

Parenting the Traumatized Child



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Good morning. Thank you for being here with me so early!

A little bit about me.

I am a psychotherapist by training and I run a counselling and developmental service agency in southern Ontario.

I live with NS (SOS1), I have three adult children, two of them, Meghan and Kirsten, have NS and are here with me today. I share this by way of saying that this presentation doesn't only stem from my professional training in working with families who have experienced trauma, it also comes from lived experience.

The goal of this morning's presentation is to get us thinking about the link between the traumas we have experienced living with NS, big behaviours and the role parent-child attachment play in helping a child manage trauma and emotion regulation. We will learn how Connection is Key to helping us manage trauma and stress, our child's and our own! Indeed, I believe it is the foundation to healthy, resilient and kind children, and life long relationships. Quite simply put... it makes life good!

What is Trauma?

A deeply distressing or disturbing experience

The Webster Dictionary defines Trauma as a “deeply distressing or disturbing experience”

Take a minute to think about trauma that a family living with NS might experience:

Think of traumas your child has experienced

Traumas their sibling has experienced

Traumas you have experienced

Traumas associated with NS affecting children, parents

- Repeated Hospitalizations
- Living with Pain
- Repeated Separations from each other due to Hospitalization, NICU stays
- Invasive, unfamiliar procedures
- Life threatening conditions
- Life threatening surgeries
- Loss of “normal”
- Discrimination, stigma due to disability other differences
- Loss of a child

What are the effects of stress and trauma?



It all starts with the Brain

The Prime Directive:
Stay Alive



Let's think for a minute about the role the brain.

It is the most amazing organ in our body.

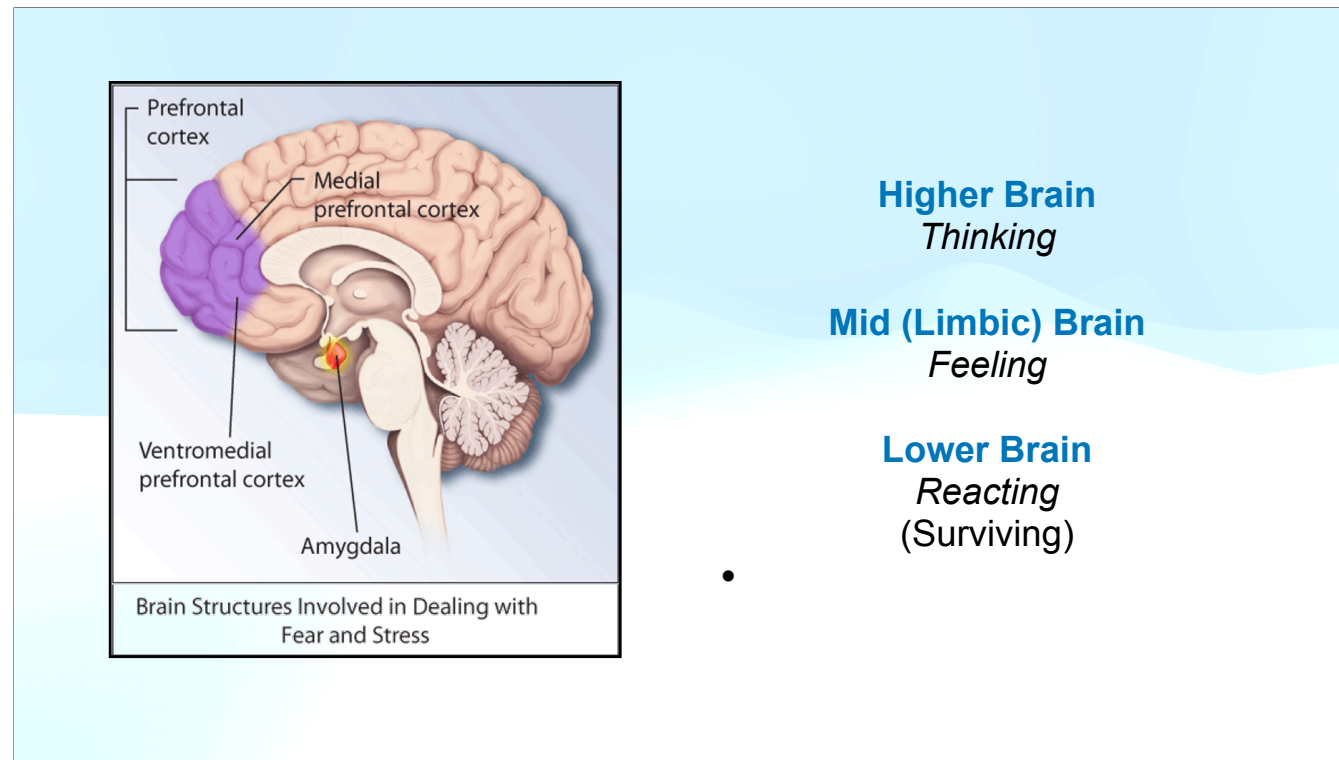
It acts as the “control center” for all of our activities, controlling everything from heart rate to complex thought. It manages all physiological, social, emotional and cognitive functioning including our reactions to trauma and stress. It does all of this with essentially one primary goal: SURVIVAL.

