



THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 3: What is Attachment?

Guest: Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.

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The amazing Dr. Tina Payne Bryson, co-author of New York Times best-sellers *The Whole-Brain Child* and *No Drama Discipline* gives us the run down on attachment. What is it, and why should parents know about it?

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.

Maureen *Welcome back to the growing brain podcast. I'm so excited today for our guest. Our guest is Dr. Tina Payne Bryson. She is the co-author with Dr. Dan Siegel of some of my very favorite books, New York Times bestsellers *The Whole-Brain Child* and *No Drama Discipline* and their latest book, *The Yes Brain*. They're also working together on a new book that will be released in January, called *The Power of Showing Up...* which I just love that title. And the subject of that book is what we're going to talk about today. But Tina is also the founder and executive director of the Center for Connection, which is a clinical practice in Pasadena, California, where she lives. She's also a psychotherapist, a parenting educator, a researcher, speaker, a million other things. But most importantly, of course, a mom to three boys. And I'm a huge fan. I joke that I'm the unpaid marketing consultant for *The Whole-Brain Child*. I think I've sold a million copies just by talking about it to so many people. So, so glad to have you as a guest today on our podcast. Thank you so much for being here.*

Tina *Oh, thank you, Maureen. It's it can be a little bit of a love fest because I'm a huge fan of you and of the Momentous Institute. And I really almost rarely give a talk where I don't mention Momentous and the amazing work that you all are doing there that I think is so in line with what we know about what works and how we really can provide experiences to kids that change their brains and change their minds and change their lives. So, um, anyway, I'm so happy to be here with you talking about these really fun and important ideas.*

Maureen *Yes, I'm so excited. We could spend the whole hour just going back and forth how much we love each other, but that might not be the most interesting for people.*

Tina We could! It might not help that many people.

Maureen *Um, so instead, uh, we're going to talk today about the science of attachment, which is the subject, like I said, of your newest book, um, that you're working on now. It's coming out in January and I assume that some people listening today will know about attachment, um, either a little bit or a lot, and then some people may not be familiar with it at all. So before we kind of go into this subject, I was hoping you could just sort of level set us, give us a little bit about what you mean when you're talking about attachment.*

Tina Yeah, I think the first thing I want to say about it is to say what it's not. Um, I think, you know, the attachment parenting is a style of parenting, um, that is very, um, child-led and it's really about, you know, tuning into your baby. And it's funny, most of the things that they talk about doing are hyphenated words. It's like hyphenated parenting, like baby-wearing, co-sleeping, demand-feeding. Um, there's all these great, uh, hyphens and I, I'm a big fan of attachment parenting. I think it's lovely. Um, but that's not what we're talking about because attachment parenting is a style of parenting, but um, you don't have to do any of those things that they sort of prescribe in attachment parenting in order to have children that are securely attached to you. Those things promote bonding, but you know, um, I've also seen parents who take attachment parenting to the extreme, to where they're really not taking care of themselves.

And so, um, so what we're, you and I, are talking about is actually attachment science and it's under the umbrella of developmental psychology and it's based on um, 80 years of research that looks at not just our human relationships, but how mammals, uh, function and how we survive. So what attachment is, is that the mammal instinct to go to an attachment figure or some, someone who will help us feel connected and protected, truly someone who will help us survive. So at its very essence, attachment is that during time of distress or threat or when we're, when we're frightened or are in danger in some way, or in pain, that we have this biological mammal instinct to go to someone who will help us survive. And that's really the fundamental of what the attachment system is about and why we have it. It's there to help us survive. It's really about a survival strategy that we have as mammals.

Maureen *So what does this look like?*

Tina Yeah, so this plays out. So it plays out in these relationships in a way where, um, that, so when we look at the, the research, so it's obviously been done across many, many cultures all across the world and on other mammals as well besides humans. But what attachment, um, looks like is that we have optimal attachment, which is called secure attachment. And then we have these insecure styles of attachment or more non-optimal patterns of attachment that can happen. So in the optimal attachment, and we're going to, since we're talking mostly to parents, that this relates to adults thinking about our own parents or about our, um, our romantic partners or our best friends, um, but let's use a parent/child, um, example here, that with secure attachment optimal attachment, what happens is the child has a need. And the parent tunes into that need fairly quickly and responds in a sensitive way to that need.

So, um, you know, Dan and I, Dan Siegel, my co-author and I, um, talked about the four S's of secure attachment. And that's where, um, we talk about the child feeling safe, seen, soothed, and that over time, having a caregiver who not perfectly, but in a predictable way, and most of the time shows up for you so that you feel safe, seen and soothed, that your brain develops what's called secure attachment.

So that fourth S is security, which is really a way to talk about how our brain gets wired, because we've had enough experiences that say, if I had a need, someone's going to see it and help me and show up for me and help me figure it out and keep me protected and safe, um, and be there for me. And so our brains get wired to say, oh, that's how relationships are supposed to work.

So it wires us to have healthier relationships as we choose mates and friends. And then as we become parents ourselves in the next generation. So that's what optimal secure attachment looks like. That's what it's, it's supposed to be is that we have a need, someone sees it and responds in a timely and sensitive way.

And we don't have to be perfect. And let me just say too, before we go on, because there might be some parents right now going, oh, no. And, uh, and so keep in mind too, that we don't have to be perfect. We, we, all the time we'll misattune. We may miss our child's, um, cues. Like one way that I found myself misreading or misattuning with, with my kids is like, um, we have a lot of fun giving each other a hard time in our, in our family. And, um, so there might be a time I might be giving my kid a hard time about something, but instead of my child thinking it was funny and joining with me in that, they might think I'm making fun or teasing them. So that would be an, that would be a time where I misattuned. I didn't, I, I misread. And so what happens with secure attachment is we have this rupture, but I recognize it. And then I go, oh sweetie, I'm sorry. I thought we were having fun. I didn't know that, I didn't mean for that to hurt your feelings. Um, tell me about that.

