

Parenting with Brains

By Jennifer Kolari MSW., RSW

You know those delicious moments when parent and child are locked into each other's gaze—laughing, smiling or just making faces? Those moments when the rest of the world disappears? Few things in life can touch those times, but they are much more than just feel-good moments. These interactions are critical to the adult/child bond and to a child's health and development.

All that cooing, copying of the baby's facial expressions and mimicking of her sounds lets her know that she is understood. That understanding is reflected back by copying and imitating babies in a wonderful back-and-forth dance throughout the day. Babies love and crave this interaction. All this mirroring calms and soothes them and helps them to feel safe with what is happening around them. Throughout our lives all of us are calmed when we feel listened to cared about and understood. It turns out that these feelings are critical to the development of a healthy sense of self and they are the building blocks for social cognition, empathy, attachment and learning.

The way the human brain learns appears to be related to what is called the mirror neuron system. Until the mid-1990s, when a group of neuroscientists in Italy discovered the way mirror neurons function, it was believed that humans basically learned by doing. Since then, we have come to understand that the same learning experience occurs simply by watching—and mirroring the behaviors we observe. So, when you smile, coo, and make funny faces at a baby, he learns to copy you. And he also learns that a particular action on his part initiates a reliable response from you. And all the while, as he “learns,” the baby's brain is creating more and more neuropathways, or connections, that ultimately determine how he responds to what's going on in his world.

Scientists now believe that the mirror neuron system is responsible not only for the acquisition of language and motor skills but also for how we acquire social skills and for our ability to empathize with the feelings of others. In the words of Dr. Giacomo Rizzolati (2001), who led the team that made the initial discovery, “Mirror neurons allow us to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but through direct stimulation, not by thinking but by feeling.”

It seems that through mirroring and reflecting feelings back, we let children know that we care about them and understand them and also help them organize their own feelings by seeing them mirrored in our own expressions and body language. As Gabor Mate (2000) explains in his book *Scattered Minds*, the interaction between parents and child affects the growth of nerve cells and emotional circuitry in the brain. Positive events release reward chemicals like opioids, endorphins and oxytocin which encourage the growth of nerve cells and the connections between them. So, mirroring, not just by parents but by significant adults in a child’s life appears to have a two-fold function: it is what creates that all-important bond or attachment that lets the child know he is safe with us, and it is responsible for allowing him to learn and develop appropriate responses to his immediate environment.

Learning to mirror or using the CALM Technique (*C-connect, A- match the affect of the child, L-listen to what you child is really saying, M-mirror and reflect the emotion back to show true understanding*), helps parents attune to children’s affect and experience, which has a powerful and very positive effect on their learning and on their ability to regulate their impulse control and anxiety. In fact, it seems to have a very positive impact on their mental health in general. Mirroring is a wonderful way to de-escalate children and can stop tantrums in their tracks.

Dealing with our children’s negative behavior can be challenging and often it can feel like nothing will work. It is especially hard with children who have difficulty

regulating their emotions. Their feelings tend to build up and children let them out in different ways. Sometimes through a tantrums, whining, bugging a sibling, rigidity or just plain not listening. This technique, along with praise, physical nurturance (such as hugging and cuddling) and the setting of fair and consistent limits, can work and bring out the best in our children and the best in us as parents.

References

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Biography



Jennifer Kolari, MSW, RSW, is a therapist in Toronto who has been helping children, teens and families get connected for 20 years. She is founder of Connected Parenting, an agency that offers individual and family therapy, as well as parent coaching and children's social skills groups. Jennifer is author of the groundbreaking book, *Connected Parenting: Transform Your Challenging Child and Build Loving Bonds for Life*. She has appeared in magazines such as Today's Parent and Canadian Family, and on television including Canada AM, Breakfast Television, and CBC's Steven and Chris. Her insightful strategies, shared with warmth and humor, make her a highly sought-after speaker with schools, organizations and agencies throughout North America. Jennifer spent several years counseling children, teens and parents for the Toronto District School Board and serving as a field supervisor for the University of Toronto faculty of Social Work. Before that she was a family therapist at Integra, a children's mental health centre in Toronto. Jennifer lives in Toronto with her husband and their three children. For further information on Jennifer or to purchase her book visit www.connectedparenting.com

