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Introduction

The last decade has seen a firework of exciting research on the brain and interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, 1999). We now know twice as much as we did 20 years ago because of the advent of revolutionary technologies that allow us to see moving images of the brain's activity while it processes information. This has led to a fantastic amount of writing on the biological correlates of emotions, thinking, and relating, and scientists have made groundbreaking discoveries on how the brain wires and rewires (neuroplasticity). More specifically, certain types of attention and experiences have been shown to significantly change physiological structures of the brain associated with memories (hippocampus), emotional reactions (amygdala), and the mental processing of information (prefrontal cortex) (Lazar et al., 2005). We now have the knowledge to better influence children's brains to respond differently to life.

These discoveries have also provided scientific evidence for the work of prominent therapists such as Michael White and David Epston (White, 1991, 1995, 2007; White & Epston, 1990; Epston, 1998), who believed that expanding skills, optimism, and connection to one's values and identities can have a greater impact on children than only harping on problems. The more we dwell on an experience and bring awareness to it, the likelier it is to be strongly encoded in the brain, more readily available, and deliberately chosen.

How can these exciting discoveries be used toward the creation of positive environments for children in groups and classrooms? How can these new findings influence how educators prevent the many ramping problems in schools, such as teasing, bullying, excluding, tattling, and so on? How can caring adults bolster children's skills in spite of the many hardships their young hearts might carry?

Philosophically grounded in narrative therapy¹, this book is written to give educators, counselors, and therapists a variety of conversational tools

¹While the philosophy is true to narrative ideas, the language may at times digress from the complex linguistic foundation of the theory to better facilitate accessibility and readability of the ideas. The reader interested in reading more on the application of these ideas in education is encouraged to read Winslade & William's *Safe and Peaceful Schools* (2011) or, for applications in therapy, Zimmerman & Dickerson (1996), Freedman & Combs (1996), Madsen (1999), Duvall & Béres (2011), and Malinen, Cooper, & Thomas (2011).

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and creative activities to foster social and emotional skills such as awareness, anger management, patience, impulse control, kindness, tolerance, empathy, perspective, calm, helpfulness, and thinking before acting.

The activities in this book are unique in several ways: Most education books and social skills training groups involve a top-down process where adults teach young people what they should do. But from a neurobiology perspective, the top-down teaching of life skills has shown itself to be fraught with many problems: children not remembering what to do at critical times because the type of brain activity during an emotional upset is very different than during a lesson; its overgeneralized, one-size-fits-all approach, which leads to the mental disconnection of children who most need these programs; and the fact that young people often find the material disengaging or irrelevant to their own emotional lives. The research-based and award-winning activities in this book do exactly the opposite: They build on students' own unique brain wiring for problem solving, boost the specific areas of the brain involved in self-regulation and impulse control, highlight the ingredients of successful problem-solving attempts, and keep children interested by using playful activities and experiential ways of exploring problem-solving moments. This powerful combination allows for a complex level of encoding because it reinvigorates and enriches emerging and uniquely personal neural connections.

If an image is worth a 1,000 words, an experience is worth a 1,000 lessons.^{TM2}

While the activities in this book may be organized by age groups, most of the concepts and theoretical content of each session can be adapted to all ages. Each chapter provides educators and counselors with all of the organizational details to facilitate the activities, including themes, purposes, times, helpful props, overviews, facilitation transcripts, and special considerations. The ideas and their respective activities can be used daily, weekly, or simply occasionally in any setting, whether office or classroom. No prior training is required as long as facilitators read Chapter 4, which provides critical information on the process, and are prepared to marvel at children's incredible thoughts on problem solving! At the time of publication of this book, Alexander Street Press Video (www.emicrotraining.com) is also developing a film showing numerous live excerpts of these activities.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

Boosting ALL Children's Social and Emotional Brain Power: Life-Transforming Activities is divided into four sections. The first section offers important theoretical underpinning of these ideas and facilitation tips. The second is on activities for younger children, the third for middle childhood, and the fourth for the period around adolescence. Tips for adapting projects to various age groups are included in Appendix 2.

