



Module 2 - Move from Red Zone Parenting to Green Zone Parenting

Dear Parent!

Welcome to the Calm Parent Challenge

Over the course of these Workshops we'll be diving into many really important topics to help all as parents.

Patrick

Podcast Recording

Please note that I have recorded a long-form podcast recording to accompany this homework. It is for parents who want to reinforce the lessons from the homework by going in-depth with me on the materials. I have stories and reflections which you won't find in the homework, though, so it is worth it. The recording is 1 hour long and you can find it on the Program Page.

A short summary of your homeworks (to complete before the next meeting)

Homework 1: Rate Your Stress Level	
Homework 2 : Improve Your Sleep	
Homework 3: Keep a Behaviour Diary	

How to Stop Yelling At Your Kids

For the past six years, I've worked with parents around the world, and I've learned so much that has helped me as a parent myself. As many of you know, I'm the father of two daughters. They've both experienced what it's like when I lose my temper, so I understand firsthand how challenging it can be to stay calm in the heat of the moment.

Why Do We Yell?

When parents come to workshops, a common theme emerges: *"My child is doing X or Y, and it's making me angry, so I yell at them."* But here's an important realization I've had: Your child could be the calmest, most well-behaved child in the world, but if you're at a 10 out of 10 on the stress scale, it doesn't matter what your child does.

In those moments, even something as small as a tissue falling to the floor can push you over the edge. Our reactions often have less to do with our children's behavior and more to do with how stressed, tired, or overwhelmed we feel.

Let's consider two scenarios:

1. **Relaxing Environment:** Imagine you're on holiday at a luxurious, all-inclusive resort. You're well-rested, relaxed, and happy. If your child does something like hit their sibling, your likely reaction might be, *"You guys will get over it. It's not a big deal."*
2. **Stressful Environment:** Now, imagine you've just come home after a long, exhausting day. It's cold and wet outside, the fridge is half-empty, and you're feeling hungry and drained. If your child does the same thing—hits their sibling—you're far more likely to explode.

The difference between these scenarios isn't your child's behavior—it's your **stress score**.

Anger Is Normal

Contrary to what you might read online, all of us have anger inside us. Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp explains that we all have an anger system wired into our brains. It's part of being human.

As parents, it's important to understand that we will never completely eliminate our anger, and we shouldn't try to. Suppressing anger is unhealthy. Instead, we need to learn how to recognize it, manage it, and respond constructively.

Here are some key ideas I'd like to share with you,

1. **Your anger is yours, not your child's.** When you yell at your child, it's not because of their behavior - it's because of your internal state, your "stress score."
2. **There's no perfect parent.** You will never reach a point where you never, ever yell or have feelings of anger at your kids. That's not realistic, and that's okay.

3. **Yelling has an impact.** Frequent yelling can harm children over time, but occasional outbursts, especially in a loving, functional family, are not traumatizing. What matters is how you handle those moments and repair the relationship afterward.

Shouting Doesn't Define You

If you're worried about whether your occasional yelling is harming your child, here's some reassurance: As long as it's not constant or part of a dysfunctional family dynamic, your child will be okay. In fact, these moments can become opportunities to model healthy emotional regulation.

By acknowledging your anger, dealing with it constructively, and apologizing if necessary, you're teaching your child an important life skill - how to manage strong emotions.

A Simple Exercise

Here's a quick exercise to help ground yourself when you feel overwhelmed:

1. Place your hands on your chest.
2. Take a deep breath.
3. Remind yourself: *"I'm only human. My children don't need me to be perfect. It's okay if I've yelled. I can do better next time."*

We'll be practicing this exercise together in the meeting, but feel free to start using it on your own.

Understanding Your Stress Score

In this section, we'll explore one of the most critical aspects of parenting: understanding just how stressed you are. If you agree that your anger and yelling are your responsibility, not your child's, the next step is to assess what's causing your stress.

