

BRAIN-BODY PARENTING

HOW TO STOP
MANAGING BEHAVIOR
AND START RAISING
JOYFUL, RESILIENT KIDS

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The Three Pathways and the Check-In

HOW UNDERSTANDING THE BRAIN AND BODY
CAN HELP US RESPOND TO OUR CHILDREN

ACTIVITY: Think of some of the coziest and most pleasurable, joyful moments that you've shared with your child. Focus on the feelings evoked in those memories. What kinds of activities or circumstances generate moments when you or your child have gleams in your eyes or a quieter feeling of connection? (You may find it difficult to recall such moments, and if so, that's okay. In subsequent chapters, we'll discuss how to make them more frequent.)

ACTIVITY: Think of a time when you or your child (or both) landed in the red pathway. Try to recall what your child's body and facial expressions looked like during that experience. Now try to remember how it felt in *your* body as you were trying to manage it. Don't linger here for an extended period, just long enough to recall the physical memories of it, and try not to judge your child or yourself. Observing our body's reactions is essential to helping your child get back to the green pathway, and simply calling to mind these moments is the first step in knowing what to do when these sensations and feelings surface.

ACTIVITY: Think of a time when you or your child felt disconnected or "blue." Do you recall the feelings you had in your body or thoughts in your mind? It can be difficult emotionally to consciously recall this kind of suffering, but doing so even for a moment

will help you recognize what to look for. Feeling this way is part of the human experience, but fortunately for most people it's not where we live.

Lucas, for example, rarely withdrew for long. His platform generally chose actions—like yelling and running to his room—rather than stillness. Red behaviors are difficult to manage as parents, but even if frustrated, the child remains engaged with others; blue-pathway behavior looks more like giving up. The next time you see your child “losing it” in the red pathway, it might be helpful to admire the way the child’s nervous system responds to stress so robustly. *Instead of seeing disruptive behaviors as “bad,” we ought to appreciate what they tell us about a child’s nervous system actively responding to perceived stress and expending a great deal of energy as they try to cope.*

As a reminder, the shorthand for the pathway colors we just discussed are:

- **GREEN:** *Calm, alert, cooperative*
- **RED:** *Moving, fighting, or running away from you*
- **BLUE:** *Disconnecting, losing contact, not communicating, possibly shutting down*
- **MIXED RED AND BLUE:** *Hypervigilant, anxious, might look calm on the outside but is activated and unsettled on the inside*
- **ANY AND ALL OTHER COMBINATIONS** *you may infer from observation*

ACTIVITY: We can look at the patterns for infants, tots, and older children to track *what activities or circumstances prompted the different pathways, when it was happening, how long it lasted, and how intense it was.* This will help you understand how to tailor and titrate

your support for your child and better understand what's going on under the tip of the iceberg. Make a weekly journal that has three or four columns for the green, red, and blue pathways, and any combinations you observe.

Date/Day of the week:

Time Began:

Time Ended:

What was happening?

What color pathway was the child?___ What was the level of distress from 1 to 5? (1 is mild distress and 5 is extreme distress.)___

What color pathway were you?___ What was the level of distress from 1 to 5?___

ACTIVITY: When you have some time by yourself, think about and write down what helps you feel calmer in the moment. Is it a certain kind of breathing? Naming the feeling to yourself? Some type of movement, a hand over your heart or squeezing your toes? Repeating a soothing phrase or mantra?

Nurturing Children's Ability to Self-Regulate

LOOK, OBSERVE, VALIDATE, AND EXPERIENCE

In thinking about co-regulation, it's helpful to remember the LOVE acronym, which makes this serve-and-return dynamic so powerful: look, observe, validate, and experience.

LOVE

LOOK: *Look at your child with “soft” eyes.* Soft eyes means that we widen our field of vision—literally and figuratively, which helps us have an open mind, free of judgment. By softening our eyes, we soften our hearts, opening to all we can learn. Having soft eyes helps you move toward respecting what your child's behaviors are telling you in this moment. The bonus: When we look with soft eyes, we communicate a message of acceptance, warmth, and affection.

