

Brain-Based Parenting

How traumatic early life experiences affect the developing brain of children and ultimately the care their parents can give them.

Recent research shows that caring for traumatized children's brains can cause trauma to adoptive parents' brains and this can then inhibit the nurturing of these relationships. A way to prevent this is for parents to have lots of support, caring and empathy from their support network. Then adopters, in turn, will be better equipped to support and nurture their children's traumatized brains.

Located near the top of the brain stem is an area called the amygdala. The amygdala can receive sensory information from the early stages of pregnancy and it activates a baby's "approaching or avoiding closeness to others" system. This area of the brain is also associated with the fight, flight or freeze response. As a baby experiences warm, loving connections the amygdala is soothed and this promotes trust, safety and sustained social engagement. If the baby experiences poor nurturing, (even in the uterus) this puts the amygdala on alert and promotes defence, mistrust of caregivers and premature self-reliance. These children can then display behaviours such as being controlling, manipulative, or aggressive.

When adopters have to manage challenging behaviours over a period of time it can be hard to remain calm, rational and in their own "thinking brain". If parents become exhausted, their brain is flooded by stress hormones and the joy of parenting disappears leading to what is called "blocked care". "Blocked care" is the adopter's brain's natural self-protection system being triggered and means their interaction systems are shut down due to the pain of parenting.

For adoptive parents' brains to begin to be switched on again, support networks (such as family, friends and professionals) need to take the time to be alongside during times of emotional distress. People in those support networks need to remain non-judgemental, offer empathy, acceptance and help adoptive parents to "feel heard".

Staying connected to children even when they are reacting defensively is vital, because good parent/child connections can help tame or calm the defence driven amygdala system which in turn will enable a child to activate its "approach with trust" amygdala system.

To sum up, for children's brains to begin to heal they need to interact with adopters who have healthy brain connections, who are able to manage their stress levels appropriately, who have made sense of their own life experiences and who are supported to manage any unresolved trauma.

For further reading on this subject please see:-

'Brain-Based Parenting' (2012) by Daniel Hughes and Jonathon Baylin