

The Importance of Positive Touch and its Potential Influences on the Development of the Brain

Pauline Carpenter

Having recently attended a study day, at The Centre for Child Mental Health in London, which covered the development of the brain in great depth, I am further convinced that teaching and encouraging parents to use positive touch, such as Infant Massage or Baby Yoga, will not only enhance lifelong relations between parent and child, but will also have a profound effect on society as a whole.

The day was broken up into (approximately) 45 minute sessions, with two speakers. The audience were fed some very complex, but interesting information about the functioning and development of the brain, which at times was enough to blow the circuits in my brain! However, all was not lost because we were treated to (and I quote) 'the Ladybird' version by Dr Margot Sunderland. Also, to keep us all alive and (brains) ticking, the sessions were broken up by a rather dynamic voice worker - who encouraged us all to move about in a particular fashion, whilst producing certain sounds and words as we did so. Sounds strange? Maybe. But, I have never spent eight hours at a study day with such complex subject matter, and felt so energised at the end!!

The book mentioned several times during the day was 'Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions' by Jaak Panksepp. (1998) Oxford University Press. A fascinating and informative book that is worth reading if you have an iota of interest in the subject. To indicate the relevance of this book to all teachers of Positive Touch, This extract from the book says it all:

"It is generally believed that harsh early experiences can modify emotional traits for a lifetime. Could the many wars and other human tragedies caused by the megalomaniac tendencies of certain individuals and groups throughout history have been avoided if the leaders had been more warmly parented as children?" (Page 247) (What does Positive Touch do? It helps the attachment bond between parent and baby – leading to the higher chance of children being 'more warmly parented'.)

During the study day there was much talk about the 'downstairs' brain – the subcortex (animal brain) and the 'upstairs' brain – the cortex. The animal brain is what newborn babies use to function. There are seven emotional systems activated by the animal brain - rage, fear, seeking, separation distress, play, lust and nurturance. Rage, Fear and Separation distress are those that a baby needs support with. If the infant is not helped by the parent/carer to control these emotions in a nurturing, caring way, then the negative effects will be lifelong.

Help is needed because there is very little glutamate in the frontal brain of a newborn, which prevents them from forming thoughts and ultimately prevents them from being able to calm themselves, without help. During a child's first two years a tremendous amount of development of the 'upstairs' brain occurs. Unfortunately, children and adults who do not have good experiences (interactions) in infancy will be inclined to only use the 'downstairs' brain and not be able to bring control to a situation when needs be. This is known as 'Psycho-biochemical Arrest' - which basically means that the person is functioning like a baby. They have a trigger happy Amygdala (part of subcortex) which reacts to 'threats' all the time – unfortunately, in these cases, the frontal lobe does not kick in to bring calm or control to the situation because the wiring system that connects the 'downstairs' and 'upstairs' brain has not been developed.

There was much proof of what was being said at the study day, as we were given the opportunity to see video clips of those unfortunate enough to have been affected by dysfunctional and neglectful parenting and were suffering the consequences. The video

showed scans of the brain of these individuals, indicating where the main activity took place, when the person was in a particular stress inducing situation. (The situations were artificially produced for the individual having the scan, through the use of films.) It was quite apparent that the activity in the 'downstairs' brain was paramount, whereas there was little or no activity in the 'upstairs' brain at all. Such examples are of impulsive murderers, whose animal brains are firing strongly, but the frontal cortex is not, thus there is no mechanism to prevent their rage from spiralling out of control and they carry an attack through to the bitter end.

The study day covered the surface of what has been learnt about the brain so far; Panksepp's book covers it in tremendous depth, but even he admits that there is still much more to find out. I will finish with one more quote from the book, which I hope will re-affirm that the work you are doing is of paramount importance. If through your work you can affect a positive change in the relationship of one parent and child, by giving massage as the tool for that child to have positive experiences, then you are helping to bring about the sound development of that child's brain – which in turn affects, not only their family relationships, but how they deal with all situations throughout their lives.

“Social bonding is of enormous psychiatric importance, for if it is inadequately established, the organism can suffer severe consequences for the rest of its life. A solid social bond appears to give the child sufficient confidence to explore the world and face a variety of life challenges as they emerge.” (Page 254)

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Affective Neuroscience is available from Touch-Needs.

For information about The Centre for Child Mental Health 2003 study day programme, call:
020 7354 2913