Seeing the Child Behind the Behavior

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Humans use both language and actions to express themselves. Children often express with behavior what they can't put into words, leaving adults to decode the message. To increase successful detective work, adults benefit when they shift their focus from trying to stop a child's behavior, to understanding the meaning "behind the behavior."

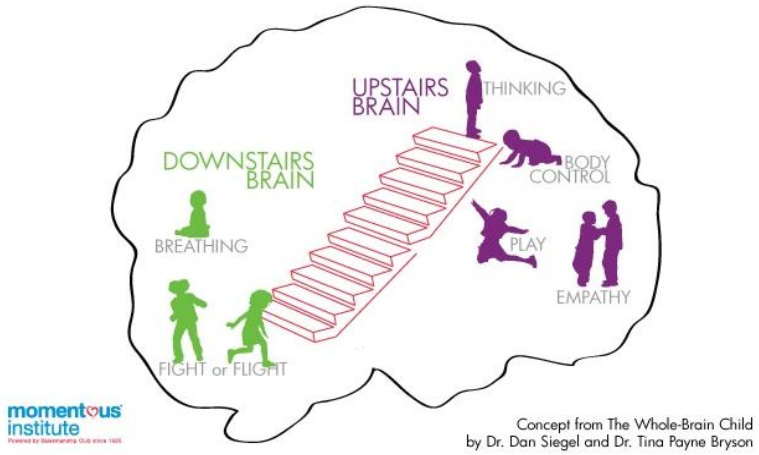
The meaning of a child's behavior becomes more discernable when adults commit to a practice of attuning to the child's thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations, needs, abilities, culture, and developmental level. In short, they see the child behind the behavior.

By "tuning" in to the whole child in this way, adults may become more effective in choosing strategies that prevent challenging behaviors, promote social and emotional skills, and meet children's basic needs.

To begin this process of seeing the child in context, let's consider the "brain reasons" for challenging behavior, then identify the "mind methods" for helping children develop appropriate responses.

Brain Development

Scientists describe brain development as happening in three parts: the brain stem, the limbic center and finally the cortex. Daniel Siegel likens this development to the construction of a house: the downstairs brain, which includes the brain stem and the limbic center, comes first; then, the upstairs brain, or the cortex, begins construction. Scientists believe the upstairs of the "house" brain, the cortex, completes its development in the mid-twenties.



This means we are asking children to think, plan, reason, pay attention, control impulses, regulate movement, manage emotions, shift gears, delay gratification (e.g., wait, share, take turns, clean up), follow multiple step directions, and carry out additional complex cognitive functions without having the brain regions of the cortex necessary to do that reliably or consistently.

Because the upstairs brain lacks the capacity to meet these demands, the more developed regions of children's brains, the downstairs, takes over. From this brain stem and limbic region, children enter fight, flight, freeze, or faint mode under stress, resulting in "stress-behavior" to get their needs met that may be physically or emotionally dangerous to the child, other children, and/or to adults.

Basic Needs

All behavior, that of adults and children alike, stems from the drive to meet three basic needs: for **safety** (physical or emotional), **satisfaction**, and **connection**. Adults may have a hard time conceptualizing challenging behavior as an attempt for children to meet their *needs*; instead, they see the behavior as children trying to get what they *want.* The risk with this view is that the adult will punish a child's behavior that is seen as "he wants what he wants when he wants it," instead of understanding the behavior stems from the brain sensing basic needs are under threat. As the brain develops, so does its capacity to meet our basic needs in appropriate ways. The propensity for a child's downstairs brain to sense what it perceives as danger and react to unmet needs with challenging behavior is, in essence, a bid for safety, satisfaction, and connection.

Consider for example, a situation where four-year-old Liam asks five-year-old Jacob for a turn on the bike, but Jacob says, "No!" Liam pushes Jacob off the bike, jumps on it and rides away leaving a crying Jacob in his wake. Clearly inappropriate behavior, but if we consider Liam's behavior through the lens of his brain's drive to meet his three basic needs, we may respond differently than if we just saw the form of the behavior, the

pushing, as wrong. From a brain perspective, Liam's pushing might be seen as a bid for: 1) ***emotional safety***: the physical act of pushing may be an attempt to help him regulate his anger or frustration he feels from not getting a turn, 2) ***satisfaction***: his words didn't get the desired outcome, so he pushes Jacob off the bike to achieve his goal, and 3) ***connection***: establishing rules for their relationship, Liam implies with his behavior that he needs Jacob to honor his requests.

