



WEEK 5 | YOUR TRANSFORMATIVE PARENTAL JOURNEY

Making Sense of Nervous System Science

The Physiology of Empowered Parenting

The nervous system is a communication system throughout the body. Through neuroception, which is how neural circuits distinguish whether situations or people are safe, dangerous, or life threatening, our body and brain are consistently, unconsciously, picking up on and translating cues of either safety or danger in our internal and external environments. (Read that again!)

The autonomic nervous system's main job is to signal to our body and brain whether we are surrounded by safety, or threat. The nervous system consists of the brain, spinal cord, sensory organs, and all the nerves that connect these organs with the rest of the body. Together, these organs are responsible for the control of the body and communication among its parts.

What does this have to do with parenting!?

If we are not in awareness and connection with our autonomic nervous system--specially the cues of our internal physiology, then we cannot access consciousness, and conscious choice when we are "triggered." We become "at the mercy of our reactivity." That does NOT feel good!

To be "triggered" means that our nervous system is perceiving a signal of threat in our environment, telling our body and brain to prepare to fight or flee! It means that our

body and brain are working together to figure out how to get us to physical and/or emotional safety as soon as possible!

Unfortunately, most come from a childhood history of chronic stress and unconscious fear, which imprints itself onto our supremely vulnerable nervous system. Meaning, we are so used to feeling stressed and afraid, we do not even realize that we feel that way. It becomes normal.

When our physiology and nervous system have been enduring chronic, prolonged stress, our signal receptors (neuroception) begin to translate SAFE cues as dangerous.

Our child crying in the car seat is not dangerous, but our body feels on fire.

Our teen telling us that they get to “make their own decisions--it’s MY LIFE!” is not dangerous, but our body feels like it’s facing a saber-toothed tiger.

In addition to a “wonky” system of neuroception, most of us cannot notice what our body is doing, or how to return to safety and calm.

Because we lack those skills, we use “tragic coping measures.” Essentially, the power over parenting paradigm, and the power under, are tragic coping strategies to deal with stress.

Therefore, in our best attempt to meet basic human needs for internal safety and calm, we exert our power over or against our children (the power over paradigm), or run away from and withdraw from leadership (the power under paradigm).

These are “instinctual” physiological responses to perceived threat.

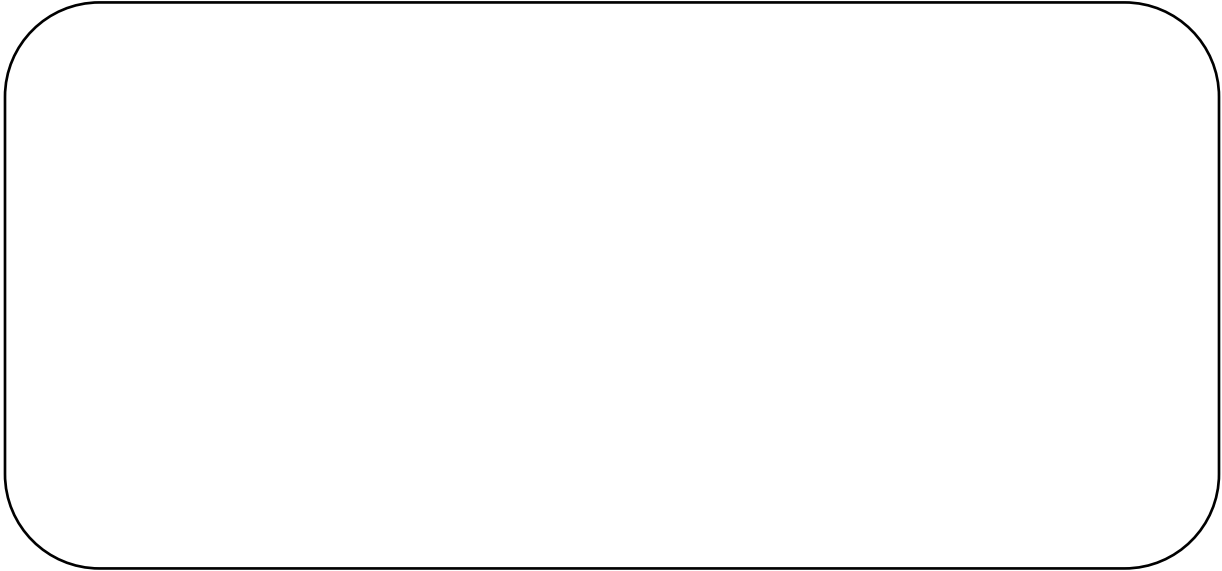
When we are perceiving our children’s behaviors as dangerous, when actually the child is experiencing danger within their own system, we cannot support our child back to safety. The child escalates until the emotional weight becomes unbearable and the parent’s only option to make the child stop is to enforce tactics of power over or under parenting.

The child explodes, we explode, and everyone is shouting, crying, or worse -- or perhaps we withdraw emotionally.

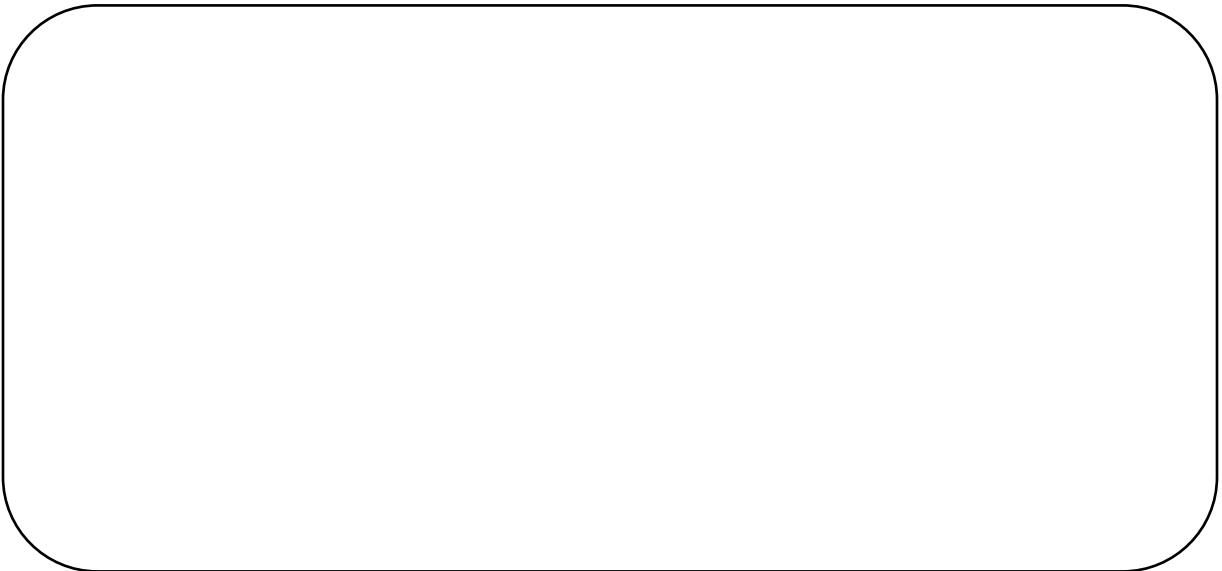
Together, we are cultivating a keen awareness of our inner world through the lens of nervous system activity. Here, we will learn how to become aware of and strengthen the communication systems within our body to support and lower our stress levels, allowing us to find the peace needed to parent peacefully, with empowerment.

