Part 1: Blue Brain, Red Brain, and Brown Brain

Parents of new babies are forever asking why. “Why is she crying? Is she hungry, wet, scared, lonely, bored?” Since we can’t just ask her, we put on our detective’s hat. We think back to previous occasions, experiment with trial-and-error, or ask somebody knowledgeable.

Things start to change around the age of three. Now we begin to ask kids why. “Why are you crying?” “Why did you hit your sister?” “Why did you take your friend’s toy?” But it’s rare to get a good answer to these questions, if one at all.

As children get older still, “Why” starts to become an important tool to help them mature. Now they can start to explain or justify why they did something. Asking them why can help them to learn that what they say and do has consequences.

And then there are meltdowns. These can happen at any age, and not just with toddlers. When a meltdown occurs it’s back to the helplessness of infancy. There’s no point in trying to talk; instead, we need to go straight back into detective-mode.

Self-Reg looks at these different kinds of “why” via the metaphor of Paul MacLean’s Triune Brain: his idea that the human brain is composed of three distinct neural systems. At the bottom is the Reptilian brain: an ancient system that takes over when we are threatened. In Self-Reg we refer to this as Brown Brain.

Above this sits a “mammalian” Red Brain, where strong emotions and urges are triggered, and all sorts of communicative and social mechanisms operate “beneath the threshold of conscious awareness.”

At the top resides the “neocortex”: the Blue Brain that it makes it possible for us to think, plan, learn, speak, be aware of others and be self-aware.

Development, in MacLean’s vision, amounts to climbing up this tri-coloured neuroaxis. But the movement can go both ways, depending on how much stress we’re under. The calmer we are, the more the Blue Brain is in control. The greater the stress the more the Red Brain takes over. And in emergency situations (real or imagined) the Brown Brain is in total command.

When children are in Blue Brain, asking them why they did something can help them to learn how to make better choices. But when they go into Red Brain, they act without thinking. Their behaviours are caused by stress, not done for a reason. Asking why in these situations is more rhetorical than interrogative. And when children go Brown Brain, they will be in a rage, inconsolable, unable to process what we’re
saying. When a child is in that state, we need to shift gears from third to first: from teaching to soothing. And then we try to figure out why it happened.

The easy part here is that when a child goes into Brown Brain the cause is always the same: too much stress. But often the child will be dealing with “hidden” stresses: things that are causing her to burn a lot of energy without realizing it. And there is always more than one stress involved. The hard part is figuring out what exactly those stresses are.

The basic rule operating here is: Under excessive stress we regress. We move down the neuroaxis. This phenomenon is true throughout life, but the younger the child, the more often and quickly it happens. This is an especially important point for kids in Kindergarten when they are exposed to a quantum leap in their stress-load.

Part 2: Reframing “Challenging Behaviour” in Kindergarten

Kindergarten marks a major transition in children’s lives: from being coddled infants to being treated as responsible individuals. They are students now, and as such they have to meet certain expectations, as noted in an article published on education.com:

1. “He can follow the lead of a teacher and will honour the requests of authority figures.
2. She treats people and materials with respect.
3. He understands that there are class rules, and he follows them.
4. She knows that hurting someone physically or emotionally is unacceptable.
5. He has an awareness of time and can distinguish between work time and play time.
6. She can follow two or three unrelated directions at a time.
7. He can listen attentively for an appropriate amount of time.
8. She knows how to take turns, share, and work in a cooperative environment.
9. He takes on self-responsibility with toileting and mealtime needs.
10. She does her best at all times.”

As important as these goals may be for a child’s education—and for that matter, their well-being—the big question every Kindergarten teacher and parent faces is: How do I help the child who is having trouble meeting these expectations? That question seems to apply to more and more children these days. It is almost starting to seem like “challenging behaviours” have become the norm and no longer the exception.

To answer the question of how we help the child who needs the most help, we need to keep asking “Why?”
The problem is: Which “Why?” should we be asking?

