



# Acknowledgement of Country

*We respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners, the Wurundjeri People, as the Custodians of this land.*

*We pay respect to all Aboriginal community Elders, past, present and emerging who have resided in the area and have been an integral part of the history of this region.*





## Yarra Ranges Council Family, Children and Youth Services

Visit [www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au](http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au) to learn more about the programs and resources available through Family, Children and Youth Services such as:

- Maternal Child and Health
- *Smalltalk* Supported Playgroups
- School Holiday programs
- Parent Information sessions
- Profession Development Training for Early Years professionals

Remember to follow the *Yarra Ranges Families* and *Yarra Ranges Youth* Facebook pages to stay up to date!

We're also available via email: [earlyyears@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:earlyyears@yarraranges.vic.gov.au) or  
[youth@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:youth@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)



# Connection-Based Parenting

presented by

Sian Chambers-Vallance and Tony Vallance

Building Better Brains Australia





# About Us

## Sian

I am the owner and manager of Artistic Revolutions and co-owner of Building Better Brains Australia. I am a clinical play therapist working in private practice specialising in early trauma and attachment difficulties. I work with children and families in a systemic way and passionately believe that brain-based parenting education and support is key to helping this next generation of children thrive.

## Tony

I am the co-owner of Building Better Brains Australia, Australian Education Awards Teacher of the Year 2019, Secondary School Teacher, Victorian Excellence in Education Awards Finalist 2018, Drumbeat and Mindfulness Facilitator, STEAMWORKS Founder, Leadership team – curriculum development and STEAM, Teacher trainer, Certified Classroom Educator for Positive Discipline, and host of the Edubabble podcast.





# Self Awareness + Self Compassion = Self Care

- Be aware that some of the things we may discuss today could trigger feelings or reactions about your own past experiences, parenting, clients, childhood, your own parent and family life growing up, personal traumas *etc.*
- Be kind and compassionate with yourself and mindful that these things may arise.
- We are all here to support each other on our journey of learning.
- If you are feeling upset, irritated, triggered in anyway please feel free to take a short break, a drink of water, some deep breaths, move your body around or resource yourself in some other way.





# Learning Outcomes

- Define what it means to have a healthy brain.
- Explore the basic biology of the brain.
- Define basic brain needs.
- Explore the window-of-tolerance and interpersonal neurobiology.
- Explore 9 ways to create safety and connection in parent-child relationships.

- Define play and look at the history of play.
- Explore why play is under threat in our society.
- Identify the problems associated with lack of play.
- Look at different types of play.
- Identify ways of using play to encourage connection and secure relationships in your family.





# What is a Healthy Mind?

A healthy mind can be defined as a mind that is **well-integrated**, meaning there is a strong flow of messages being passed between left and right hemispheres and the upstairs (cerebral cortex) and downstairs (subcortical) parts of the brain.

Dan Siegal suggests that a healthy brain shows these **nine domains of integration**:

- 1) emotional regulation
- 2) a sense of wellbeing
- 3) wisdom (ability to self reflect)
- 4) happiness
- 5) flexibility in thinking
- 6) focuses on meaning
- 7) functions well in relationships with other people – social engagement, empathy, attunement
- 8) is able to achieve positive focused attention
- 9) shows mindsight (our ability to see within ourselves as if an observer – the practice of mindfulness).





# Building the Brains of The Future

The World Economic Forum has identified the following 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills as essential for the jobs and work places of the future. *How are we as the adults in the room helping children develop these skills?* We must look to the future to help us plan – not just repeat the patterns of the the past...

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Coordinating with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Judgment and Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive Flexibility

These core skills all rely on well integrated, healthy brains and attuned, safe and supportive relationships, and on the ability to play and create.

