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THE WHOLE-BRAIN CHILD

12

REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGIES
TO NURTURE YOUR CHILD'S
DEVELOPING MIND

Survive
everyday parenting
struggles and help
your family
thrive

DANIEL J. SIEGEL, MD

Scribe Publications

THE WHOLE-BRAIN CHILD

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For Maddi and Alex: Thank you both for all you've taught me over these years and for the privilege of being your dad; and for Caroline, for the love and our journey together. — DJS

For the men in my life: my husband, Scott, and our three boys. You fill every day with fun, adventure, love, and meaning. — TPB



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Contents

Introduction: **SURVIVE AND THRIVE**

Chapter 1: **PARENTING WITH THE BRAIN IN MIND**

Chapter 2: **TWO BRAINS ARE BETTER THAN ONE:**
Integrating the Left and the Right

Whole-Brain Strategy #1: Connect and Redirect: Surfing
Emotional Waves

Whole-Brain Strategy #2: Name It to Tame It: Telling Stories
to Calm Big Emotions

Chapter 3: **BUILDING THE STAIRCASE OF THE MIND:**
Integrating the Upstairs and Downstairs Brain

Whole-Brain Strategy #3: Engage, Don't Enrage: Appealing
to the Upstairs Brain

Whole-Brain Strategy #4: Use It or Lose It: Exercising the
Upstairs Brain

Whole-Brain Strategy #5: Move It or Lose It: Moving the
Body to Avoid Losing the Mind

Chapter 4: **KILL THE BUTTERFLIES!** Integrating Memory
for Growth and Healing

Whole-Brain Strategy #6: Use the Remote of the Mind:
Replaying Memories

Whole-Brain Strategy #7: Remember to Remember: Making
Recollection a Part of Your Family's Daily Life

Chapter 5: **THE UNITED STATES OF ME:** Integrating the
Many Parts of the Self

Whole-Brain Strategy #8: Let the Clouds of Emotion Roll By: Teaching That Feelings Come and Go

Whole-Brain Strategy #9: SIFT: Paying Attention to What's Going On Inside

Whole-Brain Strategy #10: Exercise Mindsight: Getting Back to the Hub

Chapter 6: **THE ME-WE CONNECTION**: Integrating Self and Other

Whole-Brain Strategy #11: Increase the Family Fun Factor: Making a Point to Enjoy Each Other

Whole-Brain Strategy #12: Connect Through Conflict: Teach Kids to Argue with a "We" in Mind

Conclusion: **BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER**

[Refrigerator Sheet](#)

[Whole-Brain Ages and Stages](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

INTRODUCTION:

Survive *and* Thrive

You've had those days, right? When the sleep deprivation, the muddy cleats, the peanut butter on the new jacket, the homework battles, the Play-Doh in your computer keyboard, and the refrains of "She started it!" leave you counting the minutes until bedtime. On these days, when you (again?!!) have to pry a raisin from a nostril, it seems like the most you can hope for is to *survive*.

However, when it comes to your children, you're aiming a lot higher than mere survival. Of course you want to get through those difficult tantrum-in-the-restaurant moments. But whether you're a parent or other committed caregiver in a child's life, your ultimate goal is to raise kids in a way that lets them *thrive*. You want them to enjoy meaningful relationships, be caring and compassionate, do well in school, work hard and be responsible, and feel good about who they are.

Survive. Thrive.

We've met with thousands of parents over the years. When we ask them what matters most to them, versions of these two goals almost always top the list. They want to survive difficult parenting moments, and they want their kids and their family to thrive. As parents ourselves, we share these same goals for our own families. In our nobler, calmer, saner moments, we care about nurturing our kids' minds, increasing their sense of wonder, and helping them reach their potential in all aspects of life. But in the more frantic, stressful, bribe-the-toddler-into-the-car-seat-so-we-can-rush-to-the-soccer-game

moments, sometimes all we can hope for is to avoid yelling or hearing someone say, “You’re so mean!”

Take a moment and ask yourself: What do you really want for your children? What qualities do you hope they develop and take into their adult lives? Most likely you want them to be happy, independent, and successful. You want them to enjoy fulfilling relationships and live a life full of meaning and purpose. Now think about what percentage of your time you spend intentionally developing these qualities in your children. If you’re like most parents, you worry that you spend too much time just trying to get through the day (and sometimes the next five minutes) and not enough time creating experiences that help your children thrive, both today and in the future.

You might even measure yourself against some sort of perfect parent who never struggles to survive, who seemingly spends every waking second helping her children thrive. You know, the PTA president who cooks organic, well-balanced meals while reading to her kids in Latin about the importance of helping others, then escorts them to the art museum in the hybrid that plays classical music and mists lavender aromatherapy through the air-conditioning vents. None of us can match up to this imaginary superparent. Especially when we feel like a large percentage of our days are spent in full-blown survival mode, where we find ourselves wild-eyed and red-faced at the end of a birthday party, shouting, “If there’s one more argument over that bow and arrow, nobody’s getting *any* presents!”

If any of this sounds familiar, we’ve got great news for you: *the moments you are just trying to survive are actually opportunities to help your child thrive.* At times you may feel

that the loving, important moments (like having a meaningful conversation about compassion or character) are separate from the parenting challenges (like fighting another homework battle or dealing with another meltdown). But they are not separate at all. When your child is disrespectful and talks back to you, when you are asked to come in for a meeting with the principal, when you find crayon scribbles all over your wall: these are survive moments, no question about it. But at the same time, they are opportunities—even gifts—because a survive moment is *also* a thrive moment, where the important, meaningful work of parenting takes place.

