

# ‘Infant-led practice’ and its application to working with Family Violence... across the Lifespan



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# Infants & Family Violence...

- Infants in the first year of life are at greater risk of dying from abuse than at any other time period in childhood and early adolescence (AIFS, 2010).
- The leading cause of death and hospitalisation among children are injuries. In 2007-08, 32 children aged under 15 died as the result of homicide (Picture of Australian Children 2012).
- Children under 5, and infants in particular, are most likely to be present during violent episodes but are least represented in the literature and underserved in the community generally ([Lieberman, Chu, Van Horn, & Harris, 2011](#)).
- Whilst some trauma occurs outside the family, most trauma (about 80%) begins at home ([Van der Kolk, 2005](#))

- Trauma experiences in the early years, created by, or left unattended by relational disruption, lays down an implicit, preverbal and physiological foundation which has the potential to operate throughout the individual's entire life (Zeanah, 2019).
- The infant's history of trauma is shorter and more amenable to repair than any other period in life.
- The work of early years professionals can be imperative in providing 'at risk' infants with ameliorating and reparative relational experiences which 'off-set's' the impacts of early relational distress (Bunston, 2017, Bunston & Jones, 2019)

The continuum of developmental impacts of trauma?

## Ghosts in the Nursery (1975) Fraiberg, Adelson & Shapiro

The essential idea presented in this paper speaks to the ‘ghosts’ we all have from our early childhood experiences where “intruders from the parental past may break through the magic circle in an unguarded moment, and a parent and his child may find themselves re-enacting a moment or a scene from another time with another set of characters” (p. 387). For some parents, these ‘terrifying ghosts’ need to be stoically defended against - impacting their ability to empathically engage with their babies - just as they were robbed in their own early childhood of feeling empathic engagement with their own caregiver.

# Infant & Child Led Practice considers:

- Infants & Children as equal participants
- Infants & Children are impacted and have a perspective
- Infants and Children are 'hard-wired' to connect
- Infants and Children hold hope
- Attending to Infants and Children in the present, & across the past & future

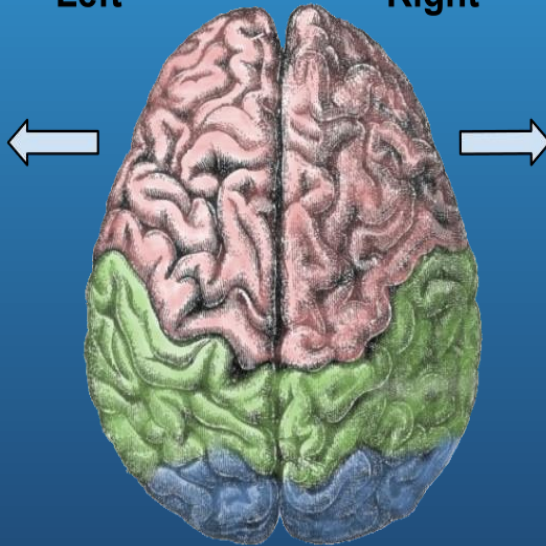
“Infant/Child led work requires a shift within the mind of the therapist (or worker) and a curiosity about just what the infant/child may be thinking, imagining, expressing and feeling. Infants and children are not objects that we do things to, or passive participants in the therapeutic process who we work on, but are willing, able and available unique subjects who are communicating volumes to their external world about how their internal world is faring” (Bunston 2008, p.335).

# Infant Led work is “Right Brain” work

## Brain Lateralization

Left

Right



- Analytical thought
- Detail Oriented Perception
- Ordered Sequencing
- Rational Thought
- Verbal
- Cautious
- Planning
- Math/Science
- Logic
- Right Field Vision
- Right Side Motor Skills

- Intuitive Thought,
- Holistic perception
- Random Sequencing
- Emotional Thought
- Non-verbal
- Adventurous
- Impulse
- Creative Writing/Art
- Imagination
- Left Field Vision
- Left Side Motor Skills



# Starting small...

*the infant, or child, can often be the most flexible, available and responsive person within the family system because they are its newest member. We can assume that the infant/child is an empty vessel, and that the adults and older members of the care giving system are there to fill that vessel to their liking. If we are sensitive to the cues and clues infants and children constantly give us about their needs, we can turn the tables on that thinking and consider the amazing lessons they can teach us, not only about them but about ourselves, (Bunston, 2016).*

