



# The 5 Parenting Systems

according to

**Dan Hughes**  
and **Jon Baylin**



Australian  
Childhood  
Foundation

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## Dan Hughes and Jon Baylin



Dan Hughes and Jon Baylin are practitioners and authors from the USA who have worked for decades with parents, carers and children who have experienced trauma. They have a particular interest in helping parents and carers strengthen their connection with their children and draw upon brain research as a frame for their approach. In their book 'Brain Based Parenting- The neuroscience of caregiving for a healthy attachment' they talk about five inter-related systems that support parenting. The following is an attempt at summarising some of their ideas from this publication.

**1. The Parental Approach System** – the ability to feel safe and stay open and engaged while interacting closely with our child.

**2. The Parental Reward System** - the ability to experience parenting as pleasurable, satisfying, and rewarding.

**3. The Parental Child Reading System** - the ability to understand, attune to, and empathize with our child.

**4. The Parental Meaning-Making System** - the ability to make sense of our experiences as a parent and to understand how we came to be the parent we are today.

**5. The Parental Executive System** - the ability to regulate our internal states, monitor the quality of our connection with our child, and engage in timely repair of our relationship should it need it.

# 1. The Parental Approach System

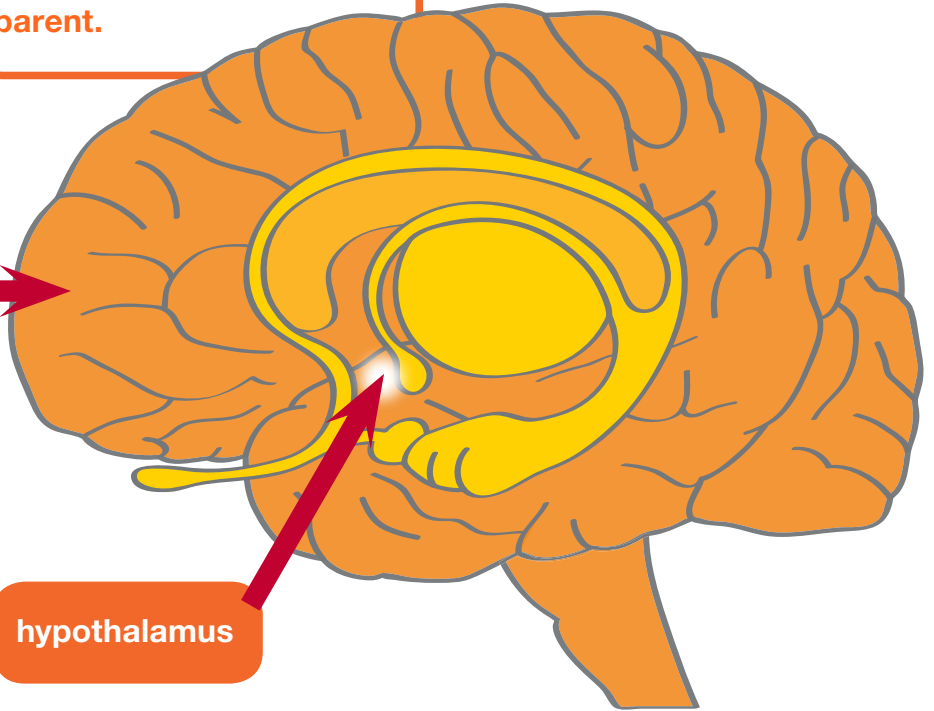
When we become a parent it changes the configuration of our brain as specialised hormones show up to help us care for our child.



estrogen  
prolactin  
oxytocin

Our changing hormones talk to our hypothalamus which sends messages to other parts of our brain and our body to help us parent.

