

MELTDOWNS: The Importance of Emotional Signaling

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Every parent and every professional wants their children to be sweet, kind, thoughtful, empathetic, and well-regulated. At the same time, we all want our children to be assertive, creative, curious, and leaders in the world – if not leaders, then certainly enjoy the world and master the challenges at hand. But many of us are confronted with daily struggles when children are moody or exceedingly sad or depressed or exceedingly negative. We are confronted with helping our children and even helping their friends when our children hit, push, bite or spit. Children with special needs often have special challenges in these areas. It's often harder when the child can't talk easily or gesture to figure out why they are being angry or why they are being impulsive or why they are being moody. It's frustrating for both the child and the parent.

How do we understand the best ways of helping our children to regulate their moods and their behavior so they become the kind of warm, empathetic, caring individuals that we all wish? The key principle here, the absolute key, is not to simply focus on changing the behavior alone. In other words, our temptation is often to institute a whole program just to curb the impulsivity, the aggression, or the moodiness and negativism. But if we focus only on the behavior, the results aren't very good. We may successfully decrease some of the bad behavior, but like squeezing a balloon it pops up somewhere else. The child may stop pushing but might start biting or may go from being aggressive to being sad. We want our children to regulate their behavior and their moods. Most importantly, we want our children to build the foundations for healthy development.

So the goal is to do two things at once—help the child overcome the symptoms or the bad behavior and, at the same time, build healthy foundations for development. In other words, if we can, on the one hand, help the child stop being aggressive or impulsive – pushing and hitting – and on the other learn to respect, care, and empathize with others and read the signals of others so that they know when it's ok to be a little more assertive and a little more rambunctious or when it's necessary to be more cautious—if we can help them to do both things at once, that is, build foundations for healthy regulation and curb their aggression—then we are really doing our job.

Then we are really helping our child enormously because we are building the cornerstones of communicating, thinking and relating in a healthy way.

How do we do that? It's a tall order to overcome the impulsive, aggressive, or moody behavior and at the same time to build healthy foundations. Even though it's not easy and even though it's a tall order, that's our task. To do one alone without the other leaves the job incomplete. It's like building a house without a healthy foundation. The first wind that blows may knock that house down.

Now in order to know how to accomplish these two goals at the same time, we need to understand how children, in ordinary development, learn to regulate their behavior and their moods. How do they learn to control impulses? How do they learn to be not too sad or not too excitable? If we learn how a typically developing baby learns these skills, we'll see how all children can learn these skills. The pathways are a little different for children with special needs, depending on how the child's biology and nervous system operates. So let's look at how it happens ordinarily and then we'll look at the special challenges when there are special biologies or special differences in the nervous system.

Typically a child learns to regulate their mood and behavior through their interactions and through their relationships. When a baby is very little, we see very global, extreme patterns. The baby gets excited and cries or maybe even gets a little bit aggressive or impulsive. Usually somewhere around 5-10 months of age, we see our babies becoming more interactive. They are reading the facial expressions of mommy and daddy or other caregivers. And it's the back-and-forth reading of emotional signals – mommy smiles, baby smiles; mommy frowns, baby frowns. Now let's look at what happens at 9 months of age, when this interaction is getting complicated. The baby looks like they are angry and they go, "RRRRRR, RRRRRR," making angry sounds because they are hungry and they want to eat and they want to eat now. Let's say daddy sees that and instead of letting it escalate to a 4+ tantrum, daddy says, "Ooooh! Is my little sweetheart upset?" with a very soothing tone of voice that responds to the baby's "RRRRRR, RRRRRR." And then daddy says, "Maybe you want this" and offers the food that the baby wants. The baby sees that, hears daddy's soothing voice and all of a sudden the baby's "RRRRRR, RRRRRR" becomes a "Ah, ah," like okay! And the baby reaches for something, maybe has a big smile to which daddy smiles back. There's that back-and-forth signaling.

Or let's go to our 14-month-old who is now crawling and walking. That 14-month-old is insistently reaching for an object that they can't have, like one of mommy's favorite pieces of china. Mommy says, "no, no, no" and baby goes, "RRRRRR, RRRRRR" and escalates up as if they are going to have a tantrum. Mommy says, "How about this instead?" in a calm, soothing voice and offers an alternative. Here is the back-and-forth negotiation with smiles and head nods and different sounds and different motor gestures where mommy offers different alternatives. Most of the time, the baby modulates. In other words, there is no reason to escalate up to a 4+ tantrum when they

communicate their anger. Mommy communicates back, “I can do something to make you feel better. There are other things you can have besides the china.” Even where mommy or daddy have to set a limit without an alternative, they use that soothing tone of voice to counter regulate.

