

transcript

Jim Sole - Brainwave Educator/Kaiako

Kia ora koutou, hello. My name is Jim Sole and I am a Kaiako/educator for Brainwave Aotearoa. This is from a speech I gave at a White Ribbon event on behalf of Brainwave.

The story contained in the speech is a combination of the science Brainwave shares and the stories of the people I worked alongside in the family violence sector.

It is a not a happy story. It is written to challenge how we value children and the role of parenting. To shed light on why preventing and addressing the impacts of childhood abuse, neglect and trauma is arguably the greatest contribution we can make for our community.

I ask that push past the fact an old fella is talking - focus on what is being said and imagine a 17 year old young man who is looking to find his place in the world telling this story.

My mum and dad live in your street.

You will find it hard to know which house I'm in. You can't tell by my name, skin colour, my parent's religion or the suburb I live in.

My mum is pregnant with me.

Much of the time she is afraid of my father, walking on eggshells. Because of this she is releasing more cortisol – a stress related chemical into my system – it crosses the placenta and impacts on my brain development.

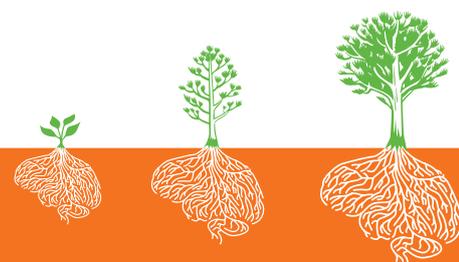
She drinks because that helps her cope. My dad knows it's bad for me and torments her about it.

Dad feels bad at times for doing this and mum feels powerless but nothing changes for me or them. At times my brain is impacted by the alcohol. It harms parts of my developing brain and its impact will show later in my story.

I am born –I seek out a face that responds with love and kindness – that will quickly respond to my distress because I have limited abilities to let others know what is worrying me or causing me pain.

My mum is depressed. My birth was hard and she is in pain. I feel the tension in her and I cry a lot. I can't settle and mum struggles to comfort me a lot of the time.

Mum's milk does not come in because she is stressed. She feels more depressed and isolated and a failure for having to bottle feed.



Dad tried to comfort me but because he received so little comfort as a child, he doesn't know how to sooth me. He does not understand the importance of warmth, availability and responsiveness. He thinks being tough with me as a baby and toddler will set me up to handle life. I wish he knew differently.

Dad does not like people coming around for some reason and makes visitors including the mid wife and Plunket nurse feel uncomfortable. Mum works harder at being happier and brighter when they are around.

My brain is growing fast. In the first year my brain has grown to about 72% of its adult weight.

I get put in front of the TV a lot and it holds my interest for a while but it's not growing my brain to connect up. Nothing beats being on the floor with mum or dad and moving about but I don't get a lot of that.

I try different techniques to get mum or dad to notice and engage with me. I smile, I point and make baby sounds, I cry. Crying works the best for getting their attention but I don't often see, hear or feel love from them in return.

Without realising it I start the process of trying to turn down my emotional needs because it leaves me hurt when they are not met.

I'm on edge a lot of the time – the same as mum. If dad is in a good mood then everything feels kind of fine. For now.

My stress response is heightened. I am growing a brain that is focussed on survival rather than learning. Like mum I start to become watchful and careful. I'm alert to changes in dad and mum. Mum is angry a lot of the time or quiet and withdrawn.

I study dad's face. I watch dad use his face with others. He uses it to get what he wants. He laughs about it with me. I'm not sure what I think, I don't like how it makes me and mum feel. On occasions dad hurts mum. I hear the yelling and the hitting sounds. Mum sobs and dad tells her it's her fault.

My brain shuts down – I freeze and stay still. I feel angry for a long time afterwards. Sometimes I want to stop dad but I'm too afraid. I hate how I feel afterwards and sometimes blame my mother for not doing what dad tells her. She knows it will make him angry but she stills does it. Mostly I'm afraid for her.

I'm afraid of him but want him to love me. I wonder what is wrong with me that he can't love me. I don't stop loving him but start not loving myself.

I find it hard to settle at Kindergarten. I worry about mum and dad. I watch the other kids – the boys especially. I practise my face when I want something or I don't want to share. Some of the other kids become scared of me.

