

"The Stoplight Approach gives hope to parents who feel hopeless
in a way that helps them and their children feel competent and powerful."

ANJA TERLOUW, PSYCHOLOGIST

How Brain Science
and the Bible
Help Parents Raise
Resilient Children

signals

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ORR

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with Kathrine Bennett, Rebecca Dougan,
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and Rachel Jones

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY®

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Introduction

HOW CAN I WRITE A BOOK ABOUT PARENTING?

I sometimes still ask myself that question, or a version of it. I know how imperfect I am at this job. I'm frequently fatigued and often feel like a total failure as I try to guide my kids toward wisdom and resilience. There have been times when I wasn't sure I had the physical, emotional, or mental strength to finish the day, much less help other parents understand how to get through *their* days.

Why would anyone want to hear what I have to say?

I expressed my doubts to my husband as I was considering this project. He agreed that we've faced some big challenges in our family, but that it was these trials that gave me the ability to help other parents. "You have lived it," he said. "You can speak into other parents' lives not because you are perfect or make every decision perfectly, but because you understand the challenges so well."

You have lived it. We have indeed. These days, we usually have ten children sitting around our dinner table at night: seven kids of our own—four of whom we've adopted—and a few other foster children we've brought under our roof until the situation improves for them elsewhere. Several of the children we've welcomed into

our home have faced special academic and behavioral challenges; a few others have experienced significant trauma. And we've done all of this while living overseas outside the comforts of our own culture. As my husband reminded me, our family life is a lot more complicated than what many people our age experience—raising a couple of kids in a big home in the suburbs. Whether through our family life or our ministry, there aren't many parenting challenges we haven't faced.

Being a mom to these kids constantly reminds me that family life is a place for growth—for kids, obviously, but also for parents. And I have seen much growth in my parenting strategies. Early on, I used the sorts of tactics my own parents used as I was growing up. If you're around my age, you may know what I'm talking about: a sort of fear-based system of expectations enforced with punishment. Obey the rules or reap the consequences.

Don't get me wrong: My mom and dad were good parents in the sense that they wanted what was best for my siblings and me. They did what they could with what they had, and I remember with fondness their wisdom, love, and good intentions. But I also recognize that most moms and dads of that generation didn't have the resources and understanding of science and childhood development that we are fortunate to have today.

So that's another reason I can help parents: I've witnessed firsthand how helpful a parenting approach that fuses scientific research and biblical wisdom can help us do our jobs better. These insights have taught me the importance of adjusting my parenting strategies to fit the reality of how kids and parents best function together.

The strategies we'll be looking at are likely not major departures from your philosophy of parenting. We all love our kids and want to guide them toward making good decisions that will help them be successful in life. But it is helpful to align our tactics

with how kids are functioning in the heat of the moment. That is my goal with this book: to help parents recognize how and when children and parents best function, based on how God made us.

Of course, changing one's parenting strategy isn't ever very easy. You may be changing habits that have become deeply entrenched. It's difficult, for example, to unlearn the habit of instantly and harshly reacting to misbehavior and then replace that habit with a more intentional, growth-focused response. It's hard work, and these decisions can take a lot of repetition before they become a natural part of you. But understanding how kids are *built*—how the state of a child's brain influences his or her behavior and decision-making ability in times of stress or peace—is an incredibly powerful tool to have at your disposal.



So, what is this tool and how can I get it? To answer that, let's briefly jump back to the spring of 2011. I was in one of those “feeling absolutely overwhelmed” phases of parenting. Traveling as a family tends to amplify those feelings. There were nine of us at the time, and we were in the middle of a family road trip across two countries. All of us, in a van, for hours on end. There were some difficult moments.

We stopped to spend a couple days at my friend Marilyn's house. Marilyn specializes in child development, so many of our conversations naturally turned to parenting and our work with children who had experienced trauma. I told her about the challenges of my adopted children, including one extremely spirited child who always seemed to have a will that was directly opposed to mine. Our home school lesson times were especially trying, often disintegrating into full-throated temper tantrums (from my daughter, not me). I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong. I was trying to make the lessons easy to understand and within

each child's skill level. I also kept school on a routine as much as possible, knowing that kids best function when the day's events are predictable. Even on our road trip, we stuck to a basic learning schedule. But it seemed that a full-on battle ensued every day, especially with this one daughter.

