The Whole-Brain Child Summary

By Daniel Siegel

Are you a frazzled parent, juggling demands, fighting over unfinished homework, and refereeing sibling fights? Or are you constantly comparing yourself unfavorably to the super-parents you know, the ones on the PTA who cook like a dream and never get irritated with their children? Sometimes it feels like we're just trying to survive as parents, when what we really want is for our families to thrive.

The Whole-Brain Child is a practical and insightful book to help parents navigate the turbulent waters of parenthood. By providing 'twelve revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind,' this book will enable you to 'survive everyday parenting struggles, and help your family thrive.'

Based on neuroscience, the authors provide parents with a set of skills and tools to cope with the trials and tribulations of contemporary parenting. We're also given practical ways to turn those moments of survival into opportunities to help our children, and ourselves, thrive. So when your children are fighting for the third time in three minutes, it could be the perfect time to teach them about reflective listening, respectful communication, negotiation, and forgiveness. The key message is that we can capitalize on everyday moments to build a child's potential.

As our authors point out, if we had to be asked what we want for ourkids, we would probably say that we want them to be happy andsuccessful. Yet, we're so often just trying to meet the day's demands thatwe don't spend intentional time developing the skills to help them thriveand grow.

We'll briefly see why this book isn't only for parents; but for any adult involved in a caregiving role. Whether you're a parent, grandparent, teacher, or therapist, *The Whole-Brain Child* offers practical wisdom, along with strategies that we can apply immediately. By explaining the whole-brain approach of integration, and some of the neurology behind this, we can learn to strategize how we react to situations. The authors add useful summaries like the "Ages and Stages" section, a refrigerator sheet, and actionable ideas at the end of each chapter, which show how we can implement the insights for ourselves.

How A Child's Brain Works

We're the experts on our kids, yet we generally know very little about how their brains work and, more importantly, how we can support their developing brains.

Analyzing the brain's integration process is valuable, and can be broken down into five different types. There's left and right brain integration, vertical and horizontal integration, memory integration, integrating the different parts of self, and finally, integrating self and other.

Our authors share the story of little Marco, who, while physically unharmed, was very distressed after he and his babysitter were involved in a car accident. The accident resulted in the babysitter being taken to the hospital in an ambulance. At two years of age, Marco's story to his

mom was 'Eeah, Woo Woo.' "Eeah" was the name he gave his beloved caregiver, and "woo-woo," the description of the noise the ambulance made.

Over the next few weeks, Marco's mom helped him retell the story repeatedly, including the vital end part where they went to visit his caregiver, who had recovered well. This retelling enabled him to process the frightening experience, which had positive neurological effects of integration.

But how and why should we help our children with integration?

The brain is enormously complex with different areas performing various tasks, yet constantly interlinking. For example, the "reptilian" part of the brain makes split-second survival choices, and the 'mammalian' part is more concerned with relationships. Good mental health means getting all areas of the brain to work well together.

To "work well together" means all the parts are integrating effectively. Horizontal integration is when the left-brain and right-brain link together. Vertical integration involves the intuitive, more primitive parts of the brain, allowing the more reasonable prefrontal cortex to pause and re-consider a little. Memory integration helps the hippocampus make implicit memories more explicit so that we can process worrying things that have occurred in the past. We can also integrate different thoughts and experiences by focusing our attention differently. And finally, we can develop our kids' built-in capacity for social connection.

Our children's experiences from birth help to constantly rewire theirbrains over the years so that the different areas of the brain can connectmore easily and constructively.

A child's mental health can be likened to being in a small boat floating down a peacefully flowing river between two banks. However, one side of the bank represents chaos, where children feel out of control and in turmoil, and the other side represents rigidity. The rigid side is where they try so hard to control everything and everyone around them, that they can't adapt or compromise. It's helpful to imagine your child's well-being as a peaceful flow of integration, where you can help them shift back when they get too close to either bank.

Let's examine the everyday strategies for each of the five areas of integration.

Integrating the Left and Right Brain

Four-year-old Katie was sick in class one day, and after that, she became reluctant to go to school, creating a fuss every morning. How do you turn a survival moment like this into a "thrive" moment?

The brain is divided into two separate hemispheres, with each side having somewhat different tasks. The left-brain loves working with cause and effect, lists, logic, and language, whereas the right side likes the non-verbal aspects such as images and emotions.

