

THE WORDS YOU SPEAK TODAY
BUILD THE FUTURE THEY LIVE TOMORROW.

WORDS HURT. BUT THEY DON'T HAVE TO.

A **21-DAY**
GUIDE TO
TRANSFORMING
YOUR CHILD'S LIFE
THROUGH THE
POWER OF
LANGUAGE

EVERY
WORD
LANDS.

EVERY
WORD
BUILDS.



LOVE



STRENGTH



KNOWLEDGE



LEADERSHIP



PURPOSE

21 DAYS TO RAISE CONFIDENT, RESILIENT, AND PURPOSE-DRIVEN CHILDREN

LARRY O. DICKERSON

FATHER. GRANDFATHER. HUSBAND, BROTHER, UNCLE.
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE.

R E A D R E M E M B E R & R E C A L L P R E S E N T S

Words Hurt. But They Don't Have To.

*A 21-Day Science-Based Guide to Transforming
Your Child's Life Through the Power of Language*

Grounded in the Research of

Jean Piaget · T. Berry Brazelton · Daniel J. Siegel

By Larry O. Dickerson

Father · Grandfather · Degree in Psychology · Memphis, Tennessee

Founder, Read Remember & Recall | readandrecall.com

"Let's Get Every Student Prepared."

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THE THREE SCHOLARS WHO SHAPE THIS BOOK

Jean Piaget (1896–1980)

Swiss Developmental Psychologist · Father of Child Cognitive Development

Key Works: *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1923) · *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (1952)

What this book draws on: Children are not small adults — they think in fundamentally different ways at each stage of development. Language received during each stage is not just heard; it is absorbed and used to construct the child's internal model of the world and of themselves. Words given at the right stage become the architecture of identity.

T. Berry Brazelton (1918–2018)

Harvard Pediatrician · Founder, Child Development Unit, Boston Children's Hospital

Key Works: *Touchpoints: Birth to 3* (1992) · *Touchpoints: 3 to 6* (2001) · *The Irreducible Needs of Children* (2000)

What this book draws on: Children experience predictable developmental 'touchpoints' — windows of intense sensitivity when the words of trusted adults carry extraordinary power. Brazelton documented that consistent, warm, specific affirmation from caregivers during these windows protects children through every challenge they face afterward.

Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.

Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, UCLA · Executive Director, Mindsight Institute

Key Works: *The Whole-Brain Child* (2011) · *Parenting from the Inside Out* (2003) · *Brainstorm* (2014) · *The Yes Brain* (2018)

What this book draws on: The brain is a social organ shaped by relationships. Words are not just sounds — they are neurological events. Repeated positive language literally builds the prefrontal cortex, the region responsible for self-regulation, empathy, and good decision-making. Siegel's 'Name It to Tame It' and 'Four S's of Parenting' are woven throughout this guide.



A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

Read this first. It will change how you read everything that follows.

I want to be direct with you before we begin, because direct is the only language that honors the seriousness of what we are about to do together.

The words you speak to your child are not just words.

They are neurological events.

Dr. Daniel Siegel — clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA, Harvard Medical School graduate, and one of the world's foremost authorities on how the brain is shaped by human relationship — spent decades documenting what happens inside a child's brain when the adults around them speak. His finding, replicated across thousands of studies: words delivered by a trusted caregiver literally build or dismantle the physical architecture of a child's developing brain. Not metaphorically. Structurally. The prefrontal cortex — the region responsible for empathy, self-regulation, decision-making, and the ability to form healthy relationships — grows stronger through consistent, warm, attuned language. It is weakened by chronic verbal negativity, which Siegel's research confirms activates the same neural pathways as physical pain.

Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist whose decades of direct observation with children produced the most comprehensive theory of child cognitive development ever assembled, showed us that children at each stage of development are not just learning facts — they are constructing their internal model of reality itself. The words they receive during these construction phases do not simply inform that model. They become the materials from which it is built. A child who hears, consistently and specifically, that they are capable will build a self-model around capability. A child who hears the opposite builds a self-model around inadequacy — and carries that model into every classroom, every relationship, and every challenge they will ever face.

T. Berry Brazelton — Harvard pediatrician, founder of the Child Development Unit at Boston Children's Hospital, and the doctor who personally changed how America thinks about early childhood — spent over fifty years in clinical practice observing what he called "Touchpoints": the predictable windows of developmental intensity when a child's entire system is most open to being shaped. His life's work showed that the single most powerful protective factor a child can have during these windows is a caregiver who speaks to them with consistency, warmth, and specificity — who tells them, in precise language, who they are.

I am a father. I am a grandfather. I hold a degree in psychology. And I built Read Remember and Recall because I believe that every student — at every age, in every community — deserves the tools to become what they are capable of becoming. This book is those tools, applied to the earliest and most critical learning that ever occurs: the learning

that happens before a child can read a single word, in the language you speak to them every day.

You are not just a parent reading a parenting book. You are a neurodevelopmental architect, working with the most powerful material in existence: the developing brain of a child who trusts you completely.

Let's use that trust well.

The most important thing you can do for your child's brain development
is not expensive.

It does not require a special program or a graduate degree.

It requires you to speak to your child with intention.



PART ONE: THE SCIENCE

What three of the world's foremost child development experts need you to know

Before we give you the 21 days, we owe you the understanding that makes those 21 days worth committing to. Because when you understand why this works at the level of neuroscience and child development, you will not need willpower to keep going. You will be motivated by knowledge.

