

Blue Brain
Red Brain
BALANCE
is the Key



Parents are forever asking us: “Can Self-Reg help me with my child’s challenging behaviours? Nothing I say or do seems to help.” Self-Reg will indeed make a difference—a huge one—in dealing with problems like explosive behaviour, aggression, defiance, tantrums, persistent crying, bouts of frenzy and constant arguing. But to address these issues we need to learn about the crucial distinction that Self-Reg draws between Blue Brain, Red Brain, and Brown Brain.

This way of thinking goes back to Paul MacLean’s Triune Brain hypothesis that three different brains evolved in different epochs to serve the needs of radically different kinds of species. The oldest brain is the Reptilian, designed for solitary creatures to regulate their motor actions and metabolic functions and keep them safe when threatened. In Self-Reg, we refer to this as Brown Brain.

Next in MacLean’s model was the Paleomammalian brain, or in Self-Reg, the Red Brain. This brain developed to deal with the complex demands of social existence: raising babies, primitive emotions, relationships with group members, spotting enemies, kicking the Brown Brain into action when threats were spotted and remembering these occasions for future reference.

Finally, there is the “neocortex”: the new brain, which supports our ability to think, plan, listen,

speak and be consciously aware of what’s going on inside and around us. This is what we refer to in Self-Reg as Blue Brain.



Blue Brain and Red Brain processes are inextricably intertwined. The question is not, which one of these brains is “switched on or off” but rather, which is dominant. So much of what we think is imbued with emotions; so much of what we feel is influenced by our thoughts. But swing too far in one direction and we don’t feel anything; swing too far in the other and what we feel is overwhelming. If one were searching for a suitable metaphor here, it would be that of a teeter-totter, rather than a heating system in which either the furnace or the AC is on.

Why is it “balance” that we should seek, and not, as is often thought, absolute Blue Brain dominion: i.e., self-control? The answer is

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that children are at their most curious and receptive when Blue and Red Brain are working smoothly together. Energy expenditure and recovery are finely counter-balanced, which promotes, not just digestion, cellular repair and a robust immune system, but emotion and social co-regulation, cognitive and prosocial development.

Each brain serves as a “brake” on the other. When a child goes “into Red Brain,” the teeter-totter gets stuck on hypo- or hyperarousal. This is where strong primitive emotions rule and the Blue Brain is left with its feet dangling in the air. However, this can be avoided by self-distraction or “reappraisal”: Blue Brain functions that can turn off the limbic alarm or help us to resist a harmful temptation.

At the same time, the Blue Brain can be an energy hog. So a system deep inside the Red Brain, that monitors blood glucose levels, will shut down a Blue Brain activity when it doesn't have enough sense to do so on its own. The Blue Brain is the seat of internal and external awareness; but the Red Brain can tamp this down when it's beneficial to do so (e.g. on a long portage).

In other words, well-being requires both “brains” working together and not against one another. Blue Brain without Red Brain is Data in Star Trek. Red Brain without Blue Brain is, well, a child with challenging behaviours. The

secret to dealing with the latter is to avoid sending your child into “cacostasis”: i.e., a Brown Brain, non-rational state of fight, flight or freeze. And that is where Self-Reg comes in.

Self-Reg helps us recognize the signs that tell us when children are slipping out of the zone of optimal arousal (the “Window of Tolerance”): that is, out of Blue Brain Red Brain balance. Being able to know when this is happening, and why, enables us to “move the child's fulcrum” so that she finds stress invigorating rather than overwhelming. That is, so that she is sufficiently aroused to deal with a challenge but not so aroused that she shuts down or becomes manic.

Children and teens will eventually have to learn how to “move their fulcrums” on their own; but mastering the art of self-regulation is much more challenging for some children than others. That is the real significance of “challenging behaviours,” and the reason why Self-Reg makes such a huge difference in how we respond.

THE TRIUNE BRAIN

