



PARENTING

GUIDE

EcoParent

Publisher
Sam Stedman, PhD

Editor-in-Chief
Jen Smith

Creative Director
Kris Antonius, cityfolkcreative.ca

guide contributors

Lesley Lacny (M.A., C. Psych), is a registered psychologist with over 15 years of experience in the counselling field. She maintains a private practice in Toronto and enjoys working through life's challenges with children, adolescents, families, couples and individuals. She also keeps herself busy by chasing after her twin boys.

Dr. Vanessa Lapointe is passionate about "big people" seeing the world through a child's eyes. Mother of two and founder of The Wishing Star Lapointe Developmental Clinic, she is also author of the best-selling book *Discipline without Damage: How to Get Your Kids to Behave Without Messing Them Up*, and *Parenting Right From the Start: Laying a Healthy Foundation in the Baby and Toddler Years*.

Dr. Deborah MacNamara is a developmentalist and on faculty at the Neufeld Institute working alongside Dr. Gordon Neufeld. She is the Director of Kid's Best Bet Counselling Centre and author of the bestselling book, *Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (Or Anyone Who Acts Like One)*, and *The Sorry Plane*, a children's picture book.

Dr. Stephanie Peltz is a licensed naturopathic doctor practicing in both BC and Ontario whose expertise is in female and pediatric health, including fertility and pregnancy. Her low-invasive, natural health toolkit includes nutrition, lifestyle, herbs, vitamins, and more. She loves hiking with her son, practicing yoga, and experimenting in the kitchen.

Dr. Leslie Solomonian is Associate Professor at the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine, and maintains a private naturopathic practice in Toronto with a strong interest in pediatric wellness. She also sits on the board of the CNME and is a Director of the Pediatric Association of Naturopathic Physicians. Leslie is currently writing a textbook on Naturopathic and Integrative Pediatrics.

Well, hello there!
Nice to meet you!

Congratulations, by the way, on raising a great kid. It's a wonderful thing you're doing.

Of course, you already know that parenting is an ever-evolving journey. Just when you think you've kinda got a handle on things, the rules of the game change. That's why we all need some sage advice once in a while to coax out our best mindful, attachment-based parenting. And so, we're very excited to offer you this collection of articles from our incredibly insightful parenting experts. We hope you find it useful on your way.

And there's so much more we'd like to share with you. Just click the banners on the following page to stay informed and inspired, the EcoParent way!

Healthily yours,

The EcoParent Team.



find us on **FACEBOOK**

follow us on **INSTAGRAM**

receive our **E-NEWSLETTER**

subscribe to our **MAGAZINE**

snuggle up with our **WEBSITE**

DISCIPLINE THROUGH *Connection*

MANAGING BEHAVIOURS WHILE
KEEPING YOUR CONNECTION STRONG

by **lesley** lacny m.a., c. psych

In response to your repeated requests to put the toys away, your preschooler screams “no” and flings his Lego creation in your direction. You discover the depth of your pre-teen’s “swearing vocabulary” during a heated discussion about cell phone use. For Sunday lunch, you get served the same old excuse as your teen explains why he missed the previous night’s curfew.

Figuring out the ‘right’ way to discipline our kids can be challenging. A glance around the parenting section of your local bookshop will quickly serve to illustrate the polarized and polarizing range of parenting styles out there: sanctions vs. rewards, understanding vs. tough love, structure vs. going with the flow, etc. Inadvertently, our attempts often end in defeat. This can end up looking like more of the behaviour we were hoping to stop in the first place, frustration on both sides, and disconnection. But what we’re really trying to achieve is the opposite: show our kids we care, help them grow into responsible, caring individuals, and stop the behaviour that is driving us mad!

So, how can you discipline your child respectfully, in a way that will maintain a close connection, and that will promote healthy behaviours and coping skills? No one has all the answers; however, we now know a few things about raising children that our parents and grandparents didn’t know. In particular, we understand more about the brain and how it is wired. It’s up to us to put these recent discoveries into practice.

Understanding the brain

Our front brain (the prefrontal cortex) is where we do our logical and rational thinking. This part of the brain does not fully develop until our early to mid twenties! When we are overstressed, the front brain gets ‘hijacked’ as our limbic system (a more primitive part of the brain) takes over, acting on impulses and emotion. A child’s ability to think about their actions and restrain themselves goes out the window.

You know these moments. Your kid is losing it, and you can feel yourself starting to follow suit. You respond out of anger and say or do things you swore you never would. As adults, it can take everything we have to stay calm, and we have the benefit of a fully developed front brain! Imagine how difficult it is for a child; yet more often than not, this is what we expect of them.