Source: *Future of Jobs Report, World Economic Forum 2016*

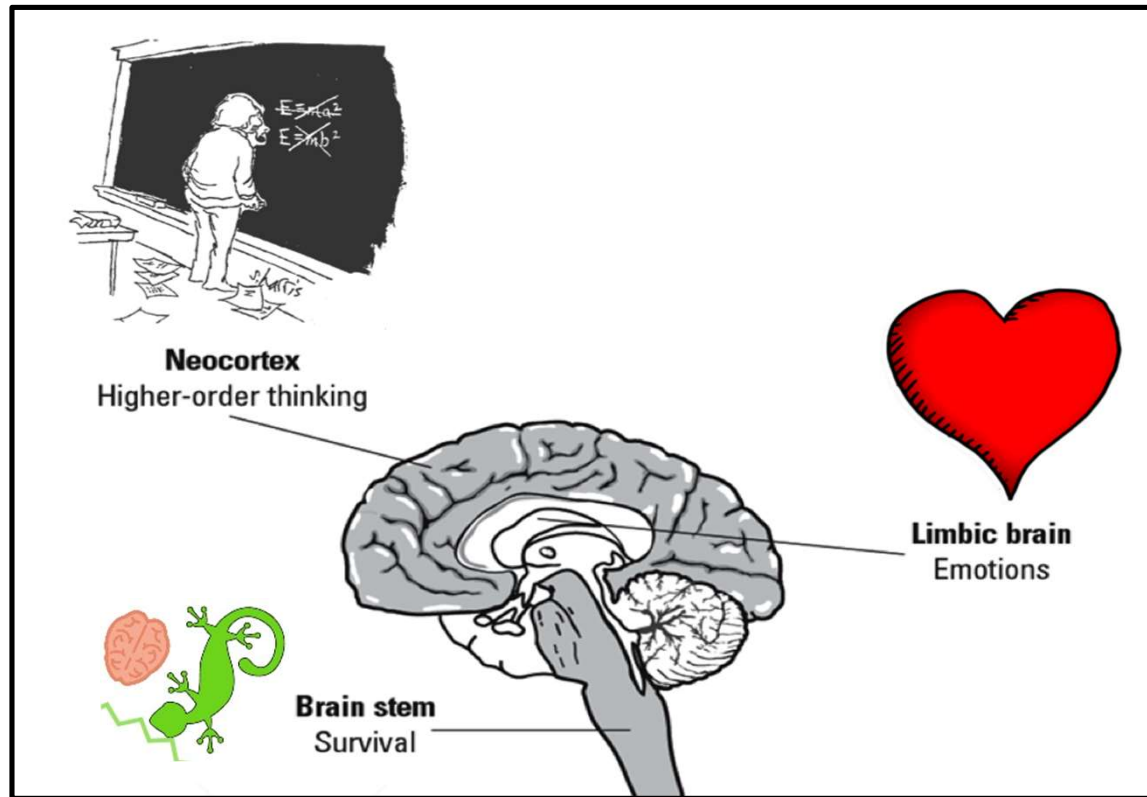




# The Biology of The Brain



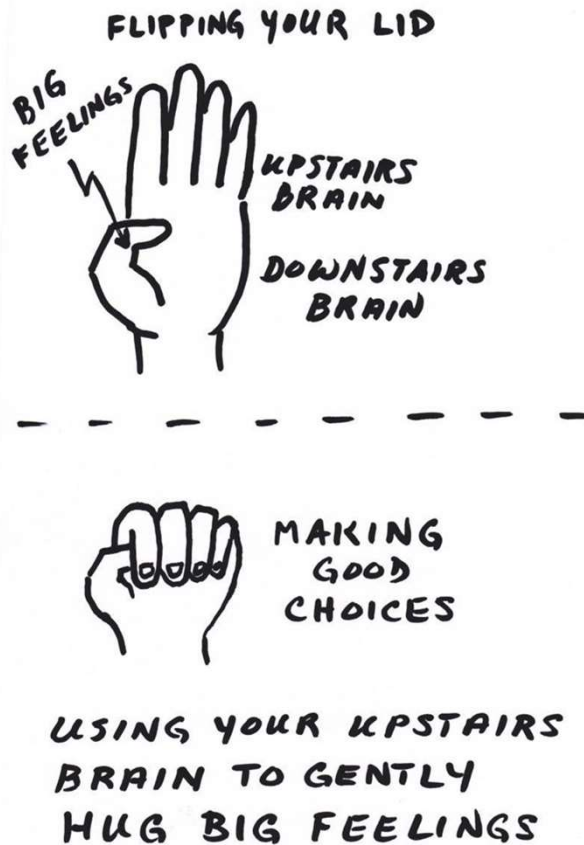
# The Biology of the Brain – Simple Version





# The Hand Model Of The Brain

(Dan Siegal)



This is useful when teaching parents, children and teachers about the brain.



# Meeting Basic Brain Needs

© 2020 Building Better Brains Australia



# Meeting Basic Brain Needs

**Basic need 1:** To feel safe

**Basic need 2:** To feel connected, accepted, loved, securely attached

**Higher need:** To make sense of personal narrative, find meaning



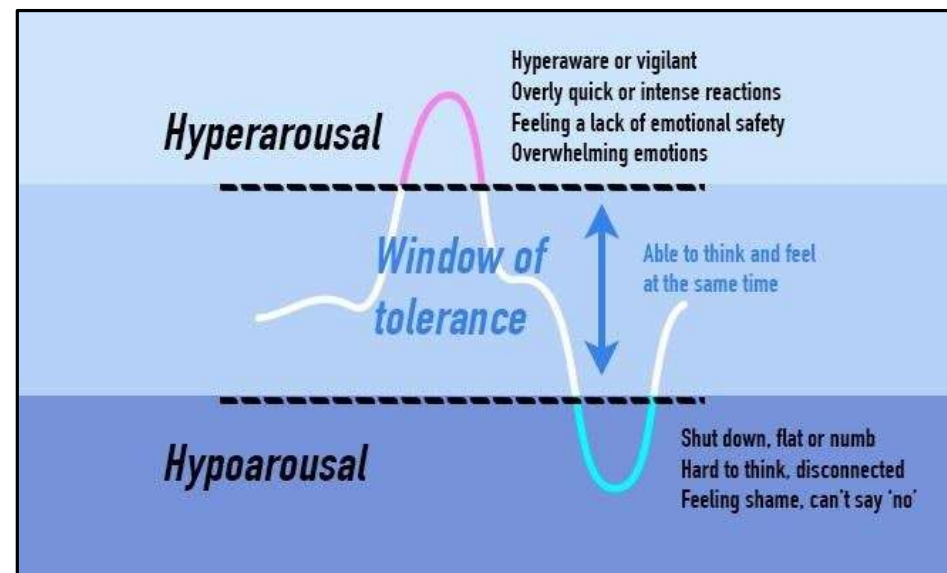
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



# Our Nervous System = Regulation

## The Window of Tolerance

This is our ability to stay within a regulated state in our nervous system before moving into *flight/fight/freeze stress responses* or *flop/faint shut down reactions*.



Source: [www.brickelandassociates.com](http://www.brickelandassociates.com)



# Mirror Neurons

*"What happens between brains affects what happens within brains"*

(Siegel and Payne Bryson)



- Study of monkeys – whether monkey watched another perform an action or performed the same action itself, the **exact same area of the brain was activated on the scans.**
- Thought to be responsible for role of **empathy and implicit learning/modelling.**
- **Mirror neurons in the Prefrontal Cortex** help us decode, receive and interpret, (particularly facial expressions) the intentions and emotions behind the action. For example, smiling for approval or frowning with disgust. The better we are at interpreting facial expressions the more active our mirror neuron system.
- **Each generation teaches the next** through social sharing, imitation and observation.
- Other animals such as monkeys, probably apes and possibly elephants, dolphins and dogs - have rudimentary mirror neurons.
- **Language development** is based on the interplay of mirror neurons.
- Based on our own sensations and experiences we can **mirror behavioural intentions of others and their emotional states.** This also means it can be hard not to be drawn into someone's anger.
- This process happens unconsciously and very quickly so we need to practice.

