

Surfing the Emotional Waves: Connect and Redirect

Whole Brain Context: The right brain is focused on the meaning and feel of an experience. It specializes in images, emotions and personal memories. The left-brain desires order. It is logical, literal, linguistic and linear. The goal is to get these two sides to work in an integrated manner. When they aren't working collaboratively or integration is blocked, chaos and rigidity arise. It is also important to know that when a child is in a heightened state of emotion, they can't access the left side of the brain making interventions that rely solely on the left brain a lose-lose approach. The goal is to help the child navigate between chaos and rigidity and maintain an overall balance of wellbeing.



Image from The Whole-Brain Child, pg. 12

Developmental Consideration: The young child—especially during the first three years—is right hemisphere dominant. The 3-6 year old child is growing their skills and capacity to use the left brain. This three year span is devoted to building important integration networks. The young child hasn't developed or mastered the ability to use logic and words to express their feelings, and they live their lives completely in the moment. Logic, responsibilities and time don't exist. The main consideration is to learn how to evaluate which side of the brain is engaged and intervene in a manner that provides opportunities for the child to begin to grow their integration.

Goal: There are times when children are hit with big waves of right brain emotion. When this occurs, the left brain isn't able to be engaged and the child is in a right brain, nonrational, emotional flood. The goal of this technique is to “surf” the emotional wave, connecting with the right side of the brain until the wave passes.

The steps below walk you through how to surf through an emotional wave.

Step 1: Connect Script

The first step is to connect with the right brain. The script below can help structure the language around this.

Recipe: Acknowledge feelings + Nonverbal signals (physical touch, empathetic facial expressions, nurturing tone of voice + nonjudgemental listening

Script: I can see you are really upset and I see tears coming from your eyes. Sometimes it is just really hard isn't it. It is hard to say goodbye.

Note for children with more developed language (3+): They may provide you with an explanation or more details. When this occurs, continue to follow the recipe above.

Step 2: Redirect Script

The second step is to redirect to the left brain. This step occurs when you feel that the child has settled. One marker to observe is if the child is acknowledging you in the connect conversation or adding their own language. The script below can help structure language around this. If you redirect too soon, the child will let you know as you will see "chaos" or "rigidity." If this happens, return to the Connect step.

Script:

I get sad too when I have to say goodbye. I do know that (I am) We are glad that you are here today.

When you are ready,

Would you like me to show you something I have picked out just for you

Or

When you are ready, you can come help me with_____.

Or

Come help me with _____. [Offering your hand]

Important Point: With this technique, nonverbal communication is key and could be argued to be more important than verbal communication. Below is a list nonverbal ways to create connection.

Eye Contact	Getting down to the child's level or below this level and look into their eyes while talking helps the child feel safe in relationship with you.
Facial Expressions	Relaxed face, "soft" eyes, empathetic smile
Tone of Voice	Soft, calm, comforting
Posture	Relaxed shoulders, open hands, kneeling or sitting on the floor.
Gestures	Gentle touch, offering hugs, holding hands
Timing of Response	Letting the child finish before speaking, asking questions before answering
Intensity of Response	Staying calm, present, being patient
Bodily Movement	Coming closer, relaxed movement, bending down.