Nervous System Science in Your Everyday Parenting

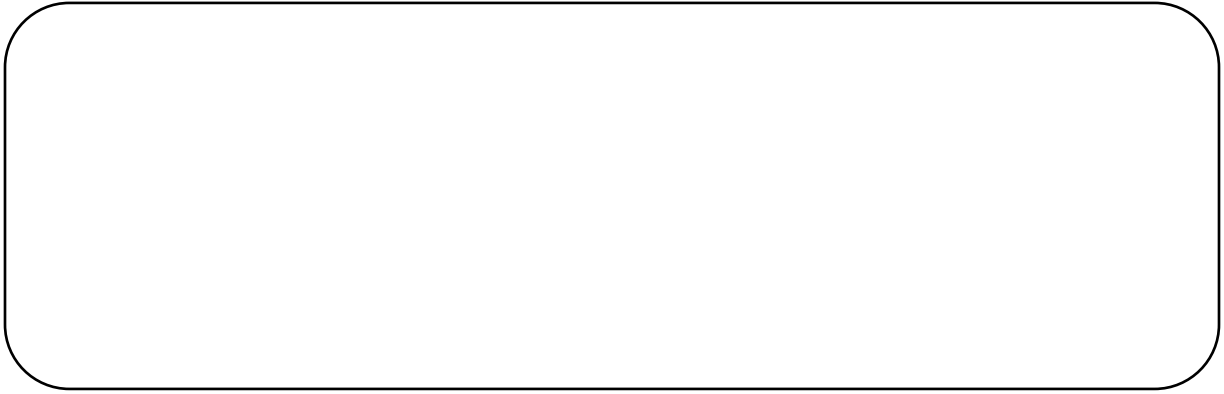
Can you recall a time in your family when your child was “melting down” and you become irritated, angry, or irate? How did that play out?



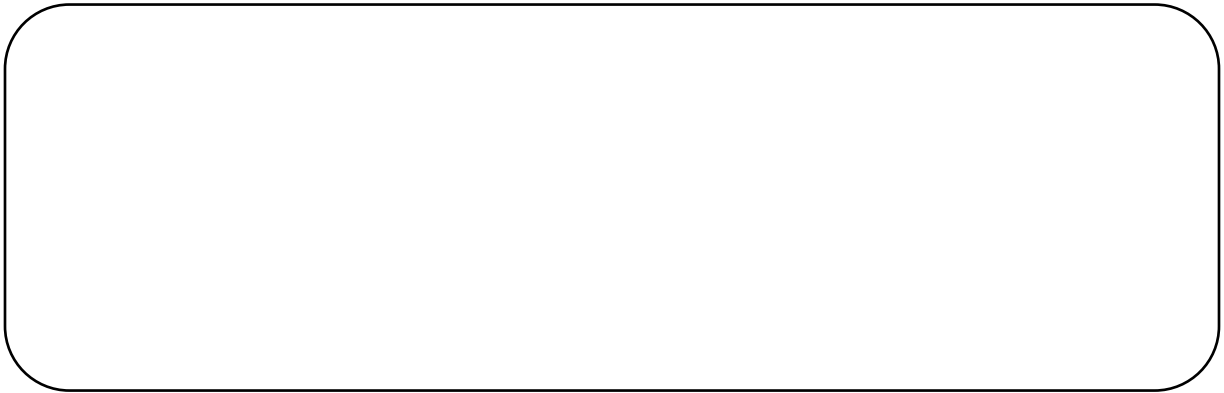
Can you recall a time when you were able to “find your calm” when your child was “melting down?” How did that play out?



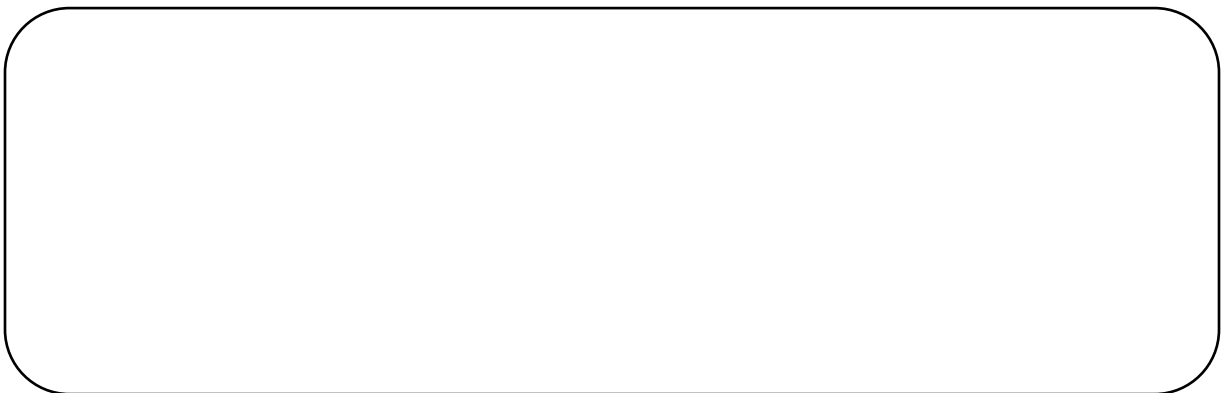
Have you ever thought, “Why does that make me so upset?! I don’t understand why I get so angry when my child does or says XYZ?”



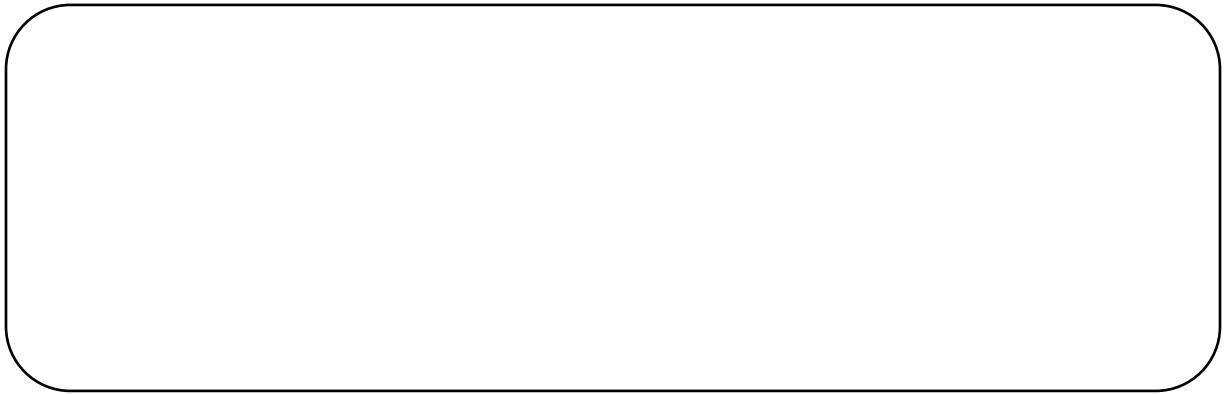
Do you notice times of the day when you are more able to access calm in your body? (Hint--this is usually when your basic needs for food, hydration, sleep, etc., are tended to.)