OBSERVE: *Observe without judgment.* We are so quick to automatically judge our child's behaviors as good or bad, but as we have learned, behaviors are outward manifestations of a child's platform. Notice your child's face, gestures, and body, and be open to the idea that you have something important to learn from observing. Also observe your child's level of calmness or agitation. We want to pay attention to the myriad of information that observation brings. Watch what your child is doing during easy *and* difficult moments with an open sense of curiosity. When we observe without judgment, we appreciate that a child's behaviors are telling us something

valuable, and we are open to learning what that is. When we give our child (and ourselves) the benefit of the doubt, we let go of preconceived ideas about what a child's behaviors mean and carry less self-judgment and self-blame for our role in contributing to their behaviors. Mantra: We're all doing the best we can with the information—and bodies—we have.

VALIDATE: *Validate your child's experience when you witness struggles.* If your child is struggling, then calmly try a serve-and-return that's soothing and connecting rather than judgmental or evaluative. Remember that difficult behaviors are your child's *nervous system's way* of asking for connection, for cues of safety from you. Your child wants to be seen and not feel alone. A very powerful form of validation is to simply bear witness to your child's struggles without automatically trying to solve them. Sometimes, that is enough, and the simple act of presence without judgment helps the child to regulate.

EXPERIENCE: *Experience safety together by sharing your green pathway with your child through your serve-and-returns.* Try various gentle serve-and-returns with your child, knowing that you probably won't get it right the first time. That's okay. We exercise our child's resilience muscles by helping them calm through our interactions when they need a deposit into their body budget. Try to move toward mutually enjoyable serve-and-return exchanges, even as you ask your child to tolerate and stretch through uncomfortable new experiences. In Chapter 6, we'll see how we can use insight into children's sensory preferences to further customize our interactions. This will enable you to increase the pleasure and joy of shared experiences, in turn helping your child stretch, develop new strengths, and increase their tolerance of new challenges.

Taking Care of Yourself

SELF-CARE BEGINS WITH AWARENESS

Just as the power of observation is crucial to understanding our children's behaviors, we must also observe ourselves. Awareness is our portal to gaining compassion for our platform, how our body and brain are faring in the moment and over time. Remember the check-in from Chapter 3? When we have awareness, it allows us to appreciate, and bring to consciousness, how calm or agitated we feel. If we know we are in the red, that simple moment of awareness can be enough to prevent us from yelling at a child and instead choose something else to do that will be more affirming and relational. When we practice becoming more aware, it leads to feeling more grounded and balanced and provides a momentary pause that can prevent us from saying or doing things that are not in our child's—or our own—best interest.

When I was a girl and my beloved grandmother was pondering a problem, she would sigh, take a deep breath, and slowly repeat the word “so.” She did this when she couldn't find the right word in English, her second language, or when something unexpected happened and she needed time to think.

The letters in “so” also happen to stand for the two steps to self-awareness: “stopping” and “observing.” These two steps comprise Step 1 of the self-check-in below, which helps you identify which pathway you are on. I'd like to think my grandmother instinctively knew that slowing down and pausing was useful, decades before mindfulness became so popular.

SELF-CHECK-IN: Take a moment to **stop** and **observe** what's

happening inside your body. Simply observe anything you are experiencing: a physical sensation such as the beating of your heart, a pain somewhere, thirst or hunger, an emotion, a thought. Observe without evaluating it as good or bad. Simply notice. If you are able to notice *anything*, congratulations! You've just had a moment of awareness, of mindfulness. If nothing's coming up or negative sensations or feelings do, that's fine, too; allow them in and then try to recognize the experience without judgment. There's no right or wrong here. Awareness of present experience can feel strange if you aren't used to it. Please don't be self-critical if it feels uncomfortable to slow and observe your mind or sensations; it's a new experience for many of us. *Awareness is a key ingredient of self-regulation for ourselves and our children.*

Some people find it difficult to stop or slow down enough to allow for awareness. If you find that the effort is creating stress in your body or mind, simply take note of that with compassion and without judgment. Some of us have engines that run fast as a protective or adaptive way of helping us stay in balance. That's okay. If slowing down sets off your safety sensor, you can honor that with curiosity. If you feel that slowing down makes you uncomfortable, simply stop and try it again at some point in the future when and if you feel ready.

Many parents tell me that they don't have *time* to notice their body's sensations. I understand. As a young mom, I was often so busy that I didn't even notice if I was thirsty, so some days I forgot to drink water. I was in constant motion and slowing down wasn't practical—until one day when I landed at my doctor's office for symptoms of dehydration. It proved a valuable lesson, making me realize how out of touch I was with many of my body's sensations—including thirst.

