

## WHAT CONSTITUTES KINDNESS:

necessary support for young children (and their older peers) who struggle with self regulation and learning.

PACER SYMPOSIUM  
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## At this workshop

- ♦ Understand why kindness becomes a critical "state of mind" for parents, educators, and community professionals working with children.
- ♦ Explain how kindness and positive interactions mediate the inevitable frustrations of learning distress.
- ♦ Consider how we effectively maintain kindness to support challenged children.

## MY PREMISE THIS MORNING:

Kindness and positive emotions are at the core of best practice for both mental health and education, and must be consciously and intentionally maintained for our work to be effective, especially when we are working with challenged children.

More than a virtue; an active intentional state of mind or foundational attitude that takes practice and requires knowledge, skill and support.

The purpose is to help the child move forward by maintaining regulation, accessing new learning, and repairing obstacles.

## DISPOSITION FOR KINDNESS

# WHAT IS REGULATION?

- Regulation is at the core of adaptation: the ability to maintain and regain balance in the face of change, threat and intense emotions.
- Regulation is learned through early and consistent care: attachment.
- Self regulation is always preceded by co-regulation: we help one another stay regulated, although children always need more help.

## why is regulation so important?



- Regulation is the core capacity that permits exploration. One has to feel safe inside to venture out.
- Young children need reliable regulating partners who can protect them from dangers, but also from too much stimulate, change, intense emotions.
- As children grow, these "regulating partners" are internalized: children carry us in memory, and learn to regulate themselves. But in moments of intense distress, they seek these regulating partners.
- Intense distress can involve outside events, but for many children with learning, emotional and behavioral challenges, distress is triggered by their own challenges.

## Impact of stress



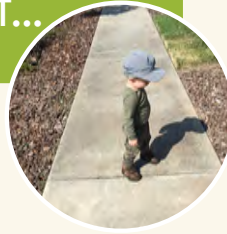
- Stress is necessary and inevitable; adult help keeps stress tolerable.
- Young children must deal with stress from outside (environmental challenges); internal stress; and relationship expectations that can cause stress.
- Toxic stress is devastating: too much, for too long with too little adult help. Children exposed to toxic stress cannot manage and often become overwhelmed = symptoms or behaviors express their distress.

## WITHOUT KIND MEDIATION, HOW DOES STRESS IMPACT CHILDREN'S BODIES?

- Sympathetic nervous system: fight or flight reaction when children perceive threat -- even when none exist (danger, fear of survival).
- Parasympathetic nervous system: painful slowing down in face of rejection, losing acceptance (heartbreak, despair).



## WHEN STRESS AROUSAL IS QUIET...



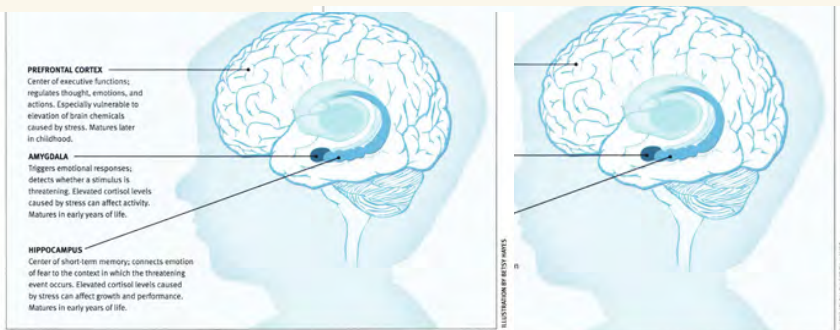
- Adults usually can remain kind. Children signal their upset and often are more open to soothing.
- Quiet distress evokes calm responses.

## WHEN STRESS AROUSAL IS LOUD...

- Children signal distress but often trigger anger, fear, disdain, dismissal in others.
- Why?
- Intensity of emotions reminds us of our own vulnerability -- and our own biases about how children "should" feel and behave. When there is pre-existing judgment, it is hard to not become reactive and seem mean.



## DILEMMA OF FEAR BRAIN VS. LEARNING BRAIN .



same brains parts; fear prevents new learning

## KINDNESS AS MEDIATING ENERGY

When we cannot fix we can still help.

Stress is best mediated by company.

Kind company actually reduces stress hormone activation, and restores children's capacity to see options (flexible thinking + emotion regulation).

Regulatory experiences with adults.

Emerging brain research

Vulnerability of (young) children

Diverse cultural perceptions

Our own wellbeing

## WHY KINDNESS?

## Bidirectional regulation

Parent (adult) provides reliable regulation support-- that supports cohesion for both.

"In sync" regulation becomes the norm for children to move towards self regulation and managing feelings.

