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EDUCATION WITHOUT FRONTIERS

Decoding Little Minds: Parenting Through Developmental Stages

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Study case

While Julia was at work, she got a call from a neighbour saying that her mother, who often watched her two-year-old son, Ben, had fallen on the sidewalk while carrying groceries. An ambulance had come, and the neighbour had taken Ben to her house until Julia could arrive. When Julia came to pick him up, Ben ran into her arms and said softly, “Nana go nee-nah.” “Nee-nah” was his word for an ambulance. In that small phrase, Julia understood what mattered most to him—not the sirens or the crowd, but that his grandmother had been taken away.

What would you do?

A) tell to your child the real story

B) try to redirect his attention to something else and avoid talking about the sad event or pretending that everything is ok

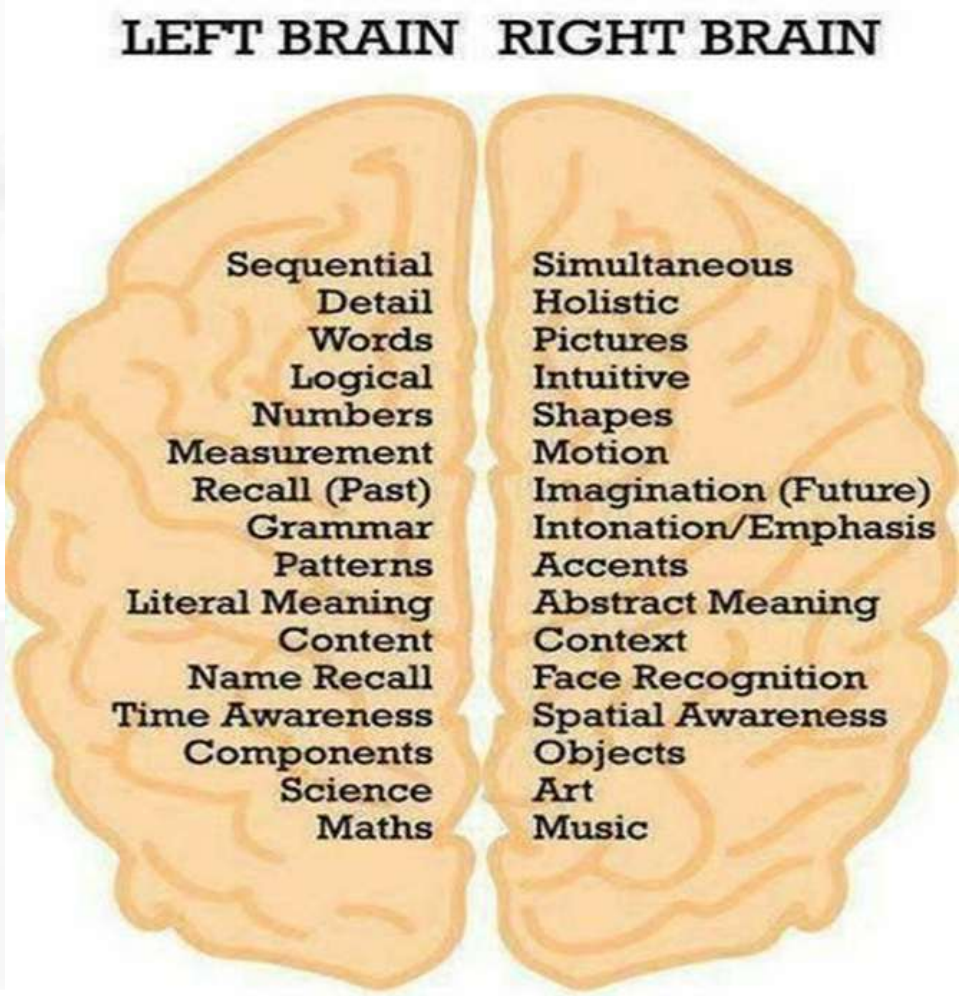
B) The problem with the “let’s go get some ice cream” approach is that it leaves the child confused about what happened and why. He is still full of big and scary emotions, but he isn’t allowed (or helped) to deal with them in an effective way

