

Session 4 - Mid-Season Review & Understanding Your Body

ICE BREAKER GAME – 2 truths and a lie

REVIEW

1. LEARN IT SESSIONS – **Have you followed through on any of your action steps from the first 3 sessions of this year?**
 - a. Our sessions so far have focused on helping you determine your unique path, set your end goals, and start making changes in your life so that you can effectively get to your end goal.

2. BLOGS: **Have you put any of these ideas to use?**
 - a. Routine: have you made a new routine this fall?
 - b. Correcting others' kids & STAR: have you tried this?
 - c. Mealtimes: have you changed anything when it comes to your family mealtimes?
 - d. Tips and Tricks for controlling your kids: have you tried any of these?
 - e. Station Transition Ideas
 - f. Relational Circuits

3. LIVE IT WEEKS: **how have your first 3 sessions gone so far for you?** [You're half done for fall!]
 - a. What did it feel like to be in there the first time? Have you seen improvements?
 - b. Have you applied anything from these live it weeks to your daily life at home?
 - c. What is still hard for you? (Does someone in your group have a strategy to help with this?)
 - d. Listen to God: what lesson does He want to teach you this year, what character trait does He want to grow you in, what can He use you to do (example to others), what does He want your child to grow in?
 - e. Share at your tables and pray for each other.

Understanding Your Body

To train effectively, an athlete needs to understand their body mechanics. They need to know which muscles to work in order to get the results they want. They watch videos of themselves so they can see what their bodies do in action and then they make changes to their body positions in order to get better performance. There are even computer programs now that can show them which muscles need to work for certain movements. Being able to visualize this helps them focus their training. And then they want to train these muscles over and over and over in practice so that they develop something called muscle memory. This is when their body just automatically knows what to do when it's put in a racing environment.

Just as importantly, how an athlete handles the emotional pressures of a race day directly determines their success. To the ability that they are able to tune-out all the noise and everything that's going on around them and the anxieties in their headspace, they'll be able to do what they've trained their bodies to do.

The same is true for us as moms: we need to understand how our minds and bodies work so that we can be effective in our job. We know that our primary job is to teach our kids but we also know that many times it feels like nothing is working, that we don't know how to reach our child or get them to change a behavior. Why is that? We need to study and learn how to be good parents so that we are not just randomly shooting arrows but so that we are hitting the mark. Once we know what to do, then we also have to be able to learn how to tune out the distractions: our personal emotions and the thoughts that are swirling around in our heads so that we can do what we know we should do. This takes learning to quiet and spend time with God, it takes being rested and not being over busy, it takes having our key priorities in order and knowing our end goals.

If athletes do this to achieve an earthly reward, how much more shouldn't we do the same knowing that we are working towards an eternal reward! We are not just investing in trivial things that are of limited value, we are investing in human lives and eternal destinies. And this should motivate us to learn, to practice, to grow, to give our best.

So today is exciting! We are going to take a look at our brains and begin to learn how God has made our bodies. This is something we're going to keep coming back to throughout this year because it's going to take time to start applying. Lots and lots of baby steps. But it's fascinating that we can use real scientific research to learn how to better disciple our kids. This excites me because I love purpose. I love knowing that what I'm doing is actually going to make a difference. I've been starting to apply these new truths to my parenting and I've been seeing tremendous results. Last year at this time I shared a session on anger and confessed how I struggle with this strong emotion. Since then and learning the things we are going to share with you this year, I can truthfully say that my angry outbursts are getting less and less and I have greater joy in my parenting because I am actually seeing results.

Some of today will be a review of the things we've been teaching at Selah over the past 2 years. Many of you are new though so we want to get everyone caught up, plus it will be a good refresher for the rest of you. It takes lots and lots of baby steps to grow in parenting skills so if you've heard this before, listen for the next steps that you might be ready to take this year.

Our brains are amazingly complex systems. There are over a billion neurons in our brain and every second they are firing and making hundreds of thousands of connections within the body as we go about our day. The more I learn about the brain the deeper my sense of awe is towards our great creator God. He has so perfectly designed our bodies. It blows me away that there are people immersed in this complex and fascinating science who still don't believe in a divine creator. But, it's still God who has made us and we can use their research to help us parent more effectively!

So let's put our thinking caps on and discuss this in more depth.