Self-observation can help you figure out what you need to fill up your tank and strengthen your nervous system for the herculean job

of parenting. When I was actively raising three children, self-focus and self-care felt like luxuries and even seemed counter to my instincts, which surely were informed by cultural messaging that maternal sacrifice is a virtue. I preferred to spend my “free” time and energy on my children. I loved being a mother and I paid little notice to the toll that stress was taking on my life.

Today when I reminisce with my adult children about that time, we laugh and cringe at our memories, now shared with love and compassion. My husband and I were ambitious parents on a dual track of parenting and building careers. I often operated with little self-awareness. Once, calling a client from home, I grew so frustrated that my kids wouldn’t be quiet that I threw a hairbrush in their direction (cringe). Another time, I drove to the shopping mall, not realizing until we arrived that I had forgotten to put on my shoes (laugh). Yes, my parenting life was sometimes an out-of-body experience. If only I had understood the importance of cultivating awareness and taking the time to meet the needs of my own nervous system, I would have been a calmer and healthier parent.

PRACTICE: One way to develop a greater awareness of your needs—and the pathway you are operating from at any given moment—is to practice mindfulness. Decades of study have demonstrated the positive impact of mindfulness on mental and physical health. You can start a mindfulness practice by simply taking a momentary pause several times a day to observe sensations or emotions. You can add a boost to your observation by setting aside a few minutes for moments of mindfulness—simply paying attention to the present moment without judgment. These brief periods not only help you become more connected to yourself but also reduce stress. There are many free apps available with guided mindfulness exercises, some as brief as one minute.

Whether we are grounded in our own calm state, or notice we’ve lost our sense of calm, the goal isn’t to be a perfect parent but rather to

navigate the inevitable twists and turns with awareness of our own bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts. When we do, we can find comfort in allowing ourselves to feel what's there and to help ourselves rather than shame ourselves.

Practice: The Self-Compassion Break

1. Notice and acknowledge a difficult moment, situation, or problem, and say to yourself, "This is hard," or, "This is stressful," or even, simply, "Ouch."
2. Remind yourself that you are not alone in suffering, and acknowledge or say to yourself, "I'm not alone," or, "This is how it feels when people struggle in this way," or, "All parents suffer at times."
3. Offer yourself kindness in some way, such as saying silently, "May I be kind or gentle to myself," or, "May I give myself what I need," or even asking, "What do I need in this moment?"

ACTIVITY: Reflect on and write down how your parents and caregivers saw and accepted your needs and emotions when you were young. Did your parents or the adults around you tolerate a narrow or wide range of your negatively charged emotions when you were a child and teenager? List your observations and then consider whether areas of past pain are showing up in your parent-ing life.

ACTIVITY: Write down your personal strategies to feel more connected to yourself or to others. Perhaps it's getting the privacy of

a hot shower without a child coming in and asking a question. Or maybe it's listening or dancing to music, taking a short walk during your lunch break, meditating, gardening, taking a yoga or spin class, or grabbing coffee with friends. Maybe it's allowing yourself simply to sit outdoors with your child, relishing the moment as the sun glistens off their hair. You and your nervous system know best what helps you to come back to balance. What are some positive experiences or habits that bring you peace, comfort, or joy? What activities fill you up when you are depleted?

Making Sense of the Senses

HOW EMOTIONS ARISE FROM THE BODY'S
EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD

INTERNAL SENSATIONS (INTEROCEPTION)

Stop and Observe:

- *How comfortable is your child with identifying and naming basic sensations coming from within their body? Of course, we would expect this from children once they have developed the ability to answer such questions. Does your child seem to notice if they are hungry or have a growling tummy? Can your child tell if they're sleepy and want to go to bed or take a nap? Can your child tell you if they are in pain, where the pain is located, and the level of the pain?*
- *Does your child have a pattern of negative reactions to internal sensations? Do you notice distress, high reactivity, or behavioral challenges when your child may be constipated, thirsty, or hungry, or has other uncomfortable sensations emanating from inside the body?*
- *When your child notices sensations, does it help calm the child and enhance relational connection? If a child can notice sensations, especially unpleasant ones, and talk about them or come to you for support, they're on the way to gaining self-regulation. Want to help your child to do this? You can model it for your child by naming your own bodily sensations and how you experience them, as they happen in everyday life: "I'm hungry, I'm going to have a snack," or "I'm thirsty, I want a nice big cup of water." We should*

also let children know that whatever sensations they feel, it's okay; these are clues to what's happening in their bodies and what they can do to feel better.

