

When We Are Very Young

Episode 8

The Bidirectional Window

In our last episode, we were talking about the Window of Tolerance, and if you didn't see that one, I would suggest watching it before watching this one because the two are connected. This one is based on the Window of Tolerance. The Window of Tolerance is Pat Ogden's concept based on Stephen Porges' Poly-Vagal Theory in order to create a conceptualization of how the brain and the Autonomic Nervous System create responses to threat and that our arousal level changes from "in the middle" which is in the Window, to high arousal, which is fight Flight Freeze or low arousal which is Shut Down.

So, what I want to do now is to add the emotional component to that diagram and that's why I call it the Bidirectional Window. Last time, we were thinking about the arousal level which is on the y-axis. Up here is high arousal and down here is low arousal. And now, we want to add to the x-axis. On the x-axis, we have emotion. Toward the positive side of the x-axis, we have positive emotion and toward the negative end of the x-axis we have negative emotion. That would be called the valence of emotion: positive or negative or neutral. So just like the Window of Tolerance, where we have high, in the just right zone and low levels of arousal, with emotional valence, we have a continuum of high positive emotions, possibly too positive, through the spectrum to negative emotions at the other end of the x-axis.

Now that we have the xy axes, that means we have four quadrants. In the upper right-hand quadrant, xy positive quadrant, we have higher levels of arousal and more positive emotions. We can think about a box around the intersection of the xy axes and within that box, we can be in the Window of Tolerance in terms of arousal and in a comfortable or appropriate emotional state. In high arousal, high positive affect, we can be excited and happy and having a really great time, or with the kids that I work with, it is easy for them to pop out of their own control, even when they are in positive affective states. For instance, we know that some children can get completely out of control and dysregulated at birthday parties or celebrations. They think they are having a good time, but in fact they are out of the Window of Tolerance because their arousal level is too high and their affective state is too intense for them to manage. (And at this point, easily flipping into a high arousal, negative

affective state--- temper tantrum!)As parents, we want to help calm them, bring their level of excitement down a little bit, and get them into the window in that quadrant.

Now, we want to think about being in the lower right-hand quadrant which would be a low level of arousal but also positive affect. So here, we might think about getting sleepy and reading stories at bedtime and just going to sleep. Your arousal level might be quite low, but if you are comfortable and happy going to sleep, your affect would be positive.

Now, let's just go across and think about low arousal but negative affect. So here, we might be in a state of sad, lonely or bored. These states would be in the Window or box that we have just described. Whereas if we go further away, further into lower arousal and further into negative emotion, then we might get into states of depression and even further into catatonia or non-responsiveness. We want people to move closer to the box by raising their arousal level and their affective state.

Let's go up finally to the arousal level that is a high arousal level but also a very negative affective state. These are states of anger, states of distress, and they may be within the box where they are in cognitive prefrontal cortex control or they may be so high in arousal and so negative in emotion, that the person is out of the box and into a very dysregulated state.

Sometimes, I think that parents need to think about ways to respond to their child's dysregulation by not only thinking about their child's arousal level but also thinking about their child's emotional valence and intensity. And so sometimes, we might be able to change and pull our child into the regulated area, in the box, if we can change or modulate their affect or if we change their arousal level. I think that using this thought process, this concept, that gives us more tools to re-regulate our child. If our child gets sad, and our child is not good at regulating her arousal level, it might be that she crashes too fast and so her arousal level would drop too fast or her affect would drop too fast. We would then have tools to help our child increase arousal and affect to help re-regulate our child.

I hope that this diagram is helpful to you. We see in the positive xy quadrant, my son throwing his son up into the air. We see positive emotions and high arousal. Below there, you can see my daughter-in-law and my grandson, both sleeping peacefully there, you can see the contentment, both with positive affect and low arousal. In the lower left-hand quadrant of low arousal and negative affect, you can see this woman who appears to be very sad, perhaps she is depressed. You can sense that her energy level is very low. Above her, you

can see a child in great distress, crying very hard, and not getting the comfort that she needs right now to feel better.

So, I hope that this is helpful to helping your child to stay in the middle – not only in the Window of Tolerance with arousal, but also staying nearer the middle in the comfortable range of emotional valence.

Reference and Reading List:

1. Trauma and the Body, Ogden, Minton and Pain.
2. The Polyvagal Theory, Stephen Porges.
3. Hope for Healing, ATTACH, available at www.attach.org

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