Homework 1: Rate Your Stress Score

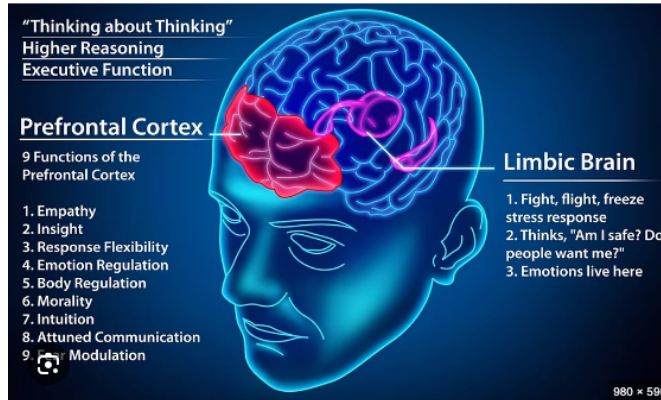
On a scale of 0 to 10, how high is your stress right now?

- **0:** You're on a relaxing holiday-calm, well-rested, and happy.
- **10:** You're completely overwhelmed, tired, and ready to explode.

Take a moment to reflect on your life, decide on your score, and write it down.

Why Stress Matters

If your stress level is at 8, 9, or 10, no new parenting strategy or technique will work for you. The reason is simple: when we're that stressed, our brain operates from the limbic system's **amygdala**-the fight-or-flight center-rather than the **prefrontal cortex**, which governs logic, reasoning, and problem-solving.



In this state, we're reactive, judgmental, and not our best selves. High-stress moments are not a reflection of who you truly are as a parent. You want to be that fun, loving parent who laughs, plays, and spends quality time with their kids. To achieve that, we need to bring our stress levels down to a manageable level, closer to a 4 or 5.

Identifying Stressors: Sleep

One of the biggest contributors to stress is **sleep**. Poor sleep directly impacts your stress level, and if you're not getting the recommended 7–9 hours a night, it's nearly impossible to move down the stress scale.

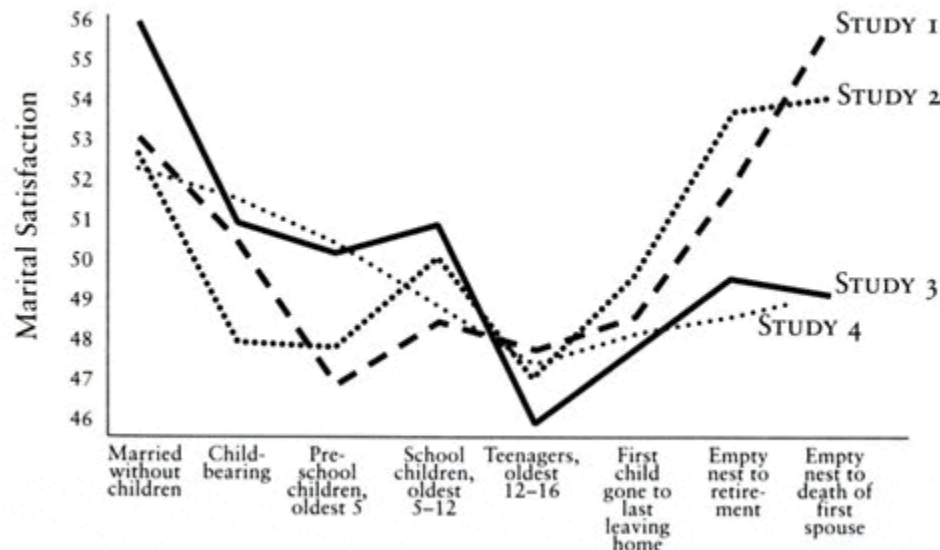
When you're sleep-deprived, your cortisol (stress hormone) levels rise, leaving you feeling drained and irritable. Whether it's trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking up too early, poor-quality sleep makes you a more stressed and reactive parent. If you're not prioritizing your sleep, even small changes can have a huge impact.

Tips for Improving Sleep

Here are some ideas to help you improve your sleep:

1. **Limit Screen Time:** Avoid screens for at least an hour (or two) before bed.
2. **Watch Your Caffeine Intake:** Avoid caffeine after mid-morning or consider cutting back entirely.
3. **Establish a Routine:** Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
4. **Address Sleep Disruptors:** If you have a snoring partner or an uncomfortable sleeping environment, find solutions to improve your sleep quality.
5. **Eat Early:** Avoid eating large meals late in the evening, as it can disrupt your sleep.