**STOP. BREATHE. REFLECT. CONNECT** *before we act.*

**Use mindfulness practice to train your brain to calm!**



# Still Face Experiment



- Brain is a **social organ**
- Shows how **baby is intrinsically driven to connect and attach** to mother
- Power of **social-emotional engagement system**
- Tries lots of different techniques to get mum to re-engage
- Shows what goes on for a child when caregiver is not attuned, receptive and responsive – when mirror neurons are not firing together.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>





# Interconnectedness

Become the physiological safe anchor for your child!

We are social mammals who rely on each other to help us **regulate, learn, grow, feel safe and connected.**

This relationship is known as **Interpersonal Neurobiology.**





# Interpersonal Neurobiology Summary

- **The brain is a social organ** - we are influenced by and we influence people and the environment around us.
- **Epigenetics** - Our life experiences (especially in the sensitive periods of brain development up to age 5) influence genetic coding and wiring in our brains and bodies.
- **Gene expression** - Our interactions with people and environments effect which genes are turned on or turned off.
- **Personal life experiences** - We act, emote and react, in response to our own life experiences and perception – we are always seeking to recreate what has 'worked' (i.e. helped us survive) in the past. This is our blueprint.





# Creating Safety and Connection

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# Creating Safety and Connection

## Parent Personal Skills Summary

1. Non-verbal communication of safety/non-threat
2. Empathic reflection – calms the guard dog, lets person feel seen and heard
3. Therapeutic limit setting on behaviour
4. Extended choice giving for power struggles
5. “Ask not tell” technique
6. Praise process over effort
7. Modelling Repair
8. Meet Your Child Where They are at – Let them lead!
9. Personal parent wellbeing and regulation support.



# 1. Non Verbal Communication

How do we create safety connection/safety?

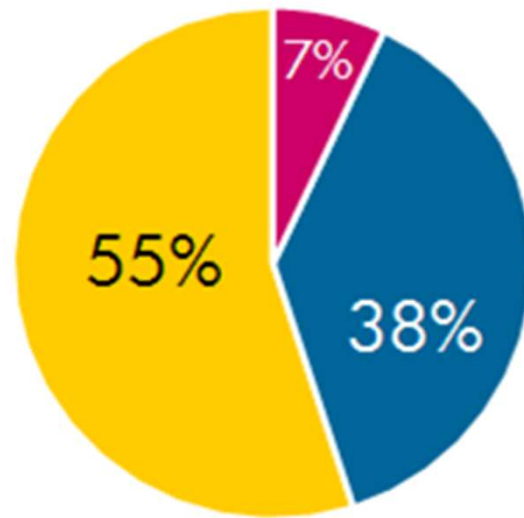
- *Eye connect* – getting down to child's level so you are not threatening
- *Facial expressions* – be mindful – soft eyes, relaxed face
- *Tone of voice* – relaxed, calm, soothing, soft
- *Posture*: Relaxed shoulders, open hands, make yourself smaller e.g. sit/kneel down
- *Gestures*: touch, offers of help
- *Timing response*: letting child speak, not talking over *etc*
- *Body movements*: coming closer, smooth, relaxed movements.

Children are far more attuned to these than adults are.

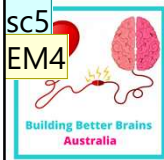
Source: The Whole Brain Child – Dan Siegal



# Elements of Personal Communication



- 7% spoken words
- 38% voice/tone
- 55% body language



# Building Safety and Connection

## Parent Checklist

Before you start, make a conscious effort to slow down, take a breath, check your own internal state and get yourself grounded (feel your feet on the floor). Use a soft tone of voice and facial expression. Get down on their level, so that you appear less intimidating.

To help the child get their higher brain back online (tick the ones that work):

- Invite them to slow down and take a breath.
- Ask them if they want to move around or get a drink of water.
- Take a breath with them and model ways to settle.
- Invite them to rub their hands together, or cross their arms over their chest and either pat, rub or squeeze their upper arms, and do this with them.
- Offer ear plugs or heavy pillows/blanket to help calm their system.
- Take a step back to give them more space.
- Limited choices "*you can choose to...or choose to...Which do you choose?*"
- Make an empathy statement "*I can see you are feeling.*"
- Encourage them to take all of the time that they need.
- Reassure them that you are there to help, and ask them how you can help.
- Help them orient to something else – like a colourful picture, or interesting object.



## Slide 23

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**sc5**

Can this be simplified? currently too wordy

sian chambers, 1/06/2020

**EM4**

**Better?**

Emily Manktelow, 2/06/2020





## 2. Empathic Responding

Reflective statements demonstrate empathic listening:

Reflecting and paraphrasing their words:

Child says *"I can't do this!"*

You might say *"you are thinking that it's really tricky to do and you are finding that hard. I am here to help. How can I help?"*

Reflecting emotional content (watch their expressions/reactions):

Child: *"I'm angry"/makes angry noises or stomps feet etc. or looks mad*

You: *"You are feeling so mad right now that things aren't working out the way you want"*

*"You are feeling so happy because ..."* (what child is feeling)

*"You are really proud of yourself for ..."* (what child is feeling) or *"I can see you are feeling super proud that you worked that out yourself"*



# Supportive De-escalation Scripts

1. **Acknowledge the feeling** - *"I can see/hear you are feeling so sad/mad/worried right now (calm tone, mirror emotion on face).*
2. **Connection and safety** – *"You are safe. I am here to help. We can get through this together."*
3. **Switch on upper brain** – *"What do we need to do to fix this?"*

NOTE: Behaviour and de-escalation language, building emotional intelligence, choice giving techniques plus therapeutic limit setting are explored in detail in our Brain and Behaviour online course and Filial Therapy training.



