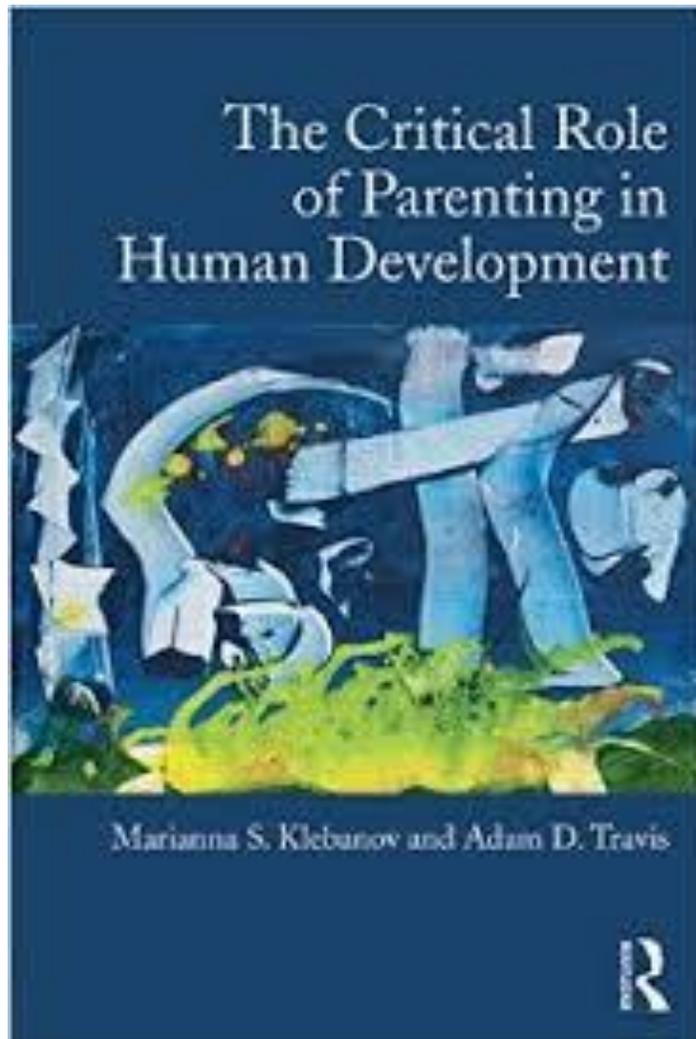


# 10 Scientific Ways Parenting Affects Your Child's Brain, Learning and Behavior

By Marianna Klebanov, J.D. and author of [The Critical Role of Human Development in Parenting](#)



**We all intuitively know that the way a child is parented has a deep and indelible impact on that child's life.**

But now, thanks to ever-more-detailed brain scans and scientific research, we're learning just how important parenting actually is.

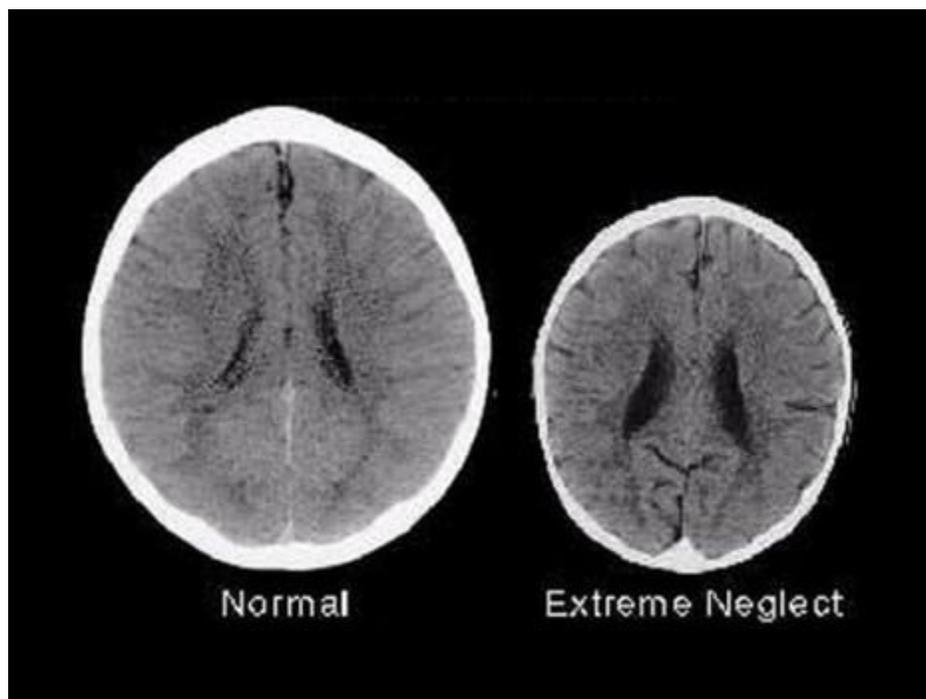
**What happens during a child's formative years directly impacts the brain's growth and development—and not always for the better.**

