

Integrating the Upstairs and Downstairs Brain: What You Can Do

1. Engage, appealing to the upstairs brain, not further enraging the downstairs brain
 - a. **Do** use words to acknowledge how they are feeling (ie. You are really mad I said no)
 - b. **Do** invite them to negotiate with you for a solution that works for both of you
 - c. **Don't** threaten, use ultimatums, give a consequence

Big emotions are not logical. One of the least effective things we can do is to argue with a child when their downstairs brain is in charge of them. First connect with the child's experience "Sometime it's just really hard...", listen and offer comfort and compassion. Then you can problem solve once they have reconnected with their upstairs brain. The child is not being manipulative. The upstairs brain remains inaccessible and difficult to engage until the downstairs brain is attended to first.

Step 1: Connect first with the child's downstairs brain. Listen to them and reflect back what they are feeling. Be careful not to talk down, just echo what you sense about what they are feeling. Use nonverbal cues like physical touch, empathetic facial expressions, and a nurturing tone of voice.

Step 2: Once the big emotions of the downstairs brain have settled, you can **redirect** the child using upstairs brain strategies of problem solving and exploring more appropriate behavior. "What could you do differently in this situation the next time?" Offer discipline and boundary setting when appropriate.

Step 3: Move onto something else.

What if...it will not always work if a child is too lost in their downstairs brain "waves of emotions". The child may be in need of sleep or food. Your rules and boundaries should not slide because a child is not thinking logically. You may need to stop self-destructive behavior and remove your child from the situation before you begin to **connect and redirect**.

It is generally a good idea to discuss misbehavior and its consequences once the child has settled and calmed down. Moments of emotional flooding are not the best times for lessons to be learned. Consider yourself a lifeguard who swims out to, puts your arms around your child, and helps him to shore before telling the child not to swim out so far next time.

2. Move it or lose it: Exercises to Help Regulate the Body to avoid losing the mind

Moving the body directly affects brain chemistry. A powerful way to help them regain their emotional balance is to have them move their bodies. "Research has shown that when we change our physical state – through movement or relaxation, for example - we can change our emotional state" (Siegel, Bryson 2011).

You may want to experiment with the following exercises at a time when the child/youth is settled. Have them track whether their body feels more energized or settled. Everyone is different so it is important to follow their lead. You can have the child/youth take note of their heart rate and body after brief physical movement (ie jumping jacks), then compare that sensation with experiences of being more settled or calm.

Settled and calm can feel uncomfortable or scary for some children/youth. It is important to follow their lead and stop if they are becoming more scared. It takes 2 minutes for the heart to stop racing after something scary happens. It is important to settle the body first and then talk about what happened.

- **Deep breathing:** With one hand on the upper chest and another on the abdomen, count to 5 while breathing in, hold the breath, then count to 5 while breathing out, hold the breath. Repeat 3-5 times.
- **Chair Push-up:** Place your weight in your hands beside you on the chair, lifting yourself up and holding until you get tired.
- **Tree:** Standing with your feet hip distance apart, root your feet into the ground imagining roots growing deep into the earth, while stretching your hands high above your head imagining them as branches reaching for the sky.
- **Arm Stretches:** With hand, pull the opposite arm across your chest, stretching the upper arm and shoulder. Do both sides.
- **Hand push:** Bring palms together in front of your chest and push as hard as possible. Hold until tired.
- **5-4-3-2-1:** Name 5 things in the room that you can see, then 5 things you can hear, then 5 sensations (things you can feel on your body) [then 4-3-2-1]
- **Physical activity:** Running, jumping, push-ups, sit-ups etc.
- **Stretching:** Focusing on major muscle groups.
- **Notice yourself in the chair:** Take a moment to notice how the chair supports your legs, bum and back.
- **Positive tactile sensation:** Hugging stuffed animals, wrapping themselves in a cozy blanket, rubbing a special stone kept in their pocket.

Adapted from Siegel, D.J., & Bryson, T.P. (2011). *The whole-brain child: Twelve revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*. New York: Random House.