

Attachment and Learning

Small children literally grow within a relationship - they look to parents and caregivers to understand themselves. Think about how they know something is good or bad - they look at their parent or caregiver's face and see smiles or frowns. If a parent smiles the child thinks 'this is good'.

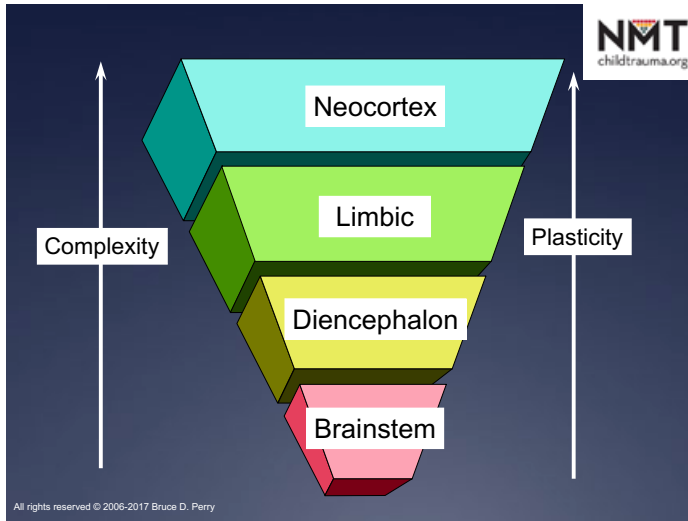


It takes many repetitions to learn something new

Trust, security and patience grow when needs are met over and over again.

Think of the crying baby - baby cries, parent comes, baby cries, parent comes, baby cries, parent comes. If the parent is a bit late in coming the 900th time, the baby thinks 'well the parent came every other time so they probably will this time' and trust is built. Predictability is a key factor in the development of trust.

When care has been unpredictable small children are not sure whether they're going to be looked after or not. They can become very easily stressed, anxious, and angry. Small children who have been repeatedly frightened, hurt and/or neglected by their parents will often find it hard to believe that adults are able to be trusted and relied on for comfort and support. Unpredictable care grows a sensitised stress response system that can may be hyper-responsive. This means that little things can make the child very stressed!



The brain develops from the bottom up

This means that the bits of the brain that are responsible for important things like heart rate, temperature regulation, basic trust, stress responses, language, movement and coordination develop first and are most impacted by adverse experiences in early childhood.

All living things work to keep their systems in balance, or in equilibrium. An example of such a system is how we sweat to cool ourselves down and shiver to warm ourselves up- sweating and shivering keeps our temperature in a state of equilibrium. We don't consciously decide to sweat and shiver, our body just does it automatically.

Repeated adverse experiences in very early childhood can interfere with the developing brains' equilibrium systems,

so we often see children who get too worked up and find it very hard to calm down, who may lash out and hurt people or who may sit in a corner and stare into space for ages. These kids are out of balance. Like sweating and shivering, these kids' brains and bodies are trying to return them to a familiar (if not necessarily healthy) balance. Their lack of trust in adult caregivers means that attempts by caregivers to set limits on behaviour, say "no" or provide comfort may be met with a similarly unconscious, lower-brain reaction from the child that resists the limits and comfort offered.

