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## For Parents: A Child's Brain on Trauma

*3 Part Series on Parenting your Child Affected by Trauma*



### *Part One: The Brain on Trauma*

Parenting is so many things. It will change your life. It will change *you*, your priorities, and it will test your sanity. That's true, I believe, for most, if not all, parents. But if you are a parent of a child who has survived trauma, parenting may be the hardest job you will ever have.

Parenting children with trauma can be relentlessly exhausting, thankless, and downright miserable at times. The quote, "*The children who need love the most will ask for it in the most unloving ways*" describes these kids. Not always, but most of the time. Often parents become involved in foster care or decide to adopt and are not given enough information about the children, their history and circumstances, or their specific challenges. They are not given or never knew to seek education and training for what to expect when their child enters their life and are woefully unprepared to parent a child with such needs. This can shake the ground underneath even the most well intentioned parents.

I don't mean to paint a dreary picture. Watching these kids heal and grow despite their circumstances is a beautiful thing. They are often resilient, have drive, passion, and determination. Given the opportunity, they can bring so many wonderful things to a family and community.

So at this point, you are asking, "How? How do we get there because I'm at my wits end with this kid and nothing I do seems to work?"

Well, to answer that question, we first need to back up and talk about the 'why'. In order to be the parent your child needs, you need to first be able to understand where they come from and why they do what they do.

## The Brain on Trauma

*Note: The human brain is both simple and complex in nature. To explain the ins and outs of the neuropsychology of trauma is extensively complex. In the name of simplicity, I'm keeping this explanation just that: simple.*

The brain has one priority: to keep you alive. Everything else comes secondary to survival. The brain, in fact, develops the parts mostly responsible for survival first, starting from the bottom (brain stem) and moving up and out. It is sensitive to its outside environment, down to being affected prenatally by a pregnant mother's stress hormones. This is why trauma experienced by an expecting mother (homelessness, domestic violence, abuse, etc.) can actually cause trauma to a developing fetus as well. Those hormones have the potential to change the DNA in the baby's cells and make the developing baby more susceptible to a host of issues after birth.

So, let's imagine this baby is born into a violent world. Perhaps this child witnesses abuse of his mother and is often neglected or suffers abuse himself. For what could be years, the child survives in a constant state of hyperarousal. The child continually examines his environment, is highly alert to even the smallest change in a person's demeanor, and is always ready to hide, run, or fight. He may even start to feel he must protect others in his home—siblings or the other parent. To make matters even more confusing, sometimes the perpetrator of such terror can sometimes be generous, gentle and kind to him. Imagine the confusion of this child moving day to day, not sure what to expect or when the parent's switch will flip from fun and loving to explosive anger, harmful words and aggressive actions.

What we know is that exposure to these kinds of experiences, over and over again, changes the brain. To add to this, the most significant and important time of brain growth is between ages 0 and 5, specifically between 0 and 2. The brain is making trillions of connections and associations, writing the blueprint for this child's internal working model, his understanding of his world, himself, and how he relates to the world.

In this example, the mother who is experiencing her own stress and is herself just trying to survive, may not be entirely emotionally or physically available to comfort, protect, or teach the child what real love is. This piece is critical to the development of healthy perceptions of self and healthy attachments. Now, for this little guy, he cannot rely on either parent to provide him with what he needs most: consistent nurturing, protection, and love demonstrated through repetitive healthy interactions. His blueprint is set.

Fast forward to today: You have just received a phone call telling you that your child was just suspended from school. You discover that he attacked another child on the playground in a game of tag. Upon further investigation, it seems the other child tagged your child, your child tripped and fell, and as the other child stood over him to help him up, your child tackled him. As staff pulled them apart, he kicked, screamed, cussed and was generally completely out of control.

If you consider this situation as it is and without consideration to this child's previous experience, you may believe this child to be an over-reactor, a sore loser, mean, a bully, and impulsive. You may be perplexed by his extreme reaction to a relatively normal and benign experience.