If you're a parent of a newborn, sleep challenges may feel unavoidable, but there are ways to make small improvements. Even a slight increase in your sleep quality can bring your stress level down by 1 or 2 points, making a noticeable difference in your parenting.



And remember, life and marital satisfaction does get a lot better, when the kids are teenagers, and even better when they move out! PN

Homework 2 : Improve Your Sleep

Take an honest look at your sleep routine. What's one solid change you can make before our next meeting?

- Can you cut back on caffeine?
- Avoid screens for a longer period before bedtime?
- Establish a more consistent bedtime routine?

Make one small change to improve your sleep, and your children will thank you for it.

By addressing your sleep, you'll bring yourself closer to that calm, confident parent you want to be. Improved sleep doesn't just lower your stress—it improves your connection with your kids. Let's make this a priority.

Stressors: Diet

What we put into our mouths has a profound impact on our day to day mood. Diets high in Ultra Processed Foods have been linked to depression, anxiety and mood instability. Currently, more

than 70% of calories consumed in the US and the UK by children consist of Ultra Processed Foods. UPFs have been called ‘the new smoking’ and are increasingly held to blame for a range of health conditions.

Although we won’t go into this during the meeting, I invite you to consider how you can make healthier choices in your own life to reduce this diet-related risk to you and your family. Make a note of your commitment and write it down.

Stressors: Movement

Our bodies and our minds were built to move. Without movement, we are prey to a range of health conditions, including worse mood (emotion over time). The average American adult walks 4-5000 steps a day. Consider upping your step count to minimum 7000 steps (I try to aim for 10,000 a day). This movement is low-impact on the body and high-impact on the mind.

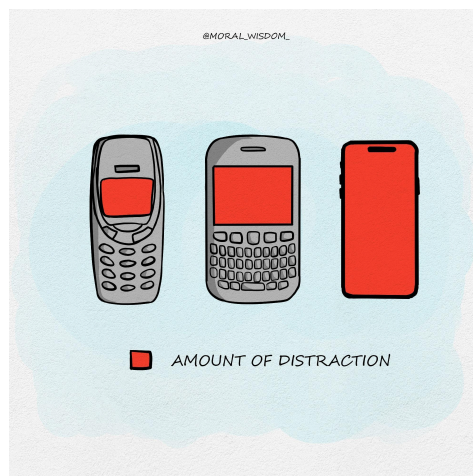
If you can combine a daily walk with a trip to nature (no phone) your mood will soar.

Stressors: We’re Serially Distracted

Here’s another big reason why we end up shouting at our kids: we’re constantly distracted.

I don’t know what your evenings look like, but maybe they’re even busier than mine. Let me paint you a picture of mine: I’m cleaning up the kitchen while trying to make something to eat for my younger daughter. Then my wife comes in and asks me a question. I don’t want to upset her, so I try to answer, but at the same time, I’m thinking about work and trying to store that thought in my mind. Suddenly, a notification goes off on my phone, and I can feel the tension building.

It’s hard to put into words, but I start feeling irritated-at everyone. Why? Because deep down, I didn’t want to be helping in the kitchen or having a conversation right now. I just wanted to focus on work.

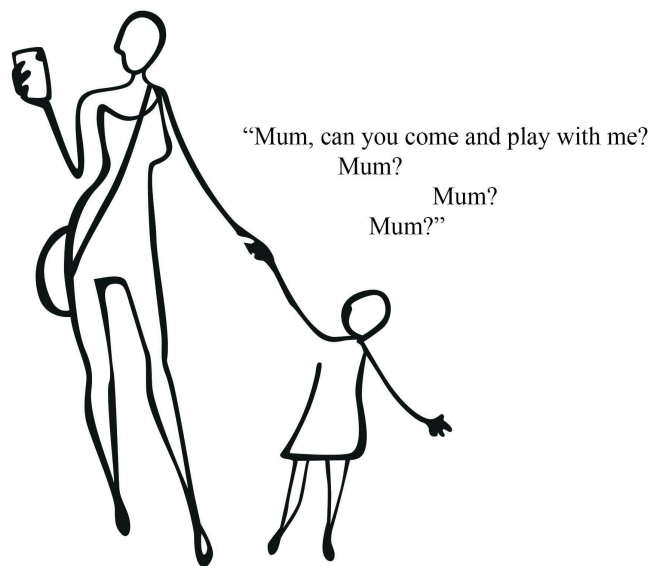


This feeling of overwhelm happens because of something called *cognitive load*. Your brain only has so much “computing power,” and when it gets overloaded, it starts making snap judgments and mistakes.