When a parent's behavior does not create a loving, supportive environment, a child's brain develops in altered form. Dysfunctional, irrational, and destructive behavior patterns are literally programmed into the child's brain, setting the stage for recurring issues throughout that child's life.

Among a host of scientific studies on these issues, [research](#) from the Washington University School of Medicine shows that **children of nurturing mothers have much larger, healthier brains.**

Furthermore, the hippocampi of neglected children were up to 10 percent smaller than those of children with caring, loving mothers. (See the image below from Bruce Perry, MD, PhD, for a comparison.)

Continue reading...see image below



**This is significant, because the hippocampus is the region of the brain responsible for memory, stress control, learning, and other cognitive tasks.**

But of course, it's only when we translate this scientific lingo into real-life consequences that the serious implications of this research truly come to light.

**Here are 10 ways in which parenting affects children throughout their lives:**

**1. Parenting affects intelligence and education.**

As has previously been stated, a parent's nurture (or lack thereof) affects the growth of children's brains, as well as their ability to learn.

Research has also amply demonstrated that children who receive corporal punishment (yes, this includes spanking) score lower on IQ tests and other tests of cognitive ability.

The bottom line is, a child who is subject to any level of abuse, mistreatment, or neglect will often grow up with lower intelligence levels and cognitive strength—consequences that obviously have a detrimental effect on his or her education.

Childhood trauma also impacts social and emotional intelligence, thus leading to relationship problems that additionally limit educational advancement, success, and accomplishment.

**2. Parenting affects career success, lack of focus and impaired learning ability.**

When we struggle with problems in our careers, their roots can often be traced to childhood issues. Of course, lack of education, which in itself limits an individual's career path, can be a consequence of arrested cognitive development caused by less-than-optimal parenting.

**Parental Put Downs Get Wired Into Your Child's Brain And Has Many Consequences**

Furthermore, if our parents were unsupportive, engaged in obvious or subtle put-downs, or modeled destructive relationship and communication patterns, these issues will become wired into our brain circuitry during our development.

This can lead to limits on upward mobility, problems with earning capacity, lack of respect for and from others, negative relationships, and other career-sabotaging problems as well as lack of focus and impaired learning ability.

**3. Parenting affects morality.**

Parental affection and attention matter much more than many of us realize.

Research has shown that fast responses to infants' cries, physical contact and affection, breastfeeding, and co-sleeping all help children grow up to become adults with mature moral development, including a developed sense of empathy and moral sensitivity to others.

Children's primary caregivers directly impact the child's primary and fundamental neural connections at times of prime brain plasticity.

Ironically, many people throughout history and today have applied the concept that children must be strictly corrected so that they do not grow up to be immoral individuals.

But in reality, kind, loving, and responsive parenting leads to emotional maturity and empathetic morality. Cruel, distant, and critical parenting leads to children who become cruel, distant, and critical adults.