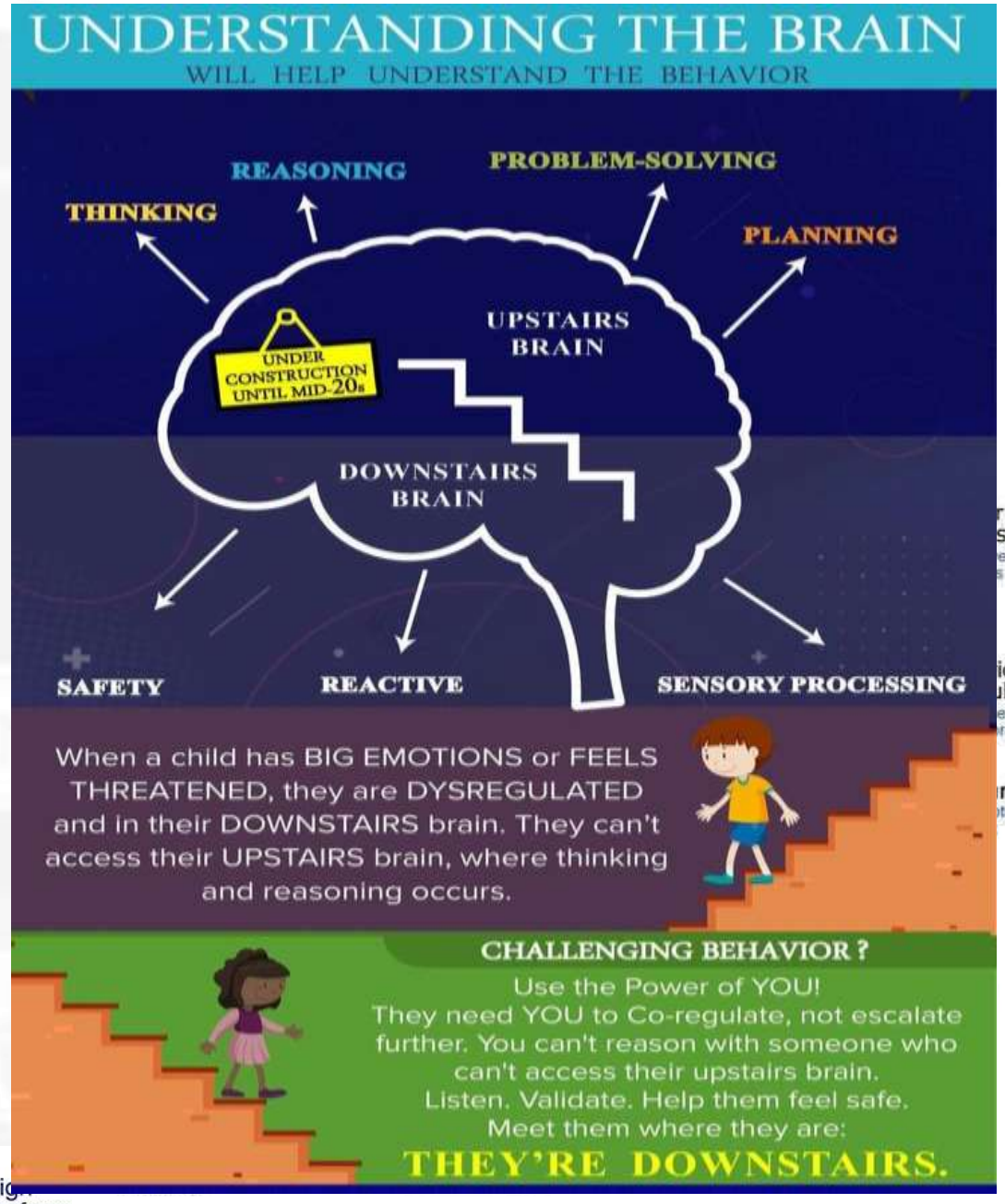
- By allowing Ben to retell the story multiple times, Julia supported him in making sense of what had happened, helping him to better comprehend and integrate the experience
- Children express emotions before they can explain them. Our role is to make sense of what they feel – not distract them from it.

What is integration and why does it matter?

- **Integration** = Connecting different parts of the brain to work harmoniously.
- *Left Brain*: Logical, organized, and literal.
- *Right Brain*: Emotional, experiential, and intuitive.
- *Upper part of the brain*: the prefrontal cortex — helps us think, plan, empathize, and regulate our reactions.
- *Lower part of the brain*: the brainstem and limbic system — controls survival instincts and emotions: fight, flight, freeze
- Goal: Help children achieve balanced brain function by harmonizing all parts.
- Children are often emotionally driven .

