



Family Newsletter



Understanding your child's behavior and the thought processes behind it

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Parents often ask Occupational Therapist Kim Barthel why a child is exhibiting certain behaviors. Is it biological or environmental? Kim's answer: It's both! And it's not the child's fault. These are a few reasons why:

The lizard brain guides much of our behavior. Brain science tells us that 80 percent of human behavior is driven by the lower and mid-levels of the brain. Scientists call the large lower area of the brain the "lizard brain" because it is all about instinctive reacting. The mid-level is similar in that it reacts with little thought processing.

Why is this important? Because when we think about children's behavior, we often ask them why they did something. And the fact is that most of the time, they really don't know!

Arousal and self-regulation drive behavior. Our ability to respond with

the appropriate level of arousal – and manage our behavior – is developed during childhood. Scientists have observed that a baby's ability to soothe itself begins in the womb.

Once we are born, we continually look to our caregivers for clues that the world is safe. When we are experiencing stress or fear or uncertainty, and someone shows us love and reassurance, it floods our system with oxytocin – a hormone that creates a sense of love and well-being. This co-regulation helps us to feel calm and connected.

It's not until we are well into our mid 20s (and even 30 for men!) that we have the hardware in our brains to be able to regulate ourselves with our own thoughts. After this point, if we are neuro-typical, we are theoretically able to draw from our developmental experiences and

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On the horizon

MARE's adoption navigators host quarterly Waiting Family Forums where you can learn what happens to your inquiries, how to strengthen them, how to make the most of your wait time and how to effectively advocate for your family. We'll announce them via email, on www.mare.org and on our Facebook page.

Learn more about foster care adoption at www.mare.org.



self-regulate. (Co-regulation continues to support people throughout their lives, but before children grow into adults, and especially if they have a background of developmental trauma, it's not realistic to expect that kids can self-regulate on their own.)

Why is this important? Because the more co-regulation we experience growing up, the better we are able to face stresses and trauma-inducing events and be resilient in later life. But as we know, many children in foster care have been deprived of these healthy experiences. They may also suffer from fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and other conditions that can negatively impact their ability to regulate their emotions and respond in a healthy way to the world around them.

Understanding sensory triggers is key

Because so much of behavior is about arousal management, it is important to recognize common sensory processing challenges that children can be born with or

develop. Once you've identified these triggers, then you can work to adjust the child's environment – and adapt your behaviors – to accommodate their needs.

- **Hypo-arousal.** These kids are low energy, hard to get going, floppy in their bodies, and have difficulty engaging in everyday activities.

- **Hyper-arousal.** This is the child who cannot sit still in class. But what looks like fidgeting or distraction can be a response to stress or to a perceived lack of salience, meaning that a child thinks that what they are doing isn't important enough.

- **Sensitivity to touch.** Touch is our biggest sensory receptor. Its job is to detect threats. For soldiers who have been through battle and are used to living on high alert, even air on their skin can create a guarding response in their body. Some of our children have been through similar prolonged stressors.

- **Sensitivity to space.** These are kids who are terrified in the elevator, don't do sports, or don't

want to play on the playground.

- **Sensitivity to sound.** You can't listen to language or tune into human voice. Your attention is hijacked by other sounds – like another person chewing.

- **Visual sensitivity.** This can look like gaze aversion or blinking of the eyes.

- **Dissociation:** When kids become stressed beyond their tolerance, the child may tune out and disconnect in order to protect themselves from overwhelming distress. Often this is interpreted as lack of attention, poor concentration, or disinterest. But it might just mean that a child is full of information or stimulation and cannot process anymore.

Tangible tips for helping children heal

It can be disheartening to think that early trauma can have such a long-lasting impact on a child and generations to come. But the good news is that our nervous system is plastic and changeable. In the context of a secure and healthy relationship, the nervous system has the potential for change.

Here are a few tips for using your body and being present to calm a child:

• **Practice “gleaming and beaming.”** This is the interaction that first happens between a mother and a baby and – ideally – continues throughout a child’s lifetime and into adulthood. When another person focuses a loving gaze and tone on you at any age, your body responds with an oxytocin hit that decreases the production of cortisol, the stress hormone.

