



Seeing the Child Behind the Behavior: The Brain Reasons and Mind Methods for Addressing Challenging Behaviors

Humans use both language and actions to express themselves. When it comes to children, they often express what they can't put into words, leaving adults to decode the message. To increase successful detective work, adults benefit when they shift their focus from trying to *stop* a child's behavior, to *understanding* the meaning "*behind the behavior.*"

The meaning of a child's behavior becomes much clearer when adults attempt to "*see the child behind the behavior*", and attune to the child's thoughts, feelings, sensations, needs, abilities, culture, and developmental level.

By "tuning" in to the child's perspective, adults have greater success in choosing strategies that prevent challenging behaviors, promote social and emotional skills, and meet children's basic needs.

To begin, let's consider the "brain reasons" for challenging behavior, then identify the "mind methods" for helping children develop appropriate responses.

Brain Reasons

Brain Development

Scientists describe brain development as happening in three parts: the brain stem, the limbic center and finally the cortex. Daniel Siegel likens this development to the construction of a house: the downstairs brain, which includes the brain stem and the limbic center, comes first; then, the upstairs brain, or the cortex, begins construction. Scientists believe the upstairs of the "house" brain, the cortex, completes its development in the mid-twenties.



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This means we are asking children to think, plan, reason, pay attention, control impulses, regulate movement, manage emotions, shift gears, delay gratification (e.g., wait, share, take turns, clean up), follow multiple step directions, and carry out additional complex cognitive functions without having the brain regions of the cortex necessary to do that reliably or consistently.

Because the upstairs brain lacks the capacity to meet these demands, the more developed regions of children's brains, the downstairs, takes over. From this brainstem and limbic region, children enter fight, flight, freeze, or faint mode under stress, resulting in "stress-behavior" that may be physically or emotionally dangerous to the child, other children, and/or to adults.

Basic Needs



All behavior, that of adults and children alike, stems from the drive to meet three basic needs: *for safety (physical or emotional), satisfaction, and connection*. As the brain develops, so does its capacity to meet our basic needs in appropriate ways. The propensity for a child's downstairs brain to sense danger and react to unmet needs with challenging behavior is, in fact, a bid for *safety, satisfaction, and connection*.

Take for example, a situation where Liam asks Jacob for a turn on the bike, but Jacob says, "No!". Liam pushes Jacob off the bike and takes off. Clearly inappropriate behavior, but it helps to consider Liam's behavior through the lens of his three basic needs. Liam's pushing aligns to 1) his need to obtain emotional *safety*, to regulate his anger or frustration he feels by not getting a turn, 2) his need for the *satisfaction* that comes with getting a turn on the bike, and 3) his need to establish himself in *connection* to others (i.e., to make sure others understand what he wants to communicate).

If the adult fails to see the child behind the behavior, attuning to these messages of unmet needs, he or she may miss an opportunity to engage the child's upstairs brain to develop appropriate ways to get those needs met.



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Basic Drives

The brain helps us meet our basic needs through what Rick Hanson describes as three “operating systems” or *drives*: *to avoid, approach, and/or attach*. Humans have the drive 1) to *avoid* harm to meet *safety* needs, 2) to *approach* rewards to meet *satisfaction* needs, and 3) to *attach* to others to meet *connection* needs.

Hanson describes the three basic *needs* and *drives* as loosely correlated with the three levels of the brain: 1) the brain stem correlates with the *need* for safety and the *drive* to *avoid* harm, 2) the limbic center with the *need* for satisfaction and the *drive* to *approach* rewards, and 3) the cortex with the *need* for connection and the *drive* to *attach*.

Let’s revisit the example of Liam and Jacob through the lens of brain development, needs, and drives. Liam *approached* the reward of riding the bike to meet his *satisfaction* needs by asking Jacob for a turn, using his upstairs brain. Jacob’s refusal triggered Liam’s brainstem and limbic center (the downstairs brain) to *avoid* the disruption of emotional *safety*, which is what the feeling of anger caused. Liam is also aimed to *approach* the *satisfaction* of getting a turn by pushing Jacob off the bike, and *attach* to Jacob by sending the message that his *connection* needs were unfulfilled.

