

Developing Brains-
Ideas for Parenting and Education
From the New Brain Science
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**Some Things which Caregivers of Infants and Toddlers
Need to Know About Brain Development**

Do babies need more than basic food, shelter and warmth?

Taking care of our very youngest children and promoting healthy development of the brain, and thus behavior, requires meeting the child's most **basic emotional needs**. Babies have emotions "built in" when they are born. Some of these emotions can seem overwhelming to the baby, and it is up to the baby's parents and caregivers to teach her/him how to manage these strong feelings.

We are learning that "early caregiving behavior sends subtle messages of emotional comfort (or not) to the infant's brain.... Over time, the actual physical structure and neurochemical profile of the baby's brain comes to reflect the caregiver's responses." (Karr-Morse and Wiley 1997, 199-200) If we soothe babies when they cry, we teach them how to regulate emotions by helping them develop a "map" in the brain for this. Left to cry alone, the baby may not learn what it feels like to maintain or regain emotional balance and comes to NOT expect comfort or sensitivity from others.

The most basic brain structures for handling negative emotionality are formed in the first 2 years of life, though this ability can be taught in later childhood (but not without negative impact on the child's social relations and on self-image.)

How Can Parents and Caregivers Support and Enhance Emotional Regulation?

The following is an edited excerpt from Karr-Morse and Wiley (201-2):

Emotional regulation begins with caregiver responses to a child's behavior. There are four aspects to caregiver/parental emotional regulation that are particularly important for young children: joyfulness, anger, fear, and empathic sensitivity.

1. Joyfulness is critical to self-esteem, relationships with others, and the development of trust in a caregiver. Children of depressed mothers who receive relatively little stimulation of this emotion are at increased risk of depression and anxiety; later social and academic problems are also related to this experience.
2. Anger or rage, while common to all children, may be inherited behavior tendencies. There is increasing evidence that irritability tends to run in families. If these emotions are not modulated in infancy or toddlerhood by caregiving adults, children may continue to act out high levels of aggression and overt conflict. The ability to control impulses may also be linked to this patterning and is definitely affected in a *positive* way by constructive and consistent adult involvement.
3. Chronic fearfulness may also be genetically based, but like rage it can be modulated by caregiving behavior. Easily frightened children, particularly little boys, may cause great concern for parents in our culture, which typically values outgoingness and boldness, especially in boys. The role for parents and caregivers here is sensitive support and encouragement to expand the child's experience, confidence, and competence.
4. Empathy is a strong protective factor against antisocial behavior. By modeling sensitivity to the child's needs and by encouraging the child to be aware of the impact of his behavior on others, children build a foundation for altruistic (prosocial¹) behavior. Some research has found that the lack of emotional sensitivity is a characteristic that distinguishes many violent criminals, as well as violent children.²

¹ Prosocial behavior is behavior that is intended to help others, and is done without expectation of a reward.

² Karr-Morse and Wiley. Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997. Also see: Families and Work Institute. Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development. New York, 1997.

What are the implications for child care?

Parents and caregivers play a critical role in a child's development of emotional regulation. This is one reason why infant and toddler groups in child care need to be kept small, and why it is necessary to employ enough caregivers to provide the individual support. The high rate of staff turnover that is found in some child care programs is a factor that can undermine a child's development of emotional regulation. Emotional regulation is most successfully achieved within the context of relationships where the child is cared for by the same people, over time, who get to know her or him as an individual.

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