



# MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

## BUILDING BETTER BRAINS...KNOWING, DOING AND BEING

Feedback and research have demonstrated a need and value in creating **home coaching tip sheets** for professionals to use with the children and families they providing services to and based on the work of the CALM Connection Parent Program.

The Melvin Brain Builder Tip Sheets incorporate the **knowing** (knowledge), **doing** (activities and interactions), and **being** (self-reflection, self-awareness, self-care) are always integrated in practice when working with children, youth and families.

## TOPICS

- Building Better Brains Starts with Connect & Reflect Interactions
- Come Play with Me - Child Directed Play
- Let's Talk About Emotions
- Big Passionate Emotions.... How do we Respond and Support?
- What does the Brain have to do with Big, Passionate Emotions?
- Angry is a Secondary Emotion.
- We are not born with these skills, but we are need them.
- Goldilocks 'Just Right' Energy States for each activity.
- 'No. Don't. Stop.' Let's Change the Narrative and Here's Why?
- I think I Can - Growth Mindset

## MELVIN'S INVITATION

Melvin invites you to share the Brain Builder Tip Sheets with families when these topics arise in your conversations and to support your discussions.





## MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

# BUILDING BETTER BRAINS STARTS WITH CONNECT & REFLECT INTERACTIONS?

**Connect** and **Reflect** interactions are like a rhythmic dance between you and your child when you notice what your child is seeing, doing and feeling. For example:

- Your child may be really busy making a picture, and they might say, "Look it!"
- They are excited for you to **Connect** with them and for you to **Reflect** on the work that they are creating.
- You might say "I see that you are using green and yellow for your picture."

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Research from the Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University<sup>(1)</sup>, states..... "Child-adult relationships that are responsive and attentive - with lots of back and forth interactions - build a strong foundation in a child's brain for all future learning and development." Children learn skills such as, turn taking, waiting and how to communicate in social interactions.



## THE HOW TO'S

- Take moments of pause and **Connect** as the parent/caregiver, to be present with your child and to take interest in what your child is seeing, doing and feeling.
- Smile back at your child when they smile at you.
- Allow for time as your child puts together their thoughts and then shares them with you.
- Respond to your children with curiosity, and try not using too many questions. Instead, **Reflect** on what they are doing.
- Play with your child in an activity that is important to them.

## MELVIN REMINDS US....

**Connect** and **Reflect** Interactions are important because they will help you to learn more about your child's strengths and interests, and it can also help you to understand where your child may need help.

Try using 'Reflect' statements other than "good work", or "good job", as this will end the interaction quickly and your child might not feel like you truly noticed and connected to the work they have been doing. Try to describe what you see them doing instead.

Find more Melvin's Brain Builders [www.connectwithcalm.ca](http://www.connectwithcalm.ca) (Distribution of this document permitted)



1. Retrieved from: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/5-steps-for-brain-buildingserve-and-return/>



# MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

## COME PLAY WITH ME, COME PLAY WITH ME..

Sometimes the requests from our children to play with them seems never ending and we think to ourselves when am I ever going to get to my list of things to do. Young children have a huge thirst for belonging and connection, and playing with you is just how they are trying to satisfy this need. You can support this need by engaging in Child-Directed Play.

### CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY

Child-directed play is 10-15 minutes of uninterrupted play where your child takes the lead and chooses the play activities. Child-directed play is essential in filling your child's energy and connection bank. A full bank helps your child to be more capable of listening and responding to requests and participating in activities.

### THE HOW TO'S:

- Have a special name for this intentional brain building activity, such as "Special Playtime". This will provide your child with predictability of what this play time means, especially when you say "I am busy right now. How about we do that later at Special Playtime."
- It is important to choose a time when your child can have your complete attention, where you are not distracted by your phone, other people, or chores and you are emotionally available to them.
- Use a timer or a countdown strip to indicate when the activity will be ending, for example: "In five minutes when the microwave beeps it will be time to clean up."
- If your child argues for more time, you can calmly let them know, "I know how much you enjoy this time and we will do it again soon."