Now let’s throw mirror neurons into the mix. Mirror neurons fire as we observe, causing our brains to respond as if the actions and emotions were our own.¹ So, if you are responding to your children with anger and aggression, in that exact moment neurons are firing in their own brains that also stimulate anger and aggression.² According to this theory, responding to your child with empathy and validation could promote their own ability to be empathetic. Monkey see, monkey do.

Striving for balance

Keeping neuroscience in mind, the science of discipline is moving away from threats and isolation, towards connection and validation, while setting limits and teaching lessons.

Harsh discipline from previous generations may have kept children ‘in line’; however, not without a potentially negative impact on the parent-child relationship and the child’s self worth.

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies a lack of discipline. Giving in to your child’s every desire makes it difficult for children to learn how to manage disappointment and understand limits and boundaries.

Then there is that elusive middle ground. Many contemporary experts agree that balance is key, providing structure that is firm, flexible, and functional.

A 2016 study linked an individual’s level of happiness and professional success in adulthood to the way in which they were raised.³ Through analysis of the survey responses, the team identified four key parenting factors: level of interest shown in child, trust, rules, and independence. Based on the ‘weight’ of each of these factors in a parenting style, the researchers identified the following categories:

SUPPORTIVE: High or average levels of independence, high levels of trust, high levels of interest shown in child, large amount of time spent together

STRICT: Low levels of independence, medium-to-high levels of trust, strict or fairly strict, medium-to-high levels of interest shown in child, many rules

INDULGENT: High or average levels of trust, not strict at all, time spent together is average or longer than average

EASYGOING: Low levels of interest shown in child, not strict at all, small amount of time spent together, few rules

HARSH: Low levels of interest shown in child, low levels of independence, low levels of trust, strict

AVERAGE: Average levels for all key factors³

The survey results demonstrated that participants reporting a supportive upbringing had high incomes, high happiness levels, academic success, and a strong sense of morality. Participants reporting a strict upbringing (where they were paid a lot of attention but with strict disciplinary methods) reported high academic success and high salaries, but high stress levels and lower levels of happiness.³

In her book *The Parent’s Toolshop*, parent educator Jody Johnston Pawel, LSW, CFLE, presents parenting styles as a continuum (see diagram next page). Jody acknowledges that parenting styles are influenced by one’s upbringing and conditioned beliefs, but maintains that we can still consciously choose a style based on one’s parenting goals. Would you like to know where you fall on the scale? Try Jody’s quiz⁵ (page 31) to find out...

Jody views the “balanced” style as most effective in reaching positive parenting goals. What a perfect world if we could live in balance and maintain that ‘supportive approach’ all the time! Given that we all react and respond in ways that are less than ideal, this remains a noble but unattainable goal. Having said that, here are some examples of how supportive approaches to discipline play out in everyday life and some suggestions that may make it easier to avoid our sometimes less-than-ideal reactions.



Before it happens:

TEACH THE NEUROSCIENCE: Help your child understand how the brain works and what happens inside our bodies when we are stressed. Too broad a topic to address here, if you need some guidance I like the kid-friendly explanation provided by psychiatrist Dr. Dan Siegel and child and adolescent therapist Dr. Tina Payne Bryson in their book *The Whole Brain Child*.

INTRODUCE AND MODEL CALMING TECHNIQUES: Start simple: breathe! It seems like such a simple thing yet it can be difficult to access when we need it most. A few deep breaths could be all it takes to turn off the 'alarm' and bring your child back into her front brain. Start young and help your child develop the habit of harnessing the power of her breath.

Try this: Have your child or teen lie on his back with his eyes closed and a hand on his belly. As he slowly inhales through his nose, ask him to pretend that he is inflating a balloon inside his belly. As he exhales through the mouth, he pretends he is letting the air out of the balloon as his belly deflates. For younger children, use bubbles or pinwheels, or have them lie down and 'rock a stuffy to sleep' on their belly to demonstrate the same technique. Use mood rings or biofeedback cards to help your child monitor the shift in his body before and after breath work.⁷

Additional relaxation and mindfulness activities:

- *Be the Boss of your Stress: Self-Care for Kids* by Timothy Cuthbert and Rebecca Kajander
- *The Mindful Child* by Susan Kaiser Greenland
- Smilingmind.com.au & www.stopbreathethink.org provide guided mindfulness exercises for children and teens.

In the moment:

TRY TO STAY CALM! We can't always calm our children but we can work on calming ourselves. Give yourself a time out, take some deep belly breaths, hit the reset button, and try to get back to your own front brain. Remember the theory of mirror neurons and trust that staying calm will help bring your child to a calmer place...eventually!

