



# RAISING MENTALLY STRONG KIDS

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How to Combine the Power of Neuroscience with  
Love and Logic® to Grow Confident, Kind, Responsible,  
and Resilient Children and Young Adults

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DANIEL G. AMEN, MD  
& CHARLES FAY, PHD

Foreword by JIM FAY, Cofounder of the Love and Logic Institute

*Raising Mentally Strong Kids* is a comprehensive guide to raising resilient children in our complex world. Each chapter is packed with immediately usable parenting strategies, and a deep philosophy that children and families of our era need pervades this book.

**MICHAEL GURIAN**, founder of the Gurian Institute and bestselling author of *The Wonder of Boys* and *The Wonder of Girls*

When two dads who also happen to be pioneers in brain science and parenting psychology tackle the biggest challenges facing kids today, the product is a dynamic, science-based response to that often-heard plea from parents: “I wish these kids came with a manual!” Well, now you have a great one—a clear road map to helping your children create a better life for themselves and a better relationship for you both!

**PHILLIP C. “DR. PHIL” MCGRAW, PH.D.**

Parents are to nurture children so they have the resources to surmount life’s challenges. Key to resilience is developing mental and emotional strength. In this easy-to-read manual, Drs. Amen and Fay unlock the essentials of effective parenting and offer vital lessons for any stage of child-rearing.

**JEFFREY K. ZEIG, PH.D.**, The Milton Erickson Foundation

Each of our kids needs all the love, encouragement, and strength we—individually and collectively—can help them generate. Drs. Fay and Amen are masters at sharing all the best practices to raise *strong kids* who become all they can be and develop into great, inspiring leaders in their respective occupations and life.

**MARK VICTOR HANSEN**, co-creator of the Chicken Soup for the Soul, ASK!, and One Minute Millionaire series of books that have sold over 500 million copies

*Raising Mentally Strong Kids* is a valuable resource for anyone looking to raise mentally strong kids in today’s complex world. By applying the principles outlined in this book, you can create lasting changes that will impact generations to come. As a testament to its effectiveness, four generations of my family have undergone SPECT brain scans, and integrating that information into family relationships has resulted in significant positive changes across generations!

**DR. EARL R. HENSLIN, PSY.D., B.C.E.T.S.**, diplomate in the American Academy of Traumatic Stress and author of *This Is Your Brain on Joy*

*Raising Mentally Strong Kids* will give any parent who wants to have kids who are confident, competent, and cooperative the step-by-step solutions.

**LEWIS HOWES**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The School of Greatness* and *The Greatness Mindset*

What if we could empower our children to be more resilient, have a strong sense of self-worth, and *healthfully* overcome the challenges they face in life? This book is the road map to equipping our kids with the tools they'll need to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

**SHAWN STEVENSON**, bestselling author of *Eat Smarter* and *Sleep Smarter*

Dr. Fay and Dr. Amen's book reveals not just the *what* to do about child and brain development and function but *why* things impact, improve, and change our behaviors, which makes these concepts deeply motivating and actionable. You may find yourself asking, "Where was this book when I was a kid?" until you happily realize that not only can you apply these ideas to help your children thrive, but yourself as well.

**DR. DARRIA LONG**, national bestselling author of *Mom Hacks*, national TV health contributor, emergency physician, and mom

*Raising Mentally Strong Kids* is an essential and urgently needed book for anyone interacting with children. Dr. Daniel Amen and Dr. Charles Fay share their amazing expertise to give parents and grandparents a guide to raise kids to be resilient, strong, and confident in a shifting world. Highly recommended!

**STEVEN MASLEY, MD, FAHA, FACN, CNS**, bestselling author of *The 30-Day Heart Tune-Up*

Dr. Fay and Dr. Amen understand the current climate and struggles that parents and teachers face while raising emotionally resilient and mentally strong kids. The authors present timeless and empowering principles within each chapter, making them easily comprehensible and applicable to readers' unique situations. To enhance its practicality, they include a concise set of action steps at the end of each chapter. This powerful book spoke to my heart and soul, causing me to recommit to being a more intentional and effective father. It has become required reading for my coaching clients and the educational institutions I work with.

**LARRY KERBY, MBA**, speaker, parenting enthusiast and life coach

This is a refreshing and innovative parenting book, and a must-read for parents interested in raising kids with their brain health and character in mind. This book provides the science, insight, and practical steps on how to raise mentally and emotionally healthy, capable, kind, and responsible children. This book has the potential to raise up healthier families, which have the opportunity to foster healthier communities!

**SHARON MAY, PH.D.**, founder of Safe Haven Marriage Intensives

In an age when children are struggling more than ever, Drs. Amen and Fay have written a masterful book to help us raise mentally strong kids—backed by neuroscience and in support of parents who are also trying to find their way forward. This should be a guide for all parents today.

**DR. UMA NAIDOO**, the Mood Food MD, nutritional psychiatrist and biologist, professional chef, and author of the bestselling *This Is Your Brain on Food*

## A SAMPLE OF OTHER BOOKS BY DANIEL G. AMEN

*Change Your Brain Every Day: Simple Daily Practices to Strengthen Your Mind, Memory, Moods, Focus, Energy, Habits, and Relationships*, Tyndale, 2023

*You, Happier: The 7 Neuroscience Secrets of Feeling Good Based on Your Brain Type*, Tyndale, 2022

*Your Brain Is Always Listening: Tame the Hidden Dragons That Control Your Happiness, Habits, and Hang-Ups*, Tyndale, 2021

*The End of Mental Illness: How Neuroscience Is Transforming Psychiatry and Helping Prevent or Reverse Mood and Anxiety Disorders, ADHD, Addictions, PTSD, Psychosis, Personality Disorders, and More*, Tyndale, 2020

*Change Your Brain, Change Your Grades*, BenBella, 2019

*Feel Better Fast and Make It Last: Unlock Your Brain's Healing Potential to Overcome Negativity, Anxiety, Anger, Stress, and Trauma*, Tyndale, 2018

*Memory Rescue: Supercharge Your Brain, Reverse Memory Loss, and Remember What Matters Most*, Tyndale, 2017

*Stones of Remembrance: Healing Scriptures for Your Mind, Body, and Soul*, Tyndale, 2017

*Captain Snout and the Superpower Questions: How to Calm Anxiety and Conquer Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs)*, Zonderkidz, 2017

*The Brain Warrior's Way: Ignite Your Energy and Focus, Attack Illness and Aging, Transform Pain into Purpose*, with Tana Amen, New American Library, 2016

*The Brain Warrior's Way Cookbook: Over 100 Recipes to Ignite Your Energy and Focus, Attack Illness and Aging, Transform Pain into Purpose*, with Tana Amen, New American Library, 2016

*Time for Bed, Sleepyhead: The Falling Asleep Book*, Zonderkidz, 2016

*Change Your Brain, Change Your Life: The Breakthrough Program of Conquering Anxiety, Depression, Obsessiveness, Lack of Focus, Anger, and Memory Problems* (revised), Harmony Books, 2015, 42-week *New York Times* bestseller

*Healing ADD: The Breakthrough Program That Allows You to See and Heal the 7 Types of ADD* (revised), Berkley, 2013

*The Daniel Plan: 40 Days to a Healthier Life*, with Rick Warren and Mark Hyman, Zondervan, 2013, debuted as a #1 *New York Times* bestseller

*Unleash the Power of the Female Brain: Supercharging Yours for Better Health, Energy, Mood, Focus, and Sex*, Harmony Books, 2013

*Use Your Brain to Change Your Age: Secrets to Look, Feel, and Think Younger Every Day*, Crown Archetype, 2012, *New York Times* bestseller

*Change Your Brain, Change Your Body: Use Your Brain to Get and Keep the Body You Have Always Wanted*, Harmony Books, 2010, *New York Times* bestseller

*The Brain in Love: 12 Lessons to Enhance Your Love Life* (formerly titled *Sex on the Brain*), Three Rivers Press, 2007

## **A SAMPLE OF OTHER BOOKS BY CHARLES FAY**

*Bullying: When Your Child Is the Target*, Love and Logic Institute, 2016

*Love and Logic Magic for Early Childhood: Practical Parenting from Birth to Six Years*, with Jim Fay, Love and Logic Institute, 2015

*Stepparenting: Keeping It Sane*, Love and Logic Institute, 2015

*From Bad Grades to a Great Life!: Unlocking the Mystery of Achievement for Your Child*, Love and Logic Institute, 2011

*Parenting for Success: Happy, High Achieving Kids*, Love and Logic Institute, 2008





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# Foreword

*By Jim Fay, Cofounder of the Love and Logic Institute*

By the time you open this book, I will have worked with kids, parents, and educators for 70 years. I'd like to tell you that it was always a great success, but unfortunately the first segment of that time was spent using some of the old traditional methods of rant, rave, and rescue. These worked with sweet, compliant kids but often backfired with strong-willed and stubborn kids. I coined the terms *Helicopter* parent and *Drill Sergeant* parent because I realized that I was a bit of both.

