



**Fall Speaker**  
Wednesday, October 26, 2016  
Landon School

**The Whole-Brain Child and Teen: Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture  
the Developing Mind**

**Tina Payne Bryson, PhD**

This year's Fall Speaker Event featured Dr. Tina Payne Bryson who addressed an audience of about 200 parents, teachers and administrators at the Landon School. Kathy Stallings, President of the Parents Council of Washington (PCW) and Jim Neill, the Head of School at Landon, welcomed attendees. Dr. Bryson was introduced and welcomed by PCW Event Co-Chair, Catherine Scott.

Dr. Bryson is a New York Times best-selling author and psychotherapist. She is co-author of *The Whole Brain Child* and *No-Drama Discipline* and Executive Director of the Center for Connection in Pasadena, CA. A frequent commentator on parenting and the developing brain for major news outlets, Dr. Bryson shared insights and useful strategies that parents and educators could use to encourage and support the development of developing minds.

Dr. Bryson commenced by discussing the brain and emphasized that parents and educators need material that is relevant and practical. Her presentation focused on how a better understanding of the workings of the brain could inform better parenting approaches and choices. She emphasized the brain is shaped by genes and experience but that neuroplasticity means that the brain can be altered by new experiences. The way parents respond to children can change the wiring of their children's brains and experiences related to relationships have the greatest impact in adulthood.

**Development of neural connections within the brain.** A child's brain rapidly develops neural pathways as it grows. However, as it ages, a subsequent 'pruning' occurs with experience determining which connections will remain and which will be deleted.

**Integrating the left and right brains.** The brain has two hemispheres – the left and right sides – and these operate differently. The left-brain specializes in logical, linear, linguistic and literal thinking. The right side is associated with senses and emotions and looks at the entire picture. It can be random and non-verbal. The logical left-brain and emotional right

brain need to work together as a coordinated whole and problems arise when they are not integrated. However, the brains of very young children are dominated by the right side and they may not respond to logical left-brain driven approaches.

**Integration is essential for success.** While the different sides of the brain do separate work and have distinct properties, they need to work together in a coordinated and balanced way. When we promote integration in the brain, we promote mental health and this is the key to developing the brain. Where there is a state of mental integration, we are flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized and stable (FACES). When integration is not present, we can get stuck in chaos or rigidity and this inhibits development.

**Strategies for integration.** A key strategy to promote the integration of the left and right brains is to CONNECT AND REDIRECT. This means connecting with emotions first before addressing or redirecting behavior. When a child is upset, it is essential to first reconnect with the right brain as the child will not be responsive to logic. This right brain connection can include providing nonverbal comfort, which may be through touch, tone, facial expressions, and the expression of empathy. A parent can try getting below eye level of the child and saying something empathetic to help them to calm down. Once the child is more in control, it is possible to redirect with the left-brain – providing solutions, words, planning, boundaries, and logical expressions.

**Discipline.** Redefine discipline as a way of teaching and building skills, rather than the traditional approach of associating this with punishment to modify or control behavior. This redefinition will shift your approach. Discipline associated with punishment may just result in your child learning how to conceal bad behavior.

**Curiosity should guide our approach.** Search for the reasons or underlying issues behind a behavior rather than just addressing the behavior itself. Behavior is a form of communication and problematic behavior shows you the areas in which kids need to build skills and better strategies.

**The River of Wellbeing.** Timing is important when applying discipline, as a child needs to be receptive and ready to learn. When a child is in control and calm, it is like they are floating down a river of wellbeing. When a child is stuck on the banks of chaos or rigidity, parents need to respond in a way that bring them back in balance or into the 'green zone'. The green zone is the state in which people can handle situations and make decisions and is the mode in which we behave most of the time. If a child's nervous system is too aroused or in the 'red zone', they may be angry, upset, tense or unteachable. Most misbehavior occurs when arousal is in the red zone. If they are the opposite or in the 'blue zone,' they may be disconnected or shut down. In both cases, you should wait until they revert to the green zone before teaching discipline. If we give discipline when a child is not in the green zone, it pushes them further away from this zone of tolerance and receptivity to learning.

**Integrating the upstairs and downstairs brain.** Dr. Bryson emphasizes it is possible to teach children tools to handle themselves including teaching them about the brain itself. She differentiated between the upstairs and downstairs brain. The downstairs brain is

more primitive or 'reptilian' and is well developed at birth. It is responsible for basic functions, reactions and impulses and strong emotions like fear and anger. The upstairs brain is responsible for more sophisticated thinking including good decision making, self-understanding and the regulation of emotions, empathy, etc. It does not mature until early adulthood. A metaphorical staircase between the two facilitates more integrated thinking and better decision-making.

**There are ways to develop the upstairs brain and to encourage integration between the different parts of the brain.** These include mindsight tools so that children can understand their own minds and those of others as well as teaching about the mind itself. An understanding of brain anatomy enables us to understand the role of the different parts. PBS.org has a useful section on the teenage brain.

**Secure attachment.** The best predictor of a child's success is whether a child has secure attachment with at least one person. This enables the child to feel connected, protected and secure and so encourages integration of the brain. One of the most important things we can do as parents is let our children know through our behavior that we are there for them and will meet their needs consistently. This will help them to feel Safe, Seen, Soothed and Secure most of the time.

**Following the presentation, Dr. Bryson responded to a number of questions from the audience and made suggestions regarding additional resources.**

With regards to setting appropriate boundaries related to screen time, she recommended two books: *The Game is Playing Your Kid* by Dr. Joe Dilley and *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age* by Catherine Steiner-Adair & Teresa H. Barker.

For stepparents, she recommended: *The Conscious Parent's Guide to Coparenting* by Jenna Flowers and *Parenting Without Power Struggles: Raising Joyful, Resilient Kids While Staying Cool, Calm, and Connected* by Susan Stiffelman.

As a general resource that covers a wide range of topics, she recommended [www.kidsinthehouse.com](http://www.kidsinthehouse.com).

For further information and to subscribe to Dr. Bryson's blog, see the links below.

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