In fact, The Prime Directive of our brain is to stay alive.

Your body is hard-wired to react to stress in ways meant to protect you against threats from predators and other aggressors.

Understanding the way the brain works when under stress or threat is critical to understanding our interactions with our children--spouses, our own parents....ANYONE. It is absolutely critical in managing trauma's effects on you and your family.

I often say that if people walk away with nothing else, this is an important thing to understand....that our brains are actually wired to create our responses to distress...it is not because someone is “behaving badly”, rather it is that their brain is “behaving normally”, under the circumstances!



Let's take brief, very simplified look at the brain.....

In order to understand big emotions and why we behave the way we do when we are upset, it helps to look at the brain in 3 main sections

The Lower Brain

It contains the Brainstem/Midbrain and the centers of survival--heart rate, blood pressure, etc. --keep us alive

This is also where our intense survival reactions come from--Freeze Flight Fight

We call it the REACTIVE centre.

2. The Mid-Limbic Section that houses the emotion centres—all emotions are processed in this part of the brain....anger, joy, contentment, frustration, etc...we call this the FEELING Centre

Amygdala (orange blob) is here and is the part of the brain always on the look out for danger and negative emotion.

Its often called the “junk yard dog” of the brain. It is continually on the look out for danger or threat—it barks (arouses us) when threat or the potential of threat is near

That junk yard dog (Amygdala) triggers the fear reaction DOWN the brain into the fight/flight/freeze centres

3. Higher Brain – we call the THINKING Section:

This is the part of the brain where we think, reason, understand things. Where we see the “big picture”, understand cause-effect, can do planning and follow through....where we remember what our intentions are and why we have them.

One of the interesting things about our brain is that when we experience fear, distress, anger, anxiety, uncertainty (all emotions that are common to a sense of threat)...our brain automatically kicks into survival mode....and sends all the energy to our lower brain....this means that we essentially lose the use of our thinking centres...and function pretty much from our feeling and reacting centres.

Intense Arousal

“flipping your lid”
Daniel Siegel



Daniel Siegel calls this intense arousal in the brain (and body) “flipping your lid”....

Imagine the closed hand represents the brain. With the thumb the amygdala, the tops of the fingers the higher brain and the palm the lower brain. When the amygdala is activated by a threat or stressor, it fires all the energy to the lower brain, making it difficult for the higher brain to remain engaged. If the amygdala is too activated the higher brain with its wise prefrontal cortex, eventually loses its grip and becomes unavailable. Like flipping your lid.. When a lid is flipped, and it can happen in a matter of minutes, there is suddenly no access to the thinking brain. When this happens with your child....what do you notice?

When your child’s “thinking centres” become unavailable, not able to effectively reason, problem solve, empathize. It is contagious and as parents we get easily caught up, too.

Have you seen it in yourself? What happens with you?

What happens when 2 flipped lids try to communicate???

It escalates and in some situations can escalate to a point that both the child and caregiver are completely out of control. Which in turn exacerbates the emotional arousal.... As parents we can also have stress reactions when children trigger unresolved emotional issues from our past. Unfortunately, it can lead to abusive parenting with both child and parent sometimes even re-traumatizing the other.



What are the effects
of Chronic Stress
and Trauma?

What can we do
about it?

What happens if stress is chronic these periods of intense arousal are frequent?

Chronic stress levels can damage the brain (your child's brain and yours!)

The primary stress hormone, cortisol can activate the brain to be in a permanent activated state of fight or flight.

Chronic Stress in children can change the brain structure and function which can explain the higher incidence of anxiety, depression, addictions and mental health issues in people who experience chronic trauma.

So managing intense arousal in ourselves and our children clearly becomes as important as managing medical challenges such as cardiac, feeding and growth issues.

As a matter of fact. I believe it is the key to our children truly succeeding in life and relationships and being well within themselves.

So our task then, is to put the lid back on....our own lids so we can then to help our kids put their lid back on.

This is where connection and attachment comes in! The antidote to stress!