I'd also like to brag that I raised my first two kids, but they were really raised by my father inside my head. Every time I opened my mouth his words and voice came out. I tried to be more patient, but I always defaulted to discipline with decibels and a Helicopter rescue every time something went wrong. My dad was still running my life. I didn't like it, even though I had grown to love him.

In 1968, as a teacher, I was stumbling all over myself because of my lack of classroom management skills. The sweet kids were afraid of me, and the defiant, uncooperative ones viewed me as weak. As a result, I barely made it through the year and was about to give up. But having been raised by a stubborn Irishman who harped on the notion that nothing is worth doing unless it's unpleasant, I couldn't see myself walking away from this misery. I couldn't give up on teaching. I had to master it, so I desperately clawed my way through a master's degree at the University of Denver. That helped a bit. What really made the difference was the gift of being able to work with some tremendous experts in the field, attend a dizzying number of their trainings, and share all of this with my son, Charles. Though he was in early elementary school at the time, he listened with great interest, and he didn't complain much when I used him as a test subject. Our relationship blossomed over our discussions of human nature, psychological theories, and muscle cars. Before long, I discovered that I had a knack for turning theories into practical skills.

I also had the benefit of being able to experiment with many students, watch many highly effective and not-so-effective teachers and parents, and see very clearly what worked and what didn't. As the years went by and I

had massive amounts of clinical practice, I discovered truths about parenting through organic, practical ways. This was extremely useful, but my methods of study and experimentation were quite primitive compared to those of neuroscientists conducting formal university research.

My dream was to get parents and teachers thinking and talking differently about adult-child relationships. About that time, I met Dr. Foster Cline, an innovative psychiatrist. Together we created the beginnings of the Love and Logic philosophy, and we established the Love and Logic Institute. As we started teaching these practical applications of psychological principles, I was amazed at how excited people were about their simplicity and effectiveness. We were constantly hearing, “Wow! This stuff really works!”

As the years went by, my dream became that of refining the techniques and simplifying them, making them easier to learn and apply. At that time, my little Charles had become a well-respected researcher, author, and public speaker called Dr. Charles Fay. As he formally joined our team, we continued the innovative discussions we’d started when he was a small boy. Through his insights, experience, and tireless work, Love and Logic became respected throughout the world.

Work and parenting were going well, but a cloud was still hanging over me. In my insecurity, I continued to wonder, *What if my discoveries fall flat in the face of the modern research being done on the brain? What if someday I’ll face the fact that none of them is relevant? What if someday I have to stand before the world and apologize for steering people in the wrong direction?*

Fortunately, I got sick . . . very sick. Diagnosed with a serious autoimmune disorder called myasthenia gravis, I sought help from a famous neuroscientist and psychiatrist named Dr. Daniel Amen. He helped me with my condition, practically curing me of this incurable disease. I quickly discovered that he was already quite familiar with Love and Logic and was enthusiastic about the match between what he was seeing in brain scans and what our approach could do to help parents and children develop stronger, healthier brains and behavior. This brilliant scientist and psychiatrist erased years of worry.

*What a relief, I thought. What a comfort to know that Love and Logic and the science of the brain fit together like a well-oiled machine. With both, children and families have more power to choose healthy brains and healthy futures.* That’s why I am so excited about this book that I can hardly contain myself. I’m excited for you, the reader, because never before has there been a more powerful combination of approaches pulled together into one practical book. It’s tremendously exciting and rewarding to know that family after family will enjoy more harmony and joy because of what Daniel and Charles have put together here.

**Jim Fay**

# Introduction

Are you ready for some practical, scientifically sound strategies for raising kids who respect and love you so much that they adopt your deepest-held values? What if these techniques helped you avoid unwinnable arguments and power struggles? How would it be if these strategies also helped your kids develop the strong brains and behavioral habits required for confidence and resilience in this challenging world?

For over 80 combined years, we've been helping parents raise respectful, responsible, and mentally strong kids and young adults. As such, the pages of this book have not been penned by rookies, but by two men who have devoted their careers and their lives to the science and the practice of parenting. Just as important, both of us have raised families of our own and experienced the highs, the lows, and the humbling nature of family life and shaping little bundles of joy into grown adults.

We know what parenting used to be like and what it's like now. Yes, we're old enough to recall the days when the biggest technological challenges parents faced were the television and the telephone with a 15-foot cord. Some children, believe it or not, were defying their parents by sneaking more TV time and by running the phone cord under their bedroom doors. Those cords often blended with the shag carpet, making them difficult for a harried parent to detect.

While simpler, those times came with serious challenges that impacted practically every family. Alcohol has always been a problem. Marijuana and other drugs were becoming more popular and accessible. More kids were feeling free to show blatant disrespect, and many were tuning out from school. Teen pregnancy was another big concern. Over the past four decades these and many other challenges have reached epic proportions for many families.

With the growth of the internet and the advent of wireless technology, a universe of information is now available through a device small enough to fit in the pocket of even the snuggest-fitting jeans. Now we parent in an age where the devices available to our children contain more temptations than we faced during our entire childhood. Sure, some of the information out there is healthy and beneficial. Unfortunately, a large amount is deceptive, dark,

and dangerous. The companies designing these devices and the software they rely on have mastered the science of addiction: Provide exciting content in random, unpredictable ways so that users always have a sense of missing out if they aren't constantly online. Provide content that targets their deepest needs to be noticed, adored, and valued as part of a social network. Get kids' brains addicted to dopamine, the reward chemical, by making the use of these devices more exciting than just about anything else (except, of course, risky sex, drugs, and other dangerous behaviors).

As we all know at heart, real joy comes from authentic relationships, a sense of purpose, helping others, and pursuing healthy challenges that lead to feelings of competence. We also know that a life filled with unhealthy distractions always leads to disappointment, anxiety, and deep depression. While most of us understand that, many of us feel overwhelmed by the thought of being in charge of providing a safe, happy home and raising our kids so they make good decisions, have healthy relationships, act kindly to others, become productive members of society, don't crumble in the face of challenges, and take responsibility for their goals and actions.

Here's the good news: You are smarter than your kids' smartphones. You've got more wisdom than their wireless devices. You've got way more hope and heartfelt motivation than the largest hard drive on earth. To make matters even better, you're reading a book like no other, one that marries 40 years of research on how to build healthy brains with 40 years of psychological strategies for taking good care of yourself while raising kids who understand an unequivocal truth: The quality of their lives—and the lives of others—will depend on the quality of their choices. And it doesn't have to be hard.

## **I'M DANIEL AMEN, MD**

I was raised in a Lebanese family of seven children, where I found myself in the middle in terms of age. Why is that important? In our culture, the oldest boy was regarded as very special and so was the oldest girl. Of course, the baby was spoiled. Even though my mother was involved and loving, you can probably imagine how busy she must have been. So was my father. They worked extremely hard to take care of us, but the mix of cultural preferences and the juggling of so many children and other responsibilities left me feeling irrelevant.

When I turned 18, the Vietnam War was still raging, and I became an infantry medic where my love of medicine was born. But a year into it, I realized I didn't really like being shot at and got myself retrained as an X-ray technician and fell in love with medical imaging. When I was a

second-year medical student, I married my childhood sweetheart, but two months later she became suicidal. I took her to see a wonderful psychiatrist, Stanley Wallace, MD, and came to realize that if he helped her, which he did, it wouldn't just help her, but it would also help me and our subsequent children and grandchildren. I fell in love with psychiatry because I realized it could help generations of people. I have loved it every day for the past 45 years.

There was one problem: I fell in love with the only medical specialty that virtually never looks at the organ it treats. As such, my love of psychiatry and my love of medical imaging were at odds. As my med school professors used to say, "How do you know unless you look?" In other words, how can we understand what's really going on inside the body . . . inside the brain . . . unless we scan the organs we're interested in? It didn't make sense that psychiatrists were not looking at the brain, and I knew this needed to change. I had no idea I would be part of the change.

