

# The Unteachable Moment: Lessons from the Neuroscience of Stress, Conflict, and (Mis)behavior

by Kirsten Haugen

*I become an agent of change only to the degree that  
I begin to live to help things go right rather than  
simply to correct things that are going wrong.*  
– The Arbing Institute (2006)

Excellent, effective educators often notice and tap into the *teachable moment* — that magical time when something unexpected happens and an unplanned, but fabulous opportunity arises to share a new insight or to guide children in exploration or discovery. A second path to effective teaching — and parenting — especially of young children, lies in honing our ability to also recognize the *unteachable moment*, when tempers and emotions run hot and things seem to erupt out of control. A conventional behavior intervention perspective might see this as an opportunity to highlight the consequences of inappropriate behavior and teach new skills. Neuroscience research offers a more nuanced perspective and sheds light on strategies for a more responsive approach.

## The Behavioral ABCs

*If you speak when angry,  
you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret.*  
– Groucho Marx (1954)

Perhaps you've been part of a scene like this: two children tug on the same block. You offer a kind word about taking turns. Child A stops and, perhaps a bit reluctantly, lets go. Child B triumphantly grabs the block and hits Child A



Among her many roles, Kirsten Haugen is honored to collaborate with passionate early childhood experts around the globe as Working Group Coordinator for the World Forum Foundation. For this article, her collaborators were closer to her home in Eugene, Oregon. When it comes to teaching, parenting, learning, and living, Lisa King never fails to provide the author with heartfelt inspiration, über-real reality checks, and a faithful sounding board. A special thanks to Tom Horn and Tyan Taubner for the introduction to the neuroscience of mindfulness and its powerful implications for teaching and learning, and for making it real in their home and with the students they teach. Thanks also to Louis Carosio for the persistent reminder: keep the main thing the main thing.

square on the head. You quickly react, "If you hit with blocks, you can't play with them anymore!" Child B instantly yells back, "I don't WANT to play with dumb blocks anyway!" and hurls the block across the room. . . . It's the child's third aggressive outburst this week. What now?

The Behavioral ABCs are a commonly used road map for deciding how to respond:

- A. What was the *antecedent* that triggered the behavior and how can we alter the activity or environment to prevent future triggers?
- B. What's the function of the *behavior*? How can we teach and perhaps reward alternative behaviors — such as using one's words and turn-taking — that help the child achieve the same end?
- C. Lastly, how can we help children understand the connection between their behavior and the *consequences*\* so they'll want to avoid making the same mistake again?

*\*Note: Consequences that occur naturally, such as the other child choosing to play with someone else, or consequences that we impose, such as taking the blocks away or enforcing a time-out.*

Have you ever felt a sense of urgency to make sure the child sees this connection? Unfortunately, in some cases more than others, no matter how creatively and consistently we modify activities, teach new skills, acknowledge or reward good behavior, and apply consequences for inappropriate behavior, we end up locked in power struggles. So, where do things break down?

## A Neurochemical Perspective

*The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a  
heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.*  
– John Milton (1667)

Look at what happens inside our brains in such a moment: When we experience strong emotions like stress, fear, or anger, the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal system releases a flood of cortisol that simultaneously:

- readies the heart, lungs, and circulatory system to handle the stressor.
- shuts down our highly-evolved prefrontal cortex, taking our inhibition and capacity to reason with it.
- signals our hippocampus to store the negative emotional experience into long-term memory.
- releases neurotransmitters into our ancient, reactive amygdala, delivering us straight into 'fight or flight' mode.

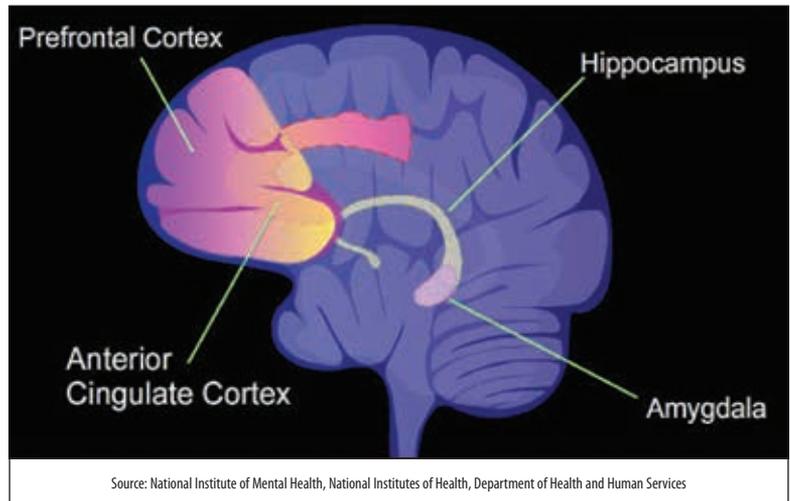
Seen another way, when aroused by fear, anger, or other strong emotion, we are neurochemically blocked from applying reason to the situation and instead get fired up into a highly-impulsive protective, reactive state. If the trigger persists, continued cortisol production maintains this heightened reactivity. Only when the stressor is gone can the cortisol slowly drain away, and our brains and bodies revert to a calm state. Until then, we remain on high alert, urged to act, but not able to learn or process. Thus, moments of stress are truly, biochemically *unteachable* moments, and yes, they will pass.

