



THE EMOTIONAL BRAIN, PART 2 - HOW TO WORK WITH A CHILD IN THE EMOTIONAL PART OF THE BRAIN

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

03/01/2012

Last week, [we introduced the limbic system](#) (the emotional part of the brain) and explained how it affects children of divorce. Children in the limbic system or the emotional part of the brain wonder if they are loved. They wonder if anyone cares about them. It is all about emotions.

Divorce and the Limbic System of the Brain

When I think back to when I went through a divorce, I now realize that I lived in for many weeks in the emotional part of my brain. I couldn't analyze or get organized, and I was late to every appointment. I even had



trouble making eye contact with people because I was afraid the person I was talking to might not like me. And it didn't end there, over the years, I know I have reverted back to that state on a number of occasions. All that, and I was an adult at the time. Think about the children coming to your church who are experiencing the divorce of their parents!

The Issue of Serotonin Production

Serotonin is a chemical in the brain that affects our emotional states. Serotonin plays an important role in the limbic system, and divorce can impact the level of serotonin in the brain. Children who suffer abuse or emotional upheaval appear to have a lower production of serotonin.

Serotonin could be described as one of the "feel good" chemicals in the brain. Adequate levels of serotonin are commonly associated with a number of positive outcomes including:

- ❖ It can keep one from becoming overwhelmed.
- ❖ It can act as calming music.
- ❖ It helps bond us with each other.

Low levels of serotonin have been linked to a number of negative outcomes including:

- ✓ Aggression
- ✓ Obsessive-compulsive behaviors





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- ✓ Depression
- ✓ Violence
- ✓ Addiction
- ✓ Impulsivity.

Dr. Becky Bailey's (<http://www.consciousdiscipline.com>, 800-842-2846) from a Conscious Discipline workshop in Wichita, Kansas explains the issue of serotonin in terms of outcomes in our society:

"We have a big serotonin problem in our world today.

- *One in 32 adults are incarcerated in the U.S. (impulsivity/aggressive behaviors).*
- *One in three adults are depressed.*
- *Lower serotonin levels are associated with aggressive behaviors in children.*
- *Regarding working with children: 'If my voice is getting louder, I'm getting aggressive; I have a lowered serotonin.'*

Increasing the Levels of Serotonin

Higher levels of serotonin will help children of divorce to cope. Ms. Bailey goes explains a number of ways to increase serotonin including:

- *Stretching always lowers stress and raises serotonin.*
- *Mastery or mastering a challenge (ever feel good after you have mastered something?)*
- *Stretching*
- *Breathing from the diaphragm or belly breathing (ever watch a newborn baby breathe while sleeping?)*
- *Eating carbohydrates*
 - *Potatoes (but only while you are eating them)*
 - *Pizza – serotonin in a circle*
 - *Fries – serotonin in a stick*
- *Making a commitment and carrying through with it*
- *Help children set a goal, achieve the goal and then check off when they have accomplished this goal. It's the checking off the goal that helps them feel better about themselves.*





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- *Hearing 'You did it' gives small bits of serotonin to a child. "Look at you. You walked across the room. You did it." Or, "You brought your Bible today. You did it."*

Children in the limbic part of the brain also do well with choices. To them their world is out of their control. Giving them choices empowers them. (We will look more at the issue of giving choices in a later article.)

Other Tips

There are a number of additional things you can do to help kids suffering through the divorce of their parents who are living in the emotional part of their brain. They include:

- Develop some simple rituals, and use them consistently. These rituals could be as simple as a fist bump every time a child enters your room.
- Give children choices. "Do you want to sit in the red chair or on the white bench?" "Do you want to look up the scripture by yourself or do you want me to help you?"
- Be close by if they want a hug. Use this or similar language. "You're telling me to go away, so I will move back a little bit, but I won't leave you alone with these scary feelings. When you're ready, I am right here to hug you." (<http://www.stressfreekids.com/9771/kids-temper-tantrums-and-meltdowns>)
- Reassure each child that they are wanted and loved by Jesus.
- Send a missing child a note to tell them everyone missed them. Remember if they are visiting the other parent every other weekend, you'll need to be prepared to do this often and do it consistently as the child will begin to rely on that connection with you.
- Use empathy with these children. "Seems to me that you are sad (mad, disappointed, embarrassed) today. What can I do to help you feel better" Or, "What can I do to help you get involved in our activities" Or, "Get you started?" Don't tell the child how they are feeling but use words like, "seems to me".

Don't Give Up!

Most importantly, don't give up on these children. They really do want to belong. For their future well-being, they need to connect and form positive relationships. These are the children who upon hearing the words "Jesus loves you" will not be able to understand them. They will need for you to "be" Jesus to them. It might take



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longer for some of these children to come around, but the children are worth it. Jesus does love these children, and He didn't create any child to be thrown away.

"I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them" (Hosea 11:4).

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.