I invited Marilyn to join our school time the next morning. Things started out fine. The children were fed and seemed ready to focus on their assignments. And the task that morning was pretty simple and low-key. I asked my kids to draw and color a picture about something interesting or enjoyable they'd experienced so far on our trip. Below the picture, they were to print a sentence describing the scene.

It wasn't long before my spirited little girl started fussing, then complaining, then refusing to start on her picture. I tried to encourage her, telling her that she could easily do this small, fun project, and that if she could just focus for a short time, she could be back to playing before she knew it. But she wasn't interested. Tensions rose, and within a few minutes she was totally overwhelmed. She was soon throwing herself on the floor, screaming and thrashing in a typical tantrum style. I stood back a little, pleading with my girl to come back to the table. We'd been in this situation many times before, and I knew that this behavior could go on for quite some time, with no schoolwork getting done.

As Marilyn reminded me, this was not typical or healthy behavior for a six-year-old child. My friend leaned close to me and asked if she could try something that might help, and I nodded my approval. I was not prepared for the transformation in behavior my friend could achieve.

Marilyn laid on the floor next to my daughter, speaking quietly to her. Within a short time—fifteen minutes or so—my daughter was back up and sitting at the table, working on her picture. It was an amazing turnaround, and in such a short time. This was

something that would normally have taken me an hour or more to accomplish.

Of course, I wanted to know what Marilyn had done, and she began explaining to me some of the basic parenting concepts known in this book as the Stoplight Approach. Marilyn explained the importance of recognizing which “mode” a child’s brain was in and using that understanding to guide our interactions and instructions. She used the simple metaphor of a stoplight’s three colors to explain the workings of a child’s brain and the very different needs the child has when operating in each of these phases.

Marilyn introduced me to cutting-edge brain research by neuroscience researcher Dr. Bruce Perry. In his research, Dr. Perry has shown that one’s intelligence and capacity for learning drops significantly when in a state of duress. Perry has shown that, when stressed, a child’s practical intelligence can drop as much as fifty percent. This weakened state directly influences a child’s ability to comprehend reasonable, logical instructions. So the goal should be to move into another mode—to satisfy the needs a child’s brain has in one mode and shift into a phase that better accommodates learning and growth.

Marilyn’s knowledge of this area of brain science sparked a passion inside me. I had just witnessed it applied effectively in a stressful parenting scenario, and I wanted to know how I could do it myself and teach others to do the same. And so, I became a student of one of the most fascinating aspects of God’s creation: the human brain. I spent many thousands of hours studying and learning from top neuroscientists, researchers, and trauma specialists from around the world.

As a parent, I was especially interested in the connection between modern brain research and child development. I recognized that there was great value in learning a little more about how God created our brains and emotions to function and how

that deeper understanding can greatly improve the effectiveness of our parenting. Yes, life is messy and imperfect, but God doesn't wait for us to have our lives together before He can use us. In our weakness, He is strong!



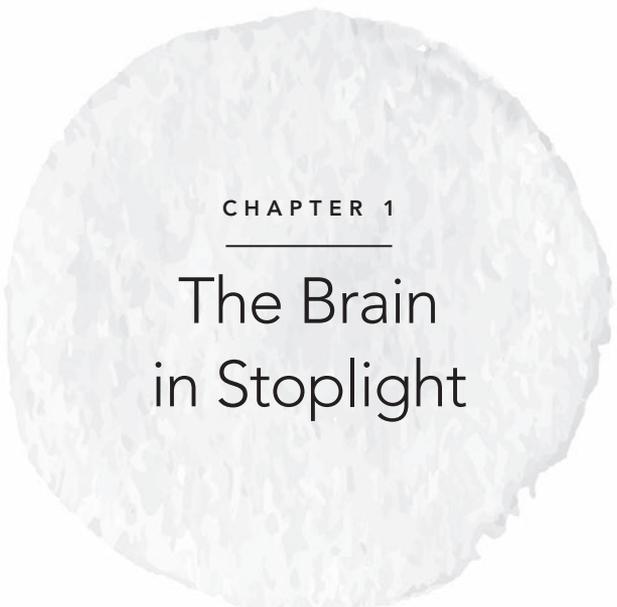
The Stoplight Approach is a tool that can be used to foster the spiritual formation of our children, as we are called to love God, love others, and be a witness as we go into all the world to share His love.