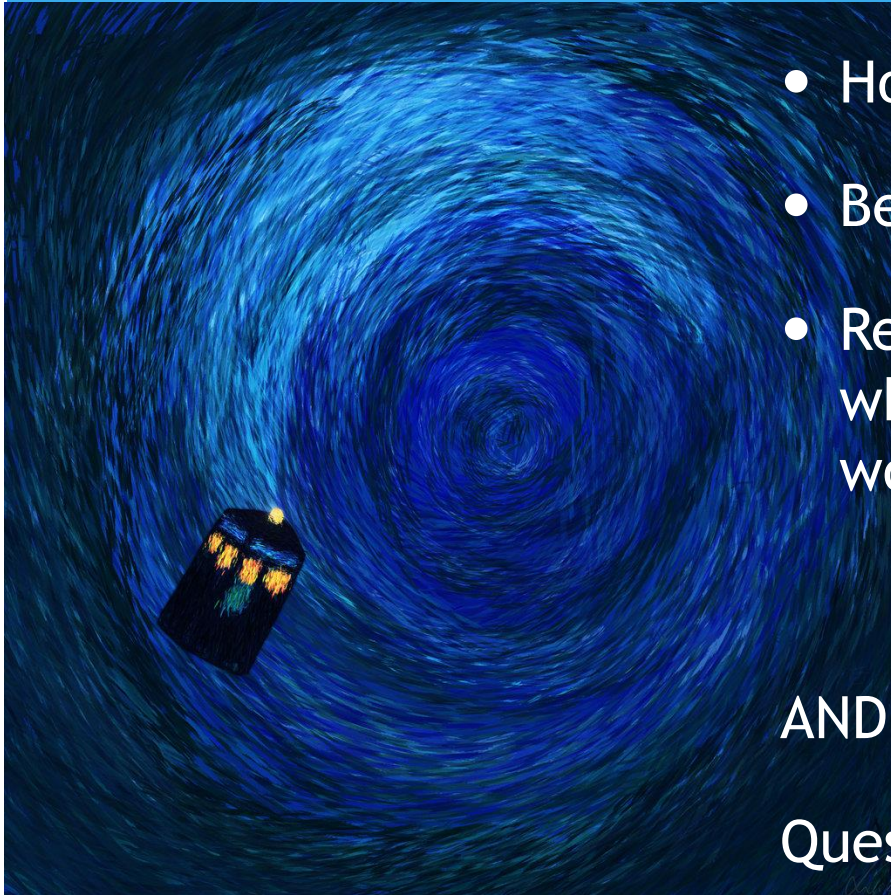


# Infant Led

- How would their baby describe them?
- How would they describe their baby?
- Be playful with baby and with parents
- Respect their culture and find out what you need from them to do your work in a culturally respectful way

AND MY FAVOURITE: The Tardis

Questions that slide through time



# Influences on adult (parent's) thinking?:

Can be (variable):

