

connected
minds

FREE GUIDE FOR PARENTS

What lies beneath *addiction*

Childhood, stress and the developing brain

A summary for parents of Dr Gabor Maté's article *Addiction: Childhood Trauma, Stress and the Biology of Addiction* (2012)

Francisca Lessa Stewart

REGISTERED PSYCHOLOGIST • CONNECTED MINDS PSYCHOLOGY



Why a parenting guide *about addiction?*

Because the roots of many adult struggles begin much earlier than we think — in the way a young brain learns to cope with stress, and in the relationships that help it feel safe.

In 2012, Canadian physician Dr Gabor Maté published a review of research on the links between childhood adversity, stress and addiction. In this guide, we translate his main ideas into clear, everyday language, and add what they can mean for us as parents.

Addiction here means more than drugs or alcohol. It describes any behaviour a person keeps returning to for short-term relief, even when it causes harm in the long term.

THIS GUIDE IS NOT ABOUT BLAME

Most parents are doing their best with what they have, often while carrying their own stress or history. Understanding these links is not about fault. It's about seeing more clearly what children need, and what can protect them.



WHAT'S INSIDE

- 01 The central idea
- 02 How relationships shape brain chemistry
- 03 The four brain systems involved
- 04 Stress: the missing piece
- 05 When childhood hurts
- 06 Why relief feels so powerful
- 07 Risk is not destiny
- 08 What this means for us as parents

The central idea

Maté proposes that addiction is not simply the result of a bad choice, bad luck or bad genes. His argument is that, for many people, it begins as an attempt to **soothe pain and manage stress** — and that the capacity to manage stress is shaped, to a great extent, by early experiences.

Seen this way, addiction is less a question of “*why the substance?*” and more a question of “*why the pain?*” It invites us to look at what lies beneath the behaviour.



Not “why the addiction?” but “why the pain?”

Relationships shape brain chemistry

When a baby shares warm, attuned moments with a caregiver, their brain releases natural opioids — the body's own “feel-good” and pain-relieving chemicals. These moments strengthen the bond and help the brain's comfort and reward circuits develop.

Chronic stress works the other way. The article reviews research — much of it with animals — showing that separation, lack of nurturing contact and ongoing stress early in life can change key brain chemicals, including dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin, as well as the stress hormone cortisol.

The encouraging side of the same research: young animals who received more nurturing contact grew up with brain systems that were better at calming anxiety — even when they were raised by a more nurturing mother than the one they were born to. **Care matters, not only genes.**

According to Maté, four brain–body systems are involved in addiction. All four are fine-tuned by early relationships and environment.

1

Attachment & comfort

The brain's natural opioids, released in warm, attuned moments. They help us feel soothed, connected and relieved of pain.

2

Motivation & reward

Dopamine circuits that drive wanting, interest and the energy to go after things.

3

Self-regulation

The prefrontal cortex: pausing, thinking before acting, managing impulses.

4

Stress response

Adrenaline and cortisol: the body's alarm system, which prepares us to face a threat.

03

Stress: the missing piece

Stress is the body's response when demands feel bigger than our resources to cope. It sets off a cascade of hormones — mainly adrenaline and cortisol — that affects almost every organ, including the emotional centres of the brain.

Babies and young children **cannot regulate this system on their own**. They learn to do it gradually, by borrowing the calm of a responsive, predictable adult. This is co-regulation, and it is how self-regulation grows.

When early stress is intense or constant, the stress system can become set to react more quickly and more strongly. The person may go on to feel stressed more easily throughout life. For humans, Maté notes, the most important stressors are emotional — above all, the threatened loss of love and connection.

When childhood hurts

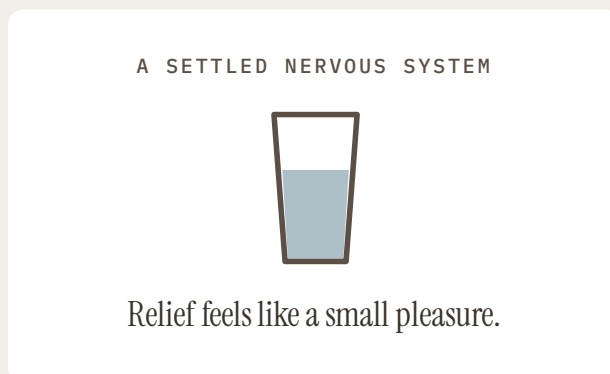
The well-known Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study looked at painful experiences in childhood — such as abuse, neglect, family violence, a parent's substance use, divorce or the death of a parent — across thousands of adults.