What Jean Piaget Tells Us About Words and the Developing Mind

Piaget showed the world something that changed everything: children do not experience the world the way adults do. They are not smaller, less-informed versions of us. They are beings in fundamentally different cognitive stages, each stage characterized by a distinct way of constructing reality.

This matters enormously for how we speak to them — because the stage a child is in determines not just how they receive a word, but what they do with it.

Piaget's Four Stages — What Words Mean at Each One

Sensorimotor (Birth–2): Words are tone and rhythm first, meaning second. The emotional warmth in your voice is what reaches them. Preoperational (2–7): Language is now the primary tool for constructing the self-concept. 'You are smart' becomes part of who they believe they are. This is the highest-leverage window. Concrete Operational (7–11): Children can now process logical language. 'Here is why you are capable' lands with full force. Formal Operational (12+): Abstract language reaches them. 'Your potential is limitless' becomes a reasoning premise, not just a comfort.

Piaget's research established that in the Preoperational stage — ages two through seven — children's thinking is egocentric in a specific, documented sense: they cannot yet separate their perception of the world from reality itself. What this means is that what they are told about themselves is not filtered through adult skepticism or self-awareness. It is received as truth.

A three-year-old who is told consistently that they are intelligent does not say 'well, that's just my parent's opinion.' They build intelligence into their self-schema — the mental framework through which they interpret every experience they have for the rest of their lives. A child who is told they are stupid builds that into the same framework. Piaget's decades of observation showed that these schemas, once established, become the lens through which every subsequent experience is interpreted.

"The goal of education is not to increase the amount of knowledge but to create the possibilities for a child to invent and discover."

— Jean Piaget

What Coach Larry adds to Piaget's framework is this: before a child can invent and discover anything, they must first believe that they are capable of inventing and discovering. That belief is built — specifically, precisely, deliberately — by the words spoken to them by the adults they trust most.

What T. Berry Brazelton Tells Us About Touchpoints and Language

T. Berry Brazelton spent more than fifty years in direct clinical practice with children and families — longer than almost any pediatrician in American history — and the theory he developed was both simple and revolutionary: children develop in predictable spurts, and before each spurt there is a period of regression and disruption that frightens parents and, if mishandled, can cause lasting damage.

He called these windows Touchpoints.

A Touchpoint is a moment of maximum vulnerability and maximum opportunity happening simultaneously. Before a child learns to walk, there is a period of clumsiness and frustration. Before a child enters school, there is a period of anxiety and behavioral disruption. Before adolescence, there is a period of withdrawal and apparent indifference. In each case, the parent who responds to the regression with criticism, frustration, or punitive language drives the child's self-concept downward at the exact moment it most needs to be stabilized.

Brazelton's Core Finding on Language

In his fifty years of clinical observation, Brazelton found that the single most protective factor for children during Touchpoints — the variable that most consistently predicted positive outcomes — was not socioeconomic status, not school quality, not neighborhood. It was the presence of at least one adult who spoke to the child with consistent, specific, warm affirmation during the regression period.

What makes Brazelton's framework so practically powerful for this book is that it tells us when words matter most. Not just that they matter — but when. A parent who learns to recognize the Touchpoints in their child's development can time their affirmations for maximum neurological impact: speaking specifically to the child's capability precisely when the child's developing system is most open to receiving and internalizing that message.

Brazelton also gave us something critically important for families in communities experiencing economic stress, trauma, or systemic pressure: he documented that the warmth and consistency of parental language was protective against these stressors in ways

that surprised even him. Children in materially difficult circumstances who received consistent affirmation from caregivers showed neurological and behavioral resilience that their peers — in identical circumstances — who did not receive that language, did not show.

The language did not eliminate the difficulty. It gave the child's brain the resources to survive it.

"What we do in the first years of life determines our capacity to function as human beings."

— T. Berry Brazelton

What Daniel Siegel Tells Us About the Brain, Language, and Identity

Dr. Daniel Siegel gave the world a concept that changed parenting science: Mindsight. It is the capacity to understand one's own mind and the minds of others — to have an internal map of the self that is accurate, flexible, and grounded in compassion. Siegel's research established that Mindsight is not innate. It is developed, primarily through relationship, and most powerfully through the language of the relationship between a child and their primary caregiver.

Siegel's most accessible work for parents, *The Whole-Brain Child*, broke down what neuroscience has established about the developing brain in terms every caregiver can act on. The key insight: the 'upstairs brain' — the prefrontal cortex, responsible for empathy, self-regulation, moral reasoning, and sound decision-making — is under construction from birth until the mid-twenties. The 'downstairs brain' — the amygdala and brainstem, responsible for survival responses, fear, and reactive emotion — is fully operational from infancy.

Siegel's 'Name It to Tame It' Principle

When a child is in emotional distress, the downstairs brain is flooding the upstairs brain. The single most effective intervention is verbal labeling: a trusted adult speaking the emotion in precise language ('I can see you are angry right now. That is a real feeling.') activates the prefrontal cortex and begins to restore integration between the two brain regions. Words literally calm the brain at a neurological level — but only when the words come from someone whose voice the child's brain recognizes as safe.