## 3. Therapeutic Limit Setting

When behaviour is escalating, use therapeutic limit setting and choice-giving scripts (ACT):

1. **Acknowledge** child's feeling or desire (your voice must convey empathy and understanding):

*"Billy, I know that you are feeling mad, so mad you would like to hit..."*

Child learns that his feelings, desires and wishes are valid and accepted (but not all behaviour); just empathetically reflecting the child's feeling often diffuses the intensity of the feeling or need).

2. **Communicate** the limit (be specific, clear and brief):

*"but.....is not for hitting/breaking/hurting etc."*

3. **Target** acceptable alternatives (provide one or more choices, depending on age of child).

*"If you need to get your mad feelings out you can go for a walk or choose an activity in our peace corner".*

The goal is to provide your child with an acceptable outlet for expressing the feeling or the original action, whilst giving him an opportunity to exercise self-control.

*Note: pointing helps re-direct a child's attention.*





## 4. Extended Limit Setting – Choice Giving

Providing children with age-appropriate choices empowers children by allowing them a measure of control over their circumstances. Children who feel more empowered and “in control” are more capable of regulating their own behavior, a prerequisite for self-control.

Presenting children with choices provides opportunities for decision-making and problem-solving. Through practice with choice-making, children learn to accept responsibility for their choices and actions and learn they are competent and capable.

Providing children with choices reduces power struggles

e.g. ACT Technique first then extend with choices if needed

A: Johnny I can see you are feeling frustrated/mad/sad/ right now but

C: the chair is not for swinging on – you might hurt yourself

T: If your body needs to move to calm down to switch back on your thinking brain, you can choose to

Choice1: Go and grab a drink of water OR you can choose to

Choice 2: use a sensory support (e.g. playdough, drawing, squishy ball, breathing ball, weighted products, fitball chair etc)

Which do you choose to do now to help yourself calm down?



## 5. Asking Instead of Telling

Asking instead of telling switches on your child's upper brain

1. Children will listen to you AFTER they feel listened to.
2. When children hear a command, a signal is sent to the brain that invites resistance.
3. When children hear a respectful question, a signal is sent to the brain to search for an answer. In the process they feel capable and are more likely to cooperate.
4. Conversational curiosity questions require a conversation.

Stop "telling" and "ask" curiosity questions such as:

"What happened?"

"How do you feel about it?"

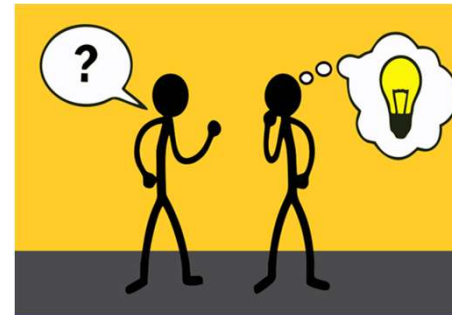
"How do you think others feel?"

"What ideas do you have to solve this problem?"

"What do you need to do to get your work done on time?"

"Who thinks it is too noisy in here right now?"

What should we do about it?"



Source: [www.positivediscipline.com](http://www.positivediscipline.com)



## 6. Praise Process, not just Product

Giving feedback on the process, not just outcome, allows child to improve their 'internal working model of self' (basis of their thoughts, feelings and behaviours).

They improve in confidence, sense of agency, and build a stronger internal sense of positivity, resiliency and regulation toward tasks and challenge.

### Self esteem-building scripts:

"You did it!"

"You decided that was the way that was supposed to fit together."

"You figured it out."

"You know just how you want that to look."

"You like the way that turned out."

"You're not giving up—you're determined to figure that out."

"You decided..."

"You've got a plan for how..."

"You look really happy/proud that you solved the problem of....." etc





## 7. Modelling Repair

The most important learning moment is what you do after what you've done!  
(Gary Landreth)

"I'm sorry I yelled at you/spoke to you/ responded like that....."

"I was feeling .....  
(own your own state!)"

"Instead I should have .....  
(target a tool/strategy for regulation e.g. come back when I was feeling clam, clenched and unclenched my fists, splashed water on my face, taken some deep breaths, gone outside for a calm down moment etc)"

"But it was not okay for me to treat you like that. You don't deserve that. I am sorry."



## 8. Meet Your Child Where They Are At – Let Them Lead!

Take the time to understand their world!

For example, be the camera person for a Tiktok video, learn about Pokemon, Minecraft or whatever they are into.

This will help them share language with you and see that you are willing to connect with them.

You don't have to become a master, basic knowledge of their world is enough.

Give lots of opportunity for voice and choice practice!

Prioritise being present with them!



shutterstock.com • 283667012





## 9. Parent Support and Wellbeing

### Stay calm to calm – Be the lighthouse in the storm!

Model your own regulation skills when getting activated eg breathing, clench/unclench fists, move, ground your feet, use a mantra – be here now. This child needs you right now.

### Use your tools

Write down 5 tools that you can practice to help support yourself when you become activated.





# What is Play?



# What is Play?

- "Play builds pro social brains" (Panckeck).
- "The behaviour is initiated when an animal is adequately fed, clothed, healthy, and not under stress (e.g., from physical danger, harsh weather, illness, social [instability](#), family dysfunction), or intense competing systems (e.g., feeding, mating, competition, fear). In other words, the animal is in a 'relaxed field" (The Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play).





# Play is Essential For Optimum Brain Function

Play is required for:

- 1) A well-integrated brain** – one that is adaptable, flexible, creative, focused on problem solving, utilises left brain (logical/verbal) and right brain (conceptual/visual) working together.
- 2) Emotional intelligence** - the ability to develop a body felt sense of what they are feeling/sensing in their bodies in reaction to the world around them and then be able to verbally label what they are feeling in words

Play-saturated children tend to have more resilience. They feel comfortable with, and are curious to know, other children who are different.

