

Being the safe place.

Young children cannot calm down or express what is happening to them without the help of a calm person.



When your child is distressed or upset, they have trouble hearing you. They are trapped in their instincts. Their bodies are full of stress chemicals. They need to be heard and understood before they can hear and understand you. When we yell, send them away (time out) get frustrated or angry with them, their distress increases and stress chemicals flood their brains. Their body picks up cues in your body, your face and voice and assesses whether you are safe for them to engage with.

Before you respond to your child, be aware of what is happening to you.

Breathe, Feel, Story, Attend.

This is difficult if your own distress was not attended to. Unstoried distress gets attached to the present, often triggered by a child's distress. By attending to your stress and distress, tuning in to your body and emotions and storying our experiences, you create new pathways in your brains and establish new ways of responding. It is never too late to create pathways. The most important thing a parent can do for their child is to process their own experiences.

Breathe deeply, gently into your belly, expanding your chest, focusing on the out breath.

Feel. What happened to me? How is it about the now? How is it overloaded with past experiences? Stay in the feeling and let it take you to where it belongs.

Story. (later) What happened? What did I do to cope? Write facts first, in sequence leaving gaps. Go back and fill in the gaps. Re-write focusing on feelings.

Attend. What did I need? Picture that younger you with a caring adult, spiritual being, Jesus, an angel, special animal or your caring adult self. What does that caring adult or spiritual being do? What does the child feel now? What does the child believe about his/herself, the world, others.

About the brain.

When a child is born, they operate from their hind brain, their instincts. A baby's reaction to pain and discomfort is instant and physical. When we respond with love, pathways form connecting the instinct brain to the mid or emotional brain. When a baby's pain, and distress is attended to with soft voices, calm bodies, soft faces, interested and delighted eyes, stress chemicals are converted to connection hormones. They feel loved and safe.

In the second year the social-emotional connections are being made in the brain. Human safety is experienced in consistent relationships; where they learn who they are and what the world is like. **In the third year** the connecting pathways extend to the organising, storying brain. It is linked to other parts of the brain as a result of caring connection.

We make sense of experiences by storying them, linking facts and feelings, bringing information from all the parts of the brain. This is only possible when the brain is free of stress chemicals. Without calm connection, the child is unable to move past their instincts. They live their lives in fight, flight or freeze states. They cannot reflect on their behaviour.

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