### MELVIN REMINDS US....

Follow your child's lead.... this models cooperation when you are doing what your child is asking you to do.

Observe and notice what your child is doing and then narrate or reflect on their play.

Encourage and praise your child's effort, "You are working hard on that puzzle."

Refrain from asking too many questions.



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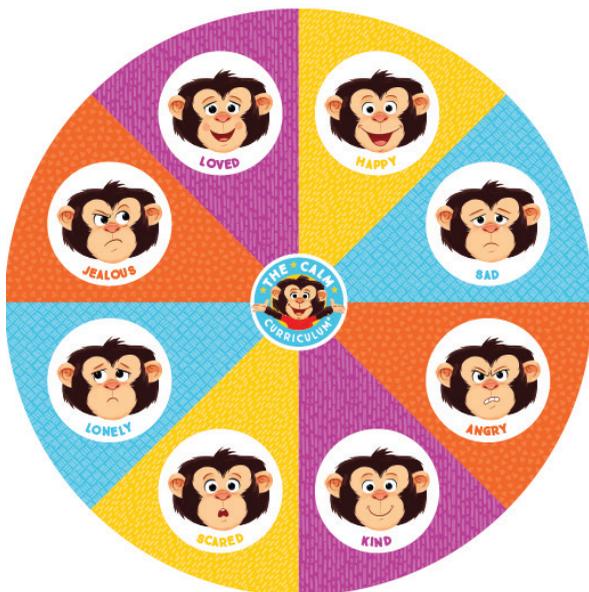
# MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

## LET'S TALK ABOUT EMOTIONS....

Helping our children learn and identify their emotions is critical in helping them manage their big emotions. Our children need to know and understand these emotions so that they can learn to express what they are feeling with their words rather than their actions.

### NAME THAT EMOTION

Dr. Goleman<sup>(1)</sup> explains, when children are supported in naming their emotions, this can help them to understand their inner world of thoughts and feelings. They need this understanding first, so that they can be supported in managing some of their big passionate emotions.



### THE HOW TO'S

- Enrich your child's vocabulary of emotions, i.e., sad, happy, angry, jealous, loved, kind, scared and lonely.
- Use games, songs, stories and TV show characters to help your children learn different emotions.
- Use everyday moments to talk about emotions, e.g.,  
"You look really excited about....",  
"Sam looks jealous that he didn't get to go first. Sometimes I get jealous when I am not first in the grocery store line-up."
- Validating emotions for our children to know they have been heard and that all emotions are okay, e.g., "I am wondering if you are feeling scared because you you are starting soccer today."
- Pause with your children during their big emotions (sad, lonely and angry). Your courage to stay with them helps your child feel safe during these times.

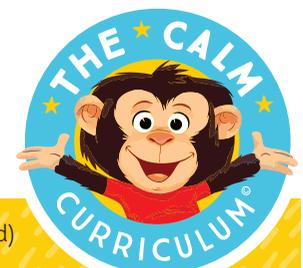
### MELVIN REMINDS US....

Our children first see and hear our emotions through our tone of voice and body language.

Being self-aware of your own emotions before you help your child with their emotion.

It is important not to blame your child for your emotions.

Children often use behaviours to demonstrate their emotions as they have not yet learned the language to communicate these feelings.



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1. Daniel Goleman (n.d). On self-awareness. Retrieved from: <http://www.danielgoleman.info/category/ask-daniel-goleman>



# MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

## BIG, PASSIONATE EMOTIONS... HOW DO WE RESPOND & SUPPORT?

In times of stress our children can quickly end up in their downstairs brain or their stress response system. It is here that children need their big person to try strategies that support safety in this area of the brain and then help them return to their upstairs brain. Practicing the **I CARE** Response can help you and your child during these big emotions.