So what would happen, and so what happens in secure attachment is after a rupture, we make a repair. And, um, and there might be times that it's even bigger than that. We may yell. We may, um, what Dan and I talk about in *The Whole-Brain Child*, flip our lids and act in ways that are chaotic and, and reactive. And again, um, once we kind of calm down, that would be a time we could go back and repair with our child.

Um, and let me just say physiologically, because I know you want to talk about the times it's not optimal. Um, what can, what happens here and the way we think about this is our child... let's say our child gets hurt. They, um, have fallen and bumped their head or skinned their knee. And so emotions are running high, their heart's beating faster, or they might be sweating. So they, they have a physiological kind of reaction that's happening and an emotional reaction that's happening. And then the parent comes and says, you're safe. I'm with you. I'm going to help you. Let's get this cleaned up. You know, I'm going to take care of you. And so the way the parent responds to the distress doesn't, isn't just like nice and helps them understand, like someone's there for me. It's not just like that they get that mindset, it's really that that physiological state gets regulated. So basically instead of feeling this huge reactivity or stress for a long period of time, the child has a stressor, um, or some sort of adversity that happens. And

then the parent comes and says, I'm with you, I've got this with you. And so it's so that the child doesn't have to stay in these prolonged states of stress. The parent helps return them to a sense of physiological safety as well.

So then when we talk about with non-optimal or insecure attachment, there are several styles. Um, I'll just hit on them really quickly because that, you know, it can take a long time to go deeply into any one of them. Um, so as we mentioned, the secure attachment results from a pattern where a parent sees the need and responds in a timely and consistent way in a fairly predictable, but not perfect way. So then there's this style of parenting, um, where the parent, um, does not see and respond to the child's emotional state. So this, this results from, um, and by the way, all of us have patterns of attachment and all of us have sometimes multiple patterns of attachment. So maybe I have pieces of lots of different styles of attachment that are embedded in how we operate in relationships, but these patterns become transgenerational, um, unless we've reflected on them. So we'll talk about, there's such a message of hope here.

But let's say you grew up in a home where your internal world, your feelings, your emotions, your thoughts, your dreams, and wishes aren't really seen. And instead you grew up in kind of more like an emotional desert. And if you have emotions, you're told by your parents to quit being so sensitive and, um, and really the child is given repeated messages of if you're upset or reactive about something or you have needs, you need to go take care of it, you're on your own.

And that leads to what's called a dismissing avoidant style of attachment. And basically what that means is that, um, there's a dismissing of the internal state, dismissing of emotion and avoiding an emotional connection or, or that kind of intimacy. And so, um, it's interesting, we have these different ways to measure attachment, and one is called the strange situation and it's a, it's done on 12 to 18 month old infants in a laboratory setting.

And what's interesting about this is in this style of attachment. Um, the parent is asked to get up and leave. So this baby is in a strange room and, um, the parent gets up and leaves and the baby usually doesn't cry. And, um, when the parent comes back in the baby kind of ignores the parent and continues playing with the toys.

But what's interesting about that is that if you look at what's happening with the baby's physiology, the baby's actually stressed out. This 12-month-old is in the strange room, their parent just left and their heart's beating faster. And we know that they're having a stress response, but by 12 months of age, this baby has already learned that they're ... that they shouldn't ask for help, or they shouldn't seek their parent out to help them regulate that stress.

So they've already learned, I think one of the ways to think about this, Maureen, is to think about how the way the attachment system works is that babies and children, um, and adults, we respond in a way that's going to elicit the best response from our parents. So this baby has already learned that the way to get the best response from

their parent is actually not to cry or not to ask for help or not to show the parents that they're under stress. So they just hide it all.

Maureen *Wow. That's so young, too.*

Tina That's so young. That's what's so amazing about the brain is that the brain makes these neural associations right already. And these patterns of wiring are laid down. Um, And, um, so what happens then is you, those, those babies grow up through childhood and adolescence and then become parents themselves. And what happens is their, their childhood and adolescence is full of anecdotes and stories about how they were really alone a lot emotionally. Um, but over time they learned to kind of not really use the right side of their brain where there's those emotional needs. And so they've learned to really learn to live in the left hemisphere and to not really even connect with their own emotions. So there becomes a dismissing or avoidance of their own internal states and their own emotions. So they kind of live on the surface level. Um, and then they become parents who repeat those same parents and patterns, unless something happens, which we'll talk about. That's the hopeful message.

So the other, another type of, um, insecure attachment is called, um, preoccupied or anxious ambivalent attachment. And so, um, the pattern here is not so much that the parent, um, is avoiding or dismissing the emotional states, but rather that the parent is more unpredictable. That sometimes the parent sees and responds to the need of the child, but other times the parent doesn't at all, um, do that. Um, or that the parent is really flooded by their own internal chaos and their own emotional needs so that they can't help regulate the child because they're so flooded themselves. So they can be intrusive with their babies. Like, um, oh no, you're not done playing. I'm going to tickle you somewhere and the baby becomes more and more stressed out. And the parent just keeps going instead of tuning in and adjusting, the parent gets so caught up in their own need to get reinforcement from the baby.

Um, and so this is a person who has a hard time managing their own internal states and they feel, um, anxious and ambivalent about whether or not people will be there for them. So the last one we talked about, the dismissing avoidant, their brains, get wired to believe um, if I have a need I'm on my own and people won't see and respond to my needs, and I don't need to do that for other people cause people should just take care of themselves. Whereas this type, um, the anxious/ambivalent, it's much more the idea that, um, if I have a need, I'm not sure someone's going to be there for me. And if they are, maybe they won't stay for long. And so I want to trust you, but I don't know if I can. So what happens is they tend to have a lot of need in relationship, which kind of pushes people away, which further reinforces that people are unreliable and can't be counted on to see and respond to their needs.