When your cognitive load is low-when you’ve got plenty of “brain battery”-you can process things calmly and logically. You can deal with challenges in a measured way. But when you’re juggling three or four things at once, not only will you do everything poorly, but you’re far more likely to snap at the people around you.

Multitasking Isn’t Helping

Let’s be real: many of us are trying to do too much at the same time. You might be a single parent with no choice but to multitask, but even then, there’s something important to recognize: multitasking creates stress, frustration, and anger.



Most of us are also guilty of letting our phones add to the problem. Research shows that the vast majority of parents use their phones constantly. That shiny little device in your hand is specifically designed to distract you and pull you away from the present moment-and from your family.

Slow Down and Focus

So here’s the takeaway: if you catch yourself feeling overwhelmed or snapping at your kids, take a moment to slow down. Do one thing at a time. This is the lesson we take from Zen Buddhism:

- When you're cooking, just cook.
- When you're working, just work.
- When you're parenting, just parent.

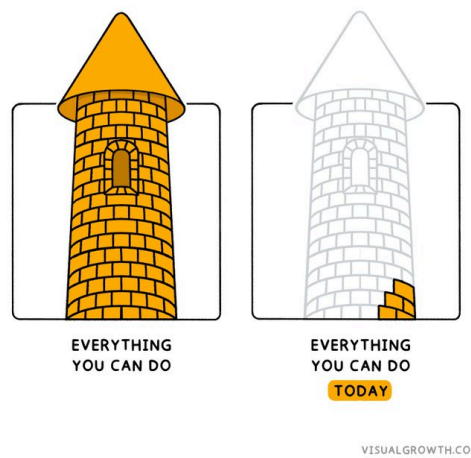
You can handle one or two tasks pretty well. But when you're trying to do three, you'll only do them poorly. Four things? You're doing them all badly.

A Quick Reflection

Ask yourself this:

- How many things are you trying to do at once?
- Are you being distracted by your phone?

If you're juggling four things, cut it back to two. Stay present. Be intentional. Your family will thank you.



It always seems impossible until it's done, as Nelson Mandela once said. Take your parenting journey one step at a time, one day at a time. PN

Dealing with Our Kids' Behavior

While earlier we discussed that yelling is about our internal state, it's also true that our kids' behavior can be frustrating. You might think of recent examples - your child breaking something, ignoring you, deliberately defying rules, or even saying hurtful things - and wonder how you're not supposed to react.

These behaviors are indeed challenging, but here's an important reminder: our reactions belong to us, not to them. The same frustrating behavior can elicit completely different reactions depending on our stress levels or internal state. As we've discussed, on a relaxed holiday, you

may brush off the same behavior that would cause you to yell on a hectic day. This is why it's critical to focus on your own emotional regulation first.

Understanding What's Normal and What Can Change

Many frustrating behaviors in children are age-appropriate. Toddlers have meltdowns, young kids might lie or grab toys, and teenagers can be disrespectful—it's all part of their developmental stage. However, if a child's behavior feels completely out of control, there is good news: you *can* change it. You'll yell less if there's less to yell about.

But here's the key—before you can start changing your child's behavior, you need to work on yourself. This is why the first step in this Calm Parent Challenge is managing your own stress before diving into techniques for setting rules and boundaries.

The Importance of Self-Work

It's natural to want to jump straight into solving your child's behavior problems, but starting with yourself is essential. Stress levels of 8, 9, or 10 mean you're operating from a reactive, amygdala state, where you're less likely to approach situations with logic or patience. Once you've reduced your stress, you'll have the emotional capacity to explore why your child is acting out. In upcoming meetings, we'll look at the underlying causes of behavior, often linked to unmet needs. For instance, children might lie to gain a sense of control or security. By understanding the root causes, you'll shift from reacting emotionally to responding thoughtfully.