What we hope to teach children over time is how to drive (i.e., *avoid, approach, and/or attach*) to meet their *safety, satisfaction, and connection* needs in appropriate ways, and from the upstairs brain.



Green Zone vs. Red Zone



Rick Hanson also describes two “settings” in the brain that determine whether humans *avoid, approach, and/or attach* to meet their basic *needs* in helpful or potentially harmful ways. Hanson describes the first as the “Red Zone”. When the brain operates from this setting, we **react** without thinking, attempting to get our *needs* met from the downstairs brain.



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The second, is the “[Green Zone](#)”. This is when the brain is operating in a more **responsive** and integrated way,

Examining Liam’s behavior through this lens, we can begin to understand that the threats to his *safety*, *satisfaction*, and *connection* needs felt intense enough for his brain to **react** from the “[Red Zone](#)”.

If Liam had felt less of a threat to his *needs*, he may have **responded** from the “[Green Zone](#)”, where his brain aimed to *avoid*, *approach*, and/or *attach* by activating one or more “appropriate” options such as finding a teacher to help resolve the conflict, getting a timer, finding another bike, or telling Jacob he felt angry.

Mind Methods

Next, we consider “mind methods” for helping children develop these brain capacities. To begin this work, adults adopt an approach or stance of interpersonal attunement.

Rick Hanson refers to this approach as “Petting the Lizard”, “Feeding the Mouse”, and “Hugging the Monkey”: meeting safety needs helps calm the brain stem (Petting the Lizard), satisfaction needs helps regulate the limbic center (Feeding the Mouse), and connection needs strengthen the cortex (Hugging the Monkey).

When adults help children “Pet the Lizard”, “Feed the Mouse”, and “Hug the Monkey”, they increase their ability to “drive” to get their “needs” met from an integrated brain (i.e., drive from the “[Green Zone](#)”).

Further, when adults (a) remain curious about what drives behavior, (b) consider children’s basic needs, and (c) understand the settings in the brain, they increase their capacity to remain in the “[Green Zone](#)”, thus increasing their feelings of effectiveness as well as their overall sense of well-being.

