

## **Fighting too much? The brain is acting up again**

by Kim Dawson

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Last week in Perspectives, I introduced some principles about how the brain works. The most important is the “use it or lose it” principle. It has been known for about half a century now that to select from among the vast information at our fingertips, the brain tends to use neural connections that have been strengthened through practice and experience, as opposed to ones that have been weakened by under-use. This strong-weak dynamic raises another important principle that is the subject of today’s article: opposition. This will interest folks who have children who lie and refuse to do as they are told. As well, opposition has important implications for relationships that are in trouble. For example, when they come to counselling, folks commonly wish to “fix their kid” or “fix their spouse”.

The trouble is this. Both the child and the spouse are commonly wishing the same thing about the complainant. Unfortunately, opposition cannot be fixed. Opposition is programmed into the brain. It is hard-wired. It isn’t something that can be fixed. Fortunately, how this programming is used can be changed – otherwise, a lot of therapists would be out of work.

To explain, neurons are the building blocks of the brain’s information processing system. When seen under a microscope, neurons look much like lush fruit trees with a complex root system. The roots are the sensors called “dendrites” which absorb information from the rest of the network. If there is enough information built up in the roots, the trunk (or “axon”) begins to move it up towards the leaves and fruit. This nourishes the leaves and fruit and makes it more likely they will ripen and drop to the ground. When this happens, the neuron cell is said to have “fired”. When the cell fires, it does so in an “all-or-none” fashion. That is, it is either a “yes” or “no” signal, never both at once. This is like the old saying, “my way or the highway”. At the same time, other neurons are saying the very same thing! Thus, each neuron is oppositional, trying its best to get its own way. So, it’s no surprise that human beings (whose brains are based on this principle) often tend to behave this way.

Each neuron fires amidst traffic that resembles the overwhelming intensity of the information highway, so chances are that any single neuron will not even get a say. But, if competing “trees” don’t stop the information from being transported all the way up the trunk, then the ripened leaves and fruit fall to the ground and provide information to the roots of the next tree in the network. In this way, the strongest trees are most likely to contribute more to the network than the weaker ones. But there is a drawback to this show of strength. By insisting their way is the only “right way”, sometimes the big trees forget to give the little trees the ground they need to grow up.

Now, if we see people as sharing information much like neurons do, we might learn something that could help us in our relationships. Remember that parents are bigger and stronger “trees” than their young children. Think about it! Children are only oppositional because they are acting against instructions given to them by a bigger, stronger adult. Repeating instructions such as “no, don’t do that!” is strengthening the

child's brain to learn the language of opposition. So, the oppositional response is unintentionally strengthened and over the years can gain considerable power.

Likewise, children who have been told 'yes' all the time can wind up in basically the same situation. Sooner or later, the big person reaches a limit with the demands of the little person and says 'no'. Well, this is such a radically different piece of information that the brain doesn't know what to do with it. In this situation, emotion circuits are activated that convey the overwhelmed state of the brain, sometimes by eliciting a temper tantrum or telling parents something hateful. It is not the sapling's fault. Instead, by repeated role-modelling and repeated use, the mature tree has encouraged and nurtured the growth of the brain's natural tendency towards oppositionality.

So, if we understand the oppositionality as intrinsic to the brain's functioning, it is no surprise arguing, bullying, and fighting are strongly represented in our repertoire. And while I have heard some say that children cannot or must not threaten or fight with each other, I respond that they most certainly can and they often do. Indeed, they need practice doing so because they will need these skills as adults. To say that children cannot or must not fight is to fully deny the reality of brain functioning in the developing child. It is to deny the daily strengthening of oppositional responses by exposure to video-games, movies, and news reports. It is to deny the entirely valid and important place of many of today's parents in jobs developing video-games, making films, reporting the news, and learning to be soldiers.

Based on the knowledge we have about the oppositionality of the human brain, can we do anything about it? Can exhausted parents and teachers (with oppositional brains ourselves) improve our relationships? Well, I would ask you to consider this question. What if the instructions were to change? It could change if the information being communicated were to strengthen ways of thinking that weakened oppositional thinking.

Supported by research done in the fields of counselling and mediation, it has repeatedly been shown that this new set of instructions can lead to improved communication and more fulfilling relationships with children and spouses alike. There are a variety of versions of this new set of instructions but most of them include the following suggestions:

1. Accept that oppositionality is a natural part of life;
2. Appreciate the harm that uncontrolled opposition can unleash;
3. Minimize harm by stating clear boundaries;
4. Take turns speaking (that is, put your own stuff on hold as the other person speaks);
5. Acknowledge a desire to get along while maintaining the right to have different points of view;
6. Appreciate the importance, interest, and likeability of a different point of view;
7. Think inclusively by letting the other person know you really want to understand their feelings; and,
8. Obtain assistance to improve your active listening and perspective-taking skills.

Finally, there will always be battles, so choose them wisely. To learn to do this better, I have found Richard Carlson's book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* to be quite helpful.

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