



Learning to Grow

MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

Healthy Relationships, Healthy Brains, Healthy Behaviors

We don't always know the right way to respond to a child's challenging behavior. One thing you can do is just "show-up." According to Siegel and Payne Bryson in *The Power of Showing Up*, showing up means not only being physically present but also mentally and emotionally present for the child in the moment. Your predictable care promotes a healthy relationship with your child by helping her feel safe, seen, soothed and secure. When you are mindful of your own emotional state, you can better respond sensitively to what the child's behavior is telling you, and thereby, support the child's healthy brain development and positive behaviors.

By understanding how the brain works, you will have a better understanding of your child and will be able to respond versus react to difficult situations. We want children to use their whole-brain in a coordinated or integrated manner, i.e., the different parts work together. Due to neuroplasticity (our brain's potential to build new connections or networks based on experiences), you can directly shape your child's developing brain by how you show up, respond, and provide experiences.

A secure and trusting relationship between a child and a caregiver lays the foundation for self-regulation, the conscious control of thoughts, behaviors and emotions. Providing positive guidance means guiding children to make better choices by helping them develop self-regulation and learn prosocial behaviors rather than focusing on a behavioral outcome. Research has shown children with strong self-regulation have



better relationships with others, adjust well to school, and have higher levels of motivation and engagement in learning.

This newsletter will discuss brain and self-regulation development at each age level – infant, toddler and preschooler, to help you focus on the whole-child rather than the child's behavior to build healthy relationships, brains and behaviors. It will also provide activity ideas for each age group.

This newsletter includes:

- ♥ **Age-specific information and suggestions** about activities to do with your infant, toddler, or preschooler,
- ♥ **Featured activities** for each age group,
- ♥ **How This Helps:** a summary of your child's development by doing these activities together,
- ♥ **Resources:** for more information about this topic, and
- ♥ **Suggested Books:** a list of books to read with your child.

Infants

We have a hierarchical brain. The lower area of the brain allows you to act instinctually for survival and to feel strong emotions. The lower-brain responses are unconscious. The upper area of the brain controls higher-order thinking, imagining and planning. The upper-brain responses are conscious and although it does not fully mature until our mid-twenties, a child's early experiences lay a critical foundation for its development.

Infants are lower brain dominant reacting to their sensory experiences and instinctual needs for survival. Their temperament or personal style plays a main role in how they respond to new experiences and how easily they will calm down. Infants are dependent on a responsive caregiver who is attuned to their needs and provides support to help them regulate. Research shows that movement is a powerful way to connect and balance the upper and lower brain for self-regulation.

You can support your infant's developing brain and ability to self-regulate by:



- ♡ Knowing how she responds to different sensory experiences and identifying her preferences and sensitivities.
- ♡ Understanding how she approaches new experiences and people, and discovering if she is flexible and adaptable, thoughtful and cautious, or feisty and intense.

Activity for Infants: *Connect and Calm Together*

What You Need:

None

What to Do:

1. When your infant is crying and you know she is not hungry and has a clean diaper, calm yourself by taking three deep belly breaths.
2. Hold your infant and use her movement preferences (rocking, bouncing or simply going on a walk with you) to calm her.
3. Use a nurturing tone of voice and empathetic expression to show your understanding.
4. Then reassure your infant and engage her upper-brain by saying, "You're safe. I'm here."



(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps her development and school readiness.)

Toddlers

Toddlers continue to be lower brain dominant as they live in the moment; however, new connections in their brains are rapidly increasing with the responsive care they receive. When a toddler is upset and the big emotions of the lower-brain are out of control, the conscious upper-brain won't work until you respond to the lower brain's emotional needs. When toddlers begin asking "Why?" the upper-brain development is kicking in.

Toddlers are developing their ability to self-regulate by using cues from caregivers to decide how to respond and to understand what they are experiencing. Research shows that assigning a name or label to what we feel calms down the activity of the emotional circuitry of the lower-brain.



You can support your toddler's developing brain and ability to self-regulate by:

- ♥ Connecting first emotionally with her, and acknowledging her feelings.
- ♥ Helping her feel more in control by using her upper-brain to make sense of what she is experiencing and how to express her feelings.

Activity for Toddlers: *Name It to Tame It with a DIY Emotions Flip Book*

What You Need:

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| Colored construction paper | Glue |
| Marker pens | An old CD or small plate |
| Scissors | |

What to Do:

1. Talk about various emotions and what your face looks like when you're feeling these emotions. Choose which of these emotions you'd like to include in the emotion book.
2. Select corresponding colors, e.g. yellow construction paper for a happy face.
3. Draw circles by tracing a CD or small plate on each colored construction paper and then cut the circles out.
4. Fold each circle in half horizontally, open it and draw an emotion face with the markers. The eyes should be above the folded crease; mouth below the crease. For example, for a happy face, draw two eyes and a big smile for the mouth.
5. Once all emotion faces are finished, fold them back in half and glue the faces together so that the back of the bottom half of the first face is glued to the back of the top half of the next face. Repeat until all faces are glued together.
6. Use the *Emotions Flip Book* to help your toddler identify her feelings so she can "Name It and Tame It" as recognizing feelings is the first step to learning how to control and regulate emotions.

