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THE WHOLE-BRAIN CHILD

12 REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGIES
TO NURTURE YOUR CHILD’S
DEVELOPING MIND

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DANIEL J. SIEGEL, M.D.,
AND TINA PAYNE BRYSON, PH.D.

AUTHORS OF **NO-DRAMA DISCIPLINE**

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Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind

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All identifying details, including names, have been changed except for those pertaining to the authors' family members. This book is not intended as a substitute for advice from a trained professional.

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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 the book's most important points. You can photocopy this sheet and place it on the refrigerator, so that you and everyone who loves your kids—parents, babysitters, grandparents, and so on—can work together on behalf of your children's overall well-being.

As we hope you'll see, we're keeping you in mind as we work to make this book as accessible and easy to read as possible. As scientists, we've emphasized precision and accuracy; as parents, we've aimed for practical understanding. And we've wrestled with this tension and carefully considered how best to provide you with the latest and most important information, while doing it in a way that's clear, helpful, and immediately practical. While the book is certainly scientifically based, you aren't going to feel like you're in science class or reading an academic paper. Yes, it's brain science, and we're absolutely committed to remaining true to what research and science

demonstrate. But we'll share this information in a way that welcomes you in, rather than leaving you out in the cold. We've both spent our careers taking complicated but vital scientific knowledge about the brain and boiling it down so that parents can understand it and immediately apply it in their interactions with their kids on a daily basis. So don't be scared off by the brain stuff. We think you'll find it fascinating, and much of the basic information is actually pretty simple to understand, as well as easy to use. (If you *are* interested in more of the details of the science behind what we're presenting in these pages, take a look at Dan's books *Mindsight* and *The Developing Mind*, 2nd edition.)

Thanks for joining us on this journey toward a fuller knowledge of how you can truly help your kids be happier, healthier, and more fully themselves. With an understanding of the brain, you can be more intentional about what you teach your kids, how you respond to them, and why. You can then do much more than merely survive. By giving your children repeated experiences that develop the whole brain, you will face fewer everyday parenting crises. But more than that, understanding integration will let you know your child more deeply, respond more effectively to difficult situations, and intentionally build a foundation for a lifetime of love and happiness. As a result, not only will your child thrive, both now and into adulthood, but you and your whole family will as well.

Please visit us at our website and tell us about your whole-brain parenting experiences. We look forward to hearing from you.

Dan and Tina

www.WholeBrainChild.com

Parenting with the Brain in Mind

Parents are often experts about their children's bodies. They know that a temperature above 98.6 degrees is a fever. They know to clean out a cut so it doesn't get infected. They know which foods are most likely to leave their child wired before bedtime.

But even the most caring, best-educated parents often lack basic information about their child's brain. Isn't this surprising? Especially when you consider the central role the brain plays in virtually every aspect of a child's life that parents care about: discipline, decision making, self-awareness, school, relationships, and so on. In fact, the brain pretty much determines who we are and what we do. And since the brain itself is significantly shaped by the experiences we offer as parents, knowing about the way the brain changes in response to our parenting can help us to nurture a stronger, more resilient child.

So we want to introduce you to the whole-brain perspective. We'd like to explain some fundamental concepts about the brain and help you apply your new knowledge in ways that will make parenting easier and more meaningful. We're not saying that raising a whole-brain child will get rid of all the frustrations that come with parenting. *But by understanding a few simple and easy-to-master basics about how the brain works, you'll be able to better understand your child, respond more effectively to difficult situations, and build a foundation for social, emotional, and mental health.* What you do as a parent matters, and we'll provide you with straightforward, scientifically based ideas that will help you build a strong relationship with your child that can help shape his brain well and give him the best foundation for a healthy and happy life.

Let us tell you a story that illustrates how useful this information

can be for parents.

E_{EA} Woo Woo

One day Marianna received a call at work telling her that her two-year-old son, Marco, had been in a car accident with his babysitter. Marco was fine, but the babysitter, who was driving, had been taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

Marianna, a principal at an elementary school, frantically rushed to the scene of the accident, where she was told that the babysitter had experienced an epileptic seizure while driving. Marianna found a firefighter unsuccessfully attempting to console her toddler. She took Marco in her arms, and he immediately began to calm down as she comforted him.

As soon as he stopped crying, Marco began telling Marianna what had happened. Using his two-year-old language, which only his parents and babysitter would be able to understand, Marco continually repeated the phrase “Eea woo woo.” “Eea” is his word for “Sophia,” the name of his beloved babysitter, and “woo woo” refers to his version of the siren on a fire truck (or in this case, an ambulance). By repeatedly telling his mother “Eea woo woo,” Marco was focusing on the detail of the story that mattered most to him: Sophia had been taken away from him.

