



How to Use the Polyvagal Theory in your Family or Classroom

In 1994 Dr. Stephen Porges gave the world the Polyvagal Theory, deepening and expanding our understanding of how our nervous system impacts every aspect of our health, our relationships, and our perception of safety. The autonomic nervous system scans our environment for cues of safety or cues of danger all day every day. We have many small branches of the vagus nerve in our lower abdomen. The information collected about our experience of our environment then travels upwards to the brain stem for processing. An example of this is what we refer to as a "gut feeling". Our autonomic nervous system then reacts to this information which will influence how we breathe, how our hearts beat, how we digest food, and our moods. And this entire process is pre-thought. It happens in an instant. All. Day. Long.

There are many reasons a child's nervous system may be finding cues of danger in her environment: a teacher, parent, peer, or sibling may be speaking harshly; perhaps the lights are too bright, or the noise pollution too great. These triggers may result in a red zone or a mobilized state when a person can struggle in the following ways: difficulty being still, irritability, stomach aches, difficulty focusing, anger, running away, and shouting. Another response to cues of danger may be the blue zone, which is a freeze response. Signs of freezing include a flat tone of voice, little to no facial expression, an I-give-up attitude, numbness, dissociation, and fainting.

These responses to the environment are not chosen by the mind but rather the body. When the children in our lives are in a red or blue zone, they need help from us to reach the green zone of safety, learning, social engagement, and restoration. This means, as individuals, we need to be regulated and in the green zone ourselves, so that we can regulate with them, a process known as co-regulation. A child in a red or blue zone needs to use our regulated (green) zone to guide their own nervous system back to a setting of safety.

I highly recommend Dr. Mona Delahooke's book "Beyond Behaviors" and Dan Siegal's book "The Yes Brain Child" for greater understanding and tools for children and the adults in their lives. When we are in the green zone, our bodies find cues of safety in our environment. Signs of safety are eye contact, greater prosody (expression) of the voice, more engagement of upper facial muscles, relaxed bodies, engaged minds, curiosity, the ability to listen, growling stomachs, and general ease. The green zone is where we create, learn, love, empathize, feel connected, and flourish.

Every mammal craves the safety of the green zone, so it's our responsibility as adults to cultivate our own self-regulation and to provide help to the children in our lives when they are out of that safe feeling. It's deceptively simple and deeply powerful work. Understanding the Polyvagal Theory will improve your relationships with yourself and the children in your life. Moreover, the work you do will better establish the foundation these children need in order to build a meaningful life for themselves.

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