

The Confident Mother

a collection of learnings with excerpts of interviews from the
2015 The Confident Mother online conference

by

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Section 1

Introducing the Confident Mother

Why The Confident Mother

I created a successful business performance consultancy in 2012 and specialised in working with law firm technology teams. I had been working in this niche sector for many years. I was well known, both in the UK and US, in the legal IT community. I had worked both in-house and for an outsourcing provider before I set up my own business. It made sense to work in this niche.

One of the main reasons that prompted me to finally set up my own business was that I wanted more quality time with my children. I wanted more flexible working hours, particularly as my girls were getting closer to secondary school education. Until this point, my husband had been the stay-at-home parent. However I wanted to be more involved in their schooling; to be more available to help with homework and get involved in the school.

After about two years, although I enjoyed my business, there was something missing. Something not quite right. I loved talking to new or potential clients and exploring ways in which we could work together. It's such a buzz when a new client signs on the dotted line. But it wasn't enough. I wasn't passionate about it. I joined a mastermind group to get help and support, and rekindle the love for my business.

Slowly it dawned on me: all my years of supporting mothers in the workplace, supporting mothers as an NCT volunteer, supporting mothers as a breastfeeding counsellor, and supporting mothers through my coaching work... THIS is where I need to focus ALL my time and attention.

I want women to feel powerful. I believe you gain power through confidence; through knowledge; through self-understanding. Being powerful is about being in control of your life. I specialise in helping women who are at a crossroads in their life and want support to make life-changing decisions: promotion to the board; relocation to another country; going back to work after a career break; setting up a new business; growing the business to new levels of growth and success.

I have always felt very strongly that working mums get a raw deal. Often, being away from the workplace means mums lose confidence. Even before becoming a mum, many women lack confidence compared to their male peers and do not put themselves forward for promotion; or they apply for roles which do not stretch and challenge them

I wanted to create The Confident Mother conference to share inspirational stories and practical tips from the frontline, actionable stories and tips, so that mums everywhere, and especially working mums, take confidence that good enough really is good enough; you don't need to be the perfect mother. I wanted mums to feel inspired, motivated, lifted... I want mums to raise their self-esteem and boost their confidence so that they can take control of their lives.

Did I succeed? Let the participants tell their story.

The Confident Mother online conference is now an annual fixture to brighten up the start of your year in January. Get in touch if you have been inspired by a mother in any sphere of life and think she will bring something special to other mums.

Email me at srb@sherrybevan.co.uk.

Section 2

Interviews

How to nurture your child's brain development in the early years.

Miriam McCaleb

She's a limbic creature. She's speaking German, I'm speaking Japanese. I have to meet her where she is. I have to get down on the floor.

Miriam McCaleb was part of a group that established the Brainwave Trust Aotearoa in the South Island, New Zealand in 2005. As well as having presented the Brainwave message more than a few times, she's worked as a university lecturer, an early childhood teacher and a parenting educator. These days she spends more time writing and parenting than teaching. Born in New Zealand, Miriam married an American and worked in the university system in Tennessee from 1999 to 2002. Later she moved

back to New Zealand Brainwave Trust which is when she met the founder, Robin Fancourt, a paediatrician and colleague of Dr Bruce Perry. Miriam worked in education when From Neurons to Neighbourhoods and Rethinking The Brain were published.

Miriam, thank you so much for joining me. You started in education – how did you become so closely involved with the neuroscience and brain development community?

When psychiatrist Dr Bruce Perry came crashing into public consciousness, to me it was apparent that this new science was earth shattering. I naively thought, 'This is going to change everything because we now have irrefutable cellular evidence about the value of the first few years of a human's life; irrefutable unarguable evidence that early relationships are the most important; and that it is early in our lives that we need the most support and care.'

The most important thing in the world is to wrap ourselves as a society around families and the work of parenthood, the work of motherhood. I thought it meant we would no longer spend massive amounts of money on building prisons or fighting wars; we are going to invest in children because it's unarguable. It didn't work out like that.

When we talk about development of the brain we are not just talking about someone who is going to do well at university. People hear 'development of the brain' and tend to think intelligence. That is only part of the story.

When we talk development of the brain, we are talking the whole person. When you decide what to cook for dinner, when you fall in love,

when you drive your car, that's your brain at work. Every decision that we make and every thought that we have is generated by our brains.

