

Your Brain on Button-Pushing

By Bonnie Harris

Thanks to Dr. Daniel Siegel's brilliant book, *Mindsight*, we now have a "roadmap" of what happens to our brain when our buttons get pushed. This model gives us another perspective for understanding why we react the way we do and fits perfectly with my model presented in *When Your Kids Push Your Buttons*.

When we react to something happening by getting triggered, seeing red, and "losing it", the prefrontal cortex section of our brain becomes temporarily disabled and "flips its lid" when we get our button pushed, according to Dr. Siegel, allowing the emotionally reactive limbic and brain stem sections (often called the reptilian or mammalian centers) that house old, deep emotions from our past to take over. Normally the prefrontal cortex calms, regulates, and makes sense of these deeper emotional layers. When our button gets pushed, rational thought is turned off and emotional reaction is what is left.

The 9 functions of the prefrontal cortex that shut down when we are triggered:

- **Body regulation** – causes physical reactions such as a tight stomach, racing heartbeat, clenched throat, etc.
- **Attuned communication** (connective communication) - causes disconnect so children feel unsafe.
- **Emotional balance** – causes chaotic overwhelm (exploding), emotional shut-down (implosion), or a rigid, depressive state (emotional withdrawal).
- **Response flexibility** – causes inability to stop-and-think, to be fully aware of what is happening, and to restrain impulses long enough to choose our action.
- **Fear Modulation** - allows fears from past experience to override present experience. Childhood experience can become activated, trigger reactions, and cause two-year-old behavior.
- **Empathy** – disables ability to "see" another's point of view and understand what the experience might feel like so we experience only our own enraged perspective.
- **Insight** – blocks understanding of ourselves and what we are doing. We merely react from emotion.
- **Moral awareness** – cannot see the greater good and can unintentionally act amorally.
- **Intuition** – lose connection with gut feelings and heartfelt responses needed to make "wise decisions, not just logical ones".

In order to defuse the buttons that get triggered when our children do or say that thing that always gets to us, we can think about our brain actually going off line, unable to regulate what it normally does without our awareness. And awareness is what we need to bring the prefrontal cortex back in line to regulate our emotions and behavior once again. Dr. Siegel presents a model that perfectly defines the process of “self-talk” (Buttons) needed to defuse or deactivate a button and reconnect with your child to repair the situation. As you would do a mental checklist upon leaving the house for such things as keys, bag, cellphone, you conduct a checklist of yourself. My list is as follows:

- What physical reactions happened in my body?
- How did I feel at the time?
- What must I have thought about myself or my child in order to feel that way?
- If I thought that, how can I reframe that thought less emotionally, more factually to evoke compassion rather than anger?
- How can I adjust my expectations of my child to be more realistic and considerate?
- What beliefs about myself from my past got triggered and took over the present?

Having a fully functional prefrontal cortex allows us to reflect. As Dr. Siegel explains, reflection is critical to repair and reconnect and has 3 critical components:

- Openness which allows us to be receptive
- Observation which grants us the ability to see and understand ourselves
- Objectivity which enables us to understand that our feelings, thoughts, beliefs and memories are not all of who we are but are temporary and can be adjusted and changed through self-awareness

What happens to us when our buttons get pushed is a complicated process with many layers outlined in ***When Your Kids Push Your Buttons***. Dr. Siegel illustrates this process from a scientific perspective, proving to us that our reactions happen for a very good reason. The Buttons work gives us the awareness and the tools to regain control of our senses and our mind so that we can come back to connection and attunement.

Bonnie is the director of Connective Parenting www.connectiveparenting.com and is available for speaking events, phone counseling, and parenting workshops. She has authored two books, "When Your Kids Push Your Buttons" and "Confident Parents, Remarkable Kids". You can follow her work through her newsletter and on facebook or contact her by emailing bh@bonnieharris.com.

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