



Making Sense of Nervous System Science

Phase 1, Week 5: Please *complete* this workbook before this week's group call

The nervous system is a communication system throughout the body. Neuroception is the process of neural circuits distinguishing whether situations or people are safe, dangerous, or life threatening. Our bodies and brains are consistently, unconsciously, receiving 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 bodies and brains 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—especially the cues of our internal physiology, then we cannot access consciousness, and conscious choice when we are “triggered.” We become “victims” of our reactivity. That does NOT feel good! To be “triggered” means that our nervous systems are perceiving a signal of threat in our environment, telling our body and brain to prepare to fight or flee. It means that our bodies and brains are working together to figure out how to get us to physical and/or emotional safety as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, if we come from a childhood history of chronic stress and unconscious fear, those environments imprint onto our supremely vulnerable nervous systems. Meaning, we are so accustomed 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 an uncalibrated 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 and under parenting paradigms 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 children are experiencing danger within their own systems, we cannot support them 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 shut down and 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 bodies to support ourselves and lower our stress levels, allowing us to find the inner calm needed to parent peacefully, with empowerment.



Nervous System Science in Your Parenting

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

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

- III. *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?”*

- IV. *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.)*

- V. *When you become irritated or stressed, how effectively do you bring your stress levels down?*



Polyvagal Theory and Transformational 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. The Green Pathway: Social Engagement, also known as the Ventral Vagal State

Presence and connection, love, safety, groundedness, 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. The Red Pathway: 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. The Blue Pathway: Immobilization, also known as the Dorsal Vagal State

A parasympathetic response; 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.

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 red or blue pathways are not “bad” or “wrong” – these are normal expressions of our human experience.



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

IMPORTANT NOTE: This graphic is provided to ignite your curiosity about the dynamics of the different vagal states. This chart is not included in the client workbook of the *Transformational Parenting™ Coach Method* (formerly known as the *Ultimate Parent Success Course*). You may use your coaching discretion in how you utilize this information in your practice. The colors of this chart do not correspond to the colors we are using in the descriptions.

The Social Nervous System: The Green Pathway

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. We have access to our prefrontal cortex (we will go deeper into neuroscience in Week 6). Until that stage of brain development, children will struggle with what parents often expect them to do with ease.

Scan the list below, and really breathe this in. These items are common pain points for parents. The traditional method of responding to our child’s struggle in these skills is to punish them, direct anger and disappointment toward them, or bribe them into being “good” and doing “good.” We now see that this is not only unhelpful and misattuned, it is *inhumane*. Would we punish a baby for not being able to walk? Would we punish a toddler for not being able to drive a car?

The prefrontal cortex **begins** to **slowly** develop around three and half, and it grows best in environments where children feel safe, empathized with, and nurtured emotionally and psychologically. Parents and children alike access the following skills only when they are in the green pathway:

- Motivation to begin and follow through on daily tasks (hygiene, work, environmental, school, or social)
- Ability to focus on one thing at a time
- Ability to take in information, think critically, and make an informed decision
- Ability to shift attention from one task to the next without extreme stress
- Ability to listen to another’s request while you are focusing on your desired task
- Ability to stop focusing on your task and succeed in another’s request of you
- The ability to access choice in your words and deeds
- The ability to ‘control’ your impulses, pause, and think before speaking or acting

The green pathway is grown and strengthened through consistent, reliable, and dependable relationships (secure attachment). This expression of our humanity is protected by relational safety. This is why the relationship comes first within the parent-child dynamic. 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 freeze, shutdown).



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

VII. *How does your body feel when you are engaged in this nervous system state? What does inner safety and calm feel like in your body?*

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

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



Mobilization: The Red Pathway

This experience on the polyvagal ladder is the “fight and flight” expression of the vagus nerve. This is our “mobilize and go!” instinct, resulting from a stress response in the sympathetic nervous system. 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 (consistent co-regulation with a 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 mobilization into social engagement: When our children are overstimulated and highly aroused, we recognize they are operating in a sympathetic nervous system state.

What they need: Support finding their calm.

