
Navigating Big Emotions Together

Understanding and Regulating the Nervous
System for Children and Their Caregivers



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Goals for Today:

- Understand the basic function of the nervous system.
- Recognize different states of the nervous system in ourselves and our children.
- Learn practical strategies for nervous system regulation for both parents and children.
- Foster empathy and compassion for our children's behavior and our own responses.

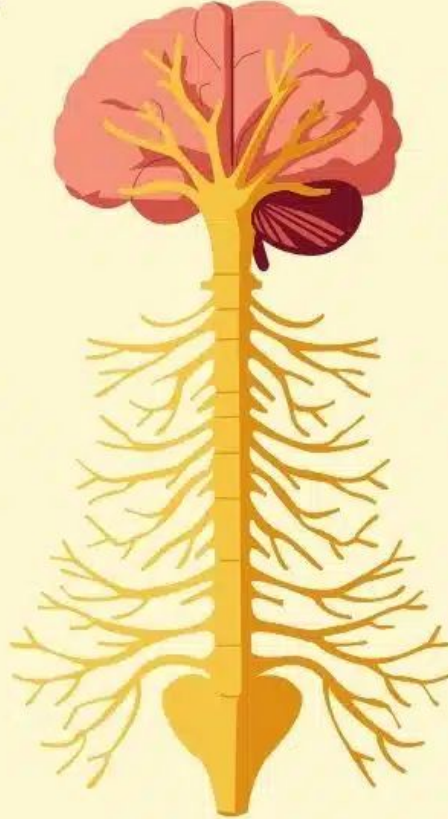
What is the nervous system?

- Brain, spinal cord, and nerves: sends messages between brain and body.
 - Vagus nerve controls all body functions
- Our internal alarm system, detects safety, danger, or threat.
- Trauma can dysregulate the nervous system, leading to hypersensitivity to perceived threats.
- Chronic stress and trauma can negatively impact the vagus nerve, affecting internal processes like digestion and immune response.

Parasympathetic nervous system

“rest and digest”

- Pupil constriction
- Slow heartbeat
- Relaxes airways
- Stimulates bile release for better digestion
- Constricts blood vessels
- Increases urinary output



Sympathetic nervous system

“fight or flight”

- Dilates pupils
- Increases heartbeat
- Opens up lungs to allow more air in
- Produces sweat
- Converts glycogen in liver to glucose for quick energy
- Slows digestion
- Adrenaline production
- Increases muscle tension including pelvic floor which puts pressure on the bladder

Three states of the nervous system

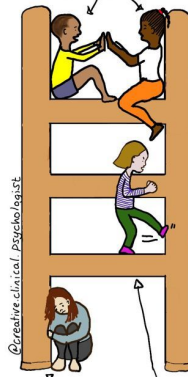
- Ventral Vagal (Connected & Calm): Feeling safe, calm, curious, connected, present in the moment
 - Examples in Children: Engaged play, easy cooperation, open communication.
- Sympathetic (Fight or Flight): Feeling fear, anger, anxiety, racing thoughts, fast heartbeat
 - Examples in Children: Meltdowns, defiance, aggression, hyperactivity
- Dorsal Vagal (Freeze): Feeling numb, helpless, despair, dissociation, low energy, shut down
 - Examples in Children: Withdrawal, zoning out, difficulty concentrating, numbness

Where are you on the...

Polyvagal Ladder?

(Adapted from the work of Stephen Porges and Deb Dana)

How do we help keep them here? e.g. interpersonal warmth



What will help her move back up the ladder?

Will she become too flooded and slide down?

• Ventral vagal - I'm feeling safe and can engage

• Sympathetic nervous system activated - I'm feeling under threat and my body is telling me to fight or run

• Dorsal vagal activation - I'm feeling overwhelmed, frozen disconnected and numb

Illustrated by Juliet Young

Applying it to ourselves as caregivers

- Recognize our own sympathetic or dorsal states and how they impact our interactions with our children
 - Fight or flight in adults: yelling, restlessness, grinding teeth, avoiding people or places
 - Freeze in adults: increased use of phone (“doom scrolling”), trouble focusing or sleeping, feeling fatigued, isolating self, increased crying, feeling helpless or hopeless
- Understand that our regulated state can co-regulate our child's nervous system.
 - “Our calm helps their calm”

Regulating strategies: finding calm together

- Breathing and movement
 - Deep breathing exercises: activate the parasympathetic nervous system
 - Playful breathing techniques: blowing bubbles, racing pompoms, balancing stuffed animals.
 - Gentle movement: rocking, swaying, bouncing, dance parties
- Sensory integration
 - Calming the nervous system through sensory input (touch, movement, sounds, etc.)
 - Examples: weighted blankets, sensory bins, aromatherapy, spending time outside
- Connection and safety
 - Co-regulation: providing a calm, present, and validating presence
 - Physical presence: holding, rocking, close proximity (if safe and welcomed)
 - Emotion labeling: "I am feeling overwhelmed," or "I can see that you're feeling frustrated."

Examples of Strategies

CALM

5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Technique

This exercise grounds you in the present moment by engaging your senses, shifting your focus away from distressing thoughts. This redirection calms an overactive sympathetic nervous system, reducing the fight-or-flight response. Practicing this technique regularly can build nervous system flexibility and resilience.

- 1 Identify five things you can see. Acknowledge each object by stating its name aloud or silently.
- 2 Acknowledge four things you can reach out and touch or feel. Again, take a moment to name them.
- 3 Shift your focus to three things you can hear in the background. Name them.
- 4 Recognize two scents you can smell, allowing your sense of smell to engage. Name them.
- 5 Finally, pay attention to one thing you can taste, even if it's just the taste of your breath.

VITALITY

Shake It Off

The practice of shaking ignites a gentle, invigorating vibration throughout the body, actively promoting emotional release and restoring the nervous system's equilibrium. This practice is especially effective when moving out of shutdown and heading up the ladder toward safety and connection.

Begin with one minute, aiming for three to five minutes with continued practice.

- 1 Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart.
- 2 Maintain a straight back as you gently tuck your hips forward. Keep your arms relaxed and by your sides.
- 3 Shake your body gently, starting with your wrists, moving up your arms to your neck and head. Breathe deeply from your diaphragm.
- 4 Bounce gently on the balls of your feet, shaking out your legs as you lift and plant your heels.

If you have neck sensitivity, focus exclusively on lower arm and leg movements.

<https://tinyurl.com/pvtcards>
(Google Drive folder)



Key Takeaways

- Understanding the nervous system helps us respond with empathy to children's behaviors
 - Seeing aggressive behaviors as a sign that the child is feeling unsafe
- Caregivers' self-regulation is crucial for co-regulation and modeling healthy coping
 - Put your own mask on first!
- Small, consistent practices build resilience for both parents and children

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