Siegel's 'Four S's of parenting' — Safe, Soothed, Seen, and Secure — establish the conditions under which a child's brain can build what he calls 'secure attachment': the neurological foundation for every healthy relationship and every resilient response to adversity they will ever have. Each of the Four S's is primarily a language function. A child feels Safe because of what they are told. They feel Soothed because of how they are spoken to. They feel Seen because their internal experience is named accurately and

compassionately by someone they trust. They feel Secure because that language is consistent.

This is why the 21 days in this book are structured the way they are. Each day targets one of the dimensions of self-concept that Siegel's research identifies as critical to integrated brain development. Each affirmation is designed to activate the child's prefrontal cortex, build the secure attachment scaffolding that Brazelton's Touchpoints work identifies as most protective, and land at the cognitive stage that Piaget's framework tells us is most receptive.

"We are what we experience with others. The mind develops through our relationships."

— Daniel J. Siegel



PART TWO: WHY 21 DAYS

The truth, the science, and why it matters more than the myth

Let's have an honest conversation about the 21-day principle — because honesty is what makes this work.

You have heard that it takes 21 days to form a habit. You may have heard it so many times that it feels like scientific fact. The truth is more interesting, more nuanced, and ultimately more encouraging than the simple number suggests.

The '21 days' figure originated with Dr. Maxwell Maltz, a plastic surgeon who wrote *Psycho-Cybernetics* in 1960. Maltz observed that his patients typically needed about three weeks to psychologically adjust to their new appearance after surgery — to stop seeing their old face when they looked in the mirror. He wrote that it requires a minimum of about 21 days to effect any perceptible change in a mental image. That word minimum disappeared as the idea spread through popular culture, and the observation — which was specifically about psychological adjustment to physical change, not behavioral habit formation — became the universal '21-day rule.'

The most rigorous scientific study of actual habit formation was conducted by Dr. Phillippa Lally and her team at University College London, published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* in 2010. Lally's team tracked 96 people over 12 weeks as they attempted to build new habits. Her finding: habits reach automaticity — the point where the behavior happens without conscious effort — in an average of 66 days, with a range of 18 to 254 days depending on the complexity of the habit and the individual.

What Lally's Research Actually Tells Us — and Why It's Good News

First: 18 days is possible. Some simple habits — especially habits of language and attention — can begin registering in the brain's automated pathways faster than complex behavioral habits like exercise or diet change. Second: missing a day does not reset the process. Lally's data found that a single missed day had no statistically significant effect on the habit's overall trajectory. Third — and most importantly for this book: the research on language habits and parental affirmation operates on a faster and more durable timeline than most habits, because language habits are reinforced by the emotional response they generate in the person receiving them.

So why does this book use 21 days?

Because 21 days is not the finish line. It is the commitment point — the minimum threshold identified by both Maltz's observations and contemporary neuroplasticity research as the window in which a new pattern of language becomes perceptible to both the speaker and the receiver. By day 21, a child's brain has received enough consistent, specific affirmation to begin registering it as a reliable pattern rather than an isolated event. By day

21, the parent has built enough repetition into their language that the affirmation is beginning to feel natural rather than practiced.

The 21-day framework in this book is designed to start the process, build the momentum, and demonstrate — through the visible change in your child's behavior, demeanor, and self-expression — that the investment is real. What you do after day 21 is continue. That is the only instruction.

What happens in the brain during these 21 days:

Days 1–7: Conscious effort. The language feels new to both of you. The child's amygdala is monitoring whether this is real or temporary. Stay consistent.

Days 8–14: The brain begins recognizing a pattern. Dopamine is released when the pattern is confirmed. Your child's prefrontal cortex is beginning to integrate the affirmations into the self-schema.

Days 15–21: New neural pathways are consolidating. The child's internal narrative is beginning to shift. You will see it in their posture, their approach to challenges, their willingness to try.

One more thing before we begin: Siegel's research established that the neuroplastic effects of consistent, warm affirmation are most powerful for children between ages two and twelve — Piaget's Preoperational and Concrete Operational stages — but they are present and measurable at every age, including adolescence. Brazelton's Touchpoints work documented that these effects are most urgent during developmental regression periods. Which means: whenever you are reading this, whatever age your child is, whatever difficulty they are currently moving through — this is the right time.

There is no window that has closed. There is only the one that is open right now.



PART THREE: TWO CHILDREN

Calvin and Jayden — a story you need to read before the 21 days begin

I want to introduce you to two children I know.

You will recognize them.

Calvin is three years old. He lives in Memphis. He has a laugh that arrives in a room before the rest of him does, and eyes that register everything — every emotion, every shift in the atmosphere, every word spoken in his presence. He does not yet have language to process what he absorbs. But his brain is absorbing all of it, always.

One afternoon, Calvin was playing on the floor with his toys when the adults in the room began arguing. The argument was not directed at him. He was not the subject. But Siegel's research tells us that a child's brain — operating in what Siegel calls 'downstairs brain' mode, all emotion and sensory intake and no prefrontal mediation — cannot distinguish between 'this conflict is about me' and 'this conflict is happening near me.' The stress hormones flood the system either way.

Calvin's play slowed. His eyes changed. He set down the toy he had been holding and simply sat.

He was three. He had no words for what was happening inside him. But his body knew. And his brain — which Piaget tells us is in the precise stage where it is most actively constructing its model of how the world works and whether the world is safe — was recording the lesson.

