

Dear Teacher,

Thank you so much for taking the time to read through this article and consider an alternative to traditional behavior management in your classroom. I'm a therapist who specializes in working with children who have experienced early trauma, abuse, and neglect. Like you, I LOVE children. I spend all day long with them!

One. At. A. Time.

I cannot imagine managing a classroom full children, and I have utmost respect for the amazing teachers who keep kids safe, teach them social skills, and provide them with the educational foundation that they'll need for advanced learning. If you're reading this article, you've likely been handed it by the parent of a child who has a history of trauma, abuse, neglect, or adoption- a parent who may be asking you to consider an alternate way of tracking behavior in your classroom. I'm assuming you're reading this because you are *willing to consider* adjusting the way you manage difficult behaviors in your room, but also aren't really sure what to do instead. Thank you for even being willing.

What's so bad about behavior charts?

Different schools use different methods, but most are variations on a similar theme. A level system, oftentimes corresponding to colors, is a popular way to motivate children to demonstrate pro-social and appropriate behavior in the classroom. Whether your classroom uses colors or levels, focusing on behaviors and providing positive or negative consequences based on those behaviors is very likely making it *more* difficult for this child to demonstrate behaviors that are appropriate at school.

A little background

Infants are born with an innate and brilliant system that promotes survival and lays the groundwork for all future relationships as well as their ability to regulate their behavior. When an infant cries and expresses a need – for food, warmth, or comfort – a loving caregiver should come quickly and offer relief. Baby cries, parent comes. This happens over and over and over again. It is through this delightful dance between parent and baby (*the attachment cycle*)¹ that the infant develops:

- Trust in their caregiver- "I can trust adults to meet my needs"
- Trust in themselves- "I am a great baby who is deserving and worthy of love"
- Trust in their voice- "I can use my voice to get my needs met"
- Trust in the environment- "The world is generally a safe place, and when it's not a grown-up will help me."

This dance also lays the strong foundation necessary for infants to develop *self-regulation* as they get older.⁶

Self-Regulation

"Keeping the accelerator and the brakes of emotion in balance" ~Dan Siegel, MD⁹. In my office, I describe self-regulation as "The amount of stress I can take without FREAKING OUT at someone." I can tolerate a pretty substantial amount of stress while staying in control of my emotions AND behaviors (keeping the accelerator and the brakes of emotion in balance) because the part of my brain that manages stress and

keeps me calm is healthy and doing its job correctly. My brain knows that even in the midst of stress, criticism, or things not going my way that overall I'm still safe.

Two Brains

I LOVE to teach kids about their brains! Kids in my office really resonate with the fact that we have two brains- a thinking brain AND a feeling brain. The thinking brain (*the prefrontal cortex*) is in the front of the brain behind the forehead and it develops AFTER the feeling brain. In fact, it's not really done developing until we are in our mid-20s!!⁷ The feeling brain (the limbic brain) is in the middle of our brain, between our ears, and it helps us determine if things are safe. Fight/flight/freeze activity starts in the feeling brain, which is working hard and scanning for danger FOUR TIMES PER SECOND⁴. Infants are born with an immature thinking brain (prefrontal cortex) and driven mostly by limbic (fight/flight/freeze) activity. When the infant cries or fusses or is upset or scared, a loving and caring adult repeatedly and continuously soothes the infant and at the SAME TIME is soothing the infant's limbic system (feeling brain). When the limbic system is calm, the infant's brain is able to begin making connections *from* the limbic system *to* their prefrontal cortex. It is because of this process that it can be said that the prefrontal cortex is developed through the secure attachment relationship⁶. The prefrontal cortex begins to come on-line in the toddler years is not finished with development until the mid-20s⁷. When an infant is not continuously soothed, or the infant is neglected, abused, or otherwise living in a scary environment, the limbic system needs to work very hard to keep the infant safe. This active limbic system cannot spare any energy to start the process of growing connections to the prefrontal cortex, and ultimately we have a child with an overactive limbic system and a developmentally immature prefrontal cortex⁶.

The prefrontal cortex is what helps kids have "green level" behavior (the highest level on a behavior system, or the behaviors that earn them a sticker or prize). Through the development of the prefrontal cortex, children are able to regulate their emotions and behaviors. They develop impulse control. The prefrontal cortex aids in decision making and helps children moderate their social behavior.

