

Are we co-escalating or co-regulating?



We've been thinking about stress behaviours (vs misbehaviour) and beginning a process of recognising ours and our children's stressors. Let's talk about how we can support children when they are over-stressed.

Any meaningful discussion about this requires that we have at least some understanding of how our brain works. Turns out, explaining sciencey stuff is a stressor for me! Makes me nervous. So I'll do this in very layman terms.

When we are calm, focussed and alert, our prefrontal cortex (thinking brain) that's in charge of executive functioning like logic, emotion regulation, problem solving, creativity etc. works together with our limbic brain (feeling brain) that's in charge of our survival needs. When we are over-stressed or when our alarms are kindled, our limbic brain kicks into high gear and takes over. At this point, our thinking brain won't come online again until the brain is certain there no longer is any danger.

The best analogy I've come across for this so far is by Dan Siegel. He calls this process of our limbic brain taking over 'flipping the lid'. You can watch him explain this [here](#).

Interbrain

As soon as a baby is born, her limbic system is wired to receive signals from the caregiver's limbic system. This channel of communication is at a frequency beneath conscious awareness. Beyond the words we use, our limbic brains are communicating by picking up on affect cues such as our touch and gaze. This limbic to limbic resonance is bi-directional. This means that as much as a caregiver's calm/stressed state can influence the child, the child's state also influences the adult. Which explains why a child's cries can be a stressor for caregivers. As the adult with the more developed brains, we have the ability to self-regulate, and in turn, co-regulate with the child.

Are you co-escalating or co-regulating?

In parenting groups like ours we often get posts asking about what parents should say/do when the child is having a meltdown, or becoming aggressive. Beyond what to say or do, what about how to 'be'? If we can prioritize being regulated ourselves, our calm will be the biggest support for our children in returning to calm. We should prioritize self-regulation because if we ourselves are stressed, we might be co-escalating instead of co-regulating.

It's also important to remember that every child is different; what one child finds calming - deep breaths, light touch, hugs, verbalizing a child's feelings - might be instead a stressor for another. There is no one-size-fits-all recipe for helping a child to calm down.