TRY FOCUSING ON INITIATING A CONVERSATION VERSUS JUMPING RIGHT TO CONSEQUENCES: If your end goal is to try to teach something, jumping straight to consequences will likely end in the lesson being lost: instead of experiencing the feelings that come from having made a not so good decision, your child's brain will likely be focused on how angry she is at you. The goal is not to avoid your child being upset with you or the situation; we are simply trying to avoid escalating the situation. Or when it does escalate, work towards turning off the alarm

and supporting your child to get back into their 'learning brain' where they can begin to think about the impact their actions or decisions are having.⁹

For example: Your teen misses his curfew again. As he attempts to sneak in the door, you interject:

Knee-jerk rejection: *"Where have you been? Don't you know what time it is? I've been worried sick – get to your room – you're grounded..."*

Instead try:
 Parent: *"I've been worried sick, what happened?"*
 Teen: *"My cell died and I lost track of time."*

Parent: *"It's late and it is not the best time to discuss this. Let's talk about this tomorrow."* (Never fear! We will be getting to tomorrow in the next section...)

LET YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCE THEIR FEELINGS: No one enjoys seeing their child upset or listening to them scream in rage at the top of their lungs. Whether it's anger, sadness, or fear, it is natural to want the behaviour to stop or to try to make everything better. Yet telling a child to calm down is like standing in front of a freight train expecting it to stop. Telling a child to "get over it" inadvertently sends a message that it is not okay for her to be disappointed. Validating and listening to her experience can help teach her to connect to her emotions.

Knee-jerk reaction: *"How many times do I have to tell you? You are not getting that toy. End of discussion and I don't want any crying out of you..."*

Instead try: *"I can see you are really disappointed, I know how much you wanted that toy. I know it's hard when you can't get what you really want"*

ALLOW CHILDREN SPACE TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM: In her book *Elevating Childcare: a Guide to Respectful Parenting*, parenting educator Janet Lansbury suggests using what she calls "sportscasting" with younger children. Avoid judging, fixing, shaming, or blaming. Focus on keeping your child safe, state what you see, and allow them the space to experience their feelings. Think of it as a non-judgmental, factual account of events just as if you were the commentator in a sporting event.

For example: *"You both want to play with the red airplane yet there is only one. Hmmm....how are you going to solve this problem?"*

I am amazed at how well this can work. When fighting over a toy, seeing my 3 year old boys come up with their own idea of taking turns made me realize how sometimes stepping back can be the best thing.

Ride it out:

Often times, there will be nothing you can do in the moment but ride it out. Try to keep yourself calm, reassure your child that it is okay for them to have their feelings, and keep themselves and others safe.

Immediately following a Lego throwing incident:

"It is okay for you to be angry but I won't let you throw your toys. I'm moving your toys so no one gets hurt and your toys don't get broken."

Your teen swears at you after being denied an extended curfew:

"I get that you are angry with me but it is not okay for you to swear at me. I'm going downstairs to get some space and we can talk later when you are calmer."

After the encounter:

GO BACK TO WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THINGS ARE CALM: You do not need to do the teaching in the moment for the impact to happen. Knowing that in the moment the 'alarms' are likely going off in your child's brain, allowing things to be restored to a calmer place creates an opportunity for a 'teachable moment'. It could be moments, hours, or for older children, even days later. Be consistent but not rigid, help them to see how their actions impacted others and help them play a part in trying to make things right.

The Lego throwing incident is over and your preschooler is now back to 'calm mode':

"I know you were really frustrated when I told you it was time to put your toys away, but throwing your toys is not okay. Let's come up with some ideas of what you can do instead when you are feeling angry."

The dust has settled after the swearing incident:

"I felt attacked when you swore at me earlier. I know you were angry with me but it's important to treat each other with respect."

For the teen that missed his curfew:

"I get that that's hard when your friends are staying out later than you. This isn't working well for either of us. I can't let you stay out as long as you want but I am open to some compromising. Let's sit down and talk about it and see if there is a reasonable middle ground... but lying about it and me not knowing where you are scares me and doesn't help me to trust you. What could you have done differently last night?"

IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO DO THE REPAIR: Knowing that things will not always go as intended, look for an opportunity to do the repair. Reflect on what led up to your 'alarm' going off and what you could have done differently to respond more consciously. Focus on taking accountability for your actions and help your child to understand that we all make mistakes; it is what we do with our mistakes that can matter most.

For example:

"I am sorry I yelled at you earlier. I was frustrated and I should have taken some deep breaths to help me calm down."

There may not be a magic solution or one size fits all approach; however, arming ourselves with information, reflecting on our own behaviour, and working to push the pause button on impulsive reactions can help lead us in our never ending quest to parent more consciously and intentionally. •

Diagram, page 82: Permission to reprint granted by author, Jody Johnston Pawel, LSW. The Parent's Toolshop © 1997

Quiz, page 83: Co-written by Jody Pawel and Pam Dillon of the Dayton Daily News (for 4/6/98 article). Copyright 2000, The Parent's Toolshop. Reprinted by permission of Ambris Publishing, Springboro, OH.