Brain's self defence system calmed which helps us want to get close to our child.



hypothalamus

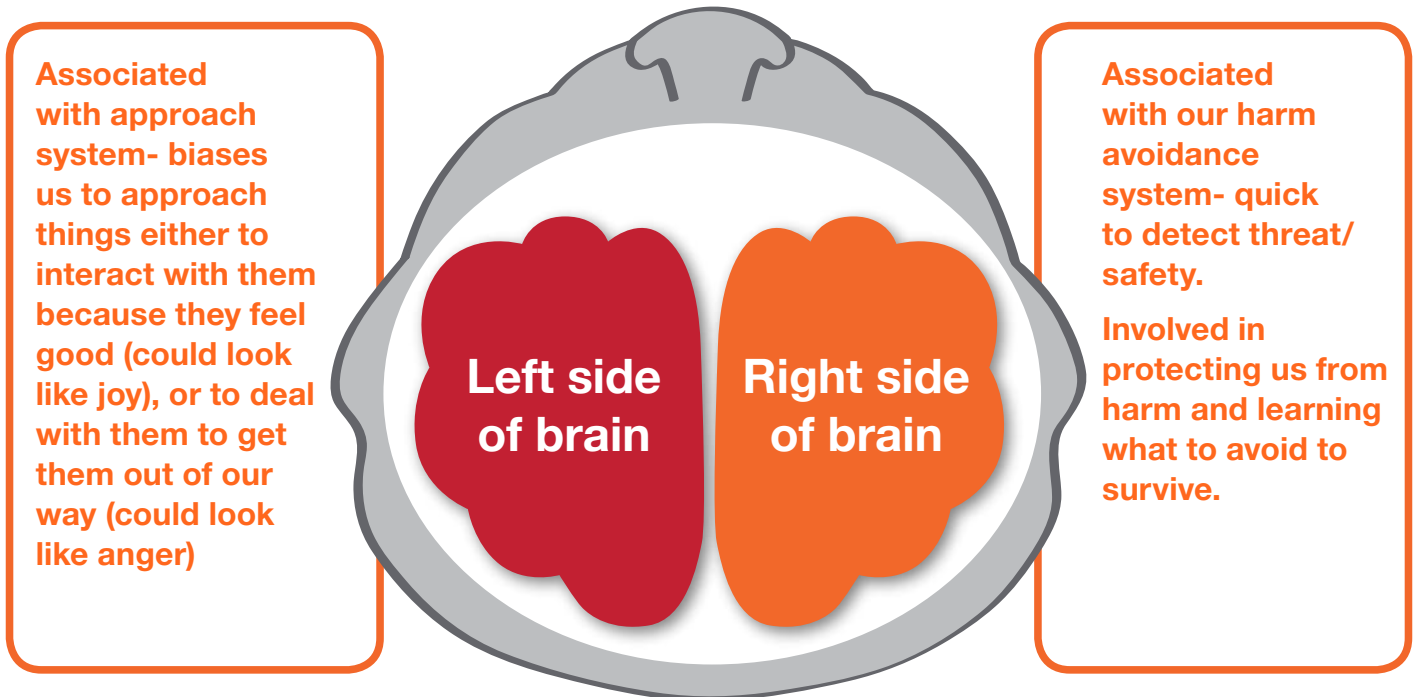
Brain's reward system becomes sensitive to the sensory experiences of interacting with our child eg. holding our child or gazing into our child's eyes. This motivates us to move towards our child.



# 1. The Parental Approach System

## Approaching vs. Avoiding and Parenting

The way we use the two different sides of our brain will play a part in how we parent.

