

WellNest Counseling

Bringing wellness to your nest



Week 7: The Science Behind Soothing

Rule of Thumb: Use Soothing to encourage cooperation and problem solving.

Please complete this workbook before your live meeting



Soothing Science

Soothing is our third S in the 4 S's of a secure attachment. Now, I'll be honest, when I started this journey of building a parenting course, I thought, "Soothing... how am I going to spend a whole session on soothing? Don't we all already know how to do that as parents?" Yes, of course! We all soothe our kids and know how to do it. It comes easy when your child falls and scrapes a knee or your teen is experiencing their first heartache. But what about when your child is acting out, showing big emotions, getting angry with you or someone else, or even hitting, kicking, or biting? I imagine, if you are anything like me, your first instinct is not to soothe them, but to manage, stop, or control the behavior. You probably even get angry, feeling disrespected. We are well-intentioned, you and I. We want our kids to learn that they cannot hurt others. We want them to learn to be kind and nice to others. We want them to learn to control their emotional reactions.

So, it's kind of ironic that we think by getting mad, controlling, punishing, or yelling, we are teaching those sought-after lessons above. How many times at this point have I said, "Our children learn best through modeling!" So, if you want them to be kind, considerate, self-regulated, nice, and empathetic, you must model that, even in the face of "bad behavior". This is where soothing comes in.

Let me explain:

Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson elaborate in their book, *The Power of Showing Up*, that soothing is an important and integral step in developing decision-making, emotional regulation, flexibility, empathy, self-understanding, and morality. These are all the things that the prefrontal cortex is responsible for, which by the way isn't done developing until we are in our mid-20's.

When parents soothe a child or teen during big behaviors or tantrums, you are helping you child to build and re-enforce positive neural pathways for inner-soothing. Inner-soothing refers to a persons ability to call upon resources within themselves For example, one might repeat a mantra or take deep breaths to regulate there emotions. Inner-soothing is developed through Inter-soothing. This is when regulations occurs between a person and something or someone else. For example, a parent hugging a dysregulated child, going for a walk, or taking a shower would all be examples of inter-soothing. The way we develop both those skills, inter- and inner-soothing, is by relying heavily on inter-soothing with your child. Meaning, you need to spend a lot of time soothing and co-regulating with your child.



Think back to the zones of regulation, red, blue, and green (from week 5). When we soothe our children back into the green regulated zone, those neural pathways strengthen. Neurons that fire together wire together, remember? So, when soothing brings calmness over and over again, those neural pathways become strong and your child begins to be able to soothe themselves without your help, with time, maturity, and development. Often, our children's behavior becomes a "can't" instead of a "won't" (from week 6). When this happens, connecting or soothing is our first parenting move.

In *The Power of Showing Up*, Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson said, "...use soothing as a tool to encourage cooperation and problem solving instead of controlling or managing him," (p. 151).

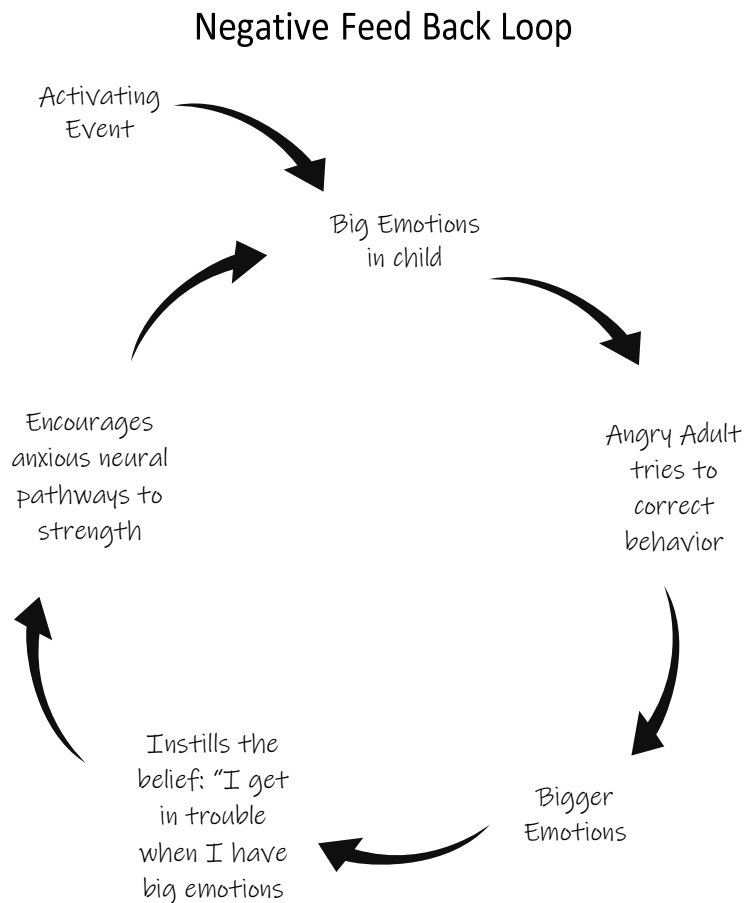
Reflect:

1. How do you engage in soothing skills for yourself?
2. When do you find it most difficult to soothe or connect to yourself?
3. When you think about your parent soothing or connecting to you, what comes to mind?
4. When do you find it most difficult to soothe or connect to your child?
5. Which pre-conceived notions about children get in the way of you connecting and soothing your child?



Feed Back Loop of Soothing or Not Soothing

The last thing I want to do as a parent is to soothe my child when they are misbehaving! Years of conditioned beliefs tell me that I need to punish, yell, or get angry to manage the behavior, instead of encouraging cooperation and problem-solving through soothing. In fact, there are still some important adults that I look up to that will tell me something along the lines of, “Don’t give in to that behavior! He can’t get what he wants.” It is incredibly difficult to break these generational patterns. But I know the science behind it. In their book, *The Power of Showing Up*, Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson describe the negative feedback loop that is created when we use anger, punishment, or yelling to “manage” children’s behaviors. Take a look at the diagram below:



Let's see how this plays out:

Activating Event: Sam's magnetile ship is destroyed when his 15 month old brother lost his balance and fell.

Big Emotions in the child: Sam is mad and yelling at his brother because the baby accidentally destroyed his magnetile ship when the baby lost his balance and fell. This resulted in Sam pushing the baby and making him cry.

Angry adult: "What is going on? That is NOT how we act when you get angry! Go to your room and calm down! I'm putting away these magnetiles since you can't play nice!" (in an angry tone)

Bigger emotions: "He messed up my magnetiles! Ahhh! I hate when they come and mess up my stuff!" Sam stomps off to his room or maybe even kicks something over.

Instills belief: Child thinks "I get in trouble when I get mad, parent doesn't listen to me and understand!" The child continues to stay dysregulated.