References:

1. Winerman, L. (2005). *The mind's mirror*. The Monitor, Vol. 8, no. 9. The American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct05/mirror.aspx>
2. Banks, A. (Interviewee). (2010). *Humans are hardwired for connection? Neurobiology 101 for parents, educators, practitioners, and the general public*. [Interview transcript] . Retrieved from Wellesley Centres for Women website: <http://www.wcwonline.org/2010/humans-are-hardwired-for-connection-neurobiology-101-for-parents-educators-practitioners-and-the-general-public>
3. Kobe University. (News brief, 2016, June 17). *How do parenting methods affect your child's future?* Retrieved from: http://www.kobe-u.ac.jp/en/NEWS/research/2016_06_17_01.html
4. Pawel, J. (2000). *The Parent's Toolshop: the universal blueprint for building a healthy family*. Springboro, OH: Ambris Publishing.
5. Pawel, J. & Dillon, P. (2000). *The parent's toolshop, parenting styles quiz*. Retrieved from: <http://parentstoolshop.org/resources/quiz/>
6. Siegel, D. J., & Payne Bryson, T. (2012). *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
7. Culbert, T., & Kajander, R. (2007). *Be the Boss of Your Stress: Self Care for Kids*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.
8. Kaiser Greenland, S. (2010). *The Mindful Child*. New York, NY: Free Press.
9. Siegel, D. J., & Payne Bryson, T. (2014). *No-Drama Discipline*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
10. Lansbury, J. (2014). *Elevating Childcare: a guide to respectful parenting*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform



TAMING BEDTIME MONSTERS

When Sleepy Time is Scary Time

by dr. **deborah** macnamara, phd

Mommy! I had a bad dream!" my daughter yelled one night after being "asleep" for five minutes. As I returned to her room and sat with her, she told me she had a dream that the roof of the house had been ripped off by wind and she was sucked up to Jupiter, and I couldn't get her back.

"Jupiter?" I said. "That would be scary and that is a really long way from home." She nodded with her wide eyes darting around the room. I added, "Do you really think I couldn't get you back from there?" She looked unsure. I said, "Nothing is strong enough to keep me from taking care of you: not wind or space travel to Jupiter." She looked pleased but the irony of my statement hit me: neither Jupiter nor the wind would be strong enough to keep me away but my own need for both sleep and having to work at night certainly was.

For many parents who still have work left to do in the evening, or even those who just need a little quiet time to themselves, this nighttime neediness can be exhausting. How do we show up as generous and caring parents at night with so many competing needs? Some families are able to solve the issue by co-sleeping with their kids and while this practice happens all over the world, each family differs in their bedtime choices and capacities.

THE SEPARATION MONSTER

Part of understanding sleep challenges in kids is making sense of why monsters and bad thoughts can appear at night. For many kids, monsters don't appear because they have learned about *monsters*; rather, it is facing separation that makes the monsters appear in the first place. Monsters or other scary things are not uncommon in a two- to three-year-old as their brain develops with increasing consciousness and imagination, allowing for sophisticated stories and images. Monsters, like separation, pose the threat of taking you away from the people you want to be with. Nighttime is the biggest separation kids face because their unconscious, and indeed their separate bedroom, takes them away from their caretakers. In short, nighttime = separation = monsters.

When separation is present, a child can have a huge emotional response including clingy pursuit, frustration, and alarm. These emotions can fuel behaviour like excess bedtime energy, tears, tantrums, and refusing to listen to directions. As a child gets stirred up with emotion at night, their parents are often not far behind. But the dance of frustration set to the music of inflamed emotion does not have to be the result of bedtime battles. There is a better way and it starts by reducing separation.

FROM MATURITY TO INDEPENDENCE

Separation is provocative for young kids because, as nature intends, they are not ready to take care of themselves and are highly dependent on adults. A child needs five to six years of strong, reliable, generous care given by an adult in order to grow into a separate self. At three years of age a child is often overhead as saying, "I do it myself" or "Me do"—a clear sign they are moving towards independence. By the time they are six years of age (with stable, healthy development), their brains are more suited for separation from caretakers and they are ready to head to school.



"For many kids, monsters don't appear because they have learned about monsters; rather, it is facing separation that makes the monsters appear in the first place."

A common myth held about young children is that they must practice at separating from us in order to grow up. This is false, and in fact quite the opposite is true. Once they are more mature and independent, they will *then* naturally detach from us. It is nature that grows a child up and makes them want to do things for themselves. It is our job to figure out how to hold onto them until their maturity takes the lead and pushes them towards more separate functioning.



"A common myth held about young children is that they have to practice at separating from us in order to grow up. This is false and in fact quite the opposite is true."