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Preschoolers

The brain does not only grow in size and weight, it grows in connectivity (the connections made within the brain between nerve cells or neurons). When the brain matures in functionality, it does from the bottom up, and from the back to the front. Brain research has shown an estimated one million new neural connections per second are being made during the first few years of life. This process peaks around six years old. The experiences that preschoolers have stimulates the neurons to communicate and connect with each other. Caregivers can directly shape the preschooler's developing brain according to the experiences they offer.

Preschoolers' ability to self-regulate parallels the rapid growth of their brain development. They start to develop an understanding that others have thoughts and feelings different from them. To self-regulate, they learn to calm themselves using sensory-motor strategies, e.g., fidgeting with an object or bouncing up and down on their



toes. They also begin to use private speech, for example you might hear your child say to herself, "Wait my turn; don't grab the toy from my friend."

You can support your preschooler's developing brain and ability to self-regulate by:

- ♥ Offering a safe place where she can express her feelings and activities that help her calm and gain an understanding of her experiences.
- ♥ Providing opportunity to make decisions for herself and problem-solve

Activity for Preschoolers: *A Jar Full of Feelings*

What You Need:

Clear plastic jar

Pom-poms of different colors

What to Do:

1. Have your preschooler choose a pom-pom color for different emotions, e.g., yellow=happy, blue=sad, purple=nervous, etc.
2. When talking with your preschooler on how she is feeling, have her fill the jar with the corresponding colored pom-poms to show how she is feeling. For example, she may pick 10 blue pom-poms and 2 yellow pom-poms because she's feeling very sad, but also a little happy.
3. Talk about and/or problem-solve what she could do to remove or add pom-poms to her feeling jar, associating it with how she's feeling. For example, "I'm sorry you're feeling sad today, but I see you're also a little happy. What can we do to make you feel happier?"
4. Dump the pom-poms out and have the jar ready for next time.

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How This Helps

The activities suggested in this newsletter help promote many different aspects of development:

Physical Development

- ♥ Learn to use her body with intention
- ♥ Learn through her senses

Social and Emotional Development

- ♥ Develop her self-regulation skills
- ♥ Develop a close bond with you

Language and Literacy Development

- ♥ Build verbal skills, vocabulary, and the use of descriptive language
- ♥ Connect words with what she experiences

Cognitive Development

- ♥ Develop her thinking and problem-solving skills
- ♥ Increase her observation, listening and understanding skills



Kids in the Kitchen

Cooking teaches valuable lessons such as math (quantities, measurement), science (how matter changes), fine motor (stirring, pouring), and literacy (print awareness). As you make this recipe with your child, talk about kitchen safety. Show her how to handle items safely and allow her to do as much as she is capable of. Praise her efforts, and ask questions throughout the process to encourage her thinking skills. Most of all, have fun!

Berry Brainy Blizzard

Ingredients:

- 1 cup frozen blueberries
- 1 avocado
- 1 cup pomegranate juice
- 20 plain roasted or raw almonds OR 1-2 T of almond butter
- 2 T wheat germ

Directions:

1. Slice the avocado in half lengthwise, remove the pit. Then, let your child use a metal spoon to scoop out the avocado into the blender.
2. Help your child measure a cup of the blueberries and add them to the blender.
3. Help your child measure and pour a cup of pomegranate juice and add it into the blender.
4. Together with your child, count and add 20 almonds to the blender OR scoop and add almond butter.
5. Scoop and add wheat germ.
6. Securely cover the blender and blend ingredients until smooth. Have your child notice how the ingredients change as they mix in the blender.
7. Enjoy this brain boosting smoothie together!



Resources

***Zero to Five: Essential Parenting Tips Based on Science* by Tracy Cutchlow**

This book offers practical information on brain development, parenting styles and positive discipline.

***The Whole-Brain Child* by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D**

The author shares piggyback songs she's written to the tune of childhood favorites.

***The Power of Showing Up* by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.**

The authors explain the importance offering a quality of presence for cultivating your child's healthy development.



Suggested Books

Discover these books and more at the **Hawai'i State Public Library** www.librarieshawaii.org.

Infants and Toddlers

***Baby Faces* by Margret Miller**

This book uses photographs to share various facial expressions of feelings e.g. yucky or oh-oh.

***Calm with the Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle**

When the very hungry caterpillar gets anxious, he takes a moment to breathe.

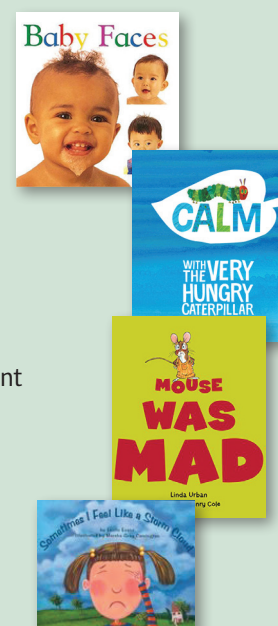
Preschoolers

***Mouse was Mad* by Linda Urban**

This book shares how a mouse struggles to express his anger. His animal friends model different ways, only for the mouse to discover his own way be best.

***Sometimes I Feel like a Storm Cloud* by Lezlie Evans**

A child describes her experiences of a variety of emotions.



Learning to Grow is a project of the University of Hawai'i, Windward Community College, with funding from the Hawai'i Department of Human Services. Visit our website at www.learningtogrowhawaii.org or visit us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/learningtogrowhawaii