HEARING AND THE AUDITORY SYSTEM

Stop and Observe:

- *Notice your child's patterns of reaction to various sounds. How does your child react to everyday sounds such as the washing machine, a fan, paper crumpling or tearing, a vacuum, or sirens? Observe variations in the volume and tone of different sounds. How does your child behave in places with background and foreground sounds, such as a shopping mall or gymnasium? Does your child prefer some kinds of music over others?*

- *Do you notice a pattern of negative or challenging behaviors when your child experiences specific sounds? Do some sounds seem to make your child fidgety or even upset regularly?*

If similar sound experiences seem to precede a consistent pattern of red- or blue-pathway behaviors, that might indicate that certain sounds trigger their safety system and you are observing the child's protective response.

- *What kinds of sounds calm your child or bring happy, joyful interactions into your relationship? The soft, melodic tone of voice that we use intuitively with babies is naturally calming for many. Try using it and see if your child settles down. Even if the child isn't a baby, you can still use an adult voice laden with cues of safety by varying your tone. Even better: Compassionately mind your own platform to see if you are feeling calm enough to co-regulate and witness your child's distress without judgment.*

Notice your child's emotional reactions to your various tones of voice. Tracking your observations in a journal can help you gauge the vocal tones and qualities that most help your child feel safe, enhancing co-regulation and enabling connection. Sounds can be calming or distressing to a child. Qualities of the voice help us to judge whether it's okay to draw closer physically and emotionally. That's why children pick up on our *emotional tone* before they register our words. They're naturally sensitive to the emotional aspects of voices, so it's important to pay attention to how your tone of voice is landing in your child.

Just hearing a beloved parent's voice can make a child feel safe. When my youngest daughter turned three, her older sister moved into her own bedroom. Having shared a bedroom from birth, our youngest was both excited and hesitant. To comfort her, at bedtime, we would all say good night through our open bedroom doors. The sounds of our voices made us all feel safer and more connected, helping to calm all of us.

Then there are the sounds we don't even think about often: the hum of the air conditioner or heater; the mechanical sounds of a mall's elevators and escalators; restaurant background music—all sending messages to the nervous system and in turn triggering behaviors. Even when these sounds go unnoticed by parents, they can destabilize the platform of a child with particular sensitivities to sound.

SIGHT AND THE VISUAL SYSTEM

Stop and Observe:

- *Notice your child's patterns of reactions to various sights. How does your child react to seeing your cheerful or stressed face? Does your child prefer bright lights or soft lighting? Or perhaps your child ignores such details. Does your child prefer to look at moving or stationary objects? Do you notice any patterns of reactions to what your child sees in the world—negative or challenging behaviors that routinely occur when your child sees certain things? What are the specific visual triggers you observe?*
- *What kinds of sights calm your child and bring joyful interactions into your relationship? Are there certain picture books that your child loves to read with you? Sitting in your lap, the tone of your voice along with the drawings or pictures are likely a winning combination for your child's overall sensory experience. What we see can also bring comfort and stabilize our body. One child I worked with brought a laminated photo of her parents with her to kindergarten to look at when she missed them. It served as a visual reminder of her beloved family, a visual aid to regulate her emotions.*

Notice how your child responds to you when you're tense in body or face. We often "wear" our platform on our visage, transmitting our emotions through our facial expressions. That's another reason to check yourself and give yourself what you need so that you can soothe your child through your empathic facial expressions. You and your child will both benefit.

