

YOUR TURN SHELBY PEDERSEN

'Upstairs brain' vital tool for kids' emotional health



Ever wonder why a toddler throwing a temper tantrum simply cannot snap out of it? It's called an amygdala hijack — one part of the brain has hijacked the other and taken over.

As a parent of a toddler, I know firsthand how frustrating these situations can be. Parents often experience a disconnect between our long-term goals for our kids (finding fulfillment, experience loving relationships, finding success) and surviving in the day-to-day chaos of raising children.

We go into "survival" mode, just getting through each day and leaving those happy and fulfilled objectives to be developed in some other moment that never comes.

I recently read the book "The Whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind" and found many connections to the techniques we use at ICAN and those I use at home with my toddler.

At ICAN, we work with 200 youths every day who come from backgrounds of disadvantage. These kids deal with poverty, crime, family loss and so many situations that most of us will never face. It is critical for our staff to understand how the brain works when dealing with these youths.

We need tools and techniques to keep these youth in a positive, caring environment when they are spending time at ICAN. The book teaches us about the "upstairs brain" (for thinking, planning and imagining), which doesn't become fully developed until we are in our mid-20s!

The "downstairs" brain is the primitive part of the brain that runs our fight-or-flight reactions that have helped us survive over time. The amygdala in the downstairs brain is responsible for those famous tantrums — because the reasoning part of the brain is hijacked in those situations, reasoning will not work well.

Here are some tips from the book that can help every parent:

Connect and Redirect: When kids get frustrated, remember to first show empathy and understanding, then connect to their logical side with reasoning once the child has calmed down.

Name it to Tame it: Try not to hide the truth to protect kids, like blaming some-



Tips can help you short-circuit a tantrum. PATRICHEAGNEY, GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

one else for something that happened. It is helpful to kids to re-tell an event where something bad may have happened. This puts logic into the event and helps them identify their emotions (name it) and how to deal with them (tame it).

Engage Not Rage: Don't expect kids to always make the best decisions. Remember: Their upstairs brain is not fully developed. When kids get upset and wind up in a tantrum, rather than enraging the downstairs brain by imposing solutions, try to engage the upstairs brain and let your child help find the solution.

Use It or Loose It: Help kids develop their upstairs brain. Encourage them to practice simple decision making (do you want to play a board game or ride your bike?). Also, help explain emotions to them (Why am I sad? Why are you sad? What does it feel like to be sad?).

At ICAN, if we can keep kids calm and let them know that they also have control over the situation we can keep youths from getting overemotional (which is important when you are dealing with 200 kids who just sat through a day of school).

In the home, every interaction is an opportunity to develop the relationship with your kids and help them grow as individuals.

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