#### **4. Parenting affects violence, crime, and war.**

When a child is parented with violence, neural connections form in an unhealthy fashion.

(Violent parenting certainly includes severe trauma, but also covers "less serious" practices like spanking and slapping.) In particular, the child's brain becomes overwhelmed with stress, leading to faulty stress response systems that contribute to irrational behaviors such as hypervigilance, violence toward others, and re-victimization.

And once again, brain scan studies demonstrate that trauma during development stunts the growth of the child's brain in various ways, which can lead to violent behavior due to limited cognitive abilities and difficulty controlling aggression in a healthy manner.

Parents who are violent toward their children often rationalize the behavior based on the concept of retribution.

That is, if a child behaves badly, he or she "deserves" a painful punishment. When the majority of a society's children are parented with violence—which is certainly the case in the United States—that society's prevailing belief becomes that escalating violence, retribution, and cruelty are somehow constructive.

It's easy to see how this belief plays out not only in individual households, but in violent crime, gang warfare, and the perpetuation of war.

#### **5. Parenting affects mental health.**

Childhood trauma caused by parental mistreatment can lead to a host of mental health dysfunctions. And in fact, many studies have shown a significant link between childhood trauma and mental illness.

Specifically, childhood trauma has been linked to PTSD, attachment disorders, dissociative behaviors, developmental delays, disordered psychological patterns, inappropriate response and interaction in social situations (including ambivalent, hypervigilant, contradictory, or excessively inhibited responses), higher levels of internalizing, and deviant behaviors in adolescence.

Childhood trauma can also lead to anxiety and depression. All of these psychological issues have tragic impacts on individual lives, and collectively, they cost our society dearly.

### 6. Parenting affects addiction.

Studies have shown that adverse childhood experiences lead to an increase in addictive behaviors. Parental substance abuse, as well as the need to dull the pain caused by one's own childhood maltreatment, may lead to substance abuse in the victimized individual. Frequently, children of substance abusers themselves replay their parents' patterns.

Whatever its cause, it's no secret that substance abuse often leads to serious lifelong problems that impact individuals and society as a whole.

These problems include health issues, emotional limitations, obsessions and compulsions, **serious financial issues, an inability to take responsibility for one's actions, destroyed relationships, anger and/or violence, a lack of productivity, an inability to responsibly manage family obligations, and more.**

### 7. Parenting affects relationships.

The relationship between a child and his or her parents serves as the foundation for all of that child's future relationships.

Infants and small children need to experience love and positive attachment behaviors from their primary caregivers in order to conduct relationships optimally throughout life.

If these things are not present, children may grow up to be too needy or attached, too critical, withdrawn, unreliable, inconsiderate, and more as they recreate the earliest relationship they experienced.

How many of us suffer because of negative relationships? We read relationship guides, we wonder why we continue to repeat the same patterns, we suffer continued discord, we suffer through the emotional pain and economic struggle of divorce, we live through continuing failed relationships or failed friendships, and we take on jobs where our coworkers and bosses treat us inappropriately.

All the time, we are unknowingly recreating patterns that developed in our brains when they were most plastic and forming their primal connections.

### **8. Parenting affects physical health.**

Childhood trauma is proven to cause numerous physical illnesses and disorders including **cancer, severe obesity, ischemic heart disease, chronic lung disease, skeletal fractures, and liver disease. It can lead to accelerated aging and inflammation, and has also been linked to chemical sensitivities and allergies, autoimmune diseases, and osteoarthritis.**

Unfortunately, these links are not general public knowledge. But they are so impressive that when they are more widely disseminated, they have the potential to make a significant positive social impact.

As a practical matter, the reduction of child abuse and neglect in various forms will lead to a decrease in physical illness and to a generally healthier society and culture. And in terms of policy, increased funding for effective parental education and therapeutic programs would lead to enormous reductions in healthcare costs, as well as a generally less ill, more energetic, more productive society.