FROM SCARED TO SECURE

If separation is the problem, then attachment is the cure. It seems counterintuitive, but to help a child with separation at night we need to help them feel *closer* to us, not convince them to stay away. When a child can take a parent's presence for granted, they won't feel motivated to cling or chase the parent in desperation, nor be emotionally stirred up. What *doesn't* work is underscoring separation with statements such as: "I am leaving in 5 minutes, you need to stay in your room," or "I don't want to see you until the morning." There are many ways we can increase connection with young kids, and it starts by taking the lead in matters of attachment and relationship.

Take the lead in holding on

Understand that a child isn't trying to *give* us a hard time at night but is *having* a hard time because of their immaturity and fear of being separate. Just as when they struggle with other challenges, it should help us find *more* generosity. It also helps to understand that while we can't make a child sleep, we can pave a warm relational path to help them get there.

Accept that we are the ones responsible for steering a child through the challenges at night rather than blaming them for their "failure"; or unleashing frustration onto them instead of helping them with

their emotions. When a child can rest in a parent's care emotionally, then the monsters are less formidable, and nighttime can be a time they associate with contact and closeness.

Examine what we can change and what we cannot. Perhaps we need to ask for help, reduce responsibilities, or plan differently. The list of things that interfere with bedtime tranquility may be endless but what is important is that the adult seize the steering wheel in reducing separation at night and holding on to the child emotionally.

Bridge the nighttime divide

Prepare your child for the goodbyes and plan for the next hello. Holding on to a child doesn't mean you can't separate from them; it means that you offer them a bridge to the next point of contact. When a child focusses on your return rather than the goodbye, then the separation they feel is diminished. When you take the lead and plan for the next hello, then, despite the monsters, the child can rest easy that there *will* be a next hello and that *you* are planning for it. This might mean talking about what you are going to do the next day or in the week ahead. It might involve laying out clothes for the morning or picking out a book to read together before breakfast.

Reassure and bridge the nighttime with check-ins or reminders for them to listen for your sounds as you clean the dishes or work on the computer. You might come and visit them and give them a paper heart that you put kisses in, or you might fluff up their pillow and fill it with "never-ending hugs." Whatever you choose to do, the message should be that there is always some connection to be anticipated and the parent has the job of remembering it.

Listen generously to their stories

Engage with your child as evening settles in. There is something special about nighttime chats with a young child. As everything comes to a still point at the end of the day, their little minds start asking questions and their imagination comes to life. Some of the best conversations you can have with a young child are when they have your undivided attention and are moved to share their ideas and feelings with your undistracted self. You become their counsellor, their confidante, and their consultant in those priceless nighttime chats. Most importantly, you will become irreplaceable as you spend your time enthusiastically inviting their ideas in.

Regale your little ones with bedtime stories about when they were younger. They often like to hear funny stories of things they did, or what *you* did when you were a child. In sharing stories, we transmit more than just facts. We reveal our values and our thoughts about who we are and who they are to us.

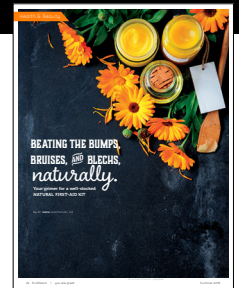
Soon enough our children will grow and become more independent and need us less. We don't need to hold it against a child that separation is so hard, that monsters appear, or that dreams are scary. Instead, take delight that we can bring such comfort. It is a testament to our relationship that our kids want to turn to us for contact and closeness. The secret to bedtimes is helping a child see that it's not their job to strive to hold on to us but to take for granted that we won't let go of them. When they take this to heart, they can better rest and separate into sleep. •

For nine years, EcoParent has been
Canada's top print resource for

conscientious PARENTS



optimize your family's HEALTH
with advice from naturopaths & holistic nutritionists



DETOX your environment
and create your healthiest home



nurture ATTACHMENT
with advice from our parenting experts



20% off your subscription
with code: PARENT20

CLICK HERE
to subscribe



PICKY EATERS

From food **WARS** to mealtime **PEACE**

by dr. **stephanie** peltz, nd

© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [LightFieldStudios]

Picture this: a mother zooms home after a busy workday. She walks in the door and tries to connect with her child while assembling a dinner that fits the bill: Does it include fresh vegetables? And no refined sugar? Or maybe she's attempting a gluten-free/dairy-free/plant-based meal. Dinner is finally ready and she sits down as her darling three-year-old takes one look at the labour of love in front of her and yells, "YUCK!" before promptly tossing the meal onto the floor. *Ugh!* Can you relate?

Picky eating is a hot topic. Food activist and author Sally Fallon states: "In no period of our history as a nation have North Americans been so concerned about the subject of diet and nutrition." Full disclosure: at one time in my bright-eyed and bushy-tailed naturopathic career, I delivered a lot of textbook advice to parents about *their* picky eaters. Then I had my son, and embarked on a long, winding journey of eating with him. Needless to say, I have been utterly humbled by the process.