Let's take a look from another perspective: The child's blueprint tells him that anyone can be a threat to his safety and survival (because if you are hurt and unprotected by your parents, the very ones who are supposed to keep you safe, then how could anyone ever be safe?). Touch hurts. Yelling means danger is coming. And a person standing above him means he is in immediate danger. To this child's

brain on trauma, he was pushed to the ground with the intention of getting him in a vulnerable position to attack him further. The teachers who came to help want to hurt him because no adult is safe and no one but himself will defend or protect him. He is on his own in a world that wants to hurt him.

You see, this is real to him. This is not some made for TV drama. This child has a legitimate reason to perceive his environment the way he does.

Back to the brain. As soon as the boy touches him and he trips, his brain tells him he is being attacked. His brain is remembering those times he was pushed in the back (or saw it happen to his mother) and fell down at home, just to be physically attacked from above. His brain quickly makes the connection through channels of associations developed over repeated similar experiences. The brain triggers the fear center in his brain and he enters what we often call “fight, flight or freeze” mode, or the survival mode. The brain’s automatic processes redirect all its attention to survival. The part of the brain that processes information, controls impulses, and solves problems begins to shut down. After all, in life or death situations, having long complex thoughts is useless and deadly. In dangerous situations, we must respond immediately and swiftly without extraneous information blocking the way to safety.

At this point, your boy cannot understand anyone’s explanation that he is safe and these people are safe, or even have an intelligent conversation with the staff or you. That part of his brain is shut down. And it may not come back on for a while. This child is operating only from his survival and emotional brain. His thinking brain has been hijacked.

This child has responded in a defensive manner. It is a learned response to actual experiences. This child has learned these behaviors because it was required for his survival. He has learned the following things: I can’t trust anyone. I have to take care of myself. Love hurts. Don’t believe it when people are nice because they will eventually hurt you. You are never safe. You will never be safe. You are and will always be alone.

I mean, it makes sense, right? It is the same mechanism by which you may have learned you can’t stand tuna sandwiches if you contracted food poisoning by eating one. Even the smell or the word ‘tuna’ on paper may make your stomach churn with bad memories of toilet hugging. Associations-your brain is awesome at it.

Your child sees the world differently. He is always on the lookout for danger, even when it seems there is none. Studies done of children with trauma compared to children without show that kids with trauma will imagine potential danger in pictures presented depicting normal or even happy events. For example, a photo of two children helping dad work on the car. A child with trauma may state that the dad better be careful because the car will fall on him and crush him or the son standing by the side with a wrench is about to hit the dad in the head with it.

You ask: “But this child has lived with me now for two years and he has never had a hand raised to him. I don’t understand why he still doesn’t trust us?” Let me ask you this: Have you ever tried to quit drinking, smoking, eating sugar or carbs, cussing, biting your nails? How many times did you relapse? If you are like most people, probably many times. Why? Because your brain tells you that you need these things to survive. How many times have you done well only to go into an environment that was triggering (a party, for example, if you are an alcoholic) and then relapsed? Why? Because of the associations your brain has made. It remembers how that drink warmed your belly when it calmed your nerves at the work party. It remembers that Bon Jovi song you used to cheers to in college with your best friends at parties. It remembers the the smell of the orange juice you used to put in

your mimosas every morning. Your brain remembers, even if you don't.

Your child and his brain have spent years honing his defensive skills to ensure his number one priority: staying alive. Recognize that it may years of constant, repetitive, unrelenting work from you to undo this and replace with healthier connections, beliefs, and behaviors.

To help your child recover from his past, you must first understand it. You need to be able to recognize how he got here and why he reacts the way he does. You must proceed with reflection and insight, be able to make some drastic mindset changes, and recognize your child operates from a place of fear, not vengeance. This requires you to avoid responding defensively yourself and meet him with what his brain is craving: recognition that he doesn't feel safe, consistent protection, comfort, and nurturing, and finally teaching (repetitively) new and healthier ways to view himself, his world, and his relationship with the world.

That's up next. Stay tuned for **Part 2: Parenting to Rewire the Brain.**