Clearly, Liam's brain needs some help getting his needs met through appropriate behavior, or with being able to identify, express and manage his emotions when his needs cannot be met. This is the adult's job: to teach children appropriate ways to get their needs met or to learn coping skills to regulate themselves when their needs cannot be met.

If the adult fails to see the child behind the behavior, attuning to these messages of unmet needs, he or she may miss an opportunity to engage the child's upstairs brain to develop appropriate ways to get those needs met.

Function of Behavior

Along with basic needs, adults must attune to the function of the behavior: what might the child be trying to ***get, avoid, or express emotionally*** in this moment? Function can always be linked to safety, satisfaction and connection, but the function will also include something more readily observable in the moment.

In the example above with Liam and Jacob: what is Liam trying to ***get, avoid, or express*** with this behavior? He seems to be trying ***to get*** a turn on the bike or ***to avoid*** not getting a turning/having to wait and he may be trying to ***express his anger or frustration*** at not getting a turn. These are just initial hypotheses that must be further investigated to find out more about what is going on from Liam's perspective.

Going deeper, consider that Liam may not have felt ***safe*** (emotionally), ***satisfied***, or ***connected*** when Jacob told him no. He may also have a history of not getting his needs met with Jacob, or at school, or in general, so the larger context of how his safety, satisfaction and connection needs get/don't get, met is important. The form of his behavior, pushing Jacob off the bike and riding away, clearly is not appropriate. But the function(s) of his behavior and the desire to fulfill his needs are completely appropriate. All children need adults who ***interpersonally attune*** to "see them" from the inside out and teach them what to do instead to get their needs and functions met.

Basic Drives

The brain helps us meet our basic needs through what Rick Hanson describes as three "operating systems" or drives: ***to avoid, approach, and/or attach***. Humans have the drive 1) to **avoid** harm to meet **safety** needs, 2) to **approach** rewards to meet **satisfaction** needs, and 3) to **attach** to others to meet **connection** needs.

Hanson describes the three basic needs and drives as loosely correlated with the three levels of the brain: 1) the brain stem correlates with the need for safety and the drive to avoid harm, 2) the limbic center with the need for satisfaction and the drive to approach rewards, and 3) the cortex with the need for connection and the drive to attach.

Let's revisit the example of Liam and Jacob through the lens of brain development, needs, and drives. Liam approached the reward of riding the bike to meet his satisfaction needs by asking Jacob for a turn, using his upstairs brain. Jacob's refusal triggered Liam's brain stem and limbic center (the downstairs brain) to ***avoid*** the disruption of ***emotional safety needs***, i.e., anger or frustration. Liam attempted to meet his ***satisfaction needs*** of getting a turn by ***approaching*** Jacob and pushing him off the bike. Finally, he tried to ***attach*** to Jacob by sending the message that his ***connection needs*** were unfulfilled so that in the future their relationship will include Jacob complying with his requests.

What we hope to teach children over time is how to drive (i.e., avoid, approach, and/or attach) to meet their safety, satisfaction, and connection needs in appropriate ways, from the upstairs brain. The challenge: sometimes the downstairs brain does the "driving."

The Brain's Settings and Zones

Rick Hanson describes two "settings" in the brain that determine how we approach, avoid, or attach to get our needs met. Our behavior may be driven from a ***reactive*** setting or a ***responsive*** setting depending upon which "zone" in the brain drives.

The ***reactive*** setting has two "zones": the red and the blue. When the brain operates from this setting, we react without thinking, driven from the downstairs brain to try to get

our needs met. Either we operate from the “Red Zone” with fight or flight behaviors, or from the “Blue Zone” with shutting down behaviors such as freezing or even fainting. From this setting, the brain has determined that the threat level is high, and action must be taken without planning or thought.

