

Parenting Equanimity

by

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Abstract

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The significant need for mental health counsellors and clinicians to find ways to improve caregiver or parent-child relationship provides the impetus for the author to develop a parenting handbook as part of an internship at Child and Youth Mental Health (CYMH) in Langley. Relationships in the family have a profound impact on child and youth development and well-being. Also important to child development and to our familial relationships is the way we communicate with our children because this directly shapes a child's emerging personality and mental health. In this handbook, the author addresses the developmental needs of children and youth, connecting care-givers and parents to concepts that explain attachment, how relationships impact brain development, mindfulness strategies, finding pathways that seek to diffuse conflict and stress using examples, quotes and reflecting questions. This handbook will also provide a helpful resource to care-givers when working to build positive relationships with their children; in that it can help them to reflect upon their choices and values, experiment with new practices that fit their lives and emphasize parenting as a relationship rather than a set of techniques.

Keywords: Parent-Child Relationships; Attachment; Child and Youth Development; Well-being

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Introduction

Relationships in the family have a profound impact on child and youth development and well-being. Also important to child development and to our familial relationships is the way we communicate with our children. Adult attachment research investigates the patterns in parent-child relationships that directly shape a child's emerging personality and sense of well-being. This research has shown that attachment patterns are directly connected to child and youth mental health (Kolhari, 2011, Siegel & Hartzell, 2004). As Siegell and Hartzell (2004) have shown, how parents make sense of their childhood experiences of how they were parented, and their behaviour towards their children are the foundations for passing on either a secure or insecure attachment style. In the absence of reflection, history often repeats itself, and parents are vulnerable to passing on to their children unhealthy patterns from the past, patterns that are strongly linked to mental health problems in children and youth (Jabes & Nelson, 2014).

Research on the prevalence of child mental health issues conducted for the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD, 2015) shows that the average overall rate for mental health disorders in children and youth in BC is 15% (Ministry of Child and Family Development, 2015). This means that in BC, approximately 140,000 children and youth experience mental disorders that cause them significant distress and impairs their functioning at home, at school, with peers, or in the community. To reduce the burden of suffering resulting from children's mental illness, Child and Youth Mental Health (CYMH) services are offered throughout BC by MCFD. CYMH Langley, where I completed my internship as a 'Child and Youth Mental Health Clinician', provides a wide range of community-based specialized mental health services and programs.

Description and Rationale of Project

CYMH Langley has been offering parenting workshops on attachment research since 2002. The team leader and my site supervisor at CYMH Langley, Ms. Carol Jones has received feedback from the participants that although parents understood the concepts that they learned about through their workshops, there remains a gap in their practical application of this knowledge because parents either forgot what they have learned in the parenting workshops or do not know how to apply the concepts they had learned. A common theme expressed by the majority of the interns as well as some clinicians working at CYMH Langley, was that although significant progress was being made with children and youth through counselling and therapy sessions, their progress was hindered by their care-givers not making positive changes. Where some young clients were concerned, there was an urgent need for the care-givers in their lives to understand the impacts of harsh parenting stances and to seek pathways that would help them to change the ways in which they were parenting their children.

To assist with the work that is being done at CYMH Langley, the Associate Team Leader Ms. Carol Jones identified the need for a parenting resource based on 'Attachment Theory' and specific concepts such as stress and conflict resolution that could help improve parent-child relationships. The focus of this project was to write a parenting handbook that would address the developmental needs of children and youth, as well as provide opportunities for parents to improve their relationships with their children and increase their well-being, thus positively impacting the mental health of children, youth and their families. This project is called 'Parenting Equanimity'.

It is hoped that this parenting handbook will provide easy-to-understand attachment based concepts, and reinforce parents to continue to use the knowledge and skills that they have acquired in the workshops that they attended. Thus, the overall objective of this project is to reinforce and support the use of helpful information that address the attachment based challenges to connection and understanding in parent-child relationships. Furthermore, the use of straightforward language that explains attachment theory using examples, quotes and reflecting questions are highlighted throughout this handbook, with the intention of making concepts more clear and accessible to parents while assisting them to reflect upon their choices and values. The ‘Parenting Equanimity’ handbook also provides a helpful resource to parents that can assist them to build and repair relationships with their children; encourage families to experiment with new practices that fit their lives and emphasize parenting as a relationship rather than a set of techniques.

Review of the Literature

Defining Attachment

In 1969, John Bowlby pioneered the work on Attachment Theory, which later on has been well covered by a range of experts on the subject, with that literature mainly focusing on parent-child development. Berry, Barrowclough & Wearden (2008) state that attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) is a lifespan developmental theory that proposes that “there is a universal need to form close affectionate bonds because human beings are social in nature: our brains are structured to be in relationship with other people in a way that shapes how the brain functions and develops.” For these reasons, attachment experiences are a central factor in shaping our development (Bowlby, 1973; Siegel & Hartzell, 2004, Berry, Barrowclough & Wearden, 2008).

Attachment behavior (caring, responsive parenting) enable children to thrive and achieve a highly flexible and adaptive capacity for balancing their emotions, thinking and empathic connection with other (Siegel & Hartzell, 2004, p. 33). Thus, attachment experiences serve as mechanisms for modulating distress in childhood as well as adulthood.

Prior and Glaser (2006) define attachment as a tie based on the need for safety, security and protection. For this reason the authors deem it incorrect to define attachment as love or affection, but instead note that this is a biological drive that impacts development. These authors who examine attachment research and evaluate the language and ideas of attachment theory through a meta- analysis of attachment research, state that infants instinctively attach to their caregivers and that “attachment serves a biological purpose of protection, survival and genetic replication” (Prior & Glaser, 2006. p.15). An important difference in the conceptualization of attachment is that there is a general acceptance that “the attachment system is continually active” (Main, 1999, p. 858, as cited in Prior & Glaser, 2006). In the absence of discomfort or alarm, the attachment system operates by monitoring the proximity and the physical and psychological accessibility of the attachment figure. This is an important concept for increasing our understanding of how the attachment system operates and what internal and external mechanisms and strategies promote physical and psychological responsiveness of the attachment figure, directly impacting children and youth’s development.

Types of Adult Attachment

Attachment styles are not confined to children but are a part of all our ways of relating throughout our lives. It is therefore important to understand attachment not only in children, but also in adults. Cooper, Shaver & Collins (1998) categorize adult attachment styles into secure, avoidant/ dismissive and anxious/ preoccupied (Ainsworth 1973; Holmes, 1943, as cited in

Cooper, Shaver & Collins, 1998) and examined individual differences in attachment styles as predictors of adjustment. For adults whose early life experiences may have included parental emotional unavailability and rejection, a dismissive stance towards attachment may be found. These parents have little sensitivity to their child's signals and their children, having been disconnected from parental intimacy and typically function with a high level of independence. It has also been found that these parents frequently insist that they do not recall their childhood experiences and that therefore, adults who experienced inconsistently available care-giving as children have a preoccupied stance toward attachment, a stance that is filled with anxiety and ambivalence (Siegel & Hartzell, 2004).

Changing Attachment Status

Fraley (2002) who studied attachment patterns through the lifespan found that representations of early attachment experiences form a system and continue to influence an individual's attachment behaviour and interpersonal dynamics across the lifespan. The early attachment transactions are imprinted into the baby's memory as relatively enduring internal working models. These working models act at levels beneath conscious awareness and encode coping strategies when stress arises. Fraley's (2012) research suggests that both early and concurrent attachment representations continually change with new events, however, even after the child has developed positive modes of representation that are consciously accessible, early states may be reactivated in the context of new interactions.

It should however be pointed out that one's attachment style is not 'carved in stone', and can be changed. For example, Kirchmann, Steyer, Mayer, Joraschky, Schreiber-Willnow, & Strauss (2012) investigated the changes in attachment characteristics of patients undergoing

group psychotherapy. In analyzing the effects of group therapy, they found a moderate increase of attachment security and attributed this to a decrease in attachment anxiety and avoidance. The authors indicate through their findings that the group therapy participants that were engaged at a higher frequency of treatment, that is attended groups more often, improved the most in their attachment security. Kirchmann et al. (2012) therefore suggest that individual attachment patterns can change and these changes are made possible either by having alternative/ corrective interpersonal experiences or by reframing one's own attachment history.

Based on an evaluation of attachment patterns, Pace, Zavattini & D'Alessio (2012) analyze the attachment patterns of 28 late adopted (four to seven year olds) and their adoptive mothers. Pace et al. (2012) found a significant change in the children's 'Internal Working Models' (IWM) and the mother child relationships within seven to eight months of their placement. The results showed a significant change in the attachment behavioural patterns for two-thirds of the children. In this study, the researchers demonstrated that there is potential for IWMs to be revised over time in relation to a new environment. Furthermore, the results indicate that a nurturing environment can revise attachment patterns in children from insecure to secure and this study further demonstrates the importance of adult attachments in making this change happen. It is with this intention that the clinicians at CYMH Langley strive to improve the contexts that surround children and youth. This parenting handbook is another means to enrich the contexts, such as parent-child relationships that encircle children, youth and their families. Additionally, beneficial to developing this handbook is to investigate the theoretical underpinnings at CYMH Langley.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The field of child and family development is becoming increasingly aware that children grow up in distinct contexts (unique combinations of personal and environmental circumstances). These different circumstances foster different cognitive capacities, social skills and feelings about the self and others (Shweder et al., 2006, as cited in Berk, 2012). Contemporary theorists regard contexts that mold development as multi layered and complex. Because of the complex network of factors contributing to human change, in this chapter I discuss three theoretical orientations that impact children, youth and families at CYMH: (1) The contextual perspective on development (2) Proximal processes of development with a common goal to describe and identify factors that influence a parent-child relationship and well-being. (3) Stress Systems.

Theories have practical value in helping to improve the lives of people as they contribute to new approaches to child and parent development that emphasize exploration, discovery and collaboration. Berk (2012) outlines the definition of a theory as an integrated set of statements that describes, explains and predicts behaviour. Theories are indispensable tools because they provide organizing frameworks for observations and they guide and give meaning to what we see (Berk, 2012). Research has attained a broad consensus that variations in genetics, everyday tasks and the people who support children and youth (care-givers) lead to individual differences in children competencies, adaptation and well-being. My role as a mental health intern at CYMH entailed initiating and supporting positive change with the children, youth and their parents. In this chapter, I generate findings that can be applied to real-life situations, thus increasing understanding on what impacts a parent-child relationship and well-being.