Tolerance, pro social skills and developing empathy are natural outgrowths of more complex play processes.





# History of Play Through the Ages (1)

## Prehistoric times

- Dice, gaming boards
- Possibly football, as some footprints discovered in Namibia suggest.

## Roman Times

- War games and wrestling for the boys
- Playing with rag dolls for the girls.

## Egypt

The earliest records for ball games come from Egyptian tombs, built in 2500 BC, which have given up artefacts showing football type games of the time.

## Ancient Greece

- The value of play and its fundamental role in child development was discussed by great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.
- Yo-yos, marbles, and knucklebones, which were made from actual sheep legs, were particularly popular games of the time.
- Around 2000 BCE, the Greeks played a game named 'Episkyros', involving both kicking and throwing a ball.



<https://sententiaeantiquae.com/2016/09/12/lifes-like-craps-but-it-neednt-be-crap-plutarch-and-plato-2/>



## History of Play Through the Ages (2)

### Middle Ages

- children were often expected to work but still managed to play
- handmade toys
- acting out stories.

### Renaissance period

- Ideas like play-based pedagogy and learning through first-hand experience were introduced by famous thinkers of the era.

### Germany (1837)

- Froebel, founded the first Kindergarten, where activities like singing and self-directed play took place

### Early 20<sup>th</sup> century

- The industrial revolution introduced factory-made games.
- Monopoly, a version of 'Life', and jigsaw puzzles.
- Playgrounds grew popular too, as urbanization raised concerns regarding the safety of children playing on the streets.



<https://sites.google.com/site/medievaltimeswtsdnj/sport/gamebal>



# History of Play Through the Ages (3)



<https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/dangerous-playgrounds-1900s/>



# What Happens When We Don't Play?





# Play Under Threat (1)

## Play is under threat from our current lifestyle

- Play is grossly undervalued and misunderstood in our productivity-driven society.
- In one generation, outdoor playtime for kids has halved compared to their parents .
- Children 3 to 11 years of age have lost 12 hours per week of free time.
- Less children are playing outside unattended, especially in urbanized countries.
- Outdoor play has decreased by 71% in one generation in the US and UK. Intergenerational play and 'family' games are also in decline (source: [www.childandfamilyblog.com](http://www.childandfamilyblog.com)).



## Play Under Threat (2)

### Technology

- Immersion in electronic media takes away time from real play, either outdoors or indoors.
- In our stressed society, time and presence of caregivers is being eroded and replaced by electronics and toys. These do not nurture and grow brains in the same way (source: [pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/3/e20182058#sec-13](https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/3/e20182058#sec-13))

### Parents

- less time to play, be present and connect with their kids because of demanding jobs and long hours commuting.
- Excessive screen time is being used to help 'manage' children's need for attention

## Why Are Children Playing Less?

### Environment

- The physical and social environments of childhood in the Western world have changed dramatically over the past several decades.
- Parents are increasingly concerned about safety and children find themselves in carefully constructed outdoor playgrounds that limit challenge (source: [www.child-encyclopedia.com](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com))

### Children

- limited time to play due to overscheduled time and structured activities.
- More focus on early academics and standardised testing than play-based education.
- Parent's perception and anxiety surrounding competitive society that they 'need to prepare their children early for...'



# Reclaiming our Need to Play

In the West, we have distorted life by separating work and play, forgetting our pasts as hunter-gatherers, in which sharing and joyfulness were integrated into the task of finding food.

Honouring a human need to be in a state of play and seeing this as a public health necessity is as important as hand washing, good nutrition or careful driving.



[Source: www.childandfamilyblog.com/early-childhood-development/play-deprivation-early-child-development/](http://www.childandfamilyblog.com/early-childhood-development/play-deprivation-early-child-development/)



# Childhood in Crisis (1)

- Males more likely than females to have experienced a mental disorder (16.3% compared with 11.5%)
- ADHD most common mental disorder among children and adolescents. This is a hyperarousal stress response in the nervous system resulting in high cortisol and high adrenalin. This shuts off the thinking brain and impulse control.
- National prevalence of 6.9% for anxiety disorders in young people.
- American Paediatrics Association are now prescribing play for children suffering from behavioural and emotional regulation disorders.

Long-term impacts of play deprivation during early child development include isolation, depression, reduced self-control, poor resilience and reduced social and emotional learning (emotional intelligence). This results in a lack of healthy brain integration and development.





# Childhood in Crisis (2)

**1 in 7 primary school children  
have a mental illness**

**1 in 5 adults will experience  
mental health problems  
throughout a year**

**1 in 3 girls suffer from an  
anxiety disorder and 1 in 5 boys**

**1 in 4 adolescents have a mental  
illness**

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics



# Effects of Play Deprivation





# The Benefits of Play









# Wired To Play

- Humans, as mammals, **are social creatures** who are wired to play in order to learn and explore the world and have relationships with others and themselves.
- Play satisfies the needs of the downstairs brain by creating **safety and connection**.
- **Strengthens vagal tone through social interaction**. The smarter, more flexible and adaptive the animal, the more they play.
- **Play increases whole brain integration** through movement, creative self-expression and the practice of self-regulation.
- Play causes **changes in the prefrontal cortex** that help to wire the brain's executive control center. This has a critical role in **regulating emotions, making plans, solving problems and helping whole brain integration**.
- **Play lowers cortisol** (stress chemicals) in the brain, **increases dopamine** in the pleasure/reward pathway and **increases oxytocin** (which promotes bonding and dampens amygdala activation).
- "The function of play is **to build pro-social brains**, which are brains that know how to interact with others in positive ways" (Panksepp).
- To develop the area of the brain responsible for higher-order thinking, children need to have rich experiences that stimulate all of their senses. For a child, **play is a critical path to those experiences that engage their senses and provide the foundation for future learning**.
- Sustained, moderate to severe play deprivation in early life has been linked to: **increased prevalence of depression, a tendency to become rigidly inflexible, diminished impulse control, less self-regulation, increased addictive susceptibility, diminished management of aggression, and fragility and shallowness of enduring interpersonal relationships**.