As I make mistakes, I can understand where I went wrong. When I do mess up, I know I can make repairs and reconnect with my children so that we grow together. The Stoplight Approach is a philosophy, not a program, giving me the framework within which to develop my own emotional intelligence and the spiritual formation of my family. It helps me grow my self-awareness and enables me to regulate my emotions while giving me the tools to parent my children in a way that meets their need for discipline, love, and safety. It is a way of seeing myself and others through the lens of brain science, and it can change the most challenging relationship into a positive connection. This book is not meant to make any of us feel guilty for the way we have parented but to give insight so that we can work toward a scientifically based parenting approach.

Alison Gopnik uses a helpful metaphor in her book, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*. She explains that parents should be like gardeners, not carpenters. Our children are not like blocks of wood that we have full control over their final form. No, children are more like flowers, each beautiful and unique. We provide an environment for growth, the best we possibly can, but the outcome is still in part determined by who the child is and the choices they make.¹

Though there are many styles of parenting, the Stoplight Approach gives parents a style of parenting within the framework of three simple colors: Red, Yellow, and Green. How do you get your home from chaotic to peaceful, from aggressive to calm, from Red to Green? Join me on a journey to learn and understand what it means to be a Stoplight parent and how it can not only change your life and the entire atmosphere of your home but ultimately help your children grow into connected adults who engage in caring communities and work toward a kinder world.





CHAPTER 1

The Brain in Stoplight

IT'S SIX IN THE MORNING, back when we were living in Uganda. I feel someone's eyes staring at me while I sleep. As I slowly wake up, I see my seven-year-old son Peter gazing at me from beside the bed. "Mommy," he says sweetly. "It's morning and I'm hungry!"

I roll over and remember that Rachel, my six-year-old daughter, had a nightmare the night before. She is now lying in such a way that her feet are poking me in the ribs. I slowly sit up to see Gordon, our six-year-old foster child who is deaf and has cerebral palsy, now wide awake. Somehow, he has also crept into the bed. I can't remember why.

"Okay, I'll be down in a minute," I say to Peter. Needless to say, I could probably use a bit more sleep.

I notice that the bedroom light is on and remember there was a rat in my room last night, and I was too scared to sleep in the dark. *Wonder where that thing went.*

I hear Peter jumping down the stairs. Instead of waiting for me, he decides to be a big boy and pour his own cereal. This is then followed by him spilling milk across the counter and onto the floor. By this point, Gordon has followed after him and is now standing in a puddle of milk. Of course, I haven't discovered any of this yet because I'm still trying to pull myself out of bed.

My husband is usually the first one up and on duty in the morning, but he is away on an overnight business trip and can't do the breakfast routine. I am not a morning person by nature, but this morning is different. Time to get up and put on my Mummy hat.

I wake up Rachel and walk downstairs to start the day. Questions start filling my mind. *Why didn't I make the kids' lunches last night? Do we have any bread for sandwiches? I don't think so. Guess we're making pancakes this morning.*

And then I see milk all over the kitchen floor. *Well, no pancakes either. Guess we're using yogurt instead.*

"Who peed on my volleyball uniform?" says Joshua, my sixteen-year-old son, walking into the kitchen. He is livid, holding up a jersey that is dripping wet. I glance around the room, trying to collect some information. I quickly deduce that the responsible party probably wasn't Thomas, my fourteen-year-old son, or Robert, my seventeen-year-old nephew. It also probably wasn't any of the girls, who sleep in a separate room.

My attention turns to Peter, who is now trying to mop up the spilled milk. "Joshua said I could sleep in his bed last night, and he left his uniform on the bed," Peter admits, "and I had an accident in the middle of the night."

Joshua sniffs the jersey. "I have a game today! I can't play with this!"

I grab the uniform and assure him that I will have his uniform cleaned and at school by the time his game starts. Did I mention the power just went out? Hand washing it is!

It's now past seven o'clock, and the kids leave for school in less than an hour. I discover that Beth, one of my ten-year-old daughters, didn't finish her homework. Jessica, my other ten-year-old daughter, is still in bed. And Rachel is now crying because she can't find her lunch box.