Reactive

Unprocessed Trauma

Easily Aroused

Fear / anxiety

Outcome driven

'Black & White' thinking

Operating from their own

earliest implicit memories

Preoccupied with own issues



# Reparation

The good enough worker, and match, mismatch and repair





# Hierarchy of Brain Functioning & its Relationship to 'Other'

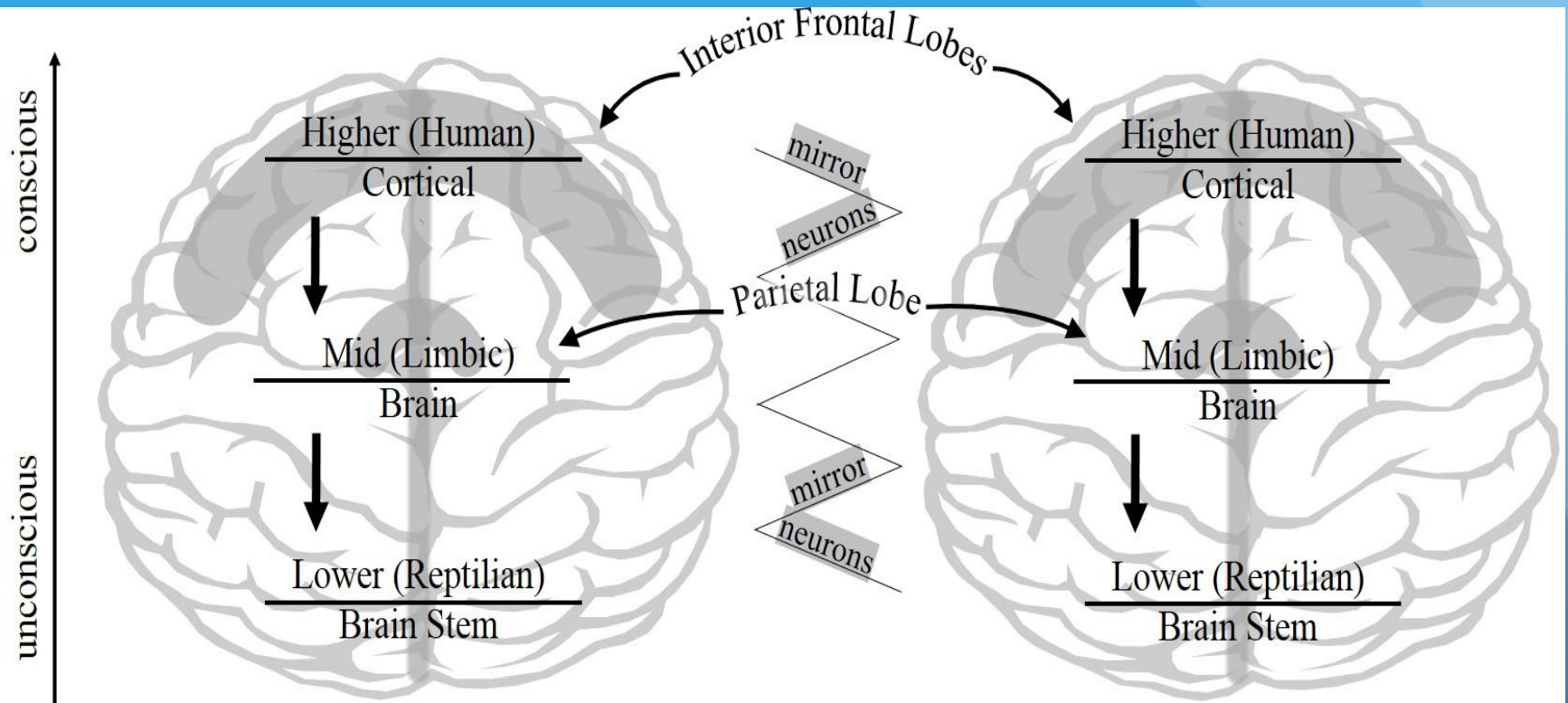


Diagram 1. Hierarchy of Brain Functioning and triggering emotional reactions in others

# When babies are at risk how do we work best with families?

- Interpersonally

- The infant as the entry point
- The infant as the bearer of hope
- Bringing the infant alive in their mind, our mind, the family's mind and the mind of others
- The engagement - the honesty - not compromising safety

- Systemically

The infant as the starting point: infant up not adult down

Advocating for the right of the infant to be an equal participant in work that effects them

Be bold, be thorough, say when you don't know but you will commit to finding out

# Ante natal

The life of the infant begins well before they are born...



# What can we do when babies have experienced relational trauma at an early age?

- What we would do with anyone else - learn about their world, talk to them, listen to what they tell us, be a safe, engaged, reliable, playful, respectful other.
- Follow their pace, wonder with them about what they feel, how they might make sense of things, who is the person who makes them feel safe, enjoyed, special and how.
- How do all these things equally apply to their mother, father, caregiver - engage with them around what their infant means to them and what they meant to their parents when they were small
- Give narrative to the experience of both, reflect, reflect, reflect