## FEELING GOOD:

positive emotions as antidote to distress

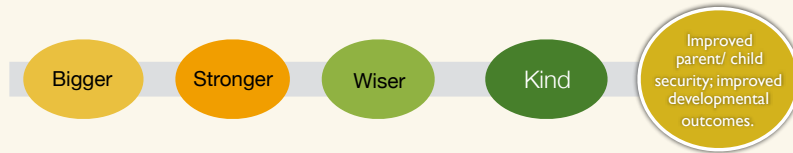
"It is no coincidence that emotions feel so good; the hormones released when you're happy, in love and feeling appreciated all help regulate your heartbeat into a "coherent" pattern. The fixed beating sets a rhythm for the rest of your body so that all other homeostatic mechanisms are carried out in sync."

Hill, NY Times, 6.3.16

## EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

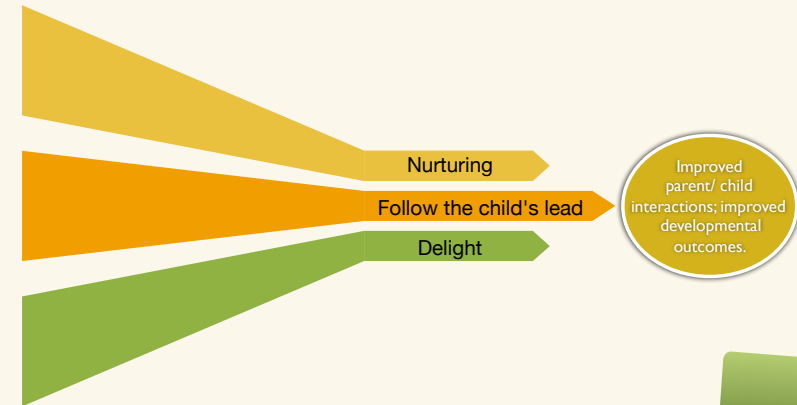
Program evidence for importance of kindness

## Circle of security \* Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin and Powell, 1998

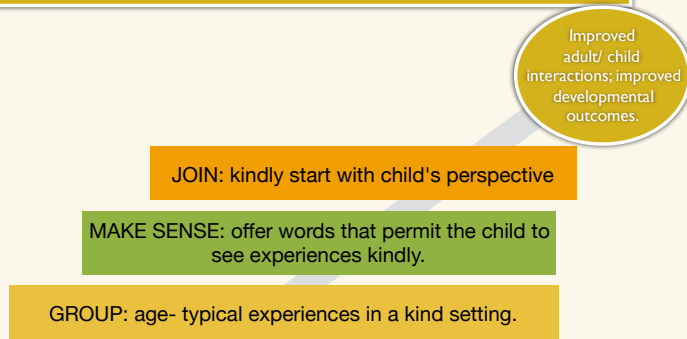


\* whenever possible, follow the child's need; whenever necessary, take charge kindly.

## ABC: attachment biobehavioral catchup Dozier 2010



## Developmental repair Gearity, 2003, 2009



For school aged children

HELPING  
CHILDREN  
SUCCEED

What Works and Why

PAUL  
TOUGH

Author of the New York Times bestseller HOW CHILDREN SUCCEED

## RAISE (Recovery After Initial Schizophrenia Episode)

- Protocols initially developed in Australia for 1st episode psychosis.
- Emphasis on working with the patient/ kindly recognizing the person more than the symptoms.
- Increased engagement and improved recovery outcomes.

## WHY IS KINDNESS HARD...

and what must we do to maintain this disposition?

## Operationalizing kindness

- an affective signal of safety;
- indicates respect, interest, willingness to join the child;
- a boost to children's motivation and stamina to learn something new;
- mediates meanness that children cannot metabolize;
- does not preclude expectations, disapproval or even consequences/ imposed kindly.

1. Children need adults to stay in balance:  
managing our own distress.



## 2. Adults need positive experiences with children to stay effective.

Single Slices / Peter Kohlsaat

I have to spend quality time with my adults or they'll become dysfunctional.



## 3. Easy to stay kind when...

- Children signal affection and receive affection easily.
- Children appreciate help.
- Children act in reciprocal ways.
- Children show positive emotions.
- Children seem innately generous to peers.

## Hard to stay kind when...

- Children appear distant and resist engagement.
- Children recoil from help or confuse adults.
- Children act "selfish, manipulative, uncooperative".
- Children display negative emotions.
- Children cause disruptions within the group.

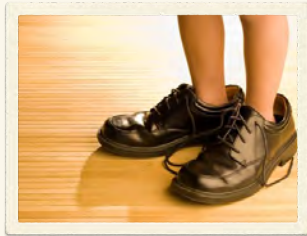
## And really hard to stay kind when...

- Adults lose track of development/ back and forth learning.
- Adults lose interest in children's real experiences.
- Adults "privilege" needs of some children over others.
- Adults are rushed, pressured, blamed.
- Adults feel personally stressed and feel too little support.