Evolved over millions of years, this response to a perceived stress remains very adaptive when facing the proverbial carnivore on the attack. Those who stopped to ponder the beast's intentions or their own best course of action usually lost their chance to pass on their genes. This same ability to act without a second thought has turned average people into heroes in the face of fires, floods, and other traumas. An evolutionary advantage like this isn't about perfection; it's about working well enough to survive. Our brains have not yet evolved to differentiate overt physical danger from other modern-day stressors, so they all evoke the same ancient chemical fight-or-flight response, even when retaining the capacity to reason would result in a much better outcome.

## Recognizing the Unteachable Moment

*Conflict cannot survive without your participation.*  
– Wayne Dyer (2008)

The chance to look inside the brain to observe these neurochemical red flags requires experts with Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRIs) and other high-tech



tools. Thankfully, we have several more readily observable clues.

Not too far into writing this article, I was walking with my dear friend and fellow author Lisa King. Just as we were talking about this cortisol reaction as 'the unteachable moment,' she received a call from her son's principal. A conflict had come up and her son was acting in a particularly defiant manner. The principal asked, "Do you always let him win?" With mindfulness and behavior very much on our minds, we mused, "Let him win? Should we let him lose?" And we wondered if *not wanting to let the kid win* might be a clue that they were experiencing an unteachable moment.

How many of us feel open and receptive to new ways of thinking or doing when backed into a corner? When someone refuses to cooperate with us? When we're in conflict with someone who has power over us? Or we don't want to



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admit we're wrong? These perceived threats are processed in the same way as physical threats, and the amygdala responds in the same way to focus our minds and bodies to react rather than reflect.

Lisa and I continued our walk, and in all seriousness and humor, we began brainstorming other possible clues:

*You know you are in an unteachable moment when:*

- someone is red in the face, holding her breath, or panting.
- things are getting smashed, broken, or thrown through the air.
- someone is making a threat or using force.
- you feel discomfort in the pit of your stomach.
- you feel an urgent need to teach someone a lesson, *now!*
- someone flip-flops his position, just to oppose the other person.
- you've repeated the same line more than twice, and it's not part of a song.

Keep in mind these clues may apply to a child acting out *and* any other adults or children involved. What other clues can you imagine? This type of thinking, ahead of time or after the fact, will help us recognize unteachable moments as they happen.

## Now What?

*The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing!*  
– Stephen Covey (2003)

No one is above experiencing an unteachable moment. We've all been there at one time or another. Learning will not occur while the brain is flooded with cortisol. Accept this and move on to some very helpful things you *can* do during an unteachable moment:

- *As they say on the airplane, put on your own oxygen mask first.* Keep your focus on calming things down, starting with yourself. Research shows that rage is contagious, but so is a sense of calm.
- *Keep everyone safe.* Sometimes this means asking those who can to do things that might seem unfair: moving away from the conflict, changing activities, or putting away an object of contention.



- *Avoid trying to teach a lesson or make a point.* It won't be heard and it will likely prolong the conflict by keeping the child in a neurochemically-charged state.
- *Recognize that the best time to confront the issue is later on,* when all brains involved have returned to a receptive, reflective state.
- *Maintain the relationship.* "One of the best predictors of resilience in children is at least one safe, secure adult relationship" (Gunnar in Walters, 2012). If there is one lesson you can teach in an unteachable moment, it's showing through calm words and actions that you still value the child, no matter what.
- *Don't pile on.* Frequently, kids with challenging behaviors have complicated lives, full of stress and conflict. "When the toxic stress response occurs continually, or is triggered by multiple sources, it can have a cumulative toll on an individual's physical and mental health — for a lifetime. The more adverse experiences in childhood, the greater the likelihood of developmental delays and later health problems" (Center on the Developing Child). *End the stress, protect the brain!*

Focus on your own *main thing* in your role as a teacher or parent. Even if you *win*, is it really worth going head to head over the mess on the floor or the unfinished worksheet? More likely, our main thing revolves around our hope for each child to grow into a unique, compassionate, competent, and confident person. Start each day by reminding yourself what your main thing is, and post it on the wall where you can see it at a glance when you need it. What can we do in each moment to move in that direction?