# Family Fun and Connection for Brain Building

- Prioritising family fun time helps provide and reinforce feelings about what it feels like to be in a safe and loving relationship, and puts connection in the 'love bank' of the relationship.
- Dopamine (a chemical in the brain) helps aid communication between brain cells. Brain cells get a 'hit' when something pleasurable happens which sets off reward/pleasure pathway in the brain. This system then seeks to recreate these feelings by repeating the experience.
- Improves receptivity, reduces reactivity and behavioural issues and improves regulatory control.
- Reduces power struggles and reactivity and encourages creativity, co operation and connection.
- Prioritise filling each others cups every day!
- Especially focus on extra connection building before separations/transitions (these can produce the most anxiety in children).
- The kind of relationships you provide for your own children today will effect generations to come.

Examples: improvisation games, board games, card games, ball games, build forts, jump on trampoline, dance, create music, go swimming, play in the park, fly kites, play hide and seek, ride bikes, water gun battles, create art together, cook together, snuggle up for stories and bedtime routines.

**"You teach your child who they are and how they deserve to be treated by the way you respond to them"**

(The Whole Brain Child – Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson)



# Different Types of Play





# Sensory Play

## What is sensory play?

- Sensory play is any type of play that engages the senses.
- Children engaged in sensory play discover new smells, colours and textures and become more comfortable with the world around them. The more senses are engaged during play, the better.
- Each time a child engages in sensory play their corresponding nerve connections grow a bit stronger. This helps their brain develop sensory processing capabilities.

Sensory play also strengthens:

- **Cognitive skills** - facilitates understanding but also improves knowledge retention by engaging the whole brain and creativity to overcome obstacles.
- **Fine and gross motor skills**. Object manipulation increases a child's ability to climb, jump, throw and hold a pencil to write accurately.
- **Social skills** - when children play together, they begin to form and explore the mechanics of relationships. They learn how to share, take turns, co-operate and negotiate with others.
- **Regulation skills** – by engaging the body and senses physically in sensory play, levels of the stress hormone cortisol are reduced, which lead to less feelings of anxiety (and other negative emotions).



# Sensory Play Activities

## Frozen Paint Cubes



*Ice cubes with food colouring*

Learnwithplayathome.com

## Beach Scavenger Hunt

- Beach Scavenger Hunt
- 1. Seashell
  - 2. Periwinkle shell
  - 3. Seaweed
  - 4. Beach glass
  - 5. Piece of Litter
  - 6. Something round
  - 7. Feather
  - 8. Beach grass
  - 9. Crab shell
  - 10. "Treasure"

bloggymomma.com

*Inspires curiosity*

## Playdough



*Fine motor skills, shapes*

Littlegraces.com.au

## Treasure Box



*Different textures and smells*

Theimaginationtree.com

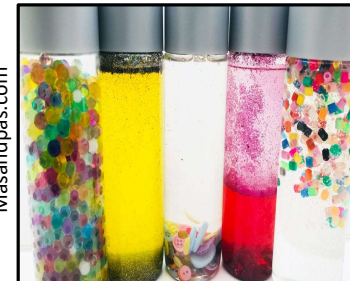
## Bath Time



*Calming scents/ sponges/bubbles*

Oxo.com

## Sensory Bottles



*Great for kids who are restless or anxious*

Masandpas.com



# Sensory Integration Activities

These types of activities link sensory inputs to language and expression, helping the child reconnect to their body, better identify their feelings, and improve self-regulation. They also help with emotional intelligence and whole brain integration (healthy brain wiring).

**Body scan:** Ask the child to lay down and notice how their feet and other body parts feel. Are they cold from the floor? Are they tense or relaxed?

**Mystery bag:** Now they need to close their eyes and identify different objects. It doesn't have to be just through touch. You can ask them to smell a rose, taste a raisin *etc.* Reflect on what they notice in detail.

**Igniting the senses:** The child explores their five senses as they imagine themselves in certain situations. For example, touch really cold water, hear their favourite song, smell chocolate cake, taste a sour lemon *etc.*

**Call-and-response drumming or clapping:** You play a rhythm with your hands or whatever home-made instrument you can find, like chopsticks. The child must then reproduce the same sound and vice versa.

**Drawing to different styles of music:** Play some music and ask the child to draw something that describes how they feel when they hear the song. Choose different types of music – fast, slow, different cultures/rhythms *etc.*



# Nurture Play

Nurture play activities decrease anxiety and boost self-esteem as they allow the child to be truly seen, felt, heard, and understood.

Nurture activities are very simple and usually involve skin-to-skin contact. Physical contact helps our body release the bonding chemical, Oxytocin, gives hits of the pleasure chemical dopamine and reduces the stress hormone cortisol.

- **Lotion hands:** Put lotion on each other hands and massage them whilst you share about the day. To make it more fun, play thumb wars afterward (let your child have a sense of winning!).
- **Guess the shape:** Take turns drawing something with your fingers on each other's back (letter, number, shape) and then try to guess what it is.
- **M&M's emotion game:** This will probably be everyone's favourite! Match a different feeling to each M&M colour, e.g. blue for sadness, yellow for jealousy, etc. They pick one M&M without peeking and before they eat it, they must talk about an experience that made them feel angry, happy, sad, etc.





