LEARNING WITH INTENTION

Talking with our kids about their nervous system:

Talking to our kids about their nervous system, from an early age, can help build powerful self-awareness and emotional regulation skills. When kids understand *why* their brain/body is reacting a certain way (e.g., having intense meltdowns, tantrums, or dysregulation), they are less likely to internalize a negative "self story" about these reactions.

- Our kid isn't hitting because "he's bad"- he's hitting because his nervous system is in fight/flight mode.
- Our kid isn't whining because "she's being a baby"- she's whining because her blood sugar is low and she needs to stabilize with a healthy snack.
- Our kid isn't tantruming because "they're a spoiled brat"- their brain is having a hard time transitioning away from a high-dopamine activity (like shows or video games).

What is the nervous system anyway?

The nervous system is the incredibly complex and amazing part of our body that sends messages to and from the brain that influence how we think, feel, and act. It's made up of the Central Nervous System (CNS) and the Peripheral Nervous System (PNS). The CNS consists of the brain and spinal cord, and the PNS is made up of the nerves that connect the brain and spinal cord to the rest of the body.

Communicating openly with our kids about their nervous system and how the brain/body works helps build their capacity for emotional regulation! With that in mind, it's important to consider developmentally appropriate language. Below is a general guideline for ways we can start weaving in these concepts, depending on the age of the child. *Please note, there can be significant variability in how children develop receptive and expressive language skills. Always keep in mind your child's unique language learning profile, and adjust your language as needed! Reach out to a speech-language pathologist if you have any questions or concerns about your child's individual language processing abilities.*

A quick word about scripts...

Scripts can be really helpful, especially when you, as the parent, set aside some intentional time to think about how *you* want to respond to your child (the best time to do this is when you're already feeling grounded and you have access to your prefrontal cortex or "thinking brain"). There is no one outside of you who has "the right way" to respond to your child (they aren't coming from the same background, family value system, soul contract, etc. and therefore lack an essential "youness" that your child is here for and craving. **Your authentic voice is what your child needs.**

With that in mind, when helping parents figure out what to say or how to respond to their child in a particularly challenging scenario, my guidance is to first build understanding around:

- What is happening in the child's nervous system
- What may be coming up in their own system, as the parent
- Releasing any conditioned "knee-jerk" responses that may be ingrained from the parent's own childhood and/or social conditioning
- Identifying any skills that the child may need to be taught

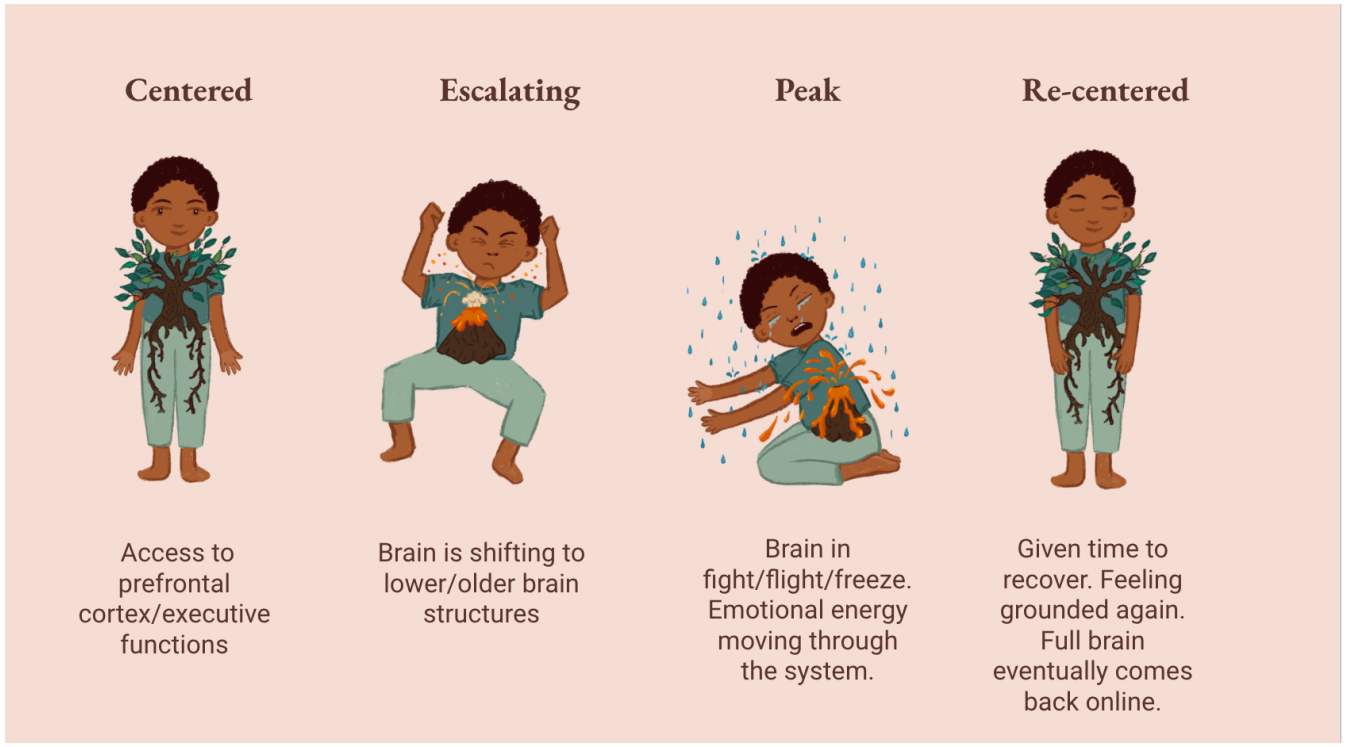
From there, the parent's own, authentic manner of speaking to the child is the most organic and appropriate response.