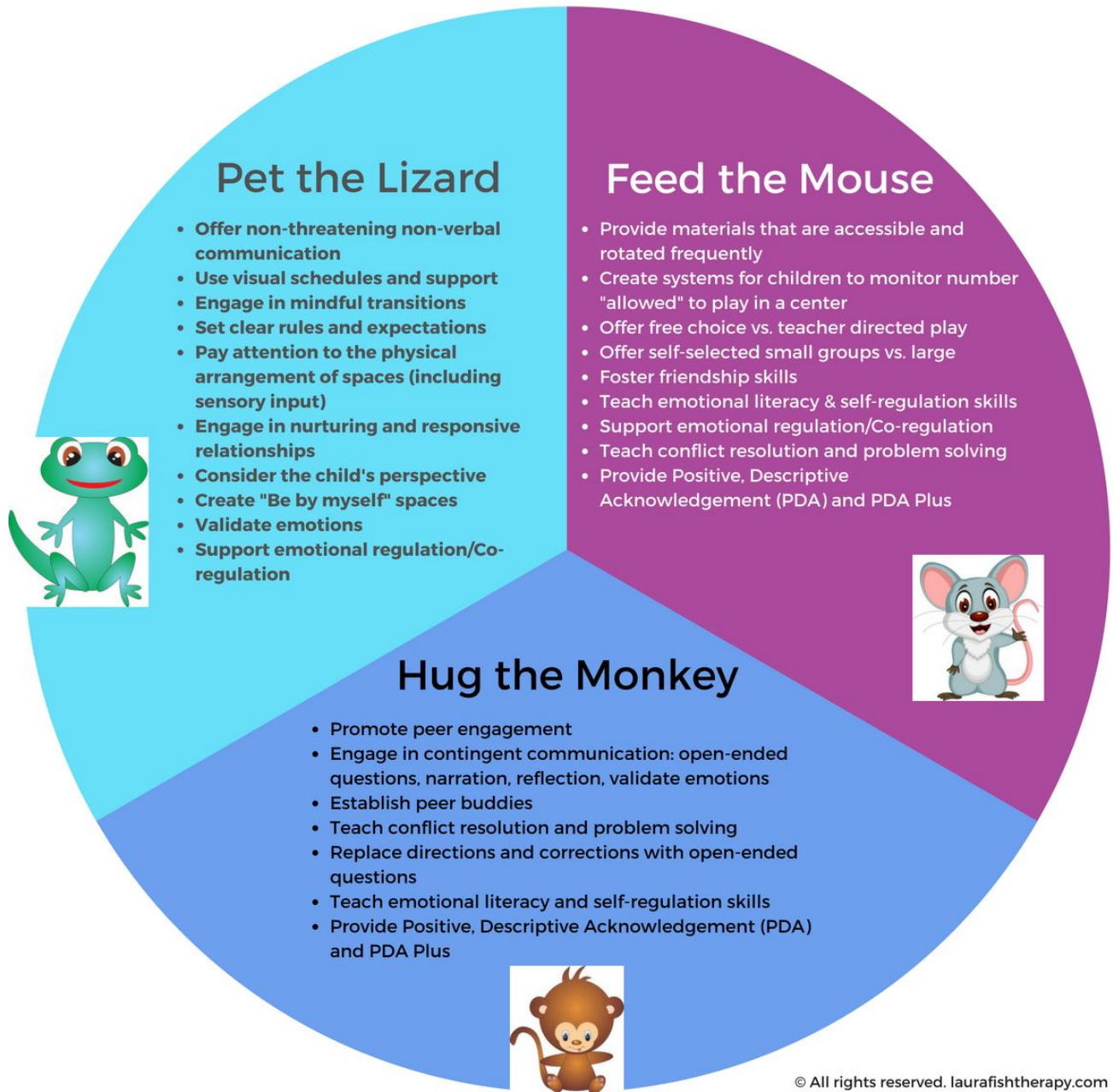
Figure 1 contains some of the mind methods for adopting this attuned approach using strategies commonly practiced in quality preschool classrooms.



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Figure 1: Practical strategies to help children avoid, approach, and attach in appropriate ways.



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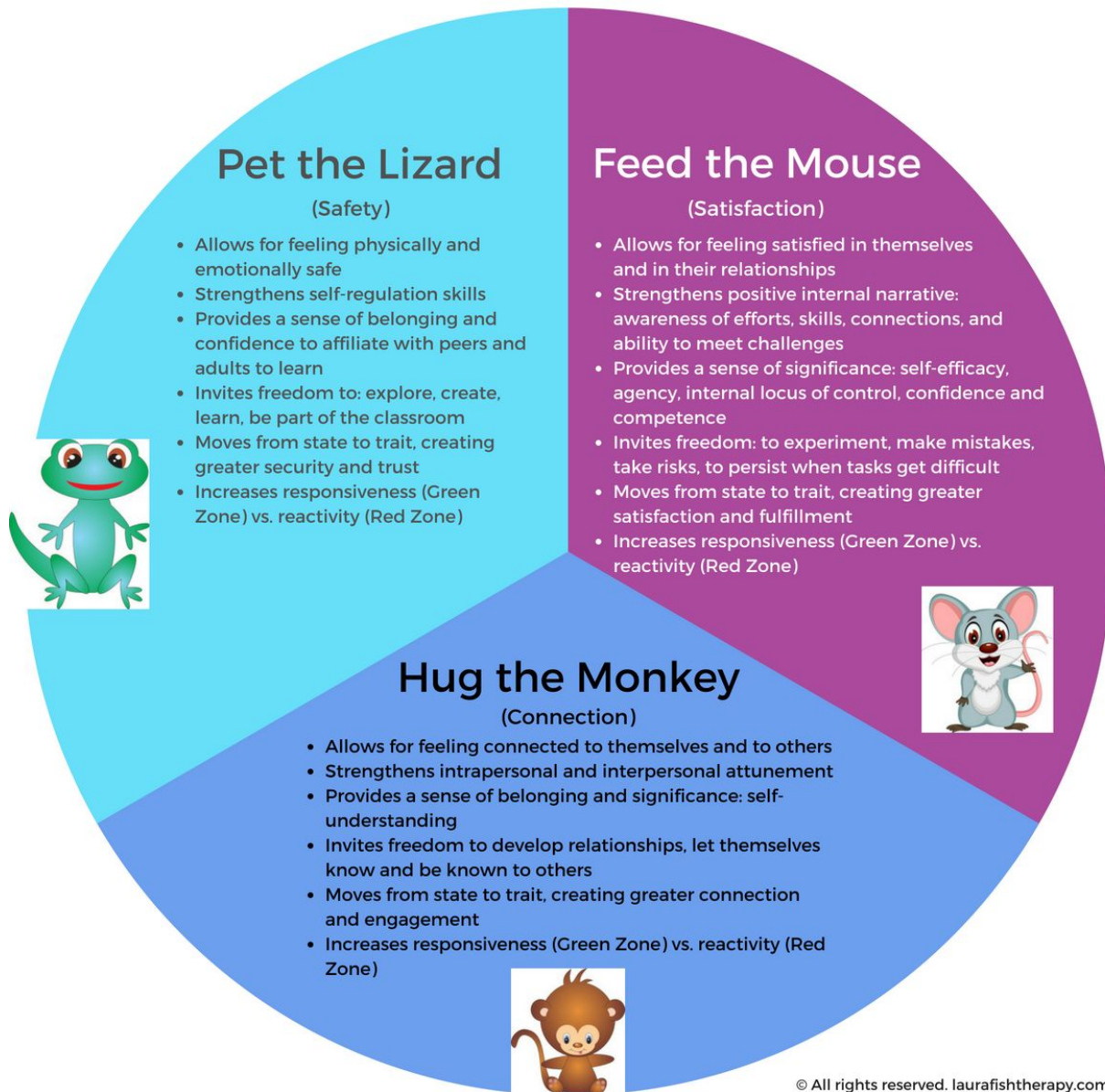
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Potential Outcomes and Benefits