# Nurture Play Activities (1)

## Young Children



Source: The Theraplay® Institute Newsletter of Spring, 1994

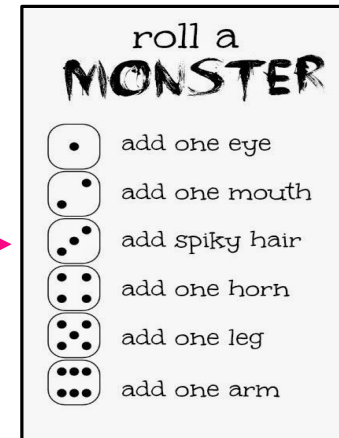
- Peek-a-boo with hands or feet.
- This little piggy went to market.
- What will happen when I push this button: Parent gently presses nose, ear, toe and "beeps," "honks," etc.
- Patty-cake: can be played with feet too!
- Any song or rhyme paired with movement (dancing, bouncing, rocking, moving limbs, finger plays). Examples – rock-a-bye baby, patty cake, itsy bitsy spider, ride a horsie, the wheels on the bus, rub a dub dub, I'm gonna get you.
- Touch and texture - lotioning, making hand or foot prints in powder, pressing hands or feet into play dough or shaving cream.
- Activities promoting eye contact: parent puts sticker on own nose and helps child pull it off: parent puts cotton ball on nose with a dab of lotion, child blows it off.
- Blow bubbles and help child pop them with fingers or toes.
- Tower of hands: Put lotion on parent's and child's hands and make a hand stack, alternating slippery hands.



# Nurture Play Activities (2)

## School kids and young teens

- **Thumb Wrestling** – Child must wait for start signal (make the waiting fun). The child starts off winning and gradually is frustrated by losing (intermittently).
- **Donut or Pretzel Challenge** - Parent and child sit cross-legged, knees touching. Adult holds donut on index finger. Instructions: *"I am going to tell you to take a small, medium, or tiny bite. Your job is to see if you can get to the last part of the donut before it falls off."* The child is not allowed to touch the donut, but the adult rotates it to facilitate success.
- **Cards/boardgames** - collaborative teamwork, builds attunement and strengthens connection and relationship.
- **Balloon tennis** – call different body parts to use to pass balloon back and forth between parent and child.
- **Word-at-a-time story** – collaborative team work, attunement, eye contact, turn-taking
- **Charades** – take it in turns to act out clues – no talking allowed.
- **Collaborative drawing challenge** – take it in turns as family or parent and child to add to a collaborative drawing or play Roll a Monster game.
- **Foot/hand massage** - to connect and debrief about day
- **Collaborative Lego challenges** – working as team build tallest tower, a bridge, your family or a peaceful calm place.





# Challenge and Self Esteem Activities

How about teaching your child the value of working together as a team?

## Word-at-a-time story

Create a story together starting with one word and adding just one word at a time, taking it in turns to contribute the next word.

## I went shopping...

And what did you buy? Each family member adds one more item to the list when it is their turn, and then repeat the rest of the shopping items before them. Others help if needed e.g. "I went shopping and I bought a carrot, some peas, and a hammer".

## Board games and card games

Promote pro-social skills, emotional regulation practice, turn taking ,impulse control, shared experiences, feel good bonding.





# What About Risky Play?

Common examples of risky play include:

- Climbing a tall tree or swinging from monkey bars - children love heights (from an evolutionary point of view we used to live in trees so this love of climbing is not surprising!).
- Exploring a hill or playing hide and seek. They also get thrilled by the possibility of getting lost (and found again - particularly when parents are playing too).
- Running or riding their bike like crazy. The need for speed is real!
- Rough and tumble social play.
- Chasing or wrestling. Such activities are known as "rough and tumble play" and are an essential component of learning regulation, limit setting, self control, and enjoying positive physical touch. This all helps to reduce the stress hormone cortisol and aids attachment and bonding by releasing hits of dopamine (the pleasure chemical) and oxytocin (involved in bonding).
- Playing close to dangerous elements, like fire, or standing close to an edge.





# Risky Play – An Exercise

Practice noticing and managing your own anxiety responses at the playground.

If your child is a climber and risky play explorer, be physically close enough to catch them if they were to fall, but give them space to explore.

If you are feeling very anxious, instead of telling them to stop their exploring (because you feel anxious) why not try doing a check-in and asking your child:

*"Do you have a plan to get down from there safely?"*

*"How does your body feel right now?"*

*"Do you need help getting down from there or do you have a plan?"*

These questions help switch on their thinking/problem solving brain to find a solution. You are also letting them know that you are available to assist if needed, but giving them space to claim the victory and build positive self confidence.

*Note: although you should encourage risky play, you should never push your child to try an activity that they are not ready for. Allow them to control the pace and encourage and support them to learn to make safe choices within their 'risky' explorations.*



# True Play is Mindfulness in Action





# The Power of Playfulness

## Reflection follow-up

Event	Usual Response	Playful, silly, fun alternatives
Tom struggles to get out the door in time for school every morning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ask 10 times</li> <li>- Tell him to do different jobs multiple times</li> <li>- Become frustrated, irritated</li> <li>- Nagging</li> <li>- Chore charts</li> <li>- Threaten, yell, coerce</li> <li>- Punish</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ask questions instead of yell – make the child’s brain work to find answers eg what else do you need to do to get ready? How long do you have to get ready? Etc</li> <li>- Use a silly song</li> <li>- Become a horse and piggy back around house</li> <li>- Have 5 minutes physical connection time at start of day – cuddle/rough housing/games etc</li> <li>- Use buzzer or timer – try and beat time score each day</li> <li>- Do celebration dance/song/pose/crazy face/word after each chore – crazier/more fun the better</li> </ul>
Other examples from your daily life:		
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		



# Fill Your Child's Love Cup



How can you fill your child's need for SAFETY and CONNECTION to help their brain thrive?