Horizontally integrated




UNDERSTANDING THE BRAIN
WILL HELP UNDERSTAND THE BEHAVIOR
REASONING
PROBLEM-SOLVING
THINKING
PLANNING
UNDER CONSTRUCTION UNTIL MID-20s
UPSTAIRS BRAIN
DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN
SAFETY
REACTIVE
SENSORY PROCESSING
When a child has BIG EMOTIONS or FEELS THREATENED, they are DYSREGULATED and in their DOWNSTAIRS brain. They can't access their UPSTAIRS brain, where thinking and reasoning occurs.
CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR ?
Use the Power of YOU!
They need YOU to Co-regulate, not escalate further. You can't reason with someone who can't access their upstairs brain.
Listen. Validate. Help them feel safe.
Meet them where they are:
THEY'RE DOWNSTAIRS.

How does your child's brain work?

- The child's brain is like an *airport* — full of energy, movement, and communication — but the *Control Tower* (the thinking brain) is still under construction. That means emotions take off and land chaotically.

1. **The Control Tower (Prefrontal Cortex)**
   - Coordinates everything, gives directions.
   - Helps with decision-making, impulse control, empathy, problem-solving.
   - In children: still developing and easily overwhelmed.
2. **The Alarm System (Amygdala)**
   - Detects threats (real or imagined).
   - When it senses danger, it sends “all planes away!” (fight-flight-freeze).
3. **The Fuel System (Body & Emotions)**
   - Feelings like hunger, tiredness, or overstimulation affect how well the tower works.
   - A low-fuel system means the tower loses power faster.

INTEGRATING THE EXECUTIVE BRAIN AND EMOTIONAL BRAIN

- The executive brain is responsible with: decision making, control of their emotions and bodies, empathy, self-understanding, and morality—are dependent on a part of their brain that hasn't fully developed yet
- During childhood and adolescence it can be "hijacked" by the emotional brain.

EMOTONAL BRAIN

- The amygdala's job is to quickly process and express emotions, especially ANGER and FEAR
- When it does sense danger, it can completely take over, or hijack, the upper brain
- When we're not truly in danger, we want to think before acting, instead of the other way around.
- kids just don't have the biological skill set to do so all the time. Sometimes they can use their upper brain, and sometimes they can't. Just knowing this and adjusting our expectations can help us see that our kids are often doing the best they can with the brain they have.