How we help:

- ACKNOWLEDGE AND ACCEPT where they are. Release judgments and labels. Release timing, resistance, or norm-based expectations (shoulds).
- Be aware of your own nervous system state. Ask yourself: “Do I have the 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. *Dip your toe in, but don’t drown.*
- You can enter 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. *NOTE: Sometimes, the child is too deep into the red pathway for this strategy to be supportive. If a playful approach does not “work”, soften your approach to a soft, gentle, quiet response.
- 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.

- X. *Do you notice when your child is 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, thrashing)*

- XI. *Do you notice when your child is in a sympathetic state WITH access to social engagement? What do you notice? (Ex: silly, playful, lots of energy into their project)*

This is the ventral vagal with a splash of mobilization. See chart on page 12.

- XII. *Do you notice when you are in the sympathetic nervous system, WITHOUT safety? If so, how does your body feel? (Ex: tight, tense, hot).*

- XIII. *When you are in fight or flight WITH safety, what kinds of behaviors do you display? (Example: silly, excited, energized for adventure).*

This is a blend of the ventral vagal state AND mobilization. See chart on page 12.

- XIV. *What kinds of calming tools do you think your child would respond to?*
See pages 20-22 for ideas.

Immobilization: The Blue Pathway

This experience on the polyvagal ladder is the shutdown or freeze response, resulting from a stress response in the parasympathetic nervous system. This is our most primal response in the face of actual threat or perceived threat. This is the dorsal vagal 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, judgment), 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 the 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.

A variation of the dorsal vagal response is the “fawn” response. This is a conditioned response when the nervous system is in shutdown and the person exhibits “prosocial” behaviors, effectively abandoning their own needs to meet the needs of others. This concept will be visited again in Week 9.

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 immobilization into social engagement: When our children are under stimulated and apathetic we recognize they are operating from the dorsal vagal state.

What they need: Support finding their connection to self and life. They will need to pass through mobilization in order to arrive at social engagement: be aware that anger, aggression, or big tears may result 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 the 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 in, but don't drown.***
- Offer gentle touch, if they are accepting.
- Meet them in their sluggishness or spaciness without any judgment. 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).

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

XVI. *When you are in a parasympathetic state WITH safety (think rest and digest), what kinds of behaviors do you display? (Example: resting, stillness, sustained focus)*

This is a blend of the ventral vagal state AND dorsal vagal state. See chart on page 12.

