways in which you can help your child get back to safety and the Green path is to socially engage and connect with them from a place of compassion and love. When you do this, the body's response shifts from Red or Blue to Green. Also, "how" you are and the energy in whic you engage with your child's challenges can matter much more than the words you use. A so tone of voice, relaxed body gestures and a loving energy can help immensely to get your child of the Red.

When your child is engaging in a "negative behavior", spend some extra time with them helpi them feel safe and coming up with solutions that feel safe for them to shift their behaviors. If bedtime is hard, start the process earlier and give extra connection time.

No matter what the behavior or challenge, choose love, connection and safety always (or as o as you can, as we are human after all!). And, if you have a bad moment, forgive yourself, as practicing love and compassion towards yourself will help you weather the storms of parentin much better than being hard on yourself.

And, as you learn to re-tune your child's nervous system, you will likely re-tune your own towa greater safety, resulting in a win-win overall. Worth the effort? Definitely.

About Afshan

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Afshan Tafler is a Whole Life Coach who helps clients transform their health and their lives thr a holistic approach to healing. Using a combination of Mind-Body Coaching and, scientifically proven, energy psychology techniques to help her clients achieve optimal mind-body health, become a sought-after wellness and parenting expert. Afshan's been featured on leading Parenting summits such as *Mindful World Parenting*, *Beyond Parenthood*, *Thriving Children*, *Parenting Like A Pro and Passionate About Parenting*. Afshan is also a mom to a sp needs child and is a proponent of Conscious Parenting and is passionate about coaching pa with sensitive and spirited children to thrive in their relationships. You can learn more about A and her services at www.illuminateu.ca.

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