

# Neuroscience 'used and abused'

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Influential policy-informing 'evidence' that children's brains are irreversibly 'sculpted' by parental care is based on questionable evidence.

The researchers warn that the success that advocates of 'brain-based' parenting have had in influencing [government policy](#) could undermine parent-child relationships.

The study identified that although there is a lack of scientific foundation to many of the claims of 'brain-based' parenting, the idea that years 0-3 are neurologically critical is now repeated in [policy](#) documents and has been integrated into [professional training](#) for early-years workers.

Dr Jan Macvarish, a Research Fellow at Kent's Centre for Parenting Culture Studies, analysed the policy literature for the study.

She said: 'What we found was that although the claims purporting to be based on neuroscience are very questionable, they are continually repeated in policy documents and are now integrated into the professional training of health visitors and other early years workers. "Brain claims" entered a policy environment which was already convinced that parents are to blame for numerous social problems, from poverty to mental illness.

'The idea that these entrenched problems will be solved by parents being more attentive to their children's brains is risible. Although aimed at strengthening the parent-child relationships, these kinds of policies risk undermining parents' self-confidence by suggesting that "science" rather

than the parent knows best.'

The study highlights that mothers, in particular, are told that if they are stressed while pregnant or suffer postnatal depression, they will harm their baby's brain.

'This dubious information is highly unlikely to alleviate stress or depression but rather more likely to increase parental anxiety,' said Dr Macvarish. 'Parents are also told they must cuddle, talk and sing to their babies to build better brains. But these are all things parents do, and have always done, because they love their babies.'

'Telling [parents](#) these acts of love are important because they are 'brain-building' inevitably raises the question of how much cuddling, talking and singing is enough? Such claims also put power in the hands of 'parenting experts' and ultimately risk making parenting a biologically important but emotionally joyless experience.'

**More information:** The key findings will be presented at a conference on 28 March. See: [blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingcult ... -final-programme.pdf](https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingcult...-final-programme.pdf)

Provided by University of Kent

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