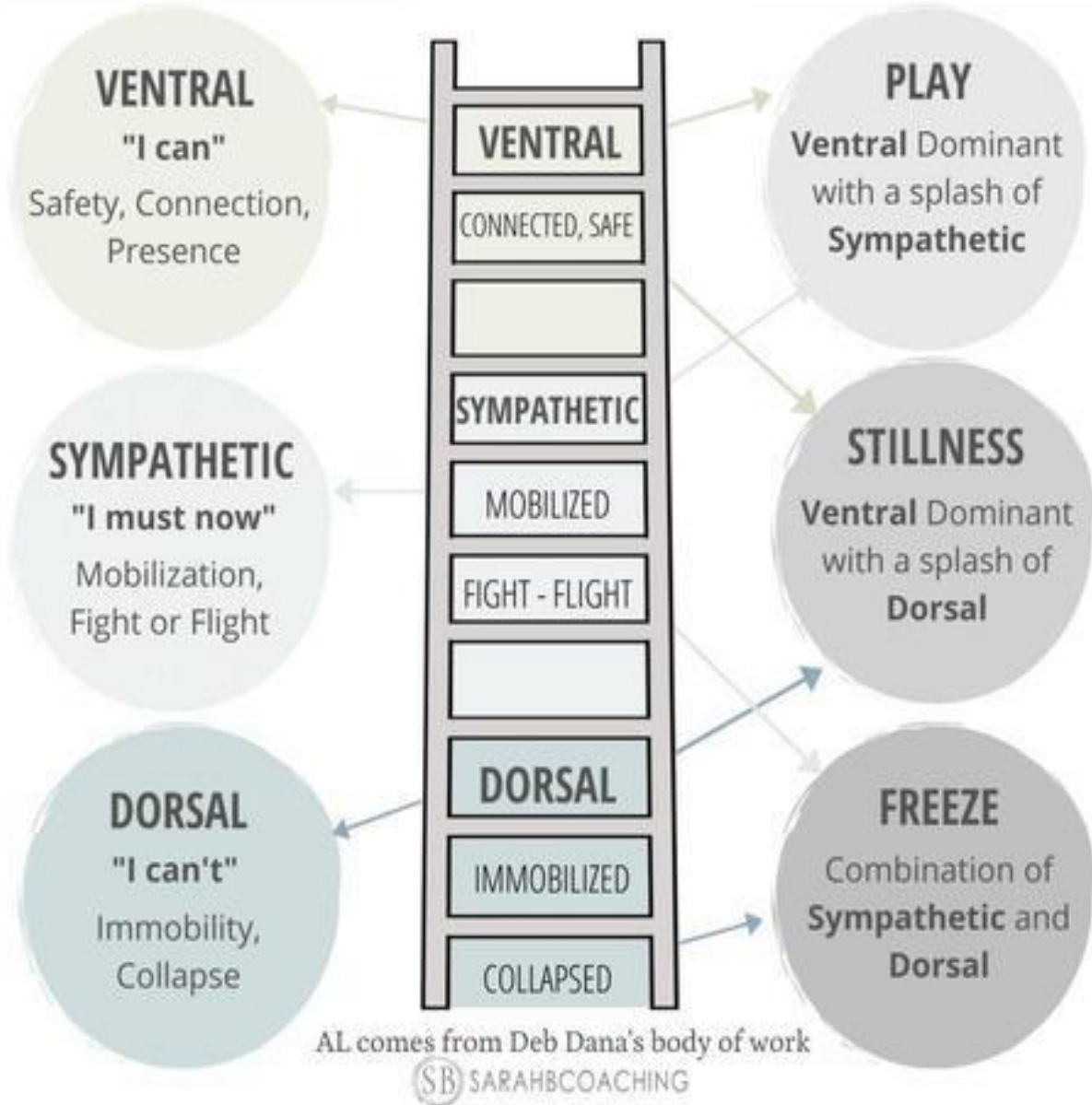
XVII. *What kinds of calming sensory tools would your child respond to when they are in this state?*
See pages 20-22 for ideas.



THE AUTONOMIC LADDER

THE THREE CIRCUITS:

BLENDED STATES:



The Vagus Nerve and Transformational Parenting

The vagus nerve is a large nerve that communicates throughout the abdomen, lungs, heart, and 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*.

You might think, “*What is more stressful than parenting?!*”

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

You might think, “*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 reacting. 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 to move 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.
- Simulating a dive reflex: splashing cold water on your face, taking a cold shower, holding a Ziplock bag filled with ice cubes against your face and holding your breath, or submerging 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.
- Spending time in nature.
- Thinking positive thoughts about other people.
- Engaging in positive social relationships.
- Laughing out loud! A full belly laugh stimulates the vagus nerve and is contagious.
- Engaging in prayer.
- Mild exercise stimulates digestive 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 strengthens the vagus nerve by activating the muscles in the back of the throat while exhaling slowly.
- Cultivating healthy intestinal bacteria; using probiotics.

XVIII. *Which suggestion from above resonates most with you?*

XIX. *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, prevent our children from experiencing harm.
- Minimize the harm our child is exposed to.
- Advocate for our children in the face of threats to their human right to 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 judgment at all, if you are struggling here)*

- Limited ability 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 ourselves.
- Difficulty co-regulating with our child due to our limited ability to self-regulate.
- Parenting from fear or anxiety.
- Rescuing our children from their feelings.
- 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

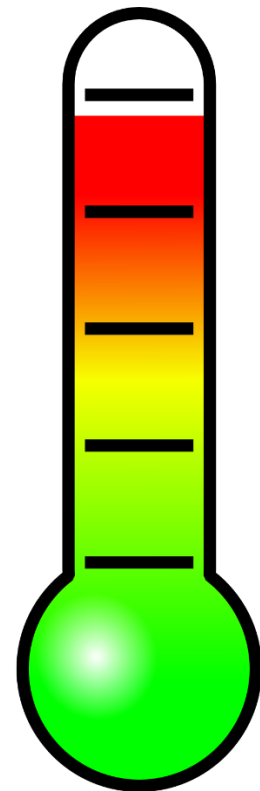
Jaw is clenching. Noise is suddenly overwhelming. Anger is rising.