If we believe it is up to the child to choose whether or not to respect authority figures or follow classroom rules, our thinking is strictly Blue Brain. If a child violates these norms, we assume that he is misbehaving, and doing so for a reason: e.g., to get or avoid something. Accordingly, we feel that we have to be careful not to reinforce that behaviour, because the child has to learn that the behaviour is unacceptable.

But what if the child has regressed—and I mean really regressed—to the sort of Brown Brain state we see in young infants? His action is neither rational nor irrational, but non-rational: i.e., driven by powerful and primitive sub-cortical brain processes that cause him to lash out or flee, and which shut down the prefrontal part of his brain that he needs to process our warnings and corrections. This leads us to a very different answer to our “Why question,” which is that his outburst is stress-behaviour and not misbehaviour.

With this way of thinking, we “reframe” the child’s behaviour. We recognize that an over-stressed child is not “choosing” to act in a certain way that concerns us, any more than a baby is “choosing” to go red in the face when she is in distress. She does not have any sort of a “purpose” for behaving in the way that violates norms. And shouting may stop her by sending her into freeze, but that will not help her in the least to develop self-control.

What we are dealing with when a child keeps regressing into Brown Brain is a patterned response to excessive stress. The most pressing issue here is not why this particular behaviour pattern has formed but rather, why the child is so stressed. That is the real “challenge” posed by “challenging behaviour”:

figuring out the answer to the right “Why question.”

**Part 3: Considering The Different Kinds of “Why?”**

The Self-Reg educator or parent seeks to understand, rather than manage a child’s behaviour. In effect, what is being reframed here is what it means to see the Kindergarten teacher, not as a glorified baby-sitter, but as a professional: someone who has been trained to ask the right kind of “Why question” and has the tools to find an answer.

If being a kindergarten teacher sometimes feels more like being a nanny than an educator, it is because young children become so impossible when they regress under stress. But being a “professional” is not a matter of insisting on expectations and not tolerating any deviations. The “professional stance” is that of recognizing and helping children to recognize when they are becoming overstressed and what to do about it, even—especially—when it is particularly hard to do so. We don’t have the luxury of not asking Why; not when the stakes are so high for a child’s future. Nor can we afford the error of asking the wrong kind of “Why.”
One of the great challenges for Kindergarten teachers is that they have little idea as to what the first years of a child’s life have been like. At first, they don’t know what the child’s strengths or vulnerabilities might be, what to expect when the child is over-stressed, why she is over-stressed, and what the signs are that she is becoming over-stressed.

The one thing to bear in mind when setting out to answer these questions is that, despite its name, Kindergarten is no garden party for kids. In fact, all of the “expectations” I mentioned in part two of this series represent a massive increase in the stresses that the child is exposed to. For example, the child must:

- Be with a lot of kids the same age, all with developmental limitations
- Be in a confined space
- Be in the presence of older kids
- Be cared for by a strange adult whose nonverbal cues are foreign
- Stay regulated (calm and alert) over the course of what, for any child, is a long day, and for some children, an excruciatingly long day
- Follow a structured program and set of rules
- Pay attention when asked to do so
- Take turns, share, and cooperate.

Once we get started on this Self-Reg way of thinking, we see our role in meeting the needs of young children in a completely new light. Nothing will ever rival Robert Fulghum’s wonderful All I Really Need to Know I learned in Kindergarten. But Self-Reg does present us with a twist on this classic: All I Really Need to Know About Handling Stress I Learned in Kindergarten—well, started to learn!

Helping the child get started on this life-shaping journey forces yet another “Why” on us: Why am I reacting in a negative way to a child’s regressive behaviours? Is it because I have not yet learned about the different states associated with Blue Brain, Red Brain, and Brown Brain? Once I begin to understand the science of self-regulation, will I begin to see the child differently? Will I see a different child?

This last question is the easiest of all to answer. The answer is: Yes! When you see a child differently, you really do see a different child.