Connection

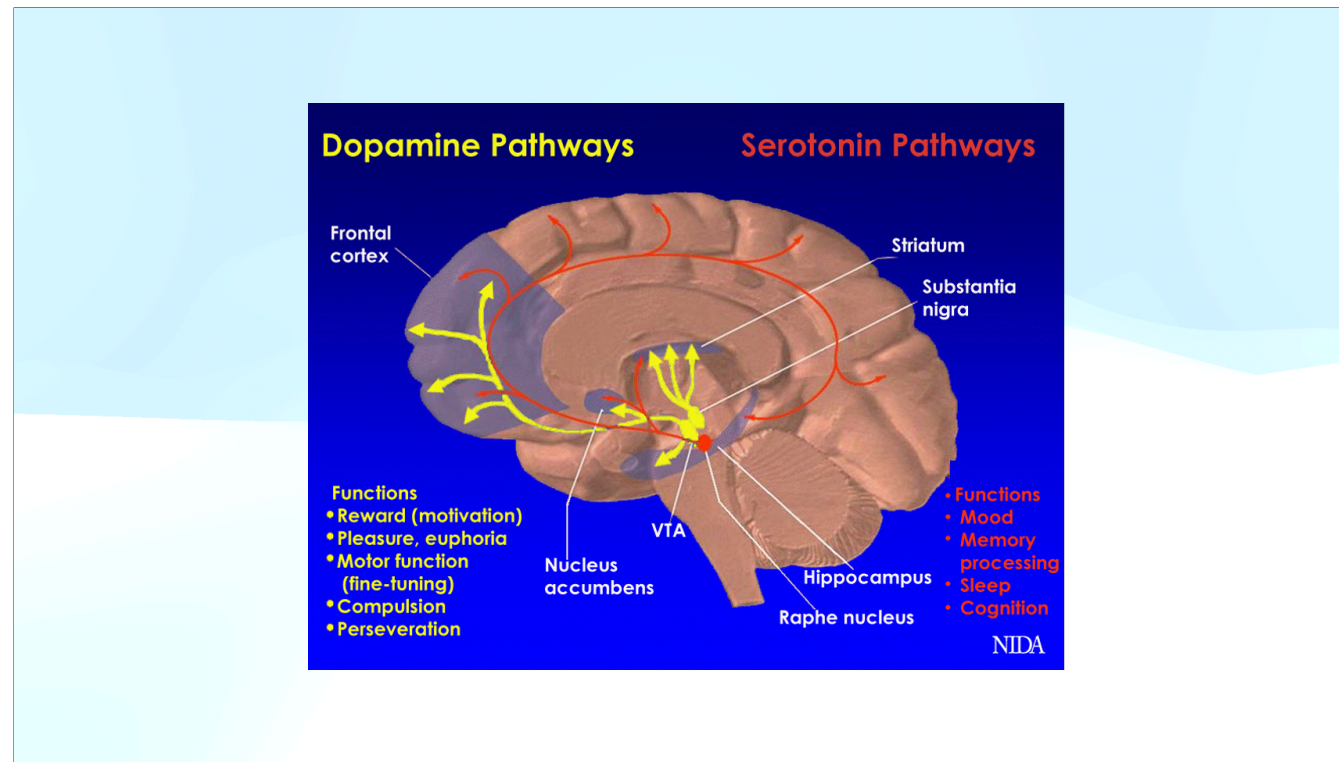
- Disengages intense emotions
- Opens connections to the thinking brain
- Increases motivation for positive behaviour



Warm, loving connections soothe the stress response (emotional reactions) and build connections to the thinking parts of the brain. Connection disengages intense emotions, open connections to the thinking brain and ..

The last point....connected people are motivated to please those they are connected with.

So.....how does this happen?



Hughes & Baylin, 2012

When parents and children are emotionally close, the neurotransmitters or chemical messengers, dopamine and serotonin are released.

Dopamine (following the yellow pathway) is involved with our experience of “pleasure”, reward and motivation. Further it is involved in focusing attention, stimulating motivation and goal-directed behavior. It is involved in altruism, helpfulness and kindness.

Dopamine facilitates the connection of thoughts and feelings to the prefrontal cortex (thinking centre), and allows time for problem solving (trace over the yellow lines, showing how they begin in the feeling center and move UP to the thinking centre)

Serotonin (following the red pathway in the picture here) is associated with feelings of happiness, focus and calm.

Stimulates release of melatonin, sleep and body clock
Involved with mood, sense of tranquility and contentment.
Again, trace the pathway....UP into the thinking centres!

I like to think of both as soothing the emotional reactions (like a nice hug for the brain!) so there is space for the thinking brain to get to work

Connection



Every connection is an “attachment” moment....stimulates all that wonderful neurological activity allowing us to experience pleasure, love, calm and comfort. For BOTH brains!

What is parent child attachment?



So.....what is attachment anyway?

An attachment bond refers to the feelings of closeness and affection that help sustain meaningful relationships over time.

Some of the earliest behavioral theories suggested that attachment was merely the result of the feeding relationship between the child and the caregiver. Because the caregiver feeds the child and provides nourishment, the child becomes attached.

Bowlby, the first attachment theorist, observed that feedings did not diminish separation anxiety. Instead, he found that attachment was characterized by clear behavioral and motivation patterns. He noticed that when children are frightened, they seek proximity from their primary caregiver in order to receive both comfort and care.

He suggested that attachment serves to keep the infant close to the mother, thus improving the child's chances of survival.