In 1991, I went to a lecture on brain SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) imaging. SPECT looks at blood flow and activity in the brain and basically tells physicians three things: is the brain healthy, underactive, or overactive? Over the next few years, my psychiatric practice radically changed. And in the last 33 years Amen Clinics has performed over 250,000 brain SPECT scans on patients from 155 countries. We have learned countless lessons from our brain-imaging work. The most important one is that, rather than seeing psychiatric problems as "mental illnesses," we see them as brain health issues. This one idea changes everything. Get your brain right and your mind will follow. It led me to repeatedly emphasize the following:

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*When their brains are troubled, children, teens, and young adults are sadder, sicker, and less successful in all they do, including schoolwork, sports, and relationships. A troubled brain means a troubled life, whereas a stronger and healthier brain means a stronger and healthier life.*

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In this book, I will provide you with a wealth of information to help you and your children develop strong brains. As you can see, it's been my life's passion, and it is an honor to share it with you. Looking at the big picture, you will learn how to:



1. **Develop a love affair with your brain.** You need to love the three-pound mass between your ears—because your brain controls how you think, act, feel, and manage those difficult situations that leave you wanting to lecture, threaten, scream, or use some other ineffective parenting strategy. Obviously, the brain helps you remain thoughtful rather than reactive, one of the hallmarks of great parenting. When you fall in love with your brain, you start taking better care of it. You feed it, exercise it, and rest it. Your brain also helps you consistently demonstrate *firmness* and *kindness*. Decades of research shows this combination of *firmness* and *kindness* to be one of the primary factors differentiating successful from unsuccessful parents.<sup>1</sup>
2. **Teach your child to love and protect their brain.** As you may already know, modeling is one of the most powerful ways of teaching your kids. As they see you falling head over heels in love with your brain, this will help them want a similar love affair. They will be responsive to learning that the brain is soft; the skull is hard and has multiple sharp ridges. When the head experiences any form of impact, the brain ricochets inside this hard and sharp casing. In brain scans, I have seen children as young as 8 suffering from serious head injuries from playing football for only one season. You read that right: brain damage at 8 years old! In fact, I recently worked with a patient who had been an all-American soccer player in high school and college. Even though she never had a concussion, her brain was not healthy—and hadn't been for years. The brain trauma she endured *and never knew about* made every aspect of her life as a parent, a wife, an employee, and a friend harder.
3. **Educate your child about *how* to care for their brain.** It's not hard. I started teaching my daughter Chloe when she was 2 years old how to make choices to care for her brain (you'll learn more about it in chapter 1). Show by example how to avoid anything that hurts the brain (e.g., trauma, drugs, alcohol, the standard American diet) and how to do things that help it (such as eating right, exercising, getting great sleep, learning new things, resisting inaccurate and negative thinking, avoiding overexposure to screens, and taking high-quality supplements).

## I'M CHARLES FAY, PHD

Two extremely good-hearted parents, who openly admitted they had no idea what they were doing when it came to parenting, raised my two older sisters and me. As I often say, my mom, Shirley, had the toughest job of the two, staying home with the three of us kids. My father, Jim, a circus and nightclub musician, soon grew tired of the travel and begged for a job teaching music and art at an inner-city school. He got the job.

It wasn't long before a severely troubled student was placed in my dad's classroom. Scott displayed all the hallmarks of a cold sociopath: lack of empathy, extreme cruelty, obsession with starting fires, and absolutely no respect for authority. This was the late 1960s, and most teachers received little or no training in how to manage a student like Scott. Demands, lectures, and threats of punishment were not working. In fact, all they did was enrage Scott such that he'd take his extreme anger out on his classmates and the classroom pet. By early spring of that school year, my dad's nerves were shot and he found himself in a life-altering situation with Scott:

"You need to sit down and stop bothering your classmates!" my father growled.

Smirking, Scott replied with a quick burst of extreme profanity. Desperate and enraged, my father slapped him just hard enough to cause a small cut on his lip. Years later, my father admitted that his first thought was, *I'm a worthless, horrible person. I love my students, and look what I've just done.*

His second thought was, *I love teaching, but this is the end of my career.*

Up to this point, corporal punishment was still commonplace, and Scott's single mother was also at her wits' end with Scott. They couldn't find a replacement who wanted to work in that tough school, so my father managed to keep his job. It felt like a miracle to him except one unavoidable fact poked at his conscience: "I have no skills for working with challenging kids. I'm even having problems with the easy ones I have at home! I need to learn some positive ways of getting children to behave without yelling or threatening."

Intensely motivated by his guilt and desire to discover positive techniques, my dad spent practically all of his spare time reading books on human behavior, studying educational and psychological research, and attending trainings with some of the most renowned experts of the day. Fascinated by his passion, I began studying the same materials, starting around the age of 8. He even managed to get me into many of the seminars he was attending. I was struggling greatly with my math and English classes at school, but I was devouring the content that my dad and I were learning together. Some of my

fondest childhood memories involved my father and I discussing the subject of human nature.

When he started using the skills on me and my sisters, I was caught by surprise. At 15, I became obsessed with having a dirt bike. The old dad would have said, “For crying out loud! Do you think money grows on trees?”

My new dad softly replied, “I can understand a young person wanting one. What’s your plan for paying for it?”

I hatched a plan to finance my new passion with some odd jobs around town. After months of hard work, I purchased a heavily used Yamaha from a friend. My father responded with just two things: “I’m happy for you, son” and “Feel free to keep that as long as all of the safety rules we’ve discussed are followed and you’re keeping up with your chores.”

I didn’t follow the safety rules, and I didn’t stay up on my chores.

“This is so sad,” he expressed with heartfelt empathy a month later. “I love you too much to nag, remind, or see you get hurt. That’s why I paid to have someone to do those chores you’ve been neglecting. Glenn the handyman was willing to take your dirt bike for trade.”

My dad never raised his voice, and he didn’t back down. As the weeks passed, my anger morphed into respect. My dad cared enough about me to set limits and hold me accountable. He cared enough about me to do so with love and firmness, rather than anger and frustration.

As my father, Jim Fay, and his good friend, Foster Cline, MD, expanded their learning, they studied thousands of children, families, and schools around the globe and produced a variety of much-loved Love and Logic materials. Studying by their side and earning my doctorate in school and clinical psychology, I furthered the approach, ensuring that it remained consistent with recent research and the demands today’s parents and educators face. I’ve also traveled the globe, sharing these powerful skills with a variety of parents and educators facing a dizzying array of real-world challenges.

As you read this book, the comprehensive medical and neuropsychiatric practices pioneered by my friend Dr. Amen will change your parenting. You’ll also benefit from the marriage of his work with the deep, yet simple-to-implement psychological ideas embedded in the Love and Logic approach. The basic principles include:

1. **Mutual dignity:** Children largely learn how to treat others and themselves by how we treat them and how we allow them to treat us. Both require that we set limits that allow us to take good care of ourselves and the people around us.

2. **Shared control:** When we try to hoard control, we lose it, but when we share some, we gain it. Children become happier and more respectful when we allow them to learn responsibility, give them plenty of small choices, and let them live with the consequences of their choices. Kids also become stronger when they learn they can handle these consequences.
3. **Shared thinking:** The brain becomes strong only when we encourage children to own and solve the problems they encounter or create. When we bark orders at them and describe exactly what they should think and do, we stunt their development. The results are similar when we operate in a permissive manner and rescue them from the limits and consequences they face. In contrast, when we remain firm and loving, guiding them toward developing solutions to the dilemmas they encounter, their brains become strong and capable of facing bigger, real-world problems—and parenting becomes easier.
4. **Sincere empathy:** When we respond to children’s mistakes or misbehavior with anger and frustration, we take ownership of their problem, making ourselves an easy target for their blame. When we respond with empathy, we make it harder for them to see us as the source of the problem. As you read this book, you will begin to see very clearly how empathy opens the brain to learning. You’ll also discover how it lowers your stress and anxiety about being a parent.
5. **Loving relationships:** Nothing works without healthy, loving relationships. When we parent according to the first four principles of Love and Logic, this fifth becomes more or less automatic. When it does, life is far more gratifying, and our children begin to adopt our values on a subconscious basis. When they bond with us, they bond with our deepest-held beliefs.