We want our children to balance logic and emotions when confronting difficulties. When raw emotions do not have left-brain logic to help them,

like the story of Katie battling with her fear of being sick in class, they drift to the bank of chaos. On the other hand, if they deny their emotions, they then move towards the bank of rigidity.

Here are two strategies we can use to help children integrate both sides of their brains.

The first is to "connect and redirect." We can help children to surf their emotional waves. Right-brained emotional waves are very strong, so it helps to start by making a right-brain to right-brain connection. In other words, connect with your child using a right-brain comment. Katie's dad acknowledged that she felt sick, and said, 'And I know that didn't feel good, did it?' Only then did he put the story together for Katie, using more logical details. Performing a right-brain to right-brain connection first is known as attunement. Attunement acknowledges feelings using empathetic facial expressions, a compassionate tone of voice, and nonjudgmental listening. It allows our children to 'feel felt,' creating a safe space to then address the situation or problem more logically. Once the brain is in a more integrated state, it's easier to manage the left brain, and solve an issue. It doesn't mean giving up on boundaries and discipline, nor does it mean solving problems immediately. It just reduces the emotional overload, allowing you to connect and then redirect.

The second strategy is "name it to tame it." This strategy helps to access the left hemisphere and retell the story of a scary or painful experience. Telling the story of what happened, or using drawings and play to do this, can help a child make sense of the experience. With Katie, her dadhelped her to tell the story of what happened the day she was sick atschool, and then he helped her to realize that school was enjoyable, herteacher cared, and that he was always there to fetch her, and that shecould learn to love school again.

Type Two Is Integrating the Upstairs and Downstairs Brain

It's tough to teach children how to make wise decisions when their emotions feel out of control.

Let's imagine the brain as a house, with an upstairs and downstairs section. The downstairs area is the more primitive part of the brain, responsible for the basics like breathing, automatic responses, and intense emotions. The upstairs brain contains the study and library, and lets in more light, allowing you to see things clearly and make wise decisions.

We want our children to balance logic and emotions, confront their difficulties, and grow from experiences. When raw emotions do not have the left brain logic to help them, like the emotions Katie was battling with, the bank of chaos looms. On the other hand, if they deny their feelings, the shift is towards the bank of rigidity. We can help our children to build the imaginary staircase between the two levels of the brain, reminding ourselves that a child's brain is always a work in progress.

Here are two strategies we can use to help integrate both sides of the brain.

The first strategy is to "engage, don't enrage." Here we have to ask ourselves which side of the brain we want to appeal to. If tension is building, it may help to engage the upstairs brain instead of trying to halt the rage brewing in the downstairs brain. So when you can see that your child is about to lose it, you can ask for more precise words for how they feel, and then maybe ask them to come up with a compromise that works for everybody, or start negotiating.

The second strategy is "use it or lose it." What we want to do is give our children lots of opportunities to practice using their upstairs brains.Giving them a choice works well. For a younger child, it could be askingthem what color shoes they want to wear on a day, and for olderchildren, letting them debate difficult decisions like buying a computergame now, or saving their allowance for a new bike at a later stage. Theythen have to live with the consequences of their decisions. We build self-understanding through questioning why they made particular choices, or why they felt a certain way. We can also build empathy by exploring why someone else might be crying or feeling upset. We foster morality when we give hypothetical moral situations and discuss how to solve them. And, of course, we should be modeling all of this through our behavior.

But, what can we do when our child is disconnecting from the upstairs brain and overwhelmed by emotion? The next strategy is to "move it or lose it." It's worth remembering, that our emotional state changes when we change our physical state through movement or relaxation. Vigorous activity, such as playing "keep it up" with a balloon or trying some yoga poses, releases a lot of tension and stress.

The Third Aspect of Integration Involves Memory

Memories aren't like photocopy machines that produce accurate pictures of what took place in the past. The hippocampus stores memory with an overlay of emotion, and our memories always coexist with the feelings we attach to an event. Memory also isn't like a filing cabinet, where we simply pull them out when we need to.

Children associate past experiences with what might happen in the future. They then react accordingly. Once an implicit memory is spoken

about and understood, it becomes explicit and, therefore, easier to deal with any fears they may have. Children don't just forget about difficult experiences; we have to help them understand what happened, and how they felt about it. Then, just like a jigsaw puzzle, put all the pieces together.

Here's a strategy that might help children to integrate implicit and explicit memories. It's called "using the remote of the mind."

