

FIGHT or FLIGHT: The Science Behind Tantrums

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of attending a 4-day intensive professional development workshop on the triune brain with Sudha Kudva, a certified play therapist and accredited clinical supervisor for play and creative art therapies. I was blown away by what she taught—it was simple yet profound and it completely solidified my 'why' in the work that I do using neuroscience for kids. Based on the attachment theory

HELPING YOUR CHILD BETTER UNDERSTAND HIS OR HER EMOTIONS AND REDUCE THE NUMBER OF EMOTIONAL OUTBURSTS.

by John Bowlby, the triune brain is the answer to all tantrums, whether by kids or adults. To make it as simple and as easy to digest as possible, we call it the gut, heart, and brain.

GUT - AM I SAFE?

The gut is the oldest and the core of all brains and where your fight-or-flight survival instincts live. In workshops, I usually describe this brain as the Empress Dowager. She is the empress and is in control—everyone's sole mission is to protect her. Whenever there is any threat to her survival, she mercilessly slays to stay in control and on top.

The gut brain is very similar to this, it is our survival mechanism. There are neural circuits in our brains called neuroception that are constantly on the lookout for



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any threat and whether they're life-threatening. As soon as it feels at risk, it disables everything else (including the frontal lobes) which means it overrides all rationality, logic, thinking, relationships, and reflection, to just focus on survival.

The gut brain's main question is: "Am I safe?"

In real life, this might look like one of these four ways:

1 FIGHT: a little one thrashing and screaming around, unable to listen to reason.

2 FLIGHT: a little one running away, avoiding, hiding, and shielding.

3 FREEZE: a little one paralysed and unable to process, move, talk, or do anything.

4 PLEASE: a little one doing everything in their power to please the other person which also includes complying even though they are only doing it to survive and not doing it authentically because they want to or understand it.

When your child is in this space, the only way out is by connecting and showing them that they are safe, heard, seen, loved, and wanted.

This is because the second part of the brain that is best friends with the gut brain is the heart.

HEART - AM I LOVED?

The heart craves for warmth, closeness, belonging, and togetherness. It is again instinctive but also often overlooked. The heart is the second stop and if it feels included, heard, seen, that it matters, and is a part of the tribe,

it gains a sense of control which then enables it to truly move into the brain that we all hope, pray, and wish our children would be in all the time - the brain.

BRAIN - WHAT CAN I LEARN?

The brain is where learning, critical thinking, problem solving, self-regulation, self-control, language, abstract thought and creativity live. The irony however, is while the gut is 500 million years in evolution and the heart is 150 million years in evolution, the brain is only at 2-3 million years in evolution. As if that isn't enough, our prefrontal cortex which controls decision-making, moderates social behaviour and drives complex cognitive behaviour (problem-solving) doesn't fully develop until the age of 25.

What does all this science and data tell us?

It means that without feeling safe or loved, learning cannot happen.

This is the heart of my *PLEASE* tool and reflects the way the brains of little ones (and adults!) work:

Prepare
Listen
EMPATHISE
Acknowledge
Sit EMPOWER

At the core of it, we all want a sense of control to feel safe which is why I always say that if you can prepare you and your child well—physically, emotionally,

logistically, then really, you may not even need the rest of the steps because your child feels safe, loved, seen, and like they matter. Instead of having epic meltdowns or throwing tantrums in their need to feel safe, they can instead remain in their logical, rational, thinking, learning brain, and confidently handle it.

If the preparation doesn't work or just didn't happen for today, take a deep breath. Take a second just to find your equilibrium before you go back into the battle again (gut). You can't pour from an empty cup, mama.

Then listen. Ask what the problem is and really, genuinely, listen.

When you can sit together, listen, acknowledge and empathise, you help your little one not only feel safe, but also feel included and connected (heart).

When they get there, only then can you talk through what really happened, but more importantly, what they can learn from it and how to do better next time (brain). ☺

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