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 cannot put into words, leaving adults to decode the message. To increase successful detective work, adults shift their focus from trying to *stop* a child's behavior, to *understanding* the meaning "behind the behavior."

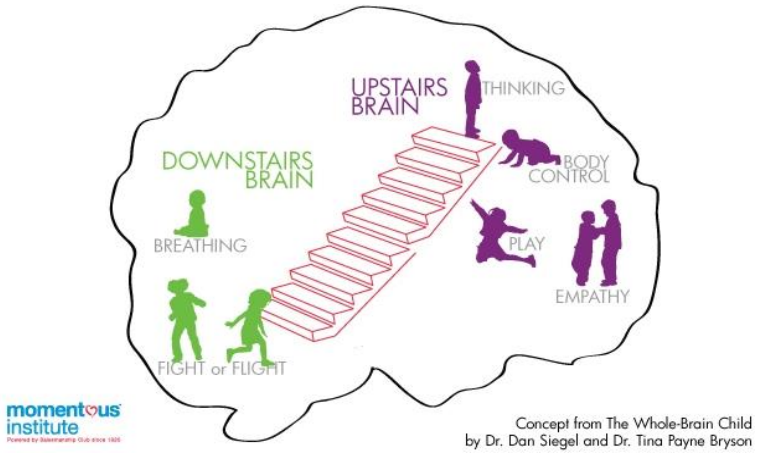
To gather that meaning, adults must attune to the child's thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations, needs, abilities, culture, and developmental level. Attuning is a skill that may take time to develop since we tend to observe to fix or change, not to understand. This diminishes the adults' capacity to truly gather information about what is behind the behavior.

By tuning in to the *child's perspective*, 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 behind the behavior, let us 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 *early thirties.* Yes: human brains are not fully developed until the early thirties.



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: **safety** (physical AND 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. When an adult punishes a child for attempting to meet their needs the quality of the relationship erodes. The child may internalize a sense of not being seen, soothed, safe, or secure because adults do not seem to understand them.

Consider for example, a classroom 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. The teacher arrives on the scene, tells Jacob to keep riding on the bike, and begins to lecture Liam about not pushing others. Jacob peddles away as Liam hangs his head to receive the teacher’s words of admonishment.

Adults cannot condone pushing behavior; yet, 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 solely focus on the form of the behavior, pushing. 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 attempt to satisfy his need for a turn on the bike, and 3) ***connection***: when his words did not work, Liam shifted to physical action to try to get his needs met, to connect with Jacob regarding the sincerity of his request for a turn on the bike. .

Of course, Liam’s brain needs help getting his needs met through ***appropriate*** behavior, but the first step is to attune to the child. It is not just about getting a turn on the bike when you look through the lens of brain development; in this example, I am highlighting the link between a child’s desire to ride a bike and his overarching needs for safety, satisfaction, and connection. This is not how most adults consider these types of exchanges with children. When we go deeper, we can be more understanding which will help our response be more helpful in the long term. With this, we strengthen our relationship with the child even amidst challenging behaviors.

Liam needs teaching: someone to help him resolve this conflict with Jacob which includes guidance on how to identify, express, and manage his emotions. Instead of pulling Liam away to lecture him, the teacher could have facilitated the two children through the four steps of conflict resolution. The children would share their perspectives: 1) what each child believes happened, 2) how each feel about what happened (emotions), and 3) ideas each one has to resolve the conflict. The final step involves the adult acknowledging the children’s efforts to work through their conflict.

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. But first we must go beyond the superficial observation that he “wanted” the bike, to a deeper attunement to the child’s experience, “I felt unsafe/dissatisfied/disconnected because Jacob wouldn’t give me a turn on the bike.”

If the adult fails to see the child behind the behavior, attuning to these messages of unmet needs, they may miss an opportunity to engage the child’s upstairs brain to

develop appropriate ways to get those needs met. In addition, the child may start to lose a bit of trust or secure connection with the adult if their perspective is not considered.

Function of Behavior

Along with basic needs, adults looking to see the child behind the behavior attune to the ***function*** of the behavior: what might the child be trying to ***get, avoid, and/ or express emotionally*** in this moment? Function can always be linked to safety, satisfaction, and connection, i.e., the child is trying to get their safety, satisfaction, and connection needs met or avoid having them not met and/or expressing their emotions about not getting their needs met. 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 is 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. To find out what the function is, we help Liam tell his story of what happened. We *attune* to his perspective versus lecture him about what he did wrong.

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/do not 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 us revisit the example of Liam and Jacob through the lens of brain development, needs, and drives. We might hypothesize that 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 his ***emotional safety needs***, i.e., anger or frustration. Liam continued with his attempt to meet his ***satisfaction needs*** by ***approaching*** Jacob and pushing him off the bike. Finally, he tried to ***attach*** to Jacob by sending the message through his behavior that his ***connection needs*** were unfulfilled so that in the future their relationship will include Jacob complying with his requests.

