

# CHAPTER 10

## Supporting Healthy Brain Chemistry

*If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse.*

— Proverbs 27:14 (NIV)

Some of the proverbs recorded in Scripture are a bit perplexing. Of course they are all inspired and full of wisdom and practical insight, but some seem a bit unusual particularly when viewed through our modern lens. Still, as we look closer we can discover many insightful principles and lessons for our kids and us.

The lesson offered in Proverbs 27:14 is one of those intriguing and perplexing insights. Certainly, it has a number of possible interpretations, but as we have learned more about the brain chemistry of at-risk children, I have become aware of one possible interpretation or explanation that also applies to them.

### *The Body Matters*

Neurotransmitters are the chemical messengers that help our bodies think, feel and move. They are involved in virtually all of our bodily functions. At the right levels, we experience optimal energy, mood, thinking and learning. However, as detailed in Chapter 10 of *The Connected Child*, when neurotransmitter levels are too high or too low, physical, emotional, behavioral and cognitive challenges can arise.

In this proverb involving the loud, overly friendly man we see a situation that can be interpreted as similar to what many of our children experience. The neighbor's day started off 'out of balance,' and that lack of balance was taken as an assault and a curse. Likewise, many of our children's bodies—in particular, their brain chemistry—are out of balance. As a result, it often seems that their days end up cursed, so to speak. In turn, our children can become overly prone to irritability, volatility, whining and so much more, all of which gives rise to behaviors and coping strategies that push us away rather than invite us to move in close and connect.

As we discussed earlier in this study guide, Scripture clearly speaks to the importance of our whole being—body, soul and spirit. Jesus often focused his teaching on the physical body and its needs.

We see this in Scripture, for example, in the Lord’s model prayer, teaching about fasting, references to water and “Living Water,” Jesus feeding hungry crowds (both spiritually and physically) and the need for nourishment of the soul through various spiritual disciplines. In addition, we see that one aspect of the body’s needs (i.e., the need for food) was one of the ways Jesus himself was tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-3). We are created as “whole beings,” and just as Jesus did not ignore the importance of the body, neither should we.

All too often, however, we do ignore the profound importance of the condition of our children’s bodies to their detriment. Because of their histories, our children are much more likely to have imbalances in their brain chemistry, which makes them more susceptible to all forms of stressors. Being aware to support their “whole being,” and especially their brain chemistry, can become an effective part of providing the practical and holistic nurture our children need. What’s more, research has found that we can actually improve brain chemistry in children from hard places through interventions designed to reduce fear, engage them in sensory rich activities, provide healthy touch and enhance connections.

## ***Empowered to Succeed***

*By Dr. Karyn Purvis*

I recently spoke with a mother about her son, Tommy. Tommy is a child from a hard place and was adopted at age two. This mother had become exceedingly frustrated because it seemed as though Tommy was determined to sabotage every family activity and outing. Even on his birthday, with friends and presents all around, Tommy managed to melt down when one little thing didn’t go exactly his way. “Why couldn’t Tommy just enjoy the good times?” this sweet mom wanted to know.

I explained to her that many of our children are simply unable to distinguish between “good” and “bad” stress. In other words, their bodies cannot differentiate whether the stress they are experiencing is a result of a joyful, happy moment or flooding over them because of fear and anxiety. This is why so many of our kids experience “meltdowns” after happy moments such as birthday parties, accomplishing something new (e.g., learning to ride a bike) or even holidays. In fact, these effects aren’t necessarily limited to the same day, but can occur days before or after an exciting event, such as the beginning of school or bringing home a straight-A report card.

Knowing this tendency, I encouraged the mother to begin to anticipate this reaction from Tommy and, more importantly, to become proactive and intentional about helping him be able to manage his stress—whether the stress was “good” or “bad.” I explained to her the need to give Tommy voice so that he could express how he was feeling and to find ways to help Tommy calm himself. In addition, we discussed the importance of making sure that Tommy did not get over-tired as well as the need to help him avoid a dip in his blood sugar level by providing him a nutritious snack at several points during the day (i.e., roughly every two hours). Most important, I encouraged her to keep in mind that Tommy’s behavior, while unacceptable, likely had to do with much more than just him willfully misbehaving.

Parents of children like Tommy need to be sure they are empowering their children to succeed by focusing on the whole child, including nutrition, hydration, sleep and other physical needs. The temptations for our kids to melt down are often very great, but we have the ability to empower them with the tools and strategies they need to overcome these temptations.

## Key Scripture Verses

The Gospel accounts record many instances in which Jesus encountered people with both physical and spiritual needs. Mark captured one such example in Mark 6 as Jesus fed the crowd of five thousand:

*The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”*

*So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.*

*By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”*

*But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”*

—Mark 6:30-37 (NIV)

## Building Upon a Strong Foundation

As we mentioned, it is important that parents focus on the holistic needs of their children in order to empower them and create a strong foundation for their future growth and success. As Christian parents we are often keenly focused on the importance of feeding our children spiritually, and rightly so, but we must remember that another key aspect of this strong foundation is meeting their unique physical needs. We must recognize that even when a child’s spirit may be willing, the body may simply be too weak. This is a reality of the human condition, and we must recognize that it is more likely to affect and inhibit children from hard places.

We see the reality that the body matters exemplified in Jesus’ earthly ministry. Time and time again, as evidenced by the passage from Mark 6, we see Jesus focused on meeting the physical needs of people even as he focused on their spiritual needs. Our focus should be no less holistic when it comes to our children. By remaining focused on our whole child—body, soul and spirit—we can best help them grow and heal.

### Questions to Consider and Discuss:

1. How much consideration have you given to the brain chemistry and physical needs of your child in terms of understanding his/her behavioral issues and what may be contributing to them?

2. Have you seen behaviors or other indications that have caused you to wonder if your child's brain chemistry is out of balance or if other physical needs are not being adequately met?

3. Based on the fact that research has determined that brain chemistry can be altered with interventions (such as the ones taught in *The Connected Child*), what connecting strategies and interventions should you consider utilizing with your child?