

# I am a child

By Marita Villafuerte



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## Brain training (your child's emotions)

### First of three parts

**A**im to train your child's brain early on. Brain training begins in the womb. Parents have the power to prepare their child for school readiness and develop the skill to learn easily for life at the onset.

Did you know that the developing brain grows so fast—at the rate of 250,000 cells a minute or 15 million cells per hour? Neurobiologist Peter Huttenlocher of the University of Chicago likened it to counting drops of water in a torrential storm. There is no way you can count it. If you were aware of your fetus' rapid developing brain rate, would you be careful about what you say, hear, think, do and how you expose yourself and receive stimulation? A developing fetus is very sensitive to stimuli it receives. Most brain cells are produced between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> month of gestation. These cells, called neurons, are fast-developing cells that develop a vast network, making connections with other cells. A newborn's brain already has more than a trillion connections.

Emotional intelligence develops while the fetus is in the womb. By the time you send your child to school, cultivating it is already more challenging. Parents, be mindful that you are the first influencers responsible for nurturing the emotional intelligence of your child. The school is the last resort for promoting emotional literacy.

Be emotionally stable for your child's sake. An infant's relationship with his primary caretaker will determine if the child will

have learning challenges. In a study made by Harold Rubenstein of the Dartmouth Medical School, problematic relationships that a young child experiences cause his brain to utilize glucose in dealing with stress. If the child were in a positive situation, the same glucose could be used for early cognitive functions. The brain adjusts and reorganizes itself when exposed to stress or violence. It increases receptor sites for alertness chemicals. These chemicals raise reactivity and blood pressure, making the child more impulsive and aggressive in school. As an educator, I have observed that children who are stressed and aggressive actually reflect what they are exposed to in the home. When parents are stressed, their children are stressed.

Remember that the number "1" is a very significant and powerful number in the life of the child. Just like in other activities, when we rank something as first, it is top priority. **A good deal of development on emotional intelligence happens on the first year.** Whether you are aware of it or not, everything you do or say to your child is considered brain training. Children learn how to respond to hundreds of everyday simple cause-and-effect situations with parents. These situations guide their emotions.

Attunement is the process whereby parents do role modeling and engage themselves in close and connected interaction and handling with their child in his first critical year. Psychiatrist Daniel Stern describes attunement this way: "The primary caregiver

plays back the proper and critical emotional responses." Aside from verbal expressions and behavior, parents' gestures are also important. Parents, take your role seriously but do it positively and joyfully. A child has the potential to be morally upright or corrupt depending on his attunement. You are the primary role models of the future generation.

Researchers now know that infant development is very important. According to neurobiologist Harry Chugani of Wayne State, the first-year experiences can completely change the way a person turns out. If parents know this, I mean really believe the power and potential of a 1-year-old child's developmental opportunities, they might change their decision on who's minding their baby. Will you still entrust your child to a day care center or to a nanny at a very young age?

A study by Harvard psychologist Jerome Kagan reveals that 50 percent of temperament is learned and 50 percent is inherited. The first 24 months of child-raising provides a wide spectrum of dramatic and probable futures. For instance, a child will learn to be more courageous when parents acknowledge and apply appropriate risk-taking activities. Parents who are fearful communicate by giving out several limitations on the child's movements. This inhibits the child.

A very young child already has a personality. Psychologists claim that personality is set by 6 years old. So dear parents, please plan well. The child has a powerful absorbent mind. Its mind does not sift or select. It just takes in everything just like a sponge.


Deliberate how you will treat and speak to your child. Observe your gestures and mind yourself because you are like a giant mirror and your child will reflect a part of you. When parents laugh at a serious situation, children will do the same. When parents promote dependence and are oversolicitous, their children will be very needy. When parents bounce back easily, their children will be resilient.

Adults find young children endearing so they normally do naughty things to the youngsters without thinking of the effect on the child. I remember I had a 2-year old boy who started pulling down the pants of his classmates. It turned out that his uncles do that to him to show their animated affection. Then there is another boy who would give each child a bear hug to the point that the one being hugged gets hurt and ends up in tears. I found out that the boy's father always had a "gigil" moment with his adorable toddler.

Then there is Lil Miss Pointee, a 2-year-old student who would always shake a finger when something goes wrong and then warns in Filipino "Hala." I could clearly hear an unsuspecting adult influencing this young child. Another 3-year-old had an auto-spank-my-hand syndrome while I taught her how to use Montessori materials. It took me several months and acquired red hands (from soreness) to teach this child how to use her hands for working with the materials and not for spanking me. One frightful 4-year-old girl always had her hands clasped so tightly. To instill her own version of discipline, her mother was so strict and constrained the child from touching things. It curtailed the girl's curiosity

to the max. It took me almost a year to teach her to open her hands so she can try out new things. The hands are the instrument of the brain. Parents do not realize the impact of their harsh words whenever they say "no" and disallow their child to touch and try things. This tender child had a serious trauma in exploring things which limited her learning capacity. Exploration is a learning experience valuable in the life of the child.

I had a student who had a vile temper at a tender age of 3. It was amazing to observe his fiery behavior when unleashed. Depending on the situation, he would be in a rage or launch terrible tantrums. Someone or something gets hurt in the process. A hurt person hurts others. He has improved a lot through the years as I gave him therapy on anger management. It is sad that this child will take years to undo what only took a while for his parents to expose him to such temper. The good news is that the child is more resilient than an adult and will learn or re-learn faster because his brain is still developing. On the other hand, there are very well-balanced and highly tolerant parents who create emotional monsters, too. I've also met drama princesses who act out the dramas that they watch with their nannies. They verbalize so many harsh words drawn from TV shows.

Contribute to the well-being of your child by being a positive conscious contributor in character formation. In order for a child to become emotionally stable, parents have to be the same. A child is not only the instrument of the future but also a source of character-building for the parents. 

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