

Why love matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain.

Sue Gerhardt.

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I found out about this book from a good friend who was pregnant. When I heard the name of the book, I thought 'Oh yes....cuddly self-help book for mums-to-be' and dismissed it without another thought. I was, however, encouraged to return to it after hearing Professor David Howe speak about the biological basis of attachment at the SIRCC national conference in Crieff this year..... and I am so glad that I did.

Research has been emerging in recent times which identifies the biological basis for problems related to disrupted early childhood. This book, which is now in its fourth reprint, is an excellent introduction to some of this research. For me, this book is an essential read for anyone who wants to understand how the children with whom we work become the young people who cause us difficulties.

Sue Gerhardt explains why the way in which a child is treated in the first two years of life has such a huge impact on their brain. The first part of the book makes references to the development of the brain and also to brain chemistry. I felt that these references were extremely important. While the book is technically detailed and scholarly, it still manages to remain accessible to those who do not have training in biology or chemistry. We know that hugs and touch are important. We know that being comforted has a physically soothing effect. Hugs and a soothing reciprocal relationship with a parent are not only helpful but are vital for positive mental health outcomes in later life.

Moving on, the book goes on to provide strong evidence for the importance of secure early attachments, illustrating how neglectful, emotionally ambivalent and emotionally distant parenting styles create brain structures and chemical imbalances that leave children prone to rage, aggression, hyper-tension, violence, depression and addiction in adulthood.

In addition to being highly informative, it is also optimistic in pointing out that change is not impossible, but prevention is the key to better outcomes for neglected and traumatised children. For me the book also emphasised the importance of relationship, which is the main tool used by any residential child care practitioner. My only complaint about the book is that it had little emphasis on application. The later chapters addressed this, but it felt a little 'hurried' as if the author was running out of steam. Also, Gerhardt works from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, which may not be to everyone's taste. To her credit,

however, she is critical of some psychoanalytic traditions which fail to address the importance of brain development.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It should be a mandatory text for every residential child care practitioner.

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