### I CONNECT AND

When your child is in the downstairs part of their brain, it is important to connect authentically. This means being with your child and showing them how much you care even when their words or actions are not easy to hear, see or feel. This can be done by:

- Allowing your child to move their body and expend all the extra energy they have;
- Waiting and just being there with them, staying close by and using little words;
- Using a soft voice tone and getting below their eye level.



### RESPOND EMPATHETICALLY

As your child makes their way back upstairs with your help, you can now respond empathetically. Empathy means reflecting or commenting on your child's needs, wishes, thoughts, behaviors and feelings without judgment and without asking questions. Explained<sup>(1)</sup> through Theresa Weisman's work, empathy means:

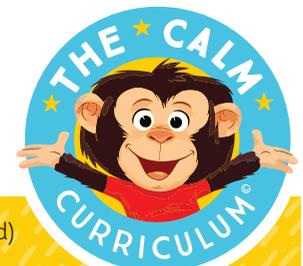
- Seeing their perspective as their truth...  
"I am hearing you say...", "You are telling me .."
- Acknowledging their feelings and communicating with them... "It sounds like this is frustrating ...."
- Feeling with them and being in the moment...  
"I am here with you," "I will wait with you."

### MELVIN REMINDS US....

When your child is in their downstairs brain, use a soft voice tone and wording such as "You are safe;" " I care about you;" "I am here with you".

Being present and having empathy when your child is upset, lets them know you understand how they feel and you are there for them.

Empathetic conversations help create safety and connection setting the stage for your children to come to you as they get older.



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1. Brown, B. (2008) I thought it was just me (but it isn't) Telling the truth about perfectionism, inadequacy, and power. New York: Gotham Books



# MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

## WHAT DOES THE BRAIN HAVE TO DO WITH BIG, PASSIONATE EMOTIONS?

We are not born with the skills needed to manage our emotions and it is often really hard for children to regulate their emotions on their own. They will rely on you.... their big person and their safe person, to help them manage their big emotions. This is called 'co-regulation'.

### THE BRAIN - (THE 'VERY' SIMPLE VERSION)

It is important to understand how the brain works and using the Bottom Up Approach to co-regulate with your child. Dr. Dan Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson<sup>(1)</sup> help us understand how the brain works by having us mentally picture the brain just like that of a house. The Bottom Up Approach means bringing your child from the downstairs brain to the upstairs brain.



### THE HOW TO'S

- The **upstairs** (or neocortex) is where all our higher level thinking happens. The **downstairs** (or reptilian brain) is where our stress response systems sits, and the **stairs** (limbic system) is the glue that connects our upstairs and downstairs brain.
- When an experience happens and we feel threatened or our safety is compromised we can fall downstairs. When an experience happens and we feel safe or supported, we can access our upstairs brain.
- In times of stress and distress, we can quickly fall to our downstairs brain and it is here that children need their big person to help them return to their upstairs brain (Using Bottom Up Approach - **I CARE** Response).

### MELVIN REMINDS US....

Managing emotions has a lot to do with:

- the brain (understanding how it works);
- how the brain interprets experiences (connect and reflect interactions);
- how the brain has practiced skills (executive functioning skills); and
- how the brain has been supported during big emotions (using the **I CARE** Response).



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1. Siegel, D.J., & Bryson, T.P. (2016). The whole-brain child: 12 revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind. Vancouver, B.C.: Langara College.



## MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

# THE "ANGRY" EMOTION IS JUST THE SURFACE. WHAT IS LAYERED BENEATH?

It helps to understand emotions as primary emotions and secondary emotions. Anger can be seen as a secondary emotion, meaning our more vulnerable emotions, perhaps sad, lonely, and jealous, are being masked by the reactive emotion of 'anger'. As parents and caregivers we must try 'in the moment' to be curious about our child's primary emotions.