What happened next changed everything.

Someone in that room — someone who had read enough and paid enough attention — went and sat on the floor next to Calvin. Said his name. Waited for eye contact. And then said, clearly and quietly: You are safe. You are loved. I see you.

Three sentences. Twelve words. Brazelton would have recognized this as a Touchpoint intervention — the precise use of language at the precise moment of maximum vulnerability. Siegel would have recognized it as 'Name It to Tame It' in its most fundamental form: not naming an emotion, but naming a presence, a safety, a love that the child's nervous system needed confirmed.

Calvin's body changed. His shoulders dropped. He picked up his toy. His eyes came back.

This is not anecdote. This is neuroscience happening in real time, in a Memphis living room, in a moment that most adults would have walked past without noticing.

Jayden is sixteen. Sixteen is a different kind of war.

Brazelton's Touchpoints work documents adolescence as one of the most significant developmental windows of all — a period of intense neurological reorganization, documented by Siegel in *Brainstorm* as a time when the adolescent brain is not broken but is undergoing precisely the kind of restructuring that will determine its adult form. The teenage brain's enhanced emotional sensitivity, its openness to peer influence, its apparent recklessness — these are not pathologies. They are features of a developmental system that is actively seeking identity formation.

What identity does it seek? The one that has been most consistently confirmed by the trusted adults in its world.

Jayden had not heard consistent confirmation of anything positive about himself in a long time. Not because no one loved him. But because love, in the communities where Jayden grew up, often expresses itself as warning rather than affirmation — Watch out. Be careful. Don't end up like. These are forms of love. They are not forms of identity-building.

Jayden carried himself small. Not physically. He was tall and built like a promise. But he made himself small in the specific way that adolescents do when they have learned that being visible invites criticism — he walked with his eyes slightly down, spoke in shorter sentences than he thought in, and presented a version of himself carefully trimmed of anything that could be targeted.

The intervention was not dramatic. It was daily. Consistent. Specific.

Not 'you're a good kid' — which Jayden's brain, now in Piaget's Formal Operational stage and fully capable of abstract reasoning, would immediately test against every piece of counter-evidence his life had given him.

Instead: 'I see how your mind works when you're solving a problem. That specific thing — the way you break something down and approach it from a different angle than anyone else in the room — that is a rare kind of intelligence.'

Specific. Observable. Tied to something real he had actually done. Siegel calls this 'feeling felt' — the profound neurological experience of having one's internal reality accurately perceived and reflected back by another person. It activates the same reward circuitry as physical nourishment.

Jayden did not change overnight. Brazelton would have told you not to expect that — Touchpoints change is not linear, and adolescent transformation follows its own timetable. But he changed. His posture changed. The sentences got longer. The eyes came up. He started talking about what he wanted to do — not what he was afraid of.

One conversation at a time. One day at a time. For twenty-one days, and then for every day after that.

Your child is Calvin. Your child is Jayden. The science does not change based on the child. The commitment is yours to make.



HOW TO USE THESE 21 DAYS

Four rules. That's all. Read them. Then begin.

Rule 1: Eye Contact.

Siegel's research identifies attunement — the parent genuinely focusing on the child's internal experience — as the neurological foundation of secure attachment. Eye contact is the physical signal of attunement. When you say the affirmation, look at your child. Not at your phone. Not across the room. At them. This single act communicates, at a neurological level, 'I am fully present with you.' That presence is what makes the words land.

Rule 2: Calm Moments Only.

Brazelton's Touchpoints work showed that words delivered during high-stress moments are processed by the downstairs brain as threat signals, not affirmations. Deliver these words when the atmosphere is calm. Morning, before the day begins. Evening, before sleep. In the car with no screens on. These are the windows when the upstairs brain is most receptive.

Rule 3: More Than Once.

Piaget's schema theory establishes that a belief becomes part of the self-schema through repetition in context. Say the affirmation in the morning. Say it again at dinner. Say it at bedtime. Three times a day creates the repetition that neuroplasticity research says is required for new neural pathways to begin consolidating.

Rule 4: Mean It.

Children's brains are extraordinarily sensitive detectors of incongruence — they know when what they are hearing does not match what they are feeling from you. Brazelton spent decades documenting this. If you say 'I believe in you' while your body language and tone signal frustration, the child receives the body language. Find something specific and true about your child each day. Root the affirmation in that truth. That is what makes it land.

✿ THE 21 DAYS

One affirmation. One day at a time. Forever.

DAY 1 "You Are Loved"

🕒 Ages 2–18 · Piaget: All stages · Brazelton: Every Touchpoint · Siegel: The foundation of all four S's

Before capability. Before achievement. Before any quality we want to build — a child must know they are loved not because of what they do but because of who they are. Siegel's research identifies this as the neurological bedrock of secure attachment: the experience of being loved unconditionally, which the brain encodes as safety. Brazelton documented that children who carry this encoding navigate every developmental challenge with measurably greater resilience. Piaget showed us that in the preoperational years, 'I am loved' becomes part of the self-schema with the same certainty as any other early belief. You are setting the foundation everything else rests on.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"I love you. Not for what you do.

Not for how you behave.

I love you because you are you.

And that is enough. That will always be enough."