*There is great hope!*

A few years back, I received a surprise call from Sam, one of my childhood buddies. We’d known each other from kindergarten through high school, and we’d had great fun goofing around. “Hey, Charles, I ran into your dad the other day, and he gave me your number,” Sam said. “I’d like to introduce you to my wife, Phoebe. Let’s get dinner some time.”

The following Friday, I was sitting across the table from someone I hadn’t seen for almost 40 years. It wasn’t long before Sam asked, “So when did you

end up becoming a psychologist? When we were kids, you weren't too excited about school. That's kind of a big switch. What happened?"

"Well I'd always been interested in it, but I didn't think I was smart enough to go to college. When we were kids, I was bitten by a tick and became sick with Rocky Mountain spotted fever. I also had chronic strep infections. This made it tough to learn. As I've gotten healthier, I've seen that my learning problems were related to those illnesses," I told him.

"That's such a coincidence!" Sam replied. "Dr. Daniel Amen had discovered some similar problems with our daughter, Jana. They have caused some serious learning and behavior problems, but things are getting better. And, by the way, Dr. Amen raves about Love and Logic. He's made it part of our treatment plan."

I had heard of Dr. Amen and was amazed that a preeminent, world-famous psychiatrist and author would include the Love and Logic approach as part of the treatment he provided his patients.

As the conversation flowed with Sam and Phoebe, I learned that they had adopted Jana and that she'd come with a long list of labels, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder, sensory integration disorder, behavior disorder, and learning disability.

"Two things really made a world of difference," Phoebe chimed in. "The first has been the brain scan. It helped us see that her brain was not physically healthy. This was actually good news, because it motivated us to learn about how we could improve things by changing her diet, incorporating exercise, helping her get on a better sleep schedule, and addressing her biochemical issues with some very simple supplements."

Sam continued, "Your Love and Logic approach was so helpful too. It encouraged us to let go and allow her to make plenty of small mistakes. Because we were new parents and super worried about her because of her problems, we were micromanaging everything. We were terrified of her making any sort of mistake."

Phoebe interrupted, "And we were major Helicopter parents. We rescued her from everything."

"Yes. It was bad," Sam agreed. "We were working way harder on her life than she was, constantly trying to make everything perfect. It was backfiring big-time. Then we decided to let go and give her a chance to blow it. It was perfect. She was arguing with us about her homework, so Phoebe just empathized, 'Oh, we love you, Jana. In fact, we love you too much to argue about your homework. We will love you regardless of whether you get it done and earn a good grade or don't get it done and do poorly. Your dad and I decided that we help only when it's fun for us.'"

“She was so mad . . . mad because I wasn’t,” Phoebe continued. “She stormed off, shouting, ‘Fine! I guess I will just fail because of you.’ She blew the assignment and had to live with the consequences at school. They were small. It was no big deal, but this started our habit of allowing her to learn like you guys always teach: ‘Hope and pray that your kids will make plenty of affordable mistakes when they are young so that they are mentally strong and have a good sense of cause and effect when the price tags become life and death.’”

“Things have dramatically improved because Dr. Amen is helping us make great progress with her brain health issues, while Love and Logic is helping us remain more empathetic, set better limits, and stay out of arguments with her and each other,” Sam said. “It’s a great combo of approaches.”

After dinner that evening, I sat at my kitchen table, wondering how such a wonderful union had been created: A powerful brain-health approach married to the psychological skills my father and I had been teaching and refining for years. It wasn’t long before I developed a friendship with Dr. Amen and focused on refining this partnership.

In 2021, we made this powerful pairing official as Love and Logic joined the Amen Clinics family. As you read the concepts and skills included in this book, we’re confident that you’ll be inspired and hope-filled, ready to tackle the great challenges of raising children from the womb to the workplace. It doesn’t have to be hard.

Enjoy the journey!

**Dr. Amen and Dr. Fay**





**PRACTICAL  
NEUROPSYCHOLOGY  
FOR PARENTING  
SUCCESS**





You will learn that the secret to successful parenting lies in the marriage of neuroscience and practical psychology, or practical neuropsychology as we call it. It is only when you address both the brain and the mind of your child (and yourself) that you can effectively raise mentally strong kids and young adults. This powerful combination arms you with solutions that work, even in difficult times and with challenging kids. By the end of Part 1, you will have the tools and strategies to help you:

- Develop a brain-centric attitude toward yourself and your children
- Have realistic expectations based on your child's stage of development
- Set clear goals for yourself as a parent and for your child
- Adopt a parenting style that fosters better decision-making in kids
- Promote bonding and relationship with your child
- Establish clear, enforceable family rules and limits
- Learn how to allow kids to make mistakes and deal with affordable consequences
- Stop being a doormat and set healthy boundaries for yourself and your children
- Think clearly and logically, and help your child do so from a young age
- Reinforce your child's positive behavior
- Raise kids with grit who don't crumble in the face of obstacles
- Stop beating yourself up for not being a perfect parent
- Give clear, unemotional consequences when your child's behavior is out of line
- Get your child to mind the first time you say something (yes, we said the first time!)
- Choose the best foods and supplements to support your child's brain (and your own), mind, and body
- Help your child learn to cultivate their own happiness
- Flip the switch on underachievement so your child can reach their potential
- Prevent your child from getting into trouble with technology
- Know what to do when brain/mental health issues arise

## CHAPTER 1

# HEALTHY BRAINS: THE FOUNDATION OF MENTAL STRENGTH, RESPONSIBILITY, EMOTIONAL CONTROL, AND SUCCESS

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*You have to be your child's frontal lobes until theirs develop,  
but you also have to give them the tools to know how to  
take the driver's seat once their brain does mature.*

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Have you ever known someone who just doesn't get it? The kind of person who continually makes the same mistakes over and over, leading you to wonder, *What were they thinking?* Maybe you have a friend or relative, or even a spouse, who has the best intentions but keeps tripping up and creating unnecessary drama in the family.

Imagine that this friend is driving on the highway in stop-and-go traffic and sees someone in their rearview mirror tailgating them. This infuriates them and sends their thoughts spinning to how they're going to get back at the tailgater by slamming on the brakes. But while your friend is fixated on the rearview mirror, envisioning their revenge—BOOM!—they rear-end the car in front of them. They were so caught up in the moment, they neglected to consider the consequences of their actions.

Now think of someone else you know, someone who's got it together. You know, the kind of person who's rational and makes such good decisions that they could never be cast in a reality TV show because they would be too boring. Let's say this person finds themselves in the same traffic scenario. They might glance in the rearview mirror and, feel fleetingly irritated, but then they let it go and get back to focusing on the road in front of them. No fender bender for this friend.

What's the fundamental difference between these two types of people?  
Brain health.

At Amen Clinics, we've been looking at the brain for over 30 years. We have over 250,000 brain scans from people in more than 150 countries—the world's largest database of brain scans related to behavior. After looking at all these scans over the last few decades, one thing is very clear: When your brain works right, you work right. When your brain is troubled—for whatever reason—you're more likely to have trouble in your life.<sup>1</sup> Everything you (and your kids) do either helps or hurts your brain function and brain development—and every aspect of your present-day and future lives. And your brain health has a major impact on your child's brain health and mental strength.

We'll give you the brain basics you need to know to help yourself and your child fall in love with the gray matter between your ears. We'll show you how to love and care for the brain, so you can have a drama-free relationship and experience more success at home, in school, and in life. When your brain is healthy, parenting is easier. We promise. We'll also outline how combining better brain function with Love and Logic's psychology-based child-rearing strategies is the ultimate secret to parenting success. It's the marriage of these two pieces of the parenting puzzle that puts you on the path to raising mentally strong kids and having more fun while doing it.

## **BRAIN BASICS**

Brains run schools, families, friendships, businesses, churches—and you. Yet most people rarely think about their brains, least of all their children's brains. Yet mental strength starts with a healthy brain. It's so important to know about the brain, love it, and maybe even become a bit obsessed with it—especially for your kids' sake. And it's equally critical to teach your children at an early age to love and care for their own brains. It will make parenting so much easier while setting them up for the mental fortitude that will help them succeed in every area of life! And remember, although it's better to start early, it's never too late to teach your child, adolescent, or young adult about brain health.

Let's take a deeper look at the supercomputer inside your head. The human brain typically weighs about three pounds and is the consistency of soft butter, tofu, or custard, and it is housed in a hard skull that has sharp bony ridges.<sup>2</sup> It's no surprise that the brain can be damaged from repeatedly heading soccer balls or from being pounded by helmet-to-helmet tackles in football!