Functions of the Middle Prefrontal Cortex ⁷	
Body Regulation	Attuned Communication
Emotional Balance	Fear Modulation
Response Flexibility	Insight
Empathy	Morality

Oversized Feeling Brain!!

The children in your classroom who have a history of abuse, neglect, or trauma are developmentally delayed with regard to their prefrontal cortex. When they were younger, their brain needed to give more energy to the limbic system because it had to pay close attention to all the danger. Even the neglected child will have an overactive limbic system because it is very scary for an infant to believe that no one is available to keep them safe. This child may now be in your classroom and continues to have an overactive limbic system and delayed connections to the prefrontal cortex. An overactive limbic system is a sign of a child who is a survivor! It was brilliant of their brain to organize in this way, and now they need our help

in calming their limbic system so that their brain can grow connections to their prefrontal cortex. Unfortunately, their delayed prefrontal cortex means that they are significantly impaired in their ability to monitor and modulate their emotions and behaviors. You may be working with a five-year-old, eight-year-old, or even 13-year-old with an emotion regulation system maturity of a toddler. Toddlers develop emotion regulation with the guidance and assistance of a calm adult who is helping them learn to regulate themselves. Toddlers need structure and boundaries- and so do the children in your classroom- coupled with scaffolding and teaching, as opposed to punishment or rewards, threats or count-downs.

What does fight/flight/freeze have to do with behavior?

The latest research and findings in neuroscience makes it clear that human beings are designed to be in relationship with others. We are social beings and are driven to stay accepted by our 'pack.' Human infants are born with an innate attachment system and need to stay in connection with their attachment figure in order to survive. When humans (adults and children!) are in the GREEN zone, they have behaviors that invite and encourage relationship, particularly with their attachment figure. Children want to make their attachment figure (and pseudo-attachment figures, like teachers or other adults who care for them) happy, as this keeps them safe. Children also want to demonstrate pro-social behavior that keeps them in the 'pack' with their peers. Children need to do a lot of experimenting with this, but ultimately children in the 'green zone' will demonstrate socially appropriate behaviors.

Low energy	Calm	High Energy that feels out of control
Collapsed body	Cooperative	Yelling
Head hanging down	Content	Physical Aggression
Head on desk	Prosocial language and behaviors	Opposition & Defiance
Absence of eye contact	Able to learn	Stealing & Lying
Limp limbs	May be high energy but child is in control	Tantrums

When children have their limbic system switched on due to perceived (not necessarily real) threat or danger, they slip into the RED zone and begin to demonstrate behaviors that are protective as opposed to pro-social⁴. Red zone behaviors are driven by fear- sometimes mild, sometimes extreme. These may include lying, stealing, tantrums, verbal aggression, opposition, defiance, and physical aggression. BLUE

zone behaviors are also driven by fear and are typically demonstrated by a child whose body had no ability to fight or flight as a small child; all they could do was freeze. Children in the blue zone are shut down and collapsed. These children may appear “checked out” or physically have floppy bodies-a hung down head and torso. All of these behaviors are the result of the brain believing that there is some threat in the environment. Lying is the brain believing “It’s not safe to tell the truth!” Stealing may be the brain believing “I cannot trust adults to meet my needs.” Opposition and defiance is the brain believing “I must be in charge- I cannot trust adults.” Verbal and physical aggression is the brain believing “I am not safe and must defend and protect myself.” I could take every single undesirable behavior that a child is demonstrating in the classroom and put it in the context of fight/flight/freeze, either directly related to the brain’s belief that he is not safe, or due to the brain’s lack of connection to the prefrontal cortex, thus not allowing the child to make any decision at all- good or bad. ***A brain in fight/flight/freeze doesn’t make a choice- it reacts in a way that seems most likely to ensure survival.***

For most children, and for the observing adult, it may not appear that something in the environment is unsafe. One of the biggest challenges, and FRUSTRATION, with a child with a history of harm is that their fight/flight/freeze system is faulty. Their overactive limbic system often perceives threat when there is none, and the child moves into red zone or even blue zone⁴.