"Helping our kids understand the biological reasons for their dysregulation cultivates a strong self-concept that isn't rooted in shame."

Let's take a look at how we might communicate with our child about the brain/body at different developmental stages. This exercise invites you to self-reflect and write down your own responses, if that feels helpful to you.

Age range 2-4 years old:

At this stage, our primary focus can be on *modeling* (showing our child in order to teach them) what a healthy expression of emotional dysregulation can look like (easier said than done, right?!). Using visuals, such as the ones offered below, shows a child that the sensation of emotional energy "erupting" in their body is perfectly natural (and if full expression is allowed in a safe manner, their body will eventually come back to grounded baseline all on its own!). *Please note, individual copies of these visuals can be found in the index so that you may print and hang them in your child's "calm corner" (or better yet, anywhere around the house you can easily see them for quick reference).*



Some examples of what parents might say/do to start introducing language around nervous system/emotional dysregulation:

- **Grounded "tree" mode**:
  - "It looks like your brain and body are ready to learn/listen/_____."
  - "My body is feeling calm and grounded now."
  - "When my body feels safe and steady, my brain can be more flexible. Kind of like when a tree is rooted in the ground, its branches can sway around."

- *What are some ways you might talk about your own brain/body in this phase with your child?*

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- **Escalation "rumbling volcano" mode:**
  - "I'm feeling frustrated. It feels like hot lava rising in my chest. I'm gonna take a break for a few minutes."
  - "When I'm angry it's hard for my brain to think, I'll answer your question when I'm feeling calmer."
  - "I'm noticing all this noise is making my inner volcano start to rumble. I'm going to put my earplugs in and take a few deep breaths."
  - *What are some ways you might talk about your own brain/body in this phase with your child?*

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

- **Peak "exploding volcano" mode:** At this phase, the nervous system is in survival mode: fight/flight/freeze, so the focus is less on talking and more on allowing the nervous system to do what it needs to do in a safe way in order to release the emotional energy. When our *child* is in "peak" mode, the <u>silent</u> message we send (without a lot of talking because their brain is not able to process language at this point): *I'm here with you, I love you unconditionally, I'll keep you safe*. When the *parent* is in "peak" mode, the focus is on modeling safe ways to discharge intense emotional energy and tending to our own nervous system (e.g., yell into a pillow, stomp feet, soothing self-hug, etc.).

- Take a moment to think about and write down what your own **inner voice** might say to *yourself* to keep you anchored while your child is in "peak mode" (e.g., "*It's safe for her body to feel this. She can handle it. I can handle this. I'm safe right now.*"):

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

- Take a moment to think about and write down what you might do to fully express your own "volcano" energy in a safe way (e.g., *intentionally yelling into a pillow, expressing how you're feeling "I'm feeling so ___ right now!", push ups against the wall, crying it out, journaling, calling a trusted friend,* etc.):

  _____
  _____
  _____
  _____

"Emotions can be thought of as energy in motion. It's safe to allow emotional energy to flow freely through the system (even though it can be intense and scary sometimes!). All emotions are valid and welcome (even if all behaviors are not)."

A note on releasing any conditioned responses that may come up when a parent is in "escalation or peak" mode...