Bio-Ecological Systems Theory- A Contextual Perspective

Bronfenbrenner (1996) describes the bio-ecological model as the dynamic interaction between the microsystem (parents), the exosystem (neighbours, media), the macrosystem (social conditions) and the mesosystem - connections between systems or between parts of a single system that impact a child's development powerfully. The chronosystem represents the changing nature of children and their environment (Berk, 2012). The family is a child's immediate surrounding, described by Bronfenbrenner (1997) as the micro-system and is the first and longest lasting context for child development. The surrounding environment is a layered set of influences that combine to help or hinder physical and psychological well-being and powerfully affect development. (Berk, 2012). CYMH Langley, in their quest to improve mental health outcomes for children and youth therefore pay close attention to micro systems such as families and relationships within families, which this project is focused upon. Bronfenbrenner's approach to understanding families and the importance of familial relationships is helpful because it is inclusive of all the systems in which families are enmeshed and because it reflects the dynamic nature of actual family relations. It is also based on the idea of empowering parents and caregivers through understanding their strengths and needs. Lastly, the bio-ecological perspective offers an insightful lens for understanding and supporting families under stress and necessitates the need for connecting to strategies that effectively help parent-child relationships and alleviate stress in families.

Proximal Processes

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) propose a theoretical model based upon organism-environment interaction called proximal processes, through which genotypes are transformed into phenotypes. The authors define proximal processes as reciprocal interaction with persons, objects and symbols in the immediate environment. An example of proximal process can be a cold, distanced or angry response to a hurting child, in need of love and nurturance.

These authors imply that when proximal processes are weak (such as insecure attachments between parent-child or lack of communication), a person's genetic potential for effective psychological functioning remains low or unrealized, but they increase as proximal processes increase in magnitude. For these reasons, working on parent-child relationship and attachment directly impacts proximal processes of a child. Further, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) postulate that behaviours that are unresponsive to the actions of another person maybe the principle mechanisms for developing destructive responses toward the environment and self, thus impacting mental health and attachment. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci indicate that proximal processes are the basis to produce effective developmental functioning when combined with a person's characteristics and contexts that surrounds them. This parenting resource will influence the proximal processes of a parent-child by providing them with attachment based and self - reflection exercises that promote healthy relationships and reduce mental health issues.

Stress Systems

Gunner, Herrera and Hostinar (2009) state that toxic early life stress (ELS) induces neural circuits and neurotransmitters which may develop into behavioural and emotional problems that may prevail into adulthood. ELS can be caused by an insecure attachment or unresponsive

parenting practices. The brain is a major organ targeted by steroid hormones produced if the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal axis (HPA) axis is agitated. The pathway from stress to medical problems involves many environmental factors which interact with the person's genes to shape HPA functioning and brain development. The early years of life are a particularly sensitive period during which chronic stress may compromise brain development. Sensitive periods and stages of enhanced brain plasticity are vulnerable to stress hormones which may alter their pathways resulting in negative mental and physical consequences. Gunner et al. (2009) point out that research has revealed that children with secure parent-child relationships resist activation of the HPA axis and other stress systems. The presence of responsive caregivers can help children handle stress effectively. For the above reasons, the team at CYMH Langley believes that attachment work needs to be done before teaching techniques of emotional self-regulation and assigns priority on positively supporting the parent-child relationship, which is the basis of 'Parenting Equanimity'.

Conclusion

When I commenced my journey of researching and writing this handbook, I had begun working with two families as a mental health intern. At that time, I did not have a clear sense of how applicable the material would be to other parents. My supervisor at CYMH afforded me a supportive and empathic clinical supervision that encouraged me to engage in reflective practice. This supervision expanded my learning and supported my growth with the appropriate amount of direction, structure and my own personal growth as a parent and a Mental Health Intern.

As a mental health intern, I had the honour of working with some parents and care-givers, whose courage, honesty and conviction to improve the situation for their children was endearing

and motivating. Stemming from their issues, needs and feedback, as well as three mental health clinicians working at CYMH, I researched salient concepts for this handbook. While a few caregivers indicated that my ideas were not “new”, they also told me that they felt affirmed and that they were on the right path. Some of the concepts in the handbook served as catalysts to challenge new ways of knowing, thinking and doing. While there may be many parents and caregivers for whom this handbook might not be appealing, I feel confident that for many this will open new doors that lead to connection and well-being within themselves and with their children.

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Parenting Equanimity



Meaning of ‘Equanimity’

The word ‘Equanimity’ refers to awareness leading to self-realization. Equanimity does not refer to a thought or emotion, rather a conscious awareness of reality. “Equanimity is defined as a state of psychological stability and composure which is undisturbed by experience of or exposure to emotions, pain, or other phenomena that may cause others to lose the balance of their mind”¹

The idea of achieving equanimity in parenting refers to being fully aware of your values, as well as your communication and parenting patterns which directly impact your child/teen’s development. This handbook contains researched concepts, ideas and strategies aimed at improving parent-child relationships and well-being.

Fundamental Assumptions and Purpose of Handbook

- All parents want to be the best parent they can be. But even the most loving and dedicated of parents can have parent-child relationships go astray.²
- There is no one right way to parent. There are many types of parents and many different ways to parent.³
- Every now and then, people make incorrect assumptions without realizing it. What makes a relationship successful is the ability of individuals to question their assumptions and correct them when necessary.⁴
- Parents often want quick answers and specific solutions and look to experts to get them. However, the model of the professional as “the expert with answers and solutions” does not work. It is best to support a parent’s capacity to think for themselves about their own or their child’s behaviour and to offer tools that help parents find their own way to connecting with themselves and their child.⁵ This is the basis of this handbook.
- Family, school, community and culture contribute to the social and emotional well-being of children. These contexts/systems are interrelated and influential as children’s environment impacts their functioning ability, leading to enhanced or hindered emotional development. The long-term effect on quality of life is reflected in reaching goals, problem solving, developing interpersonal skills, and maintaining relationships⁶ which are some things explored in this handbook.
- The purpose of this handbook is to build and sustain connected parent-child relationships using a relationship focused approach to parenting. This handbook is meant to help parents develop and enhance their parenting skills by trying alternate approaches to child-rearing, improving the family learning environment and fostering their sense of personal competence.
- The approaches used are grounded in attachment theory, child and youth development, how relationships impact brain development, mindfulness and finding pathways that seek to diffuse conflict and stress.

Empathy

What does it mean?

- Empathy is defined as the feeling that you understand and can attune to another person's emotion/s. Where your children are concerned, empathy makes it possible to grasp your child/teen's point of view.
- Empathy is what connects us to one another's experiences and assists to support relationships because it helps us to build a sense of understanding a shared perspective even when we don't agree on something.
- Empathy can be used as a tool for parents to help guide behaviour because it aids parents to connect to where their children are coming from.⁷

Why use empathy?

- Empathy can be very important to parents as it helps them to connect to their children's feelings and perspectives which in turn makes compassion possible.
- Imagine 'Empathy' to be like an emotional nourishment that you can provide to your child/teen that would help them to know that you understand them and with that increase their sense of trust in you.
- It is an essential parenting tool that nurtures compassion, helps your child/teen feel safe and willing to confide in you.⁸

How Can You Practice Empathy?

- Empathy involves two steps that are used as reference points for connecting with another's experience with heartfelt respectful attentiveness. The first step entails focusing on the other's possible feelings, and the second step entails focusing on the other's possible needs.

Table 1: Empathy⁹

Feelings: <i>Silently focusing on what the other might be feeling.</i>
Needs: <i>Silently focusing on what the other might need.</i>

- Empathy is occasionally followed by a verbal inquiry to confirm whether or not the other's feelings and needs have been accurately received. The referential empathic inquiry being: "Are you feeling... because you need..., and would you like...?" This kind of empathic inquiry is usually only voiced if it seems the other person would like confirmation, or if the listener is genuinely unclear about the other's feelings, needs, and/or possible requests.¹⁰
- **Reflection Question:** Think of a time you and your child had a different reaction to the same experience. Now try to see the event from your child's point of view. How do you think your child would react if you told her how you have made sense of her experience through her eyes?
- Here's an image and a story of a mom who posted this blog. Her son slammed a door in a fit of anger. Most parents would react out of utter frustration but this is a story of a mother who dealt with this situation with calmness, empathy and having her child's well-being in mind. Let us have a look at how her thoughts impacted her feelings of empathy toward her child.



This was my hallway last Wednesday. Broken. Sharp. Treacherous. This was my hallway. It was my son who did this. Sometimes, often really, things break - irreparably. And it takes your breath away ... straight away.

It took my breath away when my son stormed into the bathroom, frustrated, angry, fed-up for his very own, very significant to him, reasons. And when he chose to SLAM the bathroom door, causing the heavy mirror mounted to the front to slip out of the hardware holding it in place and crash onto the floor - a million, BROKEN pieces were left reflecting the afternoon light.

I was quiet. I surveyed the damage and took a deep breath. Put the dog outside so he wouldn't cut his feet, put the cat in the basement for the same reason.

I walked into the backyard and felt the hot tears streaming down my face. It's amazing how alone you can feel as a single parent in moments like these. I realized how scared and disappointed I felt. Did this really just happen? Yes. This was real.

And as I stood and considered whether or not this was an indication of his developing character, I heard his tears through the window above me, coming from inside the bathroom.

His soul hurt. This was not what he expected either. Hello, Anger - I don't remember inviting you into my house. Scary. Terrified. Ashamed. Worried. Scared.

Deep breath, # MamaWarrior. Deep breath. That small, fragile soul needs you right now. He needs your very best. Your biggest compassion. Your most gentle and firm mama love and reassurance. More deep breaths. Go Mama.

Go. Go now. Go open the front door, tiptoe through the broken glass, hear him hearing you coming, watch the bathroom door crack open, see the face you love most in the world red with worry and wet with tears, his voice is suddenly so small: "Mama, I'll never do it again, I am SO sorry." More tears. More weeping. Such uncertainty on his sweet face.

I love you. You are safe. I am right here. The worst part is over now. I've got you. I'm here. I love you.

Go Mama. Tell him about Anger. Tell him now. Anger is a really powerful feeling. You have a right to your Anger. Anger burns hot. It can purify. It can also destroy. He nods. He feels it. He's met Anger now.

There's a better way to show your big feelings.

We'll work on it together tomorrow. I'm here to help you. You are safe. You are never alone in your anger. You are never alone in your fears. I'm here. We're here together.

Now we will clean together.

And we cleaned up the broken pieces. We swept and we vacuumed. It was quiet work. It was careful work. It was thoughtful work.

Sometimes things break. Sometimes we break them. It's not the breaking that matters, the how or why. What matters is how we choose to respond to the broken-ness. Does it kill us? Does it throw us into a downward spiral of blame and punishment?

OR

Does it help us remember how to love deepest? Does it push us towards compassion and over the hurdle of "rightness" and "wrongness" into LOVENESS?

*Yes. **LOVENESS**. Go Mama. Go now. Get that baby of yours. Teach that. Show that. Live that. It's called LOVENESS. Go. Now.*¹¹

Mirroring

Understanding Mirroring ¹²

- Mirroring involves reflecting your child’s experience/ emotion back to her without judgement. You always listen first even if you may not always agree with it, and you may offer an alternate way of looking at it.
- Often, when our children are unhappy or in pain, we just want to fix it for them. We want them to stop hurting and be happy. When they’re angry or acting out, we want them to calm down and behave. At these times, it is important for us to hear what they’re thinking and feeling before we try to fix the problem. Letting your child know that you understand --or are at least trying to understand demonstrated through mirroring.