The second setting, that of ***responsivity***, activates when our brains are fully integrated with both the downstairs and the upstairs connected. From this “Green Zone,” our social engagement part of our nervous system is activated. We use the upstairs brain skills such as reason, planning, emotional balance and thoughtfulness to drive our goal of getting our needs met.

Examining Liam’s behavior through this lens, we can begin to understand that the threats to his safety, satisfaction, and connection needs felt intense enough for his brain to react from the “Red Zone”. Since children’s brains are not fully developed, their risk of ***reacting*** from this setting is greater because the downstairs brain sends emergency signals that the upstairs isn’t fully equipped to manage consistently.

If Liam had ***reacted*** from the “Blue Zone” he may have slouched down, hung his head and walked away. Maybe even retreating to a quiet corner of the playground and sitting by himself. In the “Blue Zone” the brain detects the threat to be so great, that shutting down is the only safe option.

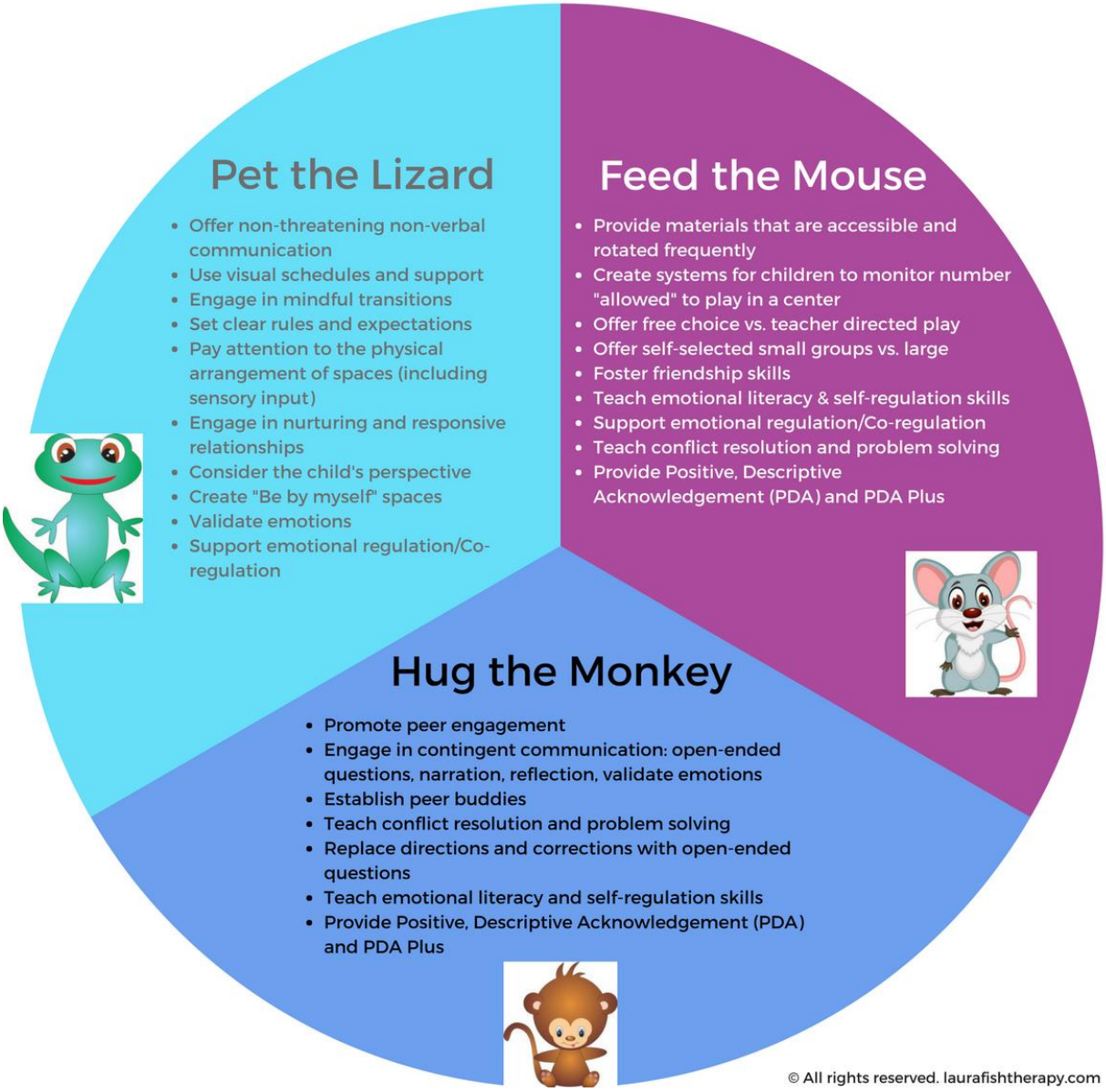
If Liam had felt less of a threat to his needs, he may have ***responded*** from the “Green Zone”, with his integrated brain avoiding, approaching, and/or attaching by activating one or more socially engaging options such as finding a teacher to help resolve the conflict, getting a timer, finding another bike, or telling Jacob he felt angry.