And then the last, which is really the most severe, which we see in, um, in, uh, abuse and neglect, but also in, in parenting where there is frequent harsh, punitiveness, is that remember how I said that the foundation of this is that when the child is in a state of distress, they go to their attachment figure to help them feel safe. And in this style of attachment, which is called disorganized attachment or unresolved attachment, the parent is the source of the terror or the source of the pain. And so it actually creates

disorganization in the brain. And because there's these two competing biological circuits, one that says get away from what's scary and dangerous. Um, but you have another circuit that says go to your parents to help you feel safe and to protect you. But if the parent's the one that's causing that, it actually creates disorganization in the brain. So, um, that one is the most troublesome and it's actually the best predictor we have for psychopathology later in life.

But what's so important to stay on the tail end of kind of hitting these is that we all have bits and pieces of different parts of these patterns wired into our own brains as parents. Right? So I have one parent that provided me with secure attachment and I had one parent that had a brain that was wired for a dismissing avoidance style of attachment. And I can trace it back in my family patterns, you know, and how that goes and all of that. Um, and so we all have these different parts of it and what's so important is that the single best predictor for how well our kids turn out is that they've had secure attachment with at least one person. And the second thing that's so important to talk about is that the best predictor for how well we are able to provide secure attachment to our own children is not whether or not we have secure attachment. Thank goodness, because about 40% of the population does not have secure attachment with their parents. So the best predictor for how well we are able to show up and help our kids communicate with them in ways where their brains get wired to believe that people will see their needs and show up for them um, and where they feel safe, seen, soothed and secure is whether or not we have reflected on our experiences of how we were parented and how our own brains have been wired about the expectations we have in relationships. And what happens is that as we start reflecting on that and going, you know what, I was alone a lot, like when I got upset, I would just kind of like walk around by myself or I would just sit in my room and I didn't feel safe at all telling my parents I was upset and I really identify with that. Or, um, my mom was so chaotic and so unpredictable that I never knew if she was going to be there for me or not. And so I just, I, you know, I found myself as a parent, you know, when I started doing that is I would get really overwhelmed.

And so there are these different ways we can connect with that and we start to reflect on them. It can be helpful to do that in therapy or, um, uh, we talk in *The Power of Showing Up*, we actually will be walking parents through these different styles and with some questions for reflection so that they can begin that process. Um, but this is a way where as we begin to reflect, our brain actually becomes more integrated in a way that increases our capacity to be able to see and respond to our children's needs and to be present to them and to regulate ourselves so that we don't go into cut off or flooded emotional states. Like we don't want to be cut off from our emotions on our kids' emotions, but we don't want to be so flooded by our own emotions or our kids' emotions that we kind of fly off the handle. We want to be able to be a safe container where we can, we can hold the, that, um, the, the dysregulation that's happening and respond in ways that help our kids feel safe seen.

And, and so, you know, we can talk about how, what this looks like, even in moments of discipline or the everyday kinds of things. But the key that I want parents to walk away from is in moments where we don't know what to do with our kids, we don't know how

to respond in a moment. We can always go back to the four S's, like I should respond in a way that will help them feel safe, seen, soothed, secure.

Um, and then the second piece is to do our own reflection and think about ways in which the ways that we were parented influenced how we're parenting. And we might be doing some of those things automatically without having an awareness. And once we begin to shine the light of awareness on the ways that we're parenting, it actually starts to open up the possibility of doing things differently and having a different choice. Right?

Maureen *So that second point you made is I, you know, I'm jotting down notes as you're talking in that I think is so powerful. I think when you hear about attachment, I think I automatically go to two places. One is like, oh no, I'm doing everything wrong, my kids are screwed, which you addressed is, you know, we all make mistakes and, you know, how we repair them. And then the other thing about, um, now I'm going to analyze my own attachment style and the attachment style of everyone I've ever met...*

Tina I'll admit that... the, um, the gold standard of sort of assessing our own attachment style, there's something called the adult attachment interview. And when I learned about it, um, I started throwing out adult attachment interview questions at family dinners, and I totally, you know...

But you know what I will tell you, and this is just very personal, that when I learned about this and I started thinking through that lens, it explained so much about myself and about the people I knew, and it was incredibly healing for me, because when I recognize that my dad, that *his* brain was wired to be an avoidant, dismissing style of attachment pattern and the way he related that his aloofness with me, you know, his unwillingness to be affectionate or to be, to really care about my internal world, that, that wasn't about me, but it was really about how his brain had been wired. And he hadn't yet begun that process of reflecting and doing all that. So I think it can be incredibly healing and freeing for us to, um, see the people that we love and the people we're in relationships with, with more compassion, um, because we can sort of see, this is how their brain was wired and keeping in mind that these patterns that we have in relationships started very early, right? In our early, early months. And we did them adaptively to get the best response from our caregivers. And my coauthor, Dan has this beautiful saying where he says things that were adaptive as children can become our prisoner.. can become our prison as an adult. So maybe you grew up in a family where if you express emotion or you were like, I'm feeling really afraid about this and someone really dismissed your fear and said, why are you being such a baby? You know, or if you're going to cry, go to your room and cry, um, then you know, those kinds of experiences, um, you know, it's just, it's so powerful to see those and to be able to reflect on them.

Um, I lost my train of thought there. I think you get the idea here. Um, but it's, so it's so powerful to be able to do that. And, um, and to see that we, we do. So, oh, so, so let's say... now I remember where I was going. So the idea that that was adaptive, maybe to say, like, I'm not going to share my feelings, I'm not going to share that I'm afraid,

because I'm going to be made fun of, or I'm going to be left even more alone if I share that.

But as an adult, if I continue with that pattern, then I'm not going to be sharing my feelings and my thoughts with other people. And so that becomes a prison for me because I don't have emotional intimacy. And I can't see my own mind much less the mind of my partner or my child. And so I continue to live in an emotional desert, so that's why it's so important and so hopeful for us to reflect on, on these patterns and how our parents' brains were wired and how that influenced us and how we can, again, shine the light of awareness to be able to break free from the things that aren't working for us.