Development of the brain is the development of emotional intelligence, and impulse control/self-regulation. Everybody wants the best for their babies and everybody hopes to provide something better than they had, whatever that may look or feel like. No one wants to make a mess of it.

We want our babies to have as many options as they can, to grow up feeling like they can make decisions for themselves and that they can do whatever they want in the world.

We are born with a brain exquisitely responsive to experience and not fully formed at birth. If you are a full term baby, all your organs are fully organised and functioning at birth; your heart is a miniature version of an adult heart, already pumping blood. That's not the case with the brain. It weighs about a third of its eventual adult weight and has significantly fewer brain cells. More to the point, the brain cells that are there, are not synaptically connected.

When we have an experience, there is an electrical charge in the centre of the brain cell (called a neuron), which causes electrical charge activity to reach out. There is a little space in between the cells and the electrical charge leaps across the space; that's the synapse or the synaptic connection.

So if I am a baby and I cry, for example, mum picks me up and holds me close and comforts me, that's a lot of experiences wrapped into one. There's me the baby vocalising; there's the sound of mum's approach... let's call that one experience. I cried, I am comforted, I feel

better. The first time I have that experience it takes a long time and a lot of work for my brain pathway to connect. It takes a long time for this cell to talk to this cell and create the pathway between. The more times I have a particular experience, or set of experiences, there's already a pathway between those two cells, and then that current can connect more readily and more quickly. Over time, that's important.

Here's the analogy that I like to use: we're neighbours and I'm going to your house. I have to walk through a jungle to get to your house. If I had a machete, the first time I go to your house, I have to work really hard to carve out a path, slice away the vines to get to your place through the jungle.

The next time I go to your house it's a bit easier. If I go to your house a lot of times, back and forth and back and forth, over time that's going to be easy for me to get to you. When I have a new experience, I'm going to have to use the machete and go in a different direction to carve a new pathway.

There are long-chain fatty acids present in human milk. Breast milk is perfectly mixed for creating and laying down myelin. Myelin is this fatty substance that is like the white plastic coating on a power cord. It allows the electric current to travel safely and without deviation, without losing any of its charge.

When a neural pathway is fully myelinated, the information can travel 250 times faster than when it is not fully myelinated. The brain decides which pathways to myelinate based around the frequency of a particular experience. If I am picked up and I am comforted most times

when I cry, my brain myelinates a pathway that is doing huge amounts of work.

It tells me that the world is safe, I am worthy of comfort, my mother is a predictable and reliable figure in my life. This is wrapped up in that experience and the myelination of that experience. It's worth communicating my needs because someone is going to pick up on them.

If, occasionally, I cry and someone says, 'I have had it with you, I can't do any more,' that's not being myelinated the same way. All of us get a permission slip to occasionally be less than awesome. We are human beings and we are fallible. Aspiring for perfection in motherhood is unhelpful. It's a disservice.

As a baby, the more times we have an experience, the stronger the pathway becomes. When we're fully myelinated, we have very efficient pathways in the brain. This is significant because around the age of three, we prune away about 40% of the brain cells we were born with. The ones we keep, are the ones that are involved in the synapses we use most often.

When you aspire for perfection in your motherhood, you have a mental image of how things should go. Immediately you're engaged in a struggle when things don't go the way you want; now your energy is spent trying to make things how you want them to be, instead of responding to what's right in front of you. Trying to be perfect is harmful. It's hard for those of us who strive to make As and A+s. I aim for a C in my mothering, because it gives me permission to respond to

what's happening in front of me and the interactive sloppiness of real life.

We don't have perfect interactions with amazingly scripted children. We have mucky faced challenges thrown across our paths all the time. You can spend your energy rolling with it or spend your energy making it a vision of perfect.

Going back to the brain development... Bruce Perry's neurosequential model (Applying Principles of Neurodevelopment to Clinical Work with Maltreated and Traumatized Children, 2006) explains the brain by imagining a layer cake. This model helps to explain what toddlers are going through and why they have such a hard time.

The first layer of the brain that develops is the brain stem. The stem of your brain controls your autonomic systems: blood temperature, blood pressure, body temperature, heart rate, blinking, food digestion etc. These are in place when we are first born.

What a baby needs the most during those early days is calm, safety, consistency and predictability. This is the more primitive region of our brain, the bit that we have in common with reptiles. It is housed at the base of your brain at the top of your spine. It controls our freeze or flight response. When we are in danger, this is where we downshift to.