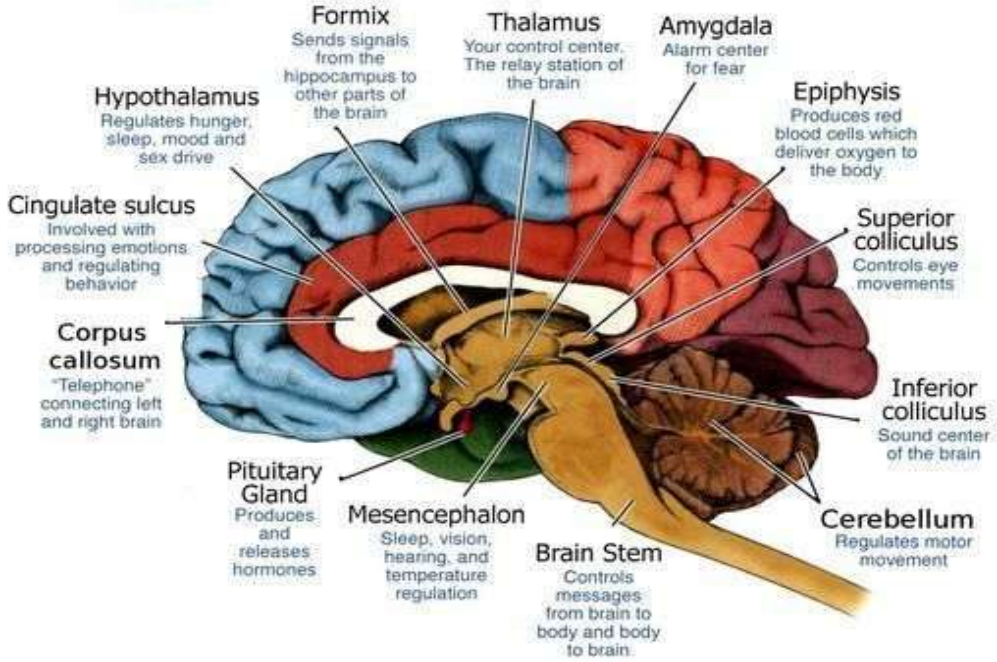
Trauma Brain Processing

1 The Brain Regularly Scans for Real or Perceived Threats

Information is filtered through the limbic system, where we instinctively react with "fight, flight, or freeze."

2 When a Threat is Perceived

The amygdala alerts the hypothalamus to release stress hormones and alarms the sympathetic nervous system to fight, flight or freeze.



3 Reaction to the "Fight, Flight or Freeze" Response

Fear, frustration and heartache influence the mind, resulting in unrelated decisions, choices and reactions.

4 Prior Childhood and Adult Trauma Increases the Brain-Body Response

With prior trauma, the parasympathetic nervous system is automatically activated, resulting in numbing or dissociating.

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- **Our brains are designed for survival, not happiness.**
  As parents and educators, our role is to help children **train and shape their brains** beyond mere survival — to develop the emotional and social skills that lead to genuine **well-being and fulfilment**.
- **Happiness isn't something that just happens — it's a skill** that can be built through practice, reflection, and connection.
  That's why it's essential to focus intentionally on the **values and qualities** we want to nurture in our children: empathy, curiosity, resilience, kindness, and self-awareness.
- By guiding their brains toward these higher goals, we're not just helping them cope with life — we're helping them **thrive.**

Developmental stages

1. **Early Childhood (Ages 0–3):**

- The brain is growing faster than at any other time in life.
- Babies and toddlers are driven by **feelings and sensations**, not logic.
- They can't calm themselves yet — they borrow your calm.
- **What's normal:**
- Big emotions, crying, clinginess, tantrums, exploring everything with their hands and mouth.
- **How to respond:**
- Focus on **connection and comfort**, not correction.
- Soothe first, then talk. ("You're sad because the toy broke.")
- Routine and safety help their brain feel secure to learn and grow.

Developmental stages

2. Early to Middle Childhood (Ages 3–6): "Integration Begins"

- The brain begins linking emotion and language.
- Imagination, curiosity, and play explode.
- **Empathy development:**
- Children begin to **recognize others' feelings**, but are still very self-focused.
- They might comfort someone but still need reminders and modeling.
- **What's normal:**
- Big feelings, wanting independence, dramatic reactions, constant "why" questions.
- **How to respond:**
- Talk about emotions — yours and theirs.
- Use stories and play to explore feelings ("How do you think she felt when…?").
- Encourage turn-taking and helping behaviours — these grow empathy.

Developmental stages

3. Middle Childhood (Ages 7–12): "Control Tower Under Construction"

- The brain's "control centre" (prefrontal cortex) grows rapidly.
- Children can now think about consequences and fairness.
- **Empathy growth:**
- True **emotional empathy** blossoms — they can imagine what others feel and why.
- They begin to care deeply about friends, fairness, and justice.
- **What's normal:**
- Strong sense of fairness, self-comparison, self-doubt, or perfectionism.
- Still need help handling frustration or disappointment.
- **How to respond:**
- Discuss feelings and perspectives often.
- Praise kindness and effort, not just achievement.
- Guide problem-solving and reflection: "What do you think they felt when that happened?"
- Encourage teamwork and community — it strengthens empathy and belonging.

Developmental stages

4. Adolescence (Ages 13–18): "Remodelling the Brain"

- The emotional centre (limbic system) is very active; the rational part (prefrontal cortex) **is still developing**.
- Teens crave independence and identity while still needing support.
- **Empathy maturity:**
- Teens can feel deep empathy and moral concern, but emotions can hijack reasoning under stress.
- Peer connection fuels empathy — they learn to balance self and others.
- **What's normal:**
- Mood swings, risk-taking, questioning rules, strong need to be understood.
- **How to respond:**
- Stay calm and open — listen more than you lecture.
- Discuss values and choices, not just rules.
- Model empathy: show respect even when you disagree.
- Encourage reflection: "How did that affect you? How do you think it affected them?"

