


Building the Brain by Setting Limits

This perspective can completely change the way we look at the opportunities we have to help our kids make better choices. When we set limits, we help develop the parts of the upstairs brain that allow children to control themselves and regulate their behaviors and their body.

One way to think about it is that we're helping our kids develop the ability to shift between the different aspects of what's called the autonomic nervous system. One part of the autonomic nervous system is the sympathetic branch, which you can think of as the "accelerator" of the system. Like a gas pedal, it causes us to react with gusto to impulses and situations, as it primes the body for action. The other part is the parasympathetic branch, which serves as the "brakes" of the system and allows us to stop and regulate ourselves and our impulses. Keeping the accelerator and the brakes in balance is key for emotional regulation, so when we help children develop the capacity to control themselves even when they're upset, we're helping them learn to balance these two branches of the autonomic nervous system.



Purely in terms of brain functioning, sometimes an activated accelerator (which might result in a child's inappropriate and impulsive action) followed by the sudden application of brakes (in the form of parental limit setting) leads to a nervous system response that may cause the child to stop and feel a sense of shame. When this happens, the physiologic manifestation might result in avoiding eye contact, feeling a heaviness in her chest, and possibly experiencing a sinking feeling in her stomach. Parents might describe this by saying she "feels bad about what she's done."

This initial awareness of having crossed a line is extremely healthy, and it's evidence of a child's developing upstairs brain. Some scientists suggest that limit setting that creates a "healthy sense of shame" leads to an internal compass to guide future behavior. It means she's beginning to acquire a conscience, or an inner voice, along with an

understanding of morality and self-control. Over time, as her parents repeatedly help her recognize the moments when she needs to put on the brakes, her behavior begins to change. It's more than simply learning that a particular action is bad, or that her parents don't like what she's done, so she'd better avoid that action or she'll get in trouble. More occurs within this child than just learning the rules of good vs. bad or acceptable vs. unacceptable.

Rather, her brain actually changes, and her nervous system gets wired to tell her what "feels right," which modifies her future behavior. New experiences wire new connections among her neurons, and the changes in the circuitry of her brain fundamentally and positively alter the way she interacts with her world. The way her parents help this process along is by lovingly and empathically teaching her which behaviors are acceptable and which aren't. That's why it's essential that we set limits and that our children internalize "no" when necessary, particularly in the early years, when the regulatory circuits of the brain are wiring up. By helping them understand the rules and limits in their respective environments, we help build their conscience.

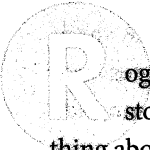
This is often difficult for a loving parent. We want our kids to be happy, and we like it when they receive what they desire. Plus we're aware of how quickly a pleasant situation can devolve when a child doesn't get what he wants. However, if we truly love our kids and want what's best for them, we need to be able to tolerate the tension and discomfort they (and we) may experience when we set a limit. We want to say yes to our children as often as possible, but sometimes saying no is the most loving thing we can do.

One caveat here: Many parents say no, or a form of it, far too often. They say it automatically, often when it's not necessary. *Stop touching that balloon. No running. Don't spill.* Our point here isn't that we want our kids to hear the word "no" a lot. In fact, much more effective than an outright no is a yes with a condition: "Yes, you can take a bath later" or "Yes, we'll read another story, but we'll need to do it tomorrow." *The point, in other words, is not to make a point of saying*

CHAPTER 5

1-2-3 Discipline: Redirecting for Today, and for Tomorrow

Playdate example

 Roger was working in his garage when his six-year-old, Katie, stormed outside, angrily calling out, “Dad! Can you do something about Allie?” Roger soon learned that Katie was upset because her friend Gina, who had come over for a playdate, had become completely enamored with Katie’s nine-year-old sister, Allie. For her part, Allie was apparently happy to monopolize the playdate, leaving her younger sister feeling left out.

In addressing the situation with his older daughter, Roger saw various alternatives. One would be simply to tell Allie she needed to give Katie and Gina some time by themselves, since that was the plan for the playdate, after all. There would be nothing wrong with this approach, but by making the call and imposing his own agenda on the situation, Roger would bypass the important process that would allow Allie to use her upstairs brain.

So instead, he went into the house, called his older daughter aside, and simply initiated a brief conversation. They sat on the couch, and he put his arm around her. Considering Allie’s personality and temperament, he decided to begin with a simple question:

ROGER: Gina's having fun playing with you, and you're really good with younger kids. But I'm wondering if you noticed that Katie's not too happy about Gina giving you all of her attention.

ALLIE: [Defensively, sitting up and turning toward her father] Dad, I'm not even doing anything mean. We're just listening to music.

ROGER: I didn't say you're doing anything wrong. I'm asking whether you've noticed how Katie is feeling right now.

ALLIE: Yeah, but that's not my fault!

ROGER: Sweetheart, I totally agree that it's not your fault. Listen to my question: do you see that Katie isn't happy? I'm asking whether you've noticed.

ALLIE: I guess.

In that one admission, we see evidence that Allie's upstairs brain had become engaged in the conversation, if only a little. She was actually beginning to listen and think about what her father was saying. At this point Roger could target which part of the upstairs brain he wanted to appeal to and exercise. Not by telling Allie what she should think or feel, but by asking her to consider the situation for herself, and to pay attention to what someone else was experiencing.

ROGER: Why do you think she might be upset?

ALLIE: I guess because she wants Gina all to herself. But that girl came into my room! I didn't even ask her to.