He viewed attachment as a product of evolutionary processes. Throughout history, children who maintained proximity to an attachment figure were more likely to receive comfort and protection, and therefore more likely to survive to adulthood. Through the process of natural selection, a motivational system designed to regulate attachment emerged.

The central theme of attachment theory is that primary caregivers who are available and responsive to an infant's needs allow the child to develop a sense of security.

The infant learns that the caregiver is dependable, which creates a secure base for the child to then explore the world.

Attachment plays a profound role across the lifespan. The earliest bonds you form with parents and family members effect brain development and can guide and shape the quality of attachments you develop to friends and romantic partners later in life.

Factors That Influence Attachment

While this process may seem straightforward, there are some factors that can influence healthy attachments. When caregivers respond quickly and consistently, children learn that they can depend on the people who are responsible for their care, which is the essential foundation for attachment. This is a vital factor.

Attachment Styles

There are four patterns of attachment, including:⁸

Ambivalent attachment: These children become very distressed when a parent leaves. Ambivalent attachment style is considered uncommon, affecting an estimated 7% to 15% of U.S. children. As a result of poor parental availability, these children cannot depend on their primary caregiver to be there when they need them.

Avoidant attachment: Children with an avoidant attachment tend to avoid parents or caregivers, showing no preference between a caregiver and a complete stranger. This attachment style might be a result of abusive or neglectful caregivers. Children who are punished for relying on a caregiver will learn to avoid seeking help in the future.

Disorganized attachment: These children display a confusing mix of behavior, seeming disoriented, dazed, or confused. They may avoid or resist the parent. Lack of a clear attachment pattern is likely linked to inconsistent caregiver behavior. In such cases, parents may serve as both a source of comfort and fear, leading to disorganized behavior.

Secure attachment: Children who can depend on their caregivers show distress when separated and joy when reunited. Although the child may be upset, they feel assured that the caregiver will return. When frightened, securely attached children are comfortable seeking reassurance from caregivers. This is the most common attachment style.

The Lasting Impact of Early Attachment

Research suggests that failure to form secure attachments early in life can have a negative impact on behavior in later childhood and throughout life.⁹

Children diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder (CD), or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) frequently display attachment problems, possibly due to early abuse, neglect, or trauma. Children adopted after the age of 6 months may have a higher risk of attachment problems.

Although attachment styles displayed in adulthood are not necessarily the same as those seen in infancy, early attachments can have a serious impact on later relationships. Adults who were securely attached in childhood tend to have good self-esteem, strong romantic relationships, and the ability to self-disclose to others.

Children who are securely attached as infants tend to develop stronger self-esteem and better self-reliance as they grow older. These children also tend to be more independent, perform better in school, have successful social relationships, and experience less depression and anxiety.

Was this page helpful?

What do we notice when we are in an attachment relationships?

There is someone we miss when we are apart

Someone we turn to when in distress or need of comfort and closeness

Can you think of examples in your life.

Now think about your attachment with your child.

Think about “missing” your child when he is at school or about your child missing you when you are at work.

Ask “who do you turn to when in distress or need of comfort and closeness?” Are there people here who still turn to their own parents? What happens when your child turns to you? How do you feel when that happens?

The Dance of Attachment

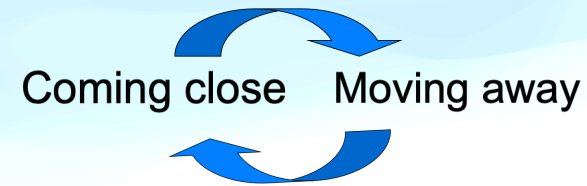


The central theme of attachment theory is that primary caregivers who are available and responsive to a child's needs allow the child to develop a sense of security. The child learns that the caregiver is dependable, which creates a secure base for the child to then explore the world.

Let's shift gears now and talk about the behaviors of attachment....

Attachment is a kind of dance....go to next slide...

A dance of closeness and separation



Attachment is a dance of COMING CLOSE and MOVING AWAY, a dance of CLOSENESS and SEPARATION. We are constantly moving between these 2 places in our relationships

And it starts the minute we are born! And continues when we are able to launch successfully and become independent and engage in satisfying, intimate relationships with other.

Babies born with the ability to bring us close and keep us near...ideas of what they do?