The brain is a symphony of parts that work together to create and sustain a life. It is the organ responsible for learning, loving, creating, and behaving. And it is the most complex and amazing organ in the universe.

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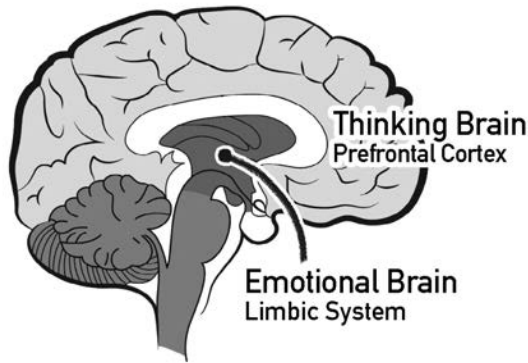
## ***Fun Facts about the Brain***

- It is 2 percent of the body's weight.
  - It uses 20 to 30 percent of your calorie intake and 20 percent of the body's oxygen and blood flow.
  - Information travels up to 268 mph in the brain.
  - Its storage capacity equals six million years of the *Wall Street Journal*.
  - Males have 10 percent more neurons.
  - Females have more connections.
- 

## **BRAIN DEVELOPMENT: FROM BIRTH TO ADULTHOOD**

The age of 18 might be when your kid legally becomes an adult. Their brain, though, hasn't completely matured yet. The truth is, the brain doesn't fully develop until about age 25 (up to age 28 in males). Until this time, kids need your help. And during the development period, you need to provide children with the tools and techniques they need to encourage healthy brain habits.

An easy way to grasp brain development is to think about where your mind was at different ages. When you were 5, what was interesting to you? Trucks, dolls, playing in the sandbox, snacks? The decisions you made were simple: whatever choices your mom or dad gave you. When you were 12, your interests changed, maybe toward making friends at school, building crafts, or reading books on your own. You certainly thought about decisions differently: *What will I wear today? If I ignore Mom long enough, will she give up on trying to get me to do my chores? Ugh, I hate chores.* Once 18 rolled around, toys and playing took on a completely different meaning. Perhaps you had your first car, a job, and possibly even a boyfriend or girlfriend. Every year of your own development brought change in your focus and ability to make decisions.



Here is a timeline of how the brain develops from birth to adulthood.

***Prenatal and newborns:*** By the time a baby is born, its brain already boasts 100 billion neurons. However, only a relatively small number of neurons are myelinated, and they have fewer connections. Over time, myelin, a white fatty substance that works like insulation, surrounds the cells and keeps the energy focused and moving in one direction. A child's brain forms trillions of connections in the first 10 years, so you don't want anything to interrupt myelination.

About three-quarters of the brain develops outside the womb, in response to environment and experience, as well as genetics. Early childhood experiences create a background for development and learning, as well as influence the way the brain is wired. In turn, the wiring affects feelings, language, and thought. Experiences mold and sculpt the brain. Nature and nurture always work together.

Brain development is fast during the first year. By 12 months old, a baby's brain on the outside resembles that of a normal young adult. In terms of outward and psychological development, here's what's happening for babies and toddlers. From birth to 18 months, babies are completely dependent, unable to delay wants or needs, think that they and their mother are much the same person, and learn mostly through their senses.

*Parenting tips: Research shows that even prior to conception, parents' lifestyle habits lay the foundation for their baby's overall physical and mental health and well-being.<sup>3</sup> In the womb, a baby's brain begins to develop. If a mom-to-be smokes (or is exposed to secondhand smoke), eats junk food, drinks too*

*much alcohol, is chronically stressed, or has infections during the pregnancy, it can have a negative influence on the baby's developing brain. On the other hand, if a mom avoids smoking, eats nutritious meals, takes prenatal vitamins, manages her stress, and is healthy throughout the pregnancy, it boosts a baby's brain health. Take care of your own brain health to improve your newborn's brain health.*

**Early childhood:** Toddlers begin to realize that they are separate, independent people and begin to exert independence by saying “No!” and “I want to do it myself.” This new independence often frightens them, so they often have fears and tend to be more clingy. They develop a sense of confidence if they are allowed to exert independent behavior (under adequate supervision) versus a sense of self-consciousness if they are overcontrolled.

By age 3, a baby's brain has formed about 1,000 trillion connections—about twice as many as adults have. Starting at about age 3, rapid social, intellectual, emotional, and physical development occurs. Brain activity in this age group is more than twice that of adults. New synapses form throughout life, but never again will the brain be so able to easily master new skills or adapt to setbacks.

The preschool years lead to continued independence and discovery. Kids at this age show initiative and curiosity—you know, those questions that never seem to stop. They are also highly imaginative, may have imaginary friends, and have some trouble separating reality from fantasy. So it's no surprise they think magically, meaning they think their thoughts have power and that they are responsible for everything around them. When something good happens, they feel pride. When something bad happens during this stage (divorce, death of a sibling, etc.), they often feel guilt, thinking somehow it was their fault, which may last a lifetime.

*Parenting tips: This is an important time for bonding and building trust with your child and an ideal age to begin using the Love and Logic concepts. At about 18 months, it's time to start setting loving limits as a form of discipline (see more about how discipline is really a teaching and training tool in chapter 6). It's also a time to allow little ones to begin experiential learning. This means allowing kids to make small mistakes that come with small consequences and to enjoy the thrill of early successes. Introduce them to the concept of brain health and start teaching them to love their brain. An online course like our Brain Thrive Pre-K–Grade 1 ([www.amenuniversity.com](http://www.amenuniversity.com)) can help.*

**Elementary years:** Once they hit school age, 6 to 11 years old, they develop friendships and ties outside home (e.g., scouts, sports) and identify with the

parent of the same sex. Their attention span dramatically increases, and they think more in literal terms, often black or white. They need supervision, rules, and structure to feel comfortable. And then their brains hit the next major stage of development.

*Parenting tips: During this period, it's a good idea to empower problem-solving and allow your child to engage in progressively greater challenges. As children learn to ride bikes, ride skateboards, or get involved in other sports, be sure they wear helmets to protect the brain and discourage them from playing brain-damaging sports like football. Encourage school-age kids to start adopting brain-healthy habits (see page 24, principle 6).*

**Preteens and young teens:** At age 11, the brain begins to prune extra connections. The circuits that remain are more specific and efficient. The brain is one of the best examples of the “use it or lose it” principle. Connections that are used repeatedly in the early years become permanent, while those that are not used are pruned. So, if a child does not play sports when they are young, then those nerve tracks get pruned. Or if a child does not learn to play a musical instrument, then the brain cuts those connections. That’s what makes it harder to learn new activities later in life.

In everyday life, here’s how this new stage of brain development looks. Preteens and young teens from 11 to 14 move toward more independent thinking, struggle with a sense of identity and shyness about their bodies, and realize parents aren’t perfect and identify their faults for them. (Perhaps this just helps keep us humble.) Young teens are more heavily influenced by their peers, and close friendships become important. This is when they also begin testing rules and limits.

*Parenting tips: Understand that this is when children need to learn to balance autonomy and individualization with safety. Continue to implement limits and focus on modeling brain-healthy habits (see page 24).*

**Teenagers:** Around 14, teens move toward further independence, start complaining about their parents (“I know how to do it myself!” “Mom, really?!”) and withdraw emotionally from Mom and Dad. They are extremely concerned about their physical appearance, and their friends are the most important people in their lives, even though they frequently change relationships. During the middle teen years, kids show more interest in specific careers.

Once teens hit 17 to 19, they are getting more secure in their identity and have more stable relationships. They can anticipate consequences for their actions and show the ability to delay needs and wants. Their concern increases for others and about their own future.

*Parenting tips: One of the biggest reasons that parents and teenagers struggle with each other is because as children grow, you expect more and more from them, yet teens do not have adult brain capacities. Many teens may, in fact, be “acting their age” when they are struggling to do the right thing. The better you understand the brain and its key functions, the more empathy and support you will be able to offer your child when they are pushing your limits. At this age, you need to help teens understand the difference between acceptance and agreement. Although teens may view themselves as mature enough to make their own decisions, it is still your job to step in as their prefrontal cortex when necessary. Encourage brain-healthy behavior. Our online course *Brain Thrive by 25* ([www.amenuniversity.com](http://www.amenuniversity.com)) offers guidelines for teens and young adults to adopt good brain habits.*

**Early adulthood:** During the late teens and into the mid-twenties, the front third of the brain, called the prefrontal cortex (PFC) or executive brain, continues to develop. Myelin continues to be deposited in the PFC until age 25 or 26, making the PFC work at a higher and more efficient level. The car insurance industry knew about maturity and brain development long ago. Typically, automobile insurance rates change at 25 because drivers are more thoughtful and get into significantly fewer accidents because their judgment centers work better.

