



Emotion Coaching – When Kids Have Big Feelings

A Feelings Dilemma

It is hard to imagine a more heated and high stakes parenting moment than the one created when our kids appear to be “losing it”. Tantrums, meltdowns, One of the most common parenting concerns comes from identifying the right response when our kids appear to be “losing it”.

It is helpful here to have an appreciation of what is going on down below, to explore what lies beneath the outburst. Daniel Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, in their book *The Whole Brain Child*, help parents to understand what is happening inside the child’s brain circuitry. This helps us understand how best to respond, but it involves a bit of observation and analysis first. Step back, and watch, before responding.

Upstairs and Downstairs Brains

Our human brains have evolved to incorporate increasingly more sophisticated zones that enable “human-like” thinking, such as language, philosophy, linking complex ideas, imagining conceptualized models of how things work.

Emotions occur within the deeper (literally, in the middle) part of the brain called the Limbic System, which is associated with our more primitive instinctive responses. For this reason, the emotion centres are sometimes referred to as **The Reptilian Brain**. Siegel and Payne Bryson call it the **Downstairs Brain**.

Logic, reasoning, and problem solving all occur in the outer shell of the brain, called the cortex (AKA our **Mammalian Brain** or the **Upstairs Brain**).

As we get older, the capacity for advanced thinking and philosophising begins to switch on in our Prefrontal Cortex (AKA the **Human Brain**), but these regions are underdeveloped until adulthood. It is always important to remember that our kids often can’t see the bigger picture or completely grasp our competing priorities and demands, because that part of their brain simply doesn’t work too well. An example might be, “can’t you tell we’re going to be late”, but this requires a concept of time, as well as all the tasks required, and who does them, and a history of all the times we have run late, and why that is important, and what it might mean to them. The younger a child is, the less likely they are to be able to conceptualise all of these things fluidly. It is frequently a source of frustration for parents, and a good reminder that *Growing Children’s Brains* takes time, patience and effort. So go slow and be kind on yourself.

Who Is Running The Show?

It may seem obvious, when you look at your child throwing things, or flailing around, or saying nasty words, that it is *them* doing the behavior. However, it is important to distinguish between a behavior which is truly BEHAVIOURAL (i.e., intentional and controlled) from one that is behavior coming from an EMOTION. Of course, you are witnessing your child doing the behaviour, but with an emotionally-triggered response, it is difficult to say that *they* (the clever, capable, reasonable them) is truly in charge. In times of high emotion, their Upstairs Brain gets hijacked by their Downstairs Brain.

Upstairs Tantrum Characteristics	Downstairs Tantrum Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conscious choice to act out and push buttons • Strategic, manipulative attempt to control the situation • Child can be reasoned with, make choices, control her emotions • Child can instantly stop when her demands are met 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress hormones flooding the body, interfering with functioning of upstairs brain • Loss of control over body and emotions, along with a high degree of stress • Child is incapable of making choices or being reasoned with.

(Siegel & Payne Bryson, The Whole Brain Child Workbook, 2015, p. 35)



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The Feelings Volcano

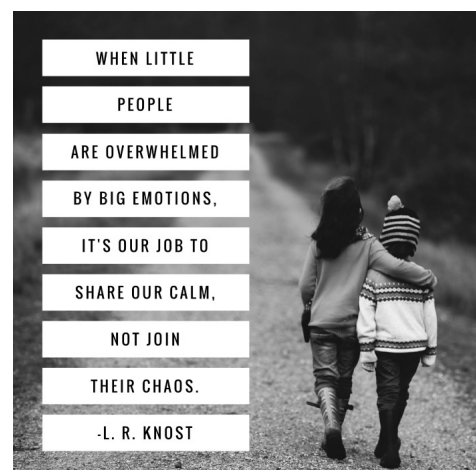
A volcano is a really helpful analogy for emotions. If we imagine that, deep within our emotional being, we have a well of lava which is increasing and decreasing in fiery intensity, sometimes getting up to “boiling point” and bubbling over, this can help us to get underneath our child’s emotional world. Sometimes, when we witness an out of control emotional and behavioural blast, we can struggle to understand what is going on, because to us, there hasn’t been any significant trigger. That can make it even more likely that we mis-label the problem as BEHAVIOURAL, because clearly they shouldn’t have feelings in this situation, it is no big deal. But if we respond only to the behavior, we are missing an important learning opportunity that helps them over time learn to *recognize* and *moderate* feelings.

It is helpful to acknowledge that all people work this way. How many times have you flown off the handle over a small situation, but have recognized that those feelings had been building up for a long time. When we suppress our feelings, it has the effect of making it more likely that they build up and explode. We nurture old hurts deep down in our lava pits, spewing it all forth during an outburst. This explains why kids are worse for their parents than at school or with the babysitter, they will tend to hold it all in until the parents come home, because that is when they feel the most safe and able to relax a little. The trick is to learn to “check in with our temperature” and “let off steam” little bits at a time. Your child needs your help in learning to do this.

Parents As Feelings Coach

The best way of responding to emotional outbursts is to recognize that you are responsible for helping your child to navigate these big emotions, not to make them go away (soothe), or to make them stop (invalidate), but to learn tools to moderate the right level of feelings at the right time, at the right dose, according to the problem at hand. Below are some strategies that are covered in detail in The Whole Brain Child book, and many more too.

1. **Connect, Then Re-Direct.** When the feelings are exploding, we need to speak to the Downstairs Brain *FIRST*, help the child feel safe and contained, and make sure they are capable of listening to instructions. Use your presence to comfort, normalize, and soothe. Once the feelings have settled, then proceed with disciplining the behavior.
2. **Name It To Tame It.** Use a feelings word to guess at how the child is feeling. Keep it simple, like “overwhelmed”, “big feelings”, “upset”, “big hurt”. It doesn’t really matter if you get your guess wrong, they will soon tell you what it is instead. Then reflect back and normalize the feeling, “yes, I can see you are disappointed”. These feelings words help to engage the Upstairs Brain to come back online.
3. **Engage, Don’t Enrage.** Attempt to engage the Upstairs Brain in problem solving when you can see feelings begin to bubble up. Reflect back the problem, accept how it seems from their perspective, and offer your perspective on how you see things differently, affirming that the feelings are ok.
4. **Move It Or Lose It.** Feelings – our temperature rising – builds up a great deal of physical energy within us. It is helpful for both adult and child to remember that when they feel distressed (and parenting children is the most stressful job in the world), they can use their physical body as an outlet for stress. This is not just about physical exercise, think of making a game of the tasks you are asking your child to do, using humour, being playful. Changing the energy of the situation can help shift into the Upstairs Brain.



Lastly, remember that you are growing little human brains, and it is always a “work in progress”. Having a positive relationship with your child, using teachable moments to increase their reflection capacities, empathy, and “mindsight” (from Siegel) helps in the long run.