

Children's emotions topic of talk by brain investigator

Education series focuses on early development

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

APPLETON — Societal pressure, marketers and the media make today's parents of young children "very nervous people," says brain researcher Seth David Pollak, who offers some reassuring words of advice.

"Relax and be natural," said Pollak, a professor of psychology, psychiatry and pediatrics, and director of the child emotion research lab at University of Wisconsin-Madison's Waisman Center.

"It's pretty hard to mess up. Trust your judgment and go with the flow."

Pollak, the third speaker in the Appleton Education Foundation's free "Brain to Five" series on early learning, will discuss children's emotions and the develop-

ing brain at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Appleton North High School.

In a phone interview, Pollak said he will focus on how children learn to express their feelings and recognize feelings in others by reading facial expressions or tone of voice.

"How we learn social-emotional communication so we can have satisfying relationships — we know very little about that," he said of his studies on nature vs. nurture.

"We still know very little about how human brain development is related to human behavior."

Tim Riley, AEF president, expects Pollak's presentation to mesh well with what other Waisman speakers have shared.

"Seth's research, particularly on emotional development of children, is a natural follow-up to some of the issues brought up by earlier speakers in the series," Riley said.

"We've heard about language development and how the brain reacts to learning, but what Seth Pol-

'Brain to Five' education series

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

Free presentations coming up:

Wednesday: Seth David Pollak on "Children's Emotions and the Developing Brain," 7 p.m., Appleton North High School auditorium

May 13: Richard "Richie" Davidson on "Shaping Your

lak will help us discover is how your environment and emotional experiences can have an impact on brain development."

Pollak said people have long assumed social-emotional behavior is hardwired, saying "He was just born that way."

Child's Brain," 7 p.m., Appleton East High School auditorium. Davidson was named one of world's 100 most influential people by Time Magazine in 2006.

Previous presentations:

April 2: Jenny Saffran on "How Babies Learn," 7 p.m. Appleton North High School auditorium

March 5: Susan Ellis Weismer on "What Does that Gurgle Really Mean? Early Language and Your Toddler"

On the Web: www.AppletonEducationFoundation.org

"I'd argue that is outdated," said Pollak, 41, adding his research on "experience-based plasticity" suggests the developing brain can respond to experience, putting a different twist on nature versus nurture.

"It's really parts of the brain coming together to re-

spond to what's happening in our lives. It's more nature really responding to nurture."

Pollak said the most important thing parents can do to shape normal emotional development is to treat their children with sensitivity, and that doesn't mean giving in to them or letting them run wild.

"Be aware of what your child can and can't do, be mindful of what they might be worried or scared about, what they are thinking and feeling. In doing that you also teach your child how to be sensitive to others."

Pollak will talk about what happens when parents are "grossly insensitive" and their children grow up severely neglected and physically abused, or deprived of a family environment with no primary caregiver.

The best predictor of a

child's normal emotional development is how parents treat that child, he said. "Children learn empathy and kindness from how their parents treat them."

Pollak said parents do much for their children's emotional health simply by spending time with them.

"Read to them, talk to them, play with them. You don't have to buy anything to do that, go to special classes or watch a video," he said.

They should also stop worrying that they have somehow "screwed their child up," he said.

"Unless there are major neurological problems, children develop emotional skills very quickly and competently. It's really a wonder."

Kathy Walsh Nufer: 920-993-1000, ext. 290, or knufer@postcrescent.com



Pollak