## Time to Clean Up

*Because you believed I was capable of behaving decently,  
I did.*

Paulo Coelho (2000)

Recognizing the unteachable moment does not mean you're *letting the kid win*. A behavioral outburst is hardly a win for any child. Doing what you can to return yourself and the child to a calm state does not mean giving up on your expectations. It simply means waiting for a more neurochemically appropriate time to address them. Once you've gotten through the unteachable moment, you'll be able to return to your goals of minimizing triggers, teaching alternative behaviors and helping children recognize the consequences of their behavior at a time when they feel safe, and their brains are in a calm and curious state.

During my last hair appointment, Annie McKinney, my hairdresser, fellow neuroscience buff, and wisdom dispenser extraordinaire, shared her family's fabulously simple and elegant approach, which they call "The Clean Up." Following an incident, they set aside a time for each person to take responsibility for their actions, express their needs, share what they wish they'd said or done, and fix any damage that resulted. The incident gets framed as a collective accident that they can clean up together. As adults, she and her husband model taking responsibility for their part. Annie might say, "Gee, I wish I hadn't yelled when your brother took your book and you hit him. I guess I totally lost it seeing you hurt each other. I really just want your brother to respect your things and for him to not get hurt. Now that we've all cooled off, I wonder how we can work it out?"

You can also try a Take Two: actually replay the incident the way you wish it had happened, just like a filmmaker would. During this process, shift the focus from blame and shame to practice becoming our best selves and maintaining the relationship.

These approaches to positive problem solving are (intentionally) lighthearted, but following up on a conflict is not just a game. The hippocampus is on call to hard wire our thoughts and experiences into long-term storage, all the more so when they are associated with strong emotions. Thinking, talking, and acting out the issue in a more appropriate way allows our brains to prune back our reactive wiring in the amygdala and flex the neural pathways that call our reflective prefrontal cortex back to work, with new long-term patterns of thinking, feeling, and responding to challenges in more playful, creative, and productive ways.

## Rx: Breathe, Be Mindful, and Play

*Those who play rarely become brittle in the face of stress or  
lose the healing capacity for humor.*

– Stuart Brown, MD

Lastly, a little advance work can help us stay calmer, shorten the duration, and even decrease the likelihood of an unteachable moment erupting in the first place. Again, neuroscience research offers many concrete strategies, including three wonderfully simple ones:

- **Breathe.** The stress response induces fast, shallow breathing. Taking slow, deep breaths actually signals to our brains that it's okay to calm down, thereby giving ourselves a neurochemical nudge toward taking a more reasoned, responsive approach.
- **Be mindful.** John Kabat Zinn (2006) states, "Mindfulness is awareness that arises from paying attention in the present moment, non-judgmentally." After just eight weeks of a mindfulness practice, MRI scans reveal the brain's "fight or flight"-oriented amygdala shrinks, while the pre-frontal cortex— associated with higher order functions including awareness, concentration, and decision-making — becomes thicker (Taren et al., 2013). Simply noticing — but not judging — our thoughts and emotions is a powerful first step toward building healthier, more resilient brains.
- **Be Playful.** In 1933, Lev Vygotsky asserted, "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior. In play it is as though he were a head taller than himself." He postulated that children shape their higher mental functions and self-regulation skills by repeatedly interacting with their social and cultural environment — in other words, by playing (Vygotsky, 1933). More than 50 years later, research would begin to back him up on the

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neurological benefits of play, showing how it strengthens neural pathways through repetition, exploring alternative possibilities, taking risks, and practicing new roles and behaviors (Brown, 2010).

These and many other activities demonstrably help both children and adults face stressful situations with greater skill. Find opportunities in your day to practice each one, and then do it again with children. By preparing for, recognizing, and responding appropriately to both teachable and unteachable moments, we become powerful allies with children in developing their capacity to be more compassionate, resilient, and productive individuals throughout their lives.

*I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made.*  
– Martin Luther King, Jr. (1965)

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*Picture your brain forming new connections as you meet the challenge and learn. Keep on going.*

Carol S. Dweck (2007)

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