the Better Me project

Why Being Human is Hard

Even for Kids!

You know those days when you ask a little human, "Why did you do that?" — and they shrug and say, "I don't know"? Well… they're not lying. Their brain actually *doesn't know* — at least not yet. The truth is, being human is hard work. Even for us big humans, our brains are constantly trying to keep us safe, not smart.

Learning: The brain's real job

Our brain's number one job isn't to make us happy or calm or polite — it's to keep us alive. That means it's always scanning for threat, predicting what might go wrong, and triggering protective reactions before we've had time to think.

For kids (and teens especially), that system is on overdrive. Their "Guard Dog Brain" (the limbic system - designed to pay attention to danger and make us pay attention) develops early, but their "Wise Handler" (the prefrontal cortex - designed to control the Guard Dog) — the part that helps with self-control, planning, reasoning and empathy — doesn't fully mature until their mid-20s.

So when kids overreact, shut down, or make impulsive choices, it's not necessarily bad behaviour; it's a brain still learning how to drive.

The good news

So here's the thing — the human brain is *plastic*, meaning it can change and grow with use. Every time a child pauses, reflects, or makes a better choice, they're wiring new pathways. We can actually help them build the structures that lead to calm, wise, and kind behaviour — through practice, modelling, and connection.

Our job as the Big Humans

It's important for we Big Humans to understand that Little Humans don't have the same brain capability that we do when controlling their emotional responses. Outbursts are 'coachable moments' that should be taken advantage of - even when we feel triggered or offended or frustrated ourselves. If we can't control our own emotional responses, how can we expect them to.

Helping our Little Humans grow into BETTER Big Humans!

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Tips for Teachers

- Talk about the brain openly — it depersonalises behaviour and helps students separate *who they are* from *what their brain is doing,* enabling time and space to take back control and understand their feelings and behaviour.
- Share your own process: “I can feel my Guard Dog barking, so I’m taking a breath before I speak.”
- Celebrate self-awareness moments — every “I noticed…” is a neural win. Celebrate the effort to self-control, not just the success. "I can see you are trying hard to get control of your Guard Dog Brain - that's great!"

Tips for at Home

- When your child reacts emotionally, stay calm and co-regulate first, that is, take time together to pause, breathe and calm down. Their Guard Dog borrows yours for cues.
- Instead of asking, “Why did you do that?” try “What was your brain trying to do for you?”
- Share your own moments of reactivity — it normalises the learning process and models accountability.

Email us at info@better-me-project.com