TOUCH AND THE TACTILE SYSTEM

Stop and Observe:

- *Notice how your child reacts to different types of touch or sensations on the skin. Does your child like having their hair washed or brushed? How does your child react to touching different textures, such as clay, dirt, or soft foods? Do they enjoy play activities such as finger painting, or touching squishy or hard surfaces? Do they prefer to wear the same clothes repeatedly? Perhaps it's because those clothes feel better, don't have annoying tags, or are of a certain texture of fabric. Certain kinds of touch experiences can make some children feel uncomfortable or even anxious.*
- *Do you notice a pattern of negative or challenging behaviors when your child touches certain substances, fabrics, or foods? Write down the textures or objects to which your child has a strong negative reaction.*
- *What kinds of touch calm your child and bring joy or joyful interactions into your relationship? Do they prefer strong hugs or light embraces? Do they enjoy a massage on the back, shoulder, or arms? Many toddlers and young children have blankets or soft pieces of fabric or stuffed animals that they hold or touch in order to soothe themselves. These children are regulating themselves via the sense of touch; they get comfort from the sensations coming from what touches their skin. The next time your child is upset, consider offering a soothing touch, customized to the child's preferences.*

TASTE AND THE GUSTATORY SYSTEM

Stop and Observe:

- *What do you notice about your child's food preferences? Do they prefer salty, sweet, spicy, or bland foods? What foods does your child love and request again and again? The sense of taste is associated with the other senses, such as sight and smell, so you might observe your child having big reactions to simply seeing or smelling a certain thing.*
- *Does your child have a pattern of negative reactions to certain foods? Is mealtime a constant struggle? List the foods your child struggles with (if any). What about food texture—does your child gag or have difficulty swallowing foods with certain textures, such as smooth pudding or crunchy chips?*
- *What kinds of food experiences does your child enjoy—and do you have joyful interactions with the child around food and meals? Are you able to slow down and enjoy mealtimes with your child at least once a day? Although feeding children can sometimes feel like a task, meals are also ideal opportunities for communication and fun. If a child has a negative reaction to a new food, openly acknowledging that is a good start. Being calm and encouraging—even playful—can help to co-regulate a child to the green pathway where they are much more likely to try foods with new flavors and textures.*

SMELL AND THE OLFACTORY SYSTEM

Stop and Observe:

- *How does your child react to different types of smells or fragrances? Do they notice or complain about smells? Do they routinely gag after smelling something? If so, these may be signs of over-reactivity to smells. Or perhaps they don't take note as readily as you or others do? That might mean they are under-reactive to smells. Children, like all of us, can have immediate positive or negative reactions to certain smells such as soaps, shampoos, foods, or air fresheners.*
- *Does your child have a pattern of negative reactions to certain smells? Does the child have strong reactions, such as refusing to eat certain foods or not wanting to visit places that smell a certain way—restaurants or the perfume section of a department store? Does your child have physical or emotional reactions to smells, such as gagging or becoming upset?*
- *What kinds of smells calm your child or bring enjoyment or pleasure? Does your child enjoy certain smells over others? Does your child seek out any particular smells? The next time your child has a reaction to a smell, try noticing it along with the child. Ask the child to talk about or try to describe the qualities of the smell (pleasant, unpleasant, good, or bad) and tell you more about it. It's a useful opportunity for the child to start developing awareness of sensations—a step toward noticing their emotions.*

BODY AWARENESS AND THE PROPRIOCEPTIVE SYSTEM

Stop and Observe:

- *Does your child move with efficiency, appropriately for their age and unique development? (Of course, babies and toddlers are still developing their abilities to move efficiently.) If your older child has to look at their hands or body in order to accomplish everyday tasks, such as tying their shoes or fastening buttons, then a feedback loop from the proprioceptive system may be still developing.*
- *Does your child have a pattern of negative reactions to situations that require body awareness, such as team sports or other physical activities that require feedback from the muscles and joints? Does your child seem to bump into other people or furniture, or misjudge how strongly to push or pull objects? Does your child feel the need to hang all over you? Some children instinctually drape their bodies on other people in order to feel more grounded and safe. Doing so provides more feedback to their muscles or joints, helping them to feel calmer. On the other hand, it could also be that your child just loves the feeling of that physical closeness! Sometimes children whose proprioceptive systems are still integrating with the other systems have an intensity to their interactions that can cause social difficulties. They might hug a sibling or peer too often or too hard. They might tap another person too hard when they intended just a light tap. These kinds of unintended actions can have a negative impact on a child's relationships with peers, who understandably misinterpret the intensity of the gestures as too strong or aggressive rather than as a bid for connection.*

If your child seems to have difficulty with body awareness, it's useful to offer more experiences that can help integrate that system with the others. Going to a fun play gym, using blankets to playfully roll up like "burritos," and playing games in which children "grade" various degrees of touch as light or heavy can help your child integrate their sense of proprioception.