Our eating habits are shaped by a multitude of factors. What a child is served, and accepts, is often determined by a complex combination of the family's ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic, knowledge, media consumption, geographical location, politics, philosophy, and values. Other influences include the child's genetics, mood, sleep, appetite, upbringing, the food's availability, convenience, texture, colour, smell, taste, and so, so much more. *Phew, that's a lot of variables!*

Never fear. Contrary to what you might think, the bulk of childhood picky eating, with a few exceptions, is actually within the realm of normal. For the most part, parents become concerned with a couple of common stumbling blocks that arise from the first solid food introduction and may last well into the school years. Specifically, parents want to make sure their child is getting enough vegetables,

and if they're eating veggies at all, are they getting enough variety? Parents tell me they dread mealtime — and I know the feeling. Such sentiments may be inevitable from time to time, but can be exhausting over the long term. Think about how often our kids need to be fed! Try incorporating some of these tips, the goal of which is an easier, more peaceful mealtime — even if some of that food still ends up on the floor!

VEGGIES, VEGGIES, AND MORE VEGGIES!

Start a small garden. Kids are more likely to eat something they watched go from seed to plate. Let them "pick" their own dinner.

Little helpers, anyone? Kids also tend to eat more when they are involved in the planning/shopping/cooking process.

I'm hungry! Try offering vegetables first, before other foods, and right after exercise and fresh air, when kids' appetites are high.

Get creative. Preparation style and presentation can make a big difference. Give one of those crinkle cutters a shot, or turn their usual sandwich into an open happy-faced monster with peppers for a smile and carrots for fangs.

Get sneaky! If needed, sneak some veggies into smoothies, baking, soups, and other comfort foods. See Dr. Heidi Lescanec's recipes for some great examples.

EXPLORING NEW FOODS WHILE MAINTAINING PEACEFUL MEALTIMES IS POSSIBLE!

Serving Style can make all the difference! Why not try cutting some food out in fun shapes, or investing in a spiralizer?

Consider the “division of responsibility” model, developed by dietician Ellen Satter: the parent decides *when* to eat, *what* to serve, and *where* to serve it, and the child decides *whether* and *how much* to eat.

Offer layered meals, with plenty of healthy options so there is always one ‘win’ available.

Monitor your child’s consumption over the course of a week rather than focusing on each individual meal. Studies show it typically balances out.

Model good eating habits. Try and enjoy a variety of foods yourself, sit down to eat, and avoid electronics at the table.

Keep mealtimes as relaxing as possible. Set the table, play soft music, light candles, and lower the pressure by refraining from commenting on what/how much your child is eating.

Avoid rewarding and bribing with food, especially sweets.

Get nutrition in at breakfast. It may be easier, especially for young ones, due to end-of-day fatigue or over-stimulation, which can make little ones uncooperative at suppertime.

Consider cutting down on snacks if intake at meals is continually an issue.

Don’t give up! Two- to five-year-olds are known to resist unfamiliar foods. It may take 10 to 15 tastes before they will accept it.

PICKY EATING & PICKING YOUR BATTLES

For me, things shifted when I realized I didn’t want meals to be a battleground: I wanted eating to be a way of connecting and experiencing pleasure. I remembered my own childhood and how I survived on chicken fingers for years and yet still went on to become an inclusive eater. I also realized my little guy is among the “supertasters” of the world; to him, flavours and textures are much more intense. I changed my approach, created rituals around our eating, and found the words, “You don’t have to eat it.” For us, being relaxed and providing predictability has helped, but it is a continuous process of letting go of control. It’s about finding your tolerance level, picking your battles, and continuing to gently nudge your wee ones along the way.

.....

I’m the first to say the struggle is *real* and I believe there is no one “right” way to feed a child. Let’s move away from shame, blame, and guilt, and stop pressuring ourselves so much as parents. This is not about perfection, but instead, muddling our way through each of our unique journeys the best we can. Feeding and raising these little people is tricky business requiring a whole lot of love, patience, compassion, and, if we’re lucky, some humour to make it through the day. If you’re struggling, pick one tip to try and let your next meal be a new adventure (and hopefully a success)! •

"Feeding and raising these little people is tricky business requiring a whole lot of *love, patience, compassion,* and, if we’re lucky, some *humour* to make it through the day."



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / iCreatistal

NB: If your child is experiencing growth concerns, symptoms of deficiency, digestive complaints, or you are not coping well with feeding dynamics, I encourage you to consult a professional (your MD, a registered holistic nutritionist, or an ND with expertise in pediatrics).



