



THE BRAIN TRAIN – THE ENGINE

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By Linda Ranson Jacobs

03/09/2012



I like to think of the brain system as the “brain train”.

A Quick Review

The caboose ([the brain stem](#)) is the train car attached to the rear of the train and used primarily by the train crew. In older days, back when trains actually had a caboose, it was used as a place of protection where soldiers, or the crew, were stationed to protect the train from raiders and robbers and keep it safe. The brain stem is all about fight, flight or freeze. The brain stem asks,

“Am I safe?”

The passenger car ([the limbic system](#)) is the place where the people ride on the train and enjoy each other’s company. The limbic system is all about emotions and asks,

“Am I loved?”

[Last week we looked at this emotional part of the brain.](#) The part of the brain that says,

“Everything is about me!”

Understanding when a child is in the emotional part of the brain is important because we need to have empathy for them and what they are experiencing.

The Upper Level of the Brain

As we move up the brain this week, we will discuss the upper level of the brain. This is the part of the brain where we want the child of divorce to access. The upper level of the brain (the frontal lobes) is where you find:

- Impulse control
- Empathy
- Working memory
- Sustained attention
- The ability to plan, prioritize, initiate





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- Organization
- Time management (Ever notice single parents are almost always late?)
- Goals and stick-to-it-iveness

For Leaders

The upper level of the brain is where we need to be as leaders when working with children of divorce. It is in this level of the brain that you will be effective leaders. Think about it. Working with some of these children can be a real challenge. It takes impulse control to keep from getting upset with some of their behaviors. It certainly takes empathy when you must feel what they are feeling and you need to put yourself in their place for a few minutes. What must it feel like when you wanted to see your mom and she didn't show up for dinner this week or last week or the last ten weeks?

I'm sure you can go down the list above and see the importance of

- Remembering what a child told you three weeks ago the last time they were at church
- Paying attention to each child of divorce
- Planning in advance, prioritizing and initiating projects effectively
- Being organized for every class
- Being on time and prepared in advance
- Being committed to stick with the child of divorce and be helpful and serving their family.

In Children of Divorce

For the child of divorce we want them to be able to access the upper level of the brain so they can learn how to process the divorce and move forward with their lives. The child has to be in this state in order to learn and solve conflicts. We learn problem solving in a social system. Children of divorce don't have an opportunity to learn this when being shuffled from home to home, or in homes where there is a lot of fighting or living with a single parent who is too stressed to pay much attention to the needs of their children. While not all single parents are like this, many who are just experiencing the heartbreak of a divorce will live in the emotional part of their brain. Plus, many children of divorce are isolated and left alone after school - zoning in front of a TV, playing video games and suffering the Internet.

We want them to be in the frontal lobes so they experience sustained attention. So they can learn to belong and feel what it is like to empathize with another person. It is important for the church and church activities/classes to welcome the child of divorce into the church family. These children need to see, feel and be a part of





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something that emulates a family environment. In these types of environments we can nurture the frontal lobes.

In his book [Think Smart: A Neuroscientist's Prescription for Improving Your Brain's Performance](#), Richard Restak says,

“I’ve found that many prisoners, especially those serving time for violent crimes, suffer from deficiencies in frontal lobe function. They can’t plan their lives or control either their emotions or their behaviors.”

“If the frontal lobes are not nurtured and developed...then we as a society can expect to pay dearly in terms of more crime, broken homes, drug use and violence..” (Richard Restak, 1994)

If you’ve read much research on children of divorce you already know that children of divorce have a higher chance of ending up incarcerated than children in two-parent homes. Richard Restak’s comments should send shock waves into the church realm if we are serious about ministering to the child of divorce in our children’s programs. Did the “broken homes” jump out at you? It did me. What if your church could be one of the tools to help kids develop and nurture their frontal lobes?