When the baby escalates up, we do something we call “down regulating” which means we soothe the child with our tone of voice, with our facial expressions and our gestures. But this soothing has to occur as part of a back-and-forth rhythm of interaction. This is how a baby learns to regulate their anger and learns to regulate their moods. On the other hand, when a baby is feeling kind of sad and gloomy, is a little inward looking and sluggish looking with no bounce or oomph or energy or big smiles, we tend to “up-regulate.” We energize up with that baby, pull that baby into a game of smiling, laughing and giggling. We may do it with sounds, with different types of touch, with different types of movement. Again, it’s a back-and- forth rhythm of interaction where we get into what we call a “continuous flow of two-way emotional signaling.” So we can up-regulate when the baby is a little more sullen and we can down-regulate when the baby is getting excited or aggressive or too overloaded. Through this pattern of signaling, babies learn to regulate their moods.

For some children it’s much harder to learn to regulate their moods. Let’s take a child who is, what we call, very “sensory-craving” where the child seeks out sensation and runs after new sensory experiences. This is a child who likes to bang into everything, likes to touch everything, likes to grab everything and likes the physical action of enhancing their access to sensation. They want to be involved in everything because they crave touch, sound, and sight. Often children with this pattern may be relatively impervious or unreactive to pain so that when they fall they don’t react very much – they get up and toddle around ready to bang into the next object or person. A pattern of sensory-craving is part of the way the child’s nervous system works.

Some children are born with this pattern and some children develop it as they learn to crawl and walk. The job of helping this child regulate is a little harder because this child, who is seeking sensation, is so active. Here the parent has to interact with this signaling system and help contain the child and direct the child to constructive ways of interacting in a more energized way. It’s harder than the child who is a little less active and a little less sensory-seeking. As the child is reaching for the favorite china, he may not respond to a little “no, no, no” with a shake of his head. You might have to say loudly, “Oh no, buddy! NO, NO, NO!”, pointing as if you were the corner policeman directing traffic. The child may object with a “RRRRRR, RRRRRR, RRRRRR,” raising his voice. But the principles here are the same: You interact with your vocal tone and with your gestures.

You can offer alternatives to help this little child find constructive ways of interacting. For this child we might have a big bean bag they could jump into or bang into. We might have toys that are soft and squishy that they can throw with us or move with us. Sensory-craving children may not like a lot of gross motor activity but if we do it in a regulated, coordinated way with a lot of back-

and-forth interaction, the child can experience the rhythm. For instance, as this child gets older, we might play games where we go fast then slow then super-slow then very, very slow. We may make loud noises then soft noises then super soft noises. We are teaching the child to regulate through interaction with noise, with movement, by modulating the intensity all the time. When we do this with this sensory-seeking child (and it takes a lot of effort I agree) the child becomes well regulated but assertive. We will have a person who is a little bit of a risk taker, but similar to a risk-taking person who is assertive, often very popular with peers, and often as an adult seeks out a career that has to do with asserting oneself. Our sensory-craving child can be very assertive, very dynamic, very charismatic if we help that child modulate and regulate early on.

Another type of biology that is hard is where a child is overly sensitive and overly reactive to sensation. This child gets overloaded easily, for instance, with too much noise, too much touch, or with people banging into him. When this child gets overloaded, he tends to push or bite, scream or throw a 4+ tantrum. It's a very different dynamic, though. We use the same principles, but we do a lot more soothing and regulating. We give the child alternative ways other than pushing or shoving to express their overload. Once they can talk, we help them use their words. Before they can talk, we help them show their emotions by raising their hand or pointing to where the overload is coming from. This teaching occurs through a lot of back-and-forth interaction to help a child become a good emotional signaler.

So in both cases, the sensory-craving child and the child who is easily overloaded, the goal is to help the child become very regulated and very soothed through their interactions with us. That means a lot of back-and-forth communication. It means a continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional signaling.

Let's think again of a baby. Ordinarily in the first few months of life, babies are all-or-nothing reactors. They may get upset and cry, scream and flail. If they could be aggressive, they would be aggressive. Or they may retreat and become solemn and withdrawn. But their reactions are all-or-nothing reactions. Then through their capacities for emotional signaling, for exchanging smiles and head nods and smirks and frowns, they learn to go from this all-or-nothing reaction to a fine tuned back-and-forth negotiation where they are communicating and negotiating everything from aggression to love and dependency. They can reach up and smile and flirt to get a hug. They can go "RRRRRR, RRRRRR, RRRRRR" and bang their fist to show they are angry. But they don't have to actually do an aggressive thing, and they don't have to actually grab you when they want to be hugged. They can flirt with you. They are learning to signal to express their needs. The way they learn this is through their back-and-forth interaction with us where we are a good signaler with them. This happens ordinarily from about 5-6 months to about 9-10 months, and it continues and really develops in that second year of life. So by the time they develop their words, they already have this emotional signaling system pretty well mastered. The mastery of this system is what enables them to use symbols and use their words constructively. Then they can express and not just signal "I'm angry" or "I'm sad" or "I want this" or "I want that."

