

How can our children's brains be wired towards violence and chaos?

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All too often in our work at All Faiths we see in the children what research has proven over the last several years about the impact that the exposure to violence and trauma has on the core structures of the brain. I have spent the last three years immersed in the work of Dr. Bruce Perry, an internationally respected expert at the Child Trauma Academy in Austin, Texas. His work is telling us that the younger children are when they are exposed to trauma and violence, the more vulnerable they become and the greater impact this damage will have on them. Many people believe in just the opposite: younger children would be less impacted by trauma caused to them because they 'wouldn't really understand what happened to them.'

Dr. Perry's research shows just the opposite. The human brain, researchers say, has completed its organization process by 80% at the age of 3. Therefore, the first three years of life are critical in the brain development and its core organization process, as this will determine brain functioning later in life. The brain develops from the 'bottom up and from inside out', meaning that the lower and inner parts of it govern the fundamental and core functions. Humans have the fastest and most extensive development in the first three years of life. Just think about everything a child learns in the first three years from mastering to crawl, to walk, and then run, starting to speak and often use multiple languages to communicate – all in the first three years of life. The rate of development in this phase of life is much greater than at any other time. Now think about how this happens: kids learn and develop based on what they are exposed to in their environment, they are truly the product of their experience. In short, a young child's experiences become organized around the environment to which they are exposed.

A young infant who is cared for by an attentive, engaged caregiver, who meets the cues of the child and will respond to them appropriately, ensures that this infant's brain will be organized around safety and responsive-ness in a calm and regular way. In this scenario, negative events (e.g. hunger, fear, discomfort and displeasure) are identified and met by the caregiver appropriately, which lays the foundation for healthy self-regulation in the child.

Now let's consider an infant who is living in an environment that is riddled with chronic chaos and stress. Picture a household where there is constant yelling and arguing between caregivers, possible physical violence in the home, or even an addiction issue and overall unpredictability. Based on the knowledge that a child's core brain functions develop mainly in the phase that starts in the prenatal stage and that this development is 80% complete by age three, further, that this development is shaped by the experience of whether unpredictability, fear, chaos, pain and violence are present, we can safely conclude that this child's core brain function is going to be wired by this environment resulting in hyper-vigilance, fear, anxiety, mistrust, attention problems, dis-ruptive behavior, academic problems, possible violence, and the list goes on. It is not hard to see why children exposed to chaotic environments have behavioral difficulties in school due to an inability to focus, concentrate and complete required tasks.

So what does all this mean for young children, especially those who were exposed to trauma and violence? It means that we as a community must focus on our young by promoting the healthiest and safest environments possible. This means that we must support parents and caregivers in their ability to be attuned with and attentive to their children. It is crucial that we provide caregivers with the tools and the support they need to meet the children's needs in a healthy, consistent and caring manner so that their children's brains will be wired with love, care and safety and they can grow up into loving, caring and safe adults and caregivers. Parents must model the ability to regulate themselves and control their emotions and behaviors and respond to daily life in non-violent and non-abusive ways so that their children can become loving, kind, well-regulated and compassionate people in later years. Parenting and care giving are the most important jobs in the world, during which every moment counts as we develop the future of our children and the world.