

Brain Integration: Parenting with the Brain in Mind

The concept at the heart of this article is *integration*. A clear understanding of integration will give you the power to completely transform the way you think about parenting your kids. It can help you enjoy them more and better prepare them to live emotionally rich and rewarding lives.

Most of us don't think about the fact that our brain has many different parts with different jobs. For example, you have a left side of the brain that helps you think logically and organize thoughts into sentences, and a right side that helps you experience emotions and read nonverbal cues. You also have a "reptile brain" that allows you to act instinctually and make split-second survival decisions, and a "mammal brain" that leads you toward connection and relationships. One part of your brain is devoted to dealing with memory, another to making moral and ethical decisions. It's almost as if your brain has multiple personalities – some rational, some irrational; some reflective, some reactive. No wonder we can seem like different people at different times!

The key to thriving is to help those parts work well together – to integrate them. Integration takes the different parts of your brain and helps them work together as a whole. It coordinates and balances the separate regions of the brain that it links together. It's easy to see when our kids aren't integrated – they become overwhelmed by their emotions, confused and chaotic. They can't respond calmly and capably to the situation at hand. Tantrums, meltdowns, aggression, and most of the other challenging experiences of parenting – and life—are a result of a loss of integration, also known as *dis-integration*.

We want to help our children become better integrated so they can use their whole brain in a well-functioning, coordinated way. For example, we want them to be *horizontally integrated*, so their left-brain logic can work well with their right-brain emotion. We also want them to be *vertically integrated*, in that the physically higher parts of their brain, which let them thoughtfully consider their actions, work well with the lower parts, which are more concerned with instinct, gut reactions, and survival.

One of the surprises that has shaken the very foundations of neuroscience is the discovery that the brain is actually "plastic," or moldable. This means that the brain physically changes throughout the course of our lives, not just in childhood, as we had previously assumed. What molds our brain? Experience. When we undergo an experience, our brain cells – called neurons – become active, or "fire." When neurons fire together, they grow new connections between them. Over time, the connections that result from firing lead to "rewiring" in the brain.

This is incredibly exciting news. It means that we aren't held captive for the rest of our lives by the way our brain works at this moment – we can actually rewire it so that we can be healthier and happier. This is true not only for children and adolescents, but also for each of us across the life span.

Findings from various areas in developmental psychology suggest that everything that happens to us – the music we hear, the people we love, the books we read, the kind of discipline we receive, the emotions we feel – profoundly affects the way our brain develops. Not only training with neurofeedback, but everyday experiences can help your child’s brain become more and more integrated. Children whose parents talk with them about their experiences, for example, tend to have better access to the memories of those experiences. Parents who speak with their children about their feelings have children who develop emotional intelligence and can understand their own and other people’s feelings more fully.

There is a whole field of the science of child development and attachment backing up this view – and the new findings of neuroplasticity support the perspective that parents can directly shape the unfolding growth of their child’s brain with regard to what experiences they offer. Hours of screen time, for example – playing video games, watching television, texting – will wire the brain in certain ways. Educational activities, sports, and music will wire it in other ways. Spending time with family and friends and learning about relationships, especially with face-to-face interactions, will wire it in yet other ways. Everything that happens to us affects the way the brain develops.

Just as individual singers in a choir can weave their distinct voices into a harmony that would not be possible for any one person to create, an integrated brain is capable of doing much more than its individual parts could accomplish alone. That’s what we want to do for each of our kids, help their brain become more integrated so they can use their mental resources to full capacity.

The reason your child’s brain isn’t always capable of integration is simple: it hasn’t had time to develop. In fact, it’s got a long way to go, since a person’s brain isn’t considered fully developed until their mid-twenties. The rate of brain maturation is largely influenced by the genes we inherit. But the degree of integration may be exactly what we can influence in our day-to-day parenting.

By using everyday moments, according to neuropsychiatrist, Daniel J. Siegel, MD, you can influence how well your child’s brain grows toward integration. First, you develop the diverse elements of your child’s brain by offering opportunities to exercise them. Second, you can facilitate integration so that the separate parts become better connected and work together in powerful ways. It’s simply being present with your children, echoes author Tina Payne Bryson, PhD, so you can help them become better integrated. As a result, they will thrive emotionally, intellectually, and socially. An integrated brain results in improved decision making, better control of body and emotions, fuller self-understanding, stronger relationships, and success in school. And it all begins with the experiences parents and other caregivers provide, which lay the groundwork for integration and mental health.

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