

Five to Thrive – Why people need people

We all know that children need good food and healthy exercise for their bodies to grow strong. But recent research shows that brains need more than this to grow strong. Human beings need loving relationships for healthy brain development. Of course we have always known that children thrive better when they are loved, but now we know why this happens – it is because being with people who love us feeds our brains.

The human body is constantly producing new cells. That's how children grow, and it's how adults stay fit and healthy. Good food and healthy exercise are vital for this process. But the brain doesn't generally grow new cells. Instead, the cells of the brain that are already in place grow bigger and stronger. Brains work when individual cells grow and stretch and change shape so that they can connect up with other cells that are growing and stretching. These linked-up cells then carry electric current, passing information around inside the brain so that it can work.

We are born with far more cells in the brain than we will need in a lifetime, but it is only when these cells become active – growing and stretching out and linking up with other cells – that our brains can work. The cells of the brain become active in response to our experience, and the most important experiences for growing strong, healthy brains are experiences of being with people who connect with us lovingly.

Our brains are changing and adapting to our experience all our lives, but they grow fastest when we are young. This is partly because for babies all experiences are new, so that the brain cells of babies are always having to produce new connections. As we get older there are more experiences that are repeated. Our brains don't need to grow new connections to carry information about experiences we've had before – the connections are already in place. So our brains grow new connections when we have new experiences, and use existing connections for experiences that are familiar to us.

So what is it about loving relationships that helps brain development? There are five simple activities that parents do every day that help the brains of children to grow well. These have been described using five key words, one for each activity, so that we can notice this happening, and make sure our children get the brain food they need:

Respond • **Cuddle** • **Relax** • **Play** • **Talk**

These are the 'Five to Thrive' of healthy brain development.

Often in daily life these activities happen all together and very quickly – think of a child who tumbles down and is upset, who comes for a parent to 'kiss it better' and then quickly toddles off to their next adventure. Yet even when they happen very quickly each of the five activities has a part to play in helping the brain to grow strong, and it is useful to be able to notice each one as it happens.

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The parent needs to be there to **Respond** to the upset child. As they do this, the two brains, child and adult, connect together. Then being close together – **Cuddle** – links them together so that the child's stress at being hurt passes to the parent. Adults can calm themselves, babies can't. When the parent can **Relax** while connected with the child, the child also calms down. Then the adult shows through non-verbal communication – **Play** – how the adult is feeling, and this helps the child to feel better. And finally, the adult uses words – **Talk** – to help the child to make sense of feeling better.

This moment of loving connection will have created vital new connections in many areas of the growing brain of the child. And when this experience is part of a pattern, the brain grows strong and flexible. The child becomes able to soothe themselves through the small adversities of life. And the child also becomes able to look for help from other people when they face a problem too big for them to settle for themselves. So little things make a big difference to brain development.

At other times the activities of Five to Thrive may take place over an extended period, as parents nurture and play and talk with their children, or lovingly give their children the space and opportunities to explore and play and make their own discoveries knowing that they are safely held in mind by their parents. This extended brain activity strengthens existing connections, so that the child becomes able to use their growing brain flexibly and find pleasure in everyday experiences.

Of course it isn't always possible to be calm and loving! Life with children can be very stressful, not to mention the all other stresses and strains that a busy parent might face day to day. Fortunately children don't need us to be perfect parents. Indeed, there is good evidence that the fact that parents are real human beings and not saints or angels is actively good for children's brain development. So long as they have enough positive brain building experience – Five to Thrive – they become more resilient by having to deal with the times when life is a bit less easy. Healthy brains benefit from a challenge.

Brains go on changing and developing all our lives. Even if things have gone badly wrong for a child, so that their brain has developed patterns for expecting life to be difficult and dangerous instead of interesting and exciting, it is possible to help them to develop new patterns based on loving relationships. The brain is growing fastest and is most flexible when the child is very young, so building new patterns later can take longer, but it is always possible to use a Five to Thrive approach to help human beings to connect with others and grow strong and healthy brains.

Sometimes children are born with disabilities that make it more difficult for them to connect with adults. But they definitely need the brain food provided by loving relationships, so the challenge is to find ways to make sure they get their Five to Thrive, and don't miss out on building the strength and health of their brain. When we know what makes a difference, we can make sure that all the different needs of our children can be met.

Since loving relationships build healthy brains all through our lives, it is very important that parents, who are providing the brain food of love for their children, are also being supported by their own

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network of loving relationships. It is much easier to give our children what they need in the way of loving care to develop their brains, when we are ourselves part of a caring community.

Every experience as a parent can build us up or knock us down. Notice the difference that other people make to us as we do our best to make a difference for our children. That person on the bus or train who helps us lift the buggy, or moves to make room for us to sit with our child. The difference between a waiting room at the doctor's surgery or hospital that is child-friendly and one that leaves us frazzled and uncomfortable. The children's centre or school that welcomes us and treats us well, or the one where we feel anxious and uncertain.

As a parent it is important that we take care of ourselves as well as taking care of our children. Look for people who are good for you, responding to you and treating you with care and respect, providing you with the brain food of relationships so that you can provide that for your child. All our lives we need people who respond to us, because that helps our brains to work. We need people who engage with us, noticing how we are feeling, because that helps us link feeling and thinking together. We need people who relax with us, because that helps us to manage our feelings. We need people who show us how they are feeling – play – because that helps us to make sense of how we feel. And we need people who talk to us because that helps us to think. When people make loving connections, everyone grows stronger.

When we know about good food we can make sure our children get what they need to grow strong and healthy bodies. When we know about Five to Thrive we can make sure our children get what they need to grow strong and healthy brains. And parents have been finding that as they notice themselves being brain builders it also adds to feeling confident and happy about being a parent – which in turn makes it more likely that their children will be confident and happy. Healthy brains are the basis for happy lives.

Kate Cairns, 1 May 2014