The main thing these kids need is your love and empathy for what they are experiencing. When they experience a healthy family type atmosphere where they feel safe physically and emotionally, and where they feel loved and accepted, then they can access the higher level of the brain, the frontal lobes.

It is in this state they will learn to solve problems. They will be able to create choices. Remember the child in the brain stem can’t make choices. The child in the limbic loves to make choices, and the child in the frontal lobes can offer choices. The upper level of the brain or the cortex loves to learn.

The Brain Train Engine

In the Brain Train, the engine (cortex) is the place where the engineer runs the train. All the decisions about running the train are made in this car. Cortex/frontal lobe loves to learn, creates choices, organizes, has working memory, has foresight, planning and follow-through actions. “The frontal lobes are also responsible for our most evolved feelings and behaviors such as ethics, altruism and compassion.” (“Think Smart”, Richard Restak) “What can I learn?” or “How can I solve this problem?” (Dr. Becky Bailey, “Conscious Discipline” www.consciousdiscipline.com 1-800-842-2846)



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Some of you might ask why does a child go from the cortex down to the brain stem? The answer is because the child needs to. The child doesn't have the wiring to get him or herself out of the brain stem; the child needs adults to help.

Another important piece of information to remember is that, even though we have all this brain information and we are learning how to help children move from the lower levels of their brain to the upper levels where they can learn and problem solve, children can still "unhook" the brain by telling themselves they are worthless!

A Brain Train Hypothetical Scenario

Brain Train Scenario: The child of divorce comes into your class and you can tell right away they don't want to be there. Their head is down and they are refusing to look at you. Or worst case scenario they hide under a table or pew. Or they go sit in the corner with their hoodie over their head refuse to look up and take the hoodie off. What do you do? For the most part in the past we have mishandled this type of situation by saying things like, "Oh come on now. Things can't be that bad." Or we try to happy up the child by saying, "Come on, give me a smile." Or, "Quit being silly! Get out from under that table." Or, "Take that hoodie off. I can't see that beautiful face of yours." When we do this, we don't help the child feel safe but instead we literally push them down into feeling unworthy.

What we have been doing hasn't been working. I know because I used to do that and because I've had hundreds of children's leaders tell me this. Most recently at the International Children's Pastor's Conference in Orlando, FL in January 2012 several children's leaders came up and said,

"I know what I've been doing hasn't been working but I just haven't known what to say. Why hasn't someone shared this with us before now?"

Here is a brain smart way to handle one of these types of situations.

Brain stem – describe what the child's actions are.

"Your head is going like this. And your face looks like this." (You make the same movements and facial expression.) When the child looks toward you and they will look toward you because they want to see what you are doing, then you are starting the movement up the brain train.

Limbic system – add empathy.

"Seems to me you might be um.... upset?" Don't tell the child what they are feeling but use the words "seems to me". "Seems to me you don't want to be here." Or, "Seems to me that you might be sad?" Usually at this point the child will mutter something like, "Yeh, I didn't want to come today because I was sad, or upset or mad

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that daddy forgot to come get me this weekend.” Of course if you are a kid and you were expecting your dad to come and get you and take you for the weekend, you don’t want to be at church! The child may be thinking, “What is he comes while I’m at church and he gets mad because I wasn’t waiting on him?”

At this point you can add empathy by saying something like, “Oh my. I understand. If I was waiting for my dad and he didn’t come I’d be upset too. What can I do to help you?” Then give the child some choices. “Would you like to just stand here by me for awhile until you get a little more comfortable? Or would you like to get a drink of water before we get started?”

Let the child make a choice. I have been surprised more than once when a child will give me other options such as, “Well, maybe I could go help the other teacher.” Or, “I think I’ll just sit over here in the corner for awhile.” To which I always add, “That seems like a good choice and then when you feel like it you can join the rest of the group.”

Let your words and your teaching impact with tenderness upon these children. Love them through this time in their lives and teach to their brains!

“Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.” Deuteronomy 32:2 (NIV)

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.