Oh, right. I still need to make some lunches.

Gordon has decided to dress himself and is now working toward emptying every cabinet in the bedroom. Thomas casually informs me that the cat has pooped in the sock basket. Joshua is about to walk out the door with or without his little siblings, because he doesn't want to be late for school. While all this goes on, I am frantically signing school forms, brushing hair, flipping pancakes, and yelling at anyone who gets in my way.

Welcome to my life.



Does the chaos of life ever totally stress you out? Ever feel like you're stuck on a roller coaster and you've completely lost control of where you're going? How about when your voice seems stuck on "yell" because nobody is listening to you?

As parents, we all emotionally react (and sometimes overreact) to the fury of family activity. Sometimes those reactions make those we love feel safe, and sometimes they make them feel unsafe. There are good days and bad days, moments we are proud of, and moments we'd like to take another swing at.

You probably don't consider very often how your brain is contributing to your responses to your family. We can't see the brain, of course, but it does send clear signals to us and to those around us. Like a traffic light sending signals for drivers to proceed, clear the intersection, or stop, our brains direct their own sort of traffic, guiding our emotions and behaviors, which in turn send their own signals to those around us. The Stoplight

Approach teaches parents how to understand and read these signals, helping grow our awareness of our own and our child's emotions, and helping us to know what kind of actions to take based on the signal sent.

My Brain Does What?

If you had to pick which organ in your body was the most important, the brain would definitely make the short list. Without a brain, you wouldn't be . . . well, *you*. The brain is a sort of central computer for human operations. It directs our actions and reactions. It gives us thoughts and emotions and allows us to have memories. All of that functionality makes the brain the most complex organ in the human body. It is so complex that brain scientists still don't understand everything about it.

What a marvel of creation our brains are! Seeking to understand the brain and how it works is a way of honoring God because it honors how He made us. There's so much to discover! And brain scientists have learned quite a lot about this most important organ.

One thing research shows us is that the human brain is wired for relationship. People have a hardwired need to be around other people, to interact and share life with each other. In his book *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman describes this as a sort of "neural ballet" that connects human brains. "Neuroscience has discovered that our brain's very design makes it sociable, inexorably drawn into an intimate brain-to-brain linkup whenever we engage with another person," Goleman writes.¹

For Christians, these kinds of discoveries are no surprise. Humans are made in the image of a relational God—one who has been in a kind of perfect relationship with Himself for all eternity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So it's no surprise that when God made humans in His image, He gave us brains that are

wired to seek and support relational connection. We are relational because our Creator is relational. Later, we'll look more closely at how humanity's hardwiring for relational connection applies to parenting.

Another aspect of the brain that has recently received a lot of study and attention is *neuroplasticity*, the brain's ability to restructure itself in response to different sensory experiences. Your brain can change dramatically over time depending on the stimuli you receive and the habits you develop. And this changing, learning quality of the brain can be utilized for positive and negative purposes. For example, practicing a musical or artistic skill until it feels automatic is neuroplasticity at work. But the same is true of a bad habit: The brain gets accustomed to a certain pattern of behavior, and it can be difficult to break free from the pattern.

As with the brain's relational wiring mentioned above, we must also consider the brain's neuroplastic nature when discussing effective parenting. Our actions and reactions directly influence the way our children's brains develop and can have both positive and negative effects on their lives. A pattern of interactions with a child will cause them to expect such interactions in the future and adjust accordingly.

Given the background of many kids that I've worked with, I've become very interested in the brain's capacity to change itself. Can this capacity for change help heal a child who has experienced trauma? Scientists have shown that this, indeed, is the case. Just like a broken arm can be mended if dealt with correctly or cause a lifetime of disability and pain if it is not, so too our interactions with our children can heal or disable. Yes, damage to the brain in the early years can have long-term effects, but the brain is always capable of change. New and healthier patterns can still influence a hurting brain. There is always hope.

Signals along the Road

Like traffic signs along a road, our brain is continually sending signals to help us react and respond to our environment. Unfortunately, we don't always recognize what those signals mean. And, as on the roadway, people can get hurt when we don't respect or understand the signs that help us know where to go and how to proceed.

To learn how to respect these signals, it's important that we understand some basics about the structure of the human brain. As mentioned earlier, the human brain is incredibly complex, and as scientists have studied the major areas, they've defined and divided them further based on specific functions and focuses. But for our purposes, we'll look at three main areas of the brain.