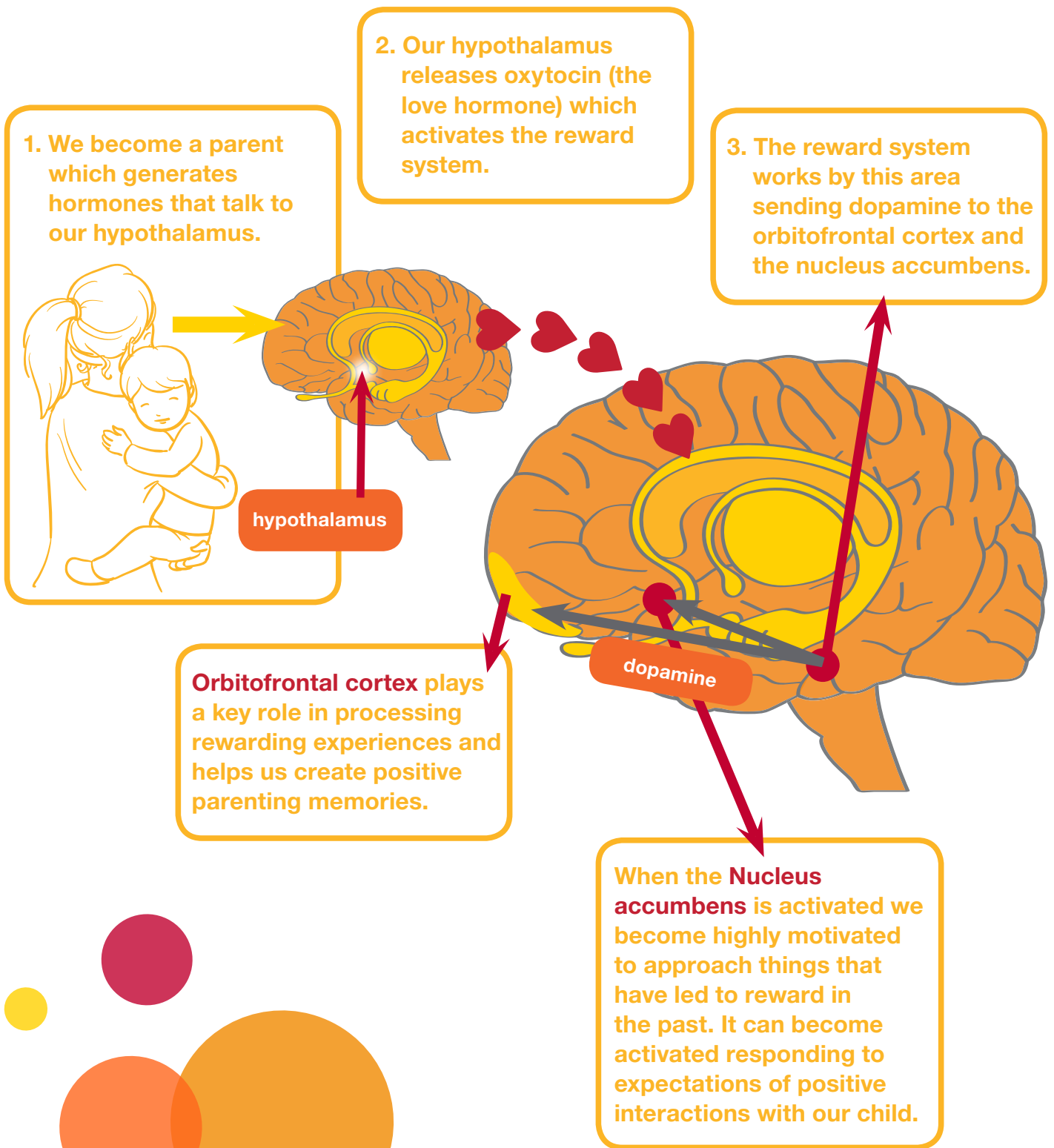


The environment we grow up in can shape how we use our right and left brain systems of avoidance and approach. If we begin life exposed to insensitive care giving our right brained harm avoidance system is likely to be used a lot. Instead of feeling protected and connected with our caregiver, we are more likely to need to shift into a defensive state of protest or collapse in order to try to protect ourselves. In order to develop our left-brain approach system for interacting comfortably with other people, we need a caregiver who consistently makes being close feel safe and pleasurable. This will strengthen connections in the left brain which will build up our approach system.

Parents that have a stronger harm avoidance system than approach system either through genetics and/or troubled childhood experiences are likely to find it more challenging to stay close to their children without their defence systems kicking in and getting in the way of feeling like they want to be close with their child. Luckily our adult brain is flexible and with help we can work it like a muscle to develop our approach system even if we get off to a less than ideal start in life.