“Seeing the child behind the behavior” has many benefits (see Figure 2). These include, but are not limited to: meeting children’s basic needs, strengthening their brain capacity, fostering a sense of belonging and significance, activating and installing desired traits, and providing experiences that promote an integrated brain.

Figure 2. Benefits of an attuned approach on children’s social, emotional, and cognitive skills.



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Adopting a stance of “*seeing the child behind the behavior*” helps teachers and parents remain in the “Green Zone”, attuning to what the behavior may be communicating. This is the first step toward choosing how best to respond.

When adults continuously “tune in” throughout the day, not just when challenging behavior occurs, they begin to develop a sense of the child’s brain development, needs, drives, and ability to be in the “Green Zone”.

Step-By-Step Actions

Ready to adopt or strengthen your stance on “seeing the child behind the behavior”?

As a first step, consider the following questions as you interact with children or after an interaction that left you feeling challenged. The questions are offered as a guide for self-reflection, designed to help you begin and/or strengthen how to “*see the child behind the behavior*”:

- What is the child thinking, feeling, sensing, perceiving about himself and others (attunement)?
- Does the child “*feel*” like his *safety* (physical and/or emotional), *satisfaction*, and *connection* needs are not being met (three basic needs)?
- How might this behavior be the child’s attempt to *avoid* harm, *approach* rewards, and/or *attach* to others (three drives)?
- What skills might the child be missing that could prevent this behavior (e.g., which upstairs brain skills need stronger connections with the downstairs brain)?
- What strategies do I have to Pet the Lizard, Feed the Mouse, and Hug the Monkey (practices that strengthen relationships and promote social and emotional skills)?
- What do I need to stay in the “Green Zone” (integrated or responsive brain)?

Over time, answers to questions such as these will help you develop a systematic plan for promoting social and emotional skills and prevent challenging behaviors.

As a second step, crosswalk your current practices with the strategies offered in Figure 1. Odds are, you are doing many of these things already. As you review the strategies, consider which are your strengths (aka the ones you do naturally), and which you could do more often with little to no effort.

Lastly, consider who else needs to “*see the child behind the behavior*”. You are encouraged to print and share this download and/or the graphics.



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