Proximity seeking behaviors:

Cooing, crying, smiling

Proximity maintaining behaviors

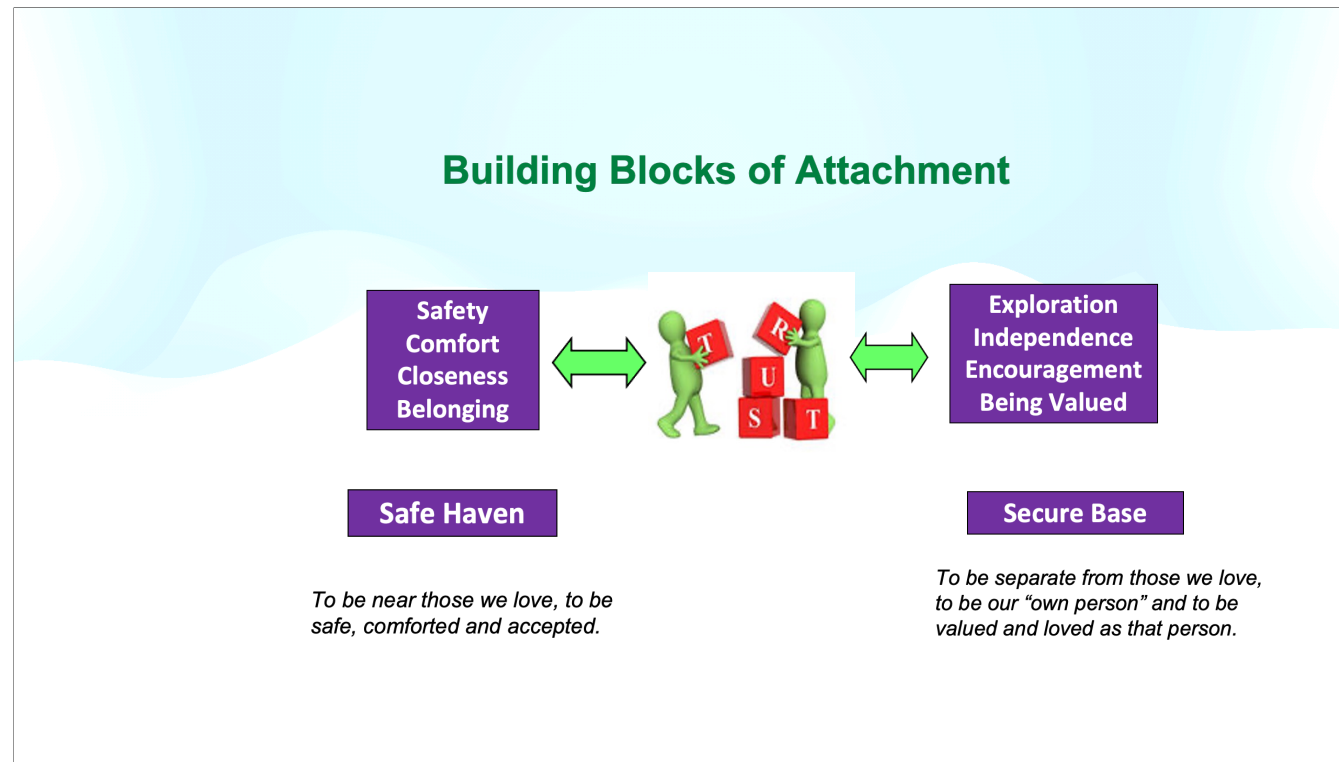
Smiling, grasping, cuddling, engaging behaviors

Ask....how does a baby get us to come close? (cry, smile, fuss, etc)

How does a baby get us to move away? (look away, fall asleep, fuss if over stimulated etc)

Our children let us know what they need from us....whether they need us to be close or they need to be separate....all the time. And not always with words!

Reading their signals is one of the key skills we bring to parenting.....go to next slide



Let's look a little closer at the role that attachment plays for all of us

For us to become successful adults we need a healthy attachment relationship that can provide us with two things:

Firstly we need a "safe haven" we can return to and seek comfort and soothing when we are upset.

The safe haven is our place for soothing connection and security.

This 'safe haven' meets our need for safety, comfort, closeness and belonging. We need to know we can be near those we love to be safe, comforted and accepted.

2. a "secure base" from which to safely explore the world.

This base gives us the security to "move away" and "check back", trusting that our parent will still be there for us.

This secure base meets our need for exploration, independence, encouragement and being valued. It allows us to be separate from those we love, to be our 'own person' and to be loved and valued at that person.

These are what motivate the dance...coming close to a safe haven and moving away with a secure base. Our children go in and out of these 2 "spaces" in any given moment....when children are supported in moving readily between these two, they start to build trust....in our parents, themselves, and their worlds. It is the most essential foundation for individuation and their lifelong success.

Parenting a child who has experienced trauma requires that we are super-attuned as the child's need for a safe haven and secure base heightened when they experience traumatic threatening events.

They need us to read their cues to their need for safe haven and secure base even more when they have experienced trauma !

Fortunately, there are attachment-promoting skills that we can practice.

Attunement

The act of reading and responding to cues given by your child



Attunement--is the skill we bring that allows us to see and understand the cues our babies--of any age--are sending us

Our ability to read & accurately respond to the needs and interests of others.

What cues do our children send that we need to attend to?

BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION. Children of all ages communicate their needs first and foremost through behavior.

