

The Nature of Nurture: Biology, Environment and the Drug Exposed Child

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Reviewed by Stephen Spitalny.

This book is an excellent resource for anyone who works with or is interested in situations of fetal drug or alcohol exposure. It seems that this is a situation that is becoming more and more prevalent, and early childhood educators need understanding and tools to address these complex situations.

Dr. Chasnoff has dedicated much of his professional work to researching cognitive, behavioral and developmental effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol, cocaine and other drugs. He has developed programs to remediate these effects in preschool settings, and he works with individual families and children. He has previously written four books and numerous articles on this subject. While not an anthroposophist or otherwise connected with Waldorf schools, his work is insightful and helpful. At times, his approach can seem intellectual, yet a glance at the title gives a clue as to his intentions.

This helpful book is filled with case studies and in depth examinations of neurological development and aberration. Different themes of behavior are thoroughly described and there are many suggestions as to how to best help the child develop the ability to self-manage. Many stages of child development examined, not only early childhood. At the back of the book, along with many scientific references, we find a very helpful glossary of terms used in the book that makes it more accessible for us all.

Here is a brief portion from the final chapter of the book:

These are exciting times. We are learning more and more about early brain development and the way children learn. We now know that brain cells begin learning during fetal development, and the connections between the brain cells, which allow them to communicate with one another, grow at an astounding rate through the baby's first year of life. During this time, the sounds, sight, touches, smells and feelings that parents communicate to the child promote the growth of the neural pathways for emotions, speech and

intellect. Your child learns language, abstract thinking, and becomes a social being through your playing with him. And, contrary to popular thought, it is not as important to teach young children their ABC's, numbers and colors, as it is to give them the emotional groundwork they need for lifelong learning.

More than anything, it is important to respect the dignity of the child and make him feel worthwhile. Teaching a child to manage his own behavior rather than the parents' controlling the behavior [is what is important].

We clearly do not know everything a child needs for optimum brain development. We do know though, that prenatal drug exposure, neglect, abuse, lack of stimulation, emotional deficits and traumatic experiences can disrupt the wiring, leading a child into negative behaviors and feelings that last a lifetime. This is where foster and adoptive parents step in. All children are born ready to grow, both intellectually and emotional. But their interaction with the world around them determines how that growth will proceed.

Brain development is not a simple matter of nature or nurture; nor does nature stop when nurture begin. The challenge to [anyone] who has a child in their care, is to provide an opportunity for growth to all children. Through love and comfort, through teaching and guiding, through managing and supporting, we can all make a difference in the life of a child.

Dr. Chasnoff has given us an important book to help in our work with young children. And his work is based on love, warmth, and helping the child come to a place of managing their own behavior, an essential foundation for later development.