## SECONDARY EMOTIONS

Dr. Deborah Christensen<sup>(1)</sup> explains that primary emotions are our reactions to an experience or an event. For example: You may feel sad that someone hurt you or anxious about an upcoming test. Many times a secondary emotion is used to protect ourselves from a primary emotion we may think is not acceptable or makes us feel vulnerable.



A primary emotion is the one we feel right before (e.g. jealous) the secondary emotion (e.g. anger). For many children they haven't learned these primary emotions and/or they don't know how to express them.

## THE HOW TO'S

- Be curious.... Consider your child's environment and whether things have changed in their world, i.e. divorce; Covid-19; loss of a pet; missing their friends? Could their primary emotion be sad, lonely or scared?
- Perhaps your child feels left out, e.g. a new baby in the house; or you are busy on the phone. Children will use behaviors to be "seen and heard" when they are feeling the primary emotions of sad, lonely and/or jealous.
- Try and name your child's primary emotion instead of the secondary emotion, "I am wondering if you are sad because I am spending so much time with your new sister".

## MELVIN REMINDS US....

Check in with yourself before responding to your child's behaviour, so that you can respond rather than react. This can be so hard to do, especially when secondary emotions can result in words like "I hate you" from our children.

Remember your child is in their downstairs brain or stress response system when they are angry. Using empathy with your child when they are upset, will let them know you understand how they feel and you are there for them.



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1. Deborah Christensen, PhD., M.S.C.P. (2010) Primary and Secondary Emotions. Retrieved from [www.cornercanyongcounseling.com](http://www.cornercanyongcounseling.com)



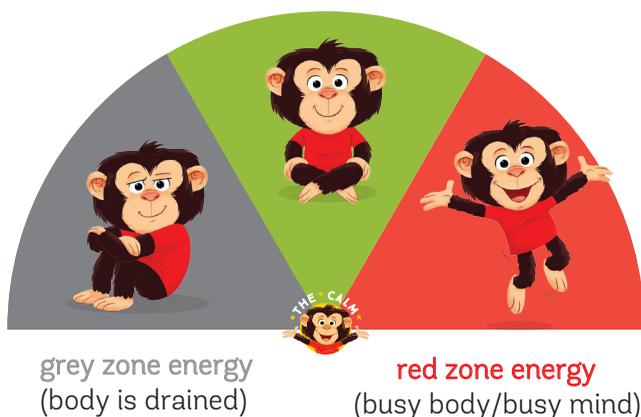
## MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

### GOLDBLOCKS 'JUST RIGHT' ENERGY STATES FOR EACH ACTIVITY.

We've all had those moments when our energy state just doesn't seem to match the activity in front of us, for example, vacuuming your home when you have low energy. With children this can sometimes sound like: "Can you please sit still while we read this book," or "You gotta run after the soccer ball to get it."

The energy gauge, a concept developed by the ALERT program<sup>(1)</sup>, (by Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger) supports children's understanding of what each energy state feels like, and provides adult awareness of these energy states, so that they can help support their child's energy alertness need.

green zone energy  
(just right)



grey zone energy  
(body is drained)

red zone energy  
(busy body/busy mind)

### ENERGY GAUGE

When your child has **red zone energy** (busy body/ busy mind) or **grey zone energy** (body is drained) it is hard for them to use some of their thinking and learning skills .

When their body is in the **green zone energy** state they are 'just right' to play and learn.

You have been naturally aware of your child's energy states, especially when they were younger, for example; you may have tried a bath at night and found that it increased their alertness, so you now bath them in the mornings.

### MELVIN REMINDS US....

We can also use our senses to change our level of alertness and this can be different for each child/person, for example:

- Taste - chewing certain textures may increase alertness;
- Smell - peppermint can increase alertness and lavender can decrease alertness;
- Sound - music can increase or decrease alertness;
- Touch - a light touch on the back or a hug might increase or decrease alertness;
- Sight - turning on or off lights might increase or decrease alertness;
- Movement - high impact activities, such as jumping or running may increase or decrease alertness.