Mind Methods

Now that we understand some of the “brain reasons” for behavior, we turn toward “mind methods” for helping children strengthen their ability to respond from the “Green Zone” in the brain to meet their needs.

Rick Hanson’s model for how the three levels of the developing brain link to basic needs and drives includes a fun way of considering this connection: to develop our brains in a healthy manner, we need to “Pet the Lizard”, “Feed the Mouse”, and “Hug the Monkey” inside our brains. Mind methods that meet safety needs help calm the brain stem (Pet the Lizard), methods to meet satisfaction needs help regulate the limbic center (Feed the Mouse), and methods to meet connection needs strengthen the cortex (Hug the Monkey). The figure below has some practical strategies, or mind methods, for meeting the various needs to help develop the brain.

Figure 1: Practical strategies to help children avoid, approach, and attach in appropriate ways.

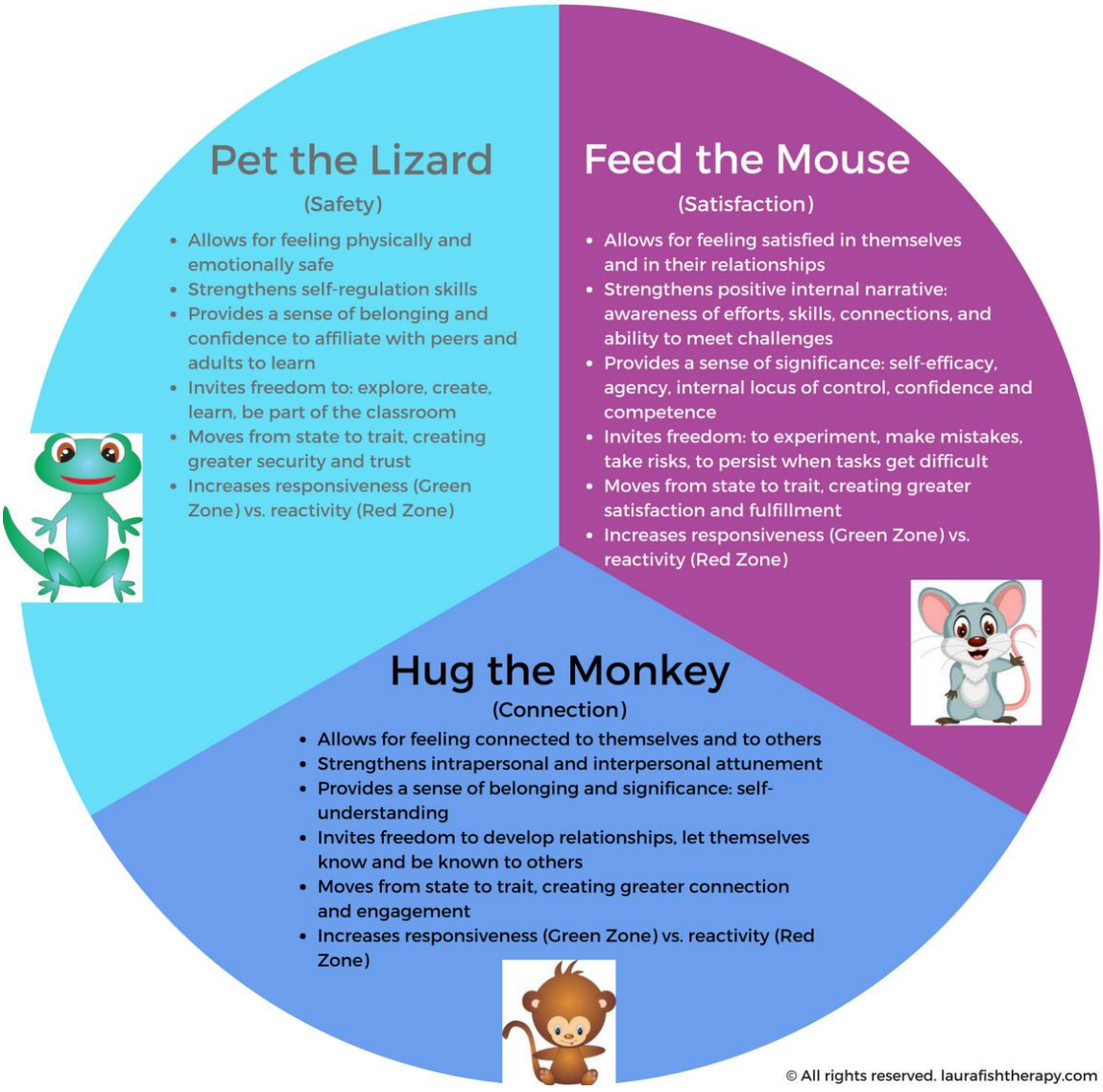


When adults help children “Pet the Lizard”, “Feed the Mouse”, and “Hug the Monkey”, they increase their ability to “drive” to get their needs met from an integrated brain (i.e., drive from the “Green Zone”).

Potential Outcomes and Benefits

Making a commitment to adopt an attuned approach of “Seeing the child behind the behavior” has many benefits (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Benefits of an attuned approach on children's social, emotional, and cognitive skills.



The benefits include, but are not limited to meeting children's safety, satisfaction and connection needs, strengthening their brain development, fostering a sense of belonging and significance, activating and installing desired traits, and providing experiences that promote integration of the mind, brain and relationships.

An important component of any work with children, of course, is teacher self-reflection. Adults must engage ***intrapersonal attunement*** to tune inward, noticing their settings of responsivity versus reactivity, their drives, and methods for them to meet their safety, satisfaction and connection needs throughout the day. This important parallel process