## 2. The Parental Reward System



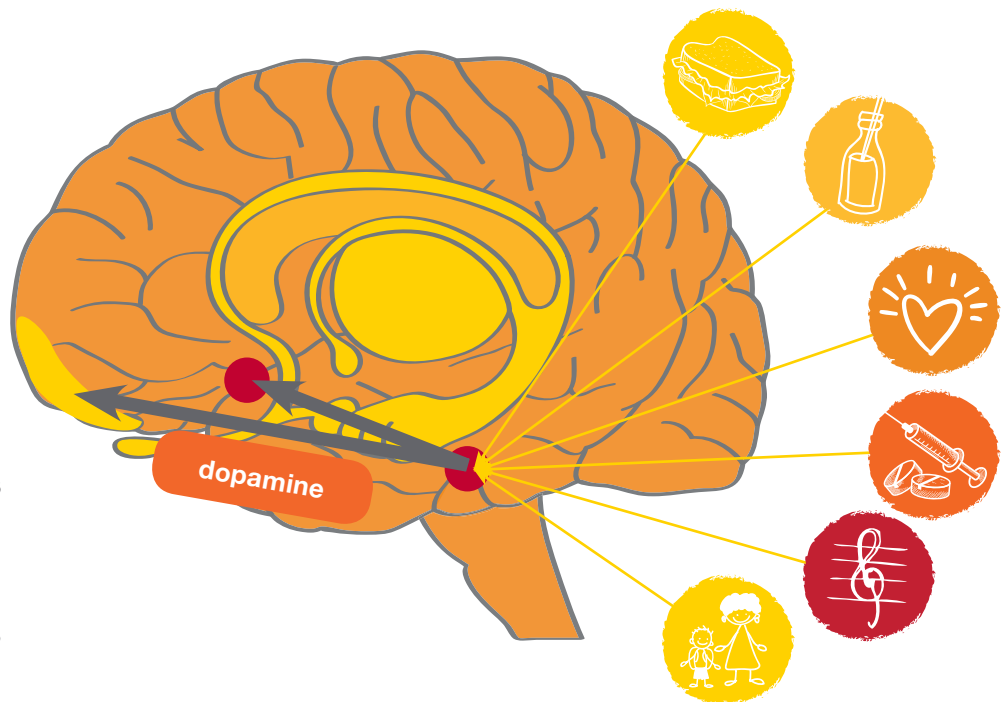
## 2. The Parental Reward System

### What's driving our dopamine reward system?

Our dopamine reward system can be driven by many things other than parenting hormones. It works by our dopamine reward system learning to associate things and actions with rewards and then functions as a reward expectancy system, going off when things around us suggest that a reward might be just around the corner.

Many different things can set off this reward system, eg. seeking out food, drugs/alcohol, and sex. These things can compete for control of the reward system, that's why for example parental use of drugs can block the rewarding qualities of care giving from gaining access to the system.

Not only can the dopamine system be activated by many kinds of rewards, it can also be suppressed by factors like depression or the experience of high levels of stress. We begin teaching our reward system how to function early in life, so if we don't experience relationships as rewarding early on, then it can lead to a dampening down of the approach and dopamine reward system. Without help this can make it hard for us when we become parents as our brains are not necessarily set up to recognise relationships as things we want to approach or find rewarding.

