

Connection builds intelligence.

Every child has a unique brain, just as every child has a face that is hers alone.

Like the shape of her eyes and the color of her hair, the brain she was born with was determined by her genes. We all know that good health and nutrition will help her make the most of her intelligence. But it has become clear through recent research that her brain also grows on the connection she feels with you and the others who are important to her.

Feeling connected is vital to children



cooperative
playful
empathetic
flexible
able to learn

receptive
warm

Feeling connected with you helps your child's mind to grow.

The loving attention of adults is brain food for a child. She can't grow well without it! She asks for attention because attention is exactly what she needs! A child's limbic system is constantly checking to see whether she is safe, protected, and cherished. Her young life depends on loving support, so quite a large part of her brain is devoted to reaching for and engaging your attention. It's her limbic system that processes the signals of love and the signals of stress that you and others send. She doesn't need to be taught the non-verbal language of feelings. When you feel relaxed, a child senses safety, and she can connect with you easily.

BRAIN RESEARCH: *To “feel felt” requires that we attune to each other’s primary emotions. When the primary emotions of two minds are connected, a state of alignment is created in which the two individuals experience a sense of joining. The music of our mind, our primary emotions, becomes intimately influenced by the mind of the other person as we connect with their primary emotional states.*

—Parenting from the Inside Out, *Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Mary Hartzell, M.Ed., p. 64.*

When a child’s limbic system is in tune with at least one thoughtful person, she can reason. She can learn.

Her prefrontal cortex lights up. This is the part of her brain that is logical, that controls her impulses, that calls upon experience to create thoughtful responses, and that governs learning. When she feels connected, she can try to put on her shoes again and again, learning a bit more each time she tries. She can give you the stick she’s running with if you show respect as you ask her for it. She sees the cat, remembers that he doesn’t like her to pull his tail, and pets him instead. Her full intelligence is engaged.

Your child's intelligence has many facets that are built to work together.

Your child's intelligence isn't ever going to be measured by an IQ test.

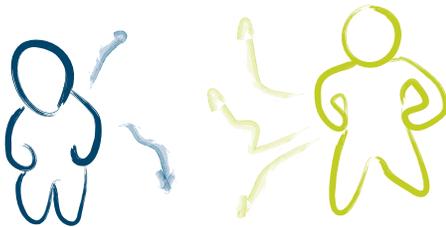
Intelligence is much more complex than a single test can measure. We think that intelligence is like a full orchestra. An orchestra has over a hundred instruments, each of which has been mastered by someone who will cooperate second by second with the other musicians. Your child's intelligence has many facets, and she gains mastery of her many abilities day by day. For instance, when she plays with blocks, her spatial perception gets some good practice. Then, she runs outside, and another part of her intelligence, her large muscle coordination, develops. She senses hunger and asks for a snack, and her attunement to her body signals and her verbal intelligence both get a short workout, along with her ability to trust that she will be understood.

Your child's intelligence isn't like the Rock of Gibraltar. It's not the same from year to year, or even moment to moment.

Your child's brain moves in and out of the ability to function at its best. For example, when a child is playing and laughing in a game of hide-and-seek, engaging happily with the people around her, she's using her full intelligence. She feels good, she learns well, she responds to the signals others give, and she comes up with fresh responses second by second. Her limbic system hums. Her cerebral cortex processes every bit of information it gets. But when a child is sucking her thumb, with glazed eyes and a passive stare, her intelligence is parked. Her mind is on idle, learning nothing new. There's no dance of expression, no light in her eyes. Her limbic system isn't humming. Her intelligence isn't gone. But it has lost its melody.

Your child's sense of connection breaks easily.

When connection breaks



**hurt feelings
broken thinking**

**Child can't think
Irrational behavior**

Your child's sense of connection with you is easily broken.

Young children are built for hours upon hours of connection with kind, patient adults. Our society doesn't give many adults the chance to be kind and attentive with children for hours on end—we have to work hard, juggle many responsibilities, and often, we care for several children at once. So when children search for connection with their parents or caregivers, they don't always find what they need. We are nearby, but our attention is often on other things.

When a child's sense of connection breaks, she feels personally hurt. And when a child feels hurt, she can't think.

Her limbic system is thrown out of balance, and her prefrontal cortex—the seat of her judgment and logical thought—shuts down. She can't process what goes on around her. She can't learn. She can't make sense of the things you say or do. All she knows is that she doesn't feel good. Things she knew—that she loves her little sister, for example, or that you said you would be back in an hour—are completely inaccessible. Her feelings trample her ability to reason and learn. She's in a state of emotional emergency. Inside her mind, there's a voice saying loudly, "Help! I am alone and small and I don't know what to do!"