*Parenting tips: Continue encouraging young adults to take ownership of their own brain health.*

## 7 BRAIN PRINCIPLES FOR PARENTS AND KIDS<sup>4</sup>

1. **Your brain is involved in everything you do.** How you think, how you feel, how you act, and how well you get along with your children, spouse, and friends has to do with the moment-by-moment functioning of your brain. Your brain is the organ behind your intelligence, character, personality, and every decision you make.
2. **When your brain works right, you work right. When your brain is troubled, you have trouble in your life.** When your brain is healthy, you tend to be happier, mentally stronger, healthier (due to better decision-making), more successful (also due to better decision-making), and a better parent. When your brain is not healthy, for whatever reason (such as multiple concussions, poor eating habits, or a family history of mental health problems), you tend to be sadder,



sicker, less successful, more vulnerable to mental health issues, and a less effective parent. The same goes for your kids.

3. **Your brain is the most amazing organ in the universe.** Your brain weighs about three pounds and has about 100 billion neurons (nerve cells) and more connections than there are stars in our galaxy.
4. **You need to fall in love with your brain and develop brain envy.** Because your brain runs your life (and your child's life), you have to care for it. Unfortunately, not enough people care about the brain, because they can't see it. You can see the wrinkles on your face or the blubber around your belly and do something about it if it bothers you. Most people, however, never get the chance to see their brains, so they don't know if there are problems or if it's headed for trouble.
5. **Many things hurt the brain. Avoid them.** Based on brain imaging work at Amen Clinics and more than 30 years of clinical practice, we have identified the 11 major risk factors that harm the brain and steal your mind. If you have any of these risk factors, parenting may feel harder than it should. And if your child has any of them, it can rob them of the mental strength, resilience, and focus they need to succeed in life. We developed the mnemonic BRIGHT MINDS to help you remember the 11 major risk factors.<sup>5</sup> I've written about these risk factors in several books, but I have adapted them here to show how they can hurt the brain and impact your life as a parent and your child's life.



- **B is for Blood Flow.** Blood flow supplies the oxygen and important nutrients your brain needs for optimal functioning and carries away waste. Our brain imaging work shows that low blood flow—from hypertension, lack of exercise, or other issues—is associated with many issues that can affect parents or kids at different ages, including problems with focus, moods, addictions, and more.

- **R is for Rational Thinking.** Every thought you have triggers the release of neurochemicals that impact brain function. Thoughts can be positive and beneficial or negative and harmful. If your brain is infested with ANTs (automatic negative thoughts), they can steal your mind and rob you or your child of joy.
- **I is for Inflammation.** Having high levels of inflammation harms the organs in your body, including your brain. Elevated inflammation is associated with mood issues, lack of motivation, and a leaky gut that causes gastrointestinal issues, allergies, and more. Research shows that chronic systemic inflammation at an early age in children has long-term impacts on brain development.<sup>6</sup>
- **G is for Genetics.** Brain health and mental health issues clearly run in families; however, your genes are not your destiny. Your daily habits can influence those genes and either switch them on or off.
- **H is for Head Trauma.** Concussions and head injuries—even mild ones that occur at any age—can contribute to learning problems, trouble with focus, mood issues, anxiousness, a vulnerability for abusing alcohol or drugs, and more.
- **T is for Toxins.** Exposure to environmental toxins found in personal care products, nonorganic produce, mold, paint, alcohol, smoke, pesticides, and other everyday items is harmful to the brain. And research shows that children’s developing brains are especially vulnerable to toxic exposure.<sup>7</sup> Brain fog, learning problems, autism, ADHD, and other issues have been linked to toxic exposure.
- **M is for Mental Health.** Having mental health problems makes it much harder to be an effective parent and makes it more challenging for children to do well in school and in life. For example, ADHD can make it difficult to focus or follow through on things. Anxiety can make you overprotective and can interfere with a child’s school life, home life, and friendships. Being depressed can rob you or your child of motivation and joy. On average, it is 11 years from the time a person first has a mental health symptom to when they are first evaluated and treated.<sup>8</sup> And research published in 2020 shows that kids up to age 25 experience the longest delay from the onset of symptoms to the time they receive treatment.<sup>9</sup> That is way too long.

- **I is for Immune System Problems and Infections.** If your immune system is out of balance, you may be more vulnerable to infections that increase the risk of brain fog, mental health problems, and memory issues. In some children, some infections—including strep, Lyme disease, COVID, and mononucleosis—have been known to trigger the onset of neuropsychiatric issues.<sup>10</sup>
  - **N is for Neurohormone Issues.** When hormones are out of whack, it negatively impacts brain function. For example, thyroid problems can zap energy, lead to fuzzy thinking, and cause trouble concentrating or paying attention. These problems can be mistaken or misdiagnosed as mental health disorders.
  - **D is for Diabetes.** The word *diabetes* is a combination of *diabetes* and *obesity*, both of which decrease the size and function of your brain. Diabetes can affect moods, memory, learning, focus, and more.
  - **S is for Sleep.** The brain needs sleep to stay healthy. In adults, sleeping less than seven hours a night has been associated with a higher risk of anxiety, depression, dementia, ADHD, and more.<sup>11</sup> Lack of sleep hits teenagers especially hard. A research study involving 27,939 high school students found that getting just one hour less of sleep on weekdays resulted in a 38 percent increase in feeling hopeless, as well as significant increases in the chances of substance abuse, seriously contemplating suicide, and attempting suicide.<sup>12</sup>
6. **Many things help the brain. Engage in regular brain-healthy habits.** The exciting news is that many things are also good for your brain and can boost its function. When you implement them into your daily life, parenting can be less tiring and more fulfilling. Incorporating them into your child's life enhances their ability to live up to their potential. Here are BRIGHT MINDS strategies you can use to minimize your (and your child's) risk factors.



- **B is for Blood Flow.** Engage in physical exercise (30 minutes a day), practice meditation and/or prayer, and eat foods such as pomegranates, citrus fruit, and walnuts (they increase blood flow).
- **R is for Rational Thinking.** You don't need to believe every stupid thought you have. Thoughts come and go and are influenced by what you see, hear, and eat; just because you have a thought doesn't mean you need to pay attention to it. Helping kids learn this at an early age can have a powerful effect on the trajectory of their lives, setting them up for greater confidence, less sensitivity to constructive criticism, and a can-do attitude in the face of obstacles. Learn to kill the ANTs by questioning your thoughts. Teach this simple method to kids of all ages: Whenever you have a thought that makes you feel bad, mad, sad, or out of control, ask yourself if it is true. See chapter 7 for more information on eliminating the ANTs.
- **I is for Inflammation.** Eat an anti-inflammatory diet, including more foods high in omega-3 fatty acids (such as salmon). Take supplements, such as fish oil and probiotics, and give them to your kids too. And floss your teeth (and teach your children to do so) every day.
- **G is for Genetics.** If you have a family history of mental health conditions, behavioral issues, or memory problems in your family, get serious about brain health as soon as possible, get screened early, and look for any signs of trouble in your children. Know your family's risk factors and work to prevent them every day. For example, Dr. Amen has obesity and heart disease in his family, but at the age of 69, he doesn't have either. He is on an obesity and heart disease prevention program every day of his life.
- **H is for Head Trauma.** Protect your (and your child's) head. Wear a helmet when biking, skiing, skateboarding, etc. Don't let kids play contact sports like tackle football, and avoid heading soccer balls. Always wear a seat belt when in a car and hold handrails when going up or down stairs. Avoid climbing ladders, and never text while walking or driving.
- **T is for Toxins.** Avoid toxic exposure. Download one of several apps available to help reduce exposure to chemicals, such as Think Dirty, and find nontoxic alternatives. Don't slather your (or your child's) body with products that contain toxins, such as

oxybenzone in sunscreen, parabens, and phthalates (fragrance) in cosmetics. Eat organic whenever possible and avoid alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes. Test for mold if you suspect its presence in your home. In addition, support the body's four organs of detoxification:

- Kidneys: Drink more water.
  - Gut: Eat more fiber, and choose organic foods.
  - Liver: Quit smoking and avoid drugs, limit alcohol, and eat brassicas (cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and brussels sprouts).
  - Skin: Exercise vigorously enough to sweat.
- **M is for Mental Health.** Adopt brain-healthy habits and eliminate your automatic negative thoughts (see Rational Thinking). Get daily physical exercise, practice stress-management techniques, and increase intake of omega-3 fatty acids.
  - **I is for Immune System Problems and Infections.** Check vitamin D levels, and if they are low, get more sun or take a supplement. Eat immune-boosting onions, mushrooms, and garlic. Get screened for common infections and be sure to treat any infections in yourself or your child early.
  - **N is for Neurohormone Issues.** Test and optimize your hormone levels as a parent and avoid hormone disruptors (found in pesticides, some food products, and some personal care products) for you and your kids.
  - **D is for Diabetes.** Eliminate or limit sugar, eat a brain-healthy diet, and don't eat more calories than needed.
  - **S is for Sleep.** Make sleep a priority in your family. Aim for 11–14 hours for toddlers, 10–13 hours for preschoolers, 9–11 hours for elementary and junior high schoolers, 8–10 hours for teenagers, and 7–8 hours for adults. Turn off tech devices 1–2 hours before bedtime.

