



Building our Children's Developing Brain

Some ideas for parents and carers



*“As parents become more aware and emotionally healthy,
their children reap the rewards and move toward health as well.*

*That means that integrating and cultivating your own brain is one
of the most loving and generous gifts you can give your children.”*

Daniel J. Siegel

This booklet is for parents of children of any age.
The ideas in it can also be applied to us as parents as well.



Getting Started

Being a parent has its rewards. It can also be stressful at times.

Most parents dread the meltdowns that seem to come out of the blue. Whether in public or at home, any child can go out of control in what appears to be a blink of an eye:

- Most of us were taught to ignore it and it will pass
- If we lose our tempers and shout we make things worse for everyone.

We may have learned to deal with tantrums as our parents did. Research is now telling us the part the brain has to play in this. This information was not available in our parent's day.

Learning how different parts of the brain work together can help get us through difficult situations. More importantly, it helps our child develop in ways that will carry them well into adulthood.

This booklet will give you ideas on how to strengthen the different parts of the brain to work together.

In this booklet you will find

1. Meeting the needs of our children
2. How the brain works
3. An ounce of prevention
4. Getting the right and left upstairs brain working together
5. Building the staircase between the upstairs and downstairs brain
6. Joining up different parts of the brain
7. Recharging our batteries: self care
8. Final thoughts and resources





Meeting the needs of our children

Parenting capacity means meeting the needs of your children consistently.

What do all children need? On top of their physical needs our children need the 4 'S' to help them feel well connected and have strong bonds.

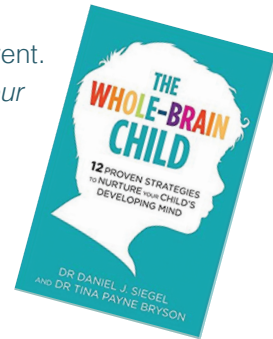
- **Seen** Look at their expressions and body language. Try and understand what they are going through
- **Safe** We avoid actions that frighten or hurt them
- **Soothed** We help them deal with difficult emotions and situations
- **Secure** We help them develop a strong sense of wellbeing.

The material in this booklet was taken from 'The Whole Brain Child' by Dr. Daniel Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson.

It will give an introduction to how our children's brains develop and some practical ideas to help foster good brain development at any age.

There is no such thing as a perfect parent. As Abraham Maslow said, *"We show our kids we care by putting thought into what we do"*.

How you use this information is up to you. We hope you find it helpful.



PARENTING
Perfection isn't possible.
BE GOOD ENOUGH
and learn more
every day.



How the brain works

The brain is a very complicated organ. So this description helps us understand how the brain works.

A child's brain develops by forming connections with significant caregivers.

The more positive interactions the child has with their caregivers, the stronger the connections become. That is the message behind infant mental health.

The brain has an upstairs and a downstairs part:

Downstairs brain

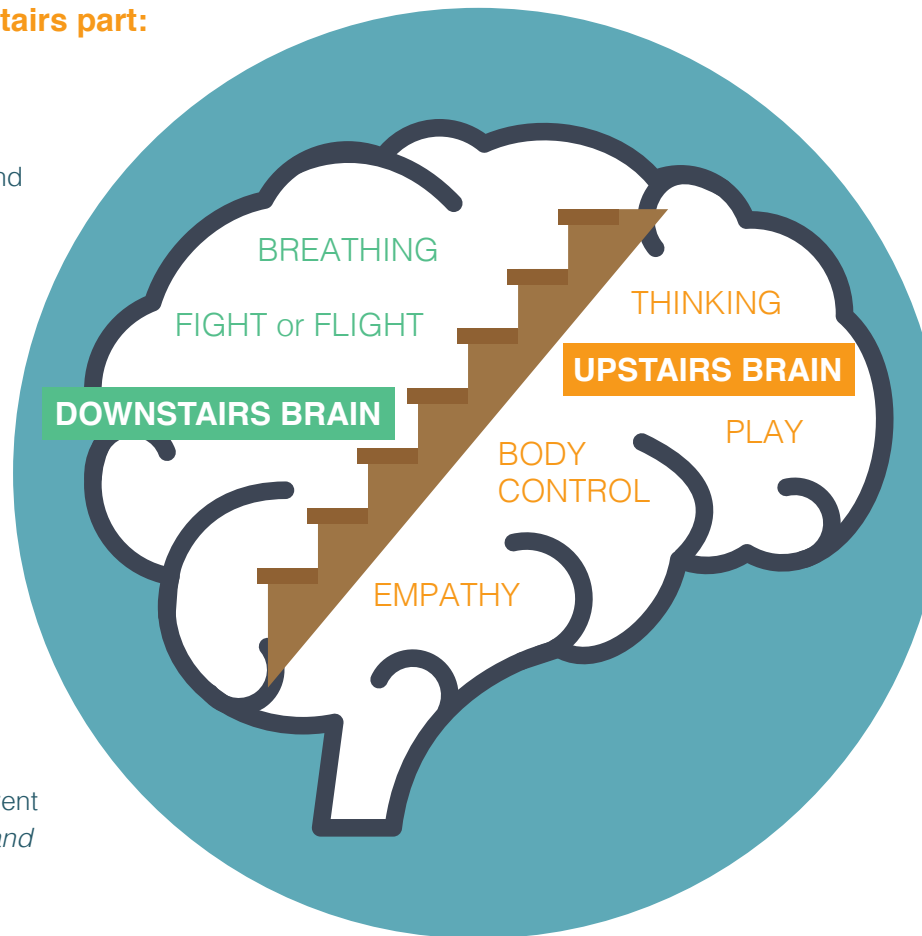
- Well developed at birth
- Responsible for basic functions, reactions and impulses (ie. fight, flight and freeze) strong emotions (ie. fear and anger).

Upstairs brain

- Not fully mature until a person reaches mid-20's
- Responsible for decision making, control over body and emotions, self-understanding and empathy.

When strong emotions take over, it is like a stair gate blocks the upstairs brain from working. Because the upstairs brain is a work in progress, it can be hijacked by the downstairs brain especially when big emotions hit.

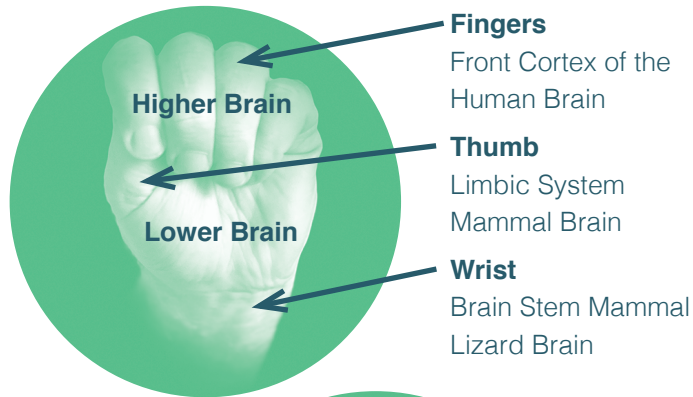
Dr. Siegel gives a simple description of how different parts of the brain work together. He calls it the *Hand Model of the Brain*.





How the brain works

As parents we can use the hand model to explain how the brain works to our kids (we can also use it ourselves) and use the skills in this booklet to help the different parts of our children's brains work better together.



Use your hand to make a model of the brain

Your thumb and below your thumb is the **downstairs brain** that regulates arousal, emotions and the way humans have a “flight or flight” response in times of danger.

Your fingers are **the upstairs part of the brain** that helps you think and make sense of things.

When you have big feelings they are coming from the downstairs part of your brain.

When you flip your lid the downstairs part of the brain takes over. Your upstairs part of the brain is not touching where the feelings are coming from and you are not thinking straight.