Well, I love that. And I really love the way you worded that is the, you know, his brain was wired in a certain way, and it's not that it lets us off the hook in terms of doing that work of, um, self-reflection but it, it does sort of, it, it does sort of separate it from personal choices I'm making about how I want to show up for my kids into more- my brain has been wired this way since I was an infant for survival, you know. So I love the way you worded that. I just think that's really important to think about ourselves and other people in that way. It kind of frees us up from getting caught in these stories about good and bad parenting and some of those narratives.

And that's so important because that allows us to be, have some self-compassion right, and to say, okay, my brain was wired this way. And that was awesome that my brain did that because it helps me survive best in my family. It helped me not be so vulnerable, you know, and it helped me get through. And now that I know that about myself, now I can begin to make changes and shifts, and I think that's really key. Um, and I think, you know, it's, it's also so important to do that because when we go down the shame spiral as parents and we start feeling like we're terrible parents, or we, you know, we're doing everything wrong. What happens is that state of mind, that shame state, which actually is very highly, um, uh, it happens a lot, especially if you have the anxious, ambivalence, um, preoccupied style of attachment, there's a lot of shame that goes with that. Like people aren't predictable because I'm defective that some, somehow, sometimes that's the lower level of thinking there. But what happens is when we feel shame as parents, when we feel like we're doing it wrong, or we're really hard on ourselves, it actually leaves us more vulnerable to not being able to be regulated. So we're more vulnerable to be more reactive with our kids and to shaming them or to be less patient with them. Um, so it's so important that we, you know, sort of begin this, this, um, story. And I think that's what Dan and I really loved in our writing the book, *The Power of Showing Up* and the subtitle is the, I think it's called the *Power of Parental Presence* or the, the, um, *How Parental Presence Shapes the Brain*, because we can start making these shifts for ourselves and change our own brains and how we get wired.

And that's what the research is so exciting to see is that as we begin to do this, our brains actually do change. And this more tuned in four S's attachment, secure attachment parenting starts becoming, um, more automatic for us. And we will always have ruptures. And, you know, Maureen, I know you said a minute ago, like, Oh no, am I doing it right? Um, you know, one, one research showed that, um, if the parent was

providing the four s's about 30% of the time, the child was probably securely attached. So we... there's a lot of room for us to make a lot of mistakes.

Maureen *Hey, that sounds pretty good. I think I can do that!*

Tina I think you can forgive that. Yeah.

Maureen *Um, and this is frankly, what we're talking about is really hard work. And I think a lot, when we talk about parenting, we go straight to that sort of child facing part, right? Like how do I discipline my kids and how do I help my kids succeed academically? And what we're talking about here is that work we have to do on ourselves. Especially those of us who have a mixture of styles, of attachment from our own childhood and how... it's so much harder. So I just want to acknowledge that, I guess like what we're talking about here is a lot of really hard work that you have to do on yourself before you even do anything, you know, with your kids.*

Tina It is, it is hard work and it's important work, but I want to say too, we've gone way down deep into this like heaviness place and this place of like, you know, this, this feels daunting, like, oh, now I got to do some therapy or I gotta do some self reflection or whatever, but I want to just, I want to say, let's talk now about make this really practical and really doable and really feel like it's something that's not this huge project we have to take on.

And the first thing around that, that we need to make a commitment, that we will always help our children feel safe. So let's just start with that first S of safety. So if you know, we, most of us yell at our kids from time to time. Right. Um, I definitely get that, like, I'm not a screamer, but I definitely get that kind of like um, impatient, like yell-y intensity tone, you know, and, um, and just really irritated, you know? And, and sometimes it takes me to a place of real immaturity too. Um, like, you know, if you did what you were supposed to do, like I say these little games, those are always times for repairs, but the first thing is I, as, as a parent, no matter what is happening, whether it's a discipline moment, whether it's, uh, um, a time of challenge for our kid where they're kind of taking a leap, like walking up the soccer field and it's the first practice um, and they're feeling unsure about that. The very first thing is we want to make sure that our kids feel safe. So, you know, I have this, um, this therapist that works with me, we were talking about, um, how we were talking about brainstem, limbic and cortex. And we were talking about one of the ways we can, we can talk about this idea of safety and to build from there, is to literally say: *You are safe. I am with you. We can figure this out.* So, you know, those are like three sentences. You're safe. I am with you and we can figure this out or we can do this together, whatever it is, those sentences when our kid is raging, when they're falling apart, when they're uncooperative, you know, whatever it is, those can be things we can use, but, um, I think, you know, we don't have to start with like taking a deep dive into our whole history. We can start with beginning to ask, to become aware and to say, are there things that I do or say, or are there things that are happening in my family that make me not feel safe, um, and make my child not feel safe because if you don't feel safe, our nervous system can't do anything else. The number one care is about safety.

Maureen *And safety here, you're talking about really like emotional safety... and of course physical safety...*

Tina And physical safety...

Maureen *But also sort of this, this sense that you can show up here with your emotions and you won't, you know, get in trouble for that.*

Tina Yeah. So what I mean, sort of like kind of the opposite of emotional safety, or, and also being, soothed would be to say like, If you're going to cry about it, you go cry about it. That's fine. But you go to your room and when you've got it all together, you can come back out. That's like sort of the opposite of what we want to be doing. We want to communicate to them. What I want to communicate with my kids is at your absolute worst, I'm here.