That's why it's so important to get the signaling system working. If we don't, we are left with what we call "catastrophic emotions and behaviors." That is, we are left with the earlier behavior where the child is an all-or-nothing reactor. As I mentioned, children who are either overly sensitive to sensation or under-reactive may have a harder time learning this system. Also, children with motor planning or sequencing problems, who can't put together 5 or 6 actions in a row, have a harder time learning how to signal emotionally because it involves many little actions – smiles, head nods, pointing – in a row. So that becomes harder too. They require more practice. Similarly for children who have auditory processing problems and language problems. They can't hear as many sounds or distinguish sounds as well. They can't make as many sounds, and eventually can't easily make their words. That too interferes with this early signaling system, making it harder to master. But the important point is that it doesn't make it impossible to master. It just means more practice is needed. That is the key point – practice, practice, practice. The harder it is for the child because of their unique biology such as a motor planning problem or a sensory seeking pattern or a language problem, the more important it is for us to give extra practice in this early signaling system.

So the choice is a child left to these all-or-nothing catastrophic reactions or one that learns to signal, modulate and regulate. When they do, they regulate mood, they regulate aggression, and they regulate anxiety levels. All kinds of constructive things happen in the way they are able to regulate their behavior.

Now what about a child with severe special needs who is already older – a 3, 4, or 5-year old or even 8-year old who is behaving aggressively or who gets very moody and very sad? How do we help that child? How do we deal with the immediacy of the situation? If the child is behaving aggressively, something has to be done immediately while he strengthens this emotional signaling system. Here is the approach. First, you have to figure out why the child is being moody or aggressive. Have they not mastered this capacity for two-way emotional signaling? You ask, "In ordinary interactions with my child (or if you are an educator or therapist the child you are working with) can this child get into what we call a pattern of continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional signaling?" In other words, regardless of whether the child is using words or not, can they stay engaged with us continuously where they have 50 or 60 circles of back-and-forth communication in a row? That's a child who is engaged and in gestural contact with us – moving, body posturing, changing facial expressions, changing vocal tones – in back-and-forth rhythm with us.

So the first question is, can a child do this? Have they mastered this? Now about 95% of the time, I find that children who have impulse control problems have not fully mastered this stage of back-and-forth communication, even if they are verbal, abstract in their thinking, and doing well in school. So children can partially master this stage and still move on in development. If it's not mastered fully, however, they may be left with impulse control problems and problems in mood regulation. So we have to see whether they have mastered it. If they haven't, the first goal is to help strengthen this. This means a lot of Floortime interactions where we work on a continuous flow of emotional signaling. We can do this while we are talking or playing make-believe with the child,

while we are just moving trucks and having fun or are doing gross motor activities – running, jumping, spinning. The important thing is back-and-forth emotional signaling to strengthen that system.

Now at the same time if the child is behaving aggressively or impulsively, we may have to set limits. Here the key is to set limits in a way that is meaningful for the child. If the child is hypersensitive to touch or sound or overloaded easily, he'll need very soothing, gentle limits. He may need a time-out (a quiet time, but not isolation) but with a soothing tone of voice, rather than our getting angry or over-reacting. We may need to sit with the child during the time-out. A child who is more sensory seeking and more rambunctious may need a firmer, more energetic time-out for reinforcement (but not isolation). This child needs to know that you are more persistent than he is and that there will be consequences when he crosses the line. And the line means, usually, hitting or hurting or breaking things. You don't want to make the line too severe for things like being loud or not playing properly with a toy because then you are controlling the child too much. So you set the line for things that are clearly very, very difficult for the child.

You need to have consistent, firm limits but they have to be gentle for the over-reactive child and very firm and energetic for the sensory-seeking child.

For the child with language problems, you have to explain very slowly and clearly why the limits are being set and help the child respond. Always try to have a conversation with the child so they understand the limits. For the child who is not verbal, you can show him pictures. If the child can't yet use symbolic pictures, you can use gestures to point to what the child broke or to the place where they hit mommy and shake your head, "no, no." You use gestures so the child understands why they have to accept the limit. This limit might be simply interrupting the activity they are doing and having them sit. I don't like isolating children, particularly children with special needs because they need that relationship to learn how to relate. Isolation can be counterproductive. Generally you never want to use a punishment or sanction or limit that is counterproductive to the child's development. So learning to sit quietly or having a quiet discussion interrupting the activity can often be enough. Obviously earning points, checkmarks, or stars that lead to special privileges is also a good way for a child who understands this approach.