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / lokaun701

LEARNING *resilience*

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENCING FAILURE

by dr. **vanessa** lapointe, r.psych

© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [puhimec]

As a parent, it's hard to let your child experience life's hardships, full of big (and small) disappointments, losses, and failures. Although the science of child development suggests that these experiences are not only good for kids, they're actually *essential* for healthy growth and development, it can be tough to convince yourself of this as you stand by watching your child suffer. As a parent who watched her own child struggle, I understand this position intimately.

My youngest son could be described as intense and sensitive. He has a beautiful, big mind, and an enormously compassionate heart, which can make the daily experiences of life overwhelming for him at times. I knew entering school was going to be interesting for him, and shortly into his kindergarten year it became clear that *interesting* meant very *challenging*. He started to have meltdowns every morning, and became behaviourally difficult at home. His little boy sparkle was increasingly absent. I knew school was too much for him, but what was to be done? If I just pulled him out of school, would I be teaching him that it was okay to give up when things got hard? But if I left him in a situation that wasn't working for him, would I damage him in profound ways? Was it just an age thing he would overcome or was there something more considerable that I had not yet figured out? I'll return to this later.

Parents today have access to an incredible amount of parenting information, keeping us informed on the perils of doing it wrong and of the boost we give our kids when we get it right. More than ever,

we are aware that how we engage with our child shapes who they become. You would think that with all of this, we big people would be really well-positioned to capably and confidently step in as guides for our children, leading them through their developmental journey.

Often, however, it goes a little sideways. All of this information at our disposal has us questioning our intuition and second-guessing what's best for our children. This insecurity inadvertently leads us to do just that by diminishing or erasing our child's experience of hardship in a way that doesn't serve their development. So when the moment comes for us to say "no" or deliver bad news, we falter and say "yes" instead, or anxiously try to soften potential disappointment. It is at this point that parental withering and uncertainty collide to become a significant problem for the child's development.

Children need to experience failure, upset, and the futility of the things in life that don't go their way. Facing challenges repeatedly spurs growth, and in that growth resilience is developed. Much like strengthening a muscle through continual flex and stretch, resilience needs to be exercised in order to reach its potential. Thus, only when children get to endure the upset of life and come face-to-face with the dark will they be driven to consider alternative outcomes, learn to cope, and find the light at the end of it all—a space of emotional rest. As Carl Jung once said, "The word 'happy' would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness."

Why Do We Hinder Those Hard Knocks?

TOO TIRED, TOO BUSY

Sometimes parents avoid allowing their child to experience difficulty because, quite simply, they're exhausted. Parents feel so much pressure to ensure that their children engage in both educational and extracurricular activities in order prepare them for a successful future that the financial realities often have both parents working outside the home to help facilitate this. And the burden to "do better because we know better" has parents rushing around reading every parenting resource available, trying to apply said suggestions for optimal outcome. How exhausting! It makes sense that, for the over-extended parent, if the choice exists between denying the child (and dealing with a big meltdown) or saying "yes" to ensure a compliant child, then "yes" it shall be! Even if "no" is what it really *should have* been.

BAGGAGE CLAIM

Parents might also choose to avoid unsettling their child because they are being run by an unacknowledged "program". Everybody has these programs. They are scripted from our own childhood and our experiences of being parented. In avoiding conflict they might be affirming the insecurity that they will never be enough, or feeding into the need to keep everyone else happy to in order to feel okay. When we become parents, we find ourselves reverting back to these scripted programs so that, when faced with a child who is angry or sad, we rush in to make it right, so no one gets mad at us, so we can feel like we're enough.

YE OF LITTLE FAITH

Parents can fall into the trap of overly protecting their children because of a lapse of faith in the developmental process. We humans are a hardy species and built not only to survive, but in fact to thrive in the face of adversity. We don't drown with the first drop of rain, and are not blown over by the first gust. The developmental process is a spectacular one and when we can trust it, we are freed to bear witness to our children's incredible potential for rising above, pushing through, and conquering life! However, when we lose faith in this process, we may bend and fix and soften in ways that fail to serve the healthy development of our children. Our job as parents is to understand what is developmentally appropriate for our child, for their stage of development. This is not always easy as each child is unique, and it is up to us to tweak where we set the bar for our child: too high – too much failure; too low – not enough.

Knowing a little about the stages children grow through as they become resilient beings can often provide exactly the affirmation that parents need in order to feel confident shifting from rescuer to guide.