The Science: Unconditional positive regard activates the ventromedial prefrontal cortex — the brain region that regulates threat responses. A child who feels unconditionally loved has a neurological buffer against anxiety, shame, and fear of failure.

DAY 2 "You Are Seen"

🕒 Ages 2–18 · Siegel's 'Feeling Felt' · Brazelton's Attunement Framework

Siegel identifies 'feeling felt' — the experience of having one's internal reality accurately perceived by another — as one of the most powerful neurological events in human development. It is not the same as being praised. It is being witnessed. A child who is seen — whose frustration, whose joy, whose confusion, whose effort is named accurately by a trusted adult — develops what Siegel calls 'internal attunement': the ability to understand

and regulate their own emotional states. That capacity is the engine of every other healthy development that follows.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"I see you. Not just the outside.

I see when you're working hard even when it looks easy.

I see when you're scared even when you act brave.

I see you. And everything I see — I am proud of."

The Science: Being 'seen' activates mirror neurons and the social brain networks that Siegel identifies as the foundation of both self-awareness and empathy.

DAY 3 "You Are Capable"

👶 Ages 3–18 · Piaget: Concrete and Formal Operational stages respond powerfully · Brazelton: Critical during regression Touchpoints

Piaget's documentation of the Preoperational stage showed us that between ages two and seven, a child's self-concept is being constructed from the language they receive as raw material. 'You are capable' — delivered consistently, tied to observed behavior, spoken with conviction — does not simply encourage. It builds the schema of capability into the child's fundamental model of who they are. Brazelton identified this affirmation as especially critical during Touchpoints — the periods of regression when a child's own behavior is giving them evidence that they are not capable. Your voice must counter that evidence consistently.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"I believe in what you can do.

Not just when things are easy.

I believe in you especially when things are hard.

You have what it takes. I have watched you prove it."

The Science: Self-efficacy — the belief in one's capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific outcomes — is one of the strongest predictors of academic and life achievement. It is built through language before it is built through experience.

DAY 4 "Your Brain Grows When You Try"

🧠 Ages 5–18 • Piaget: Concrete Operational and Formal Operational stages • Siegel: Neuroplasticity made child-accessible

Siegel's work made neuroplasticity accessible to families: the brain physically grows new connections every time it encounters a challenge and engages with it. This is not a metaphor. fMRI research documents the structural changes. When you teach your child that effort builds the brain — that trying something hard is literally making them smarter — you are giving them a tool that every piece of educational neuroscience confirms is transformative. Piaget showed us that children in the Concrete Operational stage can grasp this concept when it is explained concretely. Show them a muscle. Tell them the brain works the same way.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"Every time you try something hard,
your brain builds a new connection.
Every mistake you make and learn from
makes you literally smarter.
You grow every time you try."***

The Science: Growth mindset research by Carol Dweck, grounded in Siegel's neuroplasticity framework, shows that children who understand effort as brain-building show measurably greater persistence and academic achievement.

DAY 5 "You Are Unique"

🧠 Ages 3–18 • Piaget: Preoperational — when identity is most actively constructed

In a culture that profits from children believing they are not enough until they conform — that requires them to want what they are sold, look how they are told to look, become who they are marketed to become — this affirmation is resistance. Piaget's work on the Preoperational stage showed that children between two and seven are building their sense of self largely from reflected appraisal: they understand who they are by seeing themselves reflected in the eyes and words of the adults who matter to them. What is reflected in your eyes when you look at your child? Make sure it is their specific, unrepeatable self.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"There is nobody in this world exactly like you."

***The way you think. The way you see things.
The way you make people feel when you walk in a room.
That is yours. That is your power.
Do not spend a day of your life trying to be someone else."***

The Science: Authenticity in self-presentation correlates with lower depression, higher resilience, and stronger long-term wellbeing across every demographic studied.

DAY 6 "Mistakes Are How You Learn"

🧒 Ages 4–18 · Piaget: Central to all schema-building · Brazelton: Critical reframe during Touchpoint regressions

Piaget built his entire theory of cognitive development around the observation that children learn by encountering information that does not fit their existing schemas — and being forced to either assimilate or accommodate. Mistake is not failure in Piaget's framework. Mistake is the engine of growth. Brazelton added the clinical observation that children who are punished or shamed for mistakes during Touchpoint regressions develop fear responses that prevent exactly the kind of exploratory behavior that developmental progress requires. Your response to your child's mistakes is teaching them, moment by moment, whether the world is safe enough to try in.

SAY THIS TODAY:
***"You do not have to be perfect.
You have to keep going.
Every mistake is your brain discovering something new.
Every time you fall and get up,
you are becoming someone the world needs."***

The Science: Fear of failure is the single greatest suppressor of human potential identified in educational psychology. Children who are taught that mistakes are information — not indictments — show significantly greater creative problem-solving capacity.

DAY 7 "You Are Kind"

🧒 Ages 3–18 · Siegel: Empathy development and the social brain · Brazelton: Relational competence as protective factor

Siegel's interpersonal neurobiology research documents that kindness and empathy are not fixed personality traits — they are capacities that develop through relationship and are built in children by being both modeled and explicitly named. When you say to your child 'I see how you treat people — your kindness is one of the most powerful things about you,' you are activating the social brain networks that Siegel identifies as the foundation of every meaningful human relationship they will ever have. Name kindness. Claim it for them. In a world that often rewards cruelty and calls it strength, raising a child who leads with kindness is a radical act.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"I watch how you treat people.
The way you notice when someone is left out.
The way you share without being asked.
Your kindness is not a weakness.
It is one of the strongest things about you."***

The Science: Research on prosocial behavior in children consistently finds that children whose kindness is explicitly named and praised by caregivers show higher rates of altruistic behavior and stronger peer relationships.