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

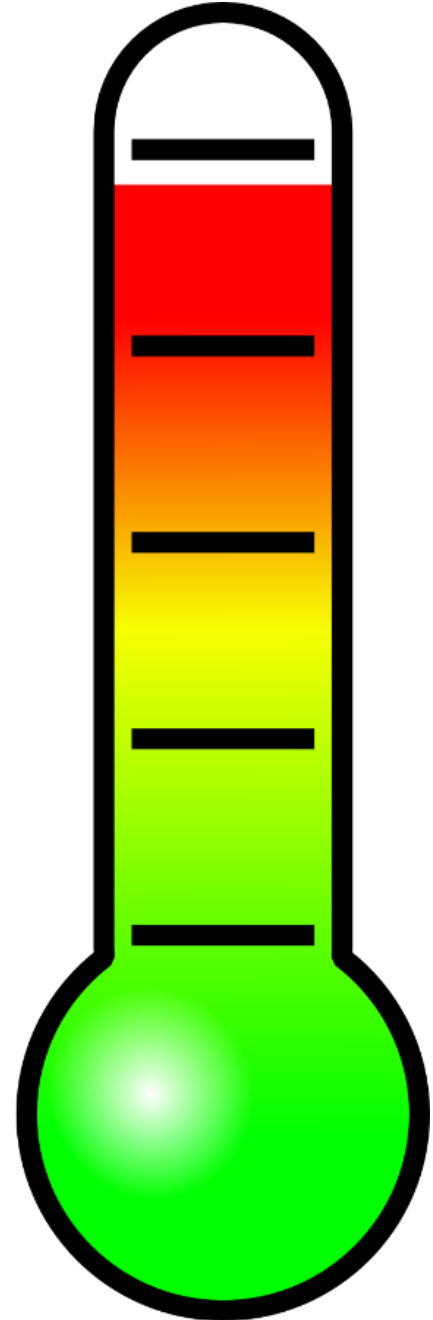
Level Five = White

Level Four = Red

Level Three = Orange

Level Two = Yellow

Level One = Deep Green



Create a Thermometer for Your Child

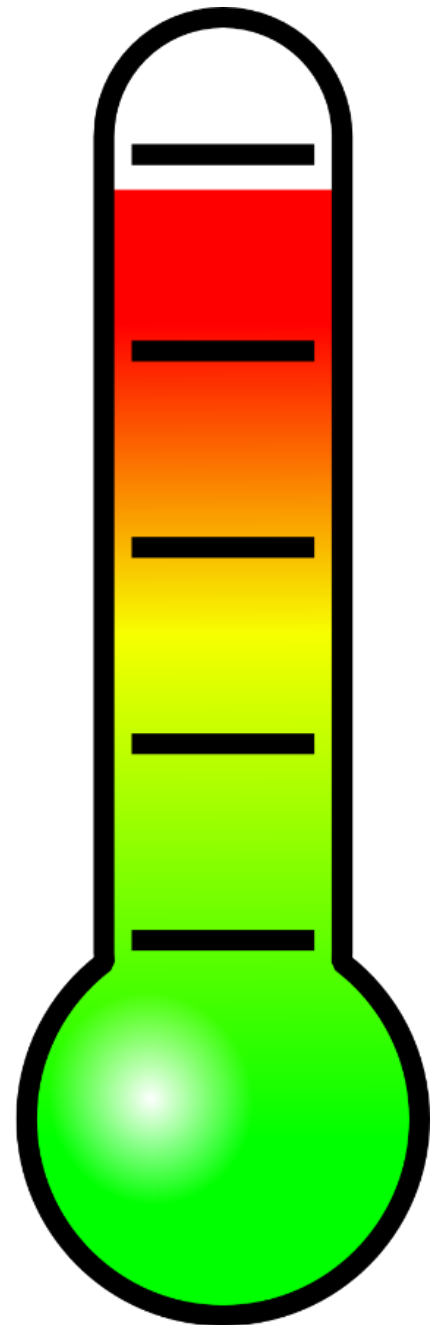
Level Five = White

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 previously 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 of 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 while we experience uncomfortable emotions. Feeling creates cellular safety, inch by inch.***

When we learn how to be secure 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 grounded and present. That does not mean we simply allow our child to attack us while they are overwhelmed. 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 signals, and we can ground them back into calmness. 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.



Sensory Needs & Calming Tools

We want to discover what sensory input supports you best to find and maintain a sense of inner well being. This is not only when stressed, but also preventatively.

What sensory needs do you have? What overstimulates you? Which tools help you move out of the red or blue pathway and back into green? And, which tools best support your child preventatively? Sensory needs are vital, especially for children ages 0-7.

Understanding and supporting a child's unique nervous system needs is a daily process of discovery between the adult and child.

Vision

- I need bright light in the room when under stress: sunlight or bright lights help me.
- I can only tolerate soft, yellow light. Under stress I need the room darkened, or I need to come in from outside to a darker room.
- I feel soothed by a completely dark space. Under stress please take me to a totally black room.
- I like to be in control of the light. When stressed I like having a flashlight, a nightlight, or sensory light system to find calm.
- It's hard for me to focus my vision when I am in a crowded space. I get visually overstimulated and prefer minimalist environments, or smaller crowds.
- I really do not like the sunshine! Keep sunglasses or a hat on me or I may melt down!

Movement

- I have a strong need for vestibular movement. Rock me, push me on my swing. I need to jump on a trampoline, bounce around, and move up and down in order to feel balanced.