# What do workers need to look out for and consider when working with babies and infants?

- Follow their lead and wonder aloud about the meanings they are making
- Leave the theory, approaches, gimmicks at the door - discover together who the infant is
- Make known their craving for intimacy with their carer and hold in mind the possibilities of how this may delight, frighten, appal, anger, sadden, disgust, relieve them
- You bring what you gather in your mind, your curiosity and with what is evidenced in the room to open up something new in their relationship



# Infant & Child led - Working Protectively

(Bunston, Helping Babies and Children Heal  
After Family Violence, JKP, UK - 2017)

**Baseline** (of Safety)  
What ensures  
the infant or  
child's  
physical and  
emotional  
safety

**Plan** What range of  
steps can be  
taken to  
ensure these  
are met

**Negotiable** What are the  
areas which  
are  
negotiable  
and how can  
we support  
the parent's  
need for  
these without  
compromising  
the baseline

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## Helping Babies and Children Aged 0–6 to Heal After Family Violence

A Practical Guide to Infant- and Child-led Work

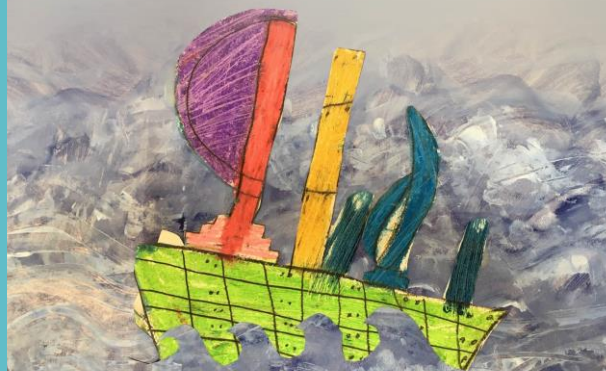


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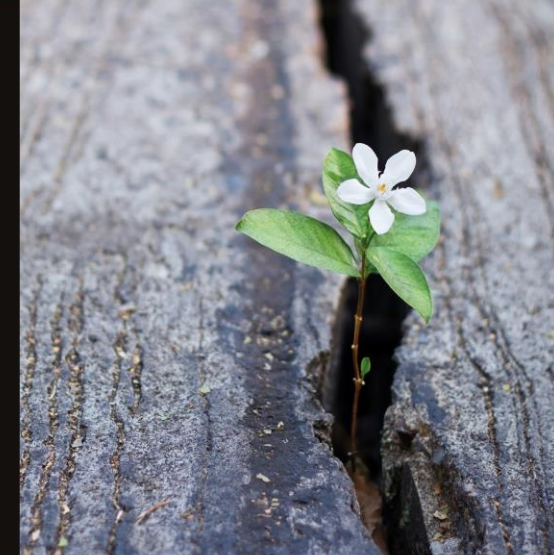
## SUPPORTING VULNERABLE BABIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

INTERVENTIONS FOR WORKING WITH  
TRAUMA, MENTAL HEALTH, ILLNESS  
AND OTHER COMPLEX CHALLENGES



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**ROUTLEDGE**  
INTERNATIONAL  
HANDBOOKS



## The Routledge International Handbook of Domestic Violence and Abuse

Edited by John Devaney, Caroline Bradbury-Jones,  
Rebecca J. Macy, Carolina Øverlien and Stephanie Holt

# Some Additional Resources:

- *Go to my podcast on Infants and Family Violence:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kl2R4ust8ck>

- *My PhD Research:*

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wendy\\_Bunston/publication/335675843\\_Professional\\_Publication\\_of\\_the\\_World\\_Association\\_for\\_Infant\\_Mental\\_Health\\_Contents/links/5d730fea4585151ee4a3dd0f/Professional-Publication-of-the-World-Association-for-Infant-Mental-Health-Contents.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wendy_Bunston/publication/335675843_Professional_Publication_of_the_World_Association_for_Infant_Mental_Health_Contents/links/5d730fea4585151ee4a3dd0f/Professional-Publication-of-the-World-Association-for-Infant-Mental-Health-Contents.pdf)

- *An Early Book:*

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- *Refuge For Babies in Crisis:*

<https://www.dvrcv.org.au/sites/thelookout.sites.go1.com.au/files/Refuge%20for%20Babies%20Manual%20FinalWEB.pdf>