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A-2

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THE POST-CRESCENT

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Brain expertise to be shared

Richard Davidson a 'not-to-be missed' speaker in Appleton education series

By **Kathy Walsh Nufer**
Post-Crescent staff writer

Richard Davidson has made a name for himself internationally by studying the brain waves of the Dalai Lama and defining links between emotions and certain diseases.

In science circles, he has drawn praise for his groundbreaking research into the physiological ef-

fects of meditation and how we can "learn" to be happy.

Now this renowned "brain investigator" with the University of Wisconsin's Waisman Center in Madison has something important to say about early brain development that parents, grandparents, child care workers and teachers should

know.

"Ultimately, emotional and social skills are more important than cognitive skills in predicting a positive outcome for children," he said last week in a phone interview.

Davidson will discuss some of the research that proves that statement when he kicks off the "Brain to Five" speaker se-

ries at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Appleton North High School. Admission is free.

"Dr. Davidson is a not-to-be-missed speaker," said Tim Riley, president of the Appleton Education Foundation, which is sponsoring the series as part of its 10th anniversary celebration.

"He has isolated images using the latest technology to show how the human brain works, and he will talk about that research

See **EXPERT**, A-10

The Richard Davidson file



Davidson

Age: 56

Occupation: University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of psychology and psychiatry and director of the Waisman Laboratory for Brain Imaging and Behavior and the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience

Education: Doctorate in psychology from Harvard University

Something you should know: In 2006, Time Magazine named Davidson one of the 100 most influential people in the world. Madison Magazine named him Person of the Year in 2007.

Inside

■ A look at the "Brain to Five" speaker series / **A-10**

EXPERT: Studies connect social growth

From A-2

and how it can affect how we parent and how we teach.”

Early brain development

Davidson is impressed the foundation is putting so much focus on the link between early development and kindergarten readiness by bringing in him and other Waisman brain researchers to speak over the next three months.

“I think it’s wonderful, it’s exciting and a very well-placed emphasis. The early years in development are a propitious time for development of the mind, a time of tremendous growth, and like it or not, education changes kids’ brains. We want to do our best to change brains for a happy and healthy life,” he said.

Davidson has devoted his career to exploring the mind and said how the brain grows in the early years of life has always been a key part of his research.

“It is based on the conviction this an incredibly important time for shaping of brain circuits that provide the foundation for subsequent learning and social interactions.”

Davidson, who will discuss how a baby’s brain develops, said the key word is “neuroplasticity.”

“We know from modern neuroscience research the brain is particularly plastic and capable of being changed in response to experience and training,” he said.

Cutting-edge research

Davidson has studied children with normal brain functions and those at risk for depression and anxiety, describing Waisman as a world class facility in which to do so.

“The primary major tools we use are noninvasive imaging methods, such as MRI, and we can study the function and structure of the brain with unprecedented detail. That provides a powerful window into our brain that was unprecedented five years ago,” he said.

Much has been learned, he said.

“We know a lot about how circuits can go awry in anxiety, depression and autism, all of

“Brain to Five” series speakers

Featuring four leading “brain investigators” from the University of Wisconsin’s Waisman Center in Madison speaking on early brain development in infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and their groundbreaking studies on brain behavior and learning.

7:30 p.m. Wednesday: Richard Davidson on “Shaping Your Child’s Brain”
7 p.m. March 5: Susan Ellis Weismer on “What Does that Gurgle Really Mean? Early Language and Your Toddler”

7 p.m. April 2: Jenny Saffran on “How Babies Learn”

7 p.m. April 23: Seth David Pollak on “Children’s Emotions and the Developing Brain”

All presentations are free and will be in the Appleton North High School Auditorium.

For more information visit: www.appletoneducationfoundation.org

which can be observed early in life. We know there are certain kinds of training that can be done in the classroom that promotes more positive behavior and affects the brain in positive ways,” he said.

“One of the strategies we are currently pursuing and beginning research on is actually looking at how certain educational practices in schools actually promote positive changes in the brain.”

For example, he said, social-emotional learning helps teach children to better manage emotions, and focus concentration. “These skills are really building blocks for successful life outcomes. ... We can actually detect that training on measures of brain function.”

Shaping the brain

Parents must pay attention to “shaping” their child’s brain, said Davidson.

“The brain is really responsible for who we are as people. One of the things we wish for children as parents is that they be happy, healthy and thrive in what they do and have positive social interactions and be good people. To maximize the likelihood those outcomes will be positive, we need to do the best job we can in cultivating a child’s brain,” he said.

Adults may not think their early interactions with children are life-altering, but they mold the functions and structure of the brain, he said. “The emotional behavior of teachers and parents toward kids literally shapes the circuits of their brains in critical and important ways.”

“We know from extensive research, certain kinds of

stressful experiences like abuse or having a parent who is depressed will have deleterious affect on a child’s brain. That has been documented and we have every reason to expect, based on our research, that positive interactions will have a beneficial effect.”

Better outcomes for children

“We think positive things can be done in school and by parents to help nurture circuits in the brain that promote happiness, making calm decisions and that will provide a foundation for successful life outcomes,” Davidson said.

He advises adults to use common sense and interact sensitively with children. Being kind and compassionate helps shape circuits that promote positive behavior.

Davidson encourages parents not to get too caught up in the cognitive skills of their children and pay equal attention to social and emotional skills.

Davidson said schools influence better outcomes by providing anti-bullying programs as well as efforts that promote good decision making and help kids delay gratification, an important predictor of future success.

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