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SECTION 1. UNDERSTANDING AND MOBILIZING THE BRAIN'S INHERENT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL POWER

Chapter 1. What You Really Need to Know About the Brain

This chapter provides example of common classroom and group problems and offers an overview of important and relevant brain discoveries. Research on synaptic density, mirror neurons, emotions, memory, attention, and mirror neurons will be examined with their implications in solving group problems. Particular attention will be given to the role of emotions and their importance in the process of change. Adults can be much more effective in solving behavioral, emotional, or relational problems with small groups or entire classrooms when they understand how children's brains learn and change.

Chapter 2. A Closer Look at Children's Skills

From a neurological standpoint, it is important to revise our old assumptions on children's skills and focus on expanding unique, emerging abilities. Readers are invited to realize that no one tolerates struggles passively and that, even in dire situations where adults have an emotional responsibility to protect their students, there is great value in creating a sharing space for students to share their own wisdom and strategies. This fact is illustrated with transcripts of conversations from students who were on lockdown for 10 hours at Peterson Middle School following the shootings by Shareef Allman on October 5, 2011, at the Cupertino Quarry. The gunman was hiding behind the school.

Chapter 3. Facilitating With the Brain in Mind and Enthusiasm at Heart!

This chapter offers general considerations for facilitators as they prepare to use the activities in this book and is essential to read. It provides information on how to maximize children's interest in the upcoming socio-emotional skills projects and includes examples of potential problems with ways to address them. In other words, this chapter provides facilitators will all the critical information they need to consider in order to successfully facilitate the activities.

SECTION 2. BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF SELF-AWARE, KIND, AND PATIENT CHILDREN

In this section, readers will find a series of creative ideas and projects that can be facilitated with younger children, from four to nine years old. These projects are all designed to cultivate self-awareness, calm, multiple

perspectives, and responses to social issues that minimize problems. As young people interact daily with other children, the skills targeted in these projects enrich everyday life with more impulse control, resilience, acceptance, and calm. This section includes Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4. The Choice Brain Versus the Lion Brain: Self-Awareness, Calm, and Impulse Control

The Choice Brain Versus the Lion Brain Project enhances young children's abilities to handle daily frustrations, calm themselves down, and sit still, to name only a few. The activities described can be facilitated any time in one-on-one or group conversations, presented as brief sequences, or integrated in the weekly curriculum. Many teachers find that it is well worth spending time increasing self-reflection and emotional skills since peaceful students are, later on, better able to focus on academic material.

Chapter 5. The Mind's Hidden Treasures: Efforts, Skills, Self-Worth, and Self Confidence

This chapter introduces many creative ways of helping children develop an awareness of their abilities and self-confidence in problem-solving skills. In this particular project, the goal is to highlight the possibility of changing the course of unfolding problematic events so that, when a conflict occurs, young people can actually have an effect on redirecting the situation in a constructive manner. While this may seem obvious to adults, it is not for many young people. A host of fun activities, such as brain maps, brain skits, secret success spies, statement of preference, witnesses everywhere, my book of success, the skill tree, and others, is used to enhance a sense of individual self-worth but also a unique group culture of intimacy, respect, appreciation, empathy, and trust. Young people discover their own best problem-solving strategies and become able to see a likeable side in everyone, even those who may at times have annoying habits. They develop a sense that everyone is valuable, including themselves, and that most people are making an effort to avoid problems.

SECTION 3: MAKING EMPATHY, CONSEQUENCE THINKING, RESPECT, AND RESPONSIBILITY MORE ACCESSIBLE IN CHILDREN'S BRAINS

Section 3 is written for children who are old enough to notice the great number of factors affecting their interactions with others, that is, usually

for older children, from nine years old onward. The brain powers collection banks on older children's more-developed memories, thought processing, and perspective-taking skills to open a new world of relational understanding. The concepts discussed in the Brain Powers Project are organized in a map that progressively becomes integrated as a relational global positioning system (GPS). This map was first created to guide parents, teachers, and counselors in their one-on-one conversations with children and published in the *SKILL-ionaire in Every Child: Boosting Children's Socio-Emotional Skills Using the Latest in Brain Research* (Beaudoin, 2012, see www.skillionaire.org). The map provides a backdrop for the life-transforming games and activities developed for this section, allowing this material to be helpful not only in one-on-one conversations but also with groups of children of all ages. While the theoretical concepts have been playfully labeled and organized as brain powers, they can also be discussed more seriously as key components of effective relational problem solving.

