

'Criminal tendencies depend on the level of care given to a child as an

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BEHAVIOURAL patterns, including whether or not a child will grow up with criminal tendencies, were dependent of the level of care given to them as infants.

Neuroscientist Dr Barak Morgan said early childhood development was a critical period for the brain. This is a period in which a child's destination into its behavioural pattern was formed, he said.

Morgan was giving a neuroscience perspective to the behaviour of people and their contribution to the violence meted out against women and children.

He spoke at a summit hosted by the Human Science Research Council on cognitive behavioural development and the prevention of violence against women and children.

The summit formed part of the beginning of the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children, which started yesterday.

"The level of care given to an infant during the first few months of life forms the major contributors to making a difference between responsible and irresponsible adults. They either become delinquents or clear thinking adults with the ability to control stress," Morgan said.

The care-giving of those first few months teach babies to cope as they grow older.

"The structure or function of a brain matters very much; it makes you who you are," the Cape Town neuroscientist

explained. He spoke about the brain and the power it had in the developmental potential of human beings.

"Nothing – no thoughts, feelings and actions – enter or leave your mind without first going through your brain."

Morgan said a bottom-up approach was borne of a parent or caregiver failing to act appropriately in times of infant distress.

He said the caregiver would not, for instance, attend to the child when a nappy was wet, did not pick them up or comfort them when they cried or immediately attend to their pain.

"The baby adopts a 'lose your head to survive' or 'act first, think later' strategy, which has a negative impact on how they handle life later."

It is from this group that children with criminal minds are most likely to abuse women and children come from.

They are also prone to substance abuse and aggressive behaviour.

Because their bodies were not allowed to switch off from stress response mode they developed toxic stress, he said.

"The brain develops structurally and functionally into a bottom-up brain," Morgan said. The other group of babies developed what Morgan called

the top-down approach to life, because they were cared for differently and had their needs attended to at the time of emotional distress.

"Caregivers and parents regulate or 'buffer' an infant's

stress response by providing warm, sensitive care, protection and reassurance."

This allows the baby's brain to switch off from the adrenaline rush they experience when stressed, and they grow up equipped with the ability to control their stress. These babies turn out to be responsible

group of people saw the bigger picture and lived on thrive mode.

He said the bottom-up group were in danger of having a short life span because of their behaviour, and they grew up faster, discounting their future and experiencing their sexual maturity earlier.

ble people who are comfortable in the knowledge that they do not have to fight their way to success.

Morgan said the difference between the two groups of children was how one went through life seeing danger and always sticking to survival mode, while the more confi-

This led to earlier reproduction and teenage pregnancies, more children than the others and less parenting effort.

The others grew up slower and had a longer life span; they planned for their future and went through their sexual maturity later.

He said social and economic

conditions contributed negatively to the level of parental care, with poverty, insecurity of jobs and accommodation removing their ability to buffer their baby's stress.

The cycle of poverty was cited as a major contributor to the development of the bottom-up brain.

CRITICAL PERIOD: The level of care given to an infant during the first few months of life forms the major contributors to making a difference between responsible and irresponsible adults. They either become delinquents or clear thinking adults, says neuroscientist Dr Barak Morgan.