By connecting to the upstairs part of your brain you can calm those big feelings and make better decisions that will work for you.

You can find this on You Tube if you search for Daniel Siegel



How the brain works

The upstairs brain has two sides: LEFT and RIGHT

LEFT BRAIN = LOGICAL



RIGHT BRAIN = EMOTIONAL

Very young children under three are right-side dominant. At two years of age the left hand side of the upstairs brain is only beginning to develop.

When your young child asks why over and over again that is the left brain growing.

It does not fully mature until adulthood. That can explain why some teenagers make poor decisions and have melt downs too.

Both sides of the brain have to work together so that your child uses both sides: logic and emotions.

- Using only the left brain results in an emotional desert. This can push your child towards being too rigid
- Using only the right brain results in an emotional flood and chaotic behaviour/thinking.

Evidence suggests that children who have experienced a lot of stress in their young lives (Adverse Childhood Experiences) are more prone to get “stuck” in the right side.

As a result, these children have a greater tendency to look to unhealthy ways to soothe strong emotions.

This can lead to a range of problems later in life. (See resources at the end of this booklet).





An ounce of prevention

What might cause your child to have a tantrum/meltdown?

Standing back and being curious can be a good start. Before you over analyse it, make sure your child is not too **h**ungry, **a**ngry, **l**onely or **t**ired. (H.A.L.T.)

You could also consider:

- **Frustration** can be due to limited language, or lacking the skills to complete tasks
- **Wanting things they can't have:** sweets, one more TV programme or a friend's toy



Know what is causing the meltdown is helpful but we still need to deal with it.

- **Wanting independence:** Wanting to walk, not ride in the buggy, choose their own clothes
- **Over-stimulation:** During exciting events like parties or Christmas
- **Emotional overload:** Trying to cope with the world and lots of new experiences every day can be too much.



Getting the right and left upstairs brain working together

Connect Then Redirect

When a child is upset logic often won't work until we have responded to the right brain's emotional needs.

'Connect and redirect' begins with helping our kids feel understood before we try to solve problems. "So how do you help your child feel **understood**"?

First, connect with the Right Brain (Emotional, Nonverbal)

- **Show it without words:** Create a warm connection through eye contact physical touch, warm facial expressions, soft tone of voice, being non-judgmental

- **Birds eye view:** Don't make the situation bigger than it needs to be. Focus on your child's needs right now
- **Chase the why:** Don't ask them why. They may not be able to tell you. Be a detective. Instead of focusing only on behaviour, look for what is behind it. What is going on for them?
- **Communicate comfort:** Get below your child's eye level. Give them a loving touch, nod of the head or an understanding look. This helps them calm down
- **Name feelings:** Put a name on what you think your child is feeling. "Your face is telling me you are angry. I wonder if you are feeling worried?"
- **Give yourself a break:** Think of your brain too. The key is that when your child is drowning in a right brain emotional flood, connect before you redirect.



Getting the right and left upstairs brain working together

Sometimes it takes time. It's OK "to ride out the storm".

The emotional waves just need to crash until the storm passes. They may simply need to eat or get some sleep.

Then, redirect with the Left Brain (Logical, Language)

Once children have felt that connection with you, it is time to redirect - talk with them about their behaviour. After all, what we want is for our kids to learn from experience.

What might help

- **Pick your battles:** When you see trouble brewing, ask yourself, "Do I really want that drama?" You decide
- **Reduce words:** Address the issue and keep it brief. Long lectures don't work at any age.
- **Big emotions are normal, kids will have them:** Help your child try to understand and express their emotions
- **Describe, don't preach:** Describe the behaviour that you saw. You might say, "*Your brother might be sad or upset by these kinds of words.*"
- **Focus on the behaviour you want to see:** This is one of the best ways to deal with misbehaviour. Instead of saying "*No whining,*" try "I like it when you talk in your calm voice. "Say what you to see".