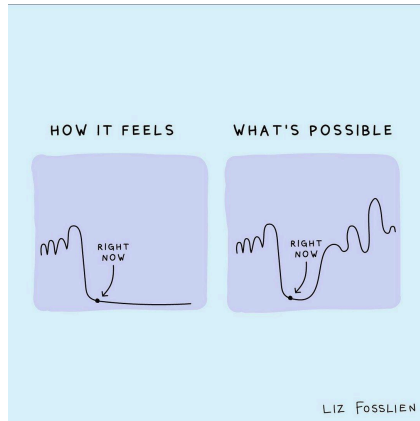
Understanding the "Why" Behind Behavior

Much of what we perceive as "bad" behavior often stems from unmet psychological needs. For example, lying might not mean your child is being manipulative; instead, it could indicate they're seeking control in a situation where they feel powerless. The more you understand your child's motivations, the less emotionally reactive you'll feel. Instead of jumping straight to anger or punishment, you'll start to see opportunities to address those unmet needs, creating lasting change.

Building Rules That Work

As you gain insight into your child's behavior, you'll also learn how to create boundaries that work for your family. This involves building rules that take into account your child's developmental needs while also aligning with your family values. These strategies will reduce the frequency of negative behaviors, bringing fewer moments of conflict and frustration into your home. Over time, this process will help lower your stress levels, making it easier to parent with patience, understanding, and empathy.

By focusing first on yourself and then on understanding your child, you'll create a calmer and more connected dynamic in your family. It starts with taking care of your internal world and builds from there.

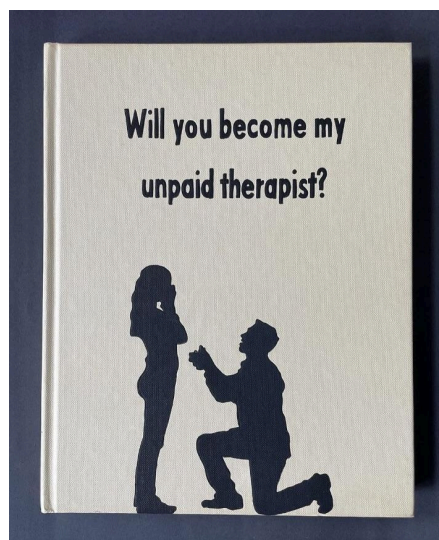


When you start working on your parenting I promise you things that felt impossible become possible!

How Our Past Shapes Our Parenting

One key reason many of us find ourselves at an 8, 9, or 10 on the stress scale is rooted in who we are and where we come from. When I became a parent, I didn't fully realize how much of my childhood had shaped my expectations of what a mother or father should be. For instance, I initially believed I had to be a better version of my dad - a man I remembered as present, switched on, and excellent at everything. But that vision of him wasn't realistic. My dad, like me, had good days and bad days, got bored, and made mistakes.

A lot of my frustration as a parent stemmed from life not turning out the way I thought it "should." Psychology shows that we carry mental models from childhood about how the world, people, and families should behave. Becoming a parent forces us to confront those ingrained lessons we learned from our own parents.



Our partners and children often see all the sides of our personality and soul we weren't aware of or would prefer not to admit to. That is love! PN

Lessons from Our Parents

Our parents did the best they could with the knowledge they had, but they didn't have resources like this Calm Parent Challenge. They were amateurs, and that's okay! However, many of us carry deep-seated resentments or expectations rooted in our childhood. Whether we've pledged not to repeat their mistakes or internalized their approaches, those lessons affect us now.

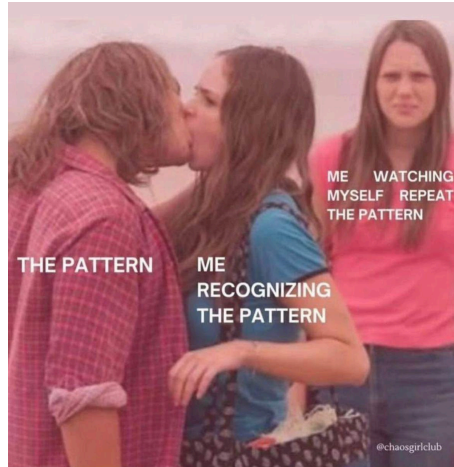
In fact, many parents I've worked with have said, "I'm not going to be like my parents. I won't make their mistakes." Yet, when they find themselves behaving just like their mum or dad, guilt sets in. It's a vicious cycle: you promise not to be like them, end up repeating their patterns, and then beat yourself up over it. This guilt creates more frustration, perpetuating the cycle.

