

Emotional Attachment and Healthy Development

by Mary Hartzell

How do we build healthy attachment relationships that supports our children's development? In the book

Parenting From the Inside Out that I co-authored with child psychiatrist Daniel J. Siegel, we look at both research in child development and brain science to understand this, as well as other issues directly relevant to parents and those working with children.

How we communicate with children has a profound impact on how they develop. Young children are very sensitive to the significant adults in their lives and build their self-understanding upon the interactions they have with their

parents, teachers, and caregivers. When these primary and secondary attachment figures have a deeper self-understanding they can offer a foundation of emotional well-being and security that enables children to thrive.

Research in the field of child development has demonstrated that a child's security of attachment to parents is very strongly connected to the parents' understanding of their own early-life experiences. It is not just what happens to the parents in their early life but also how they have come to make sense of those experiences that influence their interactions with their own children. Working with children is an opportunity for us to grow as individuals. Personal and professional development goes hand in hand. It is through a deeper understanding of ourselves that we deepen our connections and relationships with others.

Our ability to have sensitive, reciprocal communication nurtures a child's sense of security. Trusting, secure relationships help children do well in many areas of their life, including social, emotional, and cognitive domains. Communication that involves an aware-

ness 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 interpersonal relationships. Your ability to communicate about emotions supports a child in developing a sense of vitality and empathy; and these qualities are important for the nurturing of close, intimate relationships throughout the life span.

So often we are preoccupied with changing a child's behavior and are unaware of the emotions that may have been motivating the behavior. When the sense of connection that comes from the sharing of emotions and a sense of *feeling felt* is absent, a child is usually not open to listening to us, even if we think we are saying exactly the *right thing*. One way of describing emotion is as a range of feelings that we can sense in ourselves and perceive in others, and that we can usually label with words such as sadness, anger, fear, joy, surprise, or shame. These categorical emotions, however, are only one aspect of the important role that emotions play in our lives.

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More basic than categorical emotion is primary emotion, which can be thought of as surges of energy through the mind that give us an initial orientation toward an experience and an assessment of the goodness/badness of an experience. It is emotion that prepares our bodies for action. An appraisal of "good" leads to approach; an appraisal as "bad" leads to withdrawal. Primary emotions are directly observed through nonverbal expressions. Facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, gestures, posture, and the timing and intensity of response reveal the essence of how a person is feeling.

Primary emotion can be thought of as a process that integrates distinct entities into a functional whole. The brain has a massive amount of neural cells capable of firing in a chaotic fashion and needs an integrating process to help it achieve balance and self-regulation. Emotion is the process of integration that brings self-organization to the mind.

Let's look at how this might translate into your interactions with a child. When a child does something that you deem as misbehavior, your first response sets the tone for what will happen next. If the child sees you as a threat, because your voice is loud and intense, and your face looks angry, he will either fight, flee, or freeze in an effort to defend himself against this uncomfortable or frightening experience. With the child in a defensive mode, he is no longer open and available to take in whatever *good advice* you may be giving him. It is no longer a teachable moment, unless what you want to be teaching him is what an adult does when she gets angry or frustrated. Your emotional intensity is running interference to making a connection that could open the channels for communication and help the child understand his own emotions and make changes in his behavior.

Connecting to primary emotional states is how we tune in to each other's feelings. When a child feels positive sensations, like

joy and mastery, an adult can share this emotional state and reflect it with the child. It is especially helpful to reflect the experience in a way that gives the experience back to the child, rather than just letting them know what you think and how you feel. Likewise, when a child feels negative or uncomfortable sensations, the adult can offer respectful listening that doesn't judge the child and a soothing presence that can comfort the child. In these moments when a child is full of emotion, if our first response is one of joining with them, they are able to experience a connection that enables them to reorganize.

When emotions, which are a function of the right hemisphere of the brain, are no longer so intense and raw, the child will be better able to engage the left hemisphere where logic, cause and effect, and reason reside. The teacher or parent can then support the child in learning problem solving skills. If we try to move too fast and ignore or minimize the child's feelings, they go unprocessed and are not able to be integrated into a loving self-acceptance. The same goes for us as adults. If we ignore our emotions they often grow and we end up being triggered by some event later and react in ways that we may regret. When a child experiences an attuned connection from a responsive empathetic adult, they feel good about themselves because their emotions have been given resonance and reflection. The following story can perhaps bring more clarity to this concept of attunement.