When you become irritated or stressed, do you find yourself unable to bring your stress levels down?



When you are stressed with your children, how do you behave to their very “normal” behaviors like shouting, running, laughing, being silly, not focusing?



Polyvagal Theory and Empowered Parenting

How Does Our Body Learn to Feel Safe?

Stephen Porges has discovered the vagus nerve, a central nerve within the parasympathetic nervous system that is the “head conductor” of how our body’s natural calming system works to reduce our stress in everyday parenting. He has found that the autonomic nervous system has three tiers:.

1. **Social Engagement- also known as the Ventral Vagal State:** presence and connection, love, safety, groundedness, presence, loving eye contact, soft gentle tone of voice. Awareness of facial expressions and how they impact others to feel safe and dependable for empathy, or not.
2. **Mobilization:** Fight or flight. A reaction of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. The “get up and go!” response in our body.
3. **Immobilization- Also known as the Dorsal Vagal State:** A parasympathetic response. the shutdown or freeze response when unsafe. The person “tunes out” others voices. May not respond to other people’s invitation to engage. Low muscle tone, low energy.

He has found that the autonomic nervous system has three tiers. Our goal as parents is to support children to move up and down the “polyvagal ladder,” and into the social nervous system. This is where our children feel the safest,

most secure, and most willing to cooperate, engage, communicate, and work as a team!

The Social Nervous System

This is the highest evolution of our nervous system. When we are in a state of inner safety, (regulated) our facial muscles soften, and our eyes light up. Our “yes” brain is online, and our willingness to engage in cooperation, communication, and collaboration awakens.

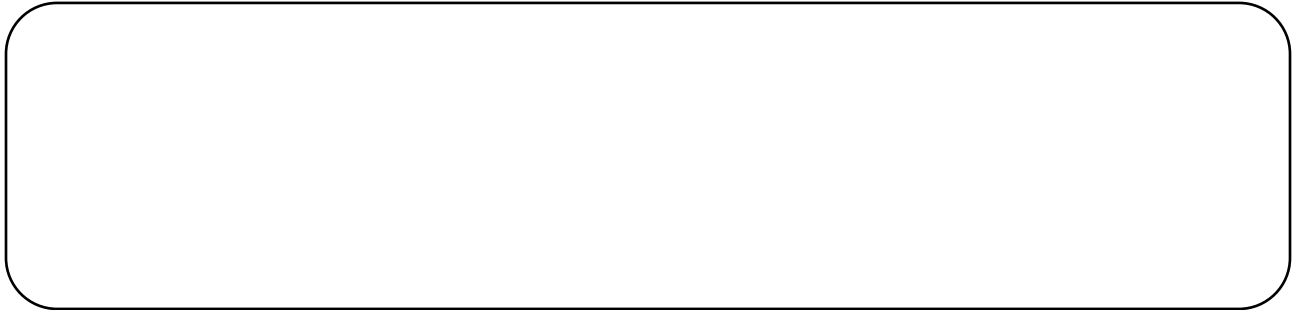
This expression of the vagus nerve is grown and strengthened through consistent, reliable, and dependable relationships (secure attachment).

This expression of our humanity is protected by relational safety, i.e. within the parent child dynamic, the relationship comes first. When this aspect is strong and cared for, our children can successfully travel up and down the ladder, through the sympathetic system (fight, flight) and the parasympathetic system (rest and digest, or fight and flee).

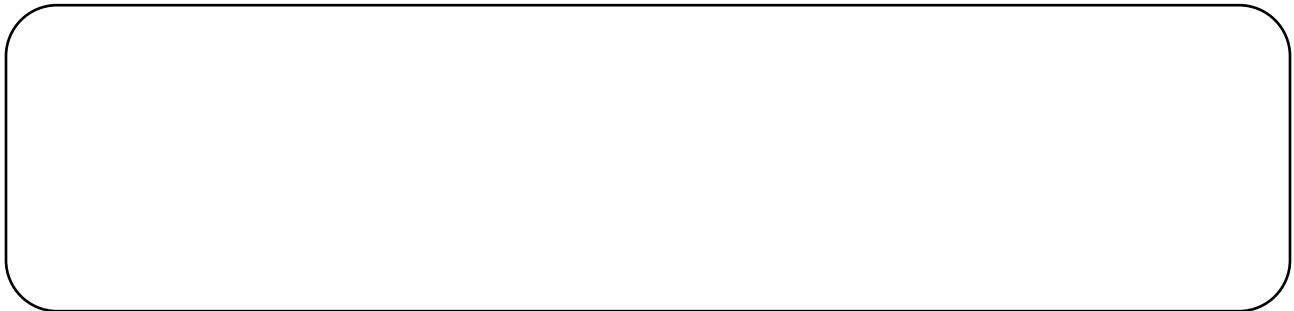
Do you notice when you are engaged in your social nervous system?

How does your body feel when you are engaged in this aspect of your nervous system?
What does inner safety and calm feel like in your body?

How do you behave when you are connected to inner safety and calm?



Do you notice when your child is in this state? How do they behave?



Mobilization: A Reaction of The Sympathetic Nervous System

This experience on the polyvagal ladder is the “fight and flight” expression of the vagus nerve. This is our “mobilize and go!” instinct. In children, this comes to life when they are stimulated by silliness, excitement, “bouncing off the walls.” They may seem squirmy, unable to sit still, anxious, or angry. They may struggle to fall asleep, and to stay asleep.

When perceiving threat or danger (lack of connection, fear, tired, hungry, thirsty, needing to use the bathroom, punishment, criticism, shaming), the child will go into “fight or flight” and appear triggered--yelling, screaming, hitting, kicking, punching, scratching, etc. When the child has access to their social engagement system (regular co-regulation with caregiver and secure attachment), then the child will be able to access playfulness, vitality, and the “get up and go!” initiative.

How To Support Our Children From Sympathetic Into Social Engagement

When our children are overstimulated and highly aroused, we know that they are living in the sympathetic nervous system state.

What they need:

Support finding their calm.

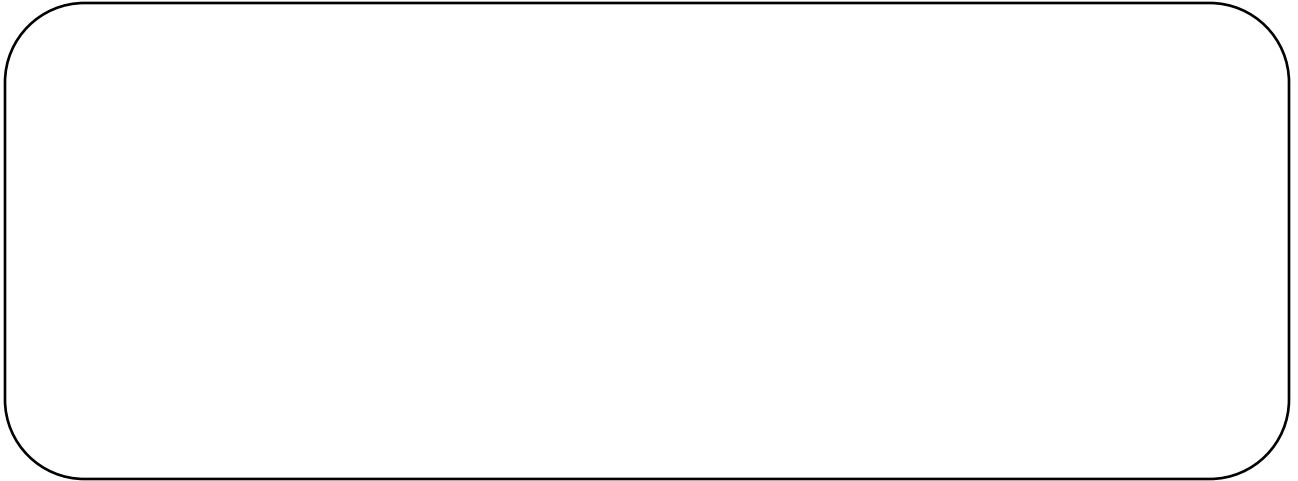
How we help:

- ✓ ACKNOWLEDGE AND ACCEPT where they are at.
- ✓ Be aware of your own nervous system state. Ask yourself: “Do I have calm they can borrow?” *Reference the acronyms ANCHOR and HARBOR below.
- ✓ **“Dip your toe in their nervous system state--but don’t drown!”**
- ✓ You can meet them in their high energy with play, if they are open to that. If they are hitting, invite them to clap your hands or push really hard. “Want to bonk my hands with your hands? I see your hands are looking for action! Let’s BONK together!” We are not wanting to bring them HIGHER into their activation, but to meet them where they are, and encourage a full release, while guiding them into calm.
- ✓ Engage in a gentle wrestling game (on something soft). Support the fight + flight energy to find release and slowly begin activating the social engagement system and into calm.
- ✓ Give them a “yes” place when they are in fight + flight mode, let them express their energy without fear that they will get hurt or property will be damaged.

Do you notice your child when they are activated by their sympathetic nervous system WITHOUT safety or access to social engagement? If so, what kinds of behaviors do you see them display? (Example: hitting, shouting, enraged)



Do you notice when your child is in a sympathetic state WITH access to social engagement? What do you notice? (Silly, playful, lots of energy into their project)



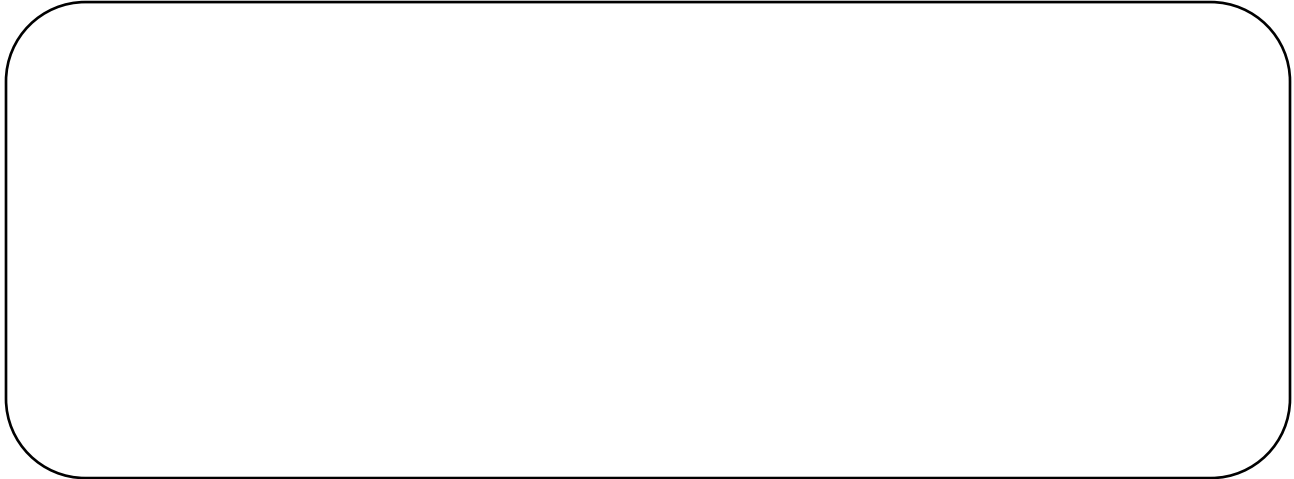
Do you notice when you are in the sympathetic nervous system state, WITHOUT safety? If so, how does your body feel? (Tight, tense, hot)



When you are in fight or flight WITH safety, what kinds of behaviors do you display? (Silly, excited, energized for adventure)



What kinds of calming tools do you think your child would respond to?



Immobilization: A Reaction of The Parasympathetic Nervous System

This experience on the polyvagal ladder is the shutdown or freeze response. This is our most primal response in the face of actual threat, or perceived threat. This is the dorsal vagus response on the polyvagal ladder.

When the body is connected to inner safety, the dorsal vagus supports our body to gently move back and forth between high energy, and rest. Under stress, the dorsal vagus shuts our entire system down. This is akin to an opossum, who plays dead to deter a potential predator. If a person, especially a child in this context, is raised in a home in the face of chronic stress (yelling, criticism, shame, fear, judgement), they will first try to fight back, or flee from the scary or threatening adult behavior.

If fighting back, or fleeing, does not help them reach safety, their autonomic nervous system shuts down into collapse. This significantly lowers our heart rate, and keeps adequate oxygenated blood flow to the brain. This manifests as a child who is disengaged, perceived as “lazy” or someone who “just doesn’t listen!”. They may truly struggle following directions because of brain fog and low life force energy.

Deep breath! This is a beautiful function of the nervous system, specifically designed to serve us as humans. We want to learn how to identify when we are in the dorsal vagal response, and how to raise ourselves back up into social engagement.

How To Support Our Children From Dorsal Vagal Into Social Engagement

When our children are under stimulated and apathetic, we know that they are operating from the dorsal vagal state.

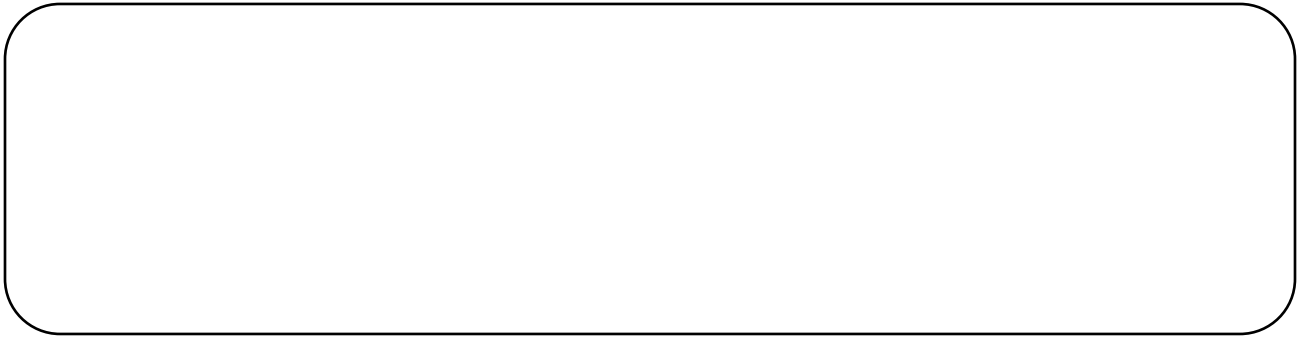
What they need:

Support finding their connection to self, and life. Guidance UP the polyvagal ladder into social engagement. They will need to pass through mobilization in order to arrive here: be aware that anger, aggression, or big tears may fall as the child is moving from the shut down state into engagement.

