

## When We Are Very Young

### Episode 5

#### The Unbaked Cake

Have you ever baked a cake? I mean just the plain kind – chocolate or white – where you mix the batter, pour into the cake pans and bake it? When it's done, you let it cool completely before adding the icing. First the base layer goes on, then you start forming the designs and rosettes with a palette knife. You finish off with pretty coloured icing squeezed out to form ribbons and ropes and Happy Birthday Dad!

I always find that that first layer is the trickiest –if the cake isn't cool enough or too soft – the icing tears apart the cake. And if the cake is only partially baked -- liquid in the middle – it's impossible to ice – it turns into a big gooey mess.

What had all this to do with raising children who have experienced early trauma and neglect, you might ask?

The short answer is this: children who have experienced developmental trauma are not as able as typically developing children to be taught or corrected through behavioural means. Behaviour modification, cognitive behavioural therapy, rewards and consequences, sticker charts, praise and criticism, are generally ineffective.

OK, let's break that down, starting at the beginning and getting back to this end.

I referred to “typically developing children”. These are children who are being reared by competent parents who love them and meet their needs for physical, relational, emotional and cognitive development. These parents respond in a sensitive and timely manner to the child's needs, especially during gestation and the child's first three years. During this time, the child's brain forms and grows within one or two loving relationships. It is during these first three years (and gestation) that 90% of brain formation and growth occurs ONLY within that loving relationship. In contrast, children raised in crowded orphanages have pervasive loss of brain size and mass; their brains literally have holes where brain matter should be.

So, we know that the first three years of a child's life is the time during which parents nurture brain development. Remember, this is not about stimulation with toys and objects --- it is about interacting: face to face, heart to heart, mind to mind with care-giving parents primarily. The outcome is secure attachment and a healthy and optimally developed brain.

The cake is baked.

Now the child becomes more social, spending more time in the care company of other children and in the care of other adults – preschool teachers and day-care providers. The child is able to understand that his *actions* are acceptable or unacceptable. The child does not internalize corrections of his behaviour; that is, he will feel guilt (I did something bad) rather than shame (I am bad).

For these children, typical parenting works well enough – praise, chastisement... it's all icing on the cake. The child already knows, deeply at his core, he is unconditionally loved, even if he acts out. So, we fine tune our children's behaviour, carefully shaping and refining as our children grow – like adding the those final touches on the already baked cake.

The brains of children who have experienced developmental trauma did not have that opportunity for optimal growth and development. Lacking consistent face to face, heart to heart, mind to mind interactions with a loving and sensitive parent, instead experiencing fear, discomfort –even pain—and abandonment – there may be a failure of the brain to develop certain capacities and or the creation of pathways based on fear. The brain remains less than optimally developed --- the cake is not fully baked.

As the children grow older, without the interaction with a sensitive, loving, primary parent, the children will likely have an insecure or

disorganized attachment style. Their self-concept is likely to be more fragile, and when corrected or criticized, or when they fail at a task, their experience is “I am bad, I am stupid.” The experience is negative, shame-inducing and EXPECTED because others are neither kind nor trustworthy.

So, strategies for changing the behaviour of children with developmental trauma are ineffective because, for the child, it is not his behaviour, it is him, his personhood that is bad, and he does not believe it can be different. Behavioural strategies will likely induce feelings of rejection in the child and frustration in the parent.

-- Like trying to ice an unbaked cake.

So, what is the pathway forward?

-- Finish baking the cake before trying to pretty up the icing.

This means helping children develop the basic physiological, relational and emotional capacities needed to heal from developmental trauma. The goals of this healing are:

1. Increase trust and reduce fear of being parented.
2. Help the child to allow the parent to comfort and soothe him when distressed.
3. Then, help the child to be able to calm himself or self-regulate.
4. Finally assist the child in seeking and accepting help and comfort as needed from the parent.

Only then, will “No” just mean “No” and not “You are bad, I don’t like you.”

I hope that remembering this analogy of baked and unbaked cakes helps us to parent our children in a way that meets their attachment needs and is not developmentally too advanced for them.

In the next blog, we'll explore more about parenting... how to be, not what to do.

### Reading List

1. The Developing Mind by Dr. Daniel Siegel. This is a must read book to understand how the brain develops.

2. The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog. By Dr. Bruce Perry. Bruce Perry is one of the leaders in the field of child trauma. Be forewarned, this book about the effects of early children abuse and neglect is essential reading but is a tough read. See the website [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org).
3. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)  
This is the website of Bessel van der Kolk and associates in Boston. There are great resources for parents and professionals.