

CHILDHOOD DISRUPTED

How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal

By Donna Jackson Nakazawa

304 pp. Atria Books. Reprint ed. 2016, first published in 2015.

Growing up, no matter the misfortune, I heard, "Kids bounce back." As if by reflex. But do they? In *Childhood Disrupted*, science journalist Donna Jackson Nakazawa explores how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) alter the developing brain's chemistry, leading to neuroinflammation and autoimmunity and related ailments in adulthood. According to ACE research, 64 percent of adults had experienced one of ten childhood traumas (e.g., parental addiction, absence, abuse); 40 percent, two or more (xv). For the child, unable to fight or flee, freeze becomes the default defense to chronic, unpredictable, toxic stress (CUTS). In Nakazawa's clear case studies, patients silenced by CUTS, once labeled too sensitive or subjected to gross neglect, etc., find their voice. For example, whether a mother overreacts or underreacts, the message is "Mommy can't help me" (121). Nakazawa's research and reporting are rigorous. "Allostatic load" (61), coined by the late endocrinologist Bruce S. McEwen, refers to the amount of trauma over one's lifetime and its cumulative effects. The "theory of the good wobble" (63) is based on the benefit of mild stressors, as studied by psychology professor Mark D. Seery. Almost half of the book addresses recovery through professionally guided treatments, such as somatic experiencing, and personal practices, such as forgiveness. Nakazawa concludes with fourteen parenting strategies (my favorite is the swift apology). Parenting well, versus poorly, also changes the child's brain, and is the key to helping kids bounce back. Presumptive reflex? No. Cultivated resilience. —Lisa Thaler, author of *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*, 21 January 2020