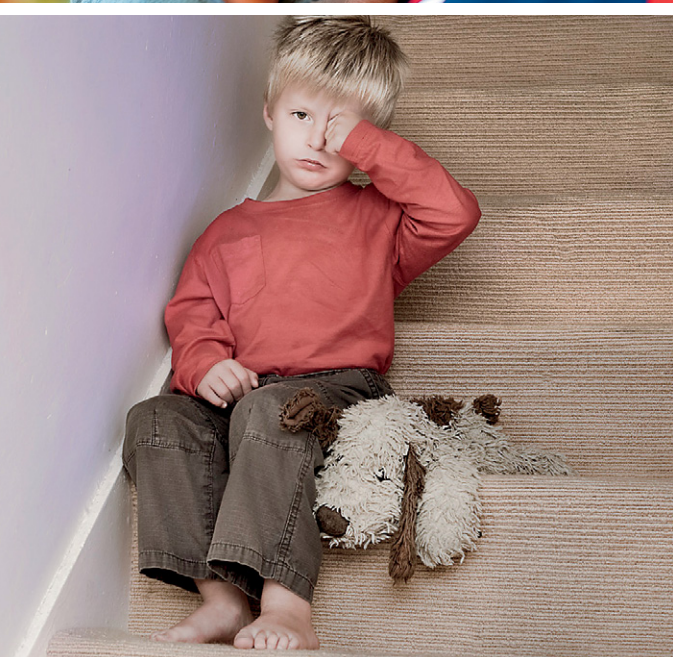
*"You are the expert
on your child. Only
you make the call
about when it is all
too much and when it
is exactly right."*



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [lucidwaters]



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [erierka]



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [photobunny]



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [mandygobehear]

Climbing the Rungs to Resilience

0-2 YEARS

For the first two years of life, brain and emotional development for your child are such that there is almost no capacity for them to independently move from frustration and upset to resolution. Rather, adults are meant to be the child's compassionate and external co-regulator. It is essential during this stage of growth that your child has you close at hand as a support while she rides out the storms of life. Let your child lean into your comforting presence as they weather these storms, even if they rage back. *Especially* if they rage back.

As your child approaches two years of age, expect those bouts of frustration and upset to grow. Neurologically, a child of this age is unable to control their temper, which is why you must continue to externally assuage those outbursts with a loving presence. You don't need to fix the situation, but rather come alongside with a soothing voice, gentle touch, and eye contact that all communicate an inherent understanding and acceptance of your child.

3 YEARS-EARLY SCHOOL AGE

From approximately three years up to early elementary school age, your child now has the neurological capacity to move from the big *mad* of the toddler years to the big *mad and sad* of the preschooler and early elementary years. As your child experiences failure and disappointment in this stage of life, there will still be the initial push-back of mad and, with your continued empathic presence, you will see that your child will more frequently begin to soften out of mad and move into sad. This can be especially heartbreaking for parents to observe, but it's important to remember that it isn't necessarily something that needs to be fixed by you. Instead, take (and give) comfort in each situation where your child gets mad then softens to sad as it is simply another wonderful opportunity for growth playing out before your very eyes.

5-12 YEARS

Around five years old, starting at very low levels and gradually increasing in fluency through to about age ten to twelve years, you will observe your child starting to do on their own what you have been supporting them to do from the outside all along. That is, there might be some tempered anger and sadness, and then this will be followed by an internal acceptance and resolve.

A little mantra I offer to my clients:

I accept what cannot be changed.

I may not like it.

I may feel mad or sad about it.

And I resolve to persevere.

Enter resilience. It is at this stage that you will see tangible evidence of your child being able to hold onto herself during moments of upset and disappointment. Of course, with more intense situations and big emotions, your capable support and presence will be required for years to come. And as your child continues to experience the exquisite pains and pleasures of life, you will continue to observe their brilliant growth, exactly as nature intended.

THE "Talk"?

Make healthy sexuality an ongoing conversation

by dr. **leslie** solomonian, nd

When my nine-year-old daughter came in from school one day, I asked if she wanted to help me write an article for parents about helping kids develop a healthy sense of sexuality. "Sure!" she shrugged, without missing a beat or raising an eyebrow. She settled in at the table where I was working – a reflection of how normal this kind of conversation is in our household – and dug in, ready to dispense her wisdom onto EcoParent's readers.

I started by asking her what sexuality is. Many parents think of sexuality as something that becomes an "issue" during puberty. However, humans are sexual beings from the womb to the grave.

RACHEL SAYS:

SEXUALITY IS

- » Gender ("what's in your head ... if you think you're a boy, you're a boy") ... usually this matches what your body looks like, but sometimes it doesn't; gender should never be forced on anyone
- » Your physical body ... if you have "boy" parts or "girl" parts
- » Making babies
- » Having sex with someone else, kissing, hugging, holding hands ... not just "penises in vaginas"
- » Having "alone time"
- » Who you "like" (sexually or romantically)
- » Your sense of what it means to be male or female; this is based on what you see in media and culture. For example, what magazines show us is "beautiful"

Sexuality encompasses not only physical sexual function and reproduction, but sexual identity, orientation, gender roles, sexual expression, intimacy, and pleasure – all of which have relevance to sexual health at all ages and stages of life (see Figure 1). The World Health Organization defines sexual health as: "A state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence."