In one of our previous challenges, a parent Andy (name changed to protect her confidentiality) realised that she was extremely controlling. She recognised this stemmed from her parents who exhibited many controlling behaviours. Despite promising she would not be like her mom and dad, she often found herself slipping into this pattern of behaviour.

During the 5 Week Calm Parent Challenge, Andy started to change her relationship to this controlling side of herself. She no longer sought to "avoid" the controlling Andy inside her, she just started to become more comfortable with it. In the process, she was able to open up new avenues in her relationship with her daughter, Jamie (12).

The Perfectionism Trap

A common theme among stressed parents is perfectionism. Perhaps you were raised by parents who equated success with perfect grades or ideal behavior. They pushed hard, often using yelling and pressure, to ensure you met their high standards. While you may have vowed never to parent like that, perfectionism can sneak in differently. Instead of pressuring your kids to achieve academically, you might pressure yourself to be the perfect parent who never yells or makes mistakes. This unrealistic standard only leads to frustration and self-criticism and increases your Stress Score



Patterns can be hard to spot. And even when you are aware of them, these psychological complexes can have great hold over you (and me). Awareness is key, though, and this feeling will change over time. PN

Breaking the Cycle

Here's a powerful exercise to reflect on these patterns. Close your eyes and go back in time to your childhood.

Think about the lessons you received from your parents about how a mother, father, or child should behave.

Acknowledge that these lessons have been with you your entire life and may be influencing your stress and frustration as a parent.

The first step is recognizing these patterns. Once you do, you can begin to challenge and reframe them, allowing yourself to parent in a way that aligns with who you are now, not who you were raised to be.

An example: should kids fight?

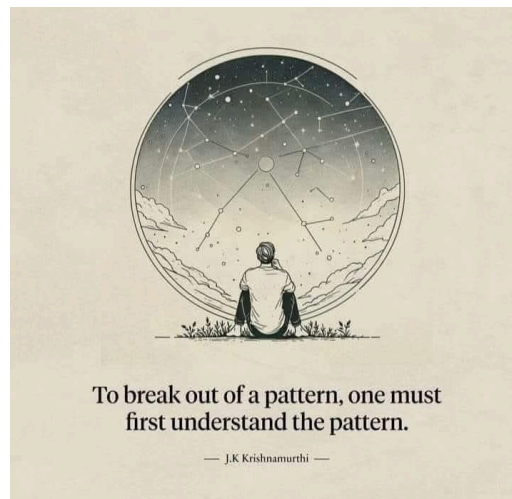
Let's imagine you were raised as an only child or had siblings who were significantly older than you. Your childhood might have been fairly calm, with little fighting or chaos, and both parents were likely able to give you a lot of attention. The belief or lesson you may have taken from that is, "This is how a childhood should look."

Fast forward to you as a parent now, and you have two kids who are constantly fighting. It feels disturbing and stressful-especially when one of them ends up crying or hurt. It seems unfair. You might think, "It shouldn't be this way." But here's the reality: all mammals, including humans, play fight and fight. It's a natural part of growing up. Neuroscientists like Dr. Jaak Panksepp have shown that aggression, just like anger, is an essential part of the human condition-it can't

be avoided.

Here's how it looks in my family

Take my wife, Maja, for example. She's an only child, and I can see how her reaction to our kids fighting has always been completely different from mine. I grew up as one of three boys, and we beat the living daylights out of each other. Honestly, I probably dished it out as much as I got, though sometimes I think I got more than my fair share! This difference between us is a perfect example of how our internal world acts as a filter. When something happens—like kids fighting—your belief system, shaped primarily by your childhood, processes that event and produces your reaction.



When you start to understand who you are and where you came from, you can change your reality today. PN

The Psychology Behind It

This principle is fundamental in psychology. You can see it in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), one of the world's most widely practiced psychological methods. The idea is simple: external events happen, your internal beliefs filter them, and then you react based on those beliefs. I'm not asking you to get rid of those internal beliefs—they're part of you. But I am asking you to recognize them. When you see those beliefs clearly, when you let some "sunlight" in on them, they can lose their dominance. They become less loud in your mind and take up less space in the story your brain tells about what's happening.

