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Book Review

The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind

Dr. Daniel Siegel

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Reviewed by Nichole Huff

As a child development specialist and mother of two, I am always on the lookout for resources that appeal to me both professionally and personally. I found such a resource in The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind. In this easily relatable text, neuropsychiatrist Dr. Daniel Siegel and parenting expert Dr. Tina Payne Bryson offer twelve brain-based strategies for raising calmer, happier children. The authors speak candidly about parenting, suggesting that child misbehavior occurs due to a lack of "integration" in the brain. Simply put, integration is the child's ability to simultaneously use the brain's distinct regions.

Siegel and Bryson explain the four different regions of the brain and the need for both horizontal and vertical integration. When a child achieves horizontal integration, for example, he is able to partner left-brain logic with right-brain emotion. Vertical integration, conversely, allows children to coordinate both higher- and lower-level cognitive functioning. The left and right hemispheres, as well as the upper and lower brain regions, each serve different functions. According to the authors, when a person—adult or child—is living in a state of integration, he or she is successfully navigating along a river between the banks of chaos and rigidity.

When all parts of a child's brain are in sync, the child can bridge gut reactions with thoughtful reflection. The greater the level of overall integration, the more likely the child is to engage his or her whole brain in everyday actions and reactions. Below, examples of two strategies illustrate particularly well the authors' methods for helping children engage their whole brains when problems arise.

To better integrate the left and right hemispheres, Siegel and Bryson suggest the strategy "Connect and Redirect," which teaches parents ways to attend to a child's irrational outbursts (e.g., temper-tantrums). Because children react to a situation with emotion first (right brain),

initially responding with logic (left brain) won't work. Instead, the authors suggest that the parent comfort the child and acknowledge his feelings. When a child feels heard, he begins to soften, and the parent can begin to use logic to resolve the issue that caused the outburst.

The strategy "Engage, Don't Enrage" addresses vertical integration. In the book, Siegel and Bryson explain the "upstairs" brain (higher-level cognitive thoughts) and "downstairs" brain (innate body processes, such as fight or flight) and how to build a "staircase of the mind" to connect them. However, the amygdala, or the "baby gate of the mind," acts as a barrier and keeps children from using that staircase effectively. This barrier is critical in survival situations when the amygdala is helping us process emotion and react quickly. But, in children especially, more often the barrier impedes access to higher-level cognitive reasoning. As an antidote, the authors suggest strategies to help parents teach thinking and listening skills to children when facing frustrating situations. With these skills, children can practice actively solving problems and being better decision-makers.

The book details technical aspects of brain development in terms that are easy for both parents and professionals to process and apply. The authors also provide age-appropriate strategies, clear explanations, illustrations, and relatable examples of parent-child interactions. I've found the book to be a useful resource, both in my own parenting journey and the work I do as a professional. I recommend this quick read for parents, clinicians, educators, and students who want to learn ways to help nurture children's maturing brains.

Reference

Siegel, Daniel J., and Tina Payne Bryson. 2012. The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind. New York: Bantam Books.