How we help:

- ✓ Be aware of your own nervous system state. Ask yourself: “Do I have calm they can borrow?” *Reference the acronyms ANCHOR and HARBOR below.
- ✓ Accept the state that they are in. Understand it’s normal.
- ✓ Meet them in their low energy. **Dip your toe, but don’t drown.**
- ✓ Will they accept your touch?
- ✓ **“Dip your toe in their nervous system state--but don’t drown!”** Meet them in their sluggishness or spaciness, without any judgement. Be their witness, and enter their space with curiosity.
- ✓ Invite the child into an activity that you and the child can do together. If they refuse, don’t take it personally or get scared. Witness them in their low state, and continue inviting them into connection. They may push you away because the low state is really scary for a lot of children (they don’t outwardly seem scared).

Do you notice when you are in the immobilization state, or dorsal vagal, WITHOUT safety? If so, how does your body feel? (sluggish, tuning out voices and sounds, spaced out, foggy brain, tunnel vision)



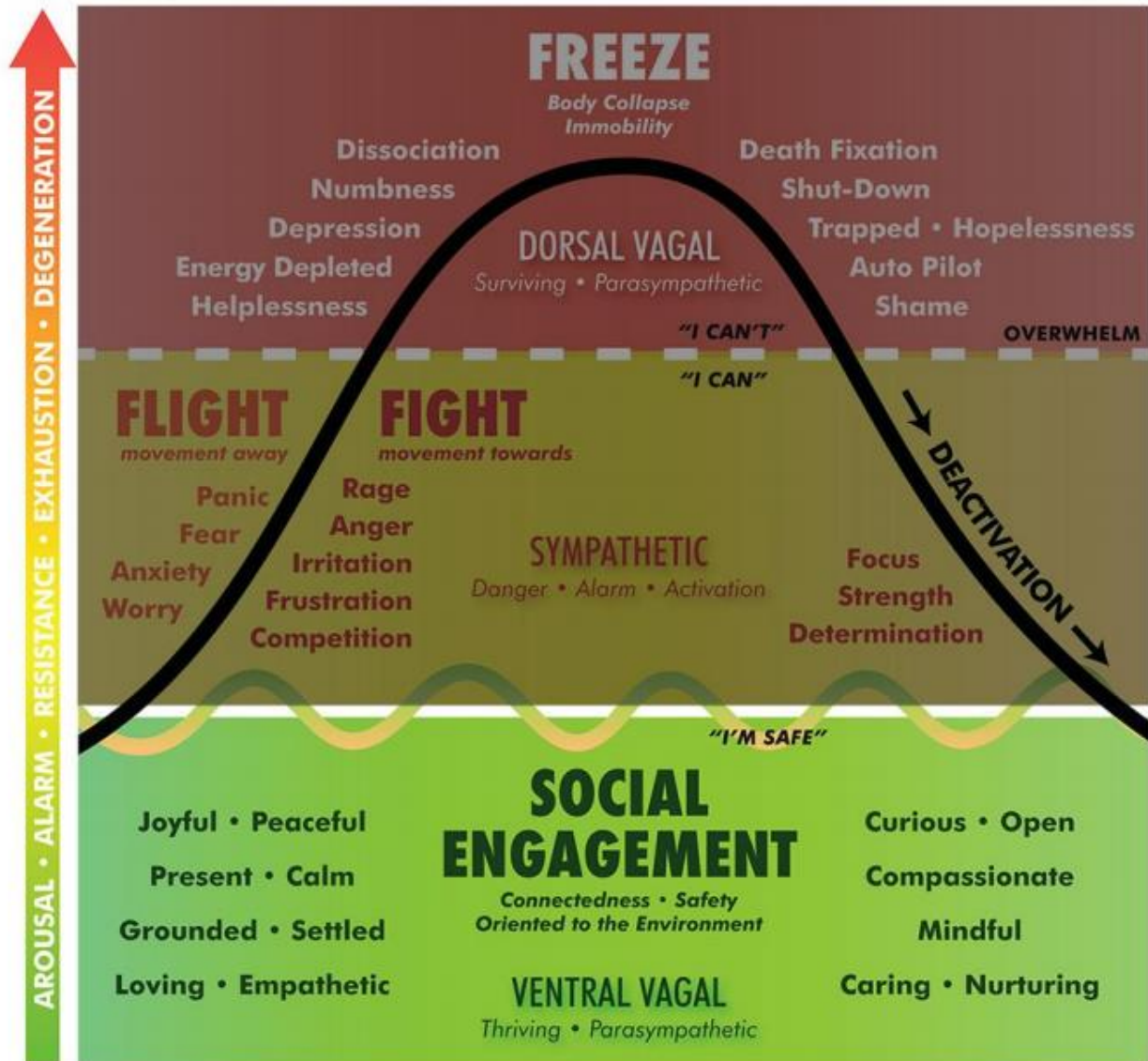
When you are in an immobilization state, or dorsal vagal WITH safety, what kinds of behaviors do you display? (relaxed, resting, able to be still, can sit and focus on a peaceful task for many hours)



What kinds of calming/security tools do you think your child would respond to when they are in this state??



Polyvagal Phase Chart Based on the work of Stephen W. Porges, PhD



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Adapted from the works of Ruby Jo Walker & Cheryl Sanders
based on Stephen W. Porges Polyvagal Theory of the ANS

The Vagus Nerve and Empowered Parenting

The vagus nerve is a large nerve that communicates throughout the lungs, heart, and abdomen to the brain. There is constant communication throughout our physiology because of this nerve. It is known as the heart-brain-body nerve, and the “tree of life,” due to its expansive network of far-reaching nerves. This nerve is the first station of communication in our body to respond to stress.

What is more stressful than parenting?!

This nerve is the first station of communication in our body to respond to love, compassion, and empathy.

What elicits greater love than parenting?!

The ability to communicate appropriately means communicating when there is REAL versus perceived danger. Your toddler not wanting to brush their teeth is NOT dangerous, contrary to your nervous system's intense instinctual reaction. This nerve works 100% unconsciously. This means that you have no idea that it's happening. It's the first signal in your body, which then communicates to your fight-or-flight response to step up and defend or run far away.

The vagus nerve is weakened by living in chronic stress or fear. Most parents come from generations of inter-relational stress and fear. For many parents, engaging in up, or down-regulating, and into the social engagement system, is very hard work. When we strengthen our vagus nerve, we can access inner safety and calm much more easily in times of stress and teach our children to do the same.