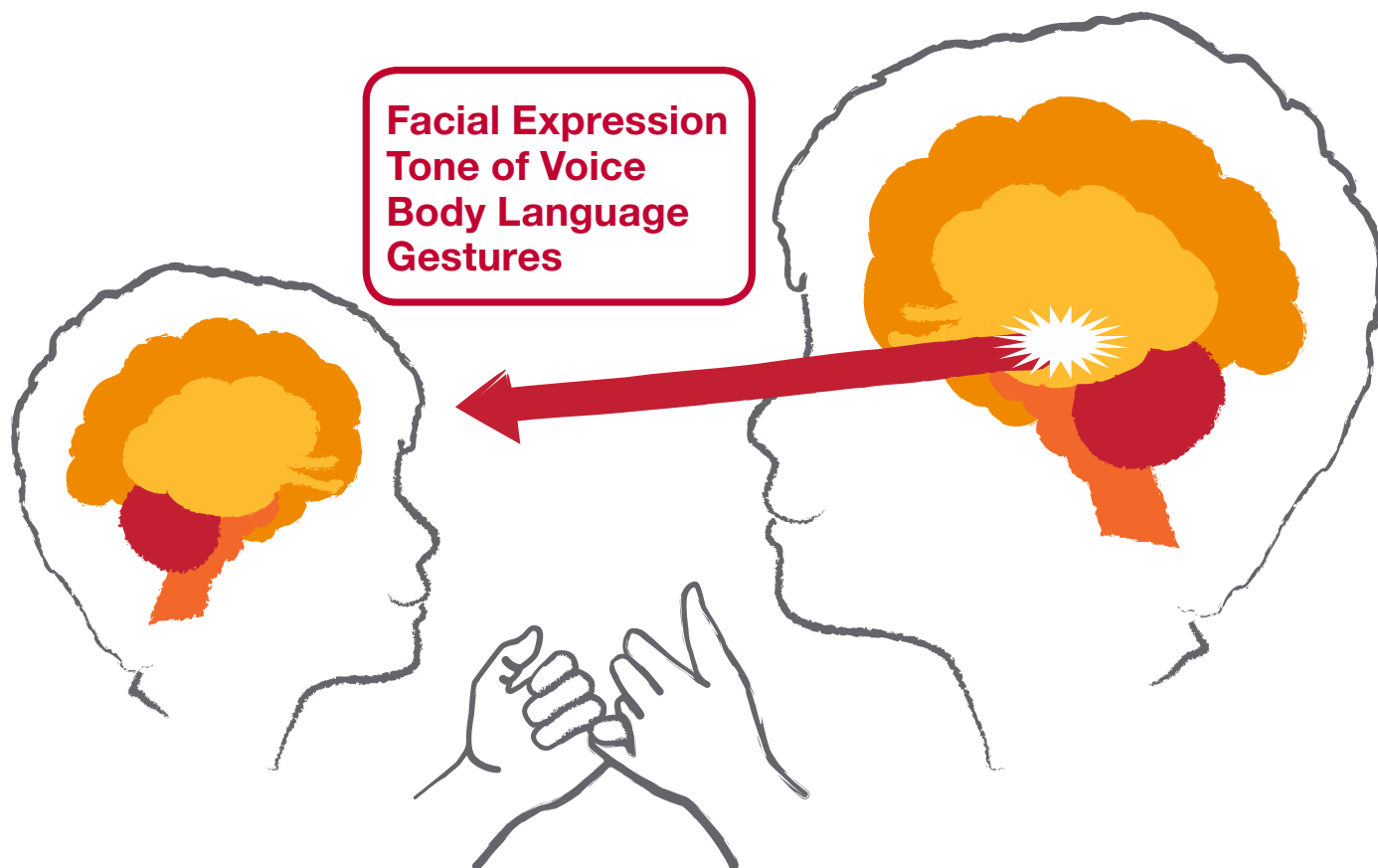


### When the system crashes.....

The parental reward system is based on us coming to expect pleasurable interactions with our children, rather than the actual experience of being with our child. If for some reason a parent approaches their child and the experience is less than expected, the reward driven dopamine system can crash and the parent could suddenly experience a defensive response rather than an approach driven response. This can lead to parents feeling blocked in their care for their child.



# 3. The Parental Child Reading System



Understanding or 'reading' our child is a process of deciphering the many hundreds of verbal and non verbal signals our kids show us from moment to moment every day. It's a complicated process of our brain taking in all of these signals, experiencing emotional and bodily reactions to these signals and then evaluating these processes to either keep in connection with our child or to have a defensive reaction which blocks our openness to our child.