Do you ever miss them? Do you remember a time when you were proud of how you picked up on a cue? How about the opposite?

Attunement is a fundamental skill in enhancing parent child attachment and helping our children manage stress and trauma.



Let's consider what we refer to as our "core" skills of connection. They are the building blocks of creating secure healthy attachment.

Curiosity

- Everything and anything
- Express interest and respect
- Explore their ideas
- Delight in what they do/say
- Be impressed by how
think, feel, know things
- Notice their changes



Healthy attachment is fostered through curiosity.

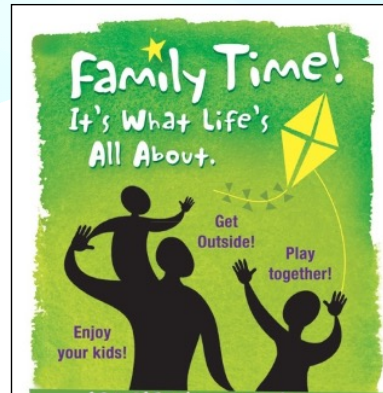
Use curiosity to find out what your child is thinking and feeling. Use curiosity to explore what they know or believe. Learn from them.

Be curious about everything and anything, express interest and respect, explore their ideas, delight in what they do and say, be impressed by how they think, feel and know things, notice changes in them.

Remember, you can be curious and delighted by the way your kids think and make sense of their worlds--AND still disagree with their conclusions.

When we show we are interested in their experiences—REALLY interested, not just interrogating them so that we can have more control over what they are doing—they will be more likely to talk about the difficult experiences.

Responsiveness



Playfulness.

Shared activities.

Movement.

Joy.

Responsiveness is about spending time with our children, doing things that they like to do, showing and interest in their interests and activities.....
playing ninja or barbies again and again and again
going to soccer games, school concerts

Play and movement engage the pleasure and calming pathways in our brains....this is important and ties back to the discussion on the brain. One way to restore the lid, is to go outside and play something together...then, when everyone is calm and connected, have a talk about what the original issue was all about.

Warmth and Affection



**Does your face light up
when your child comes
into the room?**

Expressing express love and affection to your child is also part of responsiveness.

I would invite you to come up with examples.

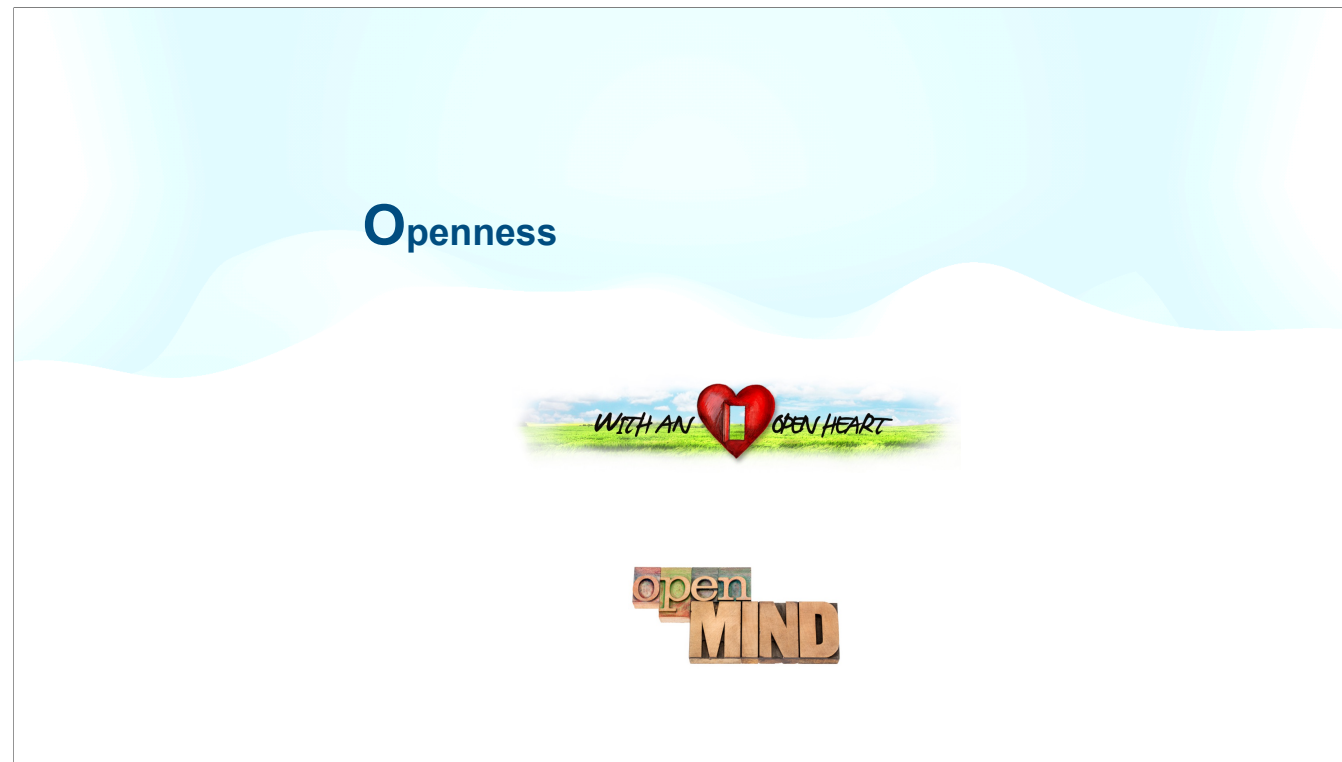
What kind of special things do you do with kids? Do you write notes, spend time at bedtime, have special “play dates”?