Enforcing limits need to be done but at the same time you have to work on the fundamentals – strengthening emotional signaling.

Now another feature of the fundamentals that should be emphasized is the tone of the voice. When parents try to get a continuous flow of back-and-forth communication going, they often do something very interesting. Their voices get desperate. As they try to keep the child engaged in a back-and-forth rhythm, their voices become shrill and desperate, with a kind of a desperate "OOOOOO" quality as opposed to a compelling "Oh boy, look at that" quality. A compelling, energized voice is very different from a shrill, desperate voice. To engage a child who is sensory-seeking or is under-reactive and in his own world to get that continuous flow of back-and-

forth emotional signaling going, you don't have to speak loudly. You don't want to overwhelm the child. You want to speak with emotion. Your voice can be very compelling while saying softly, "oh boy, look at this." It can be done with intensity and affect and animation while being soft and soothing. A shrill, loud monotone "OHBLAHBLAHBLAH!!!!!!" may get the child's attention temporarily, but it doesn't pull the child in.

So try, as best as you can, to be reflective and think about your own emotions as you work with the child whether as a therapist, as an educator, as a parent, as a sibling. Try to be relaxed and playful. Try to tailor your tone of voice and your interactions with the child in terms of their sensory reactivity, their motor planning, their language and auditory processing skills, their ability to understand things they see, or their visual spatial processing. We want to tailor our actions to the child's unique nervous system, to create a continuous flow of back-and-forth signaling, and in that context, teach the child how to control and regulate. And again for the sensory-seeking child who is a typical child but who has impulse control problems, try a lot of games where you are down-regulating and changing speed and direction and intensity, running fast then slow then super slow, talking loud then soft then super soft, banging the drums hard then soft then super soft so the child is learning to regulate as part of a continuous flow of back-and-forth emotional signaling.

After all, when you think about it, what defines a regulated individual is an individual who can respond to their environment. In the gym you can be rambunctious. In church or synagogue you need to be quiet and cautious. When grandma is visiting, you need to be one way, and when your friends are visiting, you can be another. But the ability to perceive your environment and take your clues from the environment means you have to be interactive with that environment. To do that you have to be a part of a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction because if you are self-absorbed and then involved and then self-absorbed, you're only sampling your world a little bit during the involved times. During the self-absorbed times you're tuning out from the world. To understand the world and figure out the rules, you have to be able to tune in all the time. The way you do it is through a back-and-forth pattern of communication. That is essential. As parents try different interventions and decide what intervention strategy they will use with their child, they have to remember that whatever specific techniques, the child must be involved in a continuous flow of emotional signaling in order for that child to become reality-based.

Now why does a continuous flow of emotional signaling also help a child become empathetic, caring and sweet—the kind of child all parents want—as well as assertive? Because empathy comes from sensing the emotions of another person. The only way you sense the emotions of another person is through this back-and-forth emotional signaling. That's the beginning of learning to empathize – the awareness of another person's emotions. Also, caring comes from being able to sense another person's emotions. So we have to have that flow for empathy and for caring—and to be assertive in a healthy way. You have to be able to sense what the environment is telling you: when it's appropriate to be extra rambunctious, when it's appropriate to be extra cautious. You have to get feedback from your environment and read the emotional cues of others.

To have successful peer relationships, you have to see what others are willing to do and what they aren't willing to do at any moment in time. So many problems around playing with toys or peer problems as well as aggression come from the lack of reading emotional signals.

You can't teach reading emotional signals from pictures of people's facial expressions. You can't memorize rules. That kind of approach is doomed to failure, because there are millions and millions of facial expressions and signals. The only way to learn is to do it and do a lot of it and to have lots of interaction with parents or other caregivers, or with therapists and educators and with lots of back-and-forth interactions with siblings or peers. Then you'll learn to read those signals.

Again, the harder it is, the more we have to practice, not the less we have to practice. So we work on the immediacy of the situation with limits, with consequences and with clear understanding of why the limits and consequences are there, as best we can through words, gestures or pictures. At the same time as we work on limits with soothing, regulating interactions (not desperate interactions), we exchange lots of emotional signals with the child.

That is our approach to helping children regulate their mood, their impulses and their aggression. There are many ways to implement this approach, but there's no substitute. We need parents involved, we need siblings involved, we need educators involved, and we need therapists involved: everyone who is working with the child. This approach works for children with special needs, with circumscribed learning problems, and with just behavioral problems who have no learning, language or communication problems, and for children without challenges just to help them become better regulated and more empathetic. So the same approach works for all children. We have to help develop the child's ability to read and respond to emotional signals by involving the child in a continuous flow of back-and-forth interaction. The key ingredient here is the person who interacts with the child, who shows up and who is available for long interactive sequences. Whatever else you are doing, it means lots and lots of Floortime.