

POLYVAGAL INFORMED PARENTING
Co-regulation, Welcoming emotions & Play
(Audio Transcript)

Hello, and Welcome back to our Polyvagal Informed Parenting Challenge! This is video number three.

Today, let's empower you with three polyvagal-informed parenting practices that you can put to work in your home right away: Co-regulation, Welcoming all emotions and Play!

Let's start with Co-regulation. Polyvagal theory describes co-regulation as the reciprocal sending and receiving of signals of safety. So in parenting, it's when we help our child regulate their nervous system by calming ourselves so we can send those signals of safety, and then attuning to the child's emotional state, and empathizing so the child gets the message that their emotions are not dangerous. This co-regulation process not only supports the child's emotional development, but also of course promotes trust and connection, so it strengthens the parent-child relationship.

Children don't have the capacity to shift themselves from being upset to being calm until they feel safe. That's where we come in. Our understanding, calm presence is essential to give the child the signal that they're safe, to help settle their nervous system, and to guide them back to a state where they feel safe and can become calm.

Remember, we're giving them signals, not just about the world outside them, but about their own inner state being safe. *"It's okay. Those emotions are not going to overwhelm you. I've got you. You're okay."*

This research just confirms what you as a parent already know. When we parents can do the hard work of calming ourselves down and responding to our upset child with empathy and understanding, our child begins to calm down too and responds better to whatever the situation is that's upsetting them.

But the research shows that co-regulation isn't just a tool for those tough moments to calm down. It's also supporting the child to build a healthier nervous system long-term. So it gives them more ability to regulate their emotions and stress responses, and it fosters emotional intelligence and resilience.

Our second tool is to Welcome All Emotions. Most parents struggle when their children are overwhelmed by big emotions. At our worst -- especially when children are angry at us -- we may see their emotions as a challenge to our authority, or simply as bad behavior. Even at best,

we often can't bear to see our child unhappy and we just want to make the bad feelings go away. But if we think about big emotions through the lens of polyvagal theory, we need to ask ourselves: "What do our children's nervous systems most need when they're upset?" And the answer, of course, is safety.

We can't create safety by shutting down our children's feelings. That just gives them the message that they're wrong to have those feelings, and they're all alone on their own to deal with them. The natural result is that they repress those tears and fears, which makes them feel more anxious, less safe.

From a polyvagal perspective, rejecting or dismissing emotions can activate the sympathetic nervous system's fight or flight response, and it increases drama and conflict, obviously. It can also activate the dorsal vagal complex's shutdown response, and that undermines the development of resilience. Either way, we know that ignoring emotions, shutting down emotions hinders the development of the child's ability to self-regulate.

When children have big emotions the way to create safety is co-regulating, as we've just discussed. But there is another way we can create safety when our child is upset, and that's acceptance -- just accepting their big emotions without judgment; even -- or especially -- when we're setting limits on their behavior. When we empathize, when we accept our child's emotions -- even if we limit the behavior -- we are signaling that we are available to help them navigate these difficult feelings. They aren't all alone, and this helps activate the social engagement system or the ventral vagal complex, which facilitates emotional regulation.

So no, our children can't hit, they can't throw things, but they're allowed to be angry. We aren't trying to eradicate anger, remember, which is a valuable part of our emotional lives. We're trying to transform our relationship with anger to model something healthier for our children than what most of us were brought up with.

Our third tool is Play. It's well established that play is essential for children; it's not a luxury. Through play, children develop social and emotional skills, empathy, communication, and problem solving skills. They learn to regulate their emotions, navigate complicated social interactions, cope with challenges. It enhances their flexibility, their resilience. Playing with other kids fosters cooperation and collaboration, strengthens peer relationships or sibling relationships, and promotes a sense of belonging and community.

That's why play is children's work. Recent polyvagal research has explained that some of these benefits come from the fact that play activates the social engagement system, which is in both children and adults. It stimulates feelings of safety and connection, which is why adults, too, need to play more. This sense of safety provides the context that makes learning possible -- also growth, change, healing. When our nervous systems are in social engagement, or again, ventral vagal state, the body and mind are activated to learn, to grow, to heal.

So quite simply, play helps children manage stress and become more resilient. Obviously, when children play with other children, it's invaluable for them. But don't underestimate the positive impact of you playing with your child. Whether you're roughhousing to get your child laughing for 10 minutes to make sitting down to do that homework a little easier, or you've set aside half an hour to play one-on-one with your child, the act of playing -- whether it's building with Legos or pretend play, or even playing a game of basketball -- not only strengthens your relationship with your child and encourages them to want to cooperate with you. It also, because it activates the social engagement system, it helps them regulate and balance the autonomic nervous system. So that leads to better emotional regulation, so your child has the *capacity* to cooperate, as well as the willingness.

Playing with your child helps the nervous system develop in other ways as well. Play that includes physical touch, cuddling, or roughhousing stimulates the vagus nerve, which develops vagal tone, which increases the child's ability to calm themselves down when they're upset. Physical play, laughter, and snuggling all stimulate the release of oxytocin, and that encourages the body to build more oxytocin receptors, which gives your child more capacity for joy, love, and safety for the rest of their life.

I could go on about play, but I'm going to keep this short for you and give you your challenge for today. Here's the challenge:

- **Self-regulate, so you can offer co-regulation to your child, or**
- **Empathize and welcome all emotions, or**
- **Facilitate more opportunities for your child to play, both with kids and with you.**

So those are your three choices. You could of course do them all, but that'll just overwhelm you. Pick one that you can start with today to create a new habit. Each of these practices will support your child's nervous system for more emotional health and resilience, now and in the future.

This is the end of our Polyvagal Informed Parenting Practices Challenge. I'm Dr. Laura Markham. Thank you for joining me. Enjoy your child!