The **neocortex**, which is also called the neopallium or the isocortex, is often described as the "thinking brain" or "rational brain." As those words suggest, this part of the brain is a high-level thinker. It's very logical and thoughtful. It's involved in remembering the past in order to make decisions about the future. If your son is planning for a big school project, analyzing the different steps with deadlines and follow-up processes, he will be relying extensively on his neocortex.

In the stoplight metaphor for the brain, let's think of the neocortex and its state of thinking as the green light mode. Imagine that the neocortex is saying, "Go! It is safe to proceed at full speed." While we don't really activate or deactivate different parts of our brain, we do "shift" states to use different parts of our brain in a deeper way as our needs are met and we focus on other tasks. When we shift to the green light state, we are more capable of using our advanced thinking and reasoning abilities to address a situation.

The **limbic system**, often described as the "feeling brain," is the emotional and social-relational section of the brain. When we feel

loved, supported, and encouraged for doing something well, we're using this system, and that's also true when we feel disrespected, embarrassed, or angry.

Under the Stoplight Approach, let's think of the limbic system as a yellow light. You can imagine it saying, "Be cautious! Slow down to stop or clear the intersection right away!" When in yellow light mode, it can be difficult to see facts and reason because our feelings and emotions may be clouding the situation. A more careful approach is necessary before learning and growth can happen.

The **brain stem**, sometimes called the "survival brain" or the "lizard brain," is the most basic part of our brain and is concerned with things like thirst, hunger, and safety. It also governs the body's vital functions such as heart rate, body temperature, and balance. For our purposes here, think of the brain stem as the red light. "Stop!" the Red Brain is saying. "It's not safe to proceed until the light changes."

Remember that the brain stem regulates basic functions related to our survival, so when I say, "not safe to proceed until the light changes," I mean that these basic needs must be satisfied before any higher-level functioning can effectively happen. A common example that most parents would probably recognize is that of a child trying to do homework or practice a musical instrument while hungry or tired. See, the red light is flashing! The child's irritation may be due to some very basic needs, and it is important that you first address those needs before any learning or growth can happen.

The brain is sending signals, like alarms designed to protect us, and it is important not to ignore the signals. The Stoplight Approach to life and parenting helps us recognize the signals our own brains or our children's brains are sending so we can respond appropriately. By using the colors red, yellow, and green for these

different signals, parents and children have a simple, everyday language to understand and communicate emotions and needs.

<p>Red Brain</p> 	<p>Child Acts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angry, defiant, runs away, tunes out, unresponsive • Can't think clearly, can't learn • No empathy <p>Child Feels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very unsafe • Overwhelmed • Powerless 	<p>Your response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop everything • Be calm & gentle • Do not talk, problem solve, or try to reason with them • Give child time & space to calm down <div data-bbox="661 561 852 667" style="background-color: #cccccc; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <p><i>Child Needs to Feel Safe</i></p> </div>
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Red Light, Stop!

When Dad is angry, Mom gets tense. When Mom is tense, she starts yelling at the kids, and then the kids start yelling at each other. When we are in Red, people around us tend to go into Red. When we're operating from the brain stem, the survival brain, we sense that things aren't safe for ourselves and for those around us. You might think of this as our brain's warning system telling us, "Danger! Unsafe! Cease normal activity and address the threat."

Red Brain has its place and purpose. For example, it's certainly vital in dangerous situations such as facing a lion in the wild or encountering a thief in the middle of the night. And, of course, we all need the survival brain to govern our basic biological processes. However, scientists have found that living in a constant Red Brain state is unhealthy and can have serious long-term consequences, particularly for children. When someone's brain is always focused on basic needs of survival such as hunger, thirst, and safety, there is often damage that is very difficult to repair, even with the brain's

remarkable capacity for healing. According to one study, children who have spent lots of time living in a state of fear or anxiety will experience serious learning and schooling difficulties later on.² Spend too much time in your Red Brain, and Green Brain suffers.

Here's another thing about Red Brain: When we're focused on survival and basic needs, we have a reduced capacity for higher-level functions. Scientists have demonstrated that the brain state of a child (or an adult) can have significant influence on his or her thinking and feeling capability.