An example of Mirroring in a Conversation:

Anu is starting out grade 9 knowing that none of her friends have the same classes with her. However, to her luck she found out that one of her electives- ‘drama’ not only has one of her best friends in the same class, but also her most favourite teacher. Two weeks into the schedule, Anu finds out that she has moved to a different class due to the class size being full.

Anu: “This is awful. I’m never going to have any classes with my friends again! This is the worst thing that could ever happen. All my other friends have each other and I have no one. They moved me and now I’m alone...ALONE!”

Mother: “Moved you, are you kidding me? And it happened all of a sudden! Did you know about this?”

Anu: “No! We didn’t know anything- it just happened out of the blue!”

Mother: “This was your only class with your best friend and a teacher you really like. I bet you can’t imagine ‘drama’ class being the same without her.

Anu: “Yeah, this sucks...why can’t I be lucky like the others?”

Mother: “So you can’t imagine at this moment that there will ever be a better drama partner or teacher for you?”

Anu: “What am I going to do? School’s boring as it is...this was the only class I looked forward to!”

Mother: “So you’re wondering what you can do now, because so far this was the only class you looked forward to. As you wonder about this what have you been thinking you might do”

Anu: “Do you think maybe I will make a friend in my new drama class?”

- It is so painful when your child hurts emotionally that parents instinctively try to fix the problem. In the above example, the mother tried to understand Anu’s pain and feelings of loneliness without trying to minimize it or come up with solutions for her daughter. In turn, Anu was able to reflect on her feelings of loss and disappointment and talk these over with her mother. Being brave enough to stay in the pain with your child is what makes her feel better and encourages her to tell you what’s going on in her life. If we can’t tolerate their pain, either they find it invalidating to talk to us or they worry they are hurting us, and so they choose not to.¹³

Some benefits of mirroring ¹⁴

- Mirroring creates safety in conversations allowing your child to feel understood and heard without judgement
- Mirroring provides a base for social competence and lays the groundwork for fulfilling relationships
- Mirroring builds your child’s social skills because the more empathy you show your children, the more they will show empathy to others, and being empathic is the key to having good social skills
- The more your child receives responses that accurately reflect his feelings, the more he will be able to trust himself and his intuition, directly affecting self-confidence

Reflecting Question/s

- Think of a time when your child was hurting. What was your response? Did you instinctively try to fix the problem? Now practice the same scenario in your mind and notice the things you might say or do to reflect your child's feelings without judgement. How are you able to stay in the moment with their pain, loss or sorrows? How can you encourage them to come up with their own solutions with you right there by their side?

The CALM Technique ¹⁵

- When your child feels sad or bad, you can help her/ him become CALM through mirroring. The CALM acronym is another way to mirror.

Connect- To connect is to show undivided attention and doing everything that you can to show undivided attention. It means making eye contact, using your body and your voice, leaning forward and looking involved. To establish a connection, what you're doing is matching the urgency conveyed by the child's body language with your own. While connecting make sure that you don't shift the conversation to yourself by inserting your own stories or experience, as it is essential to put your own agenda aside to validate your child's emotions. To mirror effectively, devote all your energy first to making the connection.

Affect- The term affect means 'feeling' or 'emotion' and includes non-verbal ways of expressing our emotions. Affect can be expressed through facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. For example, when you're mirroring, if your child is really angry about something, you need to join with him in showing this emotion, while at the same time not matching the level of the emotion. This allows her/ him to see that you understand her/ his feelings and the urgency of her/ his message has been delivered, allowing him to de-escalate her/ his intensity and start to organise her/ his feelings. **It is important that the affect you show your child is sincere and not too exaggerated.** Also, you don't want to rant, rave and sound angry yourself. You just want to let him know that you really understand that he feels this way. In other words, show that you can join with your child, while at the same time, modelling how the emotions can be displayed without being overwhelmed by it.

Listen- Words are your child's most direct means of letting you know what's going on in her/his head. Too often we listen to our kids with one ear while we're in the middle of doing something else. To really listen, what you can do is to say the things your child might be saying as if you were in her/his shoes.

Mirror- Connecting, accurately reflecting your child's affect and listening to what he or she is saying are the three tools that, used in combination, create genuine mirroring. As you mirror, you can: **Clarify** – “You mean you weren't doing anything and he just came along and pushed you?” You can **Paraphrase** – “So there you were minding your own business and you got a whack on your back?” or you can **Summarize-** “So he pushed you and you don't think you did anything.”



Attachment

- Attachment is an inborn primal system of the brain that evolved to keep children safe. It is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another. Attachment is also defined as a tie based on the need for safety, security and protection. An infant instinctively attaches to their caregivers and that attachment serves a biological purpose of protection, survival and genetic replication.¹⁶ Attachment enables a child to (1) seek proximity to the parent (2) go to the parent at times of distress for comforting as a source of a safe haven (3) internalize the relationship with the parent as an internal model of a secure base.

How Does Attachment Directly Impact a Child's Development?

- Attachment theory is a lifespan developmental theory that proposes that “there is a universal need to form close affectionate bonds because human beings are social in nature: our brains are structured to be in relationship with other people in a way that shapes how the brain functions and develops.”¹⁷ The parent-child relationship and attachment directly impacts how our children interact with other children, their sense of security about exploring the world, their resilience to stress, their ability to balance their emotions and their ability to create meaningful interpersonal relationships in the future. For these reasons, attachment experiences are a central factor in shaping our development.¹⁸

Attachment Styles

- Babies are born into the world dependent upon their parents for their survival. The early interactions between the child and their primary care-giver forms beliefs that are encoded as internal working models which predict interactions in close relationships later on in life , e.g. responsiveness and willingness to trust in your partner.¹⁹ Based upon a person's internal working models, there are four attachment styles:
- **Secure Attachment Style-** Secure attachment in childhood occurs when a parent is responsive to the needs of the child. This allows the child to explore the environment safely and develops confidence in their ability to interact with the world, to face challenges, and regulate their own emotions.¹⁹ Securely attached children readily seek out

their care-givers when distressed, but feel sufficiently safe to explore their environment at times of low stress.²⁰

- **Insecure Anxious/ Avoidant-** In contrast, parental unavailability and harsh rejection is associated with insecure anxious/avoidant attachment.²¹ These children view themselves as unlovable and unable to attract care from their parents. They view others as punitive and disinterested in them. Anxious-avoidant children are reluctant to approach their parents even when distressed, because they fear that their signals for comfort will be rejected or punished. **Anxious-** Children or parents with anxious attachment behaviours have internalized a pattern of inconsistent caregiving, developing an internal working model of other that includes distressing beliefs that significant others will be unavailable when they are needed. Children and Parents with anxious attachment feel a chronic fear of rejection if they are not appreciated as person, like to please others to get their approval and have high levels of anxiety.²² **Avoidant-** Avoidance is a strategy caused by the suppression of pain, stress and frustration. The parent is distant, cold, reject the child, and the child learns to inhibit his emotions. Inhibition is a strategy driven by fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, shame, guilt and causes a child to avoid seeking comfort or proximity to the parent.²³
- **Anxious Ambivalent-** In this attachment style, children are vigilant about the whereabouts and responsiveness of their care-givers and display heightened overtures of the need to provoke responsiveness in parents.²⁴ Anxious-ambivalent attachment is caused by parental inconsistency and these children view themselves as unable to sustain the interest and care of others. They are pre-occupied with the availability of their parents and this inhibits exploration of their environment which can lead to social, emotional and mental health problems.²⁵

Changing Attachment- Is it Possible?

- Research shows that relationships with parents can change and as they do, the child's attachment changes. This means that it's never too late to create positive change in a child's life. Studies also show that a nurturing relationship with someone other than a parent in which the child feels understood and safe can provide a seed of resilience which

can be developed. These relationships don't replace a secure attachment with a primary caregiver, but they are a source of strength for the child's developing mind.²⁶



The Mindful Approach to Parenting

What is ‘Mindfulness’

- Mindfulness is a term that specifically refers to practices, techniques and theory derived from Buddhist meditative practices that include the intentional, purposeful focusing of attention on the ‘here and now’ in an open and accepting way. Mindfulness practice is about bringing awareness to our thoughts without judgement and with intentional compassion.²⁹

Being Mindful as a Parent

- To become mindful as parents means that we live in the present moment and are aware of our own thoughts and feelings and are also open to those of our children. Practicing mindfulness or being mindful is at the heart of nurturing relationships- in that when we are being fully present as parents, we are practicing mindfulness. Being mindful as a parent means having intention in your actions. With intention you purposefully choose your behaviour with your child’s emotional well-being in mind.³⁰

Some Benefits of the Mindful Approach to Parenting

- The ability to stay in the present with clarity within ourselves allows us to be fully present with others and to respect each person’s individual experience. Mindfulness lets you approach relationships with acceptance and at its most basic level is a highly effective method to reduce stress, however, it should not be regarded as a “magic bullet” that takes away your problems. It is all about cultivating awareness and acceptance.³¹
- Children learn about themselves from the ways in which we communicate with them. When we are preoccupied with the past or worried about the future, we are physically present with our children, but mentally absent. Children don’t need us to be fully available all the time, but they do need our presence during connecting interactions, which mindfulness encourages.

- It is within our children's emotional connections with us that they develop a deeper sense of themselves and a capacity for relating, and practising mindfulness promotes your ability to connect with yourself and your children.³²

Mindfulness Exercises

Staying in the Moment³³

1. Take a moment to think through all you have already done today.
2. Now consider all that you still 'have' to do.
3. Next notice the environment around you (colours, sounds, movements etc.).
4. Notice any sensations in the body (tension, stiffness, twitchiness, etc.).
5. Notice how you are feeling (overwhelmed, fired up, impatient, etc.).
6. Now take a moment to consider just the moment you are in.
7. Just for this moment put aside what has happened already and what is yet to happen and allow yourself to experience 'just this'.
8. Give yourself ten seconds (you can just guess if you like) just to sit or stand where you are and not do anything else right now.
9. Just notice your experiences (sounds, sights, sensations, feelings, thoughts), as they naturally come and go, rise and fall; there is no need to follow any of them.
10. When you are ready you can now choose to jump back into the rush of your day.