I observed the following interaction between a young girl and a student teacher on the school playground. Sara was a very tentative four and a half-year old who was socially and physically cautious and was very hesitant to try new experiences. The teachers had worked carefully to

build her confidence by providing learning opportunities that she could master with support and encouragement.

It was late spring and Sara was just beginning to challenge herself. In the playground was a large sycamore tree that had fallen over many years before and had been left as a natural bridge spanning ten feet of the yard. The children loved to walk across the log. Doing so was a great accomplishment. Sara, however, had never ventured to attempt walking on it until one day in mid-May, her confidence budding like the lilacs; she stepped onto the log and completed her journey to the other end.

A student teacher had been watching her and as soon as Sara stepped off the end of the log the young woman exploded with cheers and applause because she was so excited about Sara's accomplishment. "Yea! Hooray! You're terrific! You're the greatest!" The teacher exclaimed loudly, jumping around and waving her arms with excitement. Sara looked at the teacher shyly and standing rigidly, managed a faint smile. For weeks afterward, Sara avoided the log, and it took a great deal of encouragement for her to try it again.

What was amiss in this interaction? Certainly the student teacher was positive toward Sara's accomplishment, but she missed attuning to Sara's experience. Her response reflected her own pride and excitement and was not about Sara's experience of mustering her courage and taking a great risk. The essence of Sara's experience was not reflected by the teacher's remarks. Actually, they were overwhelming to Sara and did not support her in taking a risk and trying to walk on the log again. "Maybe I won't be able to do it that well again. I'd better not try it or I

might fall off," Sara most likely thought. Being "terrific" is a hard act to follow for a cautious child, so she played it safe and did not build on her initial accomplishment.

What could the teacher have said that would have nurtured the emerging self-confidence that Sara was exhibiting? How could she have encouraged her in a way that would have been respectful of Sara's experience? How could the teacher's response have encouraged Sara to reflect on her own accomplishment in a way that she could own it and develop it further with confidence?

If the teacher could have reflected what she saw Sara accomplish in a warm and caring way, Sara could have seen herself reflected in the teacher's response. The teacher might have said, "Sara, I watched you carefully put one foot in front of the other and you walked all the way across to the other side. You did it! It was a little scary, since it was your first time, but you kept going. Good for you! You are really learning to trust your body."

This statement would have been the teacher's reflection of Sara's experience. The teacher's actual reaction tells more about the teacher's experience than it does about Sara's. The proposed reflection message that she could have offered, would have allowed Sara to integrate the experience and build on her accomplishment. This is an attuned, connecting response. This collaboration offers a reflection of both her outer behaviors and an understanding of her internal mental processes to provide an authentic reflection of Sara's ongoing experiences. In order to enrich coherent self-knowledge, children need to experience the integrating reflections of others in a way that matches both

their internal and external experience. When we join with children in attuned communication we support them in developing an integrated and coherent story of their own lives.

Attuned communication supports the emergence of a more autonomous self and flexible self-regulation. Emotional communication enables a form of joining that is an integrating process that promotes vitality and well being in both the child and the adult. The stronger sense of self that is developed through this joining enriches a child's capacity for self-understanding and compassion.

Attuned communication is not something that we do all the time. Children, just like us, have changing needs for connection and solitude, and continual reflection could feel intrusive. Understanding the important role that emotions play in our lives and the lives of children can help us to slow down and listen. When children are upset or distressed we can reflect their experience rather than quickly try to fix the situation. This helps them to integrate their emotions and develop a more coherent sense of self. Whether they are upset because of an interaction with another child or a task they're finding frustrating, our mindful, empathetic listening is the best first response. By making a meaningful connection and reflecting from their point of view we help them to see themselves more clearly, deepen their self-understanding, and make more successful choices in the future. Isn't that the essence of our work: building a future where children respect both themselves and others and create meaningful, caring relationships in their own lives?

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