- **Be creative:** Try playfulness (not banter or teasing). We can divert things by simply doing something that is fun creating an atmosphere of lightness where they feel safe and relaxed not judged or criticised.

Name It to Tame It: Telling Stories to Calm Big Emotions

When a child experiences painful, disappointing, or scary moments, it can be overwhelming. Big emotions and bodily sensations flood the right brain (remember, we as parents can feel that way too).

Research shows that simply putting a name to what we are feeling helps calm the activity on the right side of the brain.

When children learn to share their own stories; they can develop healthier responses to everything from a scraped elbow to a major loss or trauma.

Caregivers can help children use their left brain to make sense of what is going on. This can help put things in order and to name these big scary right-brain feelings so they can deal with them more effectively.

Stories can empower us to move forward and master moments when we feel out of control.

This involves listening and accepting what is important to the child and not what we expect them to say.



Building the staircase between the upstairs and downstairs brain

We described the brain as having an ‘upstairs’ and ‘downstairs’ part.

How can you strengthen the staircase connecting these two parts of the brain?

Engage, Don't Enrage: Appealing to the Upstairs Brain

We need ways to “engage” the upstairs brain and not “enrage” the downstairs brain.

1. **Avoid fueling the strong emotions** by shouting or criticism.
2. **Giving the child their voice:** Connect and redirect choosing your words carefully while keeping them safe.
3. **Compromises/Shared Power:** Find a compromise. Help to engage the child's upstairs brain in problem solving.



Use It or Lose It: Exercising the Upstairs Brain

Practicing using the upstairs brain is “the foundation of solid mental health.” Here are some ways to exercise the upstairs brain.

Sound Decision Making

- Give your child practice making choices
- Let them experience consequences safely.

Controlling Emotions and the Body

- Take a deep breath
- Help them learn mindfulness techniques
- Express their feelings.

Self-understanding

- Ask questions: Why do you think you made that choice? What made you feel that way?

Empathy

- Draw attention to other people's feelings.

We used the word mindfulness here. What does that mean?

Mindfulness is about ‘tuning in’ to the present moment, with openness and curiosity. Mindfulness is about now, not later or yesterday.

The website Blissful Kids has a free booklet that teaches children mindfulness

<http://blissfulkids.com/mindfulness-and-the-brain-how-to-explain-it-to-children/>



Building the staircase between the upstairs and downstairs brain

Move It or Lose It: Being Physically Active

Move It or Lose It is based on research that shows that when we change our physical state through movement we can change our emotions.

When your child needs help calming down or regaining control, look for ways to get them moving. You can play a game, move, dance, walk, whatever you like to do together, but remember to consider whether your child is tired or hungry.

Talking about tough memories

Memory is the way an event from the past influences the present. Our mood can influence what we remember.

If our child has strong feelings from the past, parents often think that if they don't talk about them they will forget. This is often not the case. So how do we help our children when they have negative memories?

Helping our children talk about tough memories is the beginning of them finding healthy ways to cope.

Use the Remote Control of the Mind: Replaying Memories

Instead of "fast forward and forget" try "rewind and remember."

By giving your child a voice for their memories and encouraging them to "rewind and remember," you are empowering and teaching them that they can gain control over the memories of negative/painful experiences.

Just listen, you don't need to fix it.

Sometimes, children who have experienced extreme trauma may not have the words or are ready to talk about what they have experienced.

Don't force the conversation.

If intrusive memories continue to affect a child's emotional or psychological health seek professional help.





Joining up the different parts of the brain

The difference between “I feel” and “I am”

Everyone should understand that by focusing their attention on what they feel and think, they can take control and (to a great extent) choose how they feel and respond.

Your child can easily become confused about the difference between “feel” and “am”.

Siegel and Bryson explain why this is an important distinction:

“When children experience a particular state of mind, such as feeling frustrated or lonely, they may be tempted to define themselves based on that temporary experience, as opposed to understanding that that’s simply how they feel at the moment.