Take a Chill Pill³⁴

1. First, begin by noticing your breath entering and leaving your body. Pay attention to the sensations of breathing on each in-breath and each out-breath.
2. Once you feel more in touch and focused on your breath, continue with the following steps.
3. Next see if you can notice some of the thoughts in your mind and begin to label them with one of three categories (i.e. 'past', 'future' or 'judgement'). You may notice thoughts about what has happened (such as 'I can't believe he spoke to me like that!' or the like), label them as 'past'. You may notice thoughts about what is about to happen (such as 'I'm going to totally mess up this conversation- I'm useless!') so then label them as 'future'. You may have thoughts about yourself, others or any particular situation, including this exercise itself (such as 'I'm not thinking any thoughts!', 'This is a stupid exercise', 'I'm/he/she/it is hopeless', or the like), label them as 'judgement'. You might like to also imagine these thoughts as leaves on a stream as you watch them float away or as clouds passing through the sky. Notice how each one passes by when you simply label them and untangle yourself from listening to what they have to say.
4. Next notice what you feel emotionally and label it. You may feel a range of emotions from anger, sadness, anxiety or anything else. So whichever emotion you notice, just silently say to yourself, 'I feel X right now'. If you can't feel any strong emotion, that's OK also; just notice and label that (i.e. 'I don't feel any strong emotion right now').
5. Finally, notice how your body feels. You may notice tension in your shoulders, nausea in your stomach, or no strong sensation at all. Again, just notice and label whatever is there, silently saying to yourself, 'I feel X in my body right now'. You do not need to fix any of these experiences or sensations, or figure them out; there is nothing to fight or flee from, just experience to notice with curiosity.

Reflection Questions:

- What steps will you take to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings? List 1-2 things that will help you move closer to your own awareness. (Suggestions: writing, going for a walk, meditation, prayer, yoga, exercise, riding your bike, deep breathing)
- Think of a conflict situation with your child that happened recently, and write down how you would approach the same situation by intentionally choosing your behaviour and words with your child's emotional well-being in mind.
- What signals your awareness to a conflict situation? Reflecting on being mindful, what will you do differently next time? What will you say/do or **not** say/do?



Stress Reduction-An Important Ingredient for Positive Parenting

How Stress Impacts Our Bodies Internally

- Cortisol, an important hormone in the body, is secreted by the adrenal glands and is involved in metabolizing glucose, regulating blood pressure, maintaining insulin release for blood sugar, immune functioning and inflammatory responding among others.³⁵ Its levels are highest in the morning and lowest at night. However, when you are stressed, an increased amount of cortisol is released into the bloodstream as a defense and if left unattended, it can damage body organs and systems.³⁶
- With prolonged stress, more cortisol is present in the bloodstream than needed, and this impacts learning and memory, suppresses thyroid function, upsetting blood sugar levels, decreasing bone density and muscle tissue, raising blood pressure, lowering immunity and inflammatory responses in the body, slowing the healing process, and increasing abdominal fat.³⁷ This affects the way we think, feel and behave as parents too. So, there is a need to relax and keep cortisol at healthy levels. Using humour, laughter, meditation, prayer or exercise to reduce stress and learning ways that work best for you are important parenting tools to uncover.

Stress Reduction Suggestions

Exercise # 1: Mindful Breathing³⁸

- Start by getting yourself comfortable in a place where you will be undisturbed for five to ten minutes. You may sit on the floor or on a chair with your palms upright or down on your lap.
- Close your eyes and gently guide your attention to the natural rhythm of your breath in your chest and belly. Simply notice the breath as you breathe in...and out...in...and out. There's no need to make the breath faster or slower, deeper or shallower. Just allow your breathing to do its thing. Sense the air passing from the chest through your nose and mouth as you breathe in...and out.
- Continue to notice your breathing with a sense of kindness and gentle allowing. There's nothing to do except notice your breath. Sink into its natural rhythm: the rising and the gentle falling of your chest and belly as you breathe in and out.
- If you find your mind wandering or you feel distracted, notice that, and gently return your attention to the rhythm of your breath and the rising and falling of your chest and belly. Continue this practice of kind observation for as long as you wish—just noticing your breath doing its thing.
- Then when you're ready, gradually widen your attention, and gently open your eyes with the intention of bringing this skill of kind observing to your experiences throughout the day.

Exercise # 2: Mindful Acceptance ³⁹

Water is fluid, soft and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard –
Lao-tzu (600 BC)

Making Sense of Mindful Acceptance

- Mindful Acceptance is a stance towards life: watching the struggle without judging it, feeling the pain without drowning in it, and honouring the hurt without becoming it.
- Mindful Acceptance is not a feeling or an attitude- it is a skill that takes work to learn and it is about compassion in action.
- It is an active, fully conscious, softer stance towards your mind, body and life experiences. Mindful Acceptance simply involves noticing what you think and feel and allowing your thoughts and feelings to be there- it doesn't mean liking or agreeing with them.
- Mindful Acceptance starts with cultivating your willingness to stay with the urge to act on your discomfort—without doing what your mind and history say to be done for the quick fix of temporary relief.

Exercise:

Take a moment and allow yourself to sit with the above quote from Lao Tzu. Then, insert the first noun that comes to your mind as you look at these statements:

My Worries, Anxieties, Fears are like _____ (noun).

My response to my Worries, Anxieties and Fears are like _____ (noun).

Reflecting Question/s:

- Did you select nouns describing things that are soft, gentle, fluid or yielding? Is it more likely that your mind came up nouns describing things that are solid and unyielding? Your judgemental mind can easily turn your flexible thoughts, feelings, sensations and memories into something hard and heavy
- Reflecting on Lao-Tzu's teaching- "Whatever is soft is strong" how will you nurture your capacity for gentleness, kindness, compassion with regards to your mind, body and world? What soft qualities will you meet your hard Worries, Anxieties and Fears with?



Acceptance and Parenting

- Sometimes children’s behaviours can be challenging and as parents, these behaviours can be met with in accepting, warm and sensitive ways or in unaccepting and unkind ways.³⁹ Poor parenting practices such as harsh discipline and anger lead to disconnection and mental health concerns.⁴⁰
- On the other hand, children of parents who combine kindness with limit setting or boundaries with high levels of warmth and involvement adjust well, make better relationships, have more concentration and display low levels of aggressive behaviour.⁴¹ There can be many alternatives that bring you a step closer to unconditional self-acceptance which you can choose to direct towards yourself, your children and your life. Here are some suggestions:

- 1) **Psychological flexibility** involves being connected to the present moment fully and without defense, committing to changing your behaviour to align with what matters the most to you or your values as a parent.⁴² Reflecting on the poem below, which was translated by William Martin in 1999 from writings of the famous philosopher Lao Tsu (written 2500 years ago) to express glimpses of “Tao” (translates as “the Way”), what steps will you take to become flexible and walk closer to unconditionally accepting yourself, your children and your life?

As They Are

When you are with your children be one with them. Let every part of your body relax and become as supple as your child’s. Allow all expectations and anxieties to melt away so that you can see clearly. Love them as they are in this very moment, without needing to change a thing. When their lives are filled with trouble allow events to unfold, without pushing or straining, and you will understand clearly what your role should be. You nourish them without possessing them. You guide them without controlling them. You help them without worrying. Being with your child can be like meditating. When you are with your child next, forget the past, forget the future, and let your mind and heart come to be where your body is.⁴³

2) Changing Irrational Beliefs

- Negative patterns of beliefs and behaviours that are thought to be caused by irrational beliefs are learned from the environment and these beliefs can have a great impact on the parent-child relationship.⁴⁴
- Parents belief systems have a direct influence on the parents' emotions, and irrational beliefs about one's self and your child can lead to poor parenting practices.⁴⁵

Some examples of irrational beliefs:

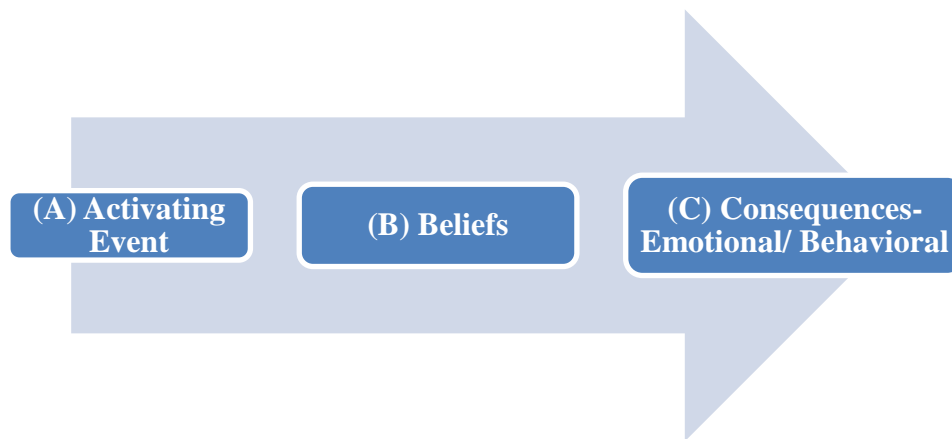
“I am a worthless person”, “You are a bad child”, “Life is not fair”, “I am a bad parent”, “To be a perfect parent and a worthwhile person, my child must be obedient at all times”, “She did this to annoy me on purpose”, “If my child does not obey me, it is awful”.

Differences - Irrational & Rational Beliefs⁴⁶

Irrational Belief	Rational Belief
An irrational belief is absolute, rigid and unbending	A rational belief is flexible because it connects to the idea of having many possibilities
It is Illogical	It is logical
It is not consistent with reality	It is consistent with actual facts
It does not help to achieve a goal	It help in pursuing goals
It leads to unhealthy emotions	It leads to healthy emotions

Countering Irrational Thoughts/ Beliefs- The ABC Model ⁴⁷

The ABC model explains that parents behavioural and emotional reactions (C) are not determined by the activating events (A) they face such as their children's behaviour but by the way they think about these events (B). The primary focus is to change 'faulty thinking' which leads to irrational beliefs that ultimately causes disconnection in parent-child relationships.



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- To change irrational beliefs, parents can learn to actively Dispute (D), challenge, examine and replace their beliefs with useful ones. The rational alternative belief patterns to promote healthy thoughts/feelings/beliefs in adults and children are preferences rather than absolute demands. For instance “I prefer to be obeyed by my child” instead of “My children must/ have to obey me at all times.” ⁴⁹

Examples of Disputing Irrational Beliefs ⁵⁰

Irrational Belief/ Thought	Disputing Beliefs/ Thoughts
I am not respected by my child and they are worthless for not respecting me	If I am not respected by my child, it feels very bad and unpleasant, however, I can accept him/her and recognize that they are worthwhile even though they do not respect me now
If my child does not obey me, it is awful	When my child does not obey, it hurts but I accept him/her despite their behaviour
I am a bad parent	I can accept myself even if sometimes I consider that I'm not a good parent and I will do everything in my power to change my inefficient behaviours
She/ He did this on purpose to annoy me	I will not jump to any conclusions and take steps to clear my biases mind. I will check-in with my children when I feel calm in order to understand where they are coming from

Challenging Negative Thoughts and Irrational Beliefs (Based on the Rational Positive Parenting Program)

- The Rational Positive Parenting Program was introduced by Gavita in 2011, as an approach for improving parent-child relationships. The program's main goal is to focus on assisting with parents dealing with their emotional difficulties such as anger, mood swings, anxiety or irrational beliefs. The overall intention is to motivate and promote parent-child positive relationships through helping parents to combine kindness with consistency as they assist their children in their daily lives.²⁷

Ways of Thinking/Behaving & Challenging Negative/ Irrational Thoughts & Beliefs:

The Rational Positive Parenting Program is based on the following statements of principles that parents can use to guide their own behaviour. These statements help parents to internalize positive self-talk and positive regards for themselves and their children.