# We Can Build Better Brains Built On Connection and Play!

1. Advocate for your child's need to have unstructured play time so they can grow healthy brains
2. Practice your personal skills and scripts to strengthen your parenting connection
3. Let your child lead – start where they are at!
4. Prioritise play and connection time in your family to fill all your cups!
5. Play cards over breakfast, games in the car, play sports together, throw a ball back and forth, go bike riding, spend at least 10-15 minutes uninterrupted, present, positive play time with your child each day to meet their developmental brain needs safety and connection.
6. If you want to learn more, train in Filial Therapy (a form of play therapy that parents can do at home with their own children), or family Theraplay.
7. Incorporate more nurture and close connection time in your family – hand massage, positive touch, eye contact, laughter and presence.
8. Give your children lots of outdoor physical time to play and explore.
9. Minimise time on screens for improved mental health.
10. Schedule a family fun night once a week and let the kids choose the activities *e.g.* board games, obstacle course, hide and seek, twister, sports, ball games, bike rides, dance parties, cooking, jamming to music, writing a song.
11. Build more kinaesthetic play into your lives – aids nervous system regulation and reduces stress *e.g.* shaving foam, water and sand, paint, mud *etc.*
12. Resource yourself by creating more time in your own life for play and connection.



# BBBA Resources for Parents Group Resources

You can download your FREE copy of the kid's calm brains activity book here:

<https://buildingbetterbrains.com.au/kids-calm-brains-exercise-book/>

In the exercise book, there are colouring sheets, worksheets, and step-by-step guides on how to do the calm brain practices with your children.

The FREE downloadable Self Care resource manual for parents is here:

<https://buildingbetterbrains.com.au/self-care-resource-book-download/>

In the resource book, there are worksheets and step by step guides on how to do the self care practices.

**Join our support group for parents and educators with the full video series and more resources here:**

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/buildingbetterbrainsaustralia/>





# Together we can build better brains!

- The mission of **Building Better Brains Australia** is to help make the world a better place through training, consultancy, education, connection and empowerment.
- We work to grow capacity and understanding in the systems around the next generation of children in our care – **parents, educators and mental health professionals**.
- Building Better Brains Australia is the love child of husband and wife team – Sian Chambers-Vallance and Tony Vallance. Just as Building Better Brains Australia is the bridge between the work Sian and Tony do to grow capacity and care in the systems they work with (mental health and education), it is also the bridge between the 20+ years of neuroscience and trauma research that needs to form the basis of best practice in the systems around our children (and all human beings).
- We hope you will work alongside us to help build a better world and healthy brains and relationship for the next generation in our care.

Come and join our worldwide community of world changers in our private online Facebook community, or subscribe to our e-mail list.

[www.buildingbetterbrains.com.au](http://www.buildingbetterbrains.com.au)

EDUCATE

CONNECT

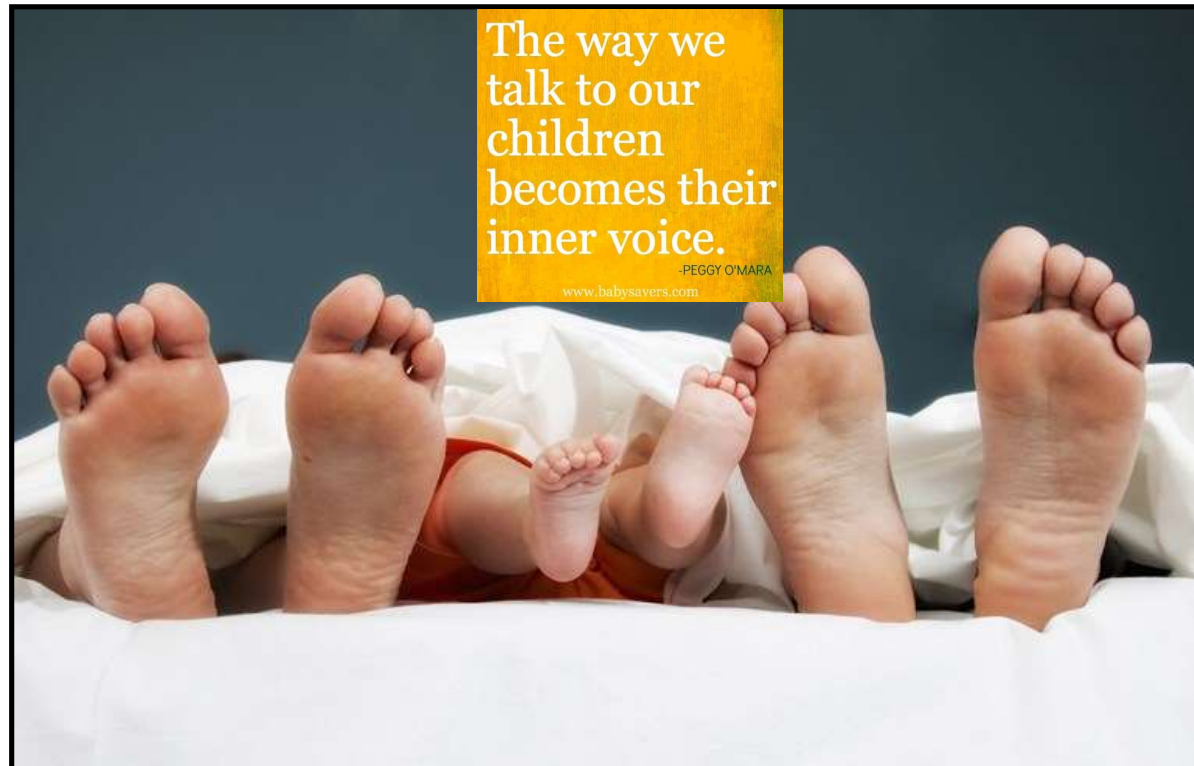
EMPOWER

GROW

66



# Thank you for listening!





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