

Autism Discussion Page

Defensive Brain versus Receptive Brain

When the world is chaotic, confusing and intensively bombarding the brain become anxious and insecure. It feels unsafe and is hyper-vigilant for the next unexpected insult. This is why anxiety is so prevalent in autism. Unexpected changes, unpredictable reactions and sensory overload all present ongoing anxiety. Like any of us, when placed in situations that are chaotic, confusing and overwhelming we become anxious, frighten and extremely reactive. The difference between neuro-typical people and those on the spectrum is that for the NT person such overwhelming situations are infrequent and they recover quickly after the threat subsides. Our "fight or flight" response recovers quickly once the threat is over.

For many on the spectrum, since the world is always unpredictable and overwhelming they experience very frequent threatening situations and their brains often take much longer to rebound. This persistent state of anxiety and apprehension creates a brain that is defensive and reactive, always on guard for the next potential assault. Never understanding when the next sensory threat, social misunderstanding, miscued response, negative reaction from another or unexpected snag will occur, the brain is on high alert and hyper-focused for any potential threat. This puts the brain in an escape/avoidance mode. An apprehensive defensive mode, which anxiety generates. Just like all of us when anxious and defensive, the brain will impulsively over-react to minor threats and snags which often create strong emotional reactions. Over the years of facing numerous threatening assaults, the brain become habitually in a defensive mode.

The defensive brain is spending so much energy trying to protect itself that it often has little left for learning. When we don't feel safe, accepted and competent, we have one eye widely open for any possible threat and one foot turned away to quickly escape if needed. Safety is the brain's first priority. It will take precedence over learning. We have to feel safe and secure in order to be receptive to learning. When defensive the person is always tip toeing into new situations, very apprehensive to threats and ready to run or fight to escape the uncertainty. For some children this anxiety is often expressed as extreme opposition and defiance in an attempt to control everything around them to feel safe, or withdraw into shutdown and passive avoidance and learned helplessness.

This severe defensiveness and anxiety is the reason why this page and books focus on providing supports to help the children feel "safe, accepted and competent." The strategies are tailored to help identify, respect and support the child's comfort zones, build in accommodations and strategies for reducing the sensory, cognitive, social and emotional overload, make the world more understandable and predictable and teach effective skills for tackling future challenges. By identifying the child's profiles (strengths and vulnerabilities in each area – social, sensory, cognitive, social and emotional) and tailoring the environmental demands to these comfort zones, the children can start to feel safe and accepted enough to lower their anxiety and become receptive to learning.

Only then can they begin to trust the world and people around them, feel safe enough to risk and stretch their comfort zones and begin to develop the competence and confidence to tackle new challenges. The brain must feel safe to exit the defensive mode and become responsive to new learning. When the child is not doing well assume the child may feel unsafe, insecure, overwhelmed and inadequate. More than likely we are placing the child in a situation where the expectations are greater than his perceived abilities for dealing with them. Back up, temporarily lower the demands, offer greater assistance and provide greater support. By doing so the child experiences greater success, feels more confident tackling challenges and learns to trust following our lead. Even then, expect for some children (especially those with pathological demand avoidance) this will take a long time to break through the rigid defensiveness and develop trust in following your lead. Patience, understanding and acceptance while allowing the child to pace and control the new learning will eventually get you there. The brain gradually becomes less defensive and more receptive.

The Fragile World on the Spectrum documented attached below helps summarize some of the main areas of vulnerabilities and some common supports for helping. The blue book, "Autism Discussion Page on the Core Challenges of Autism" goes into these areas with step by step strategies for helping.

- <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1DaJtXzRn91YjM3NTBkZWQtMzFjYS00MmUzLTlkZTEtMjA4NWU1Yjc4OWNh/view?usp=sharing>
- http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_2?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Bill+Nason