In a situation like this, many of us would be tempted to assure Marco that Sophia would be fine, then immediately focus on something else to get the child’s mind off the situation: “Let’s go get some ice cream!” In the days that followed, many parents would try to avoid upsetting their child by not discussing the accident. The problem with the “let’s go get some ice cream” approach is that it leaves the child confused about what happened and why. He is still full of big and scary emotions, but he isn’t allowed (or helped) to deal with them in an effective way.

Marianna didn’t make that mistake. She had taken Tina’s classes on parenting and the brain, and she immediately put what she knew to good use. That night and over the next week, when Marco’s mind

continually brought him back to the car crash, Marianna helped him retell the story over and over again. She'd say, "Yes, you and Sophia were in an accident, weren't you?" At this point, Marco would stretch out his arms and shake them, imitating Sophia's seizure. Marianna would continue, "Yes, Sophia had a seizure and started shaking, and the car crashed, didn't it?" Marco's next statement was, of course, the familiar "Eea woo woo," to which Marianna would respond, "That's right. The woo woo came and took Sophia to the doctor. And now she's all better. Remember when we went to see her yesterday? She's doing just fine, isn't she?"

In allowing Marco to repeatedly retell the story, Marianna was helping him understand what had happened so he could begin to deal with it emotionally. Since she knew the importance of helping her son's brain process the frightening experience, she helped him tell and retell the events so that he could process his fear and go on with his daily routines in a healthy and balanced way. Over the next few days, Marco brought up the accident less and less, until it became just another of his life experiences—albeit an important one.

As you read the following pages, you'll learn specifics about why Marianna responded as she did, and why, both practically and neurologically, it was so helpful to her son. You'll be able to apply your new knowledge about the brain in numerous ways that make parenting your own child more manageable and meaningful.

The concept at the heart of Marianna's response, and of this book, is *integration*. A clear understanding of integration will give you the power to completely transform the way you think about parenting your kids. It can help you enjoy them more and better prepare them to live emotionally rich and rewarding lives.

WHAT IS INTEGRATION AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Most of us don't think about the fact that our brain has many different parts with different jobs. For example, you have a left side of the brain that helps you think logically and organize thoughts into sentences, and a right side that helps you experience emotions and

read nonverbal cues. You also have a “reptile brain” that allows you to act instinctually and make split-second survival decisions, and a “mammal brain” that leads you 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!

The key to thriving is to help these parts work well together—to integrate them. Integration takes the distinct parts of your brain and helps them work together as a whole. It’s similar to what happens in the body, which has different organs to perform different jobs: the lungs breathe air, the heart pumps blood, the stomach digests food. For the body to be healthy, these organs all need to be integrated. In other words, they each need to do their individual job while also working together as a whole. Integration is simply that: linking different elements together to make a well-functioning whole. Just as with the healthy functioning of the body, your brain can’t perform at its best unless its different parts work together in a coordinated and balanced way. That’s what integration does: it coordinates and balances the separate regions of the brain that it links together. It’s easy to see when our kids aren’t integrated—they become overwhelmed by their emotions, confused and chaotic. They can’t respond calmly and capably to the situation at hand. 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 dis-integration.

We want to help our children become better integrated so they can use their whole brain in a coordinated way. For example, we want them to be *horizontally integrated*, so that their left-brain logic can work well with their right-brain emotion. We also want them to be *vertically integrated*, so that the physically higher parts of their brain, which let them thoughtfully consider their actions, work well with the lower parts, which are more concerned with instinct, gut reactions, and survival.

The way integration actually takes place is fascinating, and it's something that most people aren't aware of. In recent years, scientists have developed brain-scanning technology that allows researchers to study the brain in ways that were never before possible. This new technology has confirmed much of what we previously believed about the brain. However, one of the surprises that has shaken the very foundations of neuroscience is the discovery that the brain is actually "plastic," or moldable. This means that the brain physically changes throughout the course of our lives, not just in childhood, as we had previously assumed.

What molds our brain? Experience. Even into old age, our experiences actually change the physical structure of the brain. When we undergo an experience, our brain cells—called neurons—become active, or "fire." The brain has one hundred billion neurons, each with an average of ten thousand connections to other neurons. The ways in which particular circuits in the brain are activated determines the nature of our mental activity, ranging from perceiving sights or sounds to more abstract thought and reasoning. When neurons fire together, they grow new connections between them. Over time, the connections that result from firing lead to "rewiring" in the brain. This is incredibly exciting news. It means that we aren't held captive for the rest of our lives by the way our brain works at this moment—we can actually rewire it so that we can be healthier and happier. This is true not only for children and adolescents, but also for each of us across the life span.