7. **You can change your brain and change your life.** The most important and hopeful lesson we have learned from over 250,000 brain scans is that you are not stuck with the brain you have—you can make it better at any age. Before you make any decisions, one of the simplest things you can do is ask yourself, “Is this good for my brain or bad for it?” See the box below to learn how to teach this technique to young children. We all need to work hard to improve

our brain health, because with a better brain comes a better mind, better parenting, and a better life.

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## ***Getting Kids to Think About Brain Health: Chloe's Game***

Getting your children interested in brain health and learning what's good for their brain or bad for it from an early age will have a powerful and positive impact on the rest of their lives. It's actually easy to do. Dr. Amen found the simplest way to begin is to turn it into a game. He started playing this game with his daughter Chloe when she was two. He calls it Chloe's Game. You can use your own child's name.

*Is this good for my brain  
or bad for it?*



Here's how to get your kids to start asking themselves, *Is this good for my brain or bad for it?* Dr. Amen would say something like "Walnuts," and Chloe would say, "Good for my brain!" If Dr. Amen said, "Salmon," she'd say, "Yummy, very good!" But if Dr. Amen said, "Skateboarding without a helmet," she would say, "Scary bad!" You might be surprised how well young kids can distinguish what's good for them and what's bad for them.

They continued playing this game as Chloe grew, and the questions evolved as she aged. After she got her driver's license, Dr. Amen would say, "Driving without your seat belt?" and she would shoot him a disapproving look and say, "Ugh, so bad!" When she was about to head off to college, he asked, "Joining a sorority?" and she paused to think about it. She replied, "Well,

the social bonding would be great, but if there's a lot of drinking or drugs that would be terrible." What makes this game so great is you can play it anywhere—in the car, at the grocery store, at dinner—and it can be a good conversation starter.

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## THE PRACTICAL NEUROPSYCHOLOGY APPROACH

Your child needs a healthy brain to be mentally strong. Anything that interferes with brain function can also interfere with character. Damage to the brain from infection, trauma, malnutrition, or toxic exposure (such as from alcohol or other drugs) can damage your child's character. Without healthy brain function, children cannot do the things that are most human, such as make plans, control their instincts, and give and receive love. Character and morality are intertwined.

In a number of studies, poor brain function has been associated with decreased morality.<sup>13</sup> A moral person is someone who does the right thing, is fair in their actions, and avoids doing harm without necessary reasons (such as in war). People with diminished morality are those who don't care if they do the right thing, can be unfair in an interaction without it bothering them, and can hurt others for their own gain.

Who your child becomes, in large part, is shaped by brain function. A healthy brain allows them to act in consistently positive ways. Having a healthy brain allows them to learn from you, their siblings, and their teachers; it allows them to learn from the mistakes they make so they do not have to repeat them; and it allows them to notice the behaviors that make them happy and those that don't.

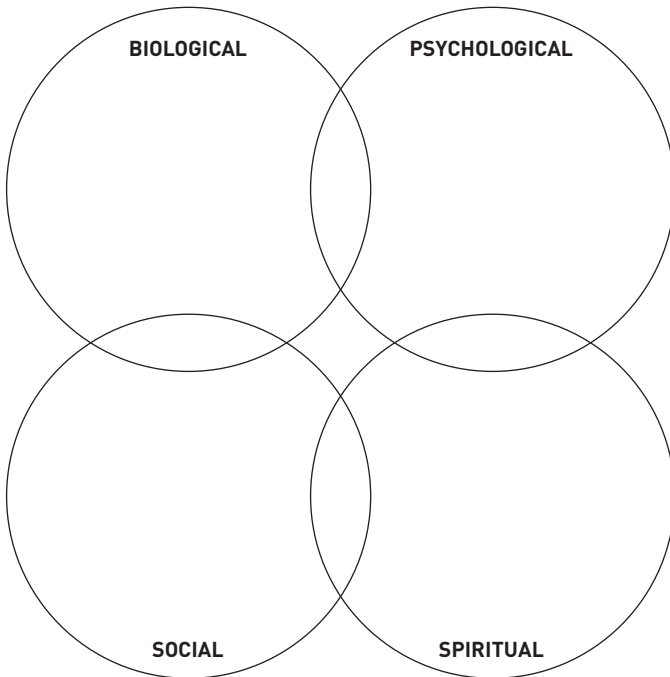
But having a healthy brain is only part of the equation in raising mentally strong, confident, resilient humans. There is also some basic parenting psychology that needs to happen in the home. Think of the brain as a high-powered computer. You can have the top model, but if all you do is download video games or stream YouTube videos, it's not functioning at its potential. You need the good hardware, but you also need high-quality software.

To raise mentally strong kids, we need a marriage of neuroscience and practical psychology. As parents, we must look after our own brain health as well as the brain development of our children in addition to using proven parenting skills. One without the other will never be enough.

## FOUR CIRCLES OF MENTAL STRENGTH

Look at how the four circles of mental strength played a role in Susan’s life as the 45-year-old mother of four children (two with ADHD) and a manager at a nonprofit. When Susan came into Dr. Amen’s office, she told him, “I’m just not feeling good. I’m tired all the time, whether I sleep in on the weekends or not! I can’t remember the simplest things, and it seems like I can’t keep my mind on anything for more than a minute before something distracts me. I am feeling very overwhelmed.”

### FOUR CIRCLES OF MENTAL STRENGTH



She sighed. “And it’s getting worse. Stuff I used to be able to do easily I now really have to struggle through.”

Susan was a classic Helicopter mom who had reached the burnout phase. Her kids—especially the two with ADHD—rarely completed their chores, got in trouble at school, and liked to push her buttons to get a rise out of her. Susan felt like she was dropping the ball, was quick to get irritated with the kids, and then felt like a failure as a mom. *What was she doing wrong?* she wondered.

Susan is like so many women who come to Amen Clinics for help. She thought she ate a healthy diet but started most days with coffee and a bagel



and had a terrible sweet tooth throughout the day. She wanted to work out but couldn't find the time. At night, she consistently drank two glasses of wine to relax. There was one major part of her body that she never gave any thought to—her brain. The irony is that Susan's brain decides what she eats and how much she sleeps. Her brain decides whether to snap at her children or to take a deep breath and try a more loving, logical approach.

Of course, none of these decisions is necessarily conscious. But Susan's brain makes them nonetheless. If Susan knew how to take care of her brain, how to give it the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual care it required, then she would be more likely to feel great and have the energy she needs to be a more effective parent.

With Susan, Dr. Amen drew four big circles on a whiteboard in his office. In the first circle, he wrote *Biological* and began with a set of questions to look at the biological factors influencing her brain. There was a family history of depression, and her diet was not great, which is a terrible thing to do to your brain. She also tended to eat on the run a lot because she was so busy—also not good for the brain.

Another big biological problem in Susan's profile was the five or fewer hours of sleep she got each night. With four children and a demanding job, it was hard to get everything done in a day. But not getting enough sleep is one of the worst things you can do for your brain (and for your children), so this was a big concern.