I need to be moving and struggle at mat time.

Some of the teachers are patient with me. Their voice calms me and I feel bad about what I did. Others get cross and I find it hard not to run or hit out when they do that.

I go off to school. Some of the kids from Kindy are there and I want to play with them but they

avoid me. That upsets me and makes me angry.

I find myself watching and listening but not on what the teacher says. My brain adjusts to this elevated state – my survival brain develops further.

I find learning hard and I don't feel like I belong. I start to feel dumb. I make friends with some of the kids that are like me. I don't like the way the other kids look at me or make comments when they think I can't hear. They deserve what they get.

Don't they understand what I have to deal with at home. I have too much cortisol in my system and I feel stressed a lot of the time. I still have trouble concentrating.

I get a teacher aid. I don't like being different. Some are kind and patient with me and it's like they understand that I have a lot to deal with. I like it when I have one on one – I can relax and be calm and I can learn some things because I can use my cortex in my brain. I start to feel good about myself and I trust them. But they change and not all the teachers are like that.

A lot of the time I'm labelled 'naughty.'

A kind teacher aid asks me about a bruise on the back of my legs. I tell her only a little about what dad did.

Another woman comes and sees me. I don't know her. She looks at the bruise. I don't say how I got it. I say I fell over. I'm worried for some reason.

Several days later I get home from school. Dad is angry with both of us. He asks me if I want to live with him and mum. I tell him of course I do. He tells me that if I talk to people about us then I'll get put in a home where I can't ever see him or mum again.

He's nice to both of us, for a while.

It takes me years to realise that many social workers, police officers, teachers and medical people believe that people like me or mum will just open up to them about our fear and shame. We struggle to trust anyone. Our world is not safe and we are ashamed.

By the time I hit puberty I have worked out some important things. My home is different to other homes. I don't fit in and can't keep friends. I need to be in control. I study others and learn what works so I can get better at the use of fear and manipulation. When it suits I can either be the bully or the victim.

I'm really interested in girls. Some girls treat me nicely. They want to look after me. But I hate it if they look at other boys or talk about other boys. If they are with me then they are with me – no-one else. Not their friends, not their parents – just me.

Girls are not to be trusted because life has taught me people are not to be trusted. Dad doesn't trust mum. He calls her horrible names to do with men.

I have had years of pretending I don't need other people to make me feel good. Drinking helps take that pain away. It turns down the cortex which is the consequence thinking part of my brain and turns up the emotional part. For while it feels good.

I go to a party with my girlfriend. I drink. I laugh and I'm funny. Then I study other boy's faces. I see her ex and I have a go at him.

By now the thinking and logical part of my brain, which has already been compromised by foetal alcohol and years of elevated stress is turned right down. Consequences are of little concern.

He looks at me. I cross the room and my brain has taken me to my survival fight response.

My girlfriend intervenes and we leave the party. She calls me a psycho and yells at me.

I'm stressed and angry and can't calm myself like others can. I have always struggled to calm myself. She goes on. Her words bite. Her facial expressions, her tone of voice and her body language are triggering me like nothing else.

I know how to get control. I become my father.

I get arrested.

The next day I appear before a judge. Mum is in Court. The judge talks about the road my life is taking. I didn't know it then but there were heaps of signs through my life that indicated I would probably end up on this road. The adults in my life have had a big part to play in that.

Growing up I have no idea they are road-signs and how they will impact on my life so much, the pain I feel and the pain I'm likely to inflict on others.

I ask that you learn to recognise the road-signs and help infants and children like me. We did not choose this life.

If you are concerned about family violence, these organisations can help:

Police 111

Oranga Tamariki 0508 FAMILY or 0508 326 459

Free from any phone 24 hours a day, every day or see their website for more information

Shine helpline 0508 744 633

Free from any phone 9am to 11pm every day.

Women's Refuge 0800 REFUGE or 0800 733 843

Free from any phone, 24 hours a day, every day.

Shakti 0800 SHAKTI or 0800 742 584

Providing specialist cultural services for African, Asian and middle eastern women and their children. 24 hours a day, every day.

It's Not Ok 0800 456 450

Information line free from any phone, 9am to 11pm every day.