Again, Liam needs guidance on how to deliver his message more adaptively. Clear. But hopefully it is also becoming clear that when adults just observe the form of the behavior, we miss important data that could inform our responses.

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 to obtain, avoid, and express themselves in appropriate ways, from their *integrated brain (the downstairs and upstairs brain are linked)*. The challenge: sometimes the downstairs brain does the "driving." And remember: the upstairs brain is not fully developed until the early thirties! As such, children need a lot of support, not shame, blame, or punishment, from those of us with fully developed brains to help them meet their needs in appropriate ways. Telling them what they did wrong does not teach them how to do things differently.

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 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.” Pushing Jacob was a Red Zone/reactive behavior. 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 is not fully equipped to manage consistently.

If Liam had ***reacted*** from the “Blue Zone” he may have slouched down, hung up his head and walked away. Maybe even retreating to a quiet corner of the playground to sit by himself. In the “Blue Zone” the brain detects the threat to be so great, that shutting down is the only safe option. While adults may label this as desirable behavior, it is not. Liam did not get the chance to work through the conflict and instead, just gave up by walking away. Blue Zone reactions might be less obviously dangerous, but they can have deleterious consequences over time i.e., co-dependency, not standing up for oneself, always giving in, beliefs of worthlessness to name a few.

If Liam had felt less of a threat to his needs, he may have ***responded*** from the “Green Zone”, with his ***integrated brain*** (both downstairs and upstairs connected) 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.

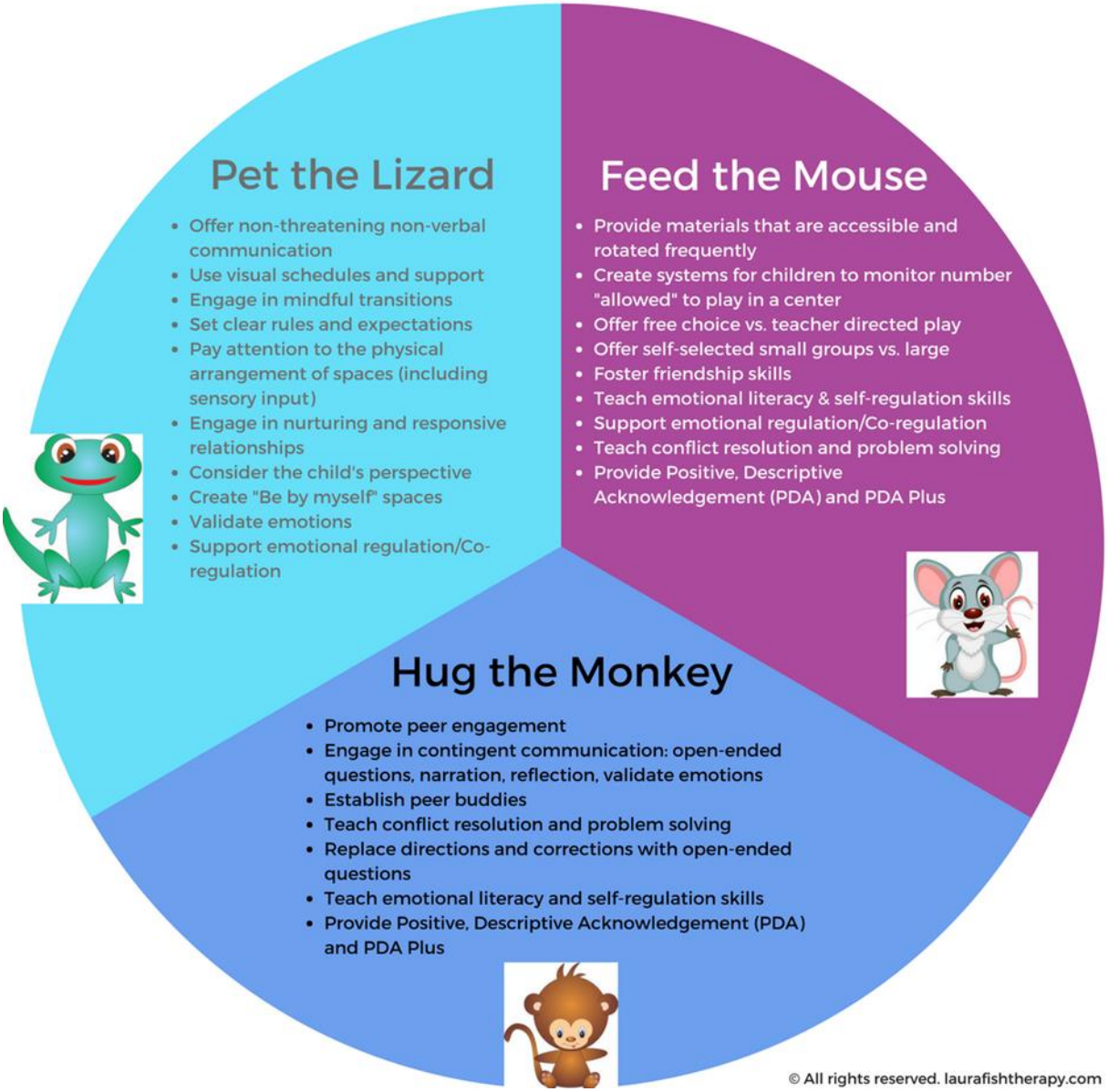
Mind Methods

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), meet ***satisfaction needs*** to regulate the **limbic center** (Feed the Mouse), and meet ***connection needs*** by strengthening the **cortex** (Hug the Monkey).

