



Chiropractic Newsletter Well-Being

The Secret Power of Your Stable Nervous System

There's a lot of well-deserved attention right now on teaching mindfulness to children, at home and in school. We know that mindfulness can be a powerful intervention to help young people cultivate critical skills for paying attention, and calming down when they are upset.

But at Mindful Schools, where I earned my Mindfulness Instructor certification and continue to serve as a guiding teacher in the Mindful Teacher certification program, we emphasize a simple, profoundly powerful idea:

Your nervous system is the intervention. As mammals, we regulate our nervous systems in the presence of stable others. We come into this world immature and dysregulated, and it's only through the soothing voices, gentle touches, and reciprocal attention of our caregivers that we learn to experience stillness, safety, and peace.

So when your child, or any child— or any other human, for that matter— is dysregulated and needs soothing, they don't necessarily need advice or ideas or lectures or solutions or therapy or a meditation app. They may just need you, a stable other, to sit with them in their distress. You can be the anchor in their proverbial emotional storm.

I experienced the power that my stable, well-regulated nervous system could have on a young person a few months ago at dance recitals. When I went backstage just before my "dance moms" group was about to perform, I noticed a young dancer (I'd later learn she was 7 years old) in hysterics, looking on from the wings as her classmates danced on stage. I had no idea what had happened, but I did learn, from her frantic screams, that she did not want to be here, and did not ever want to dance ever again, because she hates dance.

I was torn between wanting to help her (which I attempted, briefly, to do) and having to get onstage and perform my tap dance. A fellow dance mom finally had to nudge me onstage so I didn't miss my cue.

Once I returned to the dressing room, I saw this



distressed young girl with another teacher. I also teach at the studio, so I asked if I could help. The teacher gratefully asked me to stay with the child as she went to find her parents.

I had never met this young girl; I didn't even know her name. All I knew was that she was in quite an agitated state. I asked her name, which she shouted at me, angrily correcting me when I pronounced it wrong at first. Then I sat down next to her, so we were on the same level. I didn't ask what was wrong—I don't even know if she knew at that point— but I simply said, "You're really upset right now, huh?"

I saw the slightest softening in her face. "Yes! I'm so mad, and I don't want to be here!" she screamed.

"It must be so hard to be so mad and have to wait while they find your parents," I offered.

"Yes! I hate dance and I don't ever want to dance again! I've done this for four years and I don't want to ever come back!" As she screamed at me, I just sat with her, continuing to make eye contact and listen to her, and simply reflect back what I was hearing. I didn't tell her how much I love dance, or that maybe someday she would want to dance again, or maybe she was just upset because she was tired, or the million other things I might have said in an effort to "help." I knew she had a lot of charge in her system that needed to be released. I knew she needed to be listened to, to feel felt and understood.

She relaxed a little as I asked her about the doll she was

clutching, and she told me more about why she didn't like dancing. She expressed her worry that her parents would be mad at her for not going onstage. By the time her family arrived, she had calmed down a bit, and seemed to welcome the hugs that her not-mad parents offered.

So often, when children are dysregulated and upset, we end up joining them in their dysregulation. We get just as mad, just as loud, and just as unskillful in our behavior. It might be because we fear that the child's behavior is a reflection of our parenting or teaching abilities, or because the child is demonstrating a trait (such as helplessness or frustration) that we have difficulty tolerating in ourselves.

In my experience with this distraught dancer, I think I was able to maintain my own state of regulation because of my distance from this child, a complete stranger to me. And, paradoxically, that was precisely the reason I was able to invite her into the stability of my internal nervous system state. It was the most powerful gift I could offer her in that moment.

We cultivate this gift, this secret power of our own stable nervous system, each time we sit in stillness. Each time we take a few moments to notice our breath, we invite regulation into our system. And because we are members of a co-regulating species of mammals, our regulation invites the nervous systems around us to regulate as well.

We don't have to teach complicated techniques to our children. Our nervous system is the intervention.

A few weeks after dance recitals, at my daughter's dance team auditions, I was able to offer this intervention once again. My daughter ran up to me before her tap audition and said, "Mom! I'm freaking out! I'm so scared and nervous and I don't think I can do this!"

Her agitation let me know that any words of reassurance about how much she'd practiced or how good of a tapper she is would have fallen on deaf ears. Her nervous system was in a dysregulated state, where rational thinking is set aside in order to let the body's fight-or-flight instincts do their thing without cognitive interference.

So I offered my regulated state. I held her hands and took a few deep breaths—a nonverbal invitation to join me in activating her parasympathetic nervous system (the so-called "rest-and-digest" system). I helped her focus her attention away from the perceived threat by asking her what sounds she could hear in the room, and how many blue things she could see at that moment. As her breathing slowed, I spoke to her in a soothing voice...and as her number was called, she went into the audition room with a bit more poise and confidence.

I don't claim to be perfect at this practice, and I've joined the dysregulation of young people more times than I'd like to admit. But the more I practice, the more stable and grounded I become. The more I practice, the more stability and grounded-ness I can offer to young people.

That is a pretty miraculous superpower. And it's a superpower you possess, too. How will you use it?

—Sarah Rudell Beach, M.Ed.

*Appearing in Pathways to
Family Wellness Magazine
Issue 65—Spring 2020*