### **9. Parenting affects personal economics and the economy as a whole.**

Children whose parents are strict about money and anxious about not having enough (whether because of actual circumstances or due to fear-driven thriftiness) grow up in an environment of limitation and stress, which may impact the child's status with peers, ability to concentrate on studies, and feelings of anxiety.

Believe it or not, the negative impact of a parent's financial concerns can begin even before birth. For example, if a pregnant mother is concerned about the cost of raising the child she is carrying, this concern will reflect itself in the stress hormones and chemicals that are released into the body she shares with the child.

On the other hand, children who live with financial plenty grow up in an environment with less fear, less stress, and a stronger social support network.

This is one reason why wealthier parents tend to raise wealthier children, and those raised in poverty frequently remain in a state of financial limitation. And obviously, personal economics impact our society's overall economic health.

Where many in the population are financially limited, consumer spending is limited, leading to businesses that also suffer financial hardship.

### **10. Parenting affects prison costs, defense costs, and healthcare costs.**

While these consequences of negative parenting have been touched on already, their impact on spending (both public and private) is so significant that they deserve to be mentioned on their own.

### **Violence stemming from childhood trauma leads to increased rates of incarceration, and thus rising rates of prison spending.**

Our overarching cultural belief in the effectiveness of retribution causes us to act on the premise that war is necessary to correct other nations' wrongful behavior, leading to a staggering defense budget.

**And research has linked child abuse with measurably higher healthcare costs in individuals.** Just take a moment to imagine how different our country and our world might be if even a relatively small percentage of those dollars were free to be spent on other needs and initiatives.

Ultimately, very few elements of our lives escape the impact of parenting, even though we may not consciously connect our difficulties, dysfunctions, and issues with our upbringing.

My intention in sharing this information is not to shame or needlessly frighten parents, but to educate them in order to spark positive change.

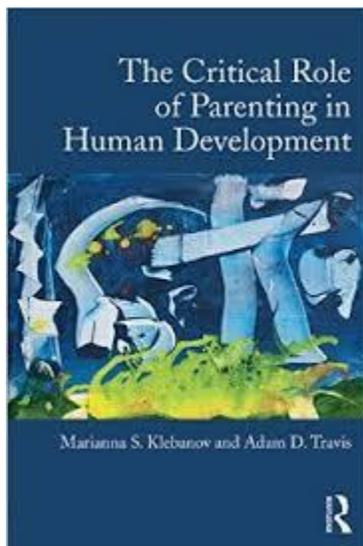
**The majority of parents *do* want the best for their children, and are themselves victims of negative parenting and erroneous cultural beliefs.**

As science and technology continue to reveal more about the effects of parenting on children's brains, as well as on their overall growth and development, I hope we will begin to see meaningful change in the education provided to parents, in our nation's policies and laws pertaining to the rights of children, and in increased funding in the area of mental health treatment.

## About Marianna Klebanov:

Marianna S. Klebanov, JD, is the coauthor of *The Critical Role of Parenting in Human Development*. She works as an attorney with a specialty in matters relating to child welfare and family violence.

[Click on book for more information](#)



She writes a column for [Examiner.com](http://Examiner.com) on issues relating to parenting, child abuse prevention, and brain development. In addition, she serves on the Board of Directors and on the Executive Committee of Family and Children Services, a large nonprofit organization focusing on mental health services.

Klebanov chairs the organization's Program Committee, overseeing the board's relationship with the organization's mental health and counseling programs. She is the legislative liaison to the Board of Supervisors for the Juvenile Justice Commission and serves on the Child Abuse Prevention Council. Klebanov graduated with honors from Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in linguistics and earned her JD from the University of California at Hastings, where she served as a journal editor.

To learn more, please visit [www.anewconversationonparenting.com](http://www.anewconversationonparenting.com).

## About the Book:

The Critical Role  
of Parenting in  
Human Development



Marianna S. Klebanov and Adam D. Travis

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