There are several key areas of the brain, each with their own unique function. When all these parts are firing and working together optimally we have something called **INTEGRATION**. Integration helps us make better decisions, control our emotions, and have stronger relationships. Integration is vital to effective parenting. If your brain is in an integrated state you're ready to teach/instruct. If your child's brain is in an integrated state, they are ready to receive and learn. And when you are both in that state together you are in the GREENZONE and true and effective discipleship can happen. If either of you is not in an integrated state, you will need to use some tools to bring yourself or your child back into the greenzone or disengage before trying again. *[Don't worry if that sounded complicated! It did to me at first. But once we begin to break down the pieces it will make more sense.]*

Let's look at the 4 parts of the brain that need to be integrated:

LEFT SIDE AND RIGHT SIDE

The left side loves order. It is logical, literal, linguistic (likes words) and linear (wants to put things in order). [It even likes that all those words start with 'L'.] The left side is all about the letter of the law. Like when you tell your kids that there can only be one person in the bathroom at a time brushing their teeth. You set this rule not because it's a moral issue but because otherwise WW3 breaks out. But then your 5-year-old pees their pants because they think they can't go into the bathroom in an emergency.

The right side is non-verbal (facial expressions, eye contact, tone, posture, gestures), relational, and experiential. It's our emotions and feelings. "Mom I'm going to die if you don't let me have that cookie right now." It's how we perceive an experience, which is highly subjective. Or think of your birth story. You and your husband probably have a different version of how that went =)

The two sides have these specialized functions and they need to be separate in order to carry out these functions. But either one alone is not complete. [Think of it like trying to swim with only one arm. You might be able swim in some awkward circle movement but it's not optimal

and you're going to get really tired really quick. Using both arms to swim is going to get you where you want to go and faster.]

We need the left side of our brains to give our lives order and structure. This creates security in our lives and a sense of safety. It can also protect us by shutting off our emotions so that we can cope, or survive, big or scary situations. But if we only had this side of the brain we would live very cold, isolated and robotic lives. And it can be very damaging if we don't eventually deal with shut-off memories, draw out the emotions and process them. The left side needs the right side to give it perspective.

We need our right side and its emotions to be able to connect with others. It's through emotions that we build relationships and feel a sense of empathy towards other people. It's also what gives us meaning and fullness of life. But if we only had this side we would be a barrage of feelings, emotions and memories that would feel utterly chaotic. The right brain needs the left to bring chaos back to order. In other words, we need both sides to work together, to **be integrated**, so that they balance each other out.

Usually we have one side that is more dominant than the other. This can be as a natural tendency or just the mood you happen to be in that day. When you are in right-brain mode you are more connected to your emotions and feelings. You'll feel deeper concern and empathy for others and their emotions too. If you are someone that others open up to easily you are probably more RB. As moms, RB-dominant women might find it easier to emotionally connect to their child, but they might find it more difficult to instruct them with logic, say no, or even discipline them if they have a hard time with conflict or causing others to feel hurt. Or they might use their emotions (like angry outbursts, sadness, fear) to control and manipulate. Or you might flip flop between permissiveness and emotional control in which case life will feel very chaotic for your child.

Left-brain dominant people, like me, like structure, order and routine. We love lists and tasks. As moms we tend towards behavior control and we like to lecture rather than allow for feelings to be expressed. You'll hear us say things like "you're fine! Or don't worry about it", shutting down all emotion. We also have no problem saying no when we have a set plan. This would be more authoritative, but LB parents can also be permissive if that's what they believe in their heads to be the best way to parent. They may let their children do whatever they want but without any emotional connect. This leaves kids feeling alone in their alone in both their pain and their joy, which can be very damaging.

Most of us won't be on the extreme end of either example, but we will have tendencies depending on the day, especially if our tanks are low, and we need to learn how to bring ourselves to the middle where logic and emotions are balanced. [And not to be a broken record, but this is easier to do when you have quieted, connected to God, and have your life priorities in order.] As our kids' primary teachers we will need to teach our kids how to do this but as with all things parenting, it starts with us. If we can't balance our minds how can we expect them to. They will learn much more by our modelling than by our words.

The first thing we have to do is recognize our own response tendencies. That's your take-home exercise this week – to make mental note of how you tend to respond to your children's emotional outbursts. Becoming self-aware is the starting point for being able to make changes in your own behavior. So think about some of these questions: Do you tend to get emotional with your child and elevate the chaos? Or do you tend to lecture before listening? Do you have a hard time saying no or do you need to work on saying yes more often? Are you able to empathize with your child's emotions?