- *What kinds of activities bring relational pleasure or help your child feel where their body is in space? Does your child enjoy climbing on jungle gyms, and can they interact with peers or you at the same time? Or perhaps your child needs help and emotional support to climb on structures or ride a bicycle—activities that require solid proprioceptive feedback. Does your child like to be wrapped in a blanket or play in one? I often encourage parents to experiment to see what kinds of reassuring pressure their child enjoys. You can pretend to make a human "sandwich," for example, if your child loves to be playfully wedged between two pillows or couch cushions. The more fun the child (and you) has, the better!*

BALANCE AND THE VESTIBULAR SYSTEM

Stop and Observe:

- *Does your child have a pattern of reactions to certain movement experiences? Does your child crave—or avoid—certain types of movement, such as swinging? Some children avoid climbing or jumping, or playground equipment like swings and slides. Others get upset on escalators (or avoid them entirely) or suffer frequent car sickness. Sometimes, children become distressed when their head is tilted back as you rinse shampoo from their hair. These children may be experiencing challenges to the vestibular system.*

- *What kinds of movement calm your child and bring relational enjoyment? Does your child seek to move around? Does your child like to dance, be swung, or otherwise move their body during playtime with you? What are your child's favorite kinds of movement experiences? Or perhaps your child prefers to be more stationary and not move much when you are interacting and playing. When you know how your child's body experiences movement, you can consider that information as you find ways to connect, co-regulate, and have fun.*

Tantrums Throw Toddlers

PUTTING TODDLERHOOD IN CONTEXT

ACTIVITY: Try to remember the last time you had an “adult tantrum” and lost control over your behaviors or emotions. If you were with another adult, did that person try to reason with you or convince you to change your mind? If so, was that helpful? What if that person had abruptly turned away to ignore you—or just walked away? Or maybe you were with someone who saw your struggle, understood, and realized that what you needed was presence and acceptance, someone to witness your pain and hold you (either in mind or body). Most people, no matter how old, want to be seen and witnessed without judgment.

Elementary School-Age Kids

FLEXIBILITY AND CREATING A BIG TOOL CHEST

The Basics of Parent-Mediated Play

What you'll need for parent-mediated play:

- **YOURSELF:** *If you can unplug for at least five minutes (or longer, if possible). If your child is struggling with challenges, a twenty-minute block is generally an adequate amount of time to allow a theme to emerge. If you can relax, ignore the to-do list in your head, and bring your curiosity, reflection, and some playfulness, you'll open the way for your child to share their world with you in whatever way they choose.*
- **TOYS:** *If it's possible and within your resources, have a few basic toys on hand. They don't need to be fancy. And toys aren't an absolute requirement—other people are the best toy a child can have! Children have imaginations and if we allow ourselves to shift our roles, we can become a “toy”—a kitty or a lion, a princess or a king. One creative family I worked with made simple dolls out of used socks, with buttons for the eyes and thread-embroidered mouths. The generous kids made me a simple “family” of the sock dolls, which I treasure and which many children visiting my office have used for various roles over the years. There's no need for expensive or mechanical toys for the play I'm about to describe, just objects that stimulate imagination and inspire role reversals and reenactment, according to each child's interests. And while board games and puzzles can be enjoyable activities (and I recommend them for family activities if*

you enjoy them), they don't stimulate a child's emotional themes like the more basic toys.

- **TOY ANIMALS (STUFFED OR OTHERWISE):** *It's useful to have on hand some friendly and nonthreatening animal toys such as teddy bears or puppy dogs, and some less gentle—perhaps more imposing dogs, a bear, a tiger, or even dinosaurs. The animals can be figurines, plush dolls, plastic, wooden—anything that might appeal to your child's interests and inspire or draw out a range of emotions. You don't want only fluffy kittens or sweet puppies, because a toy lion or bobcat can help inspire a child to play with themes of safety and threat—feelings that all humans face. Some children might shy from getting involved in the play if the human figurines are too realistic looking—it might just make the play feel too close to reality. The point is that animals are often easier for kids to pretend with because they are a bit removed from their personal experience, but kids can still project emotions onto them.*
- **INANIMATE OBJECTS, SUCH AS CARS, TRUCKS, TRAINS:** *Playing with these can also elicit themes and provide pathways for children to show you what's on their mind. Cars and trucks can have “feelings,” compete with each other, go on adventures, go to school or Grandma's house, or crash into each other. In other words, children can project human qualities onto them. And of course many kids just like playing with them.*
- **FIGURINES OF PEOPLE OR SUPERHEROES,** *such as a boy and girl and more androgynous dolls, baby dolls, or other humanlike figurines or dolls. If possible, have figurines that look like a mommy, daddy, baby, and siblings. A simple dollhouse is helpful but not necessary. You can also use simple props from the kitchen—paper plates, plastic spoons, small bowls, or anything else—as household props that inspire children to “become” a mommy or daddy or baby or sibling in the play.*

