

5 Important Brain Facts Every Parent Needs to Know

Understanding how the brain works and how it impacts behavior can help you be a better parent. Keep these brain facts in mind next time your child shows a big feeling, or better yet, teach your kids about these important brain processes.



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I always feel like I need to make a disclaimer at the beginning of articles about the brain. The brain is extremely complex. I am thankful to the people who study the brain and continue to share research related to all of its complexities. These are my extremely simplified explanations.

Your heart races as you hold your daughter close.

That car came out of nowhere!

Thankfully, you were able to grab her and her bike before the car raced past.

Thinking back now, you wonder..."How did I get there so fast? And how was I able to pull her to safety without any

effort at all?"

In this case, I'd thank your amygdala. And your Sympathetic Nervous System.

(Skip ahead for more info)

You don't need to be a scientist to understand the brain. Even a small bit of information can help you feel more empowered and in control next time your child throws a meltdown or you feel like your going to lose your cool.

Consider these 5 brain facts an introduction to the brain and how it impacts your child and your parenting.

Brain Facts for Parents

Amygdala: This is the most primitive part of your brain. I call it your "alarm" because its job is to detect danger and helps you prepare to react in an emergency. This is the part of the brain that is active during big feelings like anger, stress, and anxiety.

- **The good:** When the amygdala sounds the alarm, your body reacts: for example, it will send a surge of adrenaline allowing you to run quickly when your child is toddling into a busy street. It's great for keeping you alive and safe in threatening conditions.
- **The not so good:** The amygdala is not always great at

telling threats from non-threats. In young kids, people with a trauma history – or a parent under stress – the amygdala may overreact, seeing mundane things (a child refusing to brush their teeth, for example) as a threat.

Pre Frontal Cortex: This part of the brain is the last to develop. In fact, it isn't fully formed until around 25 years old. The PFC is where thinking, planning, and decision making happen. With time, the PFC can work through things without the amygdala sounding the alarm.

- **The good:** The development of the PFC is [slow and inconsistent](#), but as your child matures, you may notice them making good decisions, choosing the right path even when the other path may have been easier, and working through tricky social situations.
- **The not so good:** When the amygdala senses a threat, all that matters is survival. So, the brain shuts down the PFC. This means, in the heat of the moment (a meltdown or big feeling) your child is not able to think, process, or make a better choice. You need to be calm to learn...in other words, you need to turn off the amygdala alarm and get the PFC back online [before you do any teaching](#).

Autonomic Nervous System: In an instant, the brain can send signals to the rest of the body. When threatened, it

engages the Sympathetic Nervous System (the “fight or flight” response), raising your heart rate, dilating pupils, stopping digestion. When the threat passes, the Parasympathetic Nervous System kicks in, allowing your body to rest, digest, and breathe normally.

- **The good:** These systems are designed to work together – feel stressed, then relax. We are not meant to be in a constant state of stress (“fight or flight”). When you or your child learn to recognize the signs of stress, you can practice ways of [getting back to calm](#).
- **The not so good:** Lots of behaviors come from a brain reacting to the “alarm” signal from the amygdala. Since the body is ready to “fight or flight” for survival, there may be an increase in [aggressive behaviors](#), such as hitting, scratching, yelling and biting. You may also see avoidant behaviors like hiding, running away, or blaming.
- **Also not so good:** Since the Autonomic Nervous System affects so much of the body, stomach aches, headaches, dizziness, rapid heart rate, tingly fingers or tense muscles may actually be signs that your body is in a state of stress rather than a medical problem.

Neuroplasticity: This means that your brain is able to learn new things through practice! Things you do repeatedly create pathways in your brain. Over time, the brain doesn’t

need to exert as much energy before completing the task because the path is so well-worn. People say, "Neurons that fire together, wire together."

- **The good:** You can shape your child's brain! For example, when you provide a calm, confident response in the middle of a meltdown, it creates a pathway, "Big feelings are not to threats! I will feel calm again!" You can also change your own brain pathways, creating new healthy habits.
- **The not so good:** Unfortunately, this means that negative habits are also wired into the brain, making it difficult – but not impossible – to change thoughts and behaviors. I compare it to "chipping away at a rock." It takes time to change or introduce new pathways!

Mirror Neurons: The neurons in our brains are wired to mimic the emotions and behaviors we observe. This means, when your child is laughing, you may start laughing too. When your child is gruff and frowning, you may also start to feel grouchy too.

- **The good:** Mirror neurons can help us learn to [be empathetic](#) to our kids' big feelings and challenges. Plus, when we respond in a calm manner – either with our facial expressions, body language or our words – it gives them the opportunity to "catch" or "borrow" our calm feelings.

- **The not so good:** This is one reason it is challenging to stay calm when your child is upset. Seeing them angry may cause your brain to feel angry. Unfortunately, our own baggage often comes up in these moments, though we say we're "fine" or "not angry," your face gives you away. [Working on your triggers](#), turning off your "alarm," and calming your nervous system will keep you from mirroring your child's big feelings in the moment.

Want to learn more?

I keep an updated list of books and resources to help you grow in your parenting. Many include information about the brain. [Check out the list here.](#)

Talking to the kids about the brain is a great way to empower them and help them feel less overwhelmed by big emotions. I have a [script you can use here.](#)

If you'd like personalized support, Online Parent Coaching is a fantastic way to explore the root cause of your child's behaviors and find strategies to bring peace to your family. Though I'm not a neuroscientist, I do place an emphasis on creating solutions that take brain development and brain processes into account. [Learn more and schedule a coaching session today!](#)