- Under stress my body MUST MOVE. I need a physical outlet for the energy to move until I find calm.
- I love to dance around and feel my body in motion. Sometimes I like spinning until I'm dizzy!
- Invite me into my sensory swing and push me back and forth for hours!

- I need to constantly be using my hands. If I don't have a project to build, bang, or manipulate with my hands, I feel like I could combust! Keep my hands moving & engaged, or I might hit!
- When stressed, I hit, kick, or scratch. My body is seeking physical impact in order to regulate this sensory need. Make sure I'm getting plenty of vestibular and proprioceptive touch throughout my day, please!

Taste

- I feel supported and calm when I can chew, suck, or bite on something...even when I'm not hungry or thirsty. Under stress, I seek something to move in my mouth and experience orally.
- I always like to chew on gum or crunch ice. When stressed, crunching or munching helps me. My jaw needs proprioceptive input!
- Texture with foods is very important to me. I really do not like certain textures. Please, do not force me to eat certain foods that trigger me. It's okay to provide opportunities to try it, but do not force me. I need to feel safe to gain more tolerance for certain textures that just feel yucky in my mouth. I crave certain flavors and feel soothed by certain textures.
- Brushing my teeth may be very, very difficult for me. I don't like how it feels, or how it tastes. Please be gentle with me.

Sound

- I really do not like loud noises! Please, stop talking so loudly, and so fast!
- I love having soft, nature soundscapes in the background. This ambiance soothes my system.
- Under stress, going into my room and playing my favorite music helps me so much.
- I could listen to the same song over and over and over and over. It just makes me feel so calm.
- I am constantly singing, humming, or making funny sounds with my mouth. My body just needs to be expressing noise! You may not like it, or get it, but it helps me feel safe. Please try and understand my noises before calling me annoying or rude.
- Please whisper to me when I'm stressed. I am very sensitive to tone.
- Please remember my noise canceling headphones! My brain has trouble processing all of the different sounds in a crowded space.