Many kinds of events can break a child's sense of connection and hurt her feelings.

A difficult birth, health problems, the absence of a parent, seeing adults or other children fight, or seeing violence on TV are the kinds of things that make a child feel alone, frightened, and hurt. Young children are highly sensitive, so what feels to us like a small thing can cause big feelings for a child. A sharp word from an adult or sibling, being touched or picked up by someone who doesn't take a few seconds to tune in first, or feeling the stress of a hurried adult can disconnect a child.

It's time to connect



Helping process
move close
stop off-track
behavior
listen
offer connection

Healing process
crying
tantrums
trembling
perspiration
laughter

The way your child's limbic system tries to recover from hurt is to launch an emotional response—

laughter, a tantrum, or crying. (We'll talk about laughter in Class 5.) A child's cry is hearty, and her tantrums are full of movement and heat. When a child feels frightened, she struggles, trembles, arches her back, and perspires while she cries. These activities are a release valve for the emotional pressure inside your child. She is overcome with feelings, and those feelings pour out until they are gone.

Your child needs your help to reconnect.

You can help your child heal from the hurt she experienced.

If you stay and offer a warm connection during this emotional time, she gets exactly what she needs—a chance to rebuild the connection her brain needs in order to function. When she's finished offloading feelings, her mind settles, and her sense of safety returns. She can remember the experience that felt bad, but her mind makes peace with it. She understands that she's OK, and that she has the caring she needs. She is then able to learn again, have fun and be close to the people she loves.

If a child can't release her feelings with a caring person who helps her reconnect, a hurt that starts out small can grow into a trauma.

The child can't act with full intelligence. Her behavior becomes muddied with upset. The child's feelings of hurt are triggered again and again, and each time she stops thinking, more bad feelings collect. Her behavior becomes more irrational. Her parents' and caregivers' energy is drained.

For instance, a child's Daddy goes away for a week. Her Mommy is overworked, and the child loses her sense of connection. She can't think, so she pushes another child in day care. She is scolded and put in Time Out. She holds her feelings in. She desperately needs to connect, but grownups are upset with her. A cycle of hurt feelings, off-track behavior, disapproval, disconnection, and more off-track behavior begins. Her upsets at day care begin to spoil her enthusiasm for school.

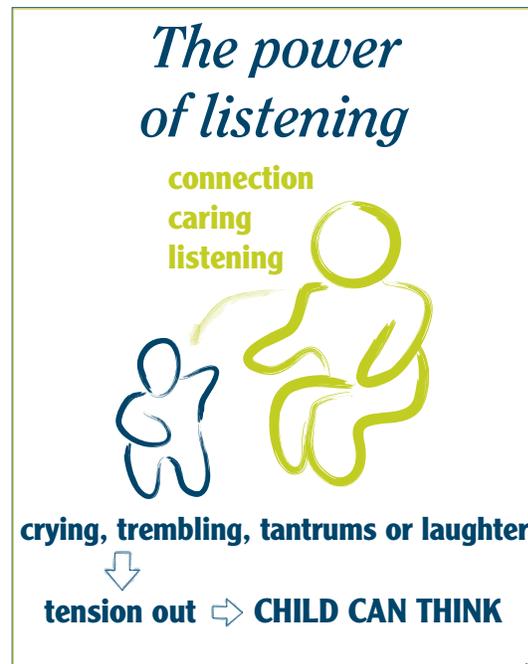
A simple "I see you don't feel good right now. I'll stay with you until you feel better" would let her grieve for Daddy, make sense of his absence, make a loving connection with Mommy or her teacher, and run off to play well. No leftover hurt, no lingering muddied behavior, no growing cycle of tension and upset.

Your child needs the safety of a connection with you in order to heal hurt feelings and get her mind working smoothly again.

Your love and the time you devote to listening to her feelings will help her recover from almost any experience that has made her feel upset.

We call listening while a child cries or has a tantrum “Staylistening.” You can help heal the hurt if you stay close and listen.

Expressing big feelings helps the child relax. Your attention and closeness give her the chance to reconnect as her brain recovers. It can take anywhere from a moment to fifty minutes or more for a child to cry her way back to a relaxed state. Tantrums are usually shorter, but not always.



BRAIN RESEARCH: Researchers have found that intense emotion by itself is not the problem. When parents provide support during difficult emotional experiences, children actually have the opportunity to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the mind.

—Parenting from the Inside Out, Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Mary Hartzell, M.Ed., p. 232.