Maureen *Nice.*

Tina You will be safe with me. It doesn't mean the behavior's okay. That's not going to, this is not permissive parenting. In fact, one of the things that helps our kids feel safe is where, where they know there are boundaries, right. Um, so let me just tell, uh, um, I think this will help with the practical piece. Let me just tell a discipline moment story. So, um, I had this moment where, um, I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom and, um, my eight year old came running into the bathroom. His name is Luke. Um, he's 16 now. So this is kind of an old story, but Luke, uh, it's such a good one. I just love telling it. So Luke came running in the bathroom and you know, was like, JP hit me. And so, um, I said, well, where did he hit you? On my back. And I lifted his shirt and, um, there was a handprint, JP's hand print was on his back. And JP was about five at the time. And so I comforted Luke, you know, I'm so sorry. I know that hurts. Do you want a cool rag? So I kind of, you know, um, uh, comforted Luke, and then it was time to deal with the discipline, right? It was time to go, it's not okay to hit your brother. So I've got to go address the behavior. Now, this is a whole other talk, Maureen, um, out of the, No Drama Discipline book, but the whole point and purpose of discipline is for them to learn so that they can become self-disciplined. So really discipline's all about teaching and if you don't feel safe, if you're in a reactive state, you actually can't learn. So in the name of discipline, if we want our children to be held accountable and to, um, you know, really start handling themselves better, we get them into a, a sense of safety first. and when we scream and yell at them or when we shame them or when we punitively send them away from us or if we spank them or we do other kinds of disciplines things, that actually communicates threat instead of safety. So we can begin sort of by asking, you know, is what I'm doing, helping the kid feel safe enough to learn? Can he listen to what I'm saying, or am I sending them kind of closer to the threat thing where they can't learn anything.

So, um, so anyway, it's time to deal with JP. And so I come around the corner and he's standing there and he's practically vibrating with anger. He's so mad. And so if in that moment, you know, I start yelling at him. Why did you hit your brother? I can't believe you did that. If I do that, it's actually communicating, not safety. It's the opposite of safety. I'm communicating threat with the aggressive tone of voice and yelling at him.

So, because I was able to stay regulated myself in this moment, I was able to say, oh, JP, you're so mad. What's going on? Come here, honey. So the first thing I do is like, he feels seen and safe already, right. And so then I'm like, come here. And then my, so my job is going to be to help him kind of get back in what I call the green zone, get back regulated. So, um, he begins to tell me what happened and the conflicts between him and Luke. And, um, and I said that must've made you so mad. I understand why that, you know, why that upset you. That would have bothered me too.

So I'm really communicating safety and seen, and then I'm holding him and I'm saying, it's okay, I'm right here with you. And we're going to figure this out. And so I start soothing him and then he gets back into a state where he can really listen. And then we talk about, you know, did you know, you really hurt your brother. How can you make things right with him? What was happening for you? How did you know you were mad? So we have this kind of reflective dialogue. Um, and then he can get to the place where he, he understands himself better. He makes things right with his brother. We've talked about what he could do differently next time. And we've actually exercised his brain and he'll need lots of reps to do that before his brain developmentally can do it for himself.

But I think if he thinks about really little kids, like, let's say you have a two year old that bites, um, you're probably not going to have a long reflective dialogue, you know, in this, in this moment, you're like, okay, my kid's frustrated. He just bit me. And that makes me really mad. And it's painful so that's activates my reptilian threats instinct because someone's inflicting pain on me. Um, but in that moment to just be like, okay, my job is to help my kids feel safe and seen and soothed. So we say something like, um, you know, biting hurts, no biting. It's okay if you're mad, but you can't hurt mommy's body, be gentle. And then I would be like, let's go outside and look for birds. Um, and I would just move on and not spend more time and attention, you know, um, on the negative behavior.

But what happens then is when we can handle our children's reactive states or their tantrums, and they know that we, we can handle it, then they learn over time that they, that not only can we handle their big feelings, but that they can handle their big feelings and that gets wired.

Maureen *Mm, nice. And so much of that, of course like you're talking about is just modeling your own calmness when you come into those kinds of situations. Like if I lose my cool...*

Tina It's so hard, though, isn't it?

Maureen *It's so hard! Like, especially when you just got bit by a two year old, it's hard to come in calm, but, but it is that modeling that sense of safety and, and, um, having him, you know, being able to soothe.. you, can't soothe them if you're in that place.*

Tina That's exactly right. So that's, you know, that's always, the first place is to kind of get regulated ourselves. Um, and, uh, and I think, you know, it's, so it's, there's a big difference between as soon as we talking about these different styles of attachment, how we might react in the moment.

So, you know, your kid hits you or bites you or something like that. Um, you know, we can get totally overwhelmed and flooded with emotions, but we also wouldn't want to just totally cut off from emotions, but instead be able to sit in the emotions and, and hold them and contain them, um, and giving our children practice to know, you know, it's funny... one of the things I hear a lot from parents want to talk about this is, um, Is if they've have, how do I, how do I hold a boundary while being the safe, seen, soothed, person?

So, um, another story I like to tell is like JP was in the bathtub and he didn't want to get in, and then he didn't want to get out. And he was just, he was just a melty mess the whole night. You know, he just, he was just really over sensitive and lots of factors obviously play into that. So it's good for us to hold on to that as parents. So in the moment, you know, I say, it's going to be time to get out in one minute and you know, doing all these fun things, nothing's working, he still just a melty mess. And so when it's time for him to get out, I'm going to hold the boundary. I've told him in one minute, we're going to get out. I'm going to hold that boundary. This is not about saying, okay, you're really sad. So you can stay in the bathtub. That's not what I'm talking about. What I do instead is say, okay, it's time to get out. You can either get out yourself or mommy's going to help you get out. And so he's like, I'm not getting out. And so I say to him, and I'm actually coaching myself as I say this, as gently as I can, because I'm so frustrated, you know, he's so frustrating. You want to squeeze him, you know? So I'm like, you know, it's time to get out. So he does, he's like, I'm not getting out. So I say, I'm going to, as gently as I can, I'm going to lift you out of the bathtub. And I'm, you know, as I'm and I, and he starts to scream and yell and flail, and I say, it's okay. As, as I'm pulling him out, I say to him, it's okay if you're mad and if you need to cry and yell for a little while about it, it's okay. It's okay to be mad. I'm right here with you... as I'm pulling him out and as I'm drying him off. So it's not about allowing the behavior it's about saying you're safe to feel and express and I can handle it. And I see that you feel that, and I'm here to help you get back to your baseline. I'm here to help soothe that. Um, and what happens in the brain is that when there's sort of like a disruption to their state and then there's enough support to bring them back to their baseline state or into a regulated state, the circuitry of the brain gets, um, it's like a muscle that gets used and then they're able to do that piece of self-regulation on their own better.

