

Facing Frustration and Flipped Lids

By K. Meagan Ledendecker



“**B**ut we don’t know what to do!” wailed one of the boys.

We were talking in the quiet of a classroom. Classical music played in the background. Children were reading, drawing, crocheting, and generally relaxing after time outdoors. On this day, however, a few children had come inside teeming with frustration.

I tried to piece together the details: a fort, a vine pulled away, a child who felt excluded, others defending their territory. Removed from the situation, I could fairly clearly see the dynamics at play. The excluded child wanted to belong, but didn’t know how to ask. So he did something that would at least get him some negative attention – ripping a beloved vine off the fort.

Our children don’t always let us know what they need in the most constructive ways. Rather than say, “I feel disconnected and I need some extra love and attention,” they are more likely to hit or tantrum, or as they get older, say or do mean things to get us to notice. In this case, the child who wanted to belong decided to attack the fort to get the other children to pay attention to him.

The defenders of the fort had responded from a place of fury. Wanting to retaliate, they weren’t thinking about any consequences of their actions, much less about the other child’s motivations. Even as we had conversation about what had happened, the boys became enflamed again.

I realized it was time to shift gears. “Our classroom gecko, she has a very basic response. If threatened she has three options: to fight, to freeze, or to flee,” I explained. Continuing, I described how we have a very reptilian part of our brain, the amygdala. When we feel threatened, we tend to go back to basic responses: fight, freeze, or flee. We also happen to have our frontal lobes, which allow us to think more logically and consider other options.

Despite having a rational part of our brain, it is easy to do what Daniel Siegel has termed “flipping our lid.” If we represent our brain with our hand, our thumb curled into our palm is like the amygdala, a primitive part of our brain essential for basic functions. The amygdala is our alarm center and responds from

a place of instinct. If we curl our fingers over the thumb, they can represent the frontal lobes of our brain, which help us with self-control, empathy, and decision-making. When we get upset, however, we can “flip our lid.” Our fingers (representing our frontal lobes) fly up and are out of commission, leaving our thumb (representing our amygdala) exposed. When this happens we tend to act from the more reptilian part of our brain.

The fort defenders were intensely focused on this description of our brain functioning, and yet they recognized the challenge. As the boy so plaintively stated, “But we don’t know what to do!”

His question was to the point. What *do* we do when we are intensely upset, have a flipped lid, and are in the midst of a challenging moment?

The boys and I really sat with the question. What if we were able to have a plan for when we get into these kinds of moments? What if others around us were able to do this, too? What if our communities, our governments, our countries were able to manage flipped lids? What kind of world would we experience?

Ultimately the boys decided to use each other for support when they felt overwhelmed by feelings of anger or frustration. They also thought about the other child’s needs and tried to help him feel more included. They moved from a place of not-knowing to taking initial steps to figure out their own plan of action.

While they didn’t have all the answers, their careful consideration of how to manage themselves in the face of challenge could serve as a reminder to us all as we confront frustration, the need to belong, or even just overstimulation this season.

So let’s all take a collective breath, unflip our lids, and consider what we *can* do.

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