

IMPORTANT THERAPEUTIC STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN

# THE POWER OF PLAY

by Yvonne Nuffer

While brain development follows a predictable pattern, the outcome of the brain development does not. There are many factors in the final outcome of every individual child's brain including experiences, social-emotional relationships with parents, play, stress, and hormones. The brain is programmed in a "hierarchical manner" meaning that the higher sections of the brain handle complex tasks, and the lower parts handle regulating the body (Gaskill, Perry, 2013, P.6). The lower regions of the brain develop first and move throughout the whole brain, helping a child to regulate hormones as well as determine if specific situations signal safety or trigger a need for protection. In each child's brain, these triggers "wire" the individual to feel safe or to continually sense danger (Stewart,

### **Develops third**

#### **Cortical brain**

thinking, learning, and inhibiting

### **Develops second**

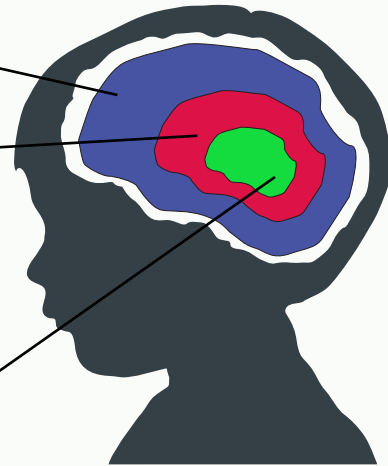
#### **Limbic brain**

attachment and emotional development

### **Develops first**

#### **Brainstem (primitive brain)**

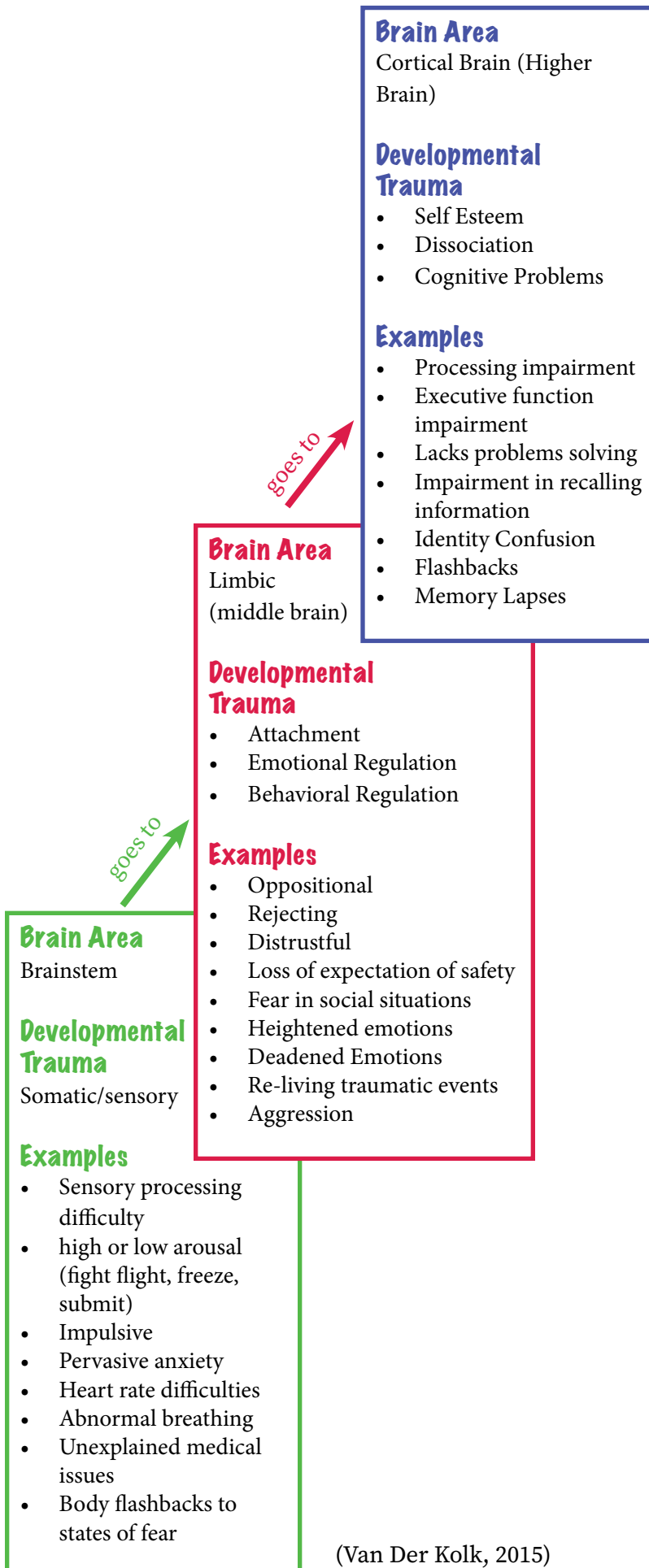
sensory/motor and survival



Field, Echterling, 2016, P. 5). Promoting change in the brain is called “neuroplasticity,” and that occurs when the brain is exposed to input. Depending if the input is one that encourages attachment and safety, or one that triggers a response to trauma, has a lot to do with the final development of the lower areas of the brain. Proper top-up or lower-to-higher brain development has lifelong implications for children in that it will help them navigate their emotions, begin to make wise decisions, and allow them to bond and connect with the world around them (Stewart, Field, Echterling, 2016, P. 7).

### **Trauma’s impact on the Brain**

Trauma has a significant impact on the developing brain of a child. The lower brain is taking in a vast array of signals, including verbal and nonverbal cues, to determine if the environment is built for safety. The lower and mid brain sections are uniquely developed to sustain survival, and as such are always aware of its surroundings. Changes in hormones,



(Van Der Kolk, 2015)

heart rate, and breathing, are controlled in these lower and mid sections. When trauma occurs, a child's body floods with a fight or flight response which signals all of the above areas of the body to be prepared to fight for survival. As children experience trauma, their brains are changed by the flooding of hormones and the signals of survival (Gaskill, Perry, P. 30-31). When this happens, a shift occurs where the child's focus moves out of the "thinking" or the upper levels of the brain, into the lower functioning or "survival" levels only (Gaskill, Perry, 2013, P.9). Over time, long term changes can be found in the brains of children who have experienced developmental trauma, including attachment issues and dysregulation of the children. A child needs a well-developed lower and upper area of the brain to be able to organize and carry out the needed tasks of life (Gaskill, Perry, 2013, P.10).