So it doesn't make them more dependent on us. It actually makes the um, independently better able to self-regulate if we help support that. So that's where the safe, seen soothe stuff comes in, even in the moment, you know, where they're, they're falling apart in there, you know, they're really difficult. And sometimes they're really hard to like in those moments and we just go, you know what.

Maureen *Yeah. Well, I love this cause I'm thinking about, um, my son sometimes has like bad dreams, night terrors and he wakes up kind of screaming and intuitively I think every parent does this... you're fine. Everything's fine. It was a dream you're safe in this house. You know, he used these phrases, like you're safe in this house. Mom and dad are here, you know? Um, and that, that's exactly what we're talking about. He feels safe. You feel seen and soothed and, and that's like an intuitive thing that we all do with something like bad dreams, but that's harder to do with something like what we consider bad*

behavior, you know? Um, but it's the same, it's the same process. So I love that because it's...

Tina It's the same process. Yeah. And one of my favorite, favorite colleagues in the world is a woman named Mona Delahooke. And she wrote this beautiful book that came out this year called Beyond Behaviors. And she has this great quote. She says, when is a willful oppositional behavior, not a willful oppositional behavior? And she says, it's when it's a stress response. Well, that's one of the things we have to keep in mind, particularly when our kids are little, you know, what looks like really bad behavior is often an undeveloped brain with a nervous system that's in a reactive state. So we can remember the brain is either in a reactive state or in a receptive kind of integrated state.

And, um, I was just teaching my teen this earlier today that, um, our whole nervous system and how we're feeling in terms of, do I feel safe or do I feel threatened or do I feel anxious or do I feel, you know, frustrated whatever's going on in our, and our emotions and our nervous system is what leads to our behavior. So a lot of times like, okay, I'm on, I was on the airplane this week, flying back from Florida. And there was this little girl on the plane, couple rows in front of me. And, um, she was probably five or six. It was a really long flight. We were trapped in the back of the plane. We've all, we all feel so much compassion for these parents already as I'm saying this cause it's so hard.

But what was interesting is this five-year-old little girl, she was screaming and yelling. And then she had that, um, the parents kept kind of tickling her to get her to stop crying, but that actually just activated her nervous system to go even higher. So then she had this really like high-pitched giggle kind of thing that was almost, um, it wasn't like a natural laugh. It was like, over the top, like totally overstimulated.

Maureen *I'm cringing over this story already.*

Tina Yeah, but well, what the parents kept saying to her was calm down, relax, you need to relax, calm down. You need to calm down. They just kept saying it over and over. And, you know, I wanted so much to say she doesn't know how. She, you can't tell her to calm down and to relax. Like that's not going to do it. Um, she, what she needed was support to be able to do that.

Maureen *And you know, you wrote something along, you wrote something a while ago that I read. And, um, I think about it a lot. You, you were talking about helping kids fall asleep and take naps and go to bed. And, um, you sent it to me cause I asked you like, can you help me help my kid go to sleep?*

And you said, I don't know about you, but I don't think I would ever fall asleep... I don't remember exactly how you worded it, but something like, I don't know about you, but I don't think I would ever fall asleep if someone was yelling at me to fall asleep and we do that as parents we're like go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep. Same thing with that little girl in the plane, just calm down. But I will never come down if someone was in my face telling me to calm down, that's the worst way to get me to calm down. So for ourselves,

and how I would want to be approached in that situation is probably the same way that my kid would want me to talk to them.

Tina

Yeah. Yeah. And I think, you know, there's all this stuff from The Whole-Brain Child, like name it to tame it, there's other, so there's science we could bring in, but just in short form, you know, one of the things we know is that when we really feel seen, when someone really says like, I get what you're feeling. It totally regulates, it turns down our nervous system arousal. It turns down our threat states. So as, as an instinct, most of the time, we would also call that sort of like a right hemisphere or tsunami where we use left hemisphere logic to tell the kid to stop feeling it, right. So it's totally just languages. So we might say, you know, there's nothing to be afraid about, you know, or like, you know, I would do the same thing, like kids would have a nightmare and I would say you're safe. And I think those are really good, important things to say, but just telling the kid you're safe. There's nothing, there's no such thing as monsters or mummies typically isn't enough. They also need something else to help them feel a bodily felt sense of safety. So that might mean a parent staying with them till they fall asleep again, or crawling the bed with mom and dad or leaving a light on, or it might mean something else. And, but we do this all the time. We tell our kids like, why are you so nervous about it? There's nothing to be afraid of. And that never helps kids be like, oh good. I don't feel worried anymore.

That is the, and so, you know, what happens is, or like I had a, I was working with a family recently where, um, the kid was a really anxious kid. This is like a six year old. She was really anxious. And, um, the parents would be like, why are you worried about that? I'm not worried about it. And so what I ended up speaking with the parents about was to say, okay, she's worried about well, I'll use earthquakes. We've had earthquakes in California recently. So we have at our clinical practice, they have a lot of kids who have a lot of big feelings about earthquakes right now. So let's say the parents are like, you know, you don't need to be worried about earthquakes. They almost never happen. I'm not worried about earthquakes. So I told the parents, I was like on the surface level, that seems like such a beautiful thing to say. And we even have some science to show that when a kid's not sure if they have to be afraid or not, they look at the parent and they look at the parent's face and the body, the parent's body language and that gives them the cue about whether or not they should be worried. Right. So that there's, there's something really good there, but if you have a kid who's hyper anxious, I said, now what your child now knows is that since you're not worried about it, she has to worry about it even more because you're not, you're not tending to it. You're not... so I was saying much better to say, it's really good that we're safe and we care a lot about safety and so here are the ways we are making ourselves safe in our family. And we keep shoes by the bed and we have flashlights by the bed. And you know, I'm going to work with you to help our house be as safe as possible. So then the child doesn't have to hold the hypervigilance to be safe because the parent's like, I'm not worried about it. There's nothing to worry about. You know, what are you worried about? Then the child has to hold that alone. And it's the opposite of feeling safe. It's the opposite of feeling seen or soothed, even though the intentions are good and it seems good on the, on the surface level.

