

Our Children Can't Learn Because They're Terrified

• Alicia Nunn Writer, relationship guru, community activist As a School Social Worker in Gary from 2001---2011, I observed many children diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, ADHD and mood disorders. The labels were inaccurate. They were traumatized children struggling to recover from the ravages of poverty and violence. Like military veterans they had nightmares and flashbacks from living in war zones in their own homes and communities. I became intrigued with the brain and the impact of trauma on child development, so I spent hundreds of hours researching. I pursued continuing education in trauma repair and became an expert on the topic. I wanted to understand. I wanted to get to the root of the problem and make a difference. I discovered the children I worked with were doing their best to cope with post-traumatic stress. Some of them were re-traumatized every day, unable to sleep at night for fear of being raped, or because their malnourished bodies were ripped with hunger pain. Their bloated stomachs ached, and minds were fogged from eating chips and processed food, the amenities of living in food deserts. Many of them had asthma and allergies from breathing air filled with heavy metals and eating genetically modified food. All of them were filled with anxiety, couldn't sit still or were on guard against threats; the result of being abused or witnessing shootings and domestic violence. How could anyone learn under these conditions? And because their developing brains were exposed to violence, they were likely to repeat the cycle. Their brains were being wired for violence. So, most of them were re-victimized at school by teachers and administrators who used verbal and physical force to control the behaviours of what they considered "bad" children, only reinforcing the child's perception that violence is the solution to problems and that they were no good. These children could not control their behaviour because the part of the brain responsible for impulse control, problem-solving and critical thinking did not develop properly. Dr Bruce Perry, founder of the Child Trauma Academy explains the effects of trauma on the developing brain in his essay 'Incubated in Terror: Neurodevelopmental Factors in the 'Cycle of Violence'', "both lack of critical nurturing experience and excess exposure to traumatic violence will alter the developing Central Nervous System (brain), predisposing to a more impulsive, reactive and violent individual." Remember a time when you didn't feel safe. How did it affect you? Were you able to concentrate? How was your mood? Was your mind on anything other than surviving the traumatic event? Now imagine living like that every day. Did your parents cuddle and smile at you when you were a baby? Did someone read to you, teach you to tie your shoes and spell your first name? Did someone feed you or change your diaper when you cried? All these bonding activities are essential to developing the ability to care about other people and to trust. Imagine growing up without bonding. Neglect is traumatic. Often neglected children do not receive the critical building blocks of healthy attachment necessary to love and care for other people and to trust that people will care for them. The effects of trauma often lead to a cycle of violence. And, while the survivor may make it out of the cycle, more than likely it takes a lifetime to fully recover. And some people never recover. Despite getting an education or a career, and even a family of their own, happiness and success may elude survivors through a cycle of bad choices, addiction, and failed relationships; the aftershocks of trauma on healthy mental and emotional development. So, they may look like an adult, but act like a child when under stress. 60% of the population has been affected by violence and many go untreated because they do not realize they have been traumatized. How can education reform help? Gaps in development caused by poverty and violence must be addressed during the school day. Children spend one third of their day in school. Have you heard the popular education slogan, "children live what they learn"? Experience shapes our brain. According to Dr Perry, "In order to understand the origins and impact of interpersonal violence, it is essential to appreciate how violence alters the developing

