



supporting children and families

Transition to School Presentation – 27/2/08

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Brain Physiology and the abused / traumatized child.

- In the first 3 years of life most of our brain neural systems are organized. We know that once these systems are established it is very difficult to reorganize them.
- The Brighter Futures Program and a growing number of Government programs focus on supporting vulnerable families through this time to optimize the brain development in their children – it is felt that this will have long lasting positive consequences.
- ‘Developmental Insult’ – Jargon for bad stuff that happens in a kids life – all types of neglect, under stimulation, exposure to violence. All these things can result in the brain not developing in an ‘optimal’ way. The child’s experiences during the first 3 years of life determine how the brain is organized.
- Healthy development of the more complex sections of the brain are underpinned by healthy development of the less complex sections of the brain. E.g. overexposure to the stress hormone Cortisol can markedly affect the brains primitive functions – this in turn undermines the healthy development of the cortex and Limbic systems.
- ‘Cortical Modulation’ – The ability to ‘use your head’ to control impulsive behavior. A well developed Cortex and Limbic system will allow a person to control their impulsive behaviors
- Without a developed Cortex and Limbic system a person will be unable to respond to mainstream counseling techniques like CBT

How the Human brain responds to new things (like going to school)

- For most kids the new experience of going to school will trigger some normal stress reaction – managing this normal reaction is one of the aims of ‘Transition to school’.
- For some kids who have experienced abuse / trauma this reaction may be quite severe (hyper arousal – fight / flight or dissociation – freeze and surrender). This ‘over reaction’ is a result of some unhealthy brain wiring.
- There is a filter in our Brain Stem called the Reticular Activating System that helps us filter out the normal everyday

stimuli of life – so that we are not overcome. E.g. – Train, air-conditioner noise, noise of your own breathing etc. This filter allows only certain things to pass through – ‘novel’ things and ‘threats’ can pass through and will come to our attention.

- Preparation for school is very important for kids who have experienced abuse. School needs to become part of these children’s ‘comfort zone’. This can be done by gentle, step by step introductions to a new environment that do not trigger these bigger stress reactions. These kids may need a longer and more gradual exposure to the new school environment so they will not develop a pattern of strong stress reactions when they arrive to start school.
- Once a child experiences school as a negative or threatening place the child will be more likely to continue to have a stress reaction to school (fright flight or with-drawl / surrender). Once a reaction pattern is established it is harder to ‘re-wire’ this experience for the child to view school as a positive safe place
- When humans experience Threat / harm / risk a part of the brain called the Affective Filter in Amygdala. Whilst a threat is present the filter is stopping the cortex being activated and learning is not possible. It is virtually impossible for humans to be creative or learn in an environment of stress.

Insider’s view of the NSW Child Protection System.

- The system is overloaded – primarily due to the ‘paper heavy’ systems employed by DoCS at present
- There is a move to more decisive intervention and removing kids earlier
- There is a rapid increase in the numbers of children entering care
- Expect changes – Special Commission convened by Justice Wood is currently undertaking a review for the NSW Government.

A great source of information on the subject of child brain development is available on www.childtrauma.org

Much of the information in this presentation has been derived from the Child Trauma Academy website and the work of Dr Bruce Perry.

HUMAN BRAIN

COMPLEX FUNCTIONS

- ABSTRACT THOUGHT

MORE PLASTIC/EASY TO CHANGE

CORTEX

- ATTACHMENT

LIMBIC

- VERBAL

- SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

DIENCEPHALON

- SLEEP

- BLOOD PRESSURE

STEM

- BODY TEMP

LESS PLASTIC/HARDER TO CHANGE

PRIMITIVE FUNCTIONS