So I just think, I, I love what you just said there, cause it's really about thinking about. What would help me feel safe, you know, and your kids, like what they would want in that moment. This is really kind of about tuning into what your child's experience is. Um, and, and, you know, there are so many times as a clinician, as a parent, when I don't know if what I'm doing is the right thing, you know, I'm like, is this the right way to go? Is this the right thing to say, is this the right boundary to set? Um, is this, you know, is this right? And there's lots of rights and lots of wrongs, but I think for me anyway, particular behavior or any particular issue is on the back burner. And on what's on the front burner is that the way I respond, the way I make my decision about whether or not I continue with that, or, or what decision I make is fundamentally anchored in Is this going to help my child feel safe? Are they going to feel seen and known so that their internal experience is matched by my response? And then do they know I'm here to help them soothe and to kind of get back to feeling better?

So, you know, what happens with secure attachment is you have an internal state, like I'm really sad. Um, and then your parents says, you look sad. Are you feeling sad? So that the internal state and the external, the response from the parent is a match. And when that happens, the child's nervous system can feel safe. But what happens is if the child is sad and the parent's like, why are you being such a baby? What are you crying about? Or boys don't cry. Or um, you know, it's your fault. You should've been listening, whatever it is, we do... their internal state and the parent's response are not a match. So the child is alone in that. So they don't feel safe and they don't feel seen, and they don't feel the soothing of the parent, helping them move through it.

Maureen *And so, and then also, you know, parents of multiple kids, which I know you are, and I am, uh, each of my kids has their own ways that they need to feel safe. So each of my, even as one parent, I have to show up differently, three different ways for each of my three kids in my experience. Like, so one kid needs certain things to feel safe and the other one, you know, doesn't need as much in that area, needs... You know? So each kid has their own sense of safety too.*

Tina Absolutely. And that's, that's where we get back to attunement and that's why, you know, we have to be, why Dan, I typically don't write about follow these five steps. You know, this is the, you know, this is the discipline, you know, protocol for every kid because we really have to honor individual differences. And if you have a kid that has, you know, their threat circuitry gets activated just by showing up at a soccer practice cause they're super introverted, they're going to need a different kind of response from a parent, um, to help them feel safe versus a kid who's a total extrovert and you know, doesn't need that same kind of thing. So it is... and I think the other thing to say too, is that our attachment needs to feel safe, seen and soothed and then secure in that relationship that that person will in a predictable way, continue to show up for, those are needs throughout our whole lifespan as mammals. You know, my dog has those needs, my dog needs to feel those things.

Maureen *Um, and our relationships, especially with like our romantic partners.*

Tina Exactly. Yeah. That's where I was going. Is that, you know, um, this is our attachment need. We, we need to, as adult, like as an adult, I still need to feel those things from my

mom. And fortunately she's really beautiful at doing that. My mom happens to be a therapist too, so that's helpful, but that's what I need. That's what I need from my husband. And that's what he needs from me. And you know, so much of the time we go to that place where we go to the, we can figure this out part and we skip over the you're safe. I hear you. I'm listening. You know, I may not agree with you, but I want to really hear where you're coming from. Um, and when we start screaming and yelling or we start arguing, we skipped the safe and the seen parts, and it often doesn't go the right way.

But the other thing I was going to say is a lot of people have partners that don't give them secure attachment. You know, we, we, we may be married to people who don't help us feel safe and seen and soothed and secure. And it's so important, it's such an important need that we all have, that if you don't have that from your significant other or your parenting, you know, as a single parent, um, it's so important that you have friends or other people in your life that do that for you. And that's really what therapists do. That's our job, as therapists is to help people feel those four S's and that's where change and healing happens. Um, so it's just so important that if we're going to provide that to our kids, we need to have people who show up for us that are there for us, gives us so much more capacity.

Maureen *Exactly. And you said earlier, and I just want to repeat it cause it's so important. You said everyone needs a secure attachment with at least one person. So there's, there's something for, even if the, your child's co-parent is not providing your child a secure attachment even, that you're you as a parent, your ability to provide a secure attachment is still so powerful and important.*

Tina It's so important. And I think, you know, as you said earlier, it is cause it's going to be like a really big bite to chew off, but you know, in the, in the book that comes out in January, 2020, um, we're going to be, there are practical strategies for each of the four, there's a chapter on each of the four S's with an opportunity for parents to do some self-reflection. Um, to ask those kinds of questions, like, hmm. Did I... who did I feel safe with when I was a kid? Like, you know, did I, did my parents really see me for who I was, or did they see me in a way where they just kind of labeled me like, you know, the, I was the wild one and they didn't really see who I really was or, um, or they would actually amplify my states of distress instead of helping me calm down. Um, and so there's some, there's some questions for that, but each of the four S's, we have these really practical strategies, uh, for parents to begin the practice of this. So, you know, for sure we know that when people have therapy or they do journaling or they are in other relationships where people show up for them and give them the four S's, it can change our brains so that we can provide this.

But I also know from my work with parents, that sometimes when we just begin the practice of parenting in this way, of communicating with our kids in this way, we don't, we, it can really start making those shifts. So. Like one of the, um, one of the strategies that probably the most people have come back to me and said has been a real game changer for them in parenting, um, has been this, this strategy I kind of happened upon by accident in a therapy session, um. I was working with this family with a five-year-old and the five-year-old and the dad would get into these major battle of the wills and the

dad's theory about his, his five-year-old was that he was, um, just really oppositional and he needed stricter discipline, that he was spoiled. This is sort of the dad's theory about him. Um, but they had been using strict discipline for a really long time and it wasn't working. And their other child did not have the same kinds of things. And so, um, uh, I, I did some investigating and ended up referring the child. He actually had some sensory integration challenges and that was a big source of his dysregulation.

