

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction

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Part IV: How the Addicted Brain Develops

Highlighted Notes

- ✚ “**The** basic cause of addiction is predominantly experience - dependent during childhood, and not substance -**dependent,**” **Dr. Felitti has written.** “**The current concept of addiction is ill - founded.**” To state that childhood brain development has the greatest impact on addiction is not to rule out genetic factors.
- ✚ However, the emphasis placed on genetic influences in addiction medicine — and in many other areas of medicine — is an impediment to our understanding.
- ✚ The expression of genetic potentials is, for the most part, contingent on the environment. This is true of the hard - core intravenous drug users such as the ones I deal with in the Downtown Eastside.
- ✚ **In many other cases it’s not a question of “bad stimulation” but of a lack of sufficient “good stimulation.”**
- ✚ In the case of these circuits, which process emotions and govern behavior, it is the emotional environment that is decisive. By far the dominant aspect of this environment is the role of the nurturing adults in the **child’s** life, especially in the early years.
- ✚ The child needs to be in an attachment relationship with at least one reliably available, protective, psychologically present, and reasonably non-stressed adult.
- ✚ **Attachment, as we’ve already learned, is the drive to pursue and preserve close**ness and contact with others; an **attachment relationship exists when that state has been achieved. It’s an instinctual drive** programmed into the mammalian brain, owing to the absolute helplessness and dependency of infant mammals — particularly infant humans. Without attachment he cannot survive; without safe, secure, and non-stressed attachment, his brain cannot develop optimally. Although that dependency wanes as we mature, attachment relationships remain important throughout our lifetime. Daniel Siegel writes in *The Developing Mind*, Infants read, react to, and are developmentally influenced by the psychological states of the parents. They are affected by body language: tension in the arms that hold them, tone of voice, joyful or despondent facial expressions, **and, yes, the size of the pupils. In a very real sense, the parent’s brain programs the infant’s,** and this is why stressed parents will often rear children whose stress apparatus also runs in high gear, no matter how much they love their child and no matter that they strive to do their best.
- ✚ “**experience - dependent.**” **Good experiences lead to healthy brain development, while the absence of good experiences or the presence of bad ones distorts development in essential brain structures.**
- ✚ Since the brain governs mood, emotional self - control, and social behavior, we can expect that the neurological consequences of adverse experiences will lead to deficits in the personal and social lives of people who suffer them in childhood, including, Dr. Joseph **continues,** “**a reduced ability to anticipate consequences or to inhibit irrelevant or inappropriate, self - destructive behaviors.**”