Although 16 to 22 weeks of exercises are described, facilitators can choose to engage in as few activities as time permits or to expand with the many variations to the projects proposed. Research shows that, when children are trained to observe their personal experiences of certain themes, their thinking and actions increasingly reflect these very ideas. This research is consistent with recent discoveries in interpersonal neurobiology, whereas experiences, if meaningful enough, leave neural tracks in the brain waiting to be reinforced. The primary goals of the activities in this project are to increase young people's awareness, empathy, compassion, and perspective by building on each of their own unique, preexisting, and burgeoning neural networks for these very skills. The development of these characteristics is accomplished by examining five specific factors that are involved in solving problematic interactions and playfully relabeled into specific, age-appropriate brain powers. Many examples in this chapter show how excited and motivated young people become when they are asked to explore exactly how their brains "shrink" problems!

Chapter 6. Shrinking Power: Keeping Problems Small

Young people are introduced to the idea that most people would rather avoid conflicts and initially have the intention of keeping problems small. Children are invited to pay attention to their intentions when a social dilemma occurs and share their efforts at managing the problems with their peers. This concept may remind readers of studies demonstrating that goal setting orients the brain's action and is powerfully expanded in this book since children's language, experiences, and visceral reactions provide this structure as opposed to an intellectual lesson.

**Chapter 7. Double-Vision Power:
Compassion Comes From a Greater Perspective**

When children see more of the context of someone's life, they see more of the peer in the interaction. Expanding young people's views of others to include hardships and situational constraints opens the door to increased empathy, compassion, and kindness. The activities in this chapter are overwhelmingly popular with both children and adults.

Chapter 8. Anchoring Power: Rain or Shine, I Choose to Be Me

Young people are encouraged to pay attention to the kind of person they would like to be regardless of the behaviors of others. Examples and complex situations are discussed, which stimulate students' thinking of the implications of being anchored in their values.

**Chapter 9. Foresight Power:
Considering the Future Implications of Our Choices**

Young people practice their mental frameworks for noticing the future ramifications of a variety of choices in their daily lives. Revisiting instances of looking into the future and imagining what will happen, while having positive emotions, reinforces neural networks associated with thinking about consequences. Although most adults emphasize this concept at home and at school, many students tell us that they never before realized it was helpful to think of consequences! The way in which this is discussed in the program allows students, sometimes for the first time, to really integrate this idea in a personally meaningful way and truly use this helpful strategy.

**SECTION 4. EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE TO
COMPETENTLY NAVIGATE RECURRING
INTERACTIONS SUCH AS BULLYING AND TEASING**

Section 4 is written for young people who are caught in a problematic interaction or for preadolescents and adolescents who are very interested in learning about relationships in general. This section fosters an understanding of the complex factors that may shape relationships and how one can change unpleasant, repetitive interactions.

Chapter 10. Seeing Complex Relationships in Action

This set of activities helps young people recognize habitual ways of interacting with others. Typical patterns of interaction include counterattacking

when receiving another's frustration, pursuing someone who tends to withdraw, or bullying another who tends to be afraid. Young people come to realize that we often inadvertently reinforce the very behaviors we would like to avoid. Understanding these patterns of interaction offers the possibility of breaking free from their repetitiveness and their associated experiences of powerlessness and "stuckness." This set of activities also helps young people noticing their own verbal and nonverbal contributions to interactions and provides them with concrete tools to alter what seems unchangeable.

CONCLUSION

Boosting ALL Children's Social and Emotional Brain Power: Life-Transforming Activities is written for educators, counselors, and therapists. It provides professionals with a powerful method of supporting the fireworks of children's emerging abilities on many levels—emotional, intellectual, and social—by encouraging the development of anti-problem skills. A child is far less likely to develop a bullying habit, for example, if the skills of empathy and compassion have been ingrained.

While many exercises and conversations in this book can be fascinating with individual children, they have powerful, life-altering effects in groups, classrooms, and entire school cultures. They make visible good intentions and efforts, which lead to an enhanced group appreciation; they actively expose all students to a number of youth-generated anger management ideas; and they get students to know each other more intimately and provide an opportunity to experience valuable, caring conversational skills. These activities all support a sense of social competency in each student and a classroom culture of awareness, appreciation, calm, empathy, and perspective. I hope you will enjoy discovering and boosting the incredible skills in the children around you.