If behavior is communicating...

Are Adults Listening?

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Children's behaviors have long been judged as good or bad…and needed to be managed. This effort to manage behaviors has ignored the communicative intention: what do children need us to know about their needs, and their minds.
Helping children know rules about how the world works.
Behavior is also about finding
Premise 2

Children don't learn by themselves.

Children's learning is highly dependent on adult engagement and support. Children need adults to provide reliable connections (attachment) so they can safely explore and, with practice, achieve mastery of all sorts of things.
I have to spend quality time with my parents or they'll become dysfunctional.

* and so will I....
Premise 3

Children with learning challenges often rely on behaviors that seem perplexing to adults. This are three reasons:

• Children are confused and distressed and show this with behaviors.

• When children experience fear, their behaviors become defensive to protect themselves.

• When children and teens continue to feel endangered, they revert to behavior patterns that worked before... even when these didn't work well.
If the significant adults in their lives can shift from

• *Why did you do this?* (tone signaling disgust, anger)

• To: *why did you do this?* (tone suggesting concern, interest, even shared investment).

then parents truly become **regulating partners** who are available to help children find their minds and learn what works.

• **experience fear** — their behaviors become defensive to protect themselves.

• When children and teens continue to feel threatened, they revert to behaviors that worked before…en when these didn't work well.
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

1. know your child’s developmental abilities.
“I would share, but I’m not there developmentally.”
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

2. Understand behavior
Sources of behavior

- **Outside**: events or experiences that are or perceived to be endangering.

- **Between**: children seek proximity (attachment) to manage fear. When important relationships are threatened or loss is possible, fear dominates.

- **Inside**: memories, perceptions, physical distress, dysregulation can cause a child to experience fear from within.

- **Inability**: I *cannot do this*. Mastery is core to childhood wellbeing.
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

3. follow this process (it looks more complicated than it is)
UNPACKING CHILD BEHAVIOR

- NOW WE KNOW WHAT TO DO
- EMPATHY ENERGY
- HOW ARE WE?/RELATIONSHIP HEALTH
- WHAT HAPPENED?/PRECEDENT
- WHAT DO I SEE?
- WHAT DOES CHILD REPORT...
- CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL ABILITIES
- FAMILY/SCHOOL STRESSORS
Perception

When a child is upset perception is often subjective, unique to me.

By asking what happens to you or tell me what’s happening… you make room for their point of view, their inside experience. Validating what is going on inside actually permits mental interest in another’s point of view.

WHAT DOES CHILD REPORT…
Security is a big deal for children… and means both objective security and connection security. Children and teens are hypervigilant to tensions, distraction, dis-ease in parental state of mind, or conflict between people in the family.

This doesn't mean hide upset…oh no! But own upset. Acknowledge emotional realities and also retain relationship security. I can be upset and still be there for you. My upset doesn't mean you can't remember our rules.

Remember, adult dysregulation that is prolonged becomes a stressor for children.
Being able to be with

This is joining: not just be physically present for a child, but having the emotional energy to enter into their experience enough that he/she feels your help.

Sometimes empathy energy can be like a passing breeze; children trust our presence.

Sometimes empathy energy needs to be very present—time stopping presence. This deregulates children so they can start to learn again.
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

4. Remember…correction is always about learning.
Fear brain/ learning brain

PREFRONTAL CORTEX
- Center of executive functions;
- Regulates thought, emotions, and actions.
- Especially vulnerable to elevation of brain chemicals caused by stress.
- Matures later in childhood.

AMYGDALA
- Triggers emotional responses;
- Detects whether a stimulus is threatening.
- Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can affect activity.
- Matures in early years of life.

HIPPOCAMPUS
- Center of short-term memory;
- Connects emotion of fear to the context in which the threatening event occurs.
- Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can affect growth and performance.
- Matures in early years of life.
My mantra

- **What does this child need to learn** …right now…and how best can I help that learning…right now.