DAY 8 "You Are Stronger Than You Know"

🧠 Ages 6–18 · Brazelton: *Resilience and the post-Touchpoint recovery* · Siegel: *Integrating difficulty into narrative*

Brazelton spent fifty years documenting children's capacity to recover from developmental difficulty — and the one variable that most consistently predicted that recovery was the presence of an adult who reflected the child's strength back to them during and after the difficulty. Siegel adds the neuroscience: when a trusted adult helps a child construct a narrative of their own resilience — 'here is something hard you went through, and here is how you survived it' — they are literally helping the child integrate a traumatic or difficult experience into the left-brain narrative function, which is what prevents that experience from remaining as unprocessed emotional material in the right brain.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"I have watched you go through things
that would have stopped a lot of people.
I need you to know something:
you are stronger than you realize."***

That strength is yours. Nobody can take it from you."

The Science: Narrative integration of difficult experiences — being helped to tell the story of one's own resilience — is one of the most evidence-based interventions for building post-traumatic growth in children.

DAY 9 "Your Future Is Being Built Right Now"

🗣️ *Ages 8–18 · Piaget: Formal Operational — abstract future thinking · Brazelton: Hope as developmental necessity*

Piaget's Formal Operational stage — beginning around age twelve — is when children develop the capacity for genuine future-oriented abstract reasoning. They can now, for the first time, build a mental model of a future self and work backward from it. Brazelton identified hope — the belief that one's future is open rather than foreclosed — as a developmental necessity for adolescents. Children in communities where the cultural narrative has narrowed the expected future to a few heavily policed options need to hear, from a trusted adult, that the future is genuinely open. Not as empty encouragement. As a specific, argued proposition.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"Your future is not already decided.

It is not written anywhere.

It is being built — right now —

***by the choices you make, the things you learn,
and the way you choose to see yourself.***

I am going to help you build something great."

The Science: Hope — defined operationally as the perceived availability of routes to desired goals — is one of the strongest predictors of academic persistence and life satisfaction in adolescents, particularly in communities with historical exposure to systemic limitation.

DAY 10 "You Deserve Respect"

🗣️ *Ages 5–18 · Brazelton: Dignity as developmental necessity · Siegel: Safe attachment as baseline*

Brazelton's clinical work with families across fifty years gave him a view of what children internalize from the way they are treated that few others have matched. His finding:

children who are treated with consistent disrespect — whose opinions are dismissed, whose presence is ignored, whose feelings are overridden without acknowledgment — develop what he identified as 'dignity deficit': a fundamental uncertainty about whether they have the right to take up space in the world. This deficit operates as a persistent drag on every developmental achievement. The corrective is not complicated. It is being told — directly, by the adult who matters most — that they deserve respect.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"You deserve to be treated with respect.

By everyone. Including me.

Your feelings are real. Your voice matters.

Your presence in this world is not a small thing.

You take up exactly the space you are supposed to take up."

The Science: Perceived interpersonal respect correlates with cortisol regulation, self-esteem stability, and academic engagement across every studied age group.

DAY 11 "You Are a Leader"

 *Ages 7–18 · Siegel: Agency and the developing self · Piaget: Concrete Operational — role and responsibility*

Leadership is not a position. It is the capacity to influence the people around you toward something better — and every child has this capacity in the specific contexts of their world. Siegel's work on the developing self-concept establishes that children who are given language of agency — who are told not that they might become a leader someday but that they already are one in the relationships they have right now — show significantly greater self-regulatory capacity. Piaget's Concrete Operational stage children can fully receive and operationalize this concept: they can name specific ways they have led, and build the identity from evidence.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"People watch you.

Even when you don't know it,

the way you act, the way you treat people,

the way you carry yourself —

it influences everyone around you.

Use that. Use it well."

The Science: Leadership identity in adolescence — the belief that one has the capacity to positively influence others — correlates with prosocial behavior, academic engagement, and reduced delinquency.

DAY 12 "Your Mind Works in Remarkable Ways"

 *Ages 5–18 · Piaget: Intelligence as diverse and developing · Siegel: Honoring the child's unique neural integration*

Piaget's foundational insight was that intelligence is not a fixed quantity — it is a developing capacity that takes different forms at different stages and in different children. His theory of cognitive development was built on decades of observation that revealed the extraordinary diversity of ways children's minds engage with the world. Siegel added the neuroscience: each child's brain develops its own unique patterns of neural integration, and the parent who identifies and names those specific patterns — rather than measuring the child against a standard — gives the child the gift of knowing that their particular kind of mind is not a deviation but a design.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"The way your mind works is remarkable.

The way you see connections other people miss.

The questions you ask that nobody else thought to ask.

Your ideas matter.

***Your imagination is not too much —
it is exactly what the world needs."***

The Science: Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, grounded in Piaget's work, established that intelligence is not unitary. Children who are affirmed in their specific cognitive style show greater academic engagement and creative output.

