

# Brain in the Palm of the Hand

"*The Brain in the Palm of the Hand*" is the work of Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., first published in his book, *Parenting from the Inside Out* (2003) and more recently published in *The Whole-Brain Child* (2011). Dr. Siegel is not associated or affiliated with, and does not endorse or sponsor the Positive Discipline Association and its activities.

## Objective:

To demonstrate a useful visual to help parents and kids understand what happens in the brain when we "lose it."

## Materials:

None

## Facilitators Note:

You can watch Daniel Siegel demonstrate using a hand as a model for the brain by going to:  
<https://www.positivediscipline.com/videos>

## Directions

1. Introduce the brain in the palm of your hand by asking everyone to hold up their hands in an open position. Ask them to follow along with what you do.
2. Point to the area of your palm to your wrist, and explain that this area represents the brain stem, which is responsible for the fight, flight, or freeze response.
3. Fold your thumb across your palm. Your thumb represents your limbic system which is where you process emotions and store memories. It is also where you have your "safety radar" (the amygdala).
4. Then fold your fingers over your thumb (so you now have a fist). This represents the cortex. The prefrontal cortex (point to the front of your fist where your fingertips touch the palm of your hand) is where "rational thinking" and "emotional control" takes place.
5. What happens when our buttons get pushed and we "lose it"? We flip our lids (let your hand open, keeping the thumb in place...fingers up).
6. Now our prefrontal cortex is not functioning. In this state we cannot think or behave rationally.
7. Because of "mirror neurons" (one reason why modeling is the best teacher), when you flip your lid, your child will flip right back. (Hold up both of your hands in the flipped lid position facing each other.) If your child flips his or her lid first, you are likely to flip your lid right back. (Two flipped lids facing each other.)

8. Is this a good time to try problem solving? Why not? (Let the group respond and expect to hear: "Can't be rational; can't hear each other; can't control emotions; no connection; etc.")
9. Why do parents try to solve a problem when they or their children are in a "flipped lid" state? Let the group respond. (Afraid they aren't doing their job; afraid they are letting the child get away with something, reacting from fear, etc.)
10. What can you do to regain access to your prefrontal cortex? (gently close hand again) Take a few ideas from the group. (Take an adult time-out, breath, count to 10, take a walk, take a bath, read a book, etc.) You can decide if you want to take time to have a volunteer record these ideas on a flip chart.
11. Follow with the activity on Positive Time-Out.
12. It is important to point out that if children can't understand this demonstration, they are not old enough even for Positive Time-Out. However, it might help parents remember to take some positive time-out—providing good modeling for children.

**Comment:**

After the demonstration, let parents know they can share this with their children who are old enough to understand (around five or six and older), to increase their understanding of how their brains work. Parents can then follow-up by helping their children create self-soothing methods such as Positive Time-Out, using the Wheel of Choice, and putting problems on the Family Meeting Agenda. (If you haven't already, you will learn all of these tools through future activities.)