### Play Therapy

Often, therapy is thought to be a place where you sit in a room and talk about your problems. But the very nature of childhood, as well as the impact of trauma on the brain, makes this type of therapy ineffective. Children who have lived in the "fight or flight for survival" response have poorly developed upper brain activity. The upper brain controls thinking and logic, so for these children much of their thought processes are disjointed and unconnected (Porges, 2004, P. 24).

Play therapy as a treatment modality offers therapists the opportunity to meet children neurologically and developmentally in a place that they can understand. Instead of asking children to talk about the trauma as a means to process, play therapy allows children to work through their trauma with play. Play is a language that every child can understand. Through the play therapy process, children are given the opportunity to begin to have a place where they trust themselves to make decisions, which begins to develop the upper, less developed areas of the brain (Gaskill, Perry, 2013, P. P. 10). Play is

# “Healing happens in relationship.”

a way for children to better understand their worlds and to process complex emotions in ways that are age appropriate (Stewart, Field, Echterling, 2016, P. 9). Through attunement with their counselors, children are assisted in developing new healthier body reactions. The attunement also provides the child with “mirror neurons” which give them a sense of being emotionally felt and understood (Stewart, Field, Echterling, 2016, P. 8). Play is a place of healing for children... a place where they can experience a trusting relationship. Healing happens in relationship (Stewart, Field, Echterling, 2016, P. 9)

## References

- Gaskill, R. L., & Perry, B. D. (2011). Child sexual abuse, traumatic experiences, and their impact on the developing brain. *Handbook of Child Sexual Abuse*, 29-47. doi:10.1002/9781118094822.ch2
- Gaskill, R. L., & Perry, B. D. (2013). The neurobiological power of play. In *Play and Creative Arts Therapy for Attachment Trauma* (pp. 1-32). IN: Guilford Press.
- Porges, S. W. (2004, May). Neuroception: A subconscious system for detecting threats and safety. *Zero to Three*, 24(5), 19-24.
- Stewart, A. L., Field, T. A., & Echterling, L. G. (2016). Neuroscience and the magic of play therapy. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 25(1), 4-13. doi:10.1037/pla0000016
- Van Der Kolk, B. (2015). Developmental trauma. Retrieved from <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/developmental-trauma/the-repair-of-early-trauma-a-bottom-up-approach/>