

Nothing's better than when your kids are in a good mood. When they're easy-going and happy, everything seems to run smoothly. They are flexible and cooperative when plans change, and even laugh at themselves when they make a mistake. In moments like these, parenting can be fun and pretty easy.

But we all know there are times when children can be biting and sensitive, and fall apart when something doesn't go just right. *WHY WON'T THIS LEGO PIECE CLICK IN?!!* In these moments, when our kids dig their heels in and go to battle over every minor issue, parenting can feel like a chore.

What explains these emotional ups and downs in our kids? Believe it or not, a lot of it has to do with the many parts of their brain. The left side of the brain helps you think logically and organize thoughts into sentences, while the right side helps you experience emotions and read nonverbal cues. We each have a "reptile brain" that allows us to act instinctively and make split-second survival decisions, and a "mammal brain" that leads us toward connection and relationships. One part of your brain is devoted to dealing with memory; another to making moral and ethical decisions. It's almost as if your brain has multiple personalities—some rational, some irrational; some reflective, some reactive. No wonder we can seem like different people at different times!

Biology could be to blame for these mood swings. The key to helping our kids be flexible and adaptive and thoughtful and all the other things we want them to be, is to help integrate these parts of the brain so they work well together as a coordinated whole—a *whole brain*. When all of the parts of your kid's brain work together like a well-oiled machine, emotions are easier to control.

When your child isn't working from an integrated whole brain, he becomes overwhelmed by his emotions, confused and chaotic. Tantrums, meltdowns, aggression, and most of the other challenging experiences of parenting—and life—are a result of a loss of integration, also known as "disintegration." In other words, these problems occur when your little one isn't (and when we ourselves aren't) using his whole brain.

As parents, how can we help our children become better integrated so they can use their whole brain in a coordinated way? Here are a few suggestions:

- **Connect and Redirect.** When your child is melting down or blowing up emotionally, avoid immediately appealing to his logic. Saying, "Why are you acting this way? I don't have any snacks in the car" is problematic because it addresses an emotional, right-brain problem using rational, left-brain logic. Instead, connect first emotionally—right brain to right brain. By telling him, "I can tell that you're really disappointed about the snacks" in a soothing tone of voice, you acknowledge his feelings in a calm manner. Then, once he is more in control and receptive, redirect by bringing in the left-brain lessons and, if necessary, setting some boundaries.
- **Name It to Tame It.** When a scary or painful experience produces big, out-of-control emotions, don't dismiss and deny them. Instead, help him tell the story of what happened. Telling a story helps his left brain make sense of all of those unfamiliar emotions that his right brain is experiencing, and this will help him to feel more in control. Storytelling allows both sides of the brain to work together, preventing disintegration.
- **Engage, Don't Enrage.** In high-stress situations, engage your child's upstairs brain, which is where his higher-order thinking takes place. Rather than triggering the more primitive and reactive downstairs brain with the "Because I said so!" card, ask questions, collaborate, and even negotiate. The more you can appeal to the upstairs brain and engage him in critical thinking and processing, the more your child will think and act and decide, rather than simply reacting to what he's feeling.
- **Get Active.** If your child loses touch with his upstairs brain, help him regain balance by having him move his body. Doing a few jumping jacks or running around the yard

can directly affect his brain chemistry. Exercise allows him to work through some of his emotions in a healthy way, allowing him to focus on other things afterward. When we change our physical state—through movement or relaxation, for example—we can change our emotional state.

These tips offer the possibility not only of surviving difficult parenting moments, but of actually turning them into times you can help your child thrive by tapping in to his whole brain. Survive*and* thrive. It really can happen, when you're raising a whole-brain child.