- This may involve identifying any responses/phrases that you currently say that you wish you didn't. These may be phrases from your own childhood, hurtful words you end up using yourself simply because your own nervous system is taxed and you've responded from "fight mode" or just responses/phrases you've noticed yourself using that are unhelpful that you'd like to let go of.
- Bringing in ritual here can be very helpful. Lighting a candle, creating a safe space for yourself where you can write down these phrases without judgment, allowing any grief to move through, (which may come up from having been on the receiving end of these words at a younger or more vulnerable time), and intentionally burn them (safely) or release them by ripping them up and throwing them away. And then writing down one or two phrases you'd like to try to use instead and placing that somewhere you will see it.

The phrases I am *releasing* are:

_____

_____

The phrases I am *calling in* are:

_____

_____

Age range 5-7 years old:

At this stage, while a parent is still doing a lot of modeling/showing the child what it looks like to tend to our own nervous system dysregulation, we can start to weave in more language around the child's own brain/body. We can start talking to them about how their own brain has an "alarm system" when it feels overwhelmed or unsafe and that this alarm will send a signal to the body to "fight, flee, or freeze" just like animals in the wild! Animal analogies are fun and accessible for children and continue the message that our body's reactions are perfectly natural (and nothing to be ashamed of!).

Activity idea: Play “I spy” (using an animal book or magazine) weaving in animal defense mechanisms:

- “I spy with my little eye, an animal with two long ears and a bushy tail that freezes when its nervous system detects a threat.”

- “I spy with my little eye, an animal with four legs and sharp teeth that will go into aggressive fight mode to protect its nest.”
- “I spy with my little eye, a small animal with two fast feet that will run away or flee quickly if its nervous system notices a predator nearby.”

At this age, we can start to help our child notice his/her/their own signals that their body is starting to get dysregulated. We can also reflect back on challenging moments together using brain-based language:

“I’m noticing your voice is starting to whine. I’m wondering if your blood sugar is low. Does your body need something to eat?”

“It seems like your body has a lot of energy right now. Let’s move some of that energy through the system by: (doing push ups against the wall, walking on all fours to the bathroom and back, whacking some pillows, etc.)

“Wow that was a really tough moment you had there before. It seems like your brain switched over into “fight or flight” mode.”

What are some ways you might talk with your *child about their brain/body?*

_____
_____
_____
_____

Age range 8-12 years old:

At this stage, children's ability to self-regulate their emotions is starting to come online (keeping in mind there is considerable variability in how children develop and many neurodivergent kids may still need quite a bit of support and co-regulation when it comes to managing their emotions). When talking with our kids about the nervous system, we can teach them some more complex vocabulary to help them understand what's happening in their brain/body.

For example, we can explain that when we started to yell at them, it was because our own amygdala in our brain got triggered, and our nervous system downshifted into fight mode (and then we can repair and apologize for yelling at them because repairing with our child at any age is one of the most powerful things we can do as a parent!).

One of the most relevant things we can start talking about with our kids in this fast-paced and constantly stimulating society is the impact of dopamine on our system.

What is dopamine?

Simply put, dopamine is a neurotransmitter or chemical in the brain that makes us feel good. Highly stimulating activities (such as scrolling social media or playing video games) can cause a surge of dopamine that then plummets. A dopamine crash can feel really uncomfortable in the body and may result in our child "acting out" or getting dysregulated.

We can help our child identify activities that may lead to a dopamine surge-crash (e.g. eating lots of sugar, watching screens for too long, etc.) and also healthy ways to stabilize the dopamine in their system (e.g., eating healthy snacks & protein, joyful movement & exercise, accomplishing a challenging task, etc.). Sometimes just *naming* a dopamine crash for what it is can be the thing that feels most grounding, as helping our kids understand the biological reasons for their dysregulation cultivates a strong self-concept that isn't rooted in shame.

No matter what age our child is, we can shift our mindset to take into account the brain/body and how our child's nervous system is developing when considering their ability to regulate their emotions. We can also start to cultivate a deeper understanding of our *own* nervous system, and how we can lovingly tend to our own brain/body.

Self-Tending Toolkit

My brain feels refreshed when I…

_____

_____

My body feels nourished when I…

_____

_____

My nervous system feels safe when I…

_____

_____

I hope this mini work-book felt helpful and supportive for you! Please reach out if you have any questions or would like to take a deeper dive into learning more about your own nervous system and how you can best support your child's emotional regulation.

With love,

Carly

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