How to Strengthen the Vagus Nerve

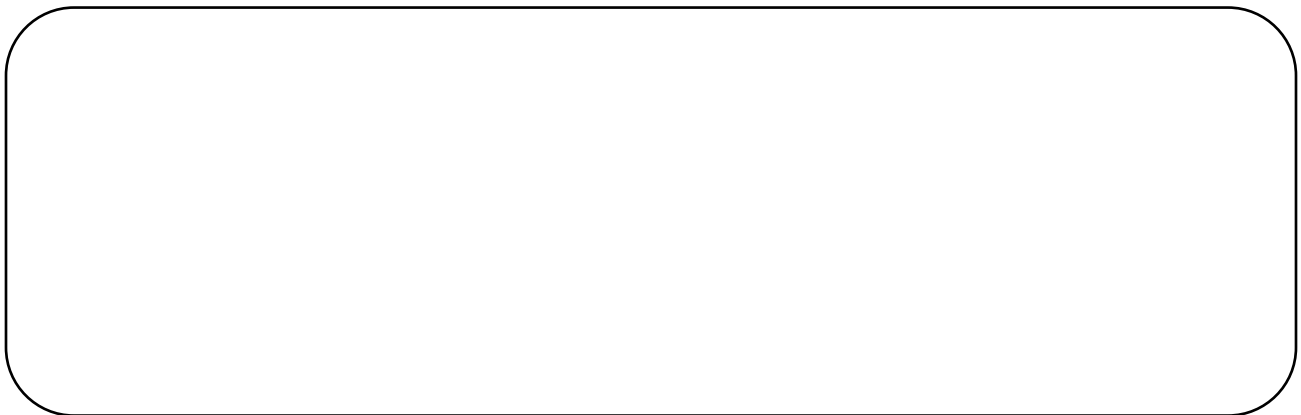
- ✓ Slow, rhythmic, diaphragmatic breathing.
- ✓ Splashing cold water on your face, or taking a cold shower, stimulates the dive reflex, which is associated with stimulating the vagus nerve. You can also achieve the same effect by holding a Ziplock bag filled with ice cubes against your face and holding your breath. Or submerge your tongue in cold liquid.
- ✓ Humming, or making a “vooooooo” or “om” sound stimulates the vocal cords and facilitates long, slow, exhalation.
- ✓ Prosody, the act of speaking slowly, rhythmically, and melodically as if you're soothing a young child or pet.
- ✓ Spend time in nature.
- ✓ Think positive thoughts about other people.
- ✓ Engage in positive social relationships.
- ✓ Laugh out loud! A full belly laugh stimulates the vagus nerve and is contagious.

- ✓ Engage in prayer.
- ✓ Mild exercise stimulates gut flow and the vagus nerve.
- ✓ Massages, even gently massaging around the carotid sinus located on the sides of your neck can stimulate the vagus nerve.
- ✓ Gargling activates the vagus nerve by activating the muscles in the back of the throat while exhaling slowly.
- ✓ Cultivate healthy intestinal bacteria, use probiotics.

Which suggestion from above resonates most with you?



Which suggestion from above do you think would work for your child?



Connecting Nervous System Science and the First “S” in Earned Secure Attachment

According to Daniel Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, in their book, “The Power of Showing Up,” the first “S” in earning a secure attachment within ourselves and with our children, is Safety.

Safety = The opposite of harm and perceived threat. Safety is not just physical. Safety includes: Relational, Emotional, Psychological, & Environmental

We are here to:

- Ideally, to prevent our children from experiencing harm.
- Minimize the harm our child is exposed to.
- Advocate for our child in the face of threat to their human right for safety.
- Become our children’s “safe harbor,” NOT the source of harm.

How we perpetuate harm: (deep breath, we ALL experience this to some degree as parents. No judgement at all, if you are struggling here)

- Inability to track our body’s signals and realize when we are on the way to becoming triggered.
- Struggle to engage our sensory access tools, to either down or up-regulate.
- Lack of self-regulation creates an inability or difficulty co-regulating with our child.
- Parenting from fear or anxiety.
- Rescuing our children from their feeling
- Avoiding strong feelings in our children because we can’t cope with them.

Deep breaths. This is painful to confront and necessary. Be kind to yourself. We are learning together. We are here creating the future of our relationship to show up for our children with safety.

How to serve our children with safety:

- We track our body's cues with our thermometer visual tool. (See below).
- We practice ANCHORING ourselves before reacting. (See below).
- We learn our specific sensory calming tool and engage it BEFORE we get to a level 5 on our thermometer.
- We practice strengthening our vagus nerve every day.
- We practice becoming our children's harbor of safety. (See below).

Nervous System Thermometer

This is your opportunity to track your body's cues and signals of stress. The intention is to learn your "stress continuum," and engage in your sensory calming tools before you get to level 5.

EXAMPLE: Nervous System Thermometer

Level Five = White

I can't contain this extreme feeling any longer. My body feels like it's going to explode. I shout, hit my fist against the table, or race out of the room and slam the door.

Level Four = Red

Breathing is very shallow. Chest is tight and heavy. Body is starting to buzz.

Level Three = Orange

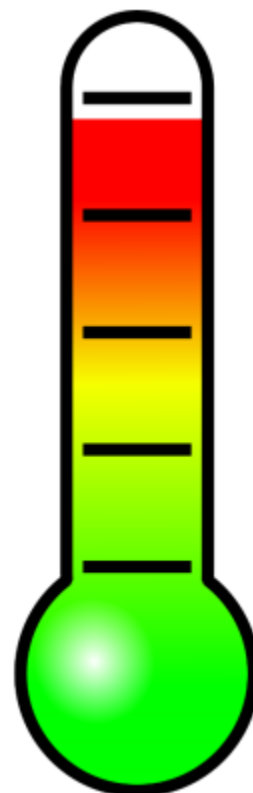
Jaw is clenching. Noise is suddenly overwhelming. Anger is rising.

Level Two = Yellow

Noticeably annoyed. Body starting to get tight.

Level One = Deep Green

Calm, present, socially engaged. Body feels loose, light.