- I can accept myself as a parent even when my child does not obey or respect me.
- When my child does not obey, I accept him/her despite this behavior.
- I can accept myself even if sometimes I consider that I am not a good parent
- I will do everything in my power to change my inefficient behaviors.
- When my children do not appreciate or respect me, I can accept that it does not influence my self-worth, their worth in any way and it does not mean that my life is bad.
- When I have difficulty parenting, I can accept that it does not influence my self-worth
- I very much want to be obeyed by my child, but I accept that things do not have to always be how I want.
- I very much want to be a good parent and I am doing everything in my power for this, but if I do not manage to be a good parent all the time, it does not mean that I am worthless; it just shows that I have poor behaviour, which can be improved in the future
- It is preferable to be obeyed by my child, and I am doing efforts for this, but when I do not manage this, it is very bad but not awful, and I can stand it.

- I want very much to be appreciated and respected by my children, and I do my best to get it, but I accept that just because I want and /or worked hard for this, it does not mean that it absolutely must happen.
- It is very bad and unpleasant if my children do not appreciate or respect me, but I can stand it, and try to find solutions, positive alternatives, and/or ways to cope. It is unpleasant and unfortunate to be disobeyed by my own child but it is not terrible, and I can find solutions, positive alternatives, and/or ways to cope.²⁸

3) **Choosing Values** is different from setting goals because they are not achieved by concrete results, but are chosen qualities of ongoing patterns of action that are expressed moment by moment in action.⁵¹ For instance, if you value being a parent who your children can turn to during times of distress, then some behaviours you could potentially choose or learn to do would be listening without judgement, practicing empathy or paying attention to how your child is feeling. Some important questions in your journey towards new insights in choosing values are:⁵²

- What matters to you in life? Is this really important to you or are you doing this because you're supposed to? Sometimes people don't freely choose values that they hold dear. They choose a value that sounds socially appropriate, makes them look good, or because of what their loved ones expect of them. What's important is that you listen to your heart, not outside pressures to conform to valuing this or that. Ask yourself: "Why am I doing this? Am I doing this for me or for someone else, or to avoid someone else being hurt or disappointed by my choices? The pursuit of values is about discovering or rediscovering what's truly important in your own life—what you want your life to stand for, not what other people want from you or for you. **An example of a value-** "I want to be a good parent" versus a goal- "I want to spend at least two nights a week playing board games with my children."⁵³

Model Contentment (A Poem on a Parenting Value)⁵⁴

To be a wise parent you must become like water. It is content to nourish all that it touches without discrimination. While people struggle to move up, water flows joyfully down, filling the low places.

As you care for your children keep their environment uncluttered, free of gadgets and distractions. Keep your conversations honest and straight-forward, free of control and manipulation. Keep your decisions fair and generous, free of punishment and shame. As you conduct your life, be serene and joyful, content and at peace. This will be your greatest legacy.

Nothing nurtures a child like a parent who takes great pleasure in a simple activity, and is content with the present moment. Are you modeling contentment or always wanting more?



Brain Development and Parenting

Understanding the Link between Brain Development and Parenting

- Right from the moment of conception, a combination of genes and external factors (availability and responsiveness of parents, experiences and environments) affect how genes are expressed and how brain connections are built.⁵⁵ Building these brain connections provide the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health.⁵⁶ This development process begins a few weeks after conception and continues through early adulthood.⁵⁷
- While most of a newborn's brain cells develop prenatally, much of the connecting of neurons (brain cell) and strengthening of neural pathways occurs after birth.⁵⁸ The way in which these brain cells connect and develop is influenced by the newborn's environment, and especially by the baby's relationship with her/his parents and primary caregivers.⁵⁹

How does Environment Shape the Development of the Brain

- The relationship between the developing brain and experience (such as parenting practices and relationships within the family) or environments (such as neighbourhoods) impacts children and youth and this relationship between the environment and brain development is affected in two ways that are important for parents to know (1) Positive parenting experiences can promote child well-being by providing the necessary information for the brain to develop optimally (2) Experiences such as parental absence or not being available emotionally can interfere with brain development and in turn disrupt the child's ability to experience the world beneficially.⁶⁰

Upstairs and Downstairs Brain ⁶¹

- Imagine your child's brain as a house, with an upstairs and a downstairs and your job as a parent is to build the stairway that connects your child's upper and lower brain, one step at a time.
- The jobs belonging to the downstairs brain are more primitive and involve basic needs and instincts. An example of this could be big emotion feelings such as fear, anger, acting before thinking. The upstairs brain is more sophisticated and responsible for many behaviours we hope to see in our children such as balancing emotions, good decision making and empathy towards others.
- When these two parts are integrated, a person is able to perform complex tasks such as thinking of consequences before acting out or considering other people's feelings.

Building the Metaphorical Brain Staircase- Why is this Necessary?

- Controlling impulses, calming big feelings and making good decisions are some important skills that many parents wish to teach their children. However, the area of the brain that controls these functions doesn't fully develop until people reach their mid-twenties. With this mind, children and teens cannot be expected to have the sort of control over their bodies and emotions and actions that adults can. Sometimes, even with a fully developed upstairs brain, many adults don't have enough practice using it and have difficulty accessing the skills associated with the upstairs brain. Parents have to teach these skills with an understanding of what to teach, when to teach, as well as how much their child understands.

How to Support Early Brain Development

- Research on early child development confirms that play provides important opportunities for children to learn and develop social, emotional and cognitive skills. These skills include managing emotions, controlling one's behaviour, sharing and language development.⁶² Child centered play that includes a balance of free and structured playtime in happy, stimulating and engaging environments is a beneficial approach to early brain development.⁶³ Most importantly, loving, safe and engaging parent and child interactions create positive learning experiences for children that last a lifetime.
- For a more detailed account of the internal working of the various parts of the brain, their functions, impacts and inter-connectivity, you can look up the seven slide series by Dr. Bruce Perry: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOsgDkeH52o>.



Mirror Neurons and Parenting

- Mirror neurons are brain cells and mechanisms of imitation and learning for the ability to create an image of the internal state of another's mind.⁶⁴ When we perceive another's emotions, automatically, unconsciously, that state is created inside us. For example, we may begin to cry when we see someone else crying. Mirror neurons don't merely fire in response to any action seen in another person. The action or behaviour must have intention behind it. For example, waving hands in the air in front of the subject does not activate a mirror neuron. Carrying out an action with an intended outcome does. For instance, if you yell at your child with the intention of improving their behaviour, mirror neurons will fire, and in turn teach your child to learn to "yell" when things don't go exactly as planned.

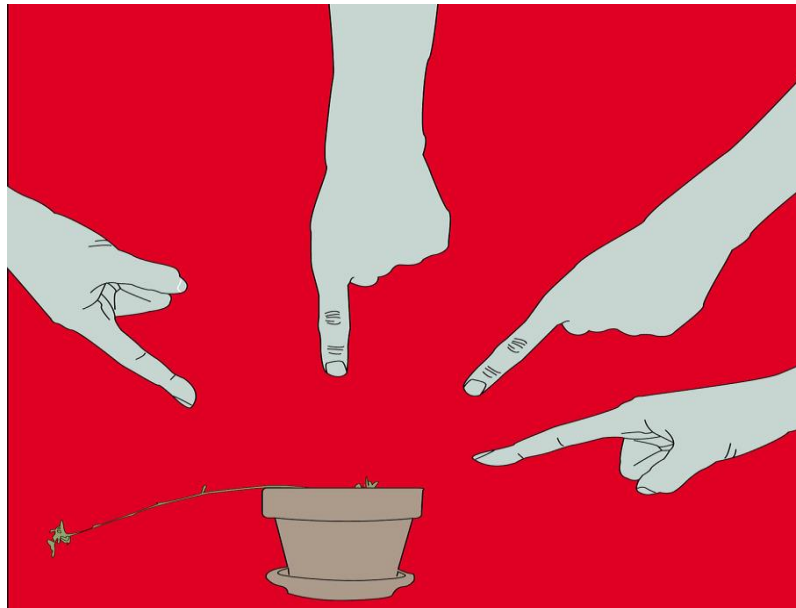
Implications of Mirror Neurons for Parents

- When children feel positive sensations, such as joy from accomplishing something, parents can share these emotional states and enthusiastically reflect them with their children.
- Similarly, when children feel negative or uncomfortable sensations, such as in moments of disappointment or hurt, parents can empathize with their feelings which can open up space for connection.⁶⁵



Reducing Parental Blame, Shame & Guilt

- There is an overwhelming amount of information, often conflicting about the latest research in early child and brain development. For instance, brain development may sometimes be discussed as part of the process of ‘making the baby smarter’ or ‘intelligent’ when in fact what we need to clearly understand is that children’s early experiences affect the development of their brains and with that , their physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.⁶⁶
- A profit-driven industry devoted to convincing parents that there are products that can make their babies smarter can lead to misinformation and pose as a challenge to parents when it comes to knowing what information to trust.⁶⁷ Parents do not need to feel anxious about buying products to “make their babies smart”. Instead they can focus on creating positive engagement with their children and feel assured that that this will help them to thrive.



Impacts on Child Development through Family Activities

- Family activities can provide opportunities for teaching effective social skills and exchanges between parents and children. Shared family activities facilitate bonding and relationship-building that gives children of all ages more confidence to navigate the outside world.⁶⁸
- Being involved in family activities also give children a chance to plan, negotiate and collaborate with other family members. These are important life skills which can then be imitated in the outside world and this strengthens a child's socio-emotional well-being.⁶⁹
- Sharing time through activities with your kids can make room for parents to model, teach and impart their values. Teaching your children through shared activities can be a medium through which parents develop their children's skills and impart life lessons that they value.⁷⁰
- An important way for parents to expose their children to unique/ different experiences can be through shared activities outside the home because these expose children to novel social interactions and open them to interact in larger social networks.⁷¹ For example volunteering in your community with your children or going to a spiritual centre.
- In addition to engaging in external activities, involvement on a regular basis in common, home-based, accessible activities with family members is also an effective way of enhancing the parents' and children's well-being.⁷²

Foundations for Developing Secure Parent-Child Relationships

- Positive parenting practices are defined as “parental behaviour based on the best interest of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child.”⁷³

Identifying Parental Actions for Positive Parenting Practices⁷⁴

Nurturing- Children need warmth, acceptance, sensitivity, responsiveness, positive involvement, and support from their parents. This develops security, confidence and a sense of belonging. Caring for your children by listening to their point of view is an example of parental nurturing.

