

GROWING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS: Developing Brains, Minds and Capacities
by Bob Gallo

We all want the best for our children. And, we work hard to be good parents. We attend to their physical health, spend time with them, encourage their friendships, expose them to enriching experiences, support their interests, enroll them in good schools, protect them from harmful influences, etc. ***Besides all of these things, did you know that you have also been developing your children's brains, minds and capacities since the day they were born?*** That's right, you have! It is extremely impressive since you aren't a neurobiologist, developmental psychologist, or Dr. Frankenstein, and you have been doing it without expensive equipment or extensive guidance from experts. In fact, you have been developing your children's brains, minds and capacities without doing anything technical, dangerous, or fancy at all. ***So, when have you been doing this? And, what exactly have you been doing?*** Well... you have been doing it in each interaction with your child! The truth is, having a ***consistent, nurturing, attuned, responsive*** relationship with your children is perhaps the single most important factor in their social, emotional, psychological, and cognitive development.

In the next few newsletters, I'll be writing about a variety of seemingly mundane things we do on a daily basis while relating with our children that have fantastic, life-altering effects on them. I think you might be surprised and impressed with yourselves. I hope you find the *Growing Through Relationships* column interesting, enjoyable, and validating. Until next month.....

GROWING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS: The Brain **by Bob Gallo**

Last month, I wrote that you have been developing your children's brains, minds and capacities since the day they were born through each of your interactions with them. I also mentioned that having a *consistent, nurturing, attuned, responsive* relationship with your children is perhaps the single most important factor in their social, emotional, psychological, and cognitive development.

I'll begin this month by saying a few things about the human brain. The brain is made of nerve cells, called neurons, which transmit electrical impulses. At birth, we have about 100 billion neurons. And, each neuron connects to an average of 10,000 other neurons. Can you imagine the amount of connections there are? $100,000,000,000 \times 10,000 =$ a whole lot! *If you made a single-file line with the all the neurons from someone's brain (Don't try this with your child's brain or your own) how long do you think the line would be?* It would be TWO MILLION MILES LONG!

So, the human brain is an incredibly complex and intricate spider web-like net of electrical connections. Certain positive experiences people have actually strengthen and increase the connections between the neurons, which improves overall brain functioning. It is widely accepted that the parts of the brain which are responsible for social and emotional functioning develop based upon one's interpersonal experiences. In other words, the *relationship* you have with your children develops the parts of their brains that are essential for a sense of well-being, resilience, and connectedness to others.

Next month, I'll describe some of the qualities of this "brain-developing" relationship, and identify some of the regular things you do on a daily basis with your children that have fantastic, life-altering effects on them. Until next time.....

GROWING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS: The “Brain-Developing” Relationship by Bob Gallo

Last time I mentioned that the relationship we have with our children actually develops the parts of their brains which are responsible for social and emotional functioning. *So, what are some characteristics of this “brain-developing” relationship?* At the foundation of this relationship is our ability to provide a sense of security for our children, and be understanding, respectful, and responsive to them. I’ll now mention four ways we can practice these foundational principles on a daily basis. You’ll probably be pleased (and relieved) to find that you already do these things quite naturally.

The first way is to have empathy for our children when they are in distress (even if we are the cause of it). This acknowledges that their feelings are real, important, and understandable. The second way is to provide the reassuring sense that we can tolerate their entire range of feelings. This means that while our children are upset, we manage our own feelings, remain stable, and continue providing comfort and/or limits. Doing this helps our children feel secure because it demonstrates that we can handle their feelings, and lets them know that they can too.

Another way to practice these “brain-developing” relationship principles is by having “reflective dialogues” with our children. During these conversations, we ask questions and help them make connections between their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations, memories, attitudes, beliefs, and intentions. These “reflective dialogues” integrate our children’s inner experiences, and teaches them about their minds. The final practice I’ll mention is referred to as “cooperation.” In this sense, it refers to interacting with our children in a respectful, harmonious way that is in synch with their mood, pace, style, and interests. And, we avoid being intrusive, jarring, or disruptive, to them. Doing this honors and supports their individuality and unique way of being in the world.

By relating to our children in these various ways, we are essentially saying, “I see you, I understand you, I know you, and I value you.” What’s more, utilizing these four practices actually strengthens and increases the connections between their neurons (the nerve cells in the brain), which improves overall brain functioning. Next month, I’ll write about the various skills and capacities our children develop when we provide these kinds of experiences for them. Be well.....