promotes teachers' capacity to implement these mind methods with fidelity. It is hard for children to feel safe, satisfied and connected if the adults are driving from their "Red Zones"! Intrapersonal attunement in adults begets interpersonal attunement with children.

Step-By-Step Actions

Ready to adopt or strengthen your commitment to "See the child behind the behavior"?

As a first step, consider the following questions as you interact with children or after an interaction that left you feeling challenged. The questions are offered as a guide for self-reflection, designed to help you begin and/or strengthen how to "S*ee the child behind the behavior*":

- What is the child thinking, feeling, sensing, perceiving and/or believing about himself and others (attunement)?
- Does the child "*feel*" like his *safety* (physical and/or emotional), *satisfaction*, and *connection* needs are not being met (three basic needs)?
- Why is the child doing this: what is the function of the behavior (three functions)?
- How might this behavior be the child's attempt to *avoid* harm, *approach* rewards, and/or *attach* to others (three drives)?
- What skills might the child be missing that could prevent this behavior (e.g., which upstairs brain skills need stronger connections with the downstairs brain)?
- What strategies do I have to Pet the Lizard, Feed the Mouse, and Hug the Monkey (practices that strengthen relationships and promote social and emotional skills)?
- How might I need to individualize these strategies for this particular child?
- What do I need to stay in the "Green Zone" (integrated or responsive brain)?

Over time, answers to questions such as these will help you develop a systematic plan for promoting social and emotional skills and prevent challenging behaviors.

For more about this important topic, please listen my guest appearance on Pre-K Teach and Play's podcast, Episode 27.