Structuring- Children also need boundaries and guidance in order to experience physical and psychological security and the development of their own values and sense of personal and social responsibility. A parental action to provide structure is to set clear and flexible limits with supervision. Some examples of providing clear and flexible boundaries can be negotiating/ setting a reasonable time limit on watching TV or playing video games; setting up a sleep schedule together; helping children learn to organize and keep their rooms clean, as well as arranging and organizing a schedule with them concerning their home-work and study times.

Stimulation- Children need opportunities to interact with other, more knowledgeable individuals to learn more about the world, because this promotes the development of their cognitive, emotional and social competencies. Knowledgeable individuals who may be able to help your children in this way could be their coaches, teachers or youth workers.

Recognition- Recognition involves being acknowledged and having one’s personal experience validated by others. To validate your children’s feelings and experiences means to accept and perceive what they are going through and to acknowledge and recognize that you heard/ understand what they feel.

Empowerment- Empowerment is your child’s confidence in his/her abilities to complete a task/ process despite obstacles. In parenting, empowering children means to enhance your child’s strengths and sense of capacity as active agents. When we empower our children, they realize

their capacities and begin to learn valuable life lessons. Consider the following example of empowering regarding clean up: “Pick up the toys now or you will sit on the chair instead of joining us for lunch” (Threatening) versus “You were having so much fun. It is hard to stop playing to clean up. What would you like me to do to help, and what will you do?” (Connection)

Free from Violence- An environment free from violence is associated with the child’s need to be considered as a human being with dignity and rights. Within the family setting this means laying the foundations for mutual respect, equal dignity, authenticity, integrity and responsibility.



Understanding and Reframing Conflict

Understanding Conflict

- Conflict is an inherent part of human progress that allows us to learn and grow and it exists when views/goals are perceived to be incompatible.⁷⁵ Conflicts within families often have a complex history, where feelings of mistrust, misunderstanding, suspicions, lack of empathy or desire for power mix together with previous experiences and the diverse interests/ goals of family members and become seeds of conflict.^{76,77}

Impacts of Conflict on Children and Youth

- When a conflict escalates in a family, some undesirable outcomes can take the form of verbal or physical aggression or violence. Children exposed to violence (screaming or verbal aggression) are known to experience a number of negative outcomes, including behavioral and emotional problems.⁷⁸ These problems include internalizing (e.g. depression, anxiety) and externalizing problems (aggression, conduct disorder) and behaviours;⁷⁷ trauma symptoms or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; as well as adjustment and developmental problems.⁷⁹
- Violence among family members (verbal, physical, emotional) can have an enduring adverse effect on diverse domains of children's development, even if children are only indirectly exposed to domestic conflicts, for example, by observing the incident.⁸⁰

Pathways to Diffuse Conflict

- A well- managed conflict can bring useful results and prevent or reduce harmful outcomes.⁸¹ What this means for parents and families is to be informed of what strategies must be used to get the best results for the relationships and communication patterns in your family. It is important to not only know some strategies that may work, but to put these into action by practicing them, even if they don't work at first or they feel uncomfortable. Some suggestions to diffuse conflicts are:

Cooperation in Relationships

- Cooperation induces and is induced by perceived similarity in beliefs and attitudes, readiness to be helpful, openness in communication, trusting and friendly attitudes, sensitivity to common interests and de-emphasis of opposed interests, orientation toward enhancing mutual power rather than power differences.⁸² For parents this means looking at problems from their children's point of view as well as their own, showing care and empathy and trying to understand the emotional need hidden underneath undesirable behavior. To begin looking at things from another's point of view, consider imagining the metaphorical window exercise:

Metaphorical Windows of Perception

- Metaphorically speaking, imagine living in a house that has windows facing in each direction, north, south, east and west. We all have a favourite window through which we view the world, and tend to ignore other windows or sometimes even forget that they are there. Imagine that each of your family members is looking outside your home through different windows and every member has a different view. Now, try to walk to a different window and look at the view from your child's window. Do the same for your spouse's window. How will you encourage yourself to look through new windows or different worldviews? This doesn't mean that the views from the windows that you have been using are wrong, but that there are different ways of knowing, thinking and doing



Reframing Conflict- Looking at the conflict from a different point of view

- Looking at conflicts or problems from your child/teen/spouse' point of view encourages perception of similarities which impacts cooperation. Among the typical effects of a cooperative relationship are positive attitudes, open communication, and an orientation toward mutual enhancement.⁸³
- Important elements for effective communication can be linked to cooperation, positive attitudes and power sharing among family members. Positive attitudes result from perceptions of similarity and open communication.⁸⁴ An example of a positive attitude is to check-in with what's going on with your child/teen instead of jumping to conclusions or assumptions of what/ how they should feel.
- Constructive conflict resolution involves a co-operative problem solving process in which the conflict can be viewed as a mutual problem to be resolved.⁸⁵ For example, planning ahead and helping yourself and your children become more self- aware of what triggers their anger or their melt-downs. Additionally, discussing 1-2 things that will help you/them calm down and setting up relationship communication rules such as- no hurting each other when anger arrives and what to do when it arrives. This does not mean that this approach will provide a quick fix to existing problems, but it provides a framework for parents to understand how to approach parent-child conflict situations that strengthen relationships.

Constructive Anger Management ⁸⁶

- Anger is part of being human and is a message that something is not working in our lives. When you're angry, physiologically your brain sends your body the signal that it is ready to fight as hormones have flooded your body. This state does not help us to find the best solutions and parents are often caught up saying and doing things they wish they had chosen differently. Our children don't need perfection from us, they need parents who are willing to try and make amends and connect with them (Markham, 2012). Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you could make mistakes and react. However, learning from your mistakes and supporting yourself will open up gateways for you to do better next time. You can also use it as an opportunity to demonstrate to your children how a mature person apologizes, reconnects and repairs. Consider practicing the following steps:
 - 1) Take 5-10 minutes to calm down as soon as you recognize getting angry because it is not the best place from where you communicate with your children. You can silently say to yourself: "I'm starting to feel angry and before I speak or do anything I need to calm down". You can splash water on your face and breathe deeply. Walking away from a potential conflict situation does not let your child win, it just models self-control. If your child is too young to be left alone, just stay in the room, sit on your couch and breathe deeply and silently, take 5 mins to say a prayer or a mantra that you have pre-prepared. If you have an older child, just let them know that you need 5-10 minutes before you can talk and then go outside for a walk or stand on your porch and breathe. By doing this you will model one of the most important lessons to your child/teen: how to calm down and regulate your emotions.
 - 2) Help your body discharge anger by doing what works best for you. Some examples are: breathing, stretching, jogging on the spot, humming, laughing, smiling- fake smiling works too, as does yawning and working out.
 - 3) Connect to positive thoughts about your child by noticing the negative ones and replacing them with more positive and constructive thoughts. This will allow your feelings and emotions to change and will help you to calm down. For instance: "His behavior is atrocious" to "He's asking for my help and I need to understand what feelings/ motives are behind this behavior" or "I'm upset right now but I can calm myself to help this

situation” or “He’s allowed to have his feelings and our relationship feels safe enough for him to show me his true feelings” or “Expressing feelings is a good thing. I don’t need to fix his grief/ rage but I can give him my loving acceptance and a safe space to express his feelings. I can handle this”.

- 4) A constructive way to handle anger is to put boundaries/ limits around anger so that we don’t hurt our children emotionally or physically. Working on the things that allow you to get into a calm state means that you are trying to put limits on how your anger is expressed. Say as little as possible until you calm down. For example: “I need to calm down before I can talk about this”
- 5) Once you are calm, you can then unpack the reasons for your anger: “What do I need to do to change the situation?”



Creating a Positive Emotional Bank Account

- When our loving connections with our children diminish, parent-child interactions can be faced with challenges such as defiance, sarcasm, yelling or temper tantrums. These behaviours usually signal that your relationship account is in the red.⁸⁷

Refilling Your Relationship Account

- Some domains within a relationship contribute positively to connection and promoting closeness which can ultimately help in refilling your relationship account with your child.⁸⁸ They are:

Affection- means showing how much you love your children through warmth and care, both physically and emotionally. Accepting their mistakes or behaviours are some ways of showing affection emotionally.

Care- means providing what is necessary for the welfare and protection of your child. Examples of some questions of care are: How can I help you? What is bothering you? What do I need to know about your situation?

Empathy- is the ability to share and understand your child/teen's point of view. Two examples of empathic statements are: "I can see your point and get what you must be going through" ; "I'm trying to understand what you are feeling and why, can you explain?".

Encouragement- is the act of bringing hope and confidence in your child's ability to do something. Some ways of encouraging stances are: "I notice that you were doing/ saying _____ or not doing/ saying _____ while you played with your friends. Sometimes this can be hard, but despite this, you are trying your best. That's great to see/ hear".

Support- is the act of helping your child/teen through love and encouragement and it is also showing that you believe in them and accept them. An example of a supporting statement is "I understand how difficult this is for you and I will help you. I will be there for you".

Involvement- is the act of participating in your child's life for their overall well-being. For instance: Spending 10 minutes after school to hear about your child's day; What was it like for them and how did they spend their day or discussing/ helping with home-work.

Play- this involves connecting through a favourite activity and figuring out ways to have more fun together. For younger children this may be playing with their favourite toys or reading together and for older teens this may involve engaging in their favourite activity like going for a swim or a jog together, volunteering for a cause with them or going shopping.

Acceptance and Validation- is a way of communicating that your relationship with your child/teen is important and solid even when you disagree on issues. To validate your child/teen's feelings is to recognise and understand their thoughts, feelings, behaviours and needs. An example of acceptance and validation can be seen as: "I disagree with your behaviour but I love you".

Reflection Question:

- What are some things that contributed to your relationship account to be in the red? What are some small steps you can take that will fill your account rather than deplete it? Some examples are: connecting after school to find out how your child's day was, snuggling for 5-10 minutes every night, making sure you have enough sleep and turning your cell phone off when you are connecting.

15 Minutes of Connection Time

- Special Time set aside with your child/teen can be an effective parenting tool that can be used to cement a bond or re-create one that is worn out by making an empathic repair and reconnect with your child.⁸⁹
- Setting 15 minutes aside to connect with your child/teen gives them the essential experience of the parent's full attention and sends a message that he/she matters to you. Furthermore, this gives children a safe opportunity to talk about their feelings (happy or sad) and a chance for parents to attune to their child's feelings and moods, which then builds a foundation of trust in the parent-child relationship.⁹⁰

Attuning During Connection Time

- Attunement means to have a better understanding of your child's emotions. It is through the sharing of emotions and attuning to what the other says, thinks and feels that we build connections with each other.⁹¹ In simpler terms, 'Attunement' is being aware of, and responsive to, another. For example: How does your child feel? Are they happy or sad, interested, engaged, capable of listening? Are they in distress, hungry or just needing to be held?