Developmental stages

Development isn't just about growing up — it's about connecting different parts of the brain so they work together in harmony. Each stage offers opportunities to "build the brain" through connection, reflection, storytelling, and empathy, gradually turning the child's control tower into a fully functional command centre.

- When the child is lacking integrity between the left and right brain he is stuck between chaos and rigidity
- When your child is in a state of integration he will show: flexibility, adaptability, stability and understanding over the world around and himself
- In terms of development, very young children are right hemisphere dominant, especially during their first three years
- In order to live balanced, meaningful, and creative lives full of connected relationships, it's crucial that our two hemispheres work together
- Using only the right or left brain would be like trying to swim using only one arm.
- The goal is to avoid living in an emotional flood or an emotional desert.

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

Strategies

- **CONNECT and REDIRECT**: When your child is upset, connect first emotionally, right brain to right brain. Then, once your child is more in control and receptive, bring in the left-brain lessons and discipline.
- Help your kids “feel felt” before you try to solve problems or address the situation logically
- When a child is upset, logic often won’t work until we have responded to the right brain’s emotional needs. We call this emotional connection “attunement, ” which is how we connect deeply with another person and allow them to “feel felt.”

- Step 1: connect with the Right (use nonverbal signals like physical touch, empathetic facial expressions, a nurturing tone of voice, and non-judgmental listening)
- Step 2: redirect with the Left

NAME IT TO TAME IT: TELLING STORIES TO CALM BIG EMOTIONS

- **Name it to tame it**: When big, right-brain emotions are raging out of control, help your kids tell the story about what's upsetting them, so their left brain can help make sense of their experience and they can feel more in control.
- The drive to understand why things happen to us is so strong that the brain will continue to try making sense of an experience until it succeeds. As parents, we can help this process along through storytelling

- Even at this young age, make it a habit to acknowledge and name feelings: You look so sad. That really hurt, didn't it? Then tell the story. With small children, you'll need to be the primary narrator. Use your words and even act out the fall or the bump, possibly using humour, and watch your child's fascination.
- It can be helpful to make a homemade book with pictures or photos to retell an upsetting story, or to prepare your child for a transition, like a new bedtime routine or starting preschool

Don’t take it personal

- Too often, we interpret a child’s behaviour as disrespectful or ungrateful. The truth is, they love you deeply—they just haven’t yet learned how to express it. When we let go of these assumptions, we open the door to parenting with greater patience, understanding, and compassion.

TANTRUMS vs MELTDOWNS

- A **tantrum** occurs when a child essentially decides to throw it. She makes a conscious choice to act out, to push buttons and terrorize you until she get what she wants
- A parent who recognizes this type of tantrum is left with one clear response: never negotiate with a ‘’terrorist’’.
- Example: “I understand that you’re excited about the slippers, but I don’t like the way you’re acting. If you don’t stop now, you won’t get the slippers, and I’ll need to cancel your playdate this afternoon, because you’re showing me that you’re not able to handle yourself well.”