Touch

- I need high or low impact, proprioceptive touch. Hug me, massage me, throw pillows at me, wrestle me (but not too roughly!)
- Please, don't touch me. I really don't like how that feels! Please request consent before giving me affection.
- I need to be holding or handling a texture that feels good in my hands.
- I feel better with firm pressure on my body. I feel calm laying under a weighted blanket.
- I really cannot tolerate some textures on my skin! Please do not make me wear things that cause me distress and physical pain, even if you don't understand. If I must wear something for my health and safety, can you try and find accommodations or options that feel better for me?
- I need to lay on the earth or walk barefoot.
- I feel good when I push into the wall and feel the resistance.
- I like to pull on my fingers or crack my knuckles.

XX. *Which sensory needs resonate with you? Which tools do you find work well for your system when under stress? Which ones resonate with your child? Be curious!*

ANCHOR, A Guide Through Self-Regulation

This framework is intended to be your guide through a stress response or distressing moment.

With practice, this will help you find safety and presence in your body, so you can show up and offer relational, emotional, and physical safety for your child. Safety and calm are *always accessible* somewhere within you. We are practicing our ability to find our way back to safety and calm whenever we need to. Your child benefits from witnessing your process of “finding inner safety.” It’s okay for them to see you struggle, and witness you traveling through stress and overwhelm, back into self-control and choice.

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. You can remember it literally, or visualize yourself dropping a physical ANCHOR in moments of high stress or conflict.

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

- **Awareness of body**
- **Name what is happening in your body**
- **Connect to your sensory calming tool**
- **Honor the process**
- **Open to connection**
- **Recommit to your child & present moment**

HARBOR, A Guide Through Co-Regulation

Our children (especially ages 0-7) 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 we attempt to re-engage with our social nervous system, then we co-regulate with our children. Please post this guidance around your home and practice as many times each day as needed.

This is the framework to use when your child is at the top of **their** thermometer, most likely nonverbal and unable to hear your words, communicate, or make sense of their experience through language.

- **H**old space
- **A**cept what is; let go of fear
- **R**emember sensory calming tools, focus on modeling
- **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 (unable to self-regulate) to co-regulate with our child. In these situations we are working together to equate *rupture* with *safety*: even mistakes are safe and we can recover from them. From this sense of safety we 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 to your child “land” 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. There are benefits to both processes.

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: *Tonight 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 our modeling of self-accountability is the goal.

Example:

"Hi sweetie, is it okay if I come into 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:

Summary

Takeaways:

- **The polyvagal theory** explains three states of our autonomic nervous system:
 - Ventral vagal (green pathway): inner safety, social engagement, love, connection
 - Mobilization (red pathway): fight or flight, physical reactions, triggered state
 - Immobilization (blue pathway): dorsal vagal, shut down, freeze, tuned out
- **Strengthening the vagus nerve** expands our capacity for inner safety and calm
- **Safety is the first “S”** in building a secure attachment (*The Power of Showing Up*)
- **Utilizing sensory calming tools** and understanding the sensory needs for ourselves (and our children) before stress builds up helps us maintain our inner safety.
- **ANCHOR and HARBOR** guide us through nervous system regulation.
- **We acknowledge that ruptures will happen**; healing occurs with forgiveness, apology, and meaningful repair.

Invitation to Practice:

- **Review** the structure and flow of the “polyvagal” ladder.
 - How can you recognize when you or your child is in any of the three states?
 - Explore techniques to strengthen your vagus nerve, and commit to making it a daily practice.
- **Explore various sensory calming tools.** Make note of your (and your child’s) response to different options.
- **Observe your and your child’s sensory system.** What over or under stimulates?
- **Notice** when you feel yourself “rise on the thermometer” and reflect on any patterns.
 - Celebrate each instance when you feel yourself rising and you ANCHOR
 - If you find it difficult to notice when you are rising, or if you find resistance or limitation in utilizing your ANCHOR, bring this to your coach to get deeper support.
- **Notice** when you see your child “rise on the thermometer” and reflect on any patterns.
 - Celebrate each instance when you ANCHOR and HARBOR back to safety.
- **Reflect** on a recent rupture and draft an apology to yourself and a repair with your child.

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