Benefits of Attuning

- Communication that involves an awareness of our own emotions, an ability to respectfully share our emotions, and an empathic understanding of our children's emotions lays a foundation that supports the building of lifelong relationships with our children.
- When we engage in attuned communication with our children, we support them in developing their sense of self and belonging, directly impacting their confidence.
- When children experience an attuned connection from a responsive empathic adult, they feel good about themselves because their emotions have been given resonance and reflection.⁹²

Creating Special Time⁹³

- 1) Announce that you want to have special time and call it by your child's name, ex: "Kaira Time"
- 2) Set a timer for fifteen minutes with your child
- 3) Turn off all phones and electronic gadgets like radios, ipads or TV
- 4) Give your child your full attention with no hidden agendas or distractions
- 5) Alternate taking turns to decide what you will do with your 'special time'. When it is your turn, find ways to talk about feelings and find ways to bring in laughter which is an effective way to release anxiety.
- 6) When it's your child's turn let your child decide what he/she would like to play or do. Enjoy watching your child explore and occasionally say what you see without evaluation. For example: "You are braiding your doll's hair"
- 7) This is a great time to practice/ develop or strengthen your attuning and empathy skills, even if you don't get it right. The key is to make an effort in this direction.
- 8) When the buzzer goes off, give your child a big hug and tell him/her how much you loved your time together and that you look forward to doing this again soon.

Transforming Parenting Practices⁹⁴

- Becoming a parent is one of life's greatest milestones and challenges. As parents, this shifts our focus from self to a focus on your child, which can bring forth a shift in consciousness like no other life experience. Transforming old parenting habits (for example, the way you think or act when your child misbehaves), ultimately impacts your relationship with yourself and your children and can have long lasting negative effects on parent and child development. In order to change habitual, reactive patterns of responding, understanding how change processes occur are necessary and explained below:

Change Processes

- The ability to imagine another way of being or to change your point of view and to take action with what you have learned are two components that are crucial to the change process.⁹⁴ True change needs to be a lived experience, not just a mental exercise, so in other words, we must practice new ways of knowing, thinking or doing.⁹⁵

Promoting Change

Some processes that support change in parenting practices are:

- 1) **Reflective Parenting-** is conscious, intentional parenting and the development of a reflective practice in parenting means to become aware of ourselves as parents and utilize our children and others around us for feedback about how we are doing.⁹⁶ The act of reflecting enables us to bring into the light behaviours or ways of thinking which were previously unconscious.⁹⁷ Most often, we parent the way we were parented, unless there is a conscious effort to shed light on those automatic habits, our parenting habits are in an automatic mode.⁹⁸

Reflective parenting involves stepping back and observing ourselves and realizing that what we do is not who we are because we possess both, strengths and weaknesses. To be reflective, we need to be able to take multiple perspectives without losing a commitment to our own values. We can also apply the same nurturing values that we use or intend to

use with our children to ourselves. For example, forgiving ourselves for our mistakes just like you would with your children, and reflecting on how you would approach the same task/ situation differently next time. A reflective parenting practice involves being open to new ideas and ways of thinking.⁹⁹

- 2) **Encouragement-** is a crucial aspect of human growth and development and that respect, empathy, confidence, focusing on strengths and having hope are key ingredients for encouragement.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, encouragement is an important factor for facilitating development in all domains such as spiritual, physical, cognitive, social and emotional. It is important for parents to learn how to become encouraging towards themselves and to those around them.¹⁰¹ To encourage means to support and bring hope to the tasks of parenting when met with difficulties. Encouragement is not just an action but also a state of being.¹⁰² There is no guarantee of the outcome but the focus is on the process. For example, parents who are encouraging towards their children may choose to respond with empathy even though they are faced with criticism, sarcasm or anger from their children. Another example is to practice compassion and forgiveness for your mistakes and making efforts to think/say/do differently next time , as well as to make a repair in your relationship with your child by taking responsibility for your actions/words or deeds.
- 3) **Journaling-** is an effective way for parents to reflect on their feelings and it can be used as a free flowing stream of observations; to expand creativity or to have a dialogue with someone or some event in our past and to explore alternatives.¹⁰³ Discovering patterns in one's life through writing or journaling can be an important step toward self-awareness, and it can be instrumental in developing a greater sense of agency in determining future directions.¹⁰⁴ In addition, writing bridges the inner and outer worlds and connects the paths of action and reflection.¹⁰⁵ A personal journal is a place where we can connect our inner reflections with the outer actions of daily life because writing something down allows us to step outside of ourselves and reflect on what we see. Journaling entails putting thoughts down on paper and offers us the choice to look at what we have written objectively. Some journaling ideas that you could practice are:
 - a) Having a dialogue with yourself about your day/ life/ event/ experience

- b) Record daily reflections on one side of the page and on the opposite side jot down your wishes/ hopes/ improvements that you want to make
- c) Journal your free flowing thought, without censoring or thinking about what is coming up, with an intention to free up some pent up blocks, in order to be more connected to the present moment
- d) Letters Never Sent- this is an opportunity to write to someone what you might have wanted to say but were unable to.
- e) Three Unsent Letters- the purpose of this exercise is to explore your emotions further. There are three versions of unsent letters: (1) A letter to ‘Negative thoughts’; ‘Worry’ ‘Anger’ or any problem emotion that leads to a dis-connection between you and your child expressing your authentic and uncensored feelings about your relationship with them (2) The second letter involves shifting one’s perspective and imagining that you are momentarily the person to whom you have written your unsent letter, imagining that ‘Anger’ or ‘Worry’ actually receives these letters. Write a letter from any one of them back to you that feels like the most likely response ‘anger’ or ‘worry’ would have rendered (3) Write a letter from ‘Anger’ or ‘Worry’ from their highest qualities. Let it be the letter you wish you receive from either one of them and let it flow as it were their hand, head and heart writing it. ¹⁰⁶



- 4) **Focusing on the Positive-** when we choose to focus on the positive, we are providing a powerful mirror (or a frame of reference) for our children, which helps them to see themselves in a positive light.¹⁰⁷ Focusing on your child’s strengths and positive actions fosters encouragement. Challenging ourselves as parents to look at what you and your child are doing well and celebrating your success will make room for hope and shift your focus from always noticing what is not working to seeing things in a positive light.

Setting Limits and Expectations

- While unconditional love and focusing on the positive are foundations for creating and maintaining healthy relationships, it is equally important for parents to implement appropriate boundaries and have reasonable expectations.¹⁰⁸ Some examples of setting boundaries include: Rules concerning phoning or texting when they will be late and Setting up expectations concerning internet safety or appropriately monitoring their online activity and social media exchanges.
- Being respectful and compassionate towards your child means having good boundaries. You are not respecting your child if you let her/ him walk over the people in their life or say “yes” to all their demands. Part of the parenting role includes having firm boundaries combined with compassion, empathy, which help children feel safe and meet their developmental needs.¹⁰⁹

Perspectives on Discipline

- Advice to parents on how to discipline their children goes back to biblical times and today contemporary print and electronic media have become a market place for new discipline programs.¹¹⁰ Discipline involves situations in which parents and children's wishes/ goals clash, and it defines how conflicts are managed in the family and helps set the emotional tone in the family.¹¹¹ Further, discipline involves guiding a child towards better behaviour, understanding and accepting parents' values or standards and impacts self-regulation. In comparison, punishment involves administering unpleasant consequences following a child's action.¹¹²
- Parental warmth and responsiveness play a crucial role in the effectiveness of discipline. Responsive parenting is the use of warm and accepting behaviors to respond to children's needs and signals. Parental responsiveness promotes a positive self-concept and emotional well-being in children and adolescents.¹¹³ In contrast, using harsh punishment as a form of discipline causes childhood trauma and can lead to a host of mental health problems.¹¹⁴
- The initial relationships between parents and child are the primary relationships in a child's life which serve as a foundation for all further relationships. When a child is mistreated through punishment and behaviors such as yelling, ignoring, shaming or blaming, that child's brain wiring is impacted adversely, and this in turn affects all other relationships and how he/she view themselves and others.¹¹⁵

Disciplining Without Punishment

Can Discipline Be Effective Without Punishment?



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- “Punishment is a very ineffective way of bringing about lasting change in people’s behaviour. Punishments do not inspire remorse or motivate effort; they seldom reform people- criminals, citizens or children; indeed they often backfire and make people angry and obstinate instead”.¹¹⁶
- Reframing the word discipline to ‘teaching’ or ‘positive guidance’ allows room for parents to view disciplining as opportunities to guide behaviour and solve problems with mutual love and reasoning.¹¹⁷ Based on researched evidence some ways of viewing discipline that are effective are:
 - 1) Proactive Prevention- Parents should use proactive prevention strategies to minimize disciplinary encounters and provide positive attention to shape behaviours. For example, if your child is young, physically removing her from dangerous or forbidden situations by distracting her to something harmless- As she grows older, if she/he wants an explanation, give it to her/him in simple terms, without assuming that she/he wants an explanation for every direction you give.¹¹⁸
 - 2) When a young child says “no” it can be seen as a positive form of self- assertion instead of defiance and defiance is often evoked by parental negative and forceful control.¹¹⁹

- 3) Some children are more challenging than others as they may be more active, impulsive or stubborn and this takes more energy to keep them on the right track. However, providing children with reasons when they want them and helping them understand the effects of their behaviour on themselves and others can help children guide their behaviour and internalize a parent's values. Guidance that includes reasons and some incorporation of a child's perspective leads to better outcomes.¹²⁰
- 4) Thinking of replacing the word 'discipline' with 'teaching/ learning how to behave' stops the process of discipline in parenting being something that is imposed on children and becomes something which, with our help, they can do for themselves.¹²¹ In this context, the parent becomes a facilitator to gain a broader set of standards for behaviour. Discipline is then replaced by opportunities for the parent and child to connect and learn and to keep the child's emotional, physical and developmental safety in mind.¹²²
- 5) Parents should work to maximize their children's understanding of behaviour and to themselves understand occasional misbehaviours. For instance, what is the emotion underneath anger- sadness, loneliness or disappointment?