- Too often we answer that questions with a global response…*learn to be respectful / keep his room clean/ stop getting so upset about little things.*

- Break down learning into **manageable parts**, to assure a sense of mastery and relationship wellbeing.
Call and respond activity
and forth energy that restores regulation and facilitates new learning.
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

5. Stay flexible in your responses.
• I don't get it… but I can still be helpful…

• **Validating child’s distress** and your support without solving the problem.

• Purpose of soothing, calming, distracting, redirecting away from impossible impasse.

• *I get your upset but what you are doing doesn't work*…

• **form and function dilemma**: *I can get the message (need) but the form of messaging isn't OK. Find a better way to tell me.*

• New learning can be *next time: when you need…use your words.*
Try not to…

- be reactive, retaliatory, mean: children struggle to metabolize these responses.

- get too anxious or dysregulated yourself so you cannot help. Children need adults to stay bigger and wiser…

- dismiss your child’s message, especially when it is accompanied by intense emotions.

- Collapse into powerlessness or defeat — but if you feel powerless or defeated, at least bring your child along: we are really stuck right now.

- Resist help.
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

It takes a village… or other minds

Collaborative parenting shifts the burden from *this is my child* — to *I'm the parent and I can use*. Help doesn't take away your rights, but can add to your ideas and your responses.
Seeking professional help

- Please don't assume I can fix your child, like a mechanic: solutions are always collaborative.

- Sometimes help can see the problem more clearly — assessment clarity.

- Behavior problems are always relational: there is that call and response and fixing interactions will change behavior.

- Don't hear blame, hear concern— and commitment to solving a problem.

- We admire children’s efforts— doing what they can — and work to offer something that works better.
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

7. Rehab time out.
Take a break

- Let's **rehabilitate time out**. Taking a break isn't punishment of evidence of defeat. It is truly how we regain our brain power. Taking a break allows the aroused energy in our brain (and our child’s brain) to recede and the more thoughtful functions to return to action.

- Sending a child away angrily will increase fear and disconnection; sending a child away as part of an established plan — *when I'm too upset I can't help the way you need me, so let's take a break and trust we can fix this.*
It's OK

- For child to play in her room
- For child to read or use things that self soothe
- For child to want water …
- Building good anxiety vs. bad anxiety
- For parent to need the bathroom
- For parent to do dishes, load the wash,
- For a parent to call a partner or a friend…
- You too are fearful, underneath your anger and upset
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

8. Are consequences useful?
Let the punishment fit the crime…
but is childhood a crime?
Understanding contingency reinforcement
Contingencies we learn

- Always start with the **first contingency**: altos take care of children.
- Second contingency: when you are in distress, I will come to you.
- Subsequent contingencies are interpersonal and social.
  - **Interpersonal**: what you and child negotiate as the rules of this relationship.
  - **Social**: behaviors the larger community expects/ rules of the club. Becoming socialized is one of the major tasks of childhood.
Teaching contingencies

Parents/adults are the ones who need to be reliable and predictable...

rules are your tools as are consequences.
Contingencies at school

- Children must learn to do school, to fit into this particular club.

- School must be fair, equitable, and committed to helping all “club” members to learn what is expected. This our school and this is how it works here.

- Consequences at school MUST were to some of the same processes described for parenting: there must be interest in the child’s experience, there must be relationship connection and teachers must bring empathic energy to this learning process.

- Focus on learning, fixing vs. paying back.
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

9. What to fix?
Fixing

- Sometimes we need to **allow the child to feel fixed** — before we expect social fixes (others).

- Many behaviors are about the child / don't make it too relational. Don't take things personally and miss the chance to help the child learn about himself/herself.

- When behaviors destabilize relationships, fix the relationship. Manage shame and guilt: a little bit goes a long way. Manage disappointment.

- Natural consequences often fix the experience. Make sure there is connection with what got “broken”. Repair.
And finally, there is a place for

(stop talking)
Becoming a better listener (and decoder):

10. Keep moving forward
“What the use in regrets? Just lessons we haven't learned yet.”

Beth Orton, *Sweetest decline*