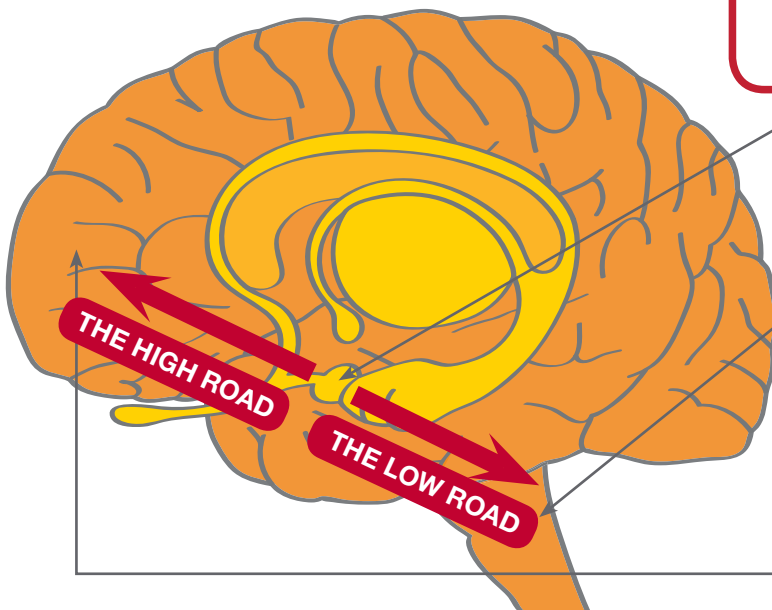
# 3. The Parental Child Reading System

## The Parental Child Reading System in Action

1. Our temporal lobe plays a big role in helping us read our child, especially the many things our child tells us besides the words they use. It picks up on things like body language, changes in voice, and facial and eye movements.



2. The limbic system which deals a lot in emotions, picks up this information from our temporal lobe and makes a decision about how to treat the information. If treated as possibly threatening it sends a message downward in our brain to activate our defensive response system. If it decides to treat the information as positive it sends a message upward in our brain activating our reward system.



### THE LOW ROAD

3. When our lower brain is triggered by a limbic system warning we are likely to shut down to our child and not read their signals well.

### THE HIGH ROAD

3. When our reward system located in the front of our brain is activated we feel open and connected with our child. We enjoy being a parent at this time.

A parent's child reading process can be affected by things like chronic stress or un-processed trauma. These issues can mean a parent develops an overly sensitive emotion reading system in their limbic system. For these parents this can lead to a tendency to feel like their child is being threatening or disrespectful towards them, simply because the parent's limbic system is primed to pick up threats due to having faced more than their share in the past. When any parent finds themselves in a defensive mode they have lost touch with their approach and reward system, this makes it really hard to be open and curious about their child.

## Parent Reading System

Just as parents have a child reading system in their brain, children develop a parent reading system in theirs. These systems are linked. When a child is feeling safe and has their approach and reward systems going, it is easier for the parent to stay engaged in the child-reading process with their approach and reward systems also activated.

On the other hand, when a child is not curious about what their parent is thinking and feeling, and is not looking to make sense of their parent's verbal and non-verbal signals, the parent is likely to find it hard to stay open and interested in the child and more likely to move into a defensive state.

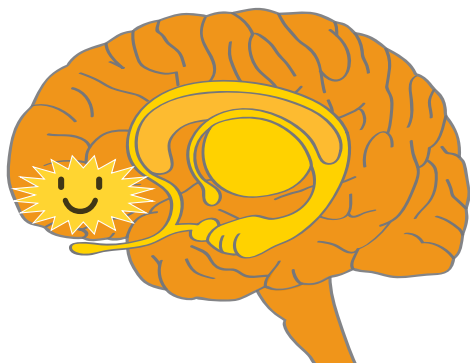


# 4. The Parental Meaning-Making System

How would you describe your child? How would you describe yourself as a parent? What are some of the things that have made you the parent that you are? The way we answer questions like these tells us about the way we go about making meaning of our experiences and gives us some idea about how our brain functions. If we are functioning with a healthy, well connected brain our stories about ourselves and our relationships are different to those that might emerge if we have been functioning with a stressed out brain that is coping with many demands on it.

## Well-Connected Brain

Utilizing the front part of the brain



- We have enriched, detailed stories we can tell about our kids and our lives.
- We feel calm, and safe and like we can trust others.
- We can weigh up more than one point of view when thinking about things or making decisions.
- We have good self-reflection skills.
- Our meaning making is complex. Eg. We understand that our child's behaviour is probably the result of a broad range of underlying factors, and can hold these factors in mind when working out how we will deal with our child.

## Stressed out Brain

Utilizing the more primitive middle region of the brain



- Our stories about ourselves and our parenting are quite black and white and lack detail. Eg. "My child chooses to do those things just to make my life hell."
- We feel stressed out and our brain functions in a defensive way.
- Our thinking becomes inflexible and blinkered.
- It's difficult to see the positive and hopeful.
- We are more likely to easily spin into heated emotional states.
- Our meaning making is simple and un-reflective.