When we are first born, our brain stem is in charge. We don't want to myelinate lots of pathways around activation of fight or flight. Contrary to what some people might think, this is powerful. The younger the baby, the more imprint the early experiences have because of the myelination process.

Babies get what they need through loving arms, warm chest, predictable adults, as few adults as possible so that they can form attachments one at a time.

The next layer is the **midbrain**. This is predominantly the home of the motor regions. You know when babies are getting into this stage. It used to be that in your arms is the best place in the world. Babies hit that point when they're really interested in moving and particularly moving away. They are harder to hold and they may be not so engaged at the breast, they're looking around.

That's a good cue that the baby is wiring up the midbrain, when they become really interested and motivated by movement. The best thing we can do is to support children in moving as much as possible. Allow them to explore the full, free range of natural movement. Pay attention to how often your baby is able to kick and stretch on the floor, how often your baby is held. When babies are held, we tend to move with them but if babies spend lots of time in walker trainers, high chairs, strollers, they can't get in or out by themselves.

Remember good enough is good enough. If you have a baby in a bouncy seat so you can get dinner on the table for the rest of the family, no problem.

It gets exciting after that. We've learned to hold up our baby head and we've rocked on hands and feet. We've rolled over, we've crawled, we've pulled up to stand, and we've started walking. We are, by definition, a toddler. That's when the 'terrible twos' malarkey starts. This is the development of our **limbic system**, our emotional brain (sometimes called the mammalian brain).

Our limbic system is the home of our emotions. It's important to recognise that with toddlers, they learn to feel stuff long before they learn how to control what it is that they're feeling.

The last layer that comes online is our **cortex**. This is the big juicy bit of our brain. Our cortex teaches us to use computers, write code, have higher analytical thought, and create art. Arguably the most important function of our cortex is that it regulates our limbic system.

If I'm angry and I want to punch somebody, my cortex jumps in: 'You know what, that's not going to be terribly helpful, there are some negative implications here, let's think it through, you've got options.' The cortex does that analytical thinking.

Toddlers are developing their limbic system; you cannot rush them into this rational way of thinking. They are not there yet.

The best way to parent a toddler deep in their limbic system is to meet them where they are. I'll give you an example. When my oldest daughter was a toddler we made juice pops. I was a more diligent mother with limiting sugar with my first child. I'm sure everybody recognises that.

I made up juice pops: fruit juice and water, and you freeze it. They come with different coloured sticks. She was going through that pink phase. 'Can I please have the pink one?' 'I'm sorry honey, there's not a pink one. I've got blue, green, yellow, which would you like?' 'I want the pink one.' 'I'm sorry honey, I don't have the pink. I've got blue, green, or yellow.' She is upset and collapses on the floor in a fit of distress.

Babies and young children are capable of feeling deep emotion but they're not capable yet of understanding, 'This emotion will pass.' Adults have the accumulated experience to have an expectation, 'I feel lousy but I'm confident I'm going to feel better later.' Toddlers don't have that. They have 'right here, right now'.

They are our teachers of how to be present and mindful. They are masters of it. Adults want to rush in with logic, 'But honey the pink one is exactly the same as the yellow one, the green and the blue, it's the same juice.' That's a logical message, a message of the cortex and she's a limbic creature. She's speaking German, I'm speaking Japanese. I have to meet her where she is. I have to get down on the floor and say, 'I see. It looks like you are disappointed. It's hard when you can't have what you want, isn't it?' I don't have to share what she is feeling. Secretly, I might be thinking, 'For goodness sake, it's just a juice pop,' but I don't express that. That would be cruel and belittle her emotional experience.

Being willing to feel stuff alongside our kids makes a lot of us uncomfortable. Many of us weren't parented that way ourselves. We live in a culture obsessed with feeling good and suppressing the negative feelings. I don't believe there are 'negative' feelings; there are emotions. This is this emotion. I feel you and I label you. I accept what it feels like to be sad or angry or disappointed. I breathe with you and I let you pass and then you'll pass.

Children need practice with that and they need a wise guide to walk alongside them. Sometimes our kids drive us nuts and it's hard to do. I hope that I've given my child time in the first instance to sit alongside her, and say, 'I can see that you're sad and that's ok. It's ok

to be disappointed when things don't go our way, because that's a normal, natural, human reaction.'

Excitement is another emotion that I notice parents downplay. Children's excitement can be unsettling, in the same way as their anger.

We don't know what jealousy is when we're 18 months old, or that frustration is different to anger.

What if we don't get it right in those first couple of years, have we ruined our children for life?