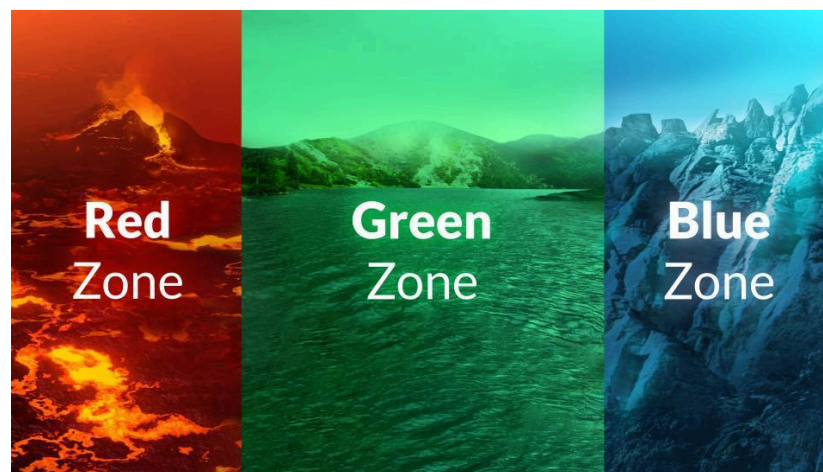
By understanding how your childhood shapes your reactions, you can start to give yourself some grace. It's not about erasing your beliefs but about seeing them for what they are: a filter, not a fact.

What Zone Are You In? The Polyvagal Theory of Dr. Stephen Porges

So far we've been using this idea of a Stress Score to help us understand where our body and our mind is, but now we're more advanced I'd like us to spend some time learning a theory which, more than any other, has helped me and thousands of other parents to understand what helps when we yell and shout, when our kids have a meltdown and when we have meltdowns too.

So let's tie this into Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory. This theory helps us understand how the nervous system responds to stress using three states, which we refer to in our All About Parenting meetings as the Green, Red, and Blue zones.

1. **Green Zone (Ventral Vagal State):** In this calm state, you feel safe and social. You are engaged and your 'upstairs' logical brain is in control, allowing you to think clearly and manage their emotions.
2. **Red Zone (Sympathetic State):** When you start to feel stressed or threatened, you move into the Red Zone, which is the fight-or-flight response. Your heart rate increases, you become more agitated, and your downstairs brain starts to take over.
3. **Blue zone (Dorsal Vagal State):** If the stress continues and becomes too overwhelming, you can move into the Blue Zone, which is a shutdown or freeze response. You might become very quiet, withdrawn, or appear disconnected.



How does this look with our children?

During a meltdown, your child's nervous system can shift rapidly between these states. They might start in the Red Zone, becoming agitated and angry, and if the stress continues, they might move into the Blue Zone, shutting down and becoming very still or quiet.

Understanding this helps us see that meltdowns are not just about behaviour; they reflect the child's nervous system being overwhelmed and unable to cope.

Let's look at an example. Imagine your child is playing happily when suddenly their favourite toy breaks. This unexpected event triggers stress. Their 'downstairs' amygdala brain takes over, and their nervous system moves into the Red Zone. They might start crying, screaming, or even

hitting. If the stress continues, they might move into the Blue Zone and become very quiet or withdrawn.

The important thing to remember is that your child has little control over this process. During a meltdown, their developing brain is overwhelmed, and their ability to manage emotions is limited. The downstairs brain, responsible for basic survival functions and emotional reactions, takes over, sidelining the upstairs brain, which handles reasoning and self-regulation. This means that even though their behaviour might seem intentional or defiant, it's actually a result of their nervous system being flooded and their brain struggling to cope. Recognizing that meltdowns are a natural and involuntary response helps us approach these moments with greater empathy and patience, focusing on calming and supporting our children rather than reacting with frustration or punishment.