Instead of saying, ‘I feel lonely’ or ‘I feel sad right now,’ they say, ‘I am lonely’ or ‘I am sad.’”

The danger is that the temporary state of mind can be seen as a permanent part of themselves and could be seen as a trait that defines who they are.

Learn that feeling are states, not traits:

I’m not _____ I feel _____

A good example is when we do something stupid. What we say to ourselves is, “I am stupid”. We are describing a trait, not a behaviour and if we say that often enough, do we start to believe it.

At the same time we can all have mixed emotions. Having very different feelings at the same time can be very common.

Sensations Images Feelings Thoughts (S.I.F.T.) - Paying Attention to What’s Going On Inside

Help your child recognise and understand what they are experiencing inside.

Use **S.I.F.T.** to help understand what they are experiencing:

1. **Sensations** in their bodies
2. **Images** in their minds
3. **Feelings:** Help them say how they feel
4. **Thoughts:** What are they saying to themselves?

Help your children name what they feel going on inside.

For example, butterflies in the stomach, heavy shoulders when they are sad, or feeling hot when they are angry.

Just by recognising different physical sensations can give children greater understanding and influence over what they are feeling.

Young children don’t always have the words yet to describe their feelings.

They may tend to use vague words like fine or bad.

When you are actively listening you can stretch their feeling vocabulary by saying back words that go beyond the word they used.

Sad could be disappointed, feeling let down.

**Help your child
build a vocabulary to express
their feelings**



Joining up the different parts of the brain

Let the Clouds of Emotions Roll by: Teaching That Feelings Come and Go

Help your child recognise that feelings are temporary. On average, an emotion comes and goes in about 90 seconds. Over thinking can make those feelings last much longer.

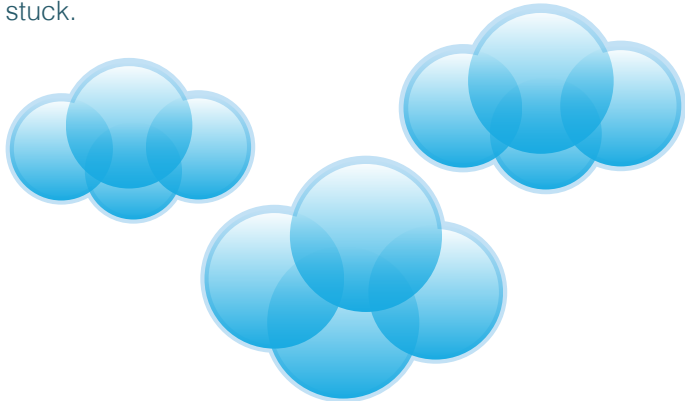
While we are striving to get our children to understand their feelings, we also need them to understand that their feelings change.

Feelings need to be recognised for what they are: temporary, and changing.

Siegel and Bryson suggest teaching your children how to focus on their breathing during nervous, anxious or difficult times to calm themselves, so they can change their focus:

“Even as young as four or five, kids can learn to focus on their breathing. A good technique is to have them lie down and place a toy, like a boat on their stomach. Ask them to focus on the boat, watching it rise and fall as it rides the waves of breath.”

Practising this with your child can help you both feel less stuck.



Increasing the Family Fun Factor: Making a Point to Enjoy Each Other

“Playful parenting” is one of the best ways to prepare children for relationships and encourage them to connect with others.

We know that having fun/positive experiences are good for your child's brain, releasing the reward chemical dopamine.

You would think this strategy goes without saying, but let's be honest: sometimes your child's idea of fun isn't fun for you.



This is especially true when your child wants you to act out the same scene over and over again.

Look for ways to have an enjoyable, meaningful time with you.

The bottom line is this: how you relate to your kids has a big impact on how they learn to relate to others.