Dr. Bruce Perry at the Child Trauma Academy has measured the decline of a child's functional IQ while in the different brain states. He's found that when a child is living in a state of fear or extreme anxiety, his or her measurable IQ can drop by as much as half of its full capacity. A child with an IQ of 105 while in a calm, focused state would drop to a range of 55–75 points when a child is feeling fearful or unsafe.³ So if you are trying to teach your son how to tie his shoes while he's in Red Brain, you might be in for a long ride.

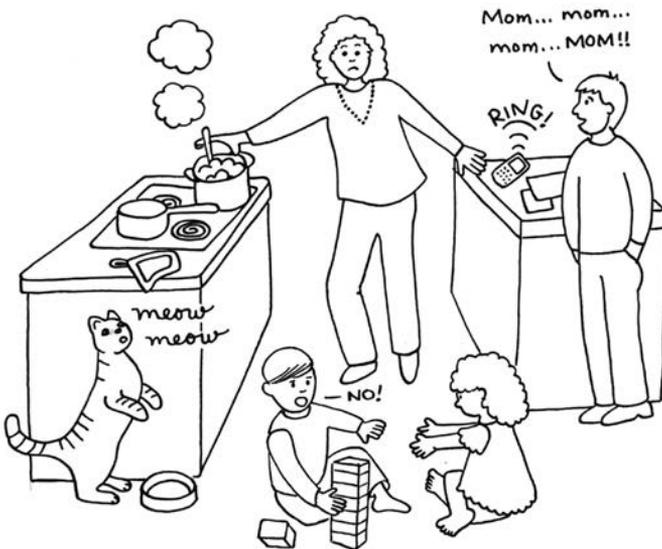
It's not that kids *won't* take in all the information while in Red Brain, it's that they really can't. While your daughter is in Red Brain, working on math homework is not only frustrating, but almost pointless. When children and parents are in Red Brain, they feel unsafe, and their reactions will appear to be irrational and out of control. Indeed, there are really only three ways we react while in Red Brain: fight, flight, or freeze. In other words, we may act angry, run away, or shut down and tune out. It goes without saying that a person in Red Brain has difficulty empathizing with others and can't see another person's perspective.

Scared children do scary things. . . . Negative behavior does not stem from a place of conscious intent, but it stems from a place of unconscious fear, unconscious survival.⁴

DR. B. BRYAN POST

Anyone who has worked with children as a parent or teacher may recognize that the situation that causes a child (or an adult) to shift into Red Brain may not *actually* be dangerous. The survival brain does not always accurately understand whether a threat is real or just perceived. But it's important to remember that, for whatever reason, the person who is truly in a Red Brain state legitimately *feels* unsafe, and we must respond appropriately. If a child is afraid of monsters under the bed, even though we know full well that there are no monsters, we still have to respect genuine feelings of fear, even as we work to show kids that their bed is a safe place.

Children in Red Brain need to feel safe. Once a perceived threat is eliminated or reframed so the child can understand the reality of the situation, the child can then move to Yellow Brain. With appropriate interventions, a Green Brain state can be achieved where successful learning, listening, obeying, and functioning can occur.



Mom is in Yellow Brain!

<p>Yellow Brain</p> 	<p>Child Acts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritable • Unfocused • Learning takes longer <p>Child Feels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stressed • Unsafe • Unvalued/unloved • Tired, sick, hungry • Frustrated • Shamed 	<p>Your Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for unmet needs, unsolved problems, lacking skills • Make them feel safe, valued, & connected <div style="background-color: #cccccc; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <p><i>Child Needs to Feel Connected</i></p> </div>
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Yellow Light, Slow Down!

When Mom is stressed, spending time connecting with the kids seems like a distant priority. When Dad is really tired, much of what his wife says may come across as annoying and irrelevant.

Operating from the limbic system, the Yellow Brain state utilizes emotional reactions to address situations. It is important in some circumstances, such as when a mother is advocating for and protecting her children; however, it is not a good state of the brain to be in when consistently making decisions, since logic and facts will have little bearing on responses.