The next thing you can start to do is practice a tool called: CONNECT AND REDIRECT. This is a fundamental strategy to help your kids link their right and left brains. We are going to come back to this one again after Christmas and give you more of a chance to work through some examples. First we just want you to have the concept in the back of your mind as you start to watch your own responses. The basic idea is that you want to first connect with the right, by showing understanding of your child's feelings ("you're frustrated right now because you want to play with that toy") and being empathic to their emotion not push it away (often with little kids this is just hugging or holding them). Then once they are in a calm state, redirecting with the left instructive side ("but Tommy's playing with it right now so we need to wait until he's done with it; is there something else we can play with?") The connect piece is not always easy. Kids can freak out over things that seem so dumb to us as adults. But no matter how nonsensical and frustrating your child's feelings may seem to you, they are real to them. We need to validate them because until their emotional needs are attuned to, no amount of logic will work. Think about how you would feel if you were having a hard day and the friend you were talking to kept texting and not even listening, or they tell you your problem is silly and you should get over it. OR they listen but then they jump in with their own drama story and take over the conversation. This would be extremely hurtful. You'd probably feel bitter towards them and you certainly wouldn't want to open up and share with them again. Jesus is our perfect Father and He models this connecting piece by always being there to listen to us. He does this with kids too. There is the famous story of Jesus calling the children up to his lap even though his agenda for the day was very busy and the disciples wanted to send them away. We are human and sinful and selfish so we'll mess up, but it is the example we should be moving towards in our parenting. First Connect, then instruct, set limits or give consequences.

Note: both these steps won't always work in the moment. Sometimes your child is past the point of no return and you will need to disengage until they are in a more logical frame of mind.
2nd Note: Very young children function solely in the right-hemisphere. Logic hasn't developed for them yet. It's only when they start asking you "why" all the time that you know the left brain is beginning to kick in. Even when it does start developing they still don't always have the words to use to properly express their emotions. So they have to resort to emotions. This can feel so frustrating! But knowing this about your child's development should help you have proper expectations. Our job then is to teach them, over and over again, the words they should use to describe their emotions and the actions that are appropriate to use.

TABLE SHARING: are you more LB or RB dominant? What were your parents like?

THIS WEEK: Start watching for how you respond to your child(ren)'s emotional outbursts.

UPSTAIRS AND DOWNSTAIRS

The downstairs brain is the brainstem and the limbic region. These are responsible for our basic bodily functions (breathing and blinking), our innate and impulsive reactions and as well as our strong emotions. You can think of it like the first floor of most houses where all the basic needs of the family can be met. [The Joy course would have described this area as Levels 1 & 2.]

The terms get a little technical but we can use a simple hand model to remember the gist of them [hold up your right hand]. Your forearm represents the brainstem. It is responsible for connecting your brain to the rest of our body and telling the body what to do in order to carry out the basic functions needed for life. It also causes the reactive responses of fight, flight, freeze, or faint.

The upstairs brain (represented by your top 4 fingers) is the cerebral cortex and its various parts. You don't need to remember the technical terms; you just need to remember that this area enables us to have a fuller picture of our world (like a light filled upstairs room.) It's where more intricate mental processes take place, like thinking, imagining and planning. It's the area that is responsible for sound decision making and planning, control over emotions and body, self-understanding, empathy and morality. [This is the captain of the brain from the Joy course, or level 4 where behavior pathways are formed.]

Now fold your thumb in to your palm. This represents your limbic area (amygdala) which works with the brain stem to process and express emotion, motivation, evaluation, memory, attachment. If it senses danger, it takes over (or hijacks the brain). These is an important function to have because there are situations where we don't have time to go through a complicated process of analysis before we act. Like when you touch a hot oven, a baseball is flying at your face or your child is about to dash onto the road. In this types of situations, being able to react impulsively is good. But when we're not really in danger we want to think before we act. So the amygdala (represented by your thumb) acts as our regulator. [In the Joy course we would have called this level 3.] It's like the baby gate that determines whether we can move upstairs or whether we stay downstairs. If we feel seen, safe, soothed, and secure we are allowed to go upstairs. Our upstairs brain takes over (fold fingers over your thumb) and we remain calm. [Remember the right brain? This is where that piece gets inserted in the overall picture.] If you feel threatened, scared, alone in your fears, the baby gate shuts and you stay stuck downstairs, unable to unlock the upstairs brain. Or if you were calm and a trigger set you off it's called "flipping your lid." Anyone ever done that? As moms this usually happens when we are tired, hormonal, worried about some pressure, haven't had enough time to be refreshed, or we have unresolved issues from the past. What's great is that our brains are plastic and we can change set pathways at any age. This year we are going to help you learn to identify some of your triggers this year to help you grow in your ability to remain calm in the chaos.