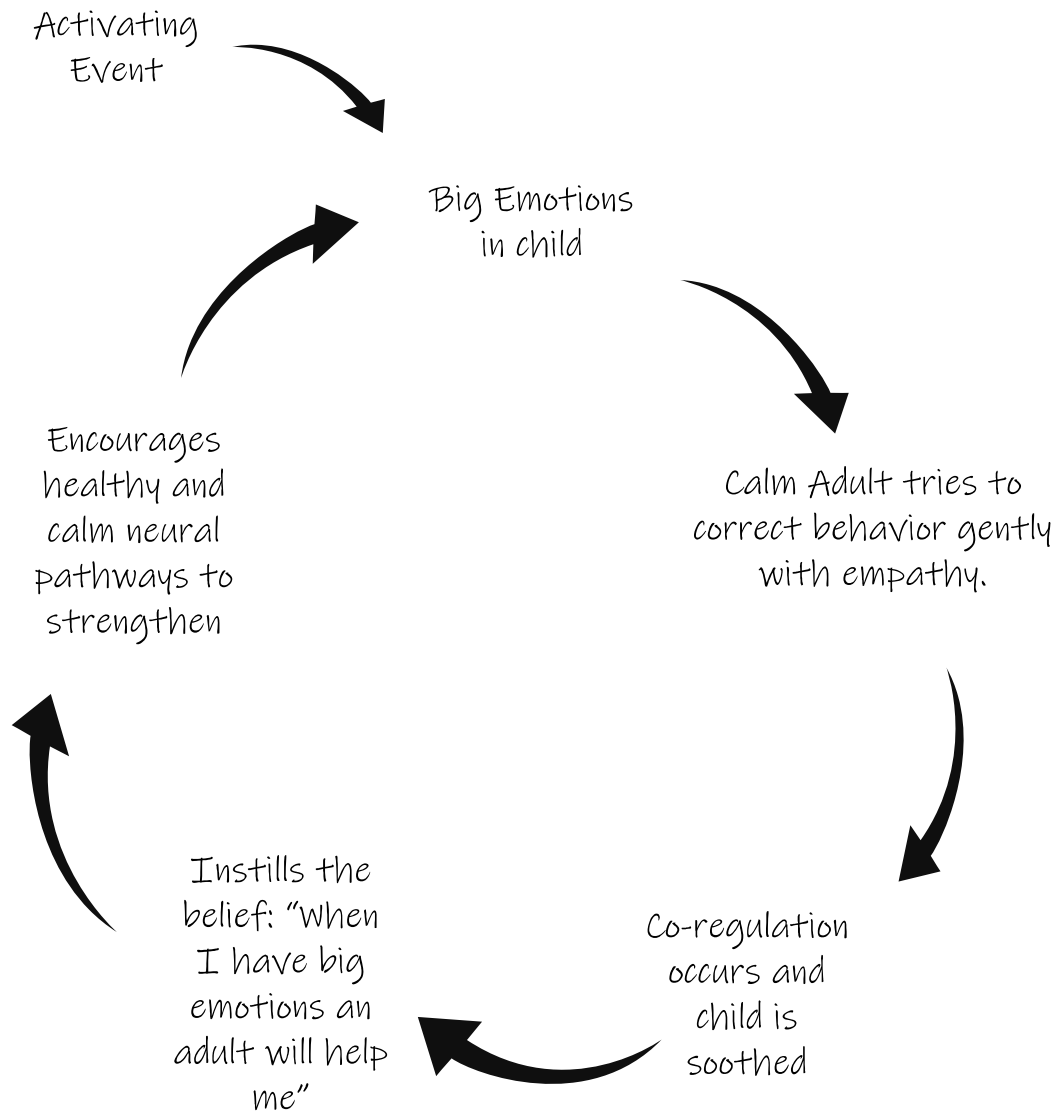
Anxious neural pathways reinforced: Sam internalizes that he got mad and then got in trouble. Over time if this pattern continues, Sam will start to feel anxious and out of control because he can't regulate his behavior. This general distrust in himself and the adults around him will contribute to bigger emotional reactions as different activating events happen.

This is a good example of how we as parents accidentally make parenting harder for us. This is not the intention any parent has when attempting to correct behavior. Yet, time and time again, we re-enforce the negative feedback loops.

Now, let's look at what a soothing feedback loop would look like on the next page:



Soothing Feed Back Loop



Over time, your voice becomes your child's inner voice and your child can begin to self-regulate and sooth so less big emotions occur

Let's see it in real time:

Activating Event: Sam's magnetile ship is destroyed when his 15 month old brother lost his balance and fell.

Big Emotions in child: Sam is mad and yelling at his brother because the baby accidentally destroyed his magnetile ship when the baby lost his balance and fell. This resulted in Sam pushing the baby and making him cry.

Calm adult: Picks up baby, makes sure baby is okay and comforts baby, then: "Oh honey, you worked so hard on that. I can see how disappointed you are. What can I do to help? Here let's take some breaths together."