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1. The Alert Program: Self-Regulation Made Easy (n.d). Brief overview of the Alert Program for Parents. Retrieved from: <https://www.alertprogram.com/brief-overview-of-the-alert-program-forparents/>



## MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

# WE ARE NOT BORN WITH THESE SKILLS BUT WE ALL NEED THEM!

Executive Functioning Skills are essential in helping people manage their life, work and relationships successfully<sup>(1)</sup>. The family of executive functioning skills are:

- **Inhibition:** Our ability to focus and resist distractions or other impulsive behaviours;
- **Working Memory:** Our ability to hold ideas and thoughts and then do something with it later, such as following directions.
- **Cognitive Flexibility:** Our ability to have mental flexibility or to adapt to new tasks, rules or priorities.

Practicing these skills will help children learn how to "stop and think", so that they can be more capable to problem solve, control impulses, adapt to change, concentrate and learn. Executive functions develop in the upstairs part of the brain.



## STRESS & EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS

- Dr. Adele Diamond<sup>(1)</sup> explains, that our ability to access our executive functioning skills can be impaired when we are stressed.
- This means, when our children are stressed, they are not able to adapt to new ideas, inhibit impulses, pay attention or follow rules.
- Playful activities such as games, help children "stop and think", providing 'good stress' so that they can practice accessing their upstairs brains.
- The more children go upstairs during 'good stress', the better they can become at accessing their upstairs brain when they are distressed.

## MELVIN REMINDS US....

As children are learning and developing these skills, you may find that sometimes the fun games, songs and activities can result in frustration and disappointment.

You can help by validating feelings.

In these moments children are learning to recover from the stress, and there is no better way to do this than being with you....their safe person.



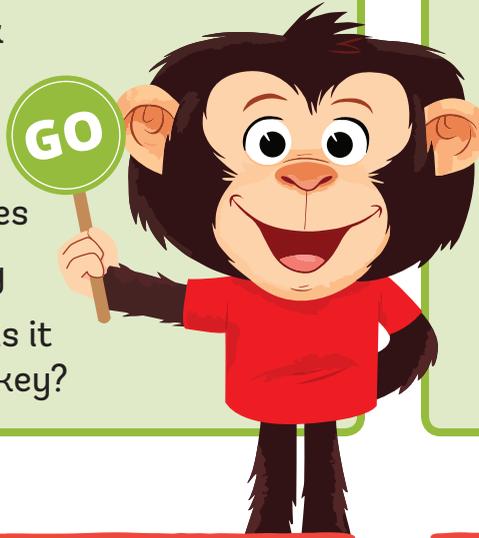
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1. Diamond, A. (2012). Activities and programs that improve children's executive functions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 21, 335-341. doi:10.1177/0963721412453722

## INHIBITION

Games that help my brain and body “stop and wait” include:

- ★ Freeze Tag
- ★ Hide & Seek
- ★ Go Go Stop
- ★ Simon Says
- ★ Board Games
- ★ Monkey Tag
- ★ What time is it Melvin Monkey?



## COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY

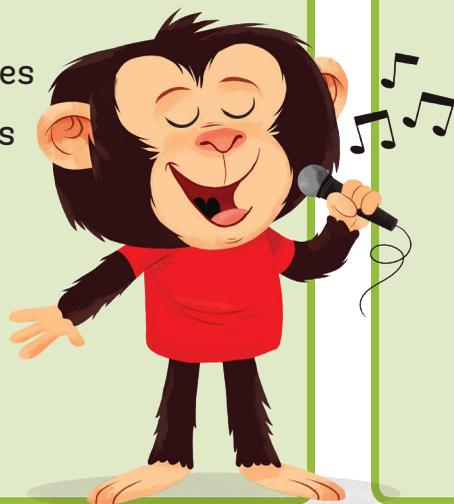
Games that help me to be flexible when rules change include:

- ★ Simon Says
- ★ Imaginative Play
- ★ Head & Shoulders, including changing the actions to the song.

