

BOOK SUMMARY

The Whole Brain Child- Approaching difficult behaviour from a brain development perspective

Left brain Right brain integration

When children are responding with an out of control, out of proportioned, emotional response they are stuck in the right brain and in a state of emotional chaos. We can support them by helping them integrate the left brain's perspective of logical reasoning.

It can be very useful to teach kids about their left and right brain so they can integrate this information themselves. Some children may need help in connecting their right brains if they have a tendency to shut down. A change in this response to distress is brought about by the parent observing subtle signs of emotions and creating a safe atmosphere for the child to express them. This is important because emotions and other right brain ways of understanding are necessary for making informed choices in difficult situations, one's that will serve us well.

Strategy # 1- Connect and Redirect

- Show empathy and connection through touch in order for your child to provide a safe connection from where they are in their emotional chaos. This helps them label their feelings (left brain organization), and feel safe enough to begin to calm. Once they are connected you can sensitively respond to their concerns and they will be more able to respond using their left brain and smooth out the chaos.

Strategy # 2- Name it to Tame it – Story telling

- When a child is stuck in some chaotic emotion they can approach left brain integration by being able to tell the story behind the emotions. As a parent you can help them start the story and help them recall what they are having trouble remembering. This reduces the emotional experience by getting the left brain into the experience.



The Mental Staircase- Upstairs and Downstairs in the Brain

The lower brain is often referred to as the more primitive part of our brain and goes online without our knowing. It is responsible for the fight/flight response to danger and controls many of our automatic functions like breathing and blinking. The upper part of our brain is responsible for more complex and sophisticated and conscious thinking. It is where we consider consequences, feel empathy, and exercise self-control. For integration between these two regions, we can imagine a staircase that we can teach our children to climb in order to have access to better understanding and choices in response to lower brain experiences like fear and anger.

YOUR CHILD'S UPSTAIRS BRAIN IS A WORK IN PROGRESS. The pre-frontal cortex is developing in children, adolescents, and even young adults. This development can be enhanced by the parental input into childhood experiences. The amygdala, located in the lower brain, often acts as a baby gate to children blocking access to the developing resources at the top of that imaginary staircase.

Whole Brain Strategy # 3- Engage, Don't Enrage

- In this strategy we suggest avoiding ultimatums or threatening consequences as they only further block access to the upper brain. When you notice your child is responding from their lower brain and displaying intense anger, consider a response that engages the upper brain. Collaborative problem solving is a useful tool to engage the upper brain. Show empathy to your child by naming and relating to their emotion. Express understanding for what they are experiencing. Once they have connected with you, you can begin to engage in a discussion about how to solve the crisis they are facing.

Whole Brain Strategy # 4- Use it or Lose it

- You can strengthen your child's upstairs brain and create more access to that stairway by doing the following. Allow children to make decisions



whenever possible, helping them consider alternatives and consequences. Emotional regulation skills for calming down are also useful, such as taking a deep breath or grounding exercises when they may need help to calm down. Asking questions about what led to behaviour or emotions can help children understand the problem they face better. Teaching our children empathy is also another good practice such as asking them how they think other people feel and why. Morality is also a function of the upper brain and can be encouraged through discussion of right and wrong behaviour, especially in situations that may not be so black and white.

Whole Brain Strategy # 5- Move it or Lose it

- The body has unique ways of communicating with the brain by changing neurochemistry. Being physically active is one way one can intentionally calm the amygdala's response down. When your child is unable to calm down take them for a walk or go outside and play some sports. Explaining to your child why it is good to do this is important so they can learn to use movement as a way of working through intense experiences of anger or fear.

Memory for Growth and Healing

Implicit memory is the memory our brain's and body's hold related to our experiences in life. We do not intentionally think about these memories, but they play a big part in our emotional and behavioural experiences. These memories form our expectations for situations as they happen around us. Depending on the implicit memory we may have pleasant or unpleasant responses to a situation. This can be seen in examples of lower brain reactions such as anger or fear in situations that seem unrelated to the emotion. The way to make implicit memories less of a barrier for children is to turn them into explicit memories. The hippocampus in the brain helps to integrate all parts of a memory and make it explicit as well, reducing the impact of the negative experience.