It found that the more of these experiences a person had lived through, the higher their risk of using substances early in life (Dube et al., 2003). Maté also describes how chronic early stress can affect the development of brain areas involved in emotion, memory and impulse control.

Why relief feels so powerful

Imagine two people drinking a glass of cool water. One is comfortable; the other is very thirsty. The water is the same, but for the thirsty person the relief is far more intense.

Psychiatrist Dr Bruce Perry used a similar image: when a nervous system lives on high alert, anything that brings quick relief — a substance, a screen, food, a behaviour — can feel much more rewarding. It isn't only pleasure; it's **relief from distress**.



Over time, stress and substances can feed each other: stress increases craving, and it is one of the most common triggers for relapse.

Risk is not destiny

Not every child who goes through adversity develops an addiction, and not every person with an addiction had a painful childhood. Maté is clear about this. These experiences **increase vulnerability**; they do not decide a child's future.

The same research that shows how stress shapes the brain also shows how much **safe relationships protect it**. Nurturing contact, stable social connection and responsive care support healthier stress systems. And the brain keeps changing throughout life.

WORTH REMEMBERING

- ☐ Many addictions begin as an attempt to soothe pain or stress.
- ☐ Children learn to regulate stress through their relationships with us.
- ☐ Adversity raises risk — safe, responsive relationships help protect.
- ☐ Behaviour is communication. Curiosity opens more doors than shame.

What this means *for us as parents*

There are no perfect parents, and none of this requires perfection. These are everyday ways of building a nervous system that feels safe.

Be a calm place to land

Before correcting, help your child settle. Co-regulation comes before correction — your calm is contagious.

Keep connection predictable

Routines, warmth and reliable presence tell a child's stress system: *you are safe here*.

Repair after hard moments

Everyone loses their temper sometimes. Coming back, naming what happened and reconnecting teaches that relationships can hold difficulty.

Look after your own stress

The article notes that the quality of care depends a lot on the parent's own mood and stress. Your wellbeing is part of your child's wellbeing.

Look beneath the behaviour

Big reactions often signal a need. Ask: *what is my child trying to manage right now?*

Keep the door open as they grow

Children and teenagers who feel heard are more likely to come to us when things get hard. Stay curious, not shaming.

If this touches your own story

Reading about childhood stress can bring up our own memories. If it does, be gentle with yourself — and consider talking to your GP or a psychologist. In Western Australia, the **Parent and Family Drug Support Line** (24/7) is available on **(08) 9442 5050** or **1800 653 203** (country), and the **Alcohol and Drug Support Line** on **(08) 9442 5000** or **1800 198 024**. Lifeline: **13 11 14**. In an emergency, call **000**.

ABOUT US

We are a Perth-based psychology practice founded by Francisca Lessa Stewart, Registered Psychologist. We help parents understand what lies beneath children's behaviour, so they can respond with confidence, connection and emotional safety — in English and Spanish.

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

Workshops for parents

Understanding What Lies Beneath Behaviour: a warm, practical space for parents of children aged 2–12 to understand big emotions, stress and connection.

[SEE UPCOMING WORKSHOPS](#)

theconnectedminds.com

ONE-TO-ONE SUPPORT

Book a session

If you'd like individual support for you or your family, you can book directly through our online portal.

[BOOK ONLINE](#)

clientportal.zandahealth.com/clientportal/connectedmindspsychology

REFERENCES

- Maté, G. (2012). Addiction: Childhood trauma, stress and the biology of addiction. *Journal of Restorative Medicine*, 1(1), 56–63. <https://doi.org/10.14200/jrm.2012.1.1005>
- Dube, S. R., Felitti, V. J., Dong, M., Chapman, D. P., Giles, W. H., & Anda, R. F. (2003). Childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction and the risk of illicit drug use: The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study. *Pediatrics*, 111(3), 564–572.
- Perry, B. D., & Pollard, R. (1998). Homeostasis, stress, trauma, and adaptation: A neurodevelopmental view of childhood trauma. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 7(1), 33–51.