



Therapeutic Parenting

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Objectives

The Caregiving Relationship

What it is and Why we need it

What it looks like in more detail

WIGO

WIN

Rupture & Repair

Therapeutic Parenting as an embodied relational dynamic

An attuned connection

*“Children need attunement to feel secure
and to develop well,
and throughout our lives we need attunement
to feel close and connected.” Dan Siegel.*

A timely and empathic response to a child's needs even when expressed through dysregulated behaviours

**A reflective relational right brain to right brain,
response to a child's needs and experiences**

Using our own internal state to resonate with the internal state of another to facilitate a 'felt sense'/empathic understanding of their deeper experience.

i.e. To feel and think about their experience

Every child needs experiences of attunement to their physical, psychological and emotional needs.
Being seen is essential for physical survival.

Throughout their lifespan, humans evolve and develop in response to their environment.

Caregiving relationships are the most significant feature within a child's environment.

10-24 yrs (current definition of adolescence provided by the WHO).

This protracted period of dependency provides opportunities for physical, psychological and social-emotional development

Whereas a lack of attuned caregiving leaves a child managing their own survival needs, reducing their energy for cognitive and social-emotional development

Being in receipt of attuned caregiving allows us to devote more attention and energy to our cognitive and social-emotional development.

It is through an attuned relationship that we develop the personal resources that support good mental health, e.g. emotional literacy/intelligence.

By sharing the mind of our caregiver we are scaffolded: e.g. experiences of 'being held in mind,' intersubjectivity, reflectivity and mentalization.

A child is distressed

- ▶ What is Going On
- ▶ What is Needed

- **Calming/Co-regulating Compassionate Connection**

Non-verbal soothing communication (a heart : heart connection that slows their dysregulated heartbeat, tone, touch, expression, eye contact)

- **Reflective**

Empathic understanding – thinking & feeling what it is like to walk in their shoes.

The capacity to “Wonder with warmth about What Is Going On, and What Is Needed”

- **Responsive not Reactive**
- **Unconditional not Conditional**
- **Reparative caregiving not Punitive**
- **Connecting not Rejecting e.g. Time-in not Time-out**
- **Child-centred not Adult-centred (e.g. authoritarian, demanding-controlling)**
- **Child-centred not Child-led (permissive and indulgent)**
- **Acknowledges the child's experience not dismissing their experience**

WIGO

A felt need sets off a cascade of physiological and emotional processes

e.g. We now have the term 'Hangry' to describe the emotional response to a physiological need for food:

We experience a lack of food

Cognitively we know we are only temporarily deprived

Physiologically we feel 'as if' we may starve = Threat!

The threat system evokes fight/flight responses manifested as low level irritability and 'hangry'

Other examples - panic buying during the first lockdown & more recently with petrol

A baby/child (even an adult) can quickly go into panic,
We have evolved to be co-regulated (the polyvagal system)

This need/capacity continues throughout adulthood, although we have also developed the capacity to self-regulate and so can switch between the two.

For a baby, child and young person, the capacity to self-regulate is much less developed

WIN - Co-regulation is needed

To help them experience a sense of safety (through the relationship) which leads to emotional regulation

To help them internalise and learn the capacity to self-regulate

Rupture, Repair and Reconnection

A child need's **Consistency, Safety and Flexibility** in relationship

- ▶ **When** ruptures occur, we need to provide opportunities for **Repair**.
- ▶ Acknowledge the rupture / misattunement / dysregulation
- ▶ tensions released, the disagreement resolved, the fall out managed. The emotionally charged situation, and emotional states can be moved through, let go of, not held on to or brought back up.
- ▶ Most importantly the disconnection can be repaired and connection can be found again.

Fight **externalised/attacking** **strategies**

- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Aggression
- ▶ Tantrums
- ▶ Swearing
- ▶ Fighting
- ▶ Stealing

Flight **Internalised protective** **strategies**

- ▶ Sadness
- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Running away
- ▶ Hiding away
- ▶ Self-harming
- ▶ “mind-less” risk taking
- ▶ Dissociative shutdown
- ▶ Collapse

If we lack a relational connection we can feel -
Destabilised and dysregulated emotionally and
psychologically

We may lose contact with reality (dissociate)

We may lose contact with ourselves (dissociate)

We may lose sight of any meaning or purpose

We can also lose sight of the transitory nature of
emotional distress

We can feel stuck or overwhelmed by dysregulated
emotions.

Recap

Therapeutic Parenting as an embodied
relational dynamic

Attunement & Co-regulation

provides an experience of calm connection and re-connection within a consistent caregiving relationship.

“The experience of a close bond (connection) is a (primary) universal human need” (Bowlby).

This experience of a calm relational connection creates a sense of safety, *‘that all is well’.*

Embodied experiences of attunement shape our *sense of self* and *the stories we live by*

A sense of safety is an embodied experience (independent of consciousness awareness). It is a felt sense resonating from a heartfelt connection.

Pre-conscious sensory experiences are often received and 'read' in the heart-gut domain, an area with some neurological substrates that we typically associate with the brain. There are about 40,000 "cardiac neurons" forming a neural system that has autonomy; it is responsive yet separate from the central nervous system.

WIN – Qualities required in the parent

- ▶ We need a mindful, compassionate connection to our self (**intrapersonal connection**) based upon a healthy history of interpersonal or intrapersonal connectedness or *a coherent autobiographical narrative*.
- ▶ We need **insight** about how our own behavioural patterns are shaped by our own personal history of relational connections. (positive or painful? Helpful or hurtful?) Historical personal stories and family scripts that shape our responses

Interoception (**Intrapersonal awareness**)– mindful awareness of our own internal states, feedback from our own internal organs (heart and gut reactions). Intrapersonal information that may also include interpersonal communication

A physiological state of '**an open, calm and caring heart.**' We need to tend to our own hearts to enable us to be 'moved' by another. Increasing demands and stress reduces this capacity. We need to tend to our own capacity to self-regulate so that we can calm/regulate the heart of another if they are in close proximity to us.

We are evolved to connect to a distressed person, by, somewhat, feeling their pain/distress, and we soothe their distress with a heart:heart response.

A caregiver needs to have the emotional capacity (and desire) to have such a heartfelt connection to their child.

A caregiver needs to be able to tolerate their child's pain without becoming dysregulated themselves.

To do this they need to have processed their own childhood pain/distress.

If not, their child will evoke any distress that has felt too intolerable.

They will become dysregulated and reactive. Reacting from their own place of (psychological) threat.

Both the child and parent will become a dysregulated dyad.

The Dynamics of Therapeutic Parenting

- ▶ The child's history (epigenetic, intergenerational, in-utero, post-natal, early life, childhood experiences)
- ▶ Did they have experiences of a calming connection?
- ▶ Have they been shaped to turn towards or turn away from caregivers and connection?

In conclusion

We are currently flooded with 'how to guides' to parenting and therapeutic parenting. Yet, parenting, as with any other relationship, is the unique relational dynamic between two embodied minds (hearts and minds)

By developing awareness of how we are connecting and recognising that through this connection we shape each other in relationship, we can ensure that we facilitate growth more often than we cause harm in our relationships as parents, professionals and in all our relational encounters.