As in Red Brain, there is a reduction of functional IQ in Yellow Brain. In this emotional, feeling state, one's IQ is operating at about only seventy-five percent of full capacity. While learning and growing are possible, these tasks will take longer and require extra effort. When children are in Yellow Brain, they are not as off as in Red Brain mode, but they are still stressed and have unmet needs and unsolved problems. They may be frustrated because they seem to have forgotten certain skills, and as a result of that tension, they feel undervalued.

In the Stoplight Approach, yellow is the warning signal to slow down and assess the situation. Is it safe to proceed slowly? Do we need to slow down because we're going to have to stop soon? Children in Yellow Brain need to feel valued, loved, and connected. Their emotional needs must be satisfied. When someone is able to find ways to fill these emotional needs, the child can return to Green Brain and be more able to learn, listen, and obey.

If your son is whining about being hungry twenty minutes before supper, instead of yelling, tell him that you would be happy to give him a piece of fruit or a vegetable—something that won't spoil his appetite for supper—if he asks politely. This addresses Red Brain's pressing needs and helps him transition back toward Green Brain, without hurting your relationship.

<h2 style="text-align: center;">Green Brain</h2> 	<p>Child Acts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative • Takes initiative • Able to learn and apply knowledge • Empathetic 	<p>Your Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep your child in Green Brain • Play & laugh with child to engage them best
	<p>Child Feels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe • Valued/loved • Happy • Content 	<p><i>Child is Ready to Learn</i></p>

Green Light, Go!

When Dad is happy, he enjoys making pancakes with his kids. When Mom is at peace, reading books with her son becomes a bonding experience. Operating from the neocortex, the Green

Brain state is the highest level of functioning. This should be the default state, and the state we always want to move toward when we find ourselves in Yellow or Red Brain.

Remember, children can have completely different capabilities depending on their current environment and which state their brain is in. When your daughter is operating in the calm, focused Green Brain state, her functional IQ is running at one hundred percent of capacity. This means that she is ready to learn, listen, and obey. It is the best area of the brain for dealing with normal life circumstances.

Green means go! When in Green Brain, we are able to fully engage with our environment, accomplish current tasks, or try new ones. We can also solve problems by integrating new knowledge and applying it to a variety of situations. The brain is in its fully functioning state where we are able to serve, love, and have empathy for others.

In Green Brain, children do not react to situations; they respond to them. They feel content and stable, and the potential for learning, listening, and obeying is at its maximum. Green Brain is the ideal state for both the parent and child.

It goes without saying that operating from the neocortex is the best state for parents, too. When you're in the Green state and your daughter is fighting with a sibling, you are able to respond in calm, focused ways, helping your children feel safe, loved, and valued. In doing so, you can help them return to a Green Brain state, where they can attempt to solve their own issues and learn from their mistakes. If your teenage son is defying what you've asked him to do, when you're in Green Brain, you can deal with the situation calmly and directly, rather than exasperating him. In Green Brain, just like with a green stoplight signal, we are able to go, responding to situations to the best of our ability.

When you connect to the heart of a child,
everything is possible.⁵

KARYN PURVIS

Be a Brain Detective

Awareness of the state of your child's brain is a big part of learning how to respond in healthy ways. Sometimes we may assume that a child is functioning in a Green Brain state when this is not the case. They may have had little sleep the night before. They may be under stress because of a bully at school. Or perhaps they're having relationship problems with a friend that we don't know about. Trying to teach, train, or discipline children while they are in a Yellow or Red state is counterproductive. In these brain states, they feel stressed, unsafe, unloved, and undervalued. In order for them to develop effectively, we must first meet these needs.

A parent's words and actions can create a sense of safety, love, and value, or a sense of fear, anger, and disrespect. Of course, we never intend the latter, but it is sometimes too easy to kindle these feelings in our children if we are unaware of what state our child is currently in.

Your goal as a parent is to respond to your child in a way that makes him or her feel emotionally safe and connected to you. Once you have moved to Green Brain, your child can be coached to grow new skills and become more resilient. They can learn to relate to and empathize with others, to decide on their own values, and engage responsibly with their world.

So consider how you can be a detective. What state is your child in? What is your child feeling right now? Are they unresponsive or disrespectful, or cooperative and helping others?

Your child may be sending clear signals, but they may also be bottling up their feelings without any outward expression. Try to

see beyond what you observe on the outside. Consider what unexpressed needs your child may have in the moment. Then respond to your child in a way that makes him feel emotionally safe and connected to you.