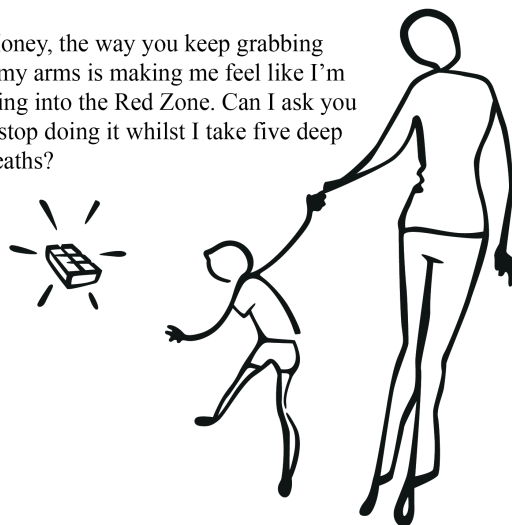
So What About Us Parents?

Our nervous systems are constantly interacting with our child's nervous system, too. If we become upset and move into the Red Zone ourselves, it can escalate or prolong our child's meltdown. This is why it's crucial for us - as much as we can - to stay calm and regulated, helping to bring our child back to the Green Zone. And that's why we've been working on improving our Stress Score, which is another way of saying, being more in the Green Zone.

Let's imagine a situation where our child has been pestering us for something sweet and sugary for about ten minutes. We're feeling the pressure a little bit, especially because someone has just given us 'that glance' which makes us feel so judged. (I've been there many times, trust me!)

"Momma, If you don't buy me that chocolate I'm gonna cry!
Gimme, Gimme, Gimme!"

"Honey, the way you keep grabbing
at my arms is making me feel like I'm
going into the Red Zone. Can I ask you
to stop doing it whilst I take five deep
breaths?"



The Momma in this example has identified the one behaviour which is tipping them into the Red Zone and in as calm a way as possible, is asking the child to stop. They're also already thinking about what to do next to stay in the Green Zone, which is something we're going to discuss in later chapters in more detail.

An Idea for Inspiration

The Mum in this example is also doing something which I highly encourage parents to do, which is to use the Green, Red, Blue language with their kids. I think this simple colour coding has helped me more than anything to have an emotions-informed discussion with my children without needing to pull out some gigantic wheel of emotion on my 5 year old and start listing individual feelings. That's way too much for small children, keep it simple, keep it clear - Red, Green, Blue. The more you do this, the more likely it is that your child will develop the same skill (and then be ahead of 90% of adults when it comes to emotional management!).

Homework 3: Keep a Behaviour Diary

I invite you to keep a log of your **own** moments of dysregulation. Note when you feel yourself moving into the Red or Blue zones – when you're starting to feel overwhelmed, stressed, or angry. Reflect on what triggered these feelings and how you responded. This exercise will help you become more aware of your own emotional states and better equipped to stay calm during your child's meltdowns. You can also practise using Red, Green, Blue language with your child or consider making a poster.

In my case, I find I am the world's perfect parent until about 8pm in the evening at which point I turn into a raging tyrant that Napoleon would be intimidated by! Little wonder, since I choose to get up at 4 or 5 am to work or hit the gym, that I am tired by the time 8pm comes around. When I wake up at 6am I have a lot more reserves of energy left in the tank and I am far more likely to stay in the Green Zone when things get tough.

Likewise, I learnt that my 2 morning strong coffees, which I thought 'woke me up' leave me crashing in the afternoon and irritable with my daughters. I also go into the Red Zone a lot more quickly when I am hot and in a busy public place. More than once I've said to my wife, Maja "you need to take this" and walked out to avoid Red Zone Dad syndrome. Knowing this, I try to manage my sleep. I gave up coffee and If I'm walking into a busy place I'm trying to get myself mentally ready for what's about to happen.

So, what causes you, dear parent, to go into the Red Zone? What can you change in your life to be more in the Green? The better you do this, the better you'll be able to handle your child's own Red Zone moments.

A List of Powerful Quotes

In our journeys to become better parents, we can always draw on the wisdom of the ages. I hope these five powerful thoughts plant a seed inside you, as they have done inside me,

Well done for completing the reading. I can't wait to see you in the first meeting!!

Patrick

*"Knowing yourself is true wisdom." **Tao Te Ching***

*"Without suffering, there can be no understanding of happiness." **Thich Nhat Hanh***

*"Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterward." **Vernon Law***

*'You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.' **Romans 2:1***

*"Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves." **Carl Jung***