

Literacy is far more than knowing how to read and write. It involves critical thinking that allows us to analyze what we hear, see, feel and touch; to comprehend and create and use a variety of written and visual materials for different purposes and audiences. But how we interact literacy needs emphasis. It must be redefined and must be promoted within our communities. It has been proven that children start experiencing reading and writing during infancy and those skills are developed and enhanced by positive human interactions. "If children are not stimulated, if they're not read to, if they're not engaged, if they're not asked questions, their brains actually atrophy (Gallagher, 2011)". This stimulation is imperative for proper growth and development. We must change the techniques in which we use to initiate parental involvement and relationships with the teacher and child. We must look deeper into chasms that separate parents and educators and begin looking at foundational causes of why historically, literacy in young children has not been successful in our school system.

More literacy programs must be established, then supported with an emotional intelligence program that initiates the value of self-worth, self-control, self-confidence and love. The key to successful learning is sustainment; we need to support not only the literacy aspect of growth and development, but the whole child from the inside out.

The following two literacy programs should be considered for expansion in Milwaukee:

### 1.) Reach Out and Read

Reach Out and Read prepares the youngest children to succeed in school by training clinicians to leverage their special relationship with families, to prescribe books and encourage them to spend time reading together. The program begins at the 6-month checkup and continues through age 5, with a special emphasis on children growing up in poverty. This two-generation approach empowers parents as their child's first and most important teachers and inspires a love of books to last a lifetime. This model

is a low-cost, high-impact intervention that is proven to work.

Reach Out and Read Wisconsin is a statewide coalition of the national, evidence-based program. Fifteen independent, peer-reviewed, published research studies show that:

- Parents involved with this program are 4 times more likely to read regularly with their children.
- English learning parents are 10 times more likely to read regularly with their children.
- When entering kindergarten, children in this program score higher on vocabulary tests than their peers. These gains hold throughout the kindergarten year.

Spoken language lays the foundation for reading. By age 4, children from low-income families hear 30 million fewer words compared to their more affluent peers. Nationally, Wisconsin has the highest academic achievement disparity gap in fourth grade. **Less than half of Wisconsin children younger than age 5 are read to daily.**

### 2). Too Small to Fail

More than half of America's children are not prepared for school when they enter kindergarten. Research shows that simple, everyday interactions such as talking, reading, and singing with young children can build their vocabularies, prepare them for school, and lay the foundation for lifelong learning. Yet many parents aren't aware of the critical importance of these language-rich activities and often, finding the time to talk and engage with their young children can be a challenge.

That's why "Too Small to Fail", a joint initiative of the Clinton Foundation and The Opportunity Institute, works to provide parents with tools and resources to promote young children's early brain and language development. Too Small to Fail aims to meet parents wherever they are – from the pediatrician's office to the playground, to the laundromat. Too Small to Fail even works with partners to integrate messages into TV shows about the importance of literacy.

## Conscious Discipline

When addressing the problem of literacy in this city, we must continue to address the problem of poverty and the negative behavior and learning deficiencies that may develop from it. Among the nation's fifty largest cities, Milwaukee has the fourth-highest percentage of children living in areas with poverty rates of 30% or higher. Nearly half of Milwaukee's children are growing up in such a neighborhood. This means that traditional ways of educating children needs to be restructured. Malia Jones, an assistant scientist and social epidemiologist at UW-Madison said, "There is some good evidence that living in poverty and experiencing issues like food and housing insecurity can cause changes in the brain that can lead to behavioral issues and low performance in school, as well as chronic disease later in life." Therefore, in addition to the expansion of literacy programs, we must have a program that supports the learning and emotional needs of our children, along with the needs of parents and educators, a program that will help sustain literacy. It's time to become more conscious of the culture and behavioral patterns that are aiding and/or impeding learning in our children. We must stop pretending we can effectively teach children life skills through single-issue prescribed curriculums like character education, bully prevention, and social skills while simultaneously using stickers, shaming, coercion and loss of privileges in attempts to force compliance. This pedagogy is called Conscious Discipline.

Conscious Discipline is a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary, self-regulation program that integrates, social-emotional learning, school culture and discipline. It helps teachers, administrators and parents build a school climate based on the internal resources of safety, connection, and problem solving instead of external rewards and punishments. Its evidence-based brain research proves how our internal states dictate our behavior. If we can tap into those internal states by reversing negative behavior, building positive and long-lasting connections and empowering the teachers and parents, the problem of literacy will be less problematic.

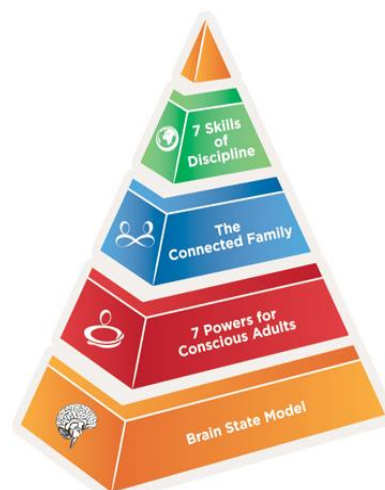


Figure 1

**Seven Skills of Discipline:** Provides adults with the seven discipline skills to effectively transform any problem into a life lesson.

**The Connected Family:** Improves all family relationships, perpetual willingness to solve problems.

**Seven Powers for Conscious Adults:** Enhances the social-emotional learning of adults, creating mindful teachers and staff who sees discipline as an opportunity to teach instead of a disruption.

**Brain State Model:** Builds schools based on safety, connection and problem-solving, with the goal of using brain research to fulfill optimal success.

