

# INTRODUCING IT: Stress Detectives and Safe Harbors: Helping Children Feel Secure



**WATCH IT** (10 minutes)

[Stress Detectives and Safe Harbors: Helping Children Feel Secure](#) (Kristie Pretti-Frontczak, Ph.D., with DEC, 2020)

**This resource, a narrated webinar with Power Point slides, introduces us to four concepts we can apply to both prevent and manage challenging behaviors in children.** It offers an evidence-based approach we can use with all children. Whether working with children that are developing typically, or those that have been identified with developmental delays or disabilities, the information in this resource will equip you with invaluable knowledge and practices!

**Extend your TRY IT! learning** through exploring the wealth of additional resources provided by Dr. Pretti-Frontczak. These handouts, blogs, and podcasts will help you to put the concepts introduced during the webinar into use!



**KNOW IT**

Here are the **important ideas** this resource offers:

- Stress can be felt in five domains: biological, social, prosocial, emotional and cognitive. Stress in any domain can impact our ability to develop, learn, and remain calm.

- Stressors come from many different situations and feelings. We need to understand what they are, how they impact us personally, and to identify those that are out of our control, and those that are not.
- Caregivers must think about stressors in relation to care environments, the way the pandemic impacts environments, as well as life in general.
- All human beings have different tolerance levels for stressors, and have different capacities to manage them. We need to recognize and respect this.
- “Stress detectives” focus on in order to help children manage stress and their behaviors are the four “S’s” – making children feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure. We need to consider how we demonstrate these to the children with whom we work.
- The concepts mean:
  - **Safe** – Protect children from harm and avoid being a source of threat and fear.
  - **Seen** – See one’s self and children served through the lens of whole-person.
  - **Soothed** – Are responsive to what is being communicated and model calm in response.
  - **Secure** – Create an environment of trust and provide learning opportunities for self-regulation and empowerment.
- The evidence that using the four S’s work is found in brain science, or neurobiology.
- The brain is made up of the base region, or brain stem. Information comes in through the brain stem. The mid-region, or limbic system, holds emotions and feelings. The upper region of the brain are its “brakes.” It contains the neocortex, which houses the cerebral cortex and prefrontal cortex. Skills like perspective-taking, problem-solving, empathy, recall, impulse control and compassion are developed here.
- If information coming in to the brain feels unsafe, we go into flight or fight (hyper arousal) mode, or freeze or faint (hypo arousal) mode. The lower/mid brain can’t communicate with the upper brain when in an arousal mode, and loses its

brakes. Therefore, big behaviors are the only way a child can tell us something is wrong.

- Brains need to be in the calm zone to be able to learn, and to use controlled, regulated responses. (See **Handout #1 - Hand model of the brain.**)
- Babies and young children's brain are **very** underdeveloped. It takes an average of 25 years of healthy development for the brain's upper region to effectively become the brain's brakes.
- Being aware of the lengthy list of child stressors to help make them feel safe. Feeling safe – not registering threat or fear - means:
  - The child feels no threat or harm can come from the physical environment or from people.
  - The child feels being vulnerable is okay and no one will make fun of him.
  - The child feels the environments and routines are predictable and feels confident in knowing the rules and expectations.
  - The child understands the meaning of gestures, facial expressions, words, looks, tone of voice.
- The strategies to creating or reestablishing safety are to ask yourself “Why this behavior and why now?” With that answer in mind, interact by:
  - Slowing down – approach with calm, quiet, and aim to connect. It's O.K. to remain silent about a behavior, but it is not okay. to intentionally ignore the behavior, and thus the child.
  - Co-regulating – stay in the moment with empathy, don't force the child to be calm, but lead them there through your own calm.
  - Prompting – Move the child away from reacting by using your calm.
    - Step 1 – Pause, don't jump in and “do.”
    - Step 2 – Notice what the child is trying to communicate or the info the child is trying to process.
    - Step 3 – Wonder aloud – ask the child what he might need or is trying to do.

- **Reframe** – Recognize **this is not misbehavior – it is stress behavior**. Avoid overwhelming with directions, corrections. Address the need driving the behavior.
- Offer a lifeline – Offer your calm and **don't worry about teaching rules or directing right now – the brain needs to feel safe before it can be in a receptive learning state**.
- **Repair / Restore** – Offer the child coping strategies in order to re-establish balance throughout the five domains of stress.
- Caregivers' brains also need to feel safe in order to be able to offer calm. Use self-care practices and mindfulness techniques to help you be ready for times that are challenging.
- Build safety for both adults and children by thinking about how we:
  - Validate vs. fix
  - Use less vs. more (words, talking, rules, etc.)
  - Slow down vs. go fast (taking punitive or ignoring action)
  - Recognize needs vs. wants
  - Offer space vs. answers
  - Offer calm, compassion and connection vs. getting compliance
- When children and adults feel safe, they feel seen, can be soothed, and know they are secure.

Here are some **terms** in the resource that may not be familiar to you:

**Attachment science** is the study of relationships and how we develop through relationships. The most important idea is that young children need to develop a relationship with at least one primary caregiver for normal social and emotional development to occur.