Whole Brain Strategy # 6- Use the Remote of the Mind: Replaying Memories

- Story telling is an effective tool for integrating different parts of the brain and to fully process events. If your child is experiencing fear, anxiety, anger, or some other response that you think is related to a previous experience, you can help them differentiate and work through past emotions by retelling the story. To do this, ask the child to recite what they remember from the earlier experience. If a part is too scary or difficult to talk about they can use an imaginary remote to fast forward until they are comfortable talking about what happened. This leads to better integration of past experiences.

Whole Brain Strategy # 7- Remember to remember: Practice remembering

- Take time to have your children talk about experiences they had during their days, even immediately following an experience. Ask questions that help children add detail to the memory. Older children may find journaling or writing in a diary a helpful way of remembering and telling stories about their different experiences. You can even make a game out of it by asking your child to tell you something that happened and something that didn't and you can take a guess about which is a real story.

Integrating the Many Parts of the Self

We can help our children develop what this author refers to as "mindsight" by practicing awareness of our inner experiences. These include thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, perceptions, and even dreams. The ideal place for our mind to exist is in our inner calm relaxed state. From this place we can take note of the various sources of inner input and decide what we will do with this information. For example, if we have a thought we can engage in a process of determining how influential this thought will be on our behaviour. When we develop mindsight we gain the ability to make choices about our



behaviour that best suit our goals. We can also influence our emotional experience and general state of being with mindsight. We develop a new identity with who we are that differs from what we think and feel.

Whole Brain Strategy # 8- Let the Clouds of Emotions Roll by

In this strategy we teach our kids that emotions are temporary experiences. This is a simple strategy that helps children reduce the impact an emotion may have on them. When your child is experiencing an emotion have them sit with it and see how long it lasts. Take time to point out to them how often their emotions change when you notice.

Whole Brain Strategy # 9- SIFT- Paying attention to inner experience

You can help your child gain inner awareness by practicing reflection using the SIFT acronym. Our children benefit from this insight because they have information to work with when trying to make behavioural change.

S-Sensations

I-Images

F-Feelings

T-Thoughts

Whole Brain Strategy # 10- Exercise mindsight (awareness)

Any mindfulness based exercise will help develop mindsight in your child. The more they exercise awareness the more they will be able to use it when they most need it. Mindfulness exercises include meditation practices, mindful movement (yoga, walking, qigong), visualization practices, and even focused breathing. These exercises can be used in the moment when a child needs to regulate when experiencing anger or anxiety, but can also be added to daily routines or spontaneous mindful moments. Anything you do that helps the

child focus on the present moment and their experience of it develops
mindsight.

The Me-We Connection

Children are born and develop an individual sense of identity as a natural part of development. Younger children can seem self-centered and their behaviour can concern parents. You might worry about how your child treats other people. You might be afraid of their sense of entitlement, but most often this is a natural step in social development. As parents we need to coach them in thinking about others when meeting our own needs. They learn through parental teaching and experience.

Whole Brain Strategy # 11- Make a point of enjoying each other (have fun)

- Every fun and enjoyable experience you have as a family together provides positive reinforcement about the benefits of loving relationships. This includes siblings having the opportunity to have fun together. Doing something fun or funny can also be used to break through to a child who is stuck on some kind of emotion that is getting in the way of them enjoying themselves. These experiences are the basis for their future relationship behaviour.

Whole Brain Strategy # 12- Connection through conflict

- With the foundation of mindsight, children will begin to become aware of the different experiences they are having. Social experiences like conflict are great social learning opportunities. First, always acknowledge and confirm the emotional experience your child is having (show them empathy). Second, take the time to encourage your child to see the conflict from both sides helping to teach empathy. It is difficult for adults to see another's point of view at times so don't be surprised if your child is not able to. Planting the seed is often where parents have to start with this type of learning.



- We can also help kids learn about non-verbal language to increase the empathy capacity. This happens when you take the time to point out nonverbal language in the natural setting when you are aware someone else is upset.
- Finally, it is important to teach our children conflict resolution skills. You can teach them how to repair a relationship after a conflict by encouraging empathy and follow through to make things right. Saying sorry is a part of this process, but should only be encouraged when the child understands they hurt someone else. Making it right may include fixing a broken toy or taking time to show a friend you care about them. Thinking from this lens allows us to see conflict as a teachable moment where the whole-brain can be used to better deal with something difficult.

NOTE: We can apply any of these strategies as parents when we notice a lack of integration between the various parts of our brain. This will not only help us regain control, but also sets a good example of what we are trying to teach our children.