The goal of Conscious Discipline is to provide systematic changes in schools by fostering the emotional intelligence of teachers first then children second. These positive, healthy climates help create optimal learning states that produce higher success rates in all academic areas.

Conscious Discipline surpasses behavioral approaches that teach specific behaviors and offers a neurodevelopmental model of the brain. It is based on and adapted from the work of Bruce Perry, Daniel Siegel, Allan Schore, Louis Cozolino, Joseph LeDoux, Paul MacLean, and Alexander Luria.

The four main focuses of Conscious Discipline are modeled in figure 1 above.

The Brain State Model becomes a framework for us to understand the internal brain. This model is most likely to produce certain behaviors in children and in conscious disciplined adults. With this awareness, we learn to consciously manage our own thoughts and emotions so we can help children learn to do the same. This is a simplified brain model as a means for increasing self-awareness so we can respond consciously to the needs of the moment.

When we feel grumpy, we tend to become easily frustrated and rude towards others. When we feel grateful, we tend to be generous and thoughtful. When we feel upset at our children, we see ourselves behaving, disciplining and speaking much like our parents did to us when they were upset. The Conscious Discipline Brain State Model helps us understand how all this happens and how we can change it.

### Executive State

The Executive State is found in the cortex or **frontal lobes** of the brain. This is where think, make rational decisions, problem solve, synthesize information, etc.

In the Executive State, we feel safe emotionally and physically. We are ready to problem-solve, and ready to learn, can be organized and make decisions; We remain calm and access our self-regulatory skills. In this state, we are eager to learn, play, and are curious about the world. The brain seeks high challenge, low stress situations as well as patterns and routines.

Once the teacher and student are at this state, they can begin to problem solve. Teachers should not attempt to solve problems or help children solve their problems **until this state has been reached.**

Figure 2

### Emotional State

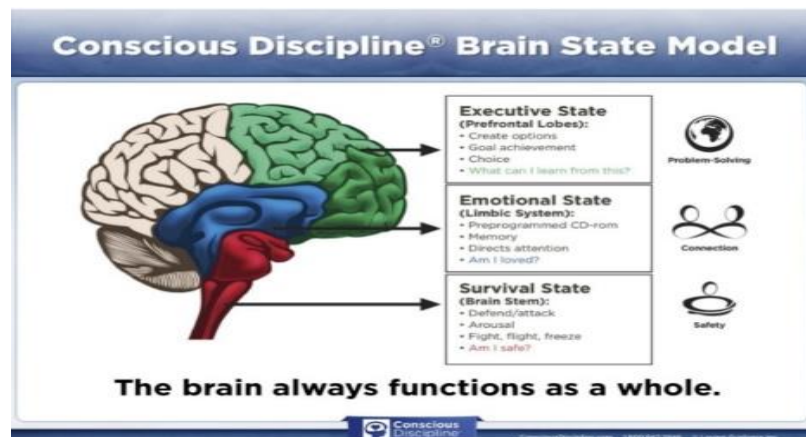
The Emotional State is housed in the **limbic system**, the middle section of the brain. This is where we question our connections and relationships and need to feel loved to function optimally.

In the Emotional State, it's as if a monkey is playing with our emotions. We don't know if we are loved, accepted, safe, fitting in, successful, etc.... This stage is like sitting on the emotional fence; with adequate self-regulatory skills, we can move ourselves back to the Executive State. Without the necessary skills, we will fall to the Survival State. We need connections with our friends, family, teachers, students, colleagues, etc... to maintain in this state and move up to the higher centers. We MUST have connections, validation, reassurance, to move out of this stage into the Executive State.

### Survival State

The Survival State is found in the **brain stem**.

In the Survival State, the fight or flight response kicks in. We don't know if we are loved, cared for, safe, successful, etc... and we either fight or retreat. Both fight and flight are very common maladaptive coping mechanisms. We cannot learn, think rationally, be organized, problem solve, etc... in this state. We reach the Survival State when our basic needs aren't met, such as lack of food or shelter, verbal or physical abuse, very stressful situations, etc... Basic needs in humans are physical (food, clothing, shelter, water, etc...) & emotional (feeling safe, loved, accepted, etc...) When kids come into your classroom without breakfast, parents fighting, unorganized, etc... they start their days in their brain stem, in this survival mode. They CANNOT be ready to learn until they feel safe and loved. This is why predictable routines, a sense of safety, love, and family in the classroom are so important! We MUST have emotional and physical safety to move out of this state.



By using tools from Conscious Discipline to develop the whole child at an early age, we will not only start to see literacy rates increase, but systematic problems decrease over time.

Research has shown that Conscious Discipline:

- ◇ Improves the quality of student-teacher interactions
- ◇ Improves the social and emotional behavior of students
- ◇ Reduces aggression in classrooms
- ◇ Increases student achievement
- ◇ Increases student academic readiness
- ◇ Decreases impulsivity and hyperactivity in difficult children
- ◇ Improves the social and emotional behavior of teachers
- ◇ Improves the organizational climate
- ◇ Enhances parent effectiveness.

Barfield & Gaskill, 2005; Hoffmann and Hutchinson and Reiss, 2005; and Rain, 2014.

## Endnotes

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/face/pdf/research-compedium/early-literacy.pdf>

<http://www.chawisconsin.org/documents/EL2RORreport.pdf>

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<http://www.reachoutandread.org/our-story/why-reach-out-and-read/>

<http://toosmall.org/>

<http://archive.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/poverty-across-wisconsin-reaches-highest-level-in-30-years-b99676529z1-370157381.html>

<http://www.chawisconsin.org>