The DANGER DANGER System

Behavior systems that result in a child losing a ‘level’ or not earning a sticker or other token can quickly and easily activate a child’s fight/flight/freeze system. Not only is this child more likely to go to fight/flight/freeze due to an overactive limbic system, but the threat or reality of a punishment- regardless of how mild- can easily trigger the terror of being punished severely at home. Because of the way the brain stores memory, even a child who now lives in a safe and loving home can have old experiences of trauma quickly triggered due to the possibility of “getting into trouble.” Just as scary, the real or implied threat of a consequence can trigger the fear of “I’m bad and I’m going to be sent away.” The child with a history of trauma and the previous loss of a family has a visceral understanding that sometimes children get sent away, and they almost always internalize this as their fault. As you can imagine, the terror of being severely punished or sent away will certainly trigger a state of fight/flight/freeze. Fight/flight/freeze states will almost certainly **increase** behavioral difficulties. Occasionally you may see a child who forces herself into behavior compliance due to the fear. This might look like improved behavior, but reinforcing compliance due to fear increases the likelihood of victimization in the future.

Behavior Charts Trigger Shame

One of the important outcomes of the attachment cycle being repeatedly met is the child’s belief that they are good. Children who have had this cycle met develop an understanding of the difference between “I am bad” and “I did something bad.” Children whose attachment cycles were not repeatedly met develop a sense of shame- the belief that “I’m a bad kid” or “I don’t deserve love.” These children are NOT able to distinguish the difference between “I am bad” and “I did something bad.” For children with secure attachment, getting lowered down to yellow level, or not earning a sticker, might leave them thinking “Oops. My behavior was not good. I will try harder next time. Even though my behavior was bad, I’m still a good kid.” Children with a history of harm who have developed a sense of shame about themselves believe “I’m BAD!” when they don’t earn a sticker or when their color is moved to yellow or

red. Shame is such an intolerable state for children with a history of harm, and it signals to the brain that more danger is coming, that fight/flight/freeze will be triggered.

What can we do instead?

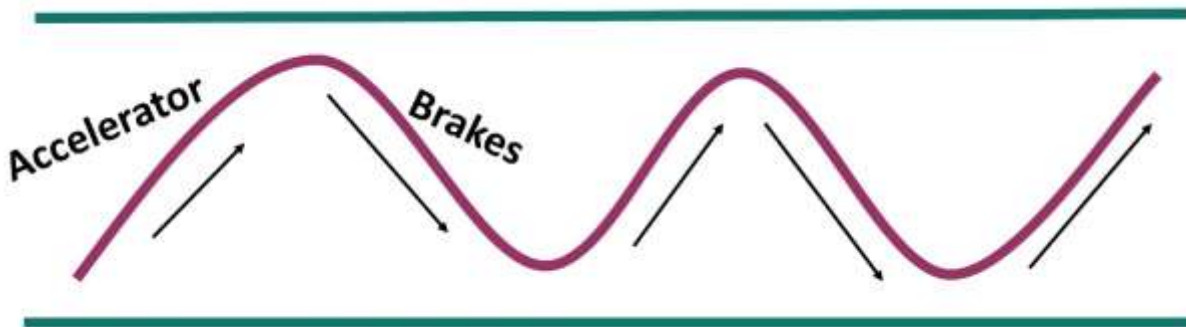
To be clear- under no circumstances am I suggested that maladaptive behavior gets ignored or excused due to a child's history of trauma. EXCUSING behavior is far different than UNDERSTANDING it. When we understand, we can work at the mechanisms that are driving the behavior and offer true healing!

One of the goals of trauma healing is affect identification and modulation. Children CAN learn to identify what zone they are in and then be taught ways to get their body back to the green zone. When a child is in the green zone, pro-social and adaptive behaviors will follow!

The Window of Tolerance

Throughout the day, we all experience countless stressors- from missing the alarm, to packing lunches in the morning, to rush hour traffic- and countless moments of recovery. Think for a moment about the last small stressor you experienced. Getting out the door in the morning is a good example for me. My son and I rush rush rush, getting more and more amped up, and then once we are in the car and backing out of the driveway, the recovery starts to set in. What's really happening in our bodies is that the accelerator is pressed as I rush around (my sympathetic nervous system) and then the brakes are gently and evenly applied once we are finally on our way (the parasympathetic nervous system). Bottom line is that all day long, the accelerator and breaks are ebbing and flowing in a (mostly) gentle and even way, preventing us from "freaking out."