• **Be in a state of attunement.** We have a natural ability to respond to the feelings of others. Pay close attention to how a child responds to your behavior, and adjust it accordingly. For example, if a child’s caregiver was overly nice to them before hurting them, your kindness may be a trigger to that child.

• **Choose your words carefully!** The brain, when it is stressed, can only process three words! In moments of stress, speak slowly and chunk your phrases.

• **Pay attention to your tone of voice.** When we are under stress, our tone of voice elevates. But, interestingly, when you drop your own voice down, you not only calm the child down, you also calm yourself down!

• **Hold space.** This means sharing someone’s distressing experience without you feeling the need to judge anything about it or to fix it. It is a very difficult thing to do because it means tolerating another person’s suffering. But it is critical to give them that time and space, because it is how they will learn to self-regulate, and it is a key strategy for deepening relationships.

• **Consider color changes.** Color can be too stimulating or not

stimulating enough. For example, blue has a sedative impact, increasing serotonin and melatonin production. Red is powerful in creating distress – it actually changes your heartbeat.

• **Lastly, mouths are for more than talking and eating!** The mouth taps into the vagus nerve, the longest nerve in our bodies that conduct communication from our brain to organs. Sucking, swallowing, or chewing can send a message to your body that it’s time to relax and calm down.

About the author

Kim Barthel is an occupational therapist, author, speaker and consultant, and this article is based on Kim’s presentation at the 2020 North American Council on Adoptable Children conference.

Grab the car keys, and make Aiden’s day!

You likely won’t find Aiden browsing Car and Driver, Motor Trend or Road & Track magazines, but he’s still plenty interested in vehicles of all types.

As a matter of fact, you might call his interest in cars, trucks and tractor-trailers Aiden’s fascination.

“Aiden enjoys anything related to vehicles. He enjoys playing with car keys,” says one of the adults who cares most about Aiden. “His favorite TV show is ‘Ice Road Truckers,’ and his favorite character is Lisa.”

Aiden enjoys going on car rides, but he also likes taking walks and spending time outside. One of Aiden’s favorite things to do is play on his tablet.

According to the adults close to him, Aiden is a kind, sweet, funny and affectionate young man. He loves going out into the community,

Aiden would do best with two patient and experienced parents who can give him the attention he requires. His new family needs to make sure Aiden receives the services that will help him thrive.



Aiden, C010213



Cody, C09070

Science and sharks intrigue Cody

Cody has an impressive and eye-popping list of favorite things. Instead of kittens and puppies, Cody lists tigers as his favorite animal. "I want a pet one!" he says. Instead of lunch and gym class, Cody says science is his favorite subject in school because he loves learning about planets.

What kind of kid likes science? The kind who wants to travel to Florida to – in his words – "swim with sharks!" The kind who wants to become a zoologist when he gets older. "I know a lot about animals," Cody says.

Cody's favorite things to do include playing football, basketball and soccer and flying his drone. He also likes playing computer games.

If you ask him what he's most proud of, Cody says that he's fast and strong, and if he had three wishes, Cody would want super strength and super speed along with the ability to fly.

Of course, Cody's list of favorite things would be closer to complete when he's part of a forever family, one who enjoys being active just like he does.

Did you know?

If you're new to adoption, we have a wealth of information for you, starting with www.mare.org > For Families > New to Adoption. This web page offers guidance to get you started and advice to keep you on track in the adoption process. Of course, you always can contact MARE's adoption navigators who have personal experience in going through the process. Contact MARE at 800-589-6273 or mare@judsoncenter.org.

Calendar

December 11
Virtual MARE
Meet & Greet
10:45 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

January 15
Virtual MARE
Meet & Greet
10:45 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

May 21, 2022
In-Person MARE
Meet & Greet
Stevensville
Noon-4 p.m.

For more information, contact jessica_thompson@judsoncenter.org or call 734-528-2070.

Take note: Watch for notices of upcoming Meet & Greets on www.mare.org and on Facebook and Twitter.

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