child. The child and the adult reflect the world they are raised in. And, sadly, in today's world, millions of children are raised in unpredictable and violent settings - incubated in terror. The most critical and formative experiences are those provided to the developing child in the incubator of the family and, optimally, by a vital, invested community. Racism, sexism, misogyny, children as property, idealism of violent heroes, cultural tolerance of child maltreatment, nationalism -all unleash, facilitate, encourage, and grow violent individuals. Without these facilitating belief systems and modelling, the neglected and abused child would carry their pain forward in less violent ways." We can only look at our history as human beings for proof of Dr Perry's point. Slavery, the holocaust and two world wars point to our violent tendencies when we are robbed of our humanity. Why is there violence across the globe? The answer is simple. people are fighting for survival. The fight for survival in Gary has nothing to do with the fact that 85% of its population is African American, which seems to be the popular misconception. In my experience, children of all races from all over the country were sent to schools in Gary through the foster care system and they all experienced the same challenges. All life has equal value and every human being has unlimited potential if their basic needs are met. Basic needs of food, shelter and safety are necessary for any human being to develop and thrive. Many studies prove a link between unemployment, poverty and violence. With a 40% unemployment rate, the best efforts to alleviate violence in Gary will remain ineffective and the vicious cycle of poverty and violence will continue. There is plenty of wealth in this world and an abundance of natural resources. So why doesn't wealth flow to everyone? Wealth certainly does not seem to flow through Gary, Indiana. Despite all the city's assets, including the lakefront, steel mills, casinos, baseball stadium, airport and higher education institutions, wealth seems to flow around the city, but not into it. Gary was founded in 1906 based on a caste system where modern-day slaves were recruited from the south to work in the steel mills. The history of racism, segregation, and corruption continues to plague Gary as the city fights to climb out of the pit of poverty and violence. According to Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute, Columbia University, 1% of the population is hoarding 50% of the world's wealth with the 80 richest people owning as much wealth as the poorest 3.5 billion people. Imagine 80 people standing on one side of a scale and 3.5 billion people on the other side. How could they possibly weigh the same? And the scales of injustice continue to tip in favour of the wealthiest 1%. How could this be possible? Well, caste systems have been around for thousands of years, and they don't seem to be going anywhere. In a world where your value is measured by money, the poor don't stand a chance of ever breaking the cycle. There is hope. The cycle can be broken. Our education system plays a vital role in the healthy development of children, so they have a fair chance to rise. Trauma survivors are very resilient, and the brain can be rewired. In my work with Gary students, the most effective interventions included art, Mindfulness and unconditional love. Children who told their stories through writing, drawing, dancing, poetry, singing and other forms of creative expression felt affirmed and empowered to move forward. Research shows that art develops the brain. According to a report from a 2009 John Hopkins University summit of educators, neuroscientists and art educators entitled, Neuroeducation: Learning, Arts, and the Brain Findings and Challenges for Educators and Researchers, "The empirical classroom experience of arts integration subjectively suggests that carefully structured arts-based pedagogy can improve students' learning and academic experiences, resulting in demonstrably positive outcomes that include deeper engagement in subject matter and better retention of content; greater emotional involvement in the learning process and deeper social awareness; and the ability to apply principles across disciplines. Arts integration is also important from a national, macroeconomic perspective: graduates are entering the workforce without critical skills that arts-based learning is known to promote-collaboration, creative problem-solving, and the ability to apply learning across

different disciplines. Further, exposure to the arts as a participant or observer has the potential to have profound effects on learning and memory, context, and comprehensive creative thinking." One of the conclusions of the summit was that students reported they were not learning when they were just learning "stuff" to get a job, go to college, and do better in life. "In contrast, when students said they were truly learning, they described the experience as "feeling bigger than usual, finding a sense of purpose, and knowing who they were." Mindfulness is a form of meditation that increases self-awareness and focus. It is being implemented in schools in communities like Gary with amazing results. I used Mindfulness in my social work practice and students would either fall asleep or report feeling high. They were able to relax for the first time without drugs. Academic performance and behaviour improved. A 2000 Harvard University study found that meditation increased the physical size of the brain regions associated with focused attention, deep thought, memory, and brain power while simultaneously quieting the electrical activity within the regions associated with anxiety, depression, fear, and anger. Dr Perry explains, "It is important to clarify that most individuals who are emotionally neglected in childhood do not end up violent. These individuals carry their scars in other ways, usually in a profound emptiness, or in emotionally destructive relationships, moving through life disconnected from others and robbed of some of their humanity. The human cortex grows, develops complexity, makes synaptic connections and modifies as a function of the quality and quantity of sensory experience. Lack of type and quantity of sensory-motor and cognitive experiences leads to underdevelopment of the cortex. The cortical and sub-cortical areas are smaller in individuals who have global environmental neglect. It is highly adaptive for a child growing up in a violent, chaotic environment to be hypersensitive to external stimuli, to be hypervigilant, and to be in a persistent stress-response state." Stressed out children need to relax, and like every living being, they need love to grow. Love is simply connection. Dr Perry explains the importance of relationships in child development, "There is no more specific 'biological' determinant than a relationship. Human beings evolved as social animals and the majority of biology of the brain is dedicated to mediating the complex interactions required to keep small, naked, weak, individual humans alive by being part of a larger biological whole-the family, the clan. Indeed, it is the primary caretaking relationships of infancy and childhood which determine the core neurobiological organization of the human individual, thereby allowing this incredible social specialization. Experience in early life determines core neurobiology." When children have consistent connection with a stable, nurturing adult, the brain can heal and develop. It is never too late. In-service training for teachers, administrators, security and school staff on trauma and peaceful conflict resolution can ensure the school setting is safe and conducive for learning for all children. Every adult is a mentor for children whether we like it or not, so what are we teaching them through our behaviour? Like the African proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child". It will take the community to resurrect urban schools. So, when you see our youth sagging their pants or stealing, don't judge them or beat them down. Develop a relationship with them and get to know their story. Show them you care. Love them unconditionally no matter how they look or behave. And most of all teach them a better way through example. Expose them to a healthy, peaceful, prosperous world. Not because they are less than you, but because it is their human right. The whole of humanity suffers as a result of injustice and inequality. If our education system does not work for everyone, then it does not work. Every child deserves the opportunity to reach their highest potential. It may seem like the fat cats sitting on top of the world's wealth are not affected but look at the state of our world. Violence is reaching into everyone's backyard.