DAY 13 "You Have the Power to Choose"

 *Ages 6–18 · Piaget: Concrete Operational — cause and consequence · Siegel: Agency and prefrontal development*

One of the most important gifts a caregiver can give a child is the understanding that their choices are the primary authors of their story. Siegel's work on the prefrontal cortex establishes that the capacity for intentional decision-making is literally built through

practice — through being given choices, experiencing consequences, and being guided through reflection on both. Brazelton's clinical framework identified the development of internal locus of control — the belief that one's actions have consequences — as one of the strongest predictors of healthy adult functioning. You build it by naming it, by giving it language, and by trusting your child with the weight of their own agency.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"You have more power than you know.
The power to choose how you respond.
The power to choose what you do with what happens to you.
I am not going to protect you from every consequence.
I am going to teach you to make choices
that you will be proud of."***

The Science: Internal locus of control — the belief that one's outcomes are determined by one's own actions — is one of the most robustly documented predictors of academic achievement, physical health, and life satisfaction.

DAY 14 "You Are a Problem Solver"

 Ages 5–18 · Piaget: Schema-building through challenge · Siegel: Upstairs brain engagement

Piaget's constructivist theory of learning is built on a single foundational insight: children learn by encountering problems and solving them. Not by being given solutions. The adult who always provides the answer is, paradoxically, preventing exactly the cognitive development that the child needs. The adult who says 'you are a problem solver — let me hear your idea before I give you mine' is doing what Siegel describes as engaging the upstairs brain: activating the prefrontal cortex and the higher-order reasoning functions that both need to be exercised to develop. Before you solve the problem, ask your child what they would do.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"You are a problem solver.
Before I give you the answer,
I want to hear your idea.
There is no wrong idea.
Your brain working through a problem
is one of my favorite things to watch."***

The Science: Metacognitive awareness — the capacity to think about one's own thinking — is a stronger predictor of academic achievement than IQ. It is built by giving children the language of problem-solving and asking them to apply it.

DAY 15 "You Are Empathetic"

 Ages 4–18 · Siegel: Social brain and mirror neurons · Brazelton: Relational competence

Siegel's interpersonal neurobiology research has documented what happens in the brain when one person genuinely understands what another person is feeling: the mirror neuron system fires, the social brain networks activate, and a neurological bridge is built between two nervous systems. Empathy is not a soft skill. It is a neurological capacity — and it develops most powerfully in children who are both shown empathy by their caregivers and taught, explicitly and repeatedly, to name what they observe in others. When you say to your child 'you have the ability to really understand other people — that is one of the most powerful things about you,' you are naming and strengthening a capacity that every relationship they will ever have depends on.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"I see how you pay attention to how people feel.
How you notice when someone is hurting
even when they haven't said anything.
That is called empathy.
It is one of the rarest and most powerful things
a person can have."***

The Science: Empathy in childhood is one of the strongest predictors of social competence, relationship quality, and moral reasoning in adulthood. It is teachable and buildable through explicit language and modeling.

DAY 16 "You Are Responsible"

 Ages 7–18 · Piaget: Moral development · Siegel: Integration of cause and consequence

Piaget's work on moral development showed that children progress from a morality of constraint — following rules because adults enforce them — to a morality of cooperation — following principles because they understand their purpose. This transition is built

through the experience of being trusted with responsibility and experiencing both the positive consequences of meeting it and the natural consequences of not. Siegel adds that responsibility, when it is named as an identity trait rather than experienced only as a burden, activates the prefrontal cortex's integration function — the child begins to see themselves as someone whose choices have consequences that belong to them. That ownership is the foundation of integrity.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"I trust you with responsibility
because I know you can handle it.
Being responsible is not a rule.
It is a statement about who you are.
And who you are is someone
whose word can be counted on."***

The Science: Adolescents who identify as responsible show lower rates of risk-taking behavior and higher rates of academic engagement. Identity-based motivation — acting from who you believe you are — is more durable than rule-based compliance.

DAY 17 "You Are Resilient"

🕒 Ages 5–18 · Brazelton: Post-Touchpoint recovery · Siegel: Narrative integration

Resilience is not the absence of pain. It is the capacity to move through pain and emerge with the self-concept intact — and ideally, enlarged by the experience. Brazelton spent fifty years documenting the mechanics of resilience in children, and his most consistent finding was this: resilience is not a trait children either have or lack. It is an experience they are given by the adults around them. The adult who says, after a child has gone through something hard, 'look at what you just survived — look at the strength that took' is not minimizing the difficulty. They are building the narrative of survivorship that Siegel identifies as the cornerstone of post-traumatic growth.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"I need you to look at what you've been through.
Really look at it.
And I need you to see
what it took to still be standing.
That is your resilience."***

***That is yours. Nobody gave it to you.
You built it. One hard day at a time."***

The Science: Narrative-based resilience — the child's capacity to construct a coherent story of their own survival and growth — is one of the most evidence-based predictors of positive mental health outcomes following adversity.

DAY 18 "You Are Curious"

 Ages 2–18 · Piaget: *The engine of all cognitive development* · Siegel: *The Yes Brain*

Piaget's entire theory of cognitive development is, at its core, a theory of curiosity. The child's drive to make sense of the world — to encounter something unfamiliar and reach toward it rather than away from it — is the engine of every stage of intellectual growth. Siegel's 'Yes Brain' framework documents what happens when children are supported in that curiosity: the prefrontal cortex develops its capacity for exploration, the child's default response to the unfamiliar shifts from threat to opportunity, and the neural architecture of lifelong learning is laid down. When you protect a child's curiosity — when you name it as one of their great gifts — you are protecting the engine of everything they will ever learn.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"Your curiosity is one of your superpowers.