In the second circle, he wrote the word *Psychological*. Psychologically, Susan was thinking in undisciplined and negative ways. Her busy brain kept returning to the same worries, anxieties, and self-criticisms: *I should have done that differently. My daughter probably hates me. I'm not doing enough for my kids. What is wrong with me, anyway?* Susan was prone to a kind of perfectionism in which she magnified her flaws and minimized her good points.

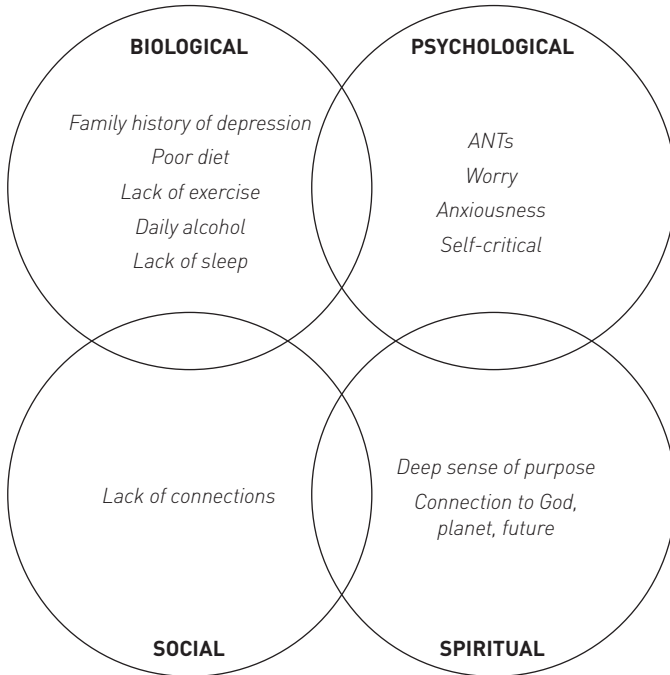
In Susan's mind, her children's normal childhood crises were clear evidence that she was not being a good enough mother. Dr. Amen refers to these automatic negative thoughts as ANTs. These psychological issues were both the result of Susan's poor brain health and a contributing factor to it.

In the third circle, Dr. Amen wrote *Social*. There, too, Susan's brain was facing a number of challenges. She felt separated from the most important people in her life, distant from her husband, and irritable with her kids. At work, she felt overwhelmed. The support she might have gotten from friends or from her community at church seemed out of reach, because Susan felt too exhausted to reach out.

In the last circle, he wrote *Spiritual*. As it happened, Susan's brain was

in good shape in this area. She had a deep sense of meaning and purpose in her life that sustained her, even in this challenging time. She felt her work mattered to others, and she knew that her presence at home was crucial for her husband and children. She had a deep sense of connection to God, the planet, and the future. Susan's brain definitely benefited from her sense of meaning and purpose.

### SUSAN'S FOUR CIRCLES



When Susan learned how to optimize the four circles of her life using the same tools and strategies you'll find in this book, she became a much more effective parent and derived far more enjoyment from her four children. Understanding how the four circles impact your own life is the first step in learning how to encourage your children to adopt a four-circle approach in their own lives. When children discover early on to optimize all of these areas, it helps them create a balanced life that promotes brain and mental strength.

Let's do a quick exercise. Think about the four circles in your own life and in your child's life and write down areas that are hurting the brain, making parenting harder, and stealing from your child's mental strength, as well as things that are boosting the brain, making parenting easier, and fortifying your child's mental wellness.

**MY FOUR CIRCLES**

**BIOLOGICAL**

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**PSYCHOLOGICAL**

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**SOCIAL**

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**SPIRITUAL**

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**MY CHILD'S FOUR CIRCLES**

**BIOLOGICAL**

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**PSYCHOLOGICAL**

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**SOCIAL**

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**SPIRITUAL**

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## A TALE OF TWO HIGH SCHOOL BASEBALL PITCHERS

To illustrate how brain health and psychology intersect, look at two high school pitchers: Keith and Troy. Keith grew up in a family where both parents were so self-absorbed they didn't pay much attention to him. As a baby, when Keith cried, his parents often took a long time to respond or just let him continue crying. This disrupted some of the most fundamental elements of a child's life: attachment and empathy.

One of the first things babies learn is cause and effect—when I cry, someone comes to hold me, coo at me, or meet my needs. It's a simple "If A, then B" equation. When this occurs on a regular basis, it creates and strengthens neural pathways involved in attachment and empathy. People who grow up without nurturing parents don't develop those neural pathways. This often leads to behavioral problems early in life. In these kids, the "terrible 2s" are beyond terrible.

As Keith grew up, one of his baseball coaches noticed he was left-handed and invited him to try pitching. Keith excelled at hurling a baseball, and all of his attention turned to baseball. His parents were thrilled and desperately hoped pitching might be Keith's ticket to success. He certainly wasn't doing well in academics. Because he lacked empathy and missed out on learning about cause and effect as a baby, he simply didn't think through the consequences of his actions, and he made some really bad decisions. His parents would come to the rescue whenever Keith got into trouble.

Somehow, Keith got a scholarship to play baseball in college. Despite his past troubles, he had everything going for him, and the future looked bright. The night before his first day at college, however, he hopped into a car with a friend and shouted, "Hey, let's steal an ATM!" With that terrible decision, Keith's scholarship and baseball career vanished into thin air.

Now look at Troy. He didn't have the same natural pitching talent that Keith did. However, his parents nurtured him as a baby and provided him with what he needed to develop the four circles of life. With this foundation, Troy was able to apply himself to his training to improve his abilities and eventually earned a college scholarship like Keith. And just like Keith, he got into a car with a buddy the night before going to college. Troy and his friend were bored and thought, "We should have some fun. What should we do?" Instead of hatching a plan like Keith's, Troy backpedaled and said, "Well, I need to leave early for college tomorrow and I don't want to be tired, so we should probably just go home and get some sleep."

A lifetime of building brain-healthy habits and making good decisions helped Troy develop the mental fortitude to do the right thing. He went on

to play baseball in college, graduated with honors, and played in the pros for a short time until he got injured. Because he had also paid attention to his studies, he shifted rather seamlessly to another career and became very successful.

## **IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO BOOST BRAIN HEALTH AND PARENTING SKILLS**

After reading about the importance of early brain development, you may be worried that you didn't instill brain-healthy habits in your children early enough. The good news is, it's never too late to start. Even if you didn't lay the best foundation, you can still turn things around. The brain imaging work at Amen Clinics proves that the brain can change, even if you've been bad to your brain or if your child has developed bad brain habits. And if you've made some parenting mistakes in the past, you can correct them with the strategies in this book.

Think back to the examples of the two drivers at the beginning of this chapter. If you stay focused on the road ahead rather than worrying about what's in the rearview mirror, you can become a better parent and raise kids who are mentally stronger.

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### ***Raising Kids with Special Needs or Disabilities***

When it comes to parenting, kids who have special needs present unique joys and challenges. If your child has a physical disability, learning disorder, developmental delay, brain/mental health challenge (more on this in chapter 13), or other issue, rest assured that you can use the strategies and techniques in this book.

We encourage you to educate yourself about your child's condition and to explore therapeutic techniques with science-backed benefits. In addition, it's important to know that getting an accurate diagnosis for your child can be the key to finding the most effective treatments. At Amen Clinics, we have found that brain imaging is an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to diagnosis for many conditions. We have seen kids who were unfocused, underachievers, sad, angry, or even aggressive, and when we scanned their brains we discovered that they had

previous head injuries, exposure to toxins, or a chronic infection like Lyme disease that was contributing to their symptoms. Knowing what's causing or exacerbating any issues can be so helpful in understanding, loving, and raising your child.

We have met with many parents of kids with special needs, and they are often filled with stress, anxiousness, sadness, grief, and a sense of guilt. This can easily lead to exhaustion or burnout. Remember that taking care of yourself is as important as caring for your child. One of the most important things you can do for yourself as a parent—and for your child regardless of their unique needs—is to adopt brain-healthy habits (see chapter 9). By supporting your (and your child's) brain and emotional well-being, you can develop a more loving relationship and improve mental strength for you both.

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## *Action Steps*

- Every day you are modeling health or illness. If you want your kids to live brain-healthy lives, model it.
- Remember to think about where your child's brain is in the development process.
- Know the seven brain principles for a healthy life and implement them into your daily life.
- Encourage your kids to take ownership of their own brain health.
- Incorporate the four circles of mental strength: biological, psychological, social, and spiritual.

For maximum effectiveness, focus on brain health in addition to using proven parenting skills coming in the next chapters.