## 4. REMEMBER DEVELOPMENT

- Development is continual but can be waylaid by stress.
- All children are more alike than not... Don't let disability preclude normal experiences.
- Be attentive to more than behavior: look at developmental "qualities" that reveal what the child feels, believes, needs and intends.



Pay attention to where a child is...not should be.

## 5. BE IN THE PRESENT

- Be interested in what is happening right now for the child.
- Privilege present and future over past; what happens now between us is more important than what is remembered.
- Privilege affective learning before cognitive mastery.
- Allow that sliding back is practice for moving forward and see it as that.

The things they carry in must be experienced with you...

recent family interactions

stressful memories and fears

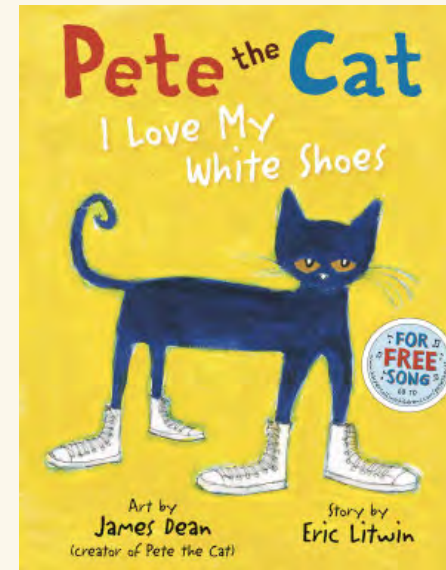
disappointments and negative expectations.



## 6. BUILD SHARED STORIES

- When children feel helpful adult company, there is greater opportunity to build a shared story-- language narrative -- that contains what happened (validation and reflection). These stories organize what happened and protects what can happen next time.
- Shared stories in good company are at the heart of culture and social belonging.
- Stress and repair narratives are core for many trauma interventions.

## Favorite shared story...



## and another...



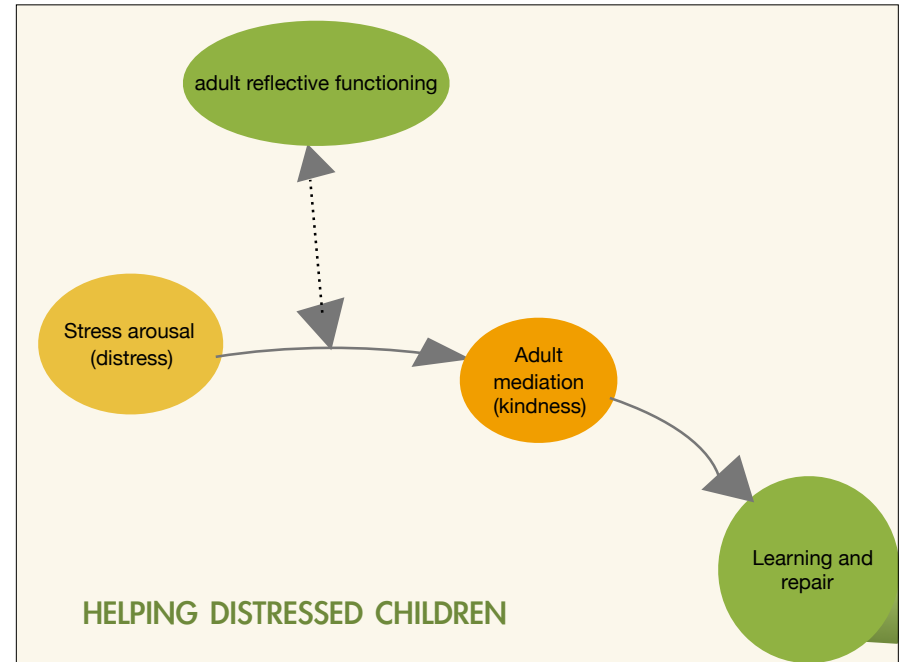
“Goodbye,” said Mr Gumpy.  
“Come for a ride another day.”

## 7. GROW YOUR CAPACITY FOR REFLECTION

- Adult reflective capacity is our ability to be aware of my own experience/ perceptions, feelings, ideas, intentions, needs AND to also access and hold onto the child's experience: perceptions, feelings, ideas, intentions, needs.
- To be reflective we must be more interested about what is going on for that child than in the child's behaviors.
- Reflective is opposite of defensive...

## Why is adult reflective capacity so important?

- Children cannot see our perspective if we don't see their perspective. They need us to affirm their experiences first.
- Social learning helps children bridge to shared experiences that they recognize as safe and useful. This is how children move forward to better functioning and social participation.



## In summary

Disposition for kindness is a mind shift that must be evident in all of our interventions when we work with young and older children who are challenged.

As obvious as this may seem, kindness has often been lacking or accidental, rather than intentional and purposeful.

We can change this.