The questions you ask.

The things you want to know.

***Never let anyone make you feel
that wondering is a waste of time.***

***Wondering is how every great thing
that ever existed got started."***

The Science: Curiosity in childhood correlates with academic achievement, creative problem-solving, and long-term intellectual engagement. It is most powerfully protected by caregivers who name and affirm it explicitly.

DAY 19 "You Are Generous"

 Ages 5–18 · Siegel: *Prosocial brain development* · Brazelton: *Community and connection*

Siegel's interpersonal neurobiology research documents something that surprises many people: generosity activates the brain's reward system more reliably than receiving. The experience of giving — of having resources (time, attention, kindness, material) and choosing to direct them toward someone else — produces a neurological response that Siegel's research confirms is one of the most durable sources of sustained positive emotion available to human beings. Children who are taught generosity — who are given the language of abundance rather than scarcity — develop a cognitive framework that protects them against the depression and isolation that scarcity mindset produces.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"You are generous.
I have seen you give
when you didn't have to.
When nobody was watching.
When you could have kept it for yourself.
That generosity is not weakness.
It is the mark of someone
who knows they have enough."***

The Science: Prosocial behavior — giving and helping — produces sustained increases in wellbeing across every demographic studied. Children who give report higher life satisfaction and show lower rates of anxiety and depression.

DAY 20 "You Are a Lifelong Learner"

 Ages 6–18 • Piaget: Learning as lifelong schema-building • Siegel: Neuroplasticity has no expiration date

Piaget showed us that cognitive development does not end at adolescence — the Formal Operational stage that begins around twelve is not the ceiling of intellectual growth but the beginning of the kind of thinking that makes lifelong learning possible. Siegel's neuroplasticity research extends this further: the brain retains the capacity to form new connections and build new pathways throughout life. When you teach a child that learning is not a building they enter and exit but a life they live — that the curiosity they have right now is not a phase to be grown out of but a capacity to be grown into — you are giving them the greatest educational gift available.

SAY THIS TODAY:

"School is a building."

***Learning is your whole life.
Everything you are curious about,
everything that lights your mind up,
everything you want to understand —
those are clues about who you're becoming.
Keep following them.
For the rest of your life, keep following them."***

The Science: Growth mindset — the belief that intelligence and capability are expandable through effort — is more predictive of academic achievement than measured IQ. It is built through explicit language from caregivers.

DAY 21 "You Can Change the World"

 Ages 8–18 · All three scholars · The culminating affirmation

Jean Piaget spent his life documenting the extraordinary capacity of the human mind to construct and reconstruct its understanding of the world. T. Berry Brazelton spent fifty years sitting across from parents and children in clinical settings and documenting what separates the children who thrive from those who do not. Daniel Siegel built the neuroscience of interpersonal connection and showed us that the mind is shaped by relationship more powerfully than by any other force. All three of them arrived at the same place: the child who is told, consistently and specifically, by a trusted adult who means it — that they have something the world needs — becomes someone the world needs. The history of human progress is made entirely of people who, at a critical moment, heard someone they trusted say: you can do something remarkable. And believed it.

SAY THIS TODAY:

***"The world is going to need
exactly what you have.
Not a version of you that is more like someone else.
You. Your specific mind. Your specific heart.
Your specific way of seeing.
I believe that.
I need you to start believing it too.",
"Because at Read Remember and Recall —
Let's get every student prepared."***

The Science: Purpose — the belief that one's life has meaning and that one has something to contribute — is the most robustly documented predictor of lifelong psychological wellbeing across every demographic and culture studied.



AFTER DAY 21

Start again. That is the only instruction.

The University College London research established that habit automaticity is reached at an average of 66 days. You have completed the first third of that journey.

Start the 21 days again from Day 1.

Not because it did not work — because it did, and it will keep working. Brazelton's Touchpoints model shows that children cycle through developmental windows throughout childhood and adolescence. The affirmation that seemed to bounce off your teenager on Day 3 may land with full force on Day 45, when they are moving through a different Touchpoint. Piaget's schema theory tells us that each pass through the same affirmation will be received differently by a brain that has grown since the last time it heard those words. Siegel's neuroplasticity research confirms that there is no point at which consistent, warm, specific language stops building the brain.

The cycle never closes. It only deepens.

What Piaget, Brazelton, and Siegel agree on — and what they would say to you today:

Piaget: Every day your child grows, their brain is constructing a new model of who they are and what is possible. Your words are the most powerful material in that construction.

Brazelton: There is no developmental window that has closed. There is only the one that is open right now. The only mistake is not showing up for it.

Siegel: The brain is a social organ. It is shaped by relationship. The relationship you are building with your child right now is the most powerful neurological intervention available to them — anywhere, at any price.

*"The words you choose are either building something or taking something away.
Choose to build. Choose every day. Choose for the rest of your life."*

— Larry O. Dickerson · Father · Grandfather · Memphis, Tennessee

"Let's Get Every Student Prepared."

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