The figure on the next page 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.

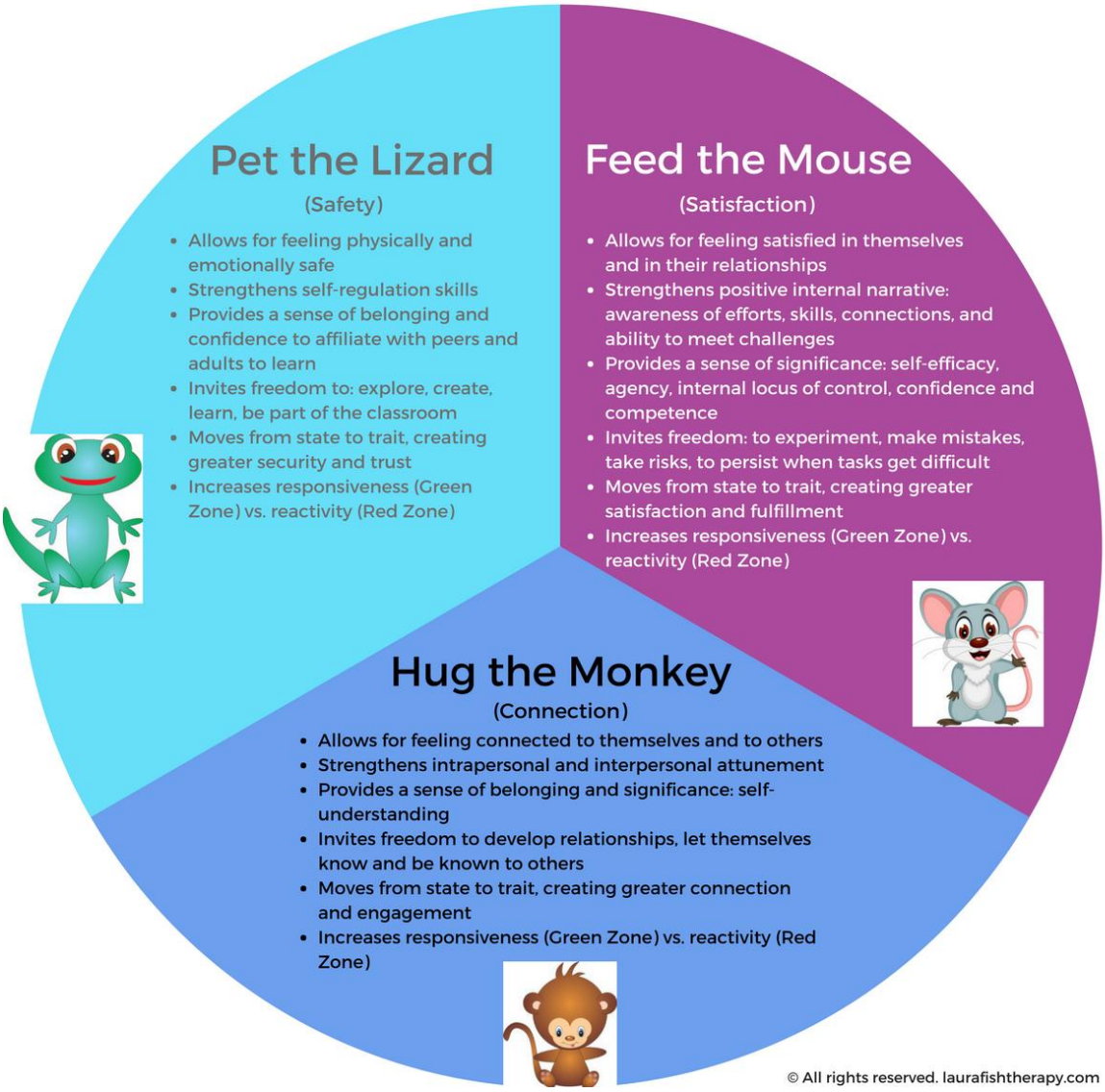


When adults help children “Pet the Lizard,” “Feed the Mouse,” and “Hug the Monkey,” they increase their ability to “drive” to get their needs met from an integrated brain (i.e., drive from the “Green Zone”).

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 adult 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 or Blue 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 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.