Retelling a scary event is helpful, but sometimes a child is uncomfortable talking about it. We can then use the idea of an internal DVD player with a remote control that they can use. Using an imaginary remote control, the child can pause, rewind and fast-forward through parts of the story. They can replay the experience in their minds more safely, fast forward through the scary parts if they want to, or pause if it's challenging. This strategy allows them some control over a bad memory. Eventually though, we have to help them retell the entire story, including the uncomfortable or scary parts.

The other memory-integration strategy is "remember to remember." Here we bring positive and memorable family experiences into our storyline as much as possible. We can encourage our kids to recall and tell stories about these events. They don't have to be big celebrations; little happenings are also important. Perhaps you can get them to create a memory book. If they can build on things that happened in the past, it's easier for them to contextualize what's happening to them in the present.

The Next Type of Integration is, "The United States of Me"

We can help children to integrate their memories, feelings, and thoughts in order to understand their minds. When they learn that they have some choice about how they feel or respond to situations, it's very empowering.

Siegel developed the concept of "mindsight," which helps us see what's happening in our minds. He uses the "Hub of Awareness" along with the metaphor of a bicycle wheel. There's a hub at the center, and various points or spokes around the rim. The hub represents the executive functioning part of the brain, where we can connect with ourselves in a deep and considered manner. This is our center of awareness. The rim's numerous points include thoughts, feelings, and memories that we have, and where we sometimes get stuck. We can shift our attention and energy to other parts of the rim, reminding ourselves that we're more than those particular thoughts or fears we tend to fixate on.

Six-year-old Jason had an irrational fear that the ceiling fan in his bedroom would crash down on him during the night. When he drew his Wheel Of Awareness with the center's hub, he could start to move his attention away from the fan blades, and the scary feelings they caused, and redirect them to the other rim points. These included how much his parents protected him and what fun his day had been. He could also use imagery, or relaxation techniques to help him to relax.

If children find the Wheel of Awareness difficult, there are two other strategies we can use.

We can "let the clouds of emotion roll by." Just as clouds come and go, so do feelings. This way, children can learn that they're not their feelings. The difference between saying "I am lonely" and "I feel lonely right now," allows them to understand the difference between a temporary state and

a permanent trait. Feelings are like the weather. They're real, but they come and go.

There's also the process of SIFT. SIFT is the acronym for sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts. We can use this acronym to help children sort through physical sensations such as butterflies in the tummy, images that might be worrying them, such as an embarrassing moment at school, and feelings. It helps if they have a broad "feeling" vocabulary, so they can use specific words like "disappointed," as opposed to a more general one like feeling "sad."

Children can also learn that they don't have to believe all their thoughts. We can encourage them to argue with the ones that may not be true. And we can teach them strategies that calm them, like visualization techniques or imagining a place where they feel calm and peaceful. If they can access a sense of stillness and calm, they can learn to separate from and manage the storms that brew around them.

The Final Step is to Integrate Self and Other

This is also known as the "me-we" connection. Sometimes children need a little bit of help with their empathy and to recognize others' needs and perspectives. Enter the fascinating discovery of mirror neurons. Our brains are activated to respond to the actions of somebody else. We can nurture this built-in wiring in our children to create more empathy. For example, if we see someone in tears, we often become tearful too. Our bodies automatically respond to someone else's emotions and actions. We mirror them. Hence, our kids can learn to empathize with others, without losing their sense of who they are.

We need to keep building experiences that lead to connection. Here are two strategies that we can use to do this. The first is to "enjoy one another." Play more games as a family, build a bit of "silly" and fun into the equation, and foster unique experiences. These practices reinforce what it means to be in harmony with others.

But it doesn't just have to be good times. The final strategy is to "connect through conflict." If our children argue or complain about something someone said to them, we can ask them to explore the other person's perspective. They can look at why they thought this person responded differently, and explore another's reactions without being defensive. They can observe someone's non-verbal behavior to understand what emotions they might have. We can also teach them to fix things after a fight by discussing how they can make amends. This could be through a kind act, or a letter of apology.

In Conclusion

Parenting isn't always easy, and we often place unreasonable expectations on ourselves and our children. Much of our expectations are because we expect a child's brain to work in the same way as ours do. Nurturing children comes in many forms, but we often overlook how to stimulate and encourage children's whole-brain development.

Even if our childhoods were less than perfect, we can still create a nurturing and loving environment for our own children. The authors emphasize, 'With an understanding of the brain, you can be more intentional about what you teach your kids, how you respond to them, and why.' This knowledge can help everyone in the family to thrive.

This holistic approach to development and integration could make all the

difference in how your child experiences the world.