

NEWS

# How to keep a child in the 'green zone' and avoid the 'red zone'

**Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje**

Oct. 10, 2018 | Updated: Oct. 10, 2018 3:59 p.m.



Outside the Lunchbox: Parenting expert Tina Payne Bryson is the keynote speaker for the DoSeum's ninth annual Outside the Lunchbox fundraising luncheon. Bryson's latest book is "The Yes Brain: How to Cultivate Courage, Curiosity and Resilience in Your Child," which she co-wrote with Daniel Siegel. The collaborators also wrote "No-Drama Discipline" and "The Whole Brain Child."

Parenting expert and New York Times–bestselling author Tina Payne Bryson will speak at the DoSeum's 9th Annual Outside the Lunchbox Luncheon from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

at the Mays Family Center at the Witte Museum.

A psychotherapist and co-founder of the Center for Connection in Pasadena, Calif., Bryson will talk about her latest book, “The Yes Brain,” released in January.

Bryson’s other two books, co-authored with Dan Siegel, are “No-Drama Discipline” and “The Whole Brain Child.” Below are excerpts from a recent conversation with Bryson about fostering the “yes brain” in children.

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**Question:** What is the “yes” brain in kids?

**Answer:** One thing it’s not about is being permissive or saying yes to everything. It’s a neurological state or way of being that is receptive and flexible and open to new information. It’s learning to see obstacles as challenges and taking chances to explore. It’s children learning over time to regulate their emotions to become balanced and resilient. Eventually, the brain wires itself that way and children become adults who approach the world in this manner.

**Q:** So, what’s a “no” brain?

**A:** It’s a brain that’s reactive and shut down, rigid and stuck in negative emotions. We’re talking about the flight-or-fight-or-freeze response, when children are feeling anxious and reactive and on guard. Again, if children are in this state repeatedly over time, that’s how their brains get wired.

**Q:** What’s the difference between the “green zone” and the “red zone?”

**A:** Kids are in the green zone when their nervous system is telling them they’re safe and things are OK. They’re relaxed and their brains are in a receptive state. In contrast, in the red zone, where the nervous system is highly activated – sweating, heart beating faster and so on – the brain becomes reactive. That’s where you often see acting out, defiant and aggressive behaviors. A child can also shut down, becoming withdrawn. The brain is still reactive, not balanced and resilient and flexible.

**Q:** How do parenting practices based on empathy and connection work with these brain states?

**A:** The whole purpose of discipline is to teach and build skills, so kids learn self-discipline as they grow up. It’s not at all about punishment. But much of what we do in

discipline is yelling at kids and punishing them, which is actually counterproductive, because it pushes kids into the red zone and out of the green zone, where their brains are receptive to build new skills. Empathy and connection are how you move them back into the green zone.

**Q:** But how do you do that with a child in a meltdown?

**A:** You respond with soothing. You say, 'I can see you're angry right now. I'm right here with you and I will listen.' When we respond with connection and empathy, it changes a child's neurophysiology and their whole nervous system. A child moves from a threatened, reactive brain to a more receptive learning state. Over time, even when they're experiencing big, intense emotional reactions, their brains get wired where they are able to soothe themselves. They develop the capacity to self-regulate.

**Q:** But aren't you talking about spoiling kids?

**A:** We don't have to worry about spoiling our kids when it comes to connection and empathy. Where spoiling comes in is when we're permissive with our boundaries. You still have high expectations and firm boundaries when you practice empathy.

Here's an example: Say your child doesn't want to get out of the bathtub. He's yelling and misbehaving. You say, 'I'm going to lift you gently out and it's OK for you to cry and be upset, to feel your feelings. I'm right here with you.' He's still getting out of the tub, but you're giving him a safe place for him to express his feelings. You want to convey to your children that, at their worst, they can't lose your love. That's not the same as saying all behaviors are OK. We're saying all feelings are OK, but you can't hurt other people.

**Q:** What's so wrong with punishment?

**A:** Especially when children are young and their brains are immature, research shows punishment is counterproductive. When a child is punished, they focus their attention on how mean we are and how they're a victim. Instead, use empathy and after they've been soothed, you have a reflective dialogue. What can you do different the next time? It gives the child *more* accountability, not less. You're teaching skills and increasing their capacity, whereas punishment just teaches them to be angry.

As a parent, you have to practice behaviors yourself to stay in the green zone, so you can model that behavior and respond appropriately, as opposed to yelling, getting angry, issuing random punishments. All that behavior does is make it more likely our kids move out of the green zone. Sit in a relaxed posture. When you talk to your child, ~~get beneath~~

their eye level. This is not submissive: It communicates there is no threat. 'I'm here to help you.' Then say something empathetic; 'Buddy, I feel bad you're so angry right now.'

**Q:** Why is all this so important?

**A:** Building empathy and resilience in our children is foundational for their mental and emotional health and even their academic success. These sort of skills are essential for the next generation of parents, teachers, politicians. We need to be intentional about building these skills, and what's lovely is that we can do it in just our daily interactions with our kids.

For more information about the luncheon, visit [www.thedoseum.org](http://www.thedoseum.org)

Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje is a staff writer in the San Antonio and Bexar County area. Read her on our [free site](http://mySA.com), [mySA.com](http://mySA.com), and on our [subscriber site](http://ExpressNews.com), [ExpressNews.com](http://ExpressNews.com). | [mstoeltje@express-news.net](mailto:mstoeltje@express-news.net) | Twitter: [@mstoeltje](https://twitter.com/mstoeltje)

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