Change is always possible. It's like building a house. You can go back into a house and do remedial foundation work. It is possible to create change but it takes time, patience, wisdom and skill on the part of the adults. I lean here on the work of Bruce Perry. He works with children who have had a difficult start to their lives.

His first book was *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*. He reminds us that we need to meet children where they are in terms of this process and start there. If that means I'm meeting somebody who needs support and development of brain stem, midbrain, or reptilian brain, I need to go back to there.

Something I found liberating came from the work of Dr Daniel Siegel who is a brain scientist. He coined the term 'rupture and repair'. He talks about the damaging effects of stress hormones on the developing brain; he shares how those damaging effects are largely mitigated by comfort and care.

The time that you lose it – for example, if I thought you were asleep and I left you have to a nap while I put the groceries away. If unbeknownst to me you've woken up and you're a blithering wreck, and you're crying. Oh no, that brain lady told me that too much stress in the developing brain is corrosive and damaging. I've ruined my kid forever and I'm feeling really guilty. I rush to pick you up and you won't calm down, then I get so irate that I scream at you: 'Just stop crying, I didn't mean to!' Then I'm feeling even worse about myself as a mother...

Daniel Siegel tells us that unpleasantness is rupture. We can repair that by going to our hild with an open, soft heart and saying, 'Honey, I am sorry. Now I'm just going to hold you while you cry. I don't have to fix it. I don't have to change it. I'm going to be a warm safe place for you to let that out.'

Our babies will regulate themselves according to what we're doing. Our heart rate influences their heart rate; our breathing pattern influences their breathing pattern. If we're stressed and tense, we can't provide comfort. Rule number one, always comfort thyself. I pretend to empty the compost, whether I'm emptying the compost or not, so I can get outside and do ten big deep breaths by myself before I come in and tackle whatever is happening in the house.

Rupture and repair; take real comfort that after any episode that you felt ended badly, if you follow up with, 'I'm sorry, can I give you a cuddle,' you've repaired what has gone wrong before. What is clear from the research is that there are risk factors and resilience factors in the life of children. The resilience factors take you forward, for example

secure relationships with parents, living in one place, not too many changes, breastfeeding etc.

There are certain things that are not so helpful: such as smoking during pregnancy, family violence or lots of partners coming through mum's life. On their own, those things are not terrible. If mum is breastfeeding, she wears you in a sling and she has a bunch of boyfriends, you're ahead of the game.

Accept that there are risk factors and there are resilience factors and do your best.

Families need to take heart that everyone's landscape looks different. We've experienced real trauma and grief in the loss of our city [Christchurch earthquake], and I lost my mum while my youngest was a tiny baby; I was something of a basket case for a few months. Risk factor. I was breastfeeding, resilience factor. We all have our own stories. No-one gets a fairytale; our kids don't get fairytales. We are preparing them for life in an imperfect world.

What I've noticed lately, is the invisibility of motherhood. Not just the raising babies, but the keeper of the castle, the laundry, cooking the meals, cleaning the toilets, the vast majority of motherhood is invisible. As a mum, I've been feeling the invisibility of that. What I'm working to do in my world, and what I ask of all mums is to notice each other. Notice the work that only we are going to recognise.

Naomi Stadlen recently published *How Mothers Love*. It's one of those examples of the millions of ways that we demonstrate our love every day. Invisible. It's lovely when we notice those things for each other. The only people who are going to notice and comment are other

mums. I'm working hard to do that in my own life, to notice my friends and other mums and the work that they do. It will give you strength in those moments when you feel, 'I'm just beating my head.' No, you're not. Someone's noticing. We notice.

In the next interview with Dorothy Marlen, Dorothy explores further how we continue to build the attachment with our young children through respectful bodily care.

Key learning points

1. What a baby needs the most during those early days is calm, safety, consistency and predictability.
2. Toddlers feel deep emotion but they are not yet capable of rationalisation.
3. There are risk factors and there are resilience factors.
4. Good enough is good enough.
5. Note the invisibility of motherhood and notice what we as mums do.

Additional resources

Brainwave Trust, a not-for-profit organisation whose aim is to spread awareness and educate the New Zealand community about the latest scientific research about early brain development:

<http://www.brainwave.org.nz/>

Learn more about Miriam's work at: www.baby.geek.nz.

THE CONFIDENT MOTHER

Available to pre-order online at

<http://theconfidentmother.co.uk/the-book/>