**Regulatory state** is when a person is or isn't exerting control over one's own emotional state and behaviors.

**Self-regulation** is the conscious control of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Another way to think about self-regulation is as a person's ability to manage attention and emotions well enough to complete tasks, organize behavior, control impulses, and solve

problems constructively. This set of skills will help children as they grow and mature to direct their own behavior towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and their own feelings.

**Co-regulate, co-regulation** – These are the warm and responsive interactions an adult offers a child that provide the support, coaching, and modeling children need to understand, express, and modulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

**Attuned, attunement** - is when we engage with someone else's feelings in the moment. They feel us and no longer feel alone, but connected. When someone experiences attunement in the other person, they feel “seen” by that person.



Let's see what you learned from this resource! **Choose the answer from choices provided. The answers are at the end the guide.**

1. Children need to feel safe, seen, soothed and \_\_\_\_\_ by the primary caregiving adults in their life.  
a) sympathy    b) superior    c) secure    d) special
2. The prefrontal cortex is the area in the brain that controls our ability to problem-solve, take perspectives, control impulses, and:  
a) laugh    b) recall    c) feel safe    d) breathe
3. The brain cannot be in a responsive learning state unless it feels:  
a) happy    b) awake    c) safe    d) interested
4. It is not acceptable to intentionally \_\_\_\_\_ a child's challenging behavior in order to manage it.  
a) make fun of    b) ignore    c) make an example of    d) mock
5. When a child is exhibiting a big behavior, we should:

- a) tell her to stop      b) remind her of the rules      c) pause, notice, wonder  
d) tell her that she's acting inappropriately



## THINK ABOUT IT

Take a few minutes to consider these questions. If you want to, write your thoughts down.

1. Think about the explanation of how the brain reacts when it feels threatened or unsafe. Now, think about a child in your care and a challenging behavior he or she uses. Before viewing the webinar, what were your thoughts about that child's behavior? Did you notice a connection between the child's big feeling and anything that could make the child feel unsafe/stressed? What cues did the child give you? Do you now feel differently about the behavior or about the child? Why?
2. How do you feel about the idea that children do not use *misbehavior*, but *stress* behavior? Did the information in this resource help to change your thinking? How? What ideas in the resource changed or reinforced your thinking?
3. Think about the idea that we should not plan to or intentionally ignore a behavior we want to discourage in a child. How do you feel about that? Why? Compare the differences between *refraining from talking* about a behavior and *ignoring* a behavior. In particular, think about how we use – or don't use - ourselves during those moments. How do you feel about both of these approaches? Why?



## TRY IT!

Here are some ideas to try:

- Take a look at **Handout #2 – Creating a Safe Harbor**. In column two, there are lots of ideas about how we can modify actions and environments to make the harbor safe. Think about a particular child and a challenging behavior they often use, and when. Write down three to five:
  - phrases that validate the child’s emotions
  - things you can do to reduce sensory input for the child
  - individualized choices for the child
- Here is a list of things you can do to offer a “lifeline” when a child is overboard. In other words, when their systems are hyper aroused (e.g., they are acting angry, being rigid, trying to escape and/or are overwhelmed) or hypo aroused (e.g., they are acting confused, feeling disconnected, and are shut down).
  - Validate emotions
  - Offer choices (especially ones based upon interests and that are [coping strategies](#), calming, and/or restorative)
  - Go silent (some say offer supportive silence or approach silently because it is very different than ignoring)
  - Reduce directions and corrections
  - Ask open-ended questions aimed to understand instead of teach
  - Use soothing tone of voice and empathetic [non-verbals](#)
  - Reduce interruptions – pause – try not to rush
  - Simplify language – slow down all movements
  - Practice sound minimalism (say very little, turn off TVs/radios, talk in low tones)
  - Reduce visual clutter
  - Read cues – touch – be close – be attuned
- Want to learn some strategies to help children cope? Kristie explores the difference between coping mechanisms and coping strategies, what self-regulation is (and isn’t), and myths about how children learn to become increasingly self-regulated in this [one-hour podcast](#).

- Kristie has a variety of additional podcasts and blogs that explore the many components and concepts presented in this resource. If you are interested in going further, consider these:

#### Podcasts

- How to Apply the Four S's to Autism for Secure Attachments [[podcast](#)]
- Pre-K Teach and Play - Harnessing the Power of Showing Up [[podcast](#)]
- Pre-K Teach and Play - The Plan Was To Ignore, So Why Are We Learning To Connect? [[podcast](#)]
- Pre-K Teach and Play - What Children Really Need [[podcast](#)]

#### Blogs

- The Power of Mindfulness (includes link to another free webinar) [[blog](#)]
- Navigating Uncertainty With Children (Laura Fish) [[blog](#)]
- The Case Against Ignoring [[blog](#)]
- Stress Detective Series for Leaders [[blog](#)]

RECALL IT! Answers: 1 – C 2 – B 3 – C 4 – B 5-C