

The Secret to Calm Parenting

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Quieting the body to quiet the mind

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This is an excerpt from A Calm Brain, a new book by Gayatri Devi, MD, a neurologist and the director of the New York Memory and Healthy Aging Services.

Calm is a sense of internal composure that lets us function to the best of our abilities. It is the ideal state of the brain, supported by a body completely allied with it, allowing us to harness our *cognitive*

powers while maintaining a balance with our emotions. When you are calm, you are in your zone, unperturbed by distractions or distress.

The brain has complex systems for relaxation and calm to counteract its mechanisms for alertness and anxiety. These body-based visceral systems lie not within our frontal lobes, our rational higher brain, the seat of logic and thinking, but within our core brain, which controls our emotions and impulses, and the vast environmental sensor and receptacle that is our body.

A calm body is a calm mind. Not the other way around, as most people believe. When a mother says to her son, “Tony, would you please calm down,” she is using a top-down approach to calming her child—asking him to use a rational, conscious process to quiet down. On the other hand, if a mother says to a screaming child, “Time out!” and sits him in a chair facing a wall, that’s using a bottom-up approach—quieting his body in order to achieve a sense of calm.

Choice Vs. Structure

In a café recently, I observed a mother with her young son, who looked about five years old. They walked in for breakfast on a crowded Sunday morning and found a corner table set for four people.

“Where do you want to sit, honey?” asked the mother, pointing to the four chairs.

“I don’t know, Mom. Wherever,” replied the boy, his voice still heavy with sleep.

“You can sit up against the wall; you can sit in the corner. Or you can sit next to Mommy, right here,” said his mother, ignoring his indifference. “If you sit next to the wall, you can watch people come and go. What do you want to do?”

“Mom, I don’t care,” said the son, starting to whine now.

“Okay, but don’t cry about it after,” warned the mother.

“Didn’t you want to draw with your crayons?”

“Uh, okay. Here?” The son gestured toward the corner seat.

“Good,” said his mother, looking pleased that he had made a decision. “Now, what would you like for breakfast?”

And so it went. By the time they left the cafe, this five year-old had had to make so many decisions I was exhausted. I sometimes thought my mother was too strict, but watching this sad Sunday morning drama, I was glad she set down a plate in front of me for breakfast every morning and that I ate what was on it.

Overscheduling and Anxiety

In the increasingly overstimulated world that is the milieu of the modern urban child, there are too many toys, too much technology, and too many choices. The one thing that children don’t have enough of, in my opinion, is community. And this is what the core brain requires. Kids need the skills gained from living in communities to help them empathize and communicate effectively, which is particularly important for calm.

Over-scheduling children’s lives, in the race to Harvard that begins at conception, leaves little time for impromptu playtime with neighborhood kids and other core-brain delights that give rise not just to calm but to a productive and healthy adulthood. Researchers have in fact found that the more activities that are scheduled for children, the more likely they are to suffer from stress and anxiety.

Accompanying frenetic scheduling is the constant need for vigilance. A patient of mine told me about her ten-year old granddaughter who lives in a New York City apartment building. Although the building has a doorman who monitors all visitors, it is not uncommon for parents to monitor their child walking down the hallway to visit another child’s apartment. What danger might lurk in the hallway? This kind of anxiety about unseen dangers surely has an impact on the impressionable core brains of young children.

Whispered Fears

A childhood steeped in excessive vigilance, even at the hands of well-intentioned parents, may impair one’s ability to self-soothe, to self-protect. Walking down Madison Avenue in New York a few weeks ago I heard a mother say to her two-year-old child slouching in his stroller, “Aaron, close your eyes, it’s getting sunny!” And little Aaron obediently shut his eyes, to protect himself from a gloriously sunny day because his mother thought the sunshine would harm him.

This example is funny in its absurdity, but it's no joke that many kids today are the unwitting victims of their parents' *germophobia*

and over-sanitization—of children and of childhood. The truth is that exposure to a reasonable number of environmental pathogens at a young age is helpful in developing immunity to a host of illnesses in adulthood. Preventing this exposure can set the stage for later susceptibility to illness. And overprotection can stimulate those unnamed, unvoiced fears that resonate through the house, whispering into a child's ear, "Be afraid!"

Related to over-vigilance and lack of community is the proliferation of technology, which further handicaps children in their quest for calm. Computer games, with their beeping and flashing and demand for tight electronic focus, further compromise community and core brain calm. As does children's constant texting, which impairs the honing of core brain people skills. As a boy who flirts through texting with a girl he adores said to me in despair, "I don't know if she likes me in real life!"

I make no claims to being an expert when it comes to children, and only my daughter can say how calm a mother I am. But it seems to me that understanding the neuroscience of a child's brain will help guide parents in raising calm children. Chess and piano lessons are all very well. But a calm brain is the greatest gift.

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A Calm Brain is available at [Amazon](#).

This article was last reviewed or updated on August 10, 2021.