Connection and Fun = Less Conflict



Self-care: Keeping your batteries charged

All these ideas suggested in this booklet may seem good but to use them takes deliberate effort.

Any parent can get worn down by the constant pressures that come with parenting.

To keep our phone working, don't we make sure we keep the battery well charged?

We need to do the same with ourselves to make sure we are responding not just reacting to everyday pressures.

Looking after your emotional wellbeing is a way to keep your own battery well charged. People tend to have more resources within themselves when they look after themselves. It is within your choice and control.

Here are some ideas to help you do this.

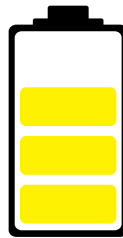


Take 5: Take 5 is a set of practical, evidence-based ways for improve everyone's' mental health and wellbeing.

Connect - With the people around you. With family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.



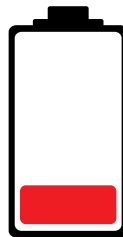
Be Active - Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Play a game. Dance. Exercising makes you feel good. Discover a physical activity you enjoy and that suits your level of mobility and fitness.



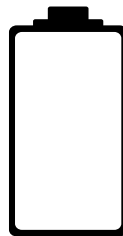
Take Notice - Be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.



Keep Learning - Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for that course. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy achieving. Learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun.



Give - Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community creates connections with the people around you.



How could Take 5 be helpful for you?

How could you use these ideas as a family?



Some final thoughts:

Before we finish we need to know one more thing about the brain.

Part of the brain develops by watching the people closest to us. It can mirror what we see others doing, feeling, etc.

That means our feelings and behaviors are passed on to others from joy and playfulness to sadness and fear.

If we are stressed, our child can feel stress. If we are anxious, our child can feel anxious. If we are excited and playful, our child will be excited and playful.

So it is our job to model the kinds of relationships and skills we want our kids to have. If we are modeling the kind of behaviours we want, our children will be able to mirror our behaviour and emotions.

Looking after each other

Adults need to be aware of the impact they have on each other.

Are they supportive and add a charge to the other's battery or drain energy that should be directed to that very thoughtful job of parenting.

The key message here is look after and support each other as well as ourselves.

Some resources you may find helpful

Fact sheets: **Stress, Trauma and Your Brain and Stress, Trauma and Your Brain: Ideas for Healing**

If you have experienced childhood stress or have stress in your life now, these fact sheets explore basic brain functioning and its impact through excessive stress and trauma and ideas for healing. They can be downloaded from the 'Alcohol and You' website: <http://www.alcoholandyouni.com>

'**Bend Don't Break**' is a workbook for building your own resilience. It can be downloaded on the South Eastern Trust website under the healthy living tab.

24 hour Domestic Violence helpline

0800 917 1414 (this number will not appear on your phone bill or be disclosed via 1471)
24hrsupport@dvhelpline.org

Family Support <http://www.familysupportni.gov.uk>

The Parenting NI Parents Helpline is a free and confidential service for support and guidance about any parenting issue. Call 0808 8010 722.

Parentline NI (CiNI and RELATE NI) 0808 8020400 or chat online <http://www.ci-ni.org.uk/parentline-ni>



**If children live with criticism,
they learn to condemn. If children live with
fear, they learn to be apprehensive. If children live with
encouragement, they learn confidence. If children live
with approval, they learn to like themselves.**

From Children Learn What They Live by Dorothy Law Nolte



This material was adapted from *The Whole Brain Child* by Dr. Daniel Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson. 2012 published by the Little Brown Book Group.

Developed by Ed Sipler Health Development Specialist South Eastern Trust South Eastern Trust

With thanks and appreciation to those who helped shape this booklet

- Jade Irwin - Fostering Network
- Dr Leigh Crawford - SET Connect, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
- Pamela Quiry - ASCERT
- Claire Black - South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

And finally to my grandchildren who taught me how to apply these skills with a lot of fun and laughter.