But what was interesting is he in the dad would get into these battle of the wills and the kid would say, you know, I want this, you know, I want this blue cup and the dad would say, you can't, it's in the dishwasher and the kid would start screaming, yelling, and your dad would scream and yell. And it would end up in these huge battles where the kid would get physically aggressive. The dad would get verbally aggressive and then the dad would be like, go to your room. And then he wouldn't go to his room and then dad would carry him to his room and then he wouldn't stay in his room for down, so dad would hold the door. And it just ended up being a lose-lose. Both of them ended up in these really reactive states and it was happening so frequently that the parents were like, we feel like we walk on eggshells to just not set him off. And the parents were so in such despair because they, they really didn't like their child. And he was so hard that they just felt completely depleted. And, um, so as we began to kind of peel back the layers of what was going on and to talk about how, you know, I really believe that children do well when they can. And that there was a reason he was so dysregulated and we needed to, um, give him the support and the skills to, you know, kind of help him have the strategies and to do the interventions that would help give him the capacity to regulate better. But I had this moment with this dad where I said, all right, so when you're yelling at him, you have an angry look on your face and an angry tone of voice and a really angry, aggressive posture. And so we all have this thing called neuroception, which is deep, deep in our nerves, our brain, and, um, in our sensory system that decides whether something's safe or threatening. It's not something we get conscious thought to it's that like, you know, um, this, this, this decision of whether or not we're safe for threat that our, our nervous system does for us.

So I said when you're doing all of these, these things, your, your kid's brain is going threat, threat, threat. And so he has no other option except to go to his threat defense systems, fight flight freeze, faint, not literally faint, but kind of like shut down, collapse. And so I said, what would happen if in one of these dysregulated moments we could communicate to his brain, no threat. What would that be? And so, as we began to play with this together, um, I recommended to this dad that the next time his five-year-old was raging and having this big temper tantrum that instead of yelling and, and doing these things that dad would sit in a really relaxed, and I said, you're not going to feel like it cause you're nervous system is going to the threat too. But you have to override that. And I want you to sit in a relaxed posture below your child's eye level, and that communicates to the brain very quickly. No threat. And I want you to only say two things, one, something empathetic like, oh buddy, you're so upset. And number two to say, I'm right here with you. And the dad was like, you want me to sit in a submissive posture to my child? And I said, no, it's a strategic posture to down-regulate his nervous system.

Um, but I didn't think I would ever see them again, and a few weeks later they came back, and the dad said, okay, I thought that was BS. And I was like, so did you just come to share that with me? And he's like, no, I came back because in a moment of desperation, my child was freaking out and I sat on the floor. He's like, I don't think I did it just right because I was like, I can tell you're mad, but I'll sit here with you. Um, but it was progress for this dad. And he said, my kid calmed down so fast. And he said, but something else happened. And that was that I was able to stay calm and there's a bunch of science behind why that would be that when we posture ourselves in different ways, we activate different neural networks. Right? If you're standing and wagging a finger at someone and yelling, you're activating fight circuitry in your own brain, versus if you're sitting in a relaxed posture and saying something empathetic, even if you don't feel like it, it activates different circuitry.

But what was so important was, as the dad told me this, he got really emotional and he said, he said, I, it felt so good to me to be able to help him like that. And it helped the dad see his child totally differently, um, that instead of enraging his child further and having the relationship just be so conflict ridden, he felt this something right happened there where he was really able to help his child feel safe instead of threatened, he was able to help his child feel like I get what you're going through, as opposed to you're being a spoiled brat. Um, and then they could work together and it transformed their relationship. It was funny too, because the wife is like, anytime I raise my voice where I start getting mad, he sits on the floor, I think he's mocking me. He was like doing it to her. So that was really funny. But this is one of the ways, again, that when our children are at their worst, this is what the attachment science tells us as mammals, that is when they need us the most. So when they're at their worst and we yell and scream at them, we send them away from us punitively, we, um, do all kinds of things. We get really reactive ourselves. We're not safe. And so if in the moment we can really communicate, I can handle this. I've got you. Um, it's so powerful. It really is because at their worst, that's when they need us the most. And that's when we need to show up, um, with our presence.

Maureen *Yes, I love that.*

Tina It doesn't even really matter what you say, but it's really being present and helping your child feel like you've got this nice.

Maureen *Yes. I love that. And so I, I could talk to you all day and all night on this, but we are out of time, but let's, I just want to, I wrote down those four S's and so, um, I'm going to keep those with me, but definitely safe, seen, soothed, and then that helps build that secure attachment. So I just think those are so good to keep in mind. So thank you so much for sharing those.*

Tina Yeah, well, and it's good to put, you know, write down those four S's on a sticky note and stick it on your steering wheel so that you're driving, you can hold those as sort of, this is my way of being, this is how I'm going to be present to my kids and to show up for them when they need me the most.

Maureen *Yeah. Yes, that's so good. Um, okay. So for people who are listening and they want to follow, you learn more about you, you know, get your book when it comes out in January, where, where should people go?*

Tina My website is tinabryson.com and that's the B R Y S O N. And there's links on there. I'm on Facebook and Instagram as Tina Payne Bryson. Um, and that's P A Y N E B R Y S O N. So those are great ways to find me. And, um, I'm, I'm out speaking all over the place, talking about Momentous everywhere I go. Um, and, uh, so yeah, and Dan and I have several events that we're going to be doing together in, um, in January through March. Um, so you'll be able to find all that information as it gets, um, situated on, on my website.

Maureen *And I'll put in a plug for, if anyone listening is anywhere near any of your speaking engagements, highly recommend. So you get a ton out of all of your, um, I, every time I hear you, I get a ton of new stuff out of it, including today. So thank you so much. I really appreciate it. I took maybe a full page of notes that I'm going to need to go home and write on post-it notes all over my house. So thank you again so much for being here. It's so lovely to talk to you as always.*

Tina Always love talking to you as well.

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