Oprah talks about the greatest lesson she ever learned as coming from Toni Morrison, nobelaureate.

Morrison asked the question: “Does your face light up when you see your child-- or is your first thought something else--”is that what you are wearing to school?” or “are the dishes done”--what you focus on will also show on your face and influence you child’s sense of self.

Does not mean do a happy dance every time your kid comes into the room...do you smile when you see your child. Look at him or her with warmth and affection before you add the corrective statement?

When we start with warmth and affection, the other stuff is heard more readily.



Openness is about having both an open mind and an open heart

It means you are open to hearing about your child's experience, open to knowing who your child really is (not just who you think he or she is).
Keeping judgment to a minimum (a big challenge for some of us!)

Empathy



Our ability to notice, and understand and respond to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of another.

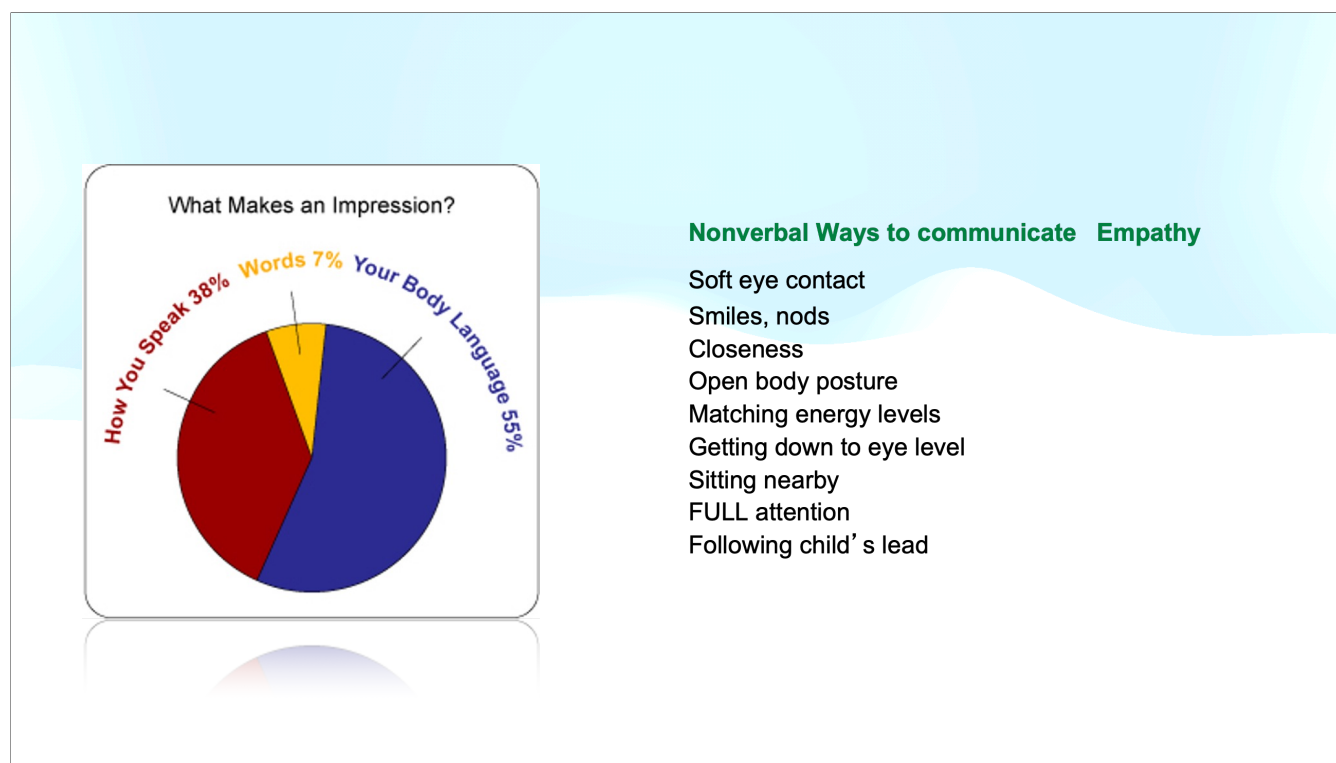
Empathy is our ability to notice, understand and respond to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others

It is our ability to kind of see into the experiences of the other and fully imagine ourselves in that moment.