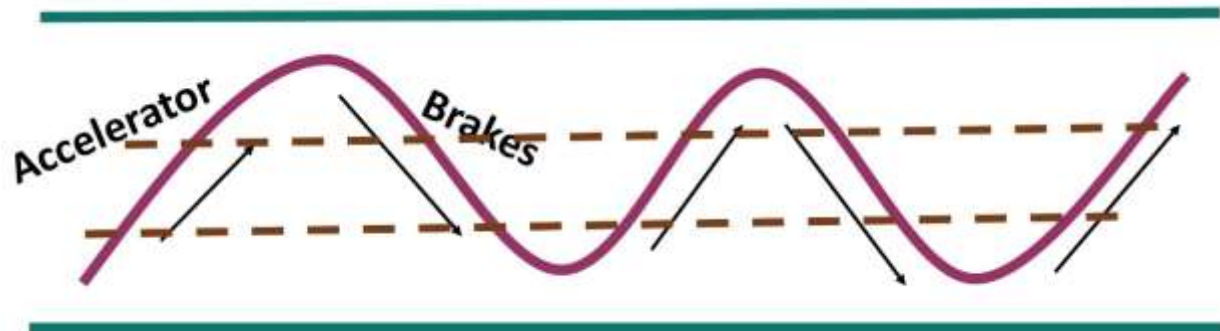
One way to visually conceptualize the different zones is with the "window of tolerance" metaphor^{3,7}. When I explain regulation and the window of tolerance in my office, I draw something that looks like this on my white board:



(Graphic- Peter Levine, PhD; www.TraumaHealing.com)

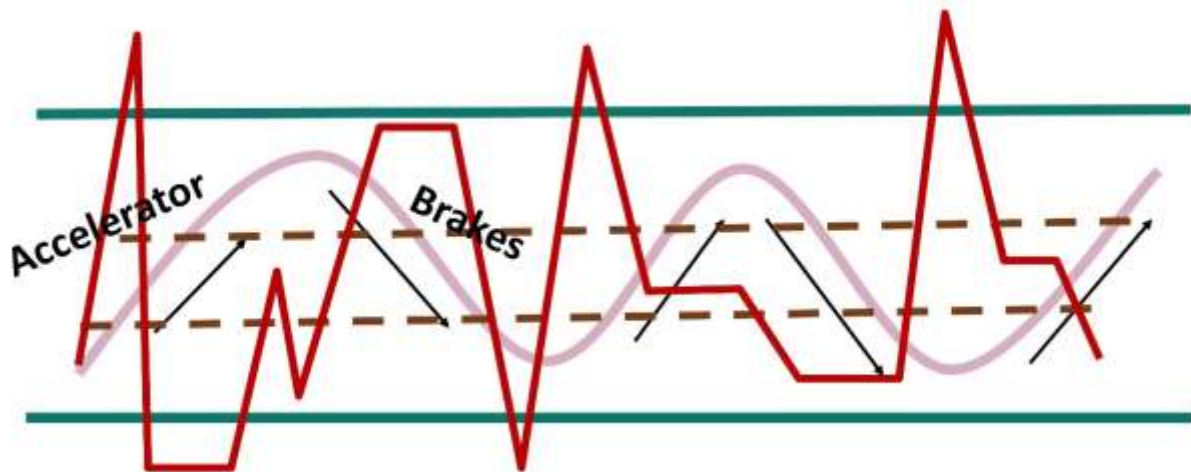
When children (and adults) are inside their window of tolerance, they are managing the stressors of the day without the maladaptive behaviors that are targeted with behavior plans. The size of a child's window of tolerance can ebb and flow throughout the day, as well as from day to day. A child's window of tolerance will be negatively impacted by lack of sleep, being hungry or thirsty, the multitude of difficult sensory experiences at school (noises, smells, or the visual stimulation of a bulletin board or organized

classroom materials) or by any other number of things. A child may have a nice window of tolerance in some circumstances, and a closed window of tolerance in other circumstances. When our window of tolerance closes up, the graphic shifts a little to something like this:



Notice now that the same amount of stress (accelerator) pushes the child outside their current window of tolerance (the dotted line).