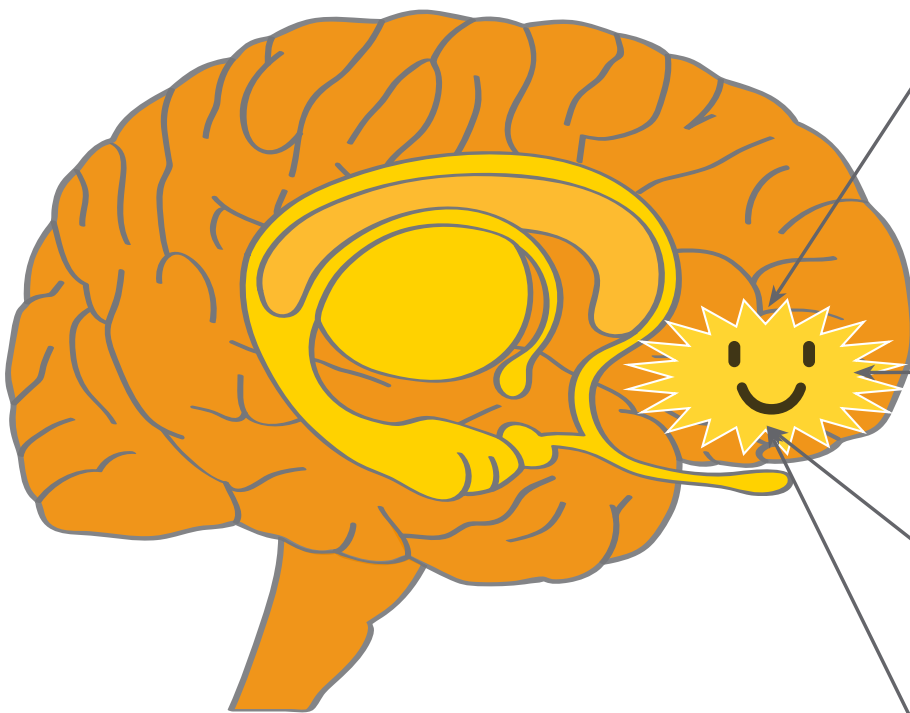
## Dealing with a Stressed out Brain

Even if we are functioning with a stressed out brain there are many strategies that are useful for calming us down. Some of the same strategies that calm our body can also be useful in calming our brain. By calming our stressed out brain we can move it away from functioning in a defensive way and shift to using the front part of our brain which allows us more detailed and enriched stories about ourselves as parents and how we came to be who we are, as well as being able to hold on to who our children are in all of their complexity and to know more about how we can help them be all that they can be.

# 5. The Parental Executive System

How would you describe your child? How would you describe yourself as a parent? What are some of the things that have made you the parent that you are? The way we answer questions like these tells us about the way we go about making meaning of our experiences and gives us some idea about how our brain functions. If we are functioning with a healthy, well connected brain our stories about ourselves and our relationships are different to those that might emerge if we have been functioning with a stressed out brain that is coping with many demands on it.

## How our Executive System helps us parent



Ability to change our thinking and behaviour in light of new information. Eg. A parent thinks their child is a lazy because they avoid reading for school, until the child is diagnosed with dyslexia and this changes the parent's understanding.

Ability to control our impulses.

Ability to realise a parenting strategy we are using isn't working anymore and we need to change our approach.