Create Your Own Thermometer

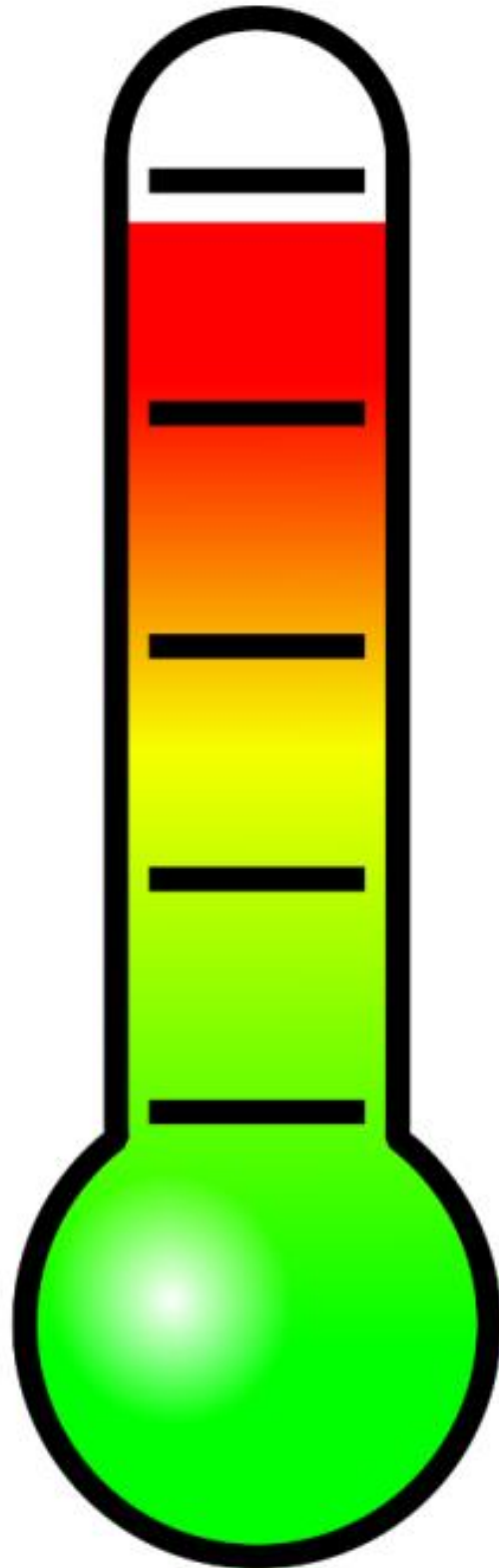
Level Five = White

Level Four = Red

Level Three = Orange

Level Two = Yellow

Level One = Deep Green



Create a Thermometer for Your Child

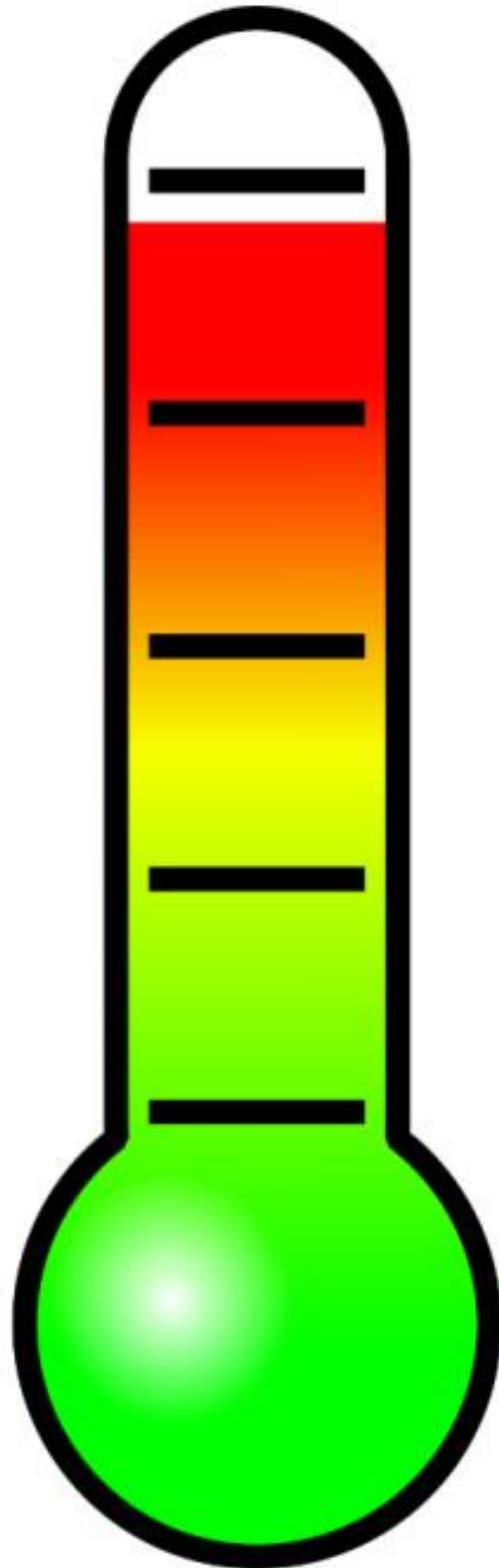
Level Five = White

Level Four = Red

Level Three = Orange

Level Two = Yellow

Level One = Deep Green



Inching Our Way Toward Inner Safety

We inch our way, through our body, toward inner peace and safety by feeling the feelings we have committed to avoiding.

The anger, the rage, the grief...we must practice, *slowly* allowing our bodies to feel, so we are not living in suppression within. When we live in suppression, our neuroception (our body's constant scan for safety or danger) will continue to be "faulty". We will continue to live in dread, chronic stress, and an inability to connect deeply and securely with our child.

When we "feel into" the little waves of physical discomfort (tightness in chest, anxious butterflies in the tummy), we build our CAPACITY to experience discomfort. According to Irene Lyon, this is what shows our body and our brain that safety is possible. Feeling creates cellular safety, inch by inch.

When we learn how to be in security with our own emotional regulation system and physiology, we will no longer DREAD our child's huge emotions or nervous system expression (especially fight or flight responses).

Our job as parents is to allow our child to feel incredible physiological and emotional pain, and not fear it. Our job is to understand that our child's fight or flight responses are normal and age appropriate. Our role, especially when our child is yelling, hitting, biting, or throwing, is to invoke our cellular safety and stand firm and present. That does not mean we simply allow our child to attack us while they are in overwhelm. Instead, we feel safe enough to get curious, get creative, and get committed to supporting our child through their dysregulation in a way that serves them best.

We can radiate inner safety, we can breathe deeply, we can attune to our child's alarm bells, and we can ground them back into calm. Parenting is walking a "Hero's Journey." We do not underestimate how difficult at times this process can be! Most of us are only now learning inner safety while raising our children who depend on us to feel safe. It's possible! Trust the process, and devote every day to allow yourself to feel your body and your emotions, inch by inch.

Inching Our Way Toward Inner Safety

We want to discover what sensory calming tool supports you best, as the parent. And, which tool supports your child best. There is no “one size fits all” for supporting our children to inner safety. It is a trial and error process, and a daily conversation with our child to discover what serves them, and you, best in your most difficult parenting moments.

Vision

- Have bright light in the room, brighten the lights.
- Have soft light in the room.
- Keep the room black without any lights.
- Use a flashlight.

Movement

- Move back and forth in a rocking motion while holding a young child.
- Have a child jump on a trampoline.
- Have child do pushups or sit ups.
- Dance around.
- Sensory swing.
- Play sports--throw balls, shoot hoops, kick soccer balls outside.

Sound

- Play a chant or rhythmic melody.
- Play soft classical or nature music.
- Sing or hum softly.
- Whisper.
- Noise cancelling headphones.

Touch

- Massage lightly your child’s feet, shoulders or back.
- Tickle or lightly pat your child’s back.
- Hold a soft object in your child’s hand.
- Hug, if your child is ok with that.
- Weighted blanket.
- Lay in the earth.
- Push up against a wall.
- Self massage

Which tool resonates with you? Which resonates with your child? Be curious!

ANCHOR

A Guide through Self Regulation

We This framework is intended to be your guide through a trigger.

This will help you find safety and calm in your body, so you can show up and offer safety for your child. Safety and calm are ALWAYS PRESENT. We are practicing being able to find our way back there whenever we need to. It's beneficial for your child to witness you "finding your inner safety." It's okay for them to see you struggle, and witness you finding calm.

This is healthy modeling of self-regulation. Feel free to post this all around your home and practice it as many times a day as needed.

IN THE MOMENT OF TRIGGER... or when you feel yourself rising in your thermometer:

- ❖ **A**wareness of body
- ❖ **N**ame What is Happening in Your Body
- ❖ **C**onnect to your Sensory Calming Tool
- ❖ **H**onor the Process
- ❖ **O**pen to Connection
- ❖ **R**ecommit to Your Child

HARBOR

A Guide through Co-Regulation

Our children are 100% dependent on our inner safety and inner calm to access their inner safety and inner calm. They cannot self-regulate as children.