For example, think about a situation you often just try to get through. Maybe when your kids are fighting with each other for the third time within three minutes. (Not too hard to imagine, is it?) Instead of just breaking up the fight and sending the sparring siblings to different rooms, you can use the argument as an opportunity for teaching: about reflective listening and hearing another person's point of view; about clearly and respectfully communicating your own desires; about compromise, sacrifice, negotiation, and forgiveness. We know: it sounds hard to imagine in the heat of the moment. But when you understand a little bit about your children's emotional needs and mental states, you can create this kind of positive outcome—even without United Nations peacekeeping forces.

There's nothing wrong with separating your kids when they're fighting. It's a good survival technique, and in certain situations it may be the best solution. But often we can do better than just ending the conflict and noise. We can transform the experience into one that develops not only each

child's brain but also her relationship skills and her character. Over time, the siblings will each continue to grow and become more proficient at handling conflict without parental guidance. This will be just one of the many ways you can help them thrive.

What's great about this survive-and-thrive approach is that you don't have to try to carve out special time to help your children thrive. You can use *all* of the interactions you share—the stressful, angry ones as well as the miraculous, adorable ones—as opportunities to help them become the responsible, caring, capable people you want them to be. That's what this book is about: using those everyday moments with your kids to help them reach their true potential. The following pages offer an antidote to parenting and academic approaches that overemphasize achievement and perfection at any cost. We'll focus instead on ways you can help your kids be more themselves, more at ease in the world, filled with more resilience and strength. How do you do that? Our answer is simple: you need to understand some basics about the young brain that you are helping to grow and develop. That's what *The Whole-Brain Child* is all about.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Whether you're a parent, grandparent, teacher, therapist, or other significant caregiver in a child's life, we've written this book for you. We'll use the word "parent" throughout, but we're talking to anyone doing the crucial work of raising, supporting, and nurturing kids. Our goal is to teach you how to use your everyday interactions as opportunities to help you and the children you care for both survive and thrive. Though much of what you'll read can be creatively tailored for teens—in fact, we plan to write a follow-up that does just

that—this book focuses on the years from birth to twelve, centering especially on toddlers, school-age kids, and preteens.

In the following pages we explain the whole-brain perspective and give you a variety of strategies to help your children be happier, healthier, and more fully themselves. The first chapter presents the concept of parenting with the brain in mind and introduces the simple and powerful concept at the heart of the whole-brain approach, integration. Chapter 2 focuses on helping a child’s left brain and right brain work together so the child can be connected to both his logical and emotional selves. Chapter 3 emphasizes the importance of connecting the instinctual “downstairs brain” with the more thoughtful “upstairs brain,” which is responsible for decision making, personal insight, empathy, and morality. Chapter 4 explains how you can help your child deal with painful moments from the past by shining the light of understanding on them, so they can be addressed in a gentle, conscious, and intentional way. Chapter 5 helps you teach your kids that they have the capacity to pause and reflect on their own state of mind. When they can do that, they can make choices that give them control over how they feel and how they respond to their world. Chapter 6 highlights ways you can teach your children about the happiness and fulfillment that result from being connected to others, while still maintaining a unique identity.

A clear understanding of these different aspects of the whole-brain approach will allow you to view parenting in a whole new way. As parents, we are wired to try to save our children from any harm and hurt, but ultimately we can’t. They’ll fall down, they’ll get their feelings hurt, and they’ll

get scared and sad and angry. Actually, it's often these difficult experiences that allow them to grow and learn about the world. Rather than trying to shelter our children from life's inevitable difficulties, we can help them integrate those experiences into their understanding of the world and learn from them. How our kids make sense of their young lives is not only about what happens to them but also about how their parents, teachers, and other caregivers respond.

With that in mind, one of our primary goals has been to make *The Whole-Brain Child* as helpful as possible by giving you these specific tools to make your parenting easier and your relationships with your children more meaningful. That's one reason roughly half of every chapter is devoted to "What You Can Do" sections, where we provide practical suggestions and examples of how you can apply the scientific concepts from that chapter.

Also, at the end of each chapter you'll find two sections designed to help you readily implement your new knowledge. The first is "Whole-Brain Kids," written to help you teach your children the basics of what we've covered in that particular chapter. It might seem strange to talk to young children about the brain. It *is* brain science, after all. But we've found that even small children—as young as four or five—really can understand some important basics about the way the brain works, and in turn understand themselves and their behavior and feelings in new and more insightful ways. This knowledge can be very powerful for the child, as well as the parent who is trying to teach, to discipline, and to love in ways that feel good to both of them. We've written the "Whole-Brain Kids" sections with a school-age audience in

mind, but feel free to adapt the information as you read aloud, so that it's developmentally appropriate for your child.

The other section at the end of each chapter is called "Integrating Ourselves." Whereas most of the book focuses on the inner life of your child and the connection between the two of you, here we'll help you apply each chapter's concepts to your own life and relationships. As children develop, their brains "mirror" their parent's brain. In other words, the parent's own growth and development, or lack of those, impact the child's brain. As parents become more aware and emotionally healthy, their children reap the rewards and move toward health as well. That means that integrating and cultivating your own brain is one of the most loving and generous gifts you can give your children.

Another tool we hope you'll find helpful is the "Ages and Stages" chart at the end of the book, where we offer a simple summary of how the book's ideas can be implemented according to the age of your child. Each chapter of the book is designed to help you put its ideas immediately into practice, with multiple suggestions appearing throughout to address various ages and stages of childhood development. But to make it easier for parents, this final reference section will categorize the book's suggestions according to age and development. If you're the mother of a toddler, for example, you can quickly find a reminder of what you can do to enhance integration between your child's left and right brain. Then, as your toddler grows, you can come back to the book at each age and view a list of the examples and suggestions most relevant to your child's new stage.

Additionally, just before the "Ages and Stages" section, you'll find a "Refrigerator Sheet" that very briefly highlights