Transmission of Discipline Processes through Generations

- Parenting patterns and processes (eg: discipline and punishment) are transmitted through generations and parents tend to recreate the same type of parenting with their children as their own parents used in parenting them.¹²³
- The transmission of negative parenting patterns (emotional or physical punishment) are based in the processes of avoidance, emotional numbing and disassociation.¹²⁴

Avoidance involves preventing the person from acknowledging the cause behind his suffering and is a conscious process of refusal to get to the source of their trauma. This denial leads to continuation of the negative parenting behaviours in the role of a parent.¹²⁵ **Emotional numbing** is an unconscious process which blunts the stress that trauma causes. For example, adult caregivers might remember the concrete details of their childhood traumas but may repress or numb their emotions attached to those memories. Another parallel process of '**disassociation**' or 'forgetting' the incident may occur, bringing physiological and psychological relief from the stress systems in our body.¹²⁶ On a conscious level, the person blames himself/ herself for the

traumatic experiences in order to maintain the need for attachment to a caregiver and internalizes the parental maltreatment which are then passed down from generation to generation.¹²⁷

- When a person is exposed to abusive parenting patterns, the architecture of that individual's brain is impacted in ways that replay the patterns that have been created in her/his brain. Additionally, the individual also tends to attract similar experiences to those that she/he suffered at the hands of her/his parents during childhood.¹²⁸
- Exposing yourself to the facts concerning your own childhood mistreatment, reflecting on how you feel and experiencing these emotions in a safe environment with a caring, containing and supportive therapist/ counsellor can prevent the repetition of negative parenting patterns. This in turn can lead to being successful in avoiding punishment when disciplining.¹²⁹



Parenting Styles

- During recent decades, parents have become increasingly ambivalent about how firmly they should discipline their children. The most important change in recent generations has been the trend away from strict authoritarian parenting to more child centered discipline.¹³⁰ Diana Baumrind (1968, 1991), a psychologist researched and found that parents interact with their children in patterned ways that reflect four psychological dimensions which were used to determine parenting styles.

(A) Nurturance- provides a supportive and positive emotional environment for learning and feeling accepted. Nurturance includes expressions of affection, positive regard and care, responsiveness to the child's needs and behaviours to safeguard the child's physical and emotional well-being.¹³¹

(B) Communication- Effective parent-child communication relies on reason and uses encouragement to understand the child's feelings and opinions. An optimal communication pattern includes being respectful of your child's feelings and views, uses explanations that are developmentally appropriate and encourages discussion when trying to set limits on behaviour or getting a child to comply with parental values.¹³²

(C) Maturity Demands- concerns with expectations parents have for their child's intellectual, social and emotional progress, as well as their ability to make independent decisions.¹³³

(D) Parental Control- is concerned with how parents regulate and try to induce changes in their children's behaviour (e.g. structuring the child's activities and establishing/enforcing house rules. Control that clarifies the limits to the child's behaviour, provides structure and reduces chaos in the child's life has positive outcomes.¹³⁴

These dimensions were used to describe three parenting styles:

- (1) **Authoritative Parents**- are warm, responsive, involved yet nonintrusive (e.g.s of intrusive- overly involved, nosy or doing things for them which they are capable of doing for themselves); set and enforce reasonable limits; and expect mature behaviours from their children. Authoritative parents use more positive reinforcement, are more accepting and display warmth towards their children. Further, they have more empathy for their children’s experiences. Authoritative parenting is related to positive outcomes which include positive self-esteem, adaptability, self -regulation, social skills that involves thinking of self and other’s needs, perspective taking and low levels of anti-social behaviour.¹³⁵
- (2) **Authoritarian Parents**- are harsh, unresponsive, rigid and use power assertive methods of control (For example: “You have to obey because I said so or because I’m the parent”). Authoritarian parenting is related to negative outcomes such as fearfulness and moodiness; vulnerability to stress and low social competence, self-confidence and initiative in relationships with peers.¹³⁶
- (3) **Permissive Parents**- are affectionate towards their children but they use lax and inconsistent discipline and encourage their children to express their impulses freely. Permissive parenting is related to impulsive, noncompliant and aggressive behaviour in children.¹³⁷
- Parents who use an authoritative style that is responsive, nonintrusive, and permits the child freedom to explore within reasonable limits support cognitive, social and emotional learning and development.¹³⁸



Parents as Emotion Coaches

Parents Role in Emotion Socialization

- Emotions are part of experiences that occur within an individual, as well as between individuals that motivate and direct social behaviours.¹³⁹ Emotion experience, arousal and display are constructive when regulated and expressed in socially normative ways and to establish effective social relationships. However, when emotions are poorly regulated and expressed, they interfere with constructive social processes leading to social relational problems.¹⁴⁰
- Parenting behaviour directed towards the child during daily interactions are the proximal and most powerful processes in socialization and the multitude of internal events such as stress, mental health or parental beliefs leading to causes of certain behaviours, intentions or feelings impact the way children learn about their own behaviours.¹⁴¹

What is Emotion Coaching?

- Children's experience, display and regulation of emotions are shaped by parental behaviour.¹⁴² Effective parent socialization (lifelong process of providing a child with social skills and habits) of child emotions has been called emotion coaching and ineffective parent socialization has been called emotion dismissing.¹⁴³

The Processes of Emotion Coaching

- Negative thoughts and strong emotions are natural, built-in, adaptive processes.¹⁴⁴ For parents to constructively face these challenges, becoming mindful and accepting of your own negative thoughts and feelings and then to distance yourself from them when your internal response interferes with behaving in ways that are in line with your goals and values as a parent can be helpful. Mindfulness, acceptance and distancing allow individuals to "step outside" of their negative thoughts and feelings (i.e. to notice them or defuse them) and then intentionally plan to model responsive behaviours such as empathy, understanding and attunement.¹⁴⁵

Characteristics of Parent Emotion Socialization Practices with Examples (Parent Modeling and Instruction) ¹⁴⁶

Emotion Coaching	Emotion Dismissing
Models awareness and expression: (I'm feeling frustrated right now. I need to take a break and get back to you in 5-10 minutes)	Models constriction of emotions: (Go to your room, you can't talk to me like that)
Models regulation and use (During parent-child heated conflict situations, takes a break and actively tries to calm down with techniques that work individually- breathing, listening to music, writing, walking, praying)	Models dysregulation of emotions (Loses temper or withdraws love by not talking/ disconnecting)
Validates, empathizes with display of emotions	Ignores emotions
Labels the emotion (I notice you are feeling angry/ sad/ worried)	Criticizes (Stop crying like a cry-baby)
Accepts the emotion (I sense that you are frustrated right now. What can I do to help you?)	Escalates (Engages in screaming matches and fuels a power struggle)
Problem solves (source of emotion)- (trying to find the source of worry or anxiety)	Ask to tolerate, minimize (You need to suck it up and not be so weak, that's no reason to be angry, act your age)
Practice problem solving efforts (role play assertiveness responses)	Distract, fix (trying to solve a conflict issue between your child and their friend, when they could have done this for themselves)
Encourage, invite description (encouraging story telling of an incident and getting the child to think of ways to resolve it if appropriate)	Stop commands

Soothe, comfort	Punish
Prompt regulation, self- soothing (what do you need to do/ need me to do in order to calm down?)	Give in (negative reinforcement of dysregulation such as giving in to whining, or temper tantrums)

Learning to Observe Versus React

- One of the most courageous things you can do when your negative emotions, thoughts or feelings such as worries or fears show up is to sit still with them and not do as they say. It's courageous because the impulse to cut and run and respond in a habitual way is automatic. It is important to learn this skill because the urge to act on your negative emotions causes disconnections and takes you away from being the parent that you want to be (think of your values). Practicing mind-watching will teach you to become a true observer of your mind. ¹⁴⁷

Mind Watching¹⁴⁸

- Observing your negative emotions/ thoughts isn't an easy task. Through practice, it'll get easier over time to observe and take note of thoughts, images and urges rather than doing as they say. Here's how you get started:
- Get in a comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. Begin by taking a series of slow, deep breaths. Keep this throughout the entire exercise. Imagine your mind is a medium- sized white room with two doors. Thoughts come in through the front door and leave out the back door. Pay close attention to each thought as it enters. Now label the thought as either a judging thought or a nonjudgmental thought.
- Wait until the thought leaves. Don't try to analyze or hold on to it. Don't believe or disbelieve it. Just acknowledge having the thought. It's just a moment in your mind, a brief visitor in the white room. If you find that you're judging yourself for having the thought, then just notice that. Don't argue with your mind's judgment. Just notice it for what it is and label it: "Judging- there's judging." The key to this exercise is to notice the judgmental thoughts rather than getting caught up in them.
- Keep breathing. Keep watching. Keep listening. A thought is just a thought. Each thought doesn't require you to react; it doesn't make you do anything: it doesn't mean you're less of a person. Observe your thoughts as if they were visitors passing in and out of the white room. Let them have a brief moment on the stage. They're fine the way they are- including the judgement thoughts and all the other uninvited visitors. The important thing is to let them leave when they're ready to go and then greet and label the next thought... and the next.
- Continue this exercise until you sense a real emotional distance from your thoughts. Wait until even the judgments are just a moment in the room- no longer important, no longer requiring action. Practice this exercise once a day.

Emotional Responsiveness

- When a child is experiencing an emotion, whether it's a positive or a negative emotion, a reactive/ explosive emotion or distancing/ shutting down behaviour, it is most important for parents to see and try to understand what they are feeling (what is actually going on for them) and then validate (reflect) your child's feelings. In other words, parents tuning in and responding to their children's emotions is called emotional responsiveness.¹⁴⁹

Focus on Feelings not the Actual Behaviour

Consider the following situation- Your child is mad/ sad/ angry for leaving a fun party, but it's getting late and they have school the next morning:

- Responding to your children with threats “ If you're not going to calm down and go to bed right now, we're not going to do (something fun) tomorrow” or with dismissal of their feelings “You should be grateful that you already got to go to the party”. These are examples of not being emotionally responsive, even though they may be rational or true statements
- Instead, a better response would be to say “I know it's so disappointing that we have to leave this party. It can make you so mad when you have to change what you had hoped to happen.” If we focus on the behaviour instead of the emotions, it is similar to treating symptoms without knowing the cause. This does not mean you don't address negative behaviours or ignore them or that we become permissive parents, or that we only talk about the feelings and we never address the behaviour. As parents, it is crucial to consistently combine being emotionally responsive first, while setting boundaries by addressing their behaviour next, as this will help you get to the root cause of their negative behaviour and reduce it to a great extent.¹⁵⁰

Benefits of Emotional Responsiveness

- Being emotionally responsive calms the brain down and when someone reflects on our emotions, it helps the child or even an adult talk about them.

- Emotional responsiveness builds the brain. When parents pay attention to the internal emotional world of their children, it builds the connective fibres in the brain that make the reactive centres of the brain (fight or flight responses) calm down by the more mature, higher parts of the brain.
- When we have repeated experiences where we are emotionally responsive with our children, we are changing their brains in a way that allows them to have better behaviour and emotional regulation over time.
- Emotional responsiveness builds attachment. Secure attachment between parent and child is promoted by a parent being consistently, predictably emotionally responsive. In other words parents provide sensitive, predictable care, where we pay attention to our child's emotional world.
- Sometimes, caring, educated and well intentioned parents have a hard time with emotional responding because they don't know how to stay with the emotion without problem solving the issue. They may immediately go to blaming someone or something or may try to solve the problem quickly. Remember to **CONNECT** then you **REDIRECT.** ¹⁵¹

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