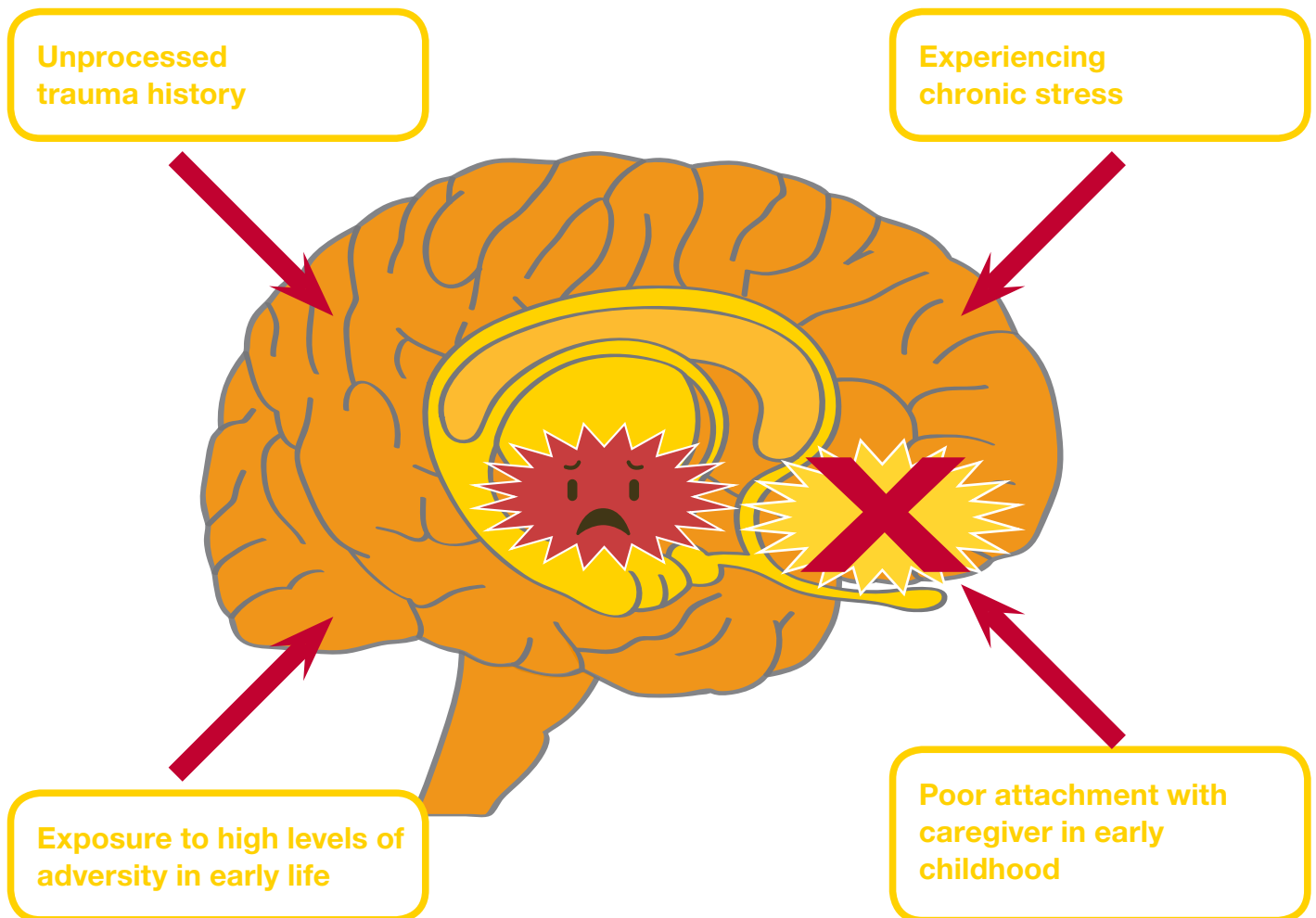
Ability to think before we react emotionally when with our kids.



# 5. The Parental Executive System

## When we can't access the Executive System

Not everyone's executive system functions as well as others and there are various experiences in life that could make it hard for anyone to access their executive system all the time (see diagram). When our executive system is not on-line we can become inflexible in our thinking and our kids can then react negatively to our rigid parenting which can disrupt our relationship with them. When not online our brain defaults to using the middle region of the brain to parent which doesn't allow the same kind of reflectiveness and often means our responses are more reactive and defensive.



By calming our stressed out brain we can move our brain away from functioning in a defensive way and shift to using the front part of our brain which allows us to think with complexity and openness. When we think about our kids and ourselves as parents with the front part of our brain on-line we create richer and more detailed pictures of who we are and how we relate with each other. This front region of the brain also allows us to better re-appraise old, unhelpful ways of thinking and helps us to see things from many perspectives.