Be a Detective

BRAIN STATE	WHAT WE SEE IN CHILD	WHAT WE FEEL	WHAT CHILD FEELS
Red Brain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angry • Defiant to instruction • Running away • Tuning out • Completely unresponsive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embarrassed • Angry • Fear of failure • Powerless • Desperate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very unsafe • Fearful • Overwhelmed • Powerless • Non-empathetic • Stuck
Yellow Brain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not focused on task • Irritable • Distracting others • Disrespecting us 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustrated • Disrespected • Impatient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsafe • Tired and/or hungry • Sick • Stressed • Frustrated • Shamed
Green Brain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on a task • Taking initiative • Cooperating • Helping others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy • Proud • Safe • Validated • Respected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe • Happy • Content • Fulfilled • Empathetic

The Most Important Job

We love because he first loved us.

1 JOHN 4:19

When it comes to my teaching, I think I'm pretty good at the job. In fact, my friends tell me I have become somewhat of a perfectionist. But while I have read many parenting books, and I've accumulated all kinds of the right practical experience and knowledge as an educator working with kids, I had to learn that parenting was so much more than I had ever imagined. As a parent, you don't get to go home after a day's work.

Every season of life with each child teaches me new things about myself and my kids. I have sent three of my children off to university, I still have four more children at home, and I have a few foster children as well! Sometimes I face a challenge that makes me feel like I'm parenting for the first time, wrestling with questions that I have never wrestled with before. Technology certainly presents new parenting challenges, with our media and internet-saturated culture pushing all numbers of complex questions into family life. These issues often seem more complicated because of the differing personalities of each of my children, along with the personal choices they are making.

God chose me to parent these children. He doesn't ask me to be a perfect parent, nor does He ask me to parent because I have all the answers. He asks me to be willing. He knows that I won't be able to parent without His help. In my search for hope and for answers, He wants me to find Him.

When I started investigating the principles that make up the Stoplight Approach, I quickly realized that brain science was helping me better understand God's design and His love, and how I need to rely on Him.

Our God is the God of relationship and the God of love. And He seeks an intimate relationship with each of us. There's a reason He so often compares our relationship with Him to that of children and their parents. God is the ultimate caregiver, and as we look to Him, He reveals Himself and how we should parent.

God is the creator of our brain. As we understand more about the brain, more of God is revealed to us. As we know more of God, we are able to understand our children in a different way. As we experience Christ's love, we will be able to grow deeper relationships with our children.

One of the most powerful things I have ever felt was when I looked at a life-size cross with Jesus on it at an old church in England. The statue made Christ feel so tangible in that moment. As I saw the life-sized wounds in the statue's side, my heart had a clear moment of understanding that the Jesus I serve is the Jesus who loves me unconditionally. He has experienced every emotion I have ever felt. Most of all, He understands suffering. He relates to the pain I feel in my heart. During Jesus' time on earth, He felt every emotion I could ever feel—red, yellow, and green.

God knows us better than we do ourselves! With a father's heart, He longs for us to know the safety and love of His presence. He enables us to seek the knowledge that helps us better understand our children, helping them to feel safe and loved. May we learn from Him and live our lives in a way that reflects God's love to our children.

STOPLIGHT REFLECTIONS

1. Can you think of a Red Brain situation that has happened recently in your home? What about a Yellow Brain situation? Green Brain? Brainstorm a few ideas you may have about responding to children who are in the Yellow or Red state while keeping yourself in Green Brain.
2. Reflect on your relationship with God. How does your faith influence your everyday brain states? Are you most often in Red, Yellow, or Green? What does the tone of your voice reveal? What color would you say your own family

members are often in? Does their relationship with God influence their state?

3. Jesus longs for us to experience His love. He wants us to be able to learn and rest in Him. He says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). His tender invitation is to satisfy our needs, to move us from the tension and chaos we feel while in “survival” mode and into a state of peacefulness and focus. Picture yourself coming to Him and resting in His arms. Know that He understands you and loves you, that it is in His love that we find a true sense of peace and security.

Prayer

*Thank you, God, that we are wondrously made in Your image!
 Lord, through Your Holy Spirit, guide me as I learn how our
 brains function. Please use this knowledge of Your design to shape
 the way I understand, love, and parent my children.*