After we have ANCHORED ourselves in inner safety and attempted to re-engage with our social engagement system, then we co-regulate with our children. Please post this guidance around your home and practice as many times of day as needed.

This is the framework to use when your child is at the TOP of their thermometer, and most likely non-verbal, and unable to hear your words, communicate, and make sense of their experience with language.

- ❖ **H**old space
- ❖ **A**ccept what is
- ❖ **R**emember sensory calming tools
- ❖ **B**e low, slow and soft
- ❖ **O**pen to connection
- ❖ **R**emind child of safety

Rupture and Repair

Inevitably, we are going to miss opportunities to support our children back into safety.

Inevitably, we are going to be too stressed ourselves, unable to self-regulate, to co-regulate with our child. Here, we are working together to equate SAFETY with RUPTURE (meaning, even mistakes are safe and we can recover from them), and from safety, engage in the art of repair.

Like all else in this process, forgiveness starts from within.

When you can access authentic self apology and forgiveness, you will anchor yourself in internal safety.

Only then will your apology “land” for your child in a way that balances their inner disequilibrium, and supports and repairs your relationship. After a mistake, as soon as you can, engage in this self apology process. You can do it in your head, or you can write it down. I like to do both.

Self-Apology for Inner Safety

1. Name what happened.
2. Name how you feel about what happened.
3. Name what you felt before you reacted.
4. Name what need was not being met for you.
5. Name how your mistake impacted your child (feelings and needs).
6. Make a commitment for next time.
7. Forgive. Let yourself know that you deserve forgiveness, and ruptures are an opportunity to reconnect.

Example: Today, I screamed really loudly at my child to get in bed, instead of supporting them gently. I had really aggressive body language. I feel disappointed and heartbroken about what happened. Before I screamed, I felt desperate and exhausted. I was needing support and rest. My child became very frightened and started to cry, making bedtime even longer. Their need for respect, gentleness and safety was dishonored. Next time, I will notice my body’s cues of stress and engage my ANCHOR, and stop before I scream. Even though I’m sad, I deserve forgiveness. I forgive myself for being human and missing an opportunity to be gentle and kind.

Recipe for a Meaningful Repair

1. Connect
2. Ask consent
3. I imagine that you're feeling _____
4. Because of my choice to _____
5. I regret how I _____, because it caused you to _____
6. In the future, I'll do my best to _____
7. Here's what I'll do right now (my calming strategies) _____
8. For now, would it support you if _____

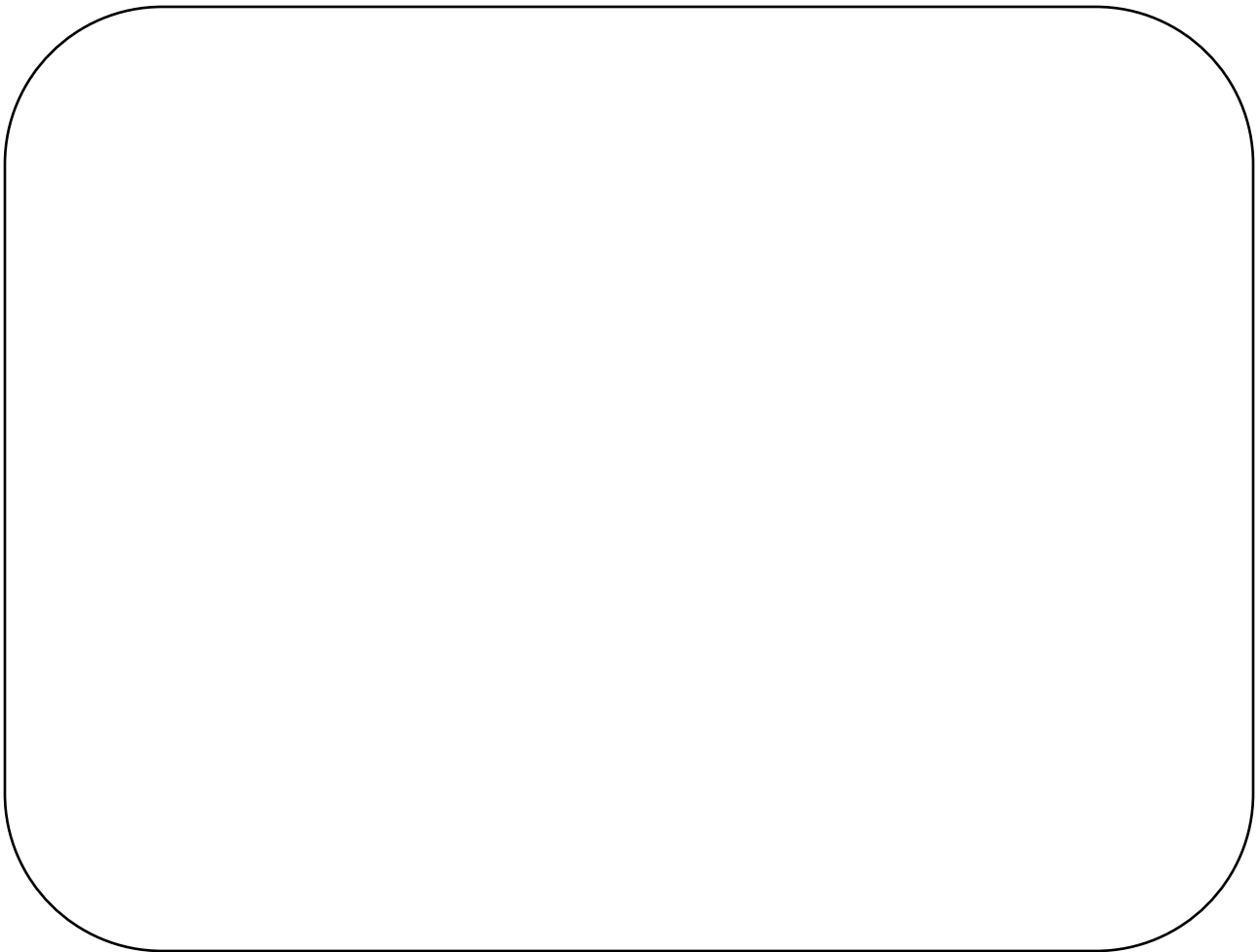
Notice how we are not asking for forgiveness.

The child gets to take their time. There is no urgency to fix the mistake. The child regaining safety through your self accountability is the goal.

Example: Hi sweetie, is it okay if I come in your room? Watcha working on? I was hoping to apologize for what happened earlier today, are you open to that? Ok, thank you. I imagine you are feeling a bit confused about what happened this morning, because of how I became very stressed and screamed at you? I regret how I lost control, because it caused you harm. You became very stressed too, and shut down. We were hoping for a smooth morning, but then it became very tense. Next time, I'm going to get everything ready BEFORE the morning, that way I'm not rushing. That will help me stay calm. For now, would it be okay if I gave you a big hug? I love you, and I am going to keep trying to be your safe place.

Practice!

Can you recall a mistake you made recently that you could apologize for? Practice writing out your script below:



Additional Resources

1. “Calming a Wiggled Out Autonomic Nervous System Using the Vagus Nerve” by Innis integrative.
2. “Children, Emotional Regulation, and Polyvagal Theory” by Dr. Arielle Schwartz.
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