

My child's brain in the womb

Well, let's start in the womb. For most mothers-to-be pregnancy is a joyful time relatively stress free, where they are able to prioritise their physical health through good diet and exercise. It is a time where they protect their child by giving up smoking and alcohol, and both they and the adults around them take care to protect the life growing within.

But for your child in that 9 months they may have been exposed to drugs and alcohol, possibly a poor diet and health care support. But most importantly mum-to-be is likely to have been under a great deal of stress. This may have been from her life events, such as an abusive partner or house moves. Or, most certainly it would have been as she anticipated the removal of her child at birth. There is evidence that heightened levels of stress in the last trimester can be a behavioural teratogen. This means that it impacts on the child's emotional and neurological development through the regular overexposure of the child to Cortisol, a stress hormone produced by mum. This means that for at least the last three months your child would have been exposed to a high level of stress hormone that impacted on their brain development.

Imagine a simple cup of water, and that for most babies this is normally a little full to keep baby safe, after all we all need a bit of stress in our lives.

But if the babies brain has been flooded with stress hormone (called cortisol) regularly for months in the womb, then when they are born, their natural level of cortisol is much, much higher than most babies.

This effects how their brain develops and their temperament, making them less easily soothed and cared for, often with sleep problems.

It also means that when they have to have just a little bit of stress, it feels overwhelming.

When babies are born they can pick out their mothers voice and her smell over all the other people in the room. So, let's now imagine that this baby is removed from their birth mother, who they have started to bond with pre-birth.

Imagine how overwhelmed their brain will be by this event!

Now let's imagine that this child goes to foster care, their basic needs are met, no abuse, and they are well cared for. But every day a person picks them up, puts them in a car whose smell they don't recognise and takes them to a contact centre to have contact with that first attachment person, their birth mother.



Finally, at eight months, they go on another car journey, in a car they don't recognise, with people they don't know and arrive in a new house, with new adults and a whole new collection of smells and sounds.

This is your home, and in spite of all you do, all your love and care does not change that early brain trauma and neglect of the cortisol overload, the loss of their attachment figure and the chaotic, unpredictable life of contact and foster care.

And their cup of water is now full, with little room for any stress triggers, to regulate itself or to manage everyday tasks.

