

# The Science Behind *Caring and Connected Parenting:* *A Guide to Raising Connected Children*

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Billions of dollars are spent each year on health care that treats physical ailments and extends life when one of the most influential factors on our longevity, health and happiness is the initial care given to us as infants and children. “Caregiver nurturance sets us on a course of physical and psychological health—or, when it is lacking, disease and mental illness.”<sup>1</sup> “Attachment studies support the view that the pattern of communication with parents creates a cascade of adaptations that directly shape the development of the child’s nervous system. Both longitudinal attachment studies and early intervention research support the idea that what parents do with their children makes a difference in the outcome of the children’s development.”<sup>2</sup> Brains are shaped by early care, setting a child on the path of developing resilience and the capability to meet challenges and handle stress - or not. Stress affects a multitude of body systems including cardiovascular, immunological and overall mental health including the risk of substance abuse. These in turn affect lifespan, health and happiness. Dr. Louis Cozolino, author of *The Neuroscience of Relationships* provides us with a corollary for the “survival of the fittest” - “Those who are nurtured best, survive best.”

In 2006 in the United States, an estimated 905,000 children were victims of maltreatment (rate of victimization 12.1 per thousand children in the population).<sup>3</sup> The highest percentages of abuse occurred during the periods of infancy and early childhood. Unfortunately, parents often parent in the way they were parented making abuse and neglect ever present, a self-feeding loop. Parents with leftover or unresolved issues are especially at risk for repeating and not repairing parent-child interactions. But there is hope, parents whose childhoods include troubled relationships with their parents can learn through reflecting on their own experiences as children and acting to change for their children.

Using the growing body of research in the field of neurobiology we can guide new parents and parents who were victims of abuse toward building connection with their child, thereby reducing the need for punishment, along with the potential for abuse or neglect. The goal of this discipline guide is to begin the habit of positive, respectful and caring interactions early in life through aiding connection and encouraging the use of positive disciplinary measures when appropriate.

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1 Louis Cozolino (2006), *The Neuroscience of Human Relationship*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, page 8.

2 Daniel J. Siegel (1999), *The Developing Mind*, New York, NY: The Guilford Press, page 245.

3 NCANDS, National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems, April 15, 2008.

“Caretakers activate the growth of the brain through emotional availability and reciprocal interactions.”<sup>4</sup> The more a particular experience is repeated the more deeply imprinted it becomes on the child’s brain circuitry. Consequently, repeated incidences of abuse or neglect will influence a child’s life. If an infant reaches out repeatedly for someone to help meet her needs and no one responds, the infant stops crying and gives up. She learns that her needs will not be met and that what she does has no influence on the world. In the extreme case, and when other conditions are present, some children will not find reward from interactions with people and can grow into sociopaths, incapable of feeling for others.

We can hope to influence a child’s early life through setting up the environment for optimal parent-child interactions. Parents are encouraged to reflect upon issues from their own upbringing that may influence the reactions to their child. Promoting responsivity to the child’s signals, the use of touch and other nonverbal communication skills, we can point the way to connection. As the child grows, by encouraging the development of verbal skills and talk regarding emotions we can hope to decrease frustration on the part of the parent and the child as the child gains the ability to express her needs. An accepting, receptive environment of secure attachment will encourage trust, and build self-acceptance. After age two, with the development of the frontal cortex, encouraging increased parent-child communication about thoughts, memories and feelings aids self-understanding and autobiographical formation, the ability to organize the events and memories that form the self. As we age, emotional regulation is made possible by using the rational, reflective thought processing areas of the mind (high-road) to interpret and act upon signals from the emotional, unconscious, automatic and quick processing areas of the mind (low road). Again, parents encouraging identification of emotions and problem solving will help integrate these two areas of the mind.

In addition children need their parents to set reasonable and responsible limits. “Parents can’t always say yes to their children’s request. If children ask for ice cream right before dinner, demand a toy every time they go to the store, or attempt to climb on the dining-room table, there is a parental need to set limits. These limit-setting experiences are crucial for the child. They involve the child’s developing a healthy sense of inhibition in which the child learns that what he wanted to do is not safe or socially appropriate within the family setting.”<sup>5</sup> The key is in how the parent says “No.” A “No” that says the parent understands that the child would like ice cream, but that ice cream after dinner is a better choice at this hour, tells the child that the parent is listening and respects his desire but cares about his health.

Children of differing temperament may have different needs but healthy

4 Cozolino, page 85.

5 Daniel J. Siegel, MD and Mary Hartzell, M. Ed. (2003), Parenting from the Inside Out, New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, page 189.

development depends upon successful attunement with caretakers who are flexible and respectful of the child's differences. A longitudinal study done by Kenneth Dodge, director of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University in Durham, N.C found that violent teenagers were not necessarily violent as very young children. These teens as pre-schoolers were temperamentally slightly impulsive and had mild behavioral problems that were often met with harsh or inconsistent disciplinary practices from parents and teachers. This further alienated the children making them more aggressive and affecting the learning of much needed cognitive and social skills. As teens these children had less parental monitoring and interaction which enabled their gravitation toward like-minded/acting peers.

Whatever the genetic differences the parents of a child are dealt, attuning to the child and treating him consistently with respect and care sets the stage for the development of a healthy child. When parents respect their own needs, set appropriate limits, stay calm and expect to be treated with kindness and respect as the child grows, they set the stage for a healthy family. Along with suggestions for developing family connection, this guide includes caring and respectful discipline techniques that are age/stage appropriate to help the parent through some of the more difficult times in child rearing (i.e. temper tantrums). It is hoped that meeting success in the earliest, most vulnerable ages will form habits of mutual caring and respect that will last throughout the child's lifetime.

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