Flourishing

A SURVEY OF MEMORIES

ACTIVITY: Before you read further, take a moment to answer that question yourself. What's your favorite childhood memory? Write down the first thing that comes to mind. (If you don't have a favorite, or if you don't remember anything happy from your childhood, have compassion for yourself and use *any* memory or thought that makes you feel good inside.) Let's see if yours has anything in common with the answers from my survey.

Here's a sampling from the many hundreds of people who shared favorite childhood memories:

- *"Sitting outside with my grandparents and eating big slices of watermelon. I remember the juice dripping all over me."*
- *"Spending a week on Lake Michigan with my family and running down the hot sand dunes into the cool lake."*
- *"Playing in the woods with my sister, sitting in my dad's lap, and talking to my mom for hours."*
- *"My father coming home after long trips. He used to be a pilot, and he smelled like airplane gasoline. The smell still makes me happy!"*
- *"Going to the bakery with my grandfather and getting cream puffs."*
- *"Memories of me cozied up and held tightly by my parents when walking outside in the snow."*

- *“When we spent all day picking blackberries on Orcas Island and then made jam and blackberry pie together.”*
- *“During a camping trip with my family, it rained horribly the whole week, so we had to stay inside the tent trailer. My parents taught us tons of card games, we read books together, and we toasted marshmallows on the flame of a propane burner.”*
- *“Sitting next to my granny, playing with the loose skin on her arm, literally bouncing it up and down! I used to do this often, cradled next to her while listening to her stories.”*
- *“Summer visits at my grandparents’ mountain cottage. Faint smell of moth balls on the quilts, smooth floor under my bare feet, crackling from the fireplace at night, fireflies out in the field, and the sound of crickets as I drifted off to sleep.”*
- *“When I was three or four years old, my mom would take her break (I was at YWCA day care) and come get me and we would go to the cafeteria and share a cinnamon bun.”*

GLOSSARY

AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (ANS): The part of the nervous system that regulates the internal organs in the body outside of our awareness. The system contains two divisions, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic branches.

BLUE PATHWAY: The term I use to describe the dorsal vagal pathway of the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system.

BODY BUDGET: A term (coined by Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett) describing how your brain allocates energy resources within your body; the scientific term is *allostasis*.

EMOTIONAL GRANULARITY: A term that describes the ability to construct more or less specific emotional experiences and perceptions (Barrett, 2017).

GREEN PATHWAY: The term I use to describe the ventral vagal pathway of the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. It is also known as the social engagement system in the Polyvagal theory.

INTEROCEPTION: Internal sensations that provide information from your body's organs, tissues, hormones, and immune system (Barrett, 2017).

INTEROCEPTIVE AWARENESS: When you perceive or become aware of sensations from deep inside your body.

NEUROCEPTION: Dr. Stephen Porges's term for the subconscious detection of safety and threat (*see also* safety system or safety detection system).

PLATFORM: Shorthand for the brain-body connection, or the physiological state of our body. We are never just a "body" or a "brain"; we are always both. The platform is influenced by the state of the autonomic nervous system.

POLYVAGAL THEORY: Introduced in 1994 by Dr. Stephen Porges, this theory links the evolution of the mammalian autonomic nervous system to social behaviors. The main premise of the theory is that human beings need safety and that our biology is protectively positioned to keep us safe.

RED PATHWAY: The term I use to describe the sympathetic, or fight-or-flight, pathway of the autonomic nervous system.

SAFETY SYSTEM OR SAFETY DETECTION SYSTEM: Simplified terms for neuroception.

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