Co-regulation occurs: Sam says, "He wrecked it on purpose! I hate when my brothers mess with my stuff!" as you hold and comfort him. Eventually, Sam calms down. Once calm, then we can come in with our problem-solving, correction, and empathy. You say, "I see how hard you worked, and you felt really mad that your ship was wrecked! I also notice the baby was really sad and scared when you pushed him. What do you think we should do about that and your ship?"

Instill belief: Sam thinks, "Mom/Dad listened to me. I am not in trouble. My parents will help me when I have big emotions." (This is more of a subconscious belief than an actual thought)

Encourages healthy and calm neural pathways: Over time, with consistency, Sam will learn how to use his own tools for soothing and not need his parents anymore. His neural pathways for calming and problem-solving are strengthened. He feels safe to express his emotions, knowing he won't get in trouble, and the parents are still correcting behavior, holding boundaries, and setting high expectations. (Just without anger)

Reflect:

1. Think of a time you became emotionally dysregulated as a child. How did your parents handle your behavior?
2. How do you handle your own difficult moments now, as an adult? Do you have someone who supports you in your difficult moments? Do you enter the red zone (fight/flight) or the blue zone (shut down/avoid)?



3. Which feedback loop has been reinforced for you as a child: soothing or negative? Why?
4. How do you think this affects your parenting?
5. Which feedback loop do you tend to reinforce for your child?
6. What is one thing you can do to make a positive change for both you and your child?

Good News! Soothing is all about the “feel”

...this means that most soothing actually comes in the form of non-verbals. In the earlier weeks we talk about how a child’s emotional or downstairs brain is essentially already developed because, from an evolutionary perspective, fight or flight is what kept us alive back when we were cavemen. This means that your kids are experts at picking up your non-verbals and your emotional tone (remember be the thermostat, not the thermometer).

One of my favorite books to read for kids is *A Little Spot of Feelings* by Diane Alber. It goes through many of the non-verbals expressed for each emotion. This would be a great way for you and your kiddo to start getting in tune with your and your child's non-verbals.



What keeps parents from soothing in times of big behaviors?

As stated earlier, the last thing I want to do when dealing with misbehavior is to soothe my child. My emotional thermometer and zone of regulation are being triggered too. Another reason we often don't soothe our children during this time is our own relationships with emotions. People are often accidentally taught to ignore and suppress their emotions due to getting in trouble as a kid by acting on them (pushing baby brother when he wrecked his magnetite ship). The Jai Institute for Parenting does a fantastic job of exploring how our own preconceived notions of emotions get in the way of soothing children. The following questions are adapted from their model.

Let's spend some time figuring out what your preconceived notions about emotions are. For the following emotions write down the very first thing that comes to mind. Like a word association game.

1. Anger _____
2. Grief _____
3. Joy _____
4. Shame _____
5. Surprise _____
6. Fear _____
7. Love _____



Reflect:

1. What came up for you as you were doing the word association with emotions above?

2. Fill in the blank:
 - a. Expressing emotions is _____
 - b. These emotions are good: _____
 - c. These emotions are bad: _____

3. As a child, if I cried, I would have been met with:

4. If I was scared, my parents responded by:

5. When I was joyful or happy, I was treated:

6. When I was feeling ashamed of something as a child, my parents would:

Elaborate on the following:

1. Is sadness a feeling you are comfortable with?

2. Do you often feel angry? How do you feel after you are angry?



3. Were your caregivers able to express emotions in a healthy way?

4. Were you taught to suppress your emotions and told to be “strong”? What was that like?

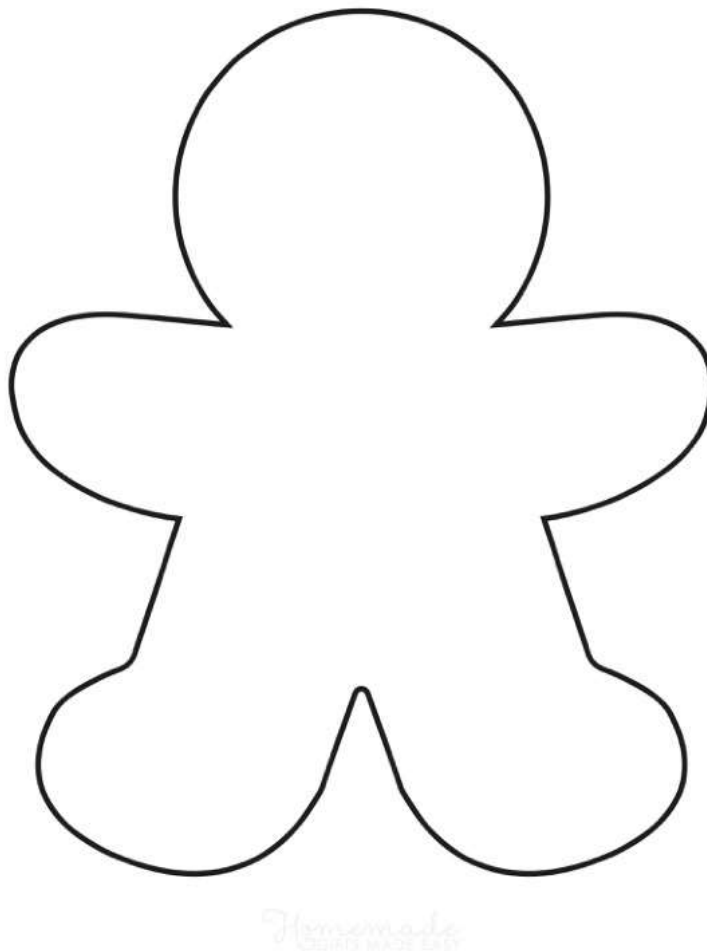
5. Were your caregivers able to provide empathy when you needed it as a child?

Gingerbread Person of feelings:

An activity I often do with my clients is placing their feelings on a gingerbread person. This allows us to start to acknowledge where we feel what. And when we know what we feel, we can accept and cope with it. Place the following core emotions on the gingerbread person in the spot you feel those emotions in your body. If you think of more emotions, feel free to add those too.

- Happy
- Sad
- Mad
- Scared
- Exciting
- Loved





Let’s take it to your child now. Based on your beliefs about emotions, you may or may not have developed limiting beliefs about emotions and children. The Jai Institute for Parenting came up with the following chart to evaluate your limiting beliefs.

Do you accept or reject:	Accept	Reject
“If you give in to a child’s tantrum and act soft, you will teach them they can get whatever they want by pitching a fit.”		
“There are good feelings and there are bad feelings”		
“Spoiled children are created by a parent validating their child’s feelings”		
“Letting children feel their feelings is coddling them and not teaching them how to exist in the real world.”		



<p>“If you respond with empathy and validation to a child’s feelings and let them stay in their feelings until they pass, you teach your children to sulk in their sorrow and think depression is normal.”</p>		
<p>“Emotions are fine to feel, but there are acceptable ways of feeling them and unacceptable ways of feeling them.”</p>		
<p>“My child should be able to control their feelings on their own.”</p>		
<p>“My child being allowed to feel their feelings is unproductive and inconvenient for me.”</p>		
<p>“A child who throws a tantrum is a brat and should be punished for their behavior.”</p>		

Reflect:

1. Which limiting belief about emotions is the strongest for you?

2. Were there any that were not quite right? Re-phrase them here to fit your experiences:

Continuing to build off this momentum, let’s connect these emotional concepts to your parenting. As parents, we can only offer empathy to our kids when we can offer it to ourselves. But often when we resort to power over/under parenting, we aren’t sure what is really going on emotionally with us because of our conditioned beliefs to suppress emotions. The Jai Institute for Parenting did an amazing job coming up with some examples that I think all parents have felt at one time or another. Let’s take a look.

Example 1: A parent yells at their child to get in the car.

This parent is not able to communicate (either internally or externally):

- To Self: “I feel hopeless/lack of control because I am longing for ease.”
- To Child: “Are you willing to work as a team with me? I believe that you and I are capable of this. Shall we touch elbows all the way to the car?”

