



FEAR AND THE BRAIN IN THE CHILD OF DIVORCE

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

02/03/2012

The Brain's Reaction to Fear

We know from the brain research and from studying the experts on brain-based learning that fear strikes at the heart of learning. When a child is fearful or feels unsafe the learning brain begins to power down so to speak. Learning becomes more difficult if not impossible.

Have you ever had something scare the daylights out of you? What were you feeling at the time? Most of us probably don't think about what we were feeling when that car zipped through the stop light in front of us and we had to slam on our breaks. We just react to the situation. Our brains do what they were supposed to do – they react and keep us safe by helping us to slam on our breaks.

Feeling safe is a basic instinct that each person has, and fear is a basic human emotion. From the time we are born our brains are equipped with the fight or flight capability. This fight or flight capacity is found in the lower level of the brain called the brain stem. Many times we can sense or feel when something is dangerous. Fear can be intense, mild or medium depending on the situation. Fear can be brief or long lasting.



From KidsHealth.org (<http://tinyurl.com/6u28czx>) we read,

“When we sense danger, the brain reacts instantly, sending signals that activate the nervous system. This causes physical responses, such as a faster heartbeat, rapid breathing, and an increase in blood pressure. Blood pumps to muscle groups to prepare the body for physical action (such as running or fighting). Skin sweats to keep the body cool. Some people might notice sensations in the stomach, head, chest, legs, or hands. These physical sensations of fear can be mild or strong.”

When a child fears something, he or she wants and expects the adults in their life to protect them and keep them safe. In talking about feeling safe, John Indermark in Turn Toward Promise (Upper Room Books) explains safety in the following statement,





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"In order to feel safe, in order to experience security, you must be able to trust in something or someone greater than yourself, greater than your fears."

Fear and the Child of Divorce

Because children of divorce have lost a sense of trust in the very people who are supposed to keep them safe, many times they experience intense safety issues. When this happens, the fight or flight part of the brain takes over. It is a reaction to the situation.

Have you ever had a child of divorce come into your group with a hoodie on and the hood pulled way down over the eyes? Many of us will try and convince the child to remove the hood from the eyes by giving them reasons they can't do this. We might try and kid them out of it or what I call "happy them up" in order to get them to remove the hood.

If the child is truly in the fight or flight part of the brain, they can't rationalize or analyze any reason to remove the hood. All they know is they don't feel safe and hiding their eyes is a way of "flight" from the situation. All of our talking and kidding can send these children even deeper into themselves or cause them to react with inappropriate responses. At the very least, it can isolate them from the entire class or possible even push them away from church completely.

The most important adults in the child's world have dropped them head first in the middle of an emotional train wreck, and then as church leaders we expect them to walk into our classes and participate just like any other child. Divorce is an emotional train wreck, and for the child it is a wreck that isn't safe and is full of fear. Memorizing scripture; answering questions about a bible story, joining in praise and worship or behaving appropriately may be almost impossible for the child of divorce as the body is physically preparing for the fear factor.

Helping Children Deal With Fear

One of the best approaches for helping children filled with fear is to assure them they are safe. Calming them and assuring them of their safety allows the fight or flight response to relax sending them to the upper levels of the brain. (more on this next week) It slows down that racing heart, lowers the blood pressure, slows the breathing and stops the release of harmful chemicals and hormones.

Helping children to breathe from the diaphragm can assist in calming them. Something as simple as saying, "Breathe! Breathe! Breathe with me" as you model deep breathing is helpful. You'll know if they are breathing from the diaphragm by watching their shoulders. If their shoulders are moving up and down, then they are still breathing in the chest area.





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Dr. Becky Bailey, in her book Conscious Discipline [<http://www.consciousdiscipline.com> (800-842-2846)], has a great concept for helping children who feel unsafe in various situations. She has developed a concept called the "Safe Keeper". It is a very simple and easy approach to use as you tell the child,

"I am the Safe Keeper. It's my job to keep things safe. And your job is to help me keep things safe."

This almost sounds too simple to work, but I have used this concept for years and it works. It works especially well with the child of divorce. It doesn't put any pressure on them, and it gives them a chance to actually feel safe in a non-threatening environment.

Only once the child feels safe can they effectively be pulled into the group. Only when they feel safe can they learn. Only when they feel safe can they connect with other children, with you and with our Savior, Jesus Christ. And the Savior is what these children desperately need in their lives.

Additional Resources

For another article that talks more about the Safe Keeper check out "Being the Shepherd and Safe Keeper for Children with Challenging Behaviors" (<http://www.hlp4.com/node/73>).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda's website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\)](http://www.hlp4.com) [<http://www.hlp4.com>]. Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at Linda@hlp4.com.