ROGER: I know. And you may be right that Katie wants Gina all to herself. But do you think that's it, exactly? If she were standing here and told us how she felt, what would she say?

ALLIE: That it's her playdate, not mine.

ROGER: That's probably pretty close. Would she have a point?

ALLIE: I just don't see why we can't all listen to music together. Seriously, Dad.

ROGER: I get it. I might even agree with you. But what would Katie say to that?

ALLIE: That when we're all together Gina just wants to play with me?

And with that question the empathy broke through. It was only an emerging awareness; we can't expect a huge Lifetime movie moment where a nine-year-old girl is moved to tears out of her compassion for her little sister's emotional pain. But it was a start. Allie was, at the very least, consciously beginning to consider the feelings of her sister (which, if you have young children, you know is no small parental victory). From there, Roger could direct the conversation so that Allie would think more explicitly about Katie's feelings. Then he could ask for Allie's help in coming up with a plan for handling the situation—"Maybe we listen to one more song, then I get ready for my slumber party?"—and in so doing he would further engage her upstairs brain by having her plan and problem-solve.

Initiating a redirection conversation like this won't always be suc-

INSTEAD OF COMMANDING AND DEMANDING...



ENGAGE THE UPSTAIRS BRAIN



cessful. There will be times when a child will be unwilling (or even unable) to see a different perspective, to listen and consider the feelings of others. Roger might end up simply telling Allie she needs to find something else to do, just as Liz had to make the call when her daughter wouldn't give in about who was going to drive her to school. Or maybe he could play a game with all three girls, making sure everyone feels included.

But notice that when he needed to redirect, Roger didn't immediately impose his own sense of justice on the situation. By facilitating empathy and problem solving, he gave his daughter a chance to exercise her upstairs brain. The more we give kids the opportunity to consider not only their own desires, but also the desires of others, and practice making good choices that positively impact the people around them, the better they'll be at doing so. Does a conversation like this one between Roger and Allie take longer than simply separating the girls? Of course. Is it harder to do? Yes, probably. But is

collaborative and respectful redirection worth the effort and extra time? No question about it. And as it becomes your default, it actually makes things easier on you and your entire family, since there will be fewer battles, and you'll be building your child's brain in such a way that less and less often will you even have to address misbehavior.

1-2-3 Discipline

In this chapter we want to take a closer look at the concept of redirection, which is actually what most people mean when they think of discipline. Redirection is how we respond when our kids do something we don't like, such as throwing something in anger, or when they're not doing something we want them to do, like brush their teeth and get ready for bed. After we've connected, how do we address uncooperative or reactive kids, redirecting them toward using their upstairs brain so they can make more appropriate decisions that become second nature over time?


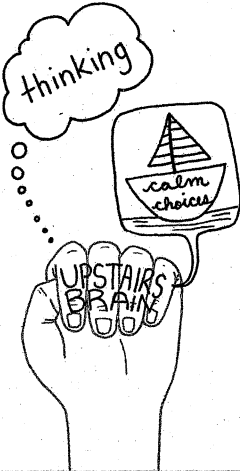

As we've said, No-Drama Discipline is about connecting and being emotionally responsive to our children, while aiming for the short-term goal of gaining cooperation now, as well as the long-term goal of building our child's brain. A simple way to think about redirection is to take a 1-2-3 approach that focuses on one definition, two principles, and three desired outcomes. You don't need to memorize every detail of the approach (especially since we've given you a handy Refrigerator Sheet at the back of the book). Just use it as an organizing framework to help you focus on what's important when it comes time to redirect your kids.



One Definition

The place to begin when thinking about redirecting our kids toward better behavior is with the definition of discipline. When our children make unwise decisions or can't manage their emotions, we need

WHOLE-BRAIN KIDS: Teach Your Kids About Their Downstairs and Upstairs Brain

YOUR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN AND YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN

		
<p>MAKE A FIST WITH YOUR HAND. THIS IS WHAT WE CALL A HAND MODEL OF YOUR BRAIN. REMEMBER HOW YOU HAVE A LEFT SIDE AND A RIGHT SIDE TO YOUR BRAIN? WELL, YOU ALSO HAVE AN UPSTAIRS AND A DOWNSTAIRS PART OF YOUR BRAIN.</p>	<p>THE UPSTAIRS BRAIN IS WHERE YOU MAKE GOOD DECISIONS AND DO THE RIGHT THING, EVEN WHEN YOU ARE FEELING REALLY UPSET.</p>	<p>NOW LIFT YOUR FINGERS A LITTLE BIT. SEE WHERE YOUR THUMB IS? THAT'S PART OF YOUR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN, AND IT'S WHERE YOUR REALLY BIG FEELINGS COME FROM. IT LETS YOU CARE ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE AND FEEL LOVE. IT ALSO LETS YOU FEEL UPSET, LIKE WHEN YOU'RE MAD OR FRUSTRATED.</p>

	
<p>THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH FEELING UPSET. THAT'S NORMAL, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN HELPS YOU CALM DOWN. FOR EXAMPLE, CLOSE YOUR FINGERS AGAIN. SEE HOW THE UPSTAIRS THINKING PART OF YOUR BRAIN IS TOUCHING YOUR THUMB, SO IT CAN HELP YOUR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS CALMLY?</p>	<p>SOMETIMES WHEN WE GET REALLY UPSET, WE CAN FLIP OUR LID. RAISE YOUR FINGERS LIKE THIS. SEE HOW YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN IS NO LONGER TOUCHING YOUR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN? THAT MEANS IT CAN'T HELP IT STAY CALM.</p>