## WORKING MEMORY

Games that help me build skills to retain information in my brain so I can work with it later...like following instructions include:

- ★ Dramatic Play
- ★ Matching Games
- ★ Memory Games
- ★ Card Games
- ★ Guess What's Missing
- ★ The Telephone Game



Rhythm activities help my brain and body regulate. Just like breathing and sleeping has rhythmic patterns, my brain may crave other types of rhythm such as songs including:

- ★ Head and Shoulders
- ★ Wheels on the bus
- ★ Gator Hunt
- ★ If You're Happy & You Know it
- ★ Ants Go Marching One by One



## MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

### "NO. STOP. DON'T." ..... LET'S CHANGE THE NARRATIVE & HERE'S WHY?

As parents and caregivers it can feel like we are always saying "No", "Don't", "Stop." Of course there are boundaries for our children and we want to keep them safe, however can you imagine if you heard these negative responses all day? It wouldn't feel so good.

#### THE YES BRAIN

Dr. Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson<sup>(1)</sup> describe the 'Yes' brain as the receptive brain rather than the reactive brain. The more we nurture our children's 'yes' brain the more they can access their upstairs brain functions and be receptive to our requests, instructions and new learnings.



#### THE HOW TO'S

Using "YES" brain interactions helps us reframe the negatives in a positive way, for example:

- Before dinner your child says "I want a cookie!" Instead of saying "No"..... you might respond, "Yes, you can have a cookie after dinner. Maybe I will have a cookie with you!"
- Your child is running through the house. Instead of saying "Stop running"... you might respond, "Your body has lots of energy, let's go outside to run around".
- Perhaps your child hits their sibling. Instead of saying "Don't hit your brother"... you might respond, "You look frustrated that your brother took your toy, let me help you with this."

#### MELVIN REMINDS US....

Remember to consider your tone of voice, body posture and being intentional about the words we are using when responding to your child.

This is a very new skill and it is hard work. Remember you will need to practice using more positive up-regulating self-talk and this takes time, be patient with yourself as you are learning a new skill too.

Sometimes we will slip into our negative and reactive responses. Remember that we are human, we will make mistakes and self-compassion is essential.



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1. Siegel, D.J., & Bryson, T.P. (2019). The yes brain: How to cultivate courage, curiosity, and resilience in your child. New York: Bantam.



# MELVIN'S BRAIN BUILDERS

## "I THINK I CAN, I THINK I CAN"...

### IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT THE END PRODUCT

Learning to celebrate the process of our work rather than focusing only on the end product is how we become more resilient. We need this resiliency to help us when tasks are challenging and/or stressful. We can learn how to challenge ourselves and be more resilient through a growth mindset lens.

### GROWTH MINDSET

Carol Dweck's<sup>(1)</sup> (Stanford University) research concluded that our beliefs about ourselves, whether we came from a "fixed mindset" or a "growth mindset", influences how we respond to a setback. Basically, a growth mindset response is about encouraging how hard we have worked during the process and a fixed mindset response evaluates the end product.



### THE HOW TO'S

Try and limit using Fixed Mindset Phrases:

- You are so smart.
- Great job!
- You are so talented.

Increase Using Growth Mindset Phrases:

- You have been working really hard on your....
- I wonder how you can do that differently....
- Mistakes help us learn other ways of doing things.
- When it feels hard, that means your brain is growing and learning.

### MELVIN REMINDS US....

Changing the narrative to a growth mindset stretches our brain and requires us to use positive self-talk, such as,

"I'm learning how to do this"....."I'm not there yet"...."I'm almost there."

Continue to support your child when they are frustrated or when they make mistakes. Your child is learning that mistakes will teach them new ways of doing things. It will give them more confidence to take risks in their learning and to solve problems in new ways.



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1. Mindset Works (n.d). Decades of scientific research that started a growth mindset revolution. Retrieved from: <https://www.mindsetworks.com/Science/Default>