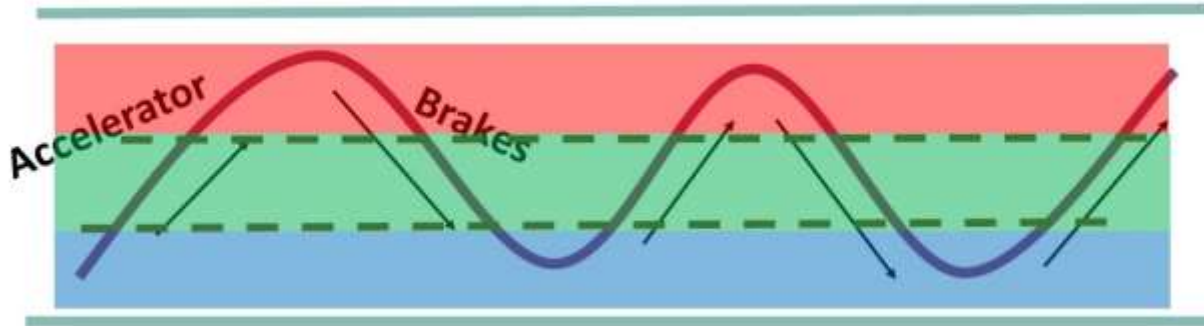
Complicating matters even more is that the child with a history of complex trauma does not have a nervous system that looks like a smooth sine wave. Their nervous system looks more like the red jagged line below:



The nervous system above spends a LOT of time outside their window of tolerance. This is the child in your classroom who cannot stay on green, or who has to move down their clothes pin, or who doesn't earn their sticker for the day. You can also see how this is a very sensitive and dramatic nervous system. The slightest stressor can cause this child to skyrocket out of their window tolerance.

Using the Window of Tolerance to invite appropriate behaviors

I've reference green, red, and blue zone behaviors throughout this article. Combining these zones of regulation with the window of tolerance looks something like this:



Helping Children Learn and Track their Zone

Children with a history of complex trauma who have difficulty regulating their behaviors are typically delayed in their ability to identify their inner state- or what zone they are in. Before anyone can attempt to change their state, they must be able to identify what the blue, green, and red zone feels like. I teach



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this to the children in my office, but you can easily teach this to the children in your classroom through direct lessons, fun social-skills role plays, and posters and bulletin boards displayed in your room. Instead of asking children to publicly track their level based on behaviors, considering having children (either the child that has led you to read this article OR even the whole classroom!) track their zone. Children might benefit from a way to physically manipulate something that shows what they zone they are in or they may just need a verbal prompt (ie Johnny,

check your zone! Or Johnny, what zone are you in right now? Or maybe Johnny that looks like red zone to me).

Children with healthy nervous systems will usually just need a prompt or reminder that they are in the red or blue zone. Most inappropriate behavior, if caught soon enough, can be easily redirected with a playful request to re-do the behavior, or to use more respectful words, or “please ask your friend for permission to have the toy before taking it from their hands.” Children with a history of complex trauma will also respond to a request for a re-do if the behavior is caught low enough, but they often need help getting back to the green zones.

Helping Children Get Back to the Green Zone

Children with a history of complex trauma need help getting back to the green zone. If they could do it themselves, they'd spend more time there in the first place. This is where this method of tracking and



changing behavior is going to become more labor intensive for the adults involved. Luckily, not all children in your classroom will need this level of intervention!

First and foremost, relationship is the ultimate regulator. Not only will children benefit in the moment from an adult lending their own regulation to aid them in getting back to the green zone, but this is how children develop a wider window of tolerance, as well as how we begin to smooth out that jagged line into a nice, smooth, even sine wave. Children who are demonstrating maladaptive behavior will benefit from soft eyes and calm voices, along with extremely clear boundaries and expectations. Basically, they need an adult who is in the green zone! They will best respond to an adult who intervenes quickly- within seconds of maladaptive behavior- and who offers both a boundary and a solution. Again you'll notice that I'm not suggesting we let difficult behavior 'slide.' On the contrary, it's most effective to quickly and efficiently address behavior when it's small. This keeps children in the green zone, but most importantly can keep them in the *middle* of the green zone, which keeps them further from the red zone. This means that they can manage more stress before getting pushed into the red zone.

