

Helping Children Connect their Upstairs and Downstairs Brain

Brains are like a house with a staircase connecting the upstairs and downstairs. It is a way to understand how our brains work when we feel things or make choices.

downstairs brain

-the lower part of the brain (brain stem and limbic system) that reacts fast and keeps us alive.

What it does:

- controls things we don't think about like breathing and heart rate
- works on instinct and is reactive rather than reflective
- reacts with strong emotions or words to express anger, fear or sadness

The downstairs brain is fully developed at birth. It is fast acting, but not always rational, often resulting in impulsive or emotional reactions, especially in stressful times. For example, an angry or sad child who is in their downstairs brain might have big behaviors (e.g. hit, kick), say extreme things (e.g. *I hate you*) or shut down (e.g. hide).

upstairs brain

-the higher part of the brain that helps us think clearly (prefrontal cortex).

What it does:

- helps us make plans, solve problems, and think before we act
- helps us understand ourselves and care about how others feel
- lets us think about what might happen next

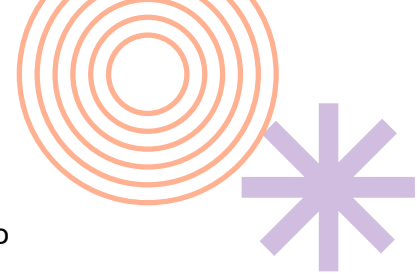
The upstairs brain grows slowly, continuing to develop until our mid-20s, and sometimes beyond. A frustrated or angry child who is in their upstairs brain pauses to think before responding or makes a plan to solve a problem.



how they interact:

When the upstairs and downstairs brains work together we can feel strong emotions, but still be in control and make good choices. If a child gets mad or scared, the downstairs brain can take over causing them to “flip their lid”. They might act without thinking, yell or run away. By recognizing when the downstairs brain is taking over, we can help children reconnect with the upstairs brain.

so what do we do when children have big feelings?



1

First check on your own well-being. Are you feeling calm or regulated enough to support your child?

Next, decide if they are in their upstairs or downstairs brain. Here are some signs:

downstairs brain: child has out of control feelings and actions. It's like their emotions are driving the car, and they can't stop easily.

upstairs brain: child is thinking and making reasonable choices. They are driving the car carefully and can talk about what is going on.

Tip: If a child seems "taken over" by emotions and can't respond in a reasonable way, their downstairs brain is probably in charge. If they can talk, listen or make a plan, their upstairs brain is active.

2

Next, we can help the upstairs and downstairs brain reconnect through **co-regulation**. This happens when we help a child feel safe and supported while being regulated ourselves. We guide the child to manage their feelings until they can do it on their own. Children need help because their upstairs brain is still growing.

Here's a guide to using co-regulation:

- make things feel safe so the downstairs brain knows things are okay (e.g. staying nearby, being present, getting to their level, removing anything stressful if you can)
- attune to their emotions and think about what might be going on for them to soothe the downstairs brain (e.g. *you are really mad and I'm here for you*)
- use nonverbal soothing ways to wake up the upstairs brain (e.g. gentle touch, calm tone, rhythmic movement such as slow breathing, rocking)
- if appropriate, acknowledge the child's feelings, wishes or wants (e.g. *you really wanted that toy*)
- model things like deep breathing or moving your body
- if they are in danger of hurting themselves or others, you may have to hold them close or give them space
- avoid trying to fix the emotion or solve the problem too quickly

When adults help children regulate, they gradually learn how to regulate themselves. Self-regulation develops from experiences of co-regulation. Over time, the upstairs and downstairs brains get better at working together so children can handle big feelings on their own. Remember, everyone needs help calming down sometimes—it's something we keep learning our whole lives. You can also ready handout "Co-regulation".

3

Once the child is back in their upstairs brain (ready to listen, talk, reason), you can do things like:

- use ACT to set firm and consistent limits. See handout "Limit Setting with ACT Approach"
- repair and/or reconnect as needed. See handout "Repairing Relationships with a Time-in"

Two important messages from Mona Delahooke (Beyond Behaviors, 2019):

- When a child is having a hard time, the first thing is not to tell, teach or instruct — stay with them and focus on your connection.
- Child development is like an iceberg: the behaviors we see are just the small part above the water, and much more is hidden underneath. If we only try to fix the behaviors we notice, it's like putting a bandage on the problem instead of finding the real cause. To truly help, we need to look beneath the surface and think about each child's unique needs and life situation.