

Guiding Children to “Listen” to Their Bodies

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Helping children to slow down and develop mindful awareness of what their bodies are telling them is a foundation for building self-regulation. Simply put, self-regulation is the process of monitoring and recognizing when arousal is too much and then doing something about it. However, this is not always a simple or straightforward process, and for children who have experienced trauma, this becomes even more challenging. They may be doing something in response to the arousal, but it may not be helping them to get their needs met.

A hungry child may be cranky or grumpy, a tired child may become squirmy and unfocused, a nervous child may feel their belly tighten or have shortness of breath. In some cases, children can become overwhelmed and dysregulated by the sensations they are experiencing, without understanding or knowing what is happening, or what to do. As the responsive parent, teacher, or caregiver, you may be the one to notice what is happening first, and then proceed to help them figure out what they need and help them get a better understanding of what they experienced. This external regulation process, which requires attunement on the part of the adult, helps to strengthen the relationship between the child and adult. From there, you can guide children so they can learn to move through this process on their own.

Part of this process involves giving children the vocabulary to name their sensory experiences, as well as helping them make the connection between sensations and emotions. We can invite children to “listen” to their bodies and notice what they feel. For example, after physical activity we may ask questions such as: “What happened to your heartbeat? Your breath?” “Does your body feel hot or cool?” “How do your legs, arms, etc. feel?” We can also help them practice checking in with themselves to see if they are hungry, tired, thirsty, etc. We can help them to create or build a sensations vocabulary in the same way that we help have the language to describe their emotional experiences,

Or, if you are helping children connect sensations to emotions, you can ask questions such as: “How does your body let you know you are sad, angry, calm, etc.?” or “Where in your body do you feel excitement, worry, etc.” It is important to help children learn to pay attention to when their bodies feel relaxed, calm safe, etc. so that they can become familiar with those states. From there we can guide children to figure out what they need. This becomes easier, when children are able to differentiate and recognize that they are hungry, for example, rather than mad.

Through the process of listening to their bodies and being able to identify what they are experiencing, children will also begin to internalize that the sensations and feelings they experience are always changing and that they don’t last forever.

For free downloadable resource to use with your child, visit www.listeningtomybody.com