

Harvard psychologist to parents: Do these 7 things if you want to raise kids with flexible, resilient brains

A child's brain is not a miniature adult brain. It is a brain born under construction that wires itself to the world. And it's up to parents to create a world — both physical and social — that is rich with wiring instructions.

Based on years of research in neuroscience and psychology, here are seven parenting rules to help your kid build a brain that is flexible and therefore resilient.

1. Be a gardener, not a carpenter.

Carpenters carve wood into the shape they want. Gardeners help things to grow on their own by cultivating a fertile landscape.

Likewise, parents can sculpt their child into something specific, say, a concert violinist. Or they can provide an environment that encourages healthy growth in whatever direction the child takes.

You might want your kid to play violin in Symphony Hall someday, but forcing them to take lessons (the carpenter approach) might build a virtuoso, or a kid who views music as an unpleasant chore.

The gardener approach would be to sprinkle a variety of musical opportunities around the home and see which ones spark your child's interest. Do they love to bang on pots and pans? Maybe your child is a budding heavy metal drummer.

Once you understand what kind of plant you're growing, you can "adjust the soil" for it to take root and flourish.

2. Talk and read to your child. A lot.

Research shows that, even when children are just a few months old and don't understand the meanings of words, their brains still make use of them.

This builds a neural foundation for later learning. So the more words they hear, the greater the effect. They'll also have better vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Teaching them "emotion words" (i.e., sad, happy, frustrated) is especially beneficial. The more they know, the more flexibly they can act.

Put this advice into action by elaborating on the feelings of other people. Talk about what causes emotions and how they might affect someone: “See that crying boy? He is feeling pain from falling down and scraping his knee. He is sad and probably wants a hug from his parents.”

Think of yourself as your children’s tour guide through the mysterious world of humans and their movements and sounds.

3. Explain things.

It can be exhausting when your child is constantly asking, “Why?” But when you explain something to them, you’ve taken something new and novel from the world and made it predictable. Brains work more efficiently when they predict well.

Avoid answering “why” questions with, “Because I said so.” Children who understand the reasons to behave a particular way can more effectively regulate their actions.

If all they know is, “I shouldn’t eat all the cookies because an authority figure told me so, and I’ll get in trouble,” that reasoning may not help when parents aren’t present.

It’s better if they understand, “I shouldn’t eat all the cookies because I’ll get a stomachache, and my brother and sister will be disappointed at missing dessert.” This reasoning helps them understand the consequences of their actions and fosters empathy.

4. Describe the activity, not the person.

When your son smacks your daughter in the head, don’t call him “a bad boy.” Be specific: “Stop hitting your sister. It hurts her and makes her feel annoyed. Tell her you are sorry.”

The same rule holds for praise: Don’t call your daughter “a good girl.” Instead, comment on her actions: “You made a good choice not slugging your brother back.” This kind of wording will help her brain build more useful concepts about her actions and herself.

Another suggestion is to describe the actions of storybook characters. When someone fails to tell the truth, don’t say, “Sam is a liar,” which is about the person. Say, “Sam told a lie,” which is about the activity. Then follow up with, “Why do you think Sam did that? How will other people feel if they find out? Should they forgive Sam?”

By engaging with curiosity, rather than certainty, you’re modeling the flexibility they’ll need in real-life situations. You’re also signaling that Sam is not inherently dishonest, but lying in a particular situation. Perhaps he’d behave more honestly in other circumstances.

5. Help your children to copy you.

Have you noticed how some tasks that seem like work to you (i.e., cleaning the house or weeding a garden) can be play to a child?

Children learn naturally by watching, playing, and most of all, by copying adults. It's an efficient way to learn, and it gives them a sense of mastery. So hand them a miniature broom or garden spade or a toy lawnmower and let the imitating begin.

One caution: Little children will copy you for better *or worse*. I remember when my daughter was three, she started saying the word "cheeses" a lot. When her father asked about it, she replied, "Oh, mama says it." (If you haven't figured it out yet, try saying "Oh, cheeses" aloud in an exasperated tone.)

6. Expose children (safely) to lots of people.

Along with people that your kids may normally encounter — grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, other kids — try to exposing them to as much diversity as you can, especially when they are infants.

According to research, babies who interact regularly with speakers of different languages may retain critical brain wiring that helps them learn other languages in the future.

Similarly, babies who see many diverse faces may wire themselves to better distinguish and remember a greater variety of faces in later life. This might be the simplest anti-racism step you can take as a parent.

7. Applaud agency.

Children love to try things on their own without your help, like getting dressed or assembling puzzles. This is good. You *want* them to develop a sense of agency.

Even actions that look like misbehavior may be a child's attempts to understand their effect on the world. When your two-year-old angel throws her Cheerios on the floor and waits for you to pick them up, she's not "manipulating" you.

More likely, she's learning something about the physics of gravity. She's also learning that her actions have an effect on the world around her. So scoop up the Cheerios and let her try again.

Knowing when to step in and when to step back can be challenging. But if you're always present, guiding your child and taking care of their every need, they don't learn to do things themselves. Sometimes, letting them struggle builds resilience and helps them understand the consequences of their actions.

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