

Expanding Our Understanding of the Meaning of Safe

By Dr. Stuart Shanker (D. Phil), CEO of The MEHRIT Centre and Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy and Psychology, York University

THERE ARE CERTAIN UNMISTAKABLE SIGNS OF WHEN A CHILD DOESN'T FEEL SAFE: the child is very withdrawn and subdued; emotionally volatile; overly anxious; highly impulsive; inattentive, or easily distracted. Or bullying other children. It's this last sentence that should make us suddenly sit up and realize that we need to think seriously about what we understand by "safe."

We have so much research now telling us how important it is for children's well-being that they feel safe. We've tended to interpret these findings in terms of the need to stamp out bullying; yet if bullying itself is an unmistakable sign that a child doesn't feel safe, then what exactly does "safe" mean?

Neuroscientists have come up with an important answer to this question. They talk about neuroception: systems that lie deep in the brain, which are constantly on the lookout for threats. And these threats come in all shapes and sizes.

There are emotional threats; threats to our ego; threats to our sense of what is right and wrong. A look, a vocalization, a gesture, even a movement can be threatening; and so too can the lack of a look, vocalization, gesture or movement. Sometimes what is threatening is the demand being made on us; or not knowing how what we are doing or saying will be received. Sometimes what is threatening is not knowing what someone is thinking, or an action we don't understand. Sometimes the threat comes from a group's shared understanding that we ourselves don't grasp. Sometimes the threat stems from our feelings of vulnerability; or being removed from our comfortable routines.

What is common to all threats is that they cause the child's alarm system to go off, releasing a surge of adrenaline that arouses the child to fight or flee. When a child feels safe, cortisol and serotonin are released, which counteract these effects.

Children all respond differently to having an alarm that keeps being triggered or that won't turn off. As we just saw, some become very withdrawn and subdued. Some have problems in mood and anxiety. Some become very impulsive or easily distracted. Some become aggressive. And some go through all of the above.

The reason for these different kinds of responses lies deep in a child's biology, coupled with the child's history of interactive experiences, starting from an incredibly young age.

When we talk about how important it is to create safe and caring environments, we are talking about creating the kind of environment, emotional as well as physical, that turns off a child's alarm. This produces a shift from what neuroscientists call the "survival brain" to the "learning brain." The learning going on here doesn't just concern what goes on in class. It's learning about what's going on inside your body; understanding your feelings and emotions; knowing what others are thinking and feeling; recognizing the impact of your actions and utterances on others.

The reason why it is so important that we expand our understanding of "safe" is the shift this promotes from thinking that what children need is greater self-control to recognizing that what children really need is better self-regulation. For the above skills are what self-regulation is all about.

The problem with seeing "safe" solely in terms of stamping out bullying is that this may lead us to think that this is simply a problem of self-control. But it's not. Children can only exercise self-control when they are calm, and that requires knowing when and why they are agitated and what they can do to return to being calm. In other words, when they self-regulate.