Right now, your child's brain is constantly being wired and rewired, and the experiences you provide will go a long way toward determining the structure of her brain. No pressure, right? Don't worry, though. Nature has provided that the basic architecture of the brain will develop well given proper food, sleep, and stimulation. Genes, of course, play a large role in how people turn out, especially in terms of temperament. But findings from various areas in developmental psychology suggest that everything that happens to us—the music we hear, the people we love, the books we read, the kind of discipline we receive, the emotions we feel—profoundly affects the

way our brain develops. In other words, on top of our basic brain architecture and our inborn temperament, parents have much they can do to provide the kinds of experiences that will help develop a resilient, well-integrated brain. This book will show you how to use everyday experiences to help your child's brain become more and more integrated.

For example, children whose parents talk with them about their experiences tend to have better access to the memories of those experiences. Parents who speak with their children about their feelings have children who develop emotional intelligence and can understand their own and other people's feelings more fully. Shy children whose parents nurture a sense of courage by offering supportive explorations of the world tend to lose their behavioral inhibition, while those who are excessively protected or insensitively thrust into anxiety-provoking experiences without support tend to maintain their shyness.

There is a whole field of the science of child development and attachment backing up this view—and the new findings in the field of neuroplasticity support the perspective that parents can directly shape the unfolding growth of their child's brain according to what experiences they offer. For example, hours of screen time—playing video games, watching television, texting—will wire the brain in certain ways. Educational activities, sports, and music will wire it in other ways. Spending time with family and friends and learning about relationships, especially with face-to-face interactions, will wire it in yet other ways. Everything that happens to us affects the way the brain develops.

This wire-and-rewire process is what integration is all about: giving our children experiences to create connections between different parts of the brain. When these parts collaborate, they create and reinforce the integrative fibers that link different parts of the brain. As a result, they are connected in more powerful ways and can work together even more harmoniously. Just as individual singers in a choir can weave their distinct voices into a harmony that would be impossible for any one person to create, an integrated brain is capable of doing

much more than its individual parts could accomplish alone.

That's what we want to do for each of our kids: help their brain become more integrated so they can use their mental resources to full capacity. This is exactly what Marianna did for Marco. When she helped him retell the story over and over again ("Eea woo woo"), she defused the scary and traumatic emotions in his right brain so that they didn't rule him. She did so by bringing in factual details and logic from his left brain—which, at two years old, is just beginning to develop—so that he could deal with the accident in a way that made sense to him.

If his mother hadn't helped him tell and understand the story, Marco's fears would have been left unresolved and could have surfaced in other ways. He might have developed a phobia about riding in cars or being separated from his parents, or his right brain might have raged out of control in other ways, causing him to tantrum frequently. Instead, by telling the story with Marco, Marianna helped focus his attention both on the actual details of the accident and on his emotions, which allowed him to use both the left and right sides of his brain together, literally strengthening their connection. (We'll explain this particular concept much more fully in [chapter 2](#).) By helping him become better integrated, he could return to being a normal, developing two-year-old rather than dwelling on the fear and distress he had experienced.

Let's look at another example. Now that you and your siblings are adults, do you still fight over who gets to push the button for the elevator? Of course not. (Well, we hope not.) But do your kids squabble and bicker over this kind of issue? If they're typical kids, they do.

The reason behind this difference brings us back to the brain and integration. Sibling rivalry is like so many other issues that make parenting difficult—tantrums, disobedience, homework battles, discipline matters, and so on. As we'll explain in the coming chapters, these everyday parenting challenges result from a *lack of integration* within your child's brain. The reason her brain isn't always capable of integration is simple: it hasn't had time to develop. In fact, it's got a

long way to go, since a person's brain isn't considered fully developed until she reaches her mid-twenties.

So that's the bad news: you have to wait for your child's brain to develop. That's right. No matter how brilliant you think your preschooler is, she does not have the brain of a ten-year-old, and won't for several years. The rate of brain maturation is largely influenced by the genes we inherit. But the degree of integration may be exactly what we can influence in our day-to-day parenting.

The good news is that by using everyday moments, you can influence how well your child's brain grows toward integration. First, you can develop the diverse elements of your child's brain by offering opportunities to exercise them. Second, you can facilitate integration so that the separate parts become better connected and work together in powerful ways. This isn't making your children grow up more quickly—it's simply helping them develop the many parts of themselves and integrate them. We're also not talking about wearing yourself (and your kids) out by frantically trying to fill every experience with significance and meaning. We're talking about simply being present with your children so you can help them become better integrated. As a result, they will thrive emotionally, intellectually, and socially. An integrated brain results in improved decision making, better control of body and emotions, fuller self-understanding, stronger relationships, and success in school. And it all begins with the experiences parents and other caregivers provide, which lay the groundwork for integration and mental health.

GET IN THE FLOW:

NAVIGATING THE WATERS BETWEEN CHAOS AND RIGIDITY

Let's get a little more specific about what it looks like when a person—child or adult—is living in a state of integration. When a person is well integrated, he enjoys mental health and well-being. But that's not exactly easy to define. In fact, even though entire libraries have been written discussing mental *illness*, mental *health* is rarely defined.