

Two Brains Are Better Than One

The scientific community refers to the way the different sides of the brain influence us as left-hemisphere and right-hemisphere modalities. Your left brain loves and desires order. It is logical, literal, linguistic (it likes words), and linear (it puts things in a sequence or order). The right brain is holistic and nonverbal, sending and receiving signals that allow us to communicate, such as facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, posture, and gestures. Instead of details and order, our right brain cares about the big picture – the meaning and feel of an experience – and specializes in images, emotions, and personal memories. Technically, it's more accurate to talk about this side of the brain as more directly influenced by the body and lower brain areas, which allow it to receive and interpret emotional information. You might think of it this way: the left brain cares about the *letter of the law*, while the right brain cares about the *spirit of the law*. The left focuses on the text – the right is about the context.

In order to live balanced, meaningful, and creative lives full of connected relationships, it's crucial that our two hemispheres work together. We want the two sides to become *horizontally integrated*, across the corpus callosum, so that the two sides of our children's brains can act in harmony. That way our children will value both their logic and their emotions; they will be well-balanced and able to understand themselves and the world at large.

Significant problems arise when the two sides of our brain are not integrated and we end up coming at our experiences primarily from one side or the other. If our right brain took over and we ignored the logic of our left brain, we would feel like we were drowning in images, bodily sensations, and what could feel like an emotional flood. But at the same time, we don't want to use only our left brains, divorcing our logic and language from our feelings and personal experiences. That would feel like living in an emotional desert.

We don't want our children to hurt. But we want them to do more than simply get through their difficult times; we want them to face their troubles and grow from them. Denial of our emotions isn't the only danger we face when we rely too heavily on our left brain. We can also become too literal, leaving us without a sense of perspective, where we miss the meaning that comes from putting things in context.

By helping our kids connect left and right, we give them a better chance of avoiding the banks of chaos and rigidity, and of flowing and living in the flexible current of mental health and happiness. Integrating the left brain with the right brain helps to keep children from floating too close to one bank or another. When the raw emotions in their right brain are not combined with the logic of the left, they will be floating too close to the bank of chaos. That means we

need to help them bring in the left brain to get some perspective and handle their emotions in a positive way. Likewise, if they're denying their emotions and retreating to the left, they are hugging the bank of rigidity. In that case, we need to help them bring in more of the right brain so they can be open to new input and experiences.

Parents know how powerful storytelling can be when it comes to distracting their kids or calming them down, but most people don't realize the science behind this powerful force. The right side of our brain processes our emotions and autobiographical memories, but our left side is what makes sense of these feelings and recollections. Healing from a difficult experience emerges when the left side works with the right to tell our life stories. When children learn to pay attention to and share their own stories, they can respond in healthy ways to everything from a scraped elbow to a major loss or trauma.

What kids often need, especially when they experience strong emotions, is to have someone help them use their left brain to make some sense of what's going on – to put things in order and to name these big and scary right brain feelings so they can deal with them effectively. This is what storytelling does: it allows us to understand ourselves and our world by using both our left and right hemispheres together. To tell a story that makes sense, the left brain must put things in order, using words and logic. The right brain contributes the bodily sensations, raw emotions, and personal memories, so we can see the whole picture and communicate our experience. This is the scientific explanation behind why journaling and talking about a difficult event can be so powerful in helping us heal. In fact, research shows that merely using a name or label to what we feel literally calms down the activity of the emotional circuitry in the right hemisphere.

It is important, for this same reason according to neuropsychiatrist, Daniel J. Siegel, for kids of all ages to tell their stories, as it helps them try to understand their emotions and the events that occur in their lives. Sometimes parents avoid talking about upsetting experiences, thinking that doing so will reinforce their children's pain or make things worse. Actually, telling the story is often exactly what children need, both to make sense of the event and to move on to a place where they can feel better about what happened. 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.