

POLYVAGAL-INFORMED PARENTING

Rethinking Discipline

(Audio Transcript)

Welcome back to our Polyvagal Informed Parenting Challenge. Today, let's explore how looking at our children's behavior through the lens of safety transforms our approach to discipline.

Spoiler alert: the latest findings in neurobiology show us that much of what we thought we knew about discipline as a society was just wrong.

Polyvagal theory was developed by Stephen Porges, who made some groundbreaking discoveries about how our nervous systems work. But what do polyvagal theory and the nervous system have to do with discipline?

Well, consider this common scenario. Your child has just done something reprehensible. He's hit his little brother in a scuffle over a toy. Poor little brother is howling. But does your child apologize? No. He clutches the toy and scuttles off to the other side of the room to play behind the couch. Worse yet, he shows no remorse. His expression is vacant.

Naturally, you're mad. You call him: "Come back here right now and say you're sorry, or else!" But he looks at you blankly. He's not listening to you. He doesn't really seem to hear you. He looks away like he doesn't even care that his brother is crying!

Yet, you know your son loves his little brother. Moments ago, they were laughing together. What has happened to transform your child into this cold-hearted, mean person who doesn't even care that he hurt his little brother? He needs to learn a lesson right now!

But that's only true if we believe the common misconception that a child's blank expression signifies lack of remorse. It's only true if we think he's not listening to us out of defiance. It's only true if we think he's playing behind the couch to dodge responsibility for this hurtful thing he's done.

Polyvagal theory suggests that we look at our child's challenging behaviors through the lens of safety. Let's consider this. Does this child feel safe right now?

Of course not. First of all, he had to fight for a toy that mattered to him. Fighting always mobilizes the nervous system. He only fought for the toy because it felt like a threat to lose the toy. Then, he realized that the price of getting the toy was hurting his brother -- who he loves! His brother is crying. Then, his parent, upon whom he depends for... well, for everything -- yelled at him and threatened him.

Recent neurobiological research has shown that when humans feel threatened, the facial expression flattens. It has also demonstrated that when the nervous system is mobilized to protect, hearing changes so that we have difficulty extracting the human voice from background noises.

So all of the behaviors this child is exhibiting are actually indicators of fear or a shutdown response! Clearly, this child feels under threat. It's no wonder he's hiding behind the couch.

Conventional discipline says, "We need to teach this child a lesson, so he knows not to hit."

Some parents might strike him to show him what it feels like to be hit. We know the research says that never works. It teaches children to hit.

Many parents would yell at him. Whether they want to or not, they're so upset they would just yell.

Some parents might drag him off to the naughty step and tell him to think about what he's done. At that point, he's so on the defensive. Do you think he's thinking about how he can be a better big brother, or do you think he's taking refuge and going blank and disassociating, or is he mobilizing now into fight mode where his little brother now looks like the enemy and he wants to teach his little brother a lesson for getting him into this pickle?

Let's think about this whole idea of teaching lessons. What is the lesson we want this child to learn? Obviously, we want him to not hit again. We want to teach him the skills to work out solutions when he has a conflict with someone. We want him to take responsibility when he's hurt another person or property. Of course, we want him to make a repair when he hurts someone/when he hurts a relationship. Do these sound like things that humans can do when they feel under threat?

We all know the answer to that. It's no. We can't learn when we feel threatened. The learning systems are shut down. When our nervous system is mobilized to protect, we can't listen to another person and hear their side of things. We can't express what we want and need without going on the attack. We can't be emotionally generous enough to make a repair.

What's more, when children feel disconnected from us, they need to reconnect in order to feel safe. And they need to feel safe before they can make a repair. What our children need from us when they feel stressed, overwhelmed, or unsafe is connection and safety.

Discipline, as we usually think of it, means, to most people, punishment or some consequence that teaches a lesson. But that kind of discipline doesn't create safety. It doesn't reconnect with

the child. That kind of discipline that makes the child feel wrong/that pushes the child away... That will never work to teach our children the lessons we want them to learn.

Are you worried at this point that this child won't learn the lesson about not hitting? Of course, we want this child not to hit. Believe me, the child already knows not to hit. If they don't, then teaching is in order, not a consequence for something they didn't know was wrong.

But of course, this child knew not to hit his brother, who he loves. He was overcome by the threat of losing his toy, and his immature prefrontal cortex gave in to his fear. He feels terrible about himself right now. He will learn so much from the repair with his brother that he will never want to hit again.

But he can't make that repair without the support of his parents, the reconnection with his parents to help his nervous system shift from that state of threat and fear into a state of safety and social engagement. That's necessary for him to express emotional generosity toward his brother.

What this child needs is safety and support. Once he's recovered, absolutely, we have the expectation that he will make a repair with his brother. We always, as parents, hold that expectation, and support our child to do that, empower them to do that, because they get so much out of it. But it's not a punitive exchange. Once they're shifted into a state of positive social engagement, they want to make things better with the other person.

So much of children's misbehavior stems from a sense of distress or a feeling that they aren't safe. Yet, traditional approaches to discipline focus on punitive measures aimed at controlling behavior through fear or coercion. Even consequences are threats that don't teach our children the lessons we want them to learn.

When we consider our child through the lens of safety, we realize that conventional discipline can actually trigger children's defensive responses, leading to increased stress, resistance, and worse behavior. When they feel cut off from you, why should they rise to your expectations? In fact, if it seems your expectations are negative, they will live down to your expectations.

Notice that reframing our understanding of our child's behavior through the lens of safety suggested by polyvagal theory changes everything. Instead of punitive measures, we offer comfort and guidance. We address the root causes of our child's distress. We become better at calming our child so they can feel safe, so they can recover, so they can cooperate, so they can learn the lessons that matter about repair.

Wouldn't it be great if we had all learned those lessons in our childhoods? This shift -- from control and threat to empathy and support -- strengthens and sweetens our relationships with our children, activating the social engagement system and promoting more emotional regulation. That's how we override the desire to hit. Our prefrontal cortex becomes more able to emotionally

regulate. When children feel safe, not only are they better at emotionally regulating. They're more receptive to our guidance. They're less likely to act defensively. They're more likely to cooperate with us, with their brother and with everyone else.

Here's your challenge. The next time your child acts out, remember that you now know how to apply the insights of polyvagal theory to parenting. You can forget about discipline, and opt instead for loving guidance, which is so much more effective. **Your challenge is:** How can you create safety so that your child can calm down and shift states out of the nervous system state of threat, into the state of connection and social engagement? Your child then can learn from this tough moment. That's your challenge.

Thank you. I'll see you in the next video, where we're going to talk about co-regulation, calming yourself, and other strategies that you can use on a daily basis in your home to help your child grow a nervous system that is calm and resilient.