Example 2: A parent grabs his son’s arm after the son “back talks” him in front of other parents at the party and tells the child we are leaving right now!”

This parent is not able to communicate:

- To self: “I feel disrespected. Kindness and respect are my core values.”



- To Child: “You must be trying to tell me something that is important to you. I am listening.”

Example 3: A parent grabs the video game/phone and rips it away from their child because they did not turn it off when the parent asked. The parent even asked 5 or 6 times before becoming frustrated.

This parent is not able to communicate:

- To Self: “I am feeling so stressed and like I cannot control the situation. I am feeling disrespected because my child never listens about getting off the electronics in a timely manner. I am needing some support so I will tag in my spouse or someone I trust to help.”
- To Child: “I notice you are having a hard time getting off the electronics. I am feeling myself get frustrated so I am going to take a break and then we can try again. (Parents can also use choice giving as a consequence described later in this book.)

Reflect:

Think about a time over the last week when your child was exhibiting big emotions and behaviors and you reacted instead of responding with empathy and soothing.

1. What happened?
2. I felt _____ while this was going on.
3. What needs were not being met for you as the parent?
4. What judgments were you holding about your child’s behaviors?
5. What fears did you attach to the behaviors or judgments?



6. What beliefs did you hold that you didn't realize you believed? (i.e., my child is intentionally throwing a fit to get her way. Or, if I give in, I will just reinforce this tantrum.)

Tools to Develop Inner Soothing for Kids

There are many ways to help soothe your child in times of big emotions or tantrums. Here are just a few ways to help. This is not an expansive list so feel free to add to it, seek outside sources, or adapt any of these to meet the needs of your family.

Calm Cave/Corner

Identify a place in your home where family members can go to seek inner soothing. This can be done together or separately and you can give your child the options. This is NOT time out. Most of the time little kids need connection in order to soothe, so you might say, "let's go to the calm corner together and see if we can find peace." As your child gets older you might say, "Do you need the calm corner? Would you like me to go with you or do you want to be alone?" The calm corner is not to be used as punishment. For example saying, "go to your calm corner until you are nicer. Don't come out till you are ready to talk nicely," would be punishment, and not an appropriate use of the calm corner.

Energy Releasing Movements

Little kids, teens, and adults alike can benefit from this one. Going back to the nervous system, the vagus nerve is stimulated by energy-release movements. Walking like a bear, going for a walk, running, jumping jacks, jumping on the trampoline, punching a pillow, pushing with flat hands on a wall, or wringing a towel can all be good ways to release energy when one is feeling angry.

Soothing Music

Most of us enjoy listening to music that is calming or brings joy. Have a playlist ready and if you have a smart speaker you can say, "play my calm playlist." If you don't, you can simply pull up calming music on YouTube.

Touch

Most kids benefit from some type of calming safe touch. We take our kids' lead on this one. In my house, I always ask, "do you want a hug?" I have one child that always says, "yes" and another that always says, "no!" When my "no" kids refuse touch, I just sit near him offering gentle verbal reminders like, "I'm here."



“Distress Signal”

Come up with a hand gesture that lets your child signal to you that they need a break. Some families use the “flip your lid” hand brain model, and others come up with their own. The trick here is that the signal must be respected.

A note- Soothing is not the same as coddling

We’ve touched on this a bit already. I want to make it clear, soothing is not the same as coddling. You are not giving your child everything they want by soothing them. We are not giving in and we are not being permissive. The skill of soothing is about helping your child emotionally regulate and showing empathy for them even though you are the one enforcing the consequence. It is saying, “No, you can’t go to that party. Man, I know how disappointing that is for you!” genuinely and sincerely (not condescendingly – remember your tone should match your words). You can say “no” to your child while also saying “yes” to their need for connection and soothing.

Reflect:

1. What is one thing that has resonated with you this week?

2. What is one commitment you would like to make towards intentional parenting?

3. Any thoughts, questions, or comments about this week?



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Landreth, G. (2006). Child Parent Relationship Therapy Manual. New York, Routledge.

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