It often means tapping in to our feelings as well and feeling right along side the person---without letting our feelings become the focus! Very tricky

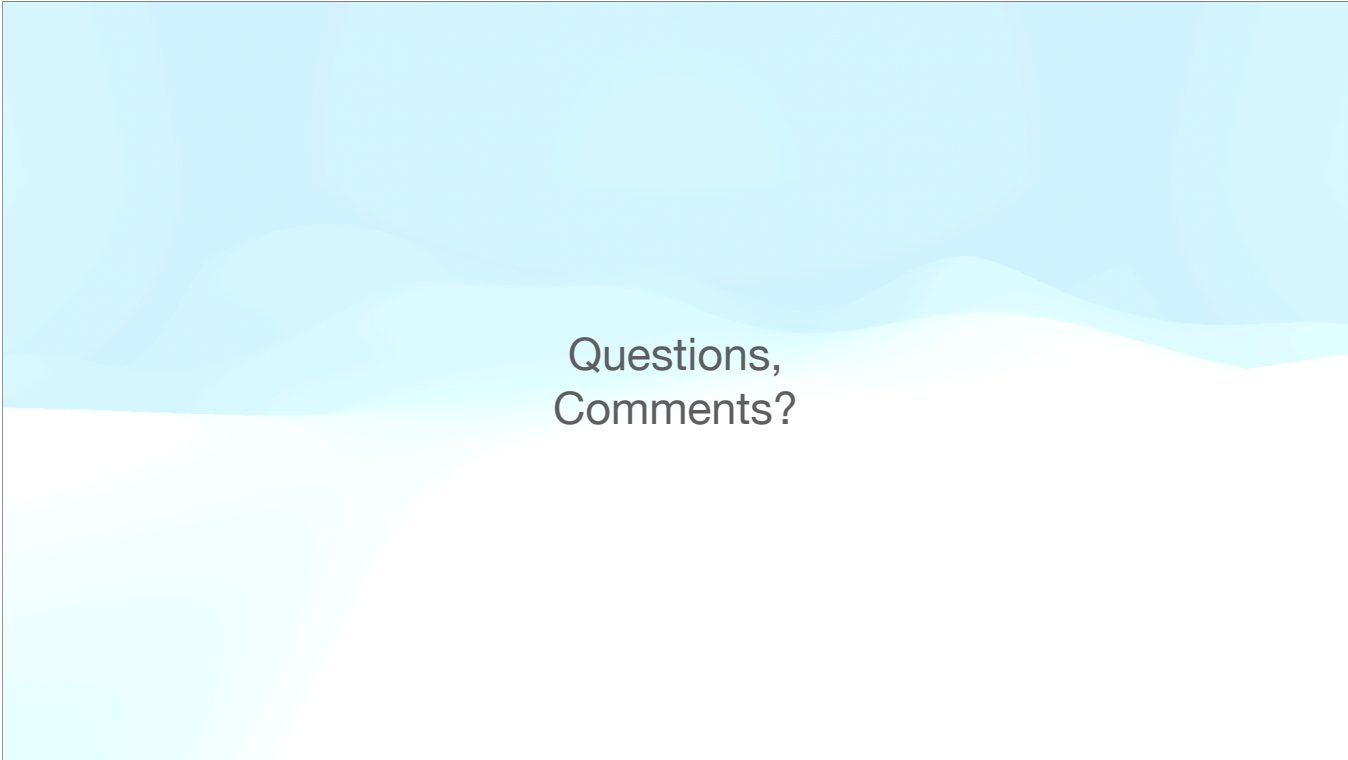
In parenting, empathy is about trying really hard to understand our children's experience.

How can you communicate to your child that you understand what they are experiencing?



Remember the way we say things (tone of voice, body language, facial expressions) conveys WAY MORE information than the words we use!

Curiosity is about communication....paying attention to how we are communicating makes a big difference in how kids respond to our efforts



Questions,
Comments?

In closing I hope this got everyone thinking about the link between the traumas we have experienced living with NS, big behaviours and the role parent-child attachment plays in helping a child manage trauma and emotion regulation. I would encourage you to practice these skills. No one gets it right all the time but the research shows us, the more our children experience connection and attunement secure their attachment. Connection, attachment and attunement is key to helping us manage trauma and stress, our child's and our own! When we connect meaningfully with our children it is not only their brain that lights up like a Christmas tree, our does also. Connection is corrective and healing for all of us. Indeed, I believe it is the foundation for healthy, resilient and kind children, and finding delight in our life long relationships.

<https://parentingnow.ca/learn-2/videos/>

Check out any Dan Siegel or Bruce Perry parenting books
Including Siegel's The Power of Showing Up and The Whole-Brain Child
And Perry's What Happened to You