Another ideal way to help children get into the green zone is through movement. Brain research indicates that movement helps children metaphorically grab hold of their prefrontal cortex, thus shifting out of fight/flight/freeze and ultimately more able to demonstrate appropriate behavior. Movement can be inserted into a child's day through offering stress or squeeze balls (the movement of squeezing can be enough!), allowing gum chewing or another alternative for chewing (chewing provides jaw movement!), sitting on an exercise ball instead of a chair, or regularly permitting a child to get up and out of their chair. You can incorporate stretching, and even yoga poses or body movements from brain gym,

into the schedule for your entire classroom! Maybe the child who has difficulty with regulation is assigned a special job that involves walking somewhere in the school and coming back. There are endless opportunities to provide appropriate opportunities for movement. Sometimes it's necessary to shift the lens through which we interpret movement. A moving, wiggly child may not be "not paying attention" but may actually be finding ways to attempt to stay in the green zone. This child may need ideas for more appropriate and less distracting ways to move their body.

Calm Down Spot

One great way to help children shift into the green zone is by developing a calm-down spot in your classroom where a child can retreat- not as a punishment but as an intervention to help them reflect on their zone and use skills to get into the green zone. A calm down spot should be quiet and somewhat separate from the classroom. You could use a child's tent or some fun fabric to give the child the sense of containment inside of space- this often helps bring a child into the green zone. You might have a fuzzy



rug or carpet to sit on, which provides a nice, calming sensory experience for children. Different children need different things in a calm down spot. Some common items would include headphones (to block out noise- these could be noise canceling or connected to some calming music or sounds), play dough for squishing, a mirror (so they can see their face and develop greater awareness of their zone), a stuffed animal for hugging, crayons and paper for drawing, water bottles or juice boxes (hydration, as well as sucking, often helps move a child from the red zone to the green zone), cards that show stretches, yoga poses, or big body movements like jumping jacks, feelings faces flash cards, and maybe a picture or word list for difference choices to calm down. A quick google search, or better yet a Pinterest search, provides hundreds of ideas of a calm-down spot in the classroom.

The Green Zone is where Children Learn

Helping children develop pro-social skills is really important- you know this! It helps children feel more socially confident and certainly makes your classroom easier to manage. But don't forget that keeping a child in the green zone also supports another important goal- learning. A child who is demonstrating red zone or blue zone behavior has an over-active amygdala and is lacking in connection to their prefrontal cortex. Remember that it is adaptive for our brains to shut down connections to our prefrontal cortex- the thinking part of our brain- when we believe we might be under threat. If I'm about to be eaten by a lion, I want my body to react. I DON'T want my brain to think logically about what I should do. That will take too long and lower my chances for survival! A child in red zone does not have adequate access to their prefrontal cortex to support learning. You've already experienced the frustration at attempting to teach a child who is in the red zone. They aren't logical and they aren't learning! Ultimately, a child will learn much more efficiently- and your job will be much more fun and rewarding- when they are in the green zone.

Thank You to the Helpers

Thank you, thank you, thank you for caring enough about the children in your classroom to invest the time to read this. Your time outside direct classroom teaching hours is so valuable- I get it! I have a family and responsibilities outside the office too. I am so grateful to your commitment to the children in your classroom. You play a much more important role in a child's healing than I do because you spend so much more time with this child.

My office is located in Austin, TX. If you are local to Austin, I am happy to help in a direct way with implementing strategies into your classroom to help your struggling student. If you are NOT local to Austin, you are welcome to email me and I will point you to additional resources or answer simple questions. I know that practical and easy-to-implement strategies are never covered thoroughly enough in articles or other written resources, largely because the specifics can vary based on the situation and specific needs of the classroom or child. I regret this, but will also help in any way I can to convert theory into practical application, beyond what this article offered.

You can contact me by email at robyn@gobbelcounseling.com. I also write a blog that is largely directed toward parents, but much of the information would be helpful and easily applicable to the classroom. www.GobbelCounseling.com/blog.

Robyn Gobbel, LCSW

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“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers - so many caring people in this world.”

— *Mister Rogers*