Just as with the left and right brain parts, the downstairs and upstairs brain parts have unique functions that are vital, but they work best together. The downstairs brain needs the upstairs brain to help calm its strong emotions. But the upstairs brain also needs to validate and consider the emotions and instincts of the downstairs brain before deciding on a course of action.

Note: just as with the LB, one very important thing to remember is that our kids' upstairs brain and the staircase to get there is not yet fully developed (the downstairs is, but upstairs will not be fully developed until their mid-20s'; it's still a work in progress). So while the goal is to teach them how to integrate all the areas of their brain, we have to have realistic expectations of what is possible. They will often get 'trapped' downstairs and it's important to remember that this is part of normal development. [It's easy to feel fear: they'll always be selfish, they'll never have empathy, they'll be angry, can't control themselves, etc. when really it's just because that part of their brain isn't fully developed yet.] This doesn't mean they can get away with bad behavior. It just means that they need our patient help. They need us to help them build and reinforce the staircase, which is a pretty important responsibility God's given us. We will need to teach them the skills they are missing, and do it over and over and over again. It takes hundreds of repetitions before another rung of their staircase is build.

How do we do this? Again, just as with learning to integrate the LB and the RB, the first thing we have to do is recognize our own response tendencies. Start watching how you respond to your child's emotional outbursts. Which ones bother you and which ones can you handle? Are their specific triggers that set you off? Times of day? Of the Month?

The next thing you can start to do is practice a tool called: Engage don't Enrage. This is very similar to Connect Then Redirect. You want to hear them out, let them share the story without assuming you know what happened and through that help them identify what they are feeling. You want to empathize with them by putting themselves in their shoes. Just the act of doing that will help you to remain calm and be able to think in the moment. When you are in this GREENZONE, then you can begin to help them learn to make good choices. When they are young you can offer choices: do you want to walk up the stair by yourself or should I carry you like an airplane. As they get older you can get them to more actively participate: how do you think that made your sister feel? what kind thing can you do for your sister that will show her you are sorry? Making them replay the situation is a great consequence and brain exercise.

And finally, we need to get good at making **repairs!!** Our kids give us lots of chances to practice this stuff, but we won't always get it right. And that's OK because we they can learn from our mistakes too. When we say sorry for something we did and tell them what we will do differently next time, it creates pathways in their brain. This is not permission to mess up! We should be making less and less mistakes each year. It's just meant to encourage you that if you are honestly trying, God can use even your mistakes to help your kids.

TABLE SHARING & DISCUSSION: Think for a moment about what typically sets you off. [Running late, feeling judged, juggling too many responsibilities.] What could you do for yourself so that your upstairs brain remains more in control when you're interacting with your kids? [Ex. Prepare as much as possible the night before. Talking through your expectations.] Discuss ideas for how to keep your cool in the moment.

THIS WEEK: journal. Take time at the end of the day, or the beginning of the next day, to record the parenting situations from the day before and note times when you were reactive and when you stayed calm. Notice what happens as a result. Also journal if you try connecting with your child before lecturing or giving consequences. What did you do and how did your child respond?

GROWING IN CAPACITY

Throughout the rest of the year, we are going to continue talking about this brain science and teaching you how to grow in capacity so that you better able to integrate your own brain and then your child's brain. The things we are going to hit over and over again are the importance of growing in self-awareness and then working on your character by identifying your triggers and dealing with them, learning to quiet and grow in appreciation, and then practicing key parenting tools and sharing our stories together, which is next week's topic.

LAYING DOWN OUR LIVES.

All of this takes laying down our earthly lives in order to give our kids an eternal future. Just as Christ gave up his rights and privileges in order to save us, we as parents have to lay down our own schedules, plans, desires in order to disciple our kids. I know this is not easy!! That's why this year is themed Motherhood the Ultimate Endurance Sport! But the earlier we can learn to do this the better. Their problems are relatively small right now, not sharing toys, but they get more complex as they get older, like getting the call that they're at the police station. If we can learn these tools now when they are young, we will be much more equipped to help them when it gets more complex. Let's stand and pray a prayer telling God that we want to do this for our kids and asking Him to help because we can't do it without Him!