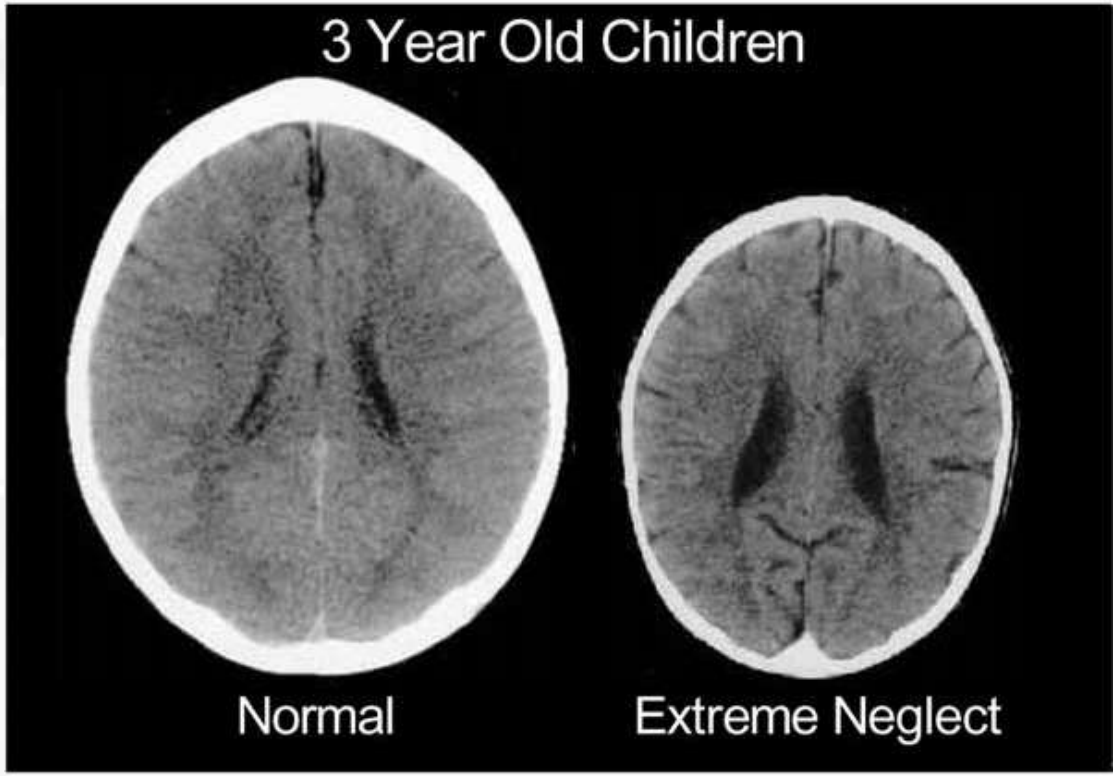
TANTRUMS vs MELTDOWNS

- A **meltdown**, in contrast, is an intense response to overwhelming stress, sensory overload, or emotional overwhelm, rather than a deliberate attempt to get something. It often occurs in individuals with heightened sensitivities, such as those with autism or ADHD. During a meltdown, the person may cry, scream, shake, or shut down completely, and they have little to no control over their behaviour in the moment. Meltdowns usually take longer to resolve than tantrums, and after they occur, the individual may feel exhausted, embarrassed, or emotionally drained, needing time, comfort, or a quiet space to recover. Unlike tantrums, meltdowns are not purposeful and cannot be “stopped” through negotiation or distraction.

MYTHS:

- If we don’t talk about it, he will forget and won’t suffer.
- ‘’Don’t hug your child too much, or they may become overly attached.’’

We are wired for connection



CONNECTION — The Foundation of a Healthy Brain

- **Connection Comes First:** Emotional bonds build brain pathways for regulation, learning, and resilience.
- **Parent vs. Friend:** Being a parent = guiding, setting boundaries, teaching life skills; being a “best friend” is secondary.
- **Healthy Balance:** Be loving and emotionally available **without giving up your parental role.**
- **Takeaway:** Connection + guidance = optimal brain growth.

POSITIVE PARENTING– Connection With Boundaries

- **Misconception:** Positive parenting ≠ permissiveness or avoiding discipline.
- **Reality:** Positive parenting = connection + guidance + teaching.
- **Risks of Extreme "Positive Parenting":**
- Confuses children about expectations
- Weakens emotional regulation
- Reduces resilience
- **Balanced Approach:**
- Encourage all emotions, not just "positive" ones
- Set clear boundaries with empathy
- Discipline = teaching, not punishment
- **Takeaway:** Positive parenting = **love + limits**.

DISCIPLINE = Brain Training, not punishment

- **Discipline Shapes the Brain:** Builds self-control, focus, and emotional regulation.
- **Modern Challenge:** Many adults struggle with self-discipline → impulsivity, poor stress management, difficulty achieving goals.
- **Parenting Role:** Teach discipline early with guidance and empathy to create resilient, capable children.
- **Key Idea:** Discipline = **training the brain for life**, not punishment.

RISKY BEHAVIOR AND THE TEENAGE BRAIN

- Studies also show the brains of teenagers might be more biologically wired to engage in risky behaviours. The adolescent age group is quick to make poor decisions and engage in reckless risk-taking behavior more than children and adults
- It can be a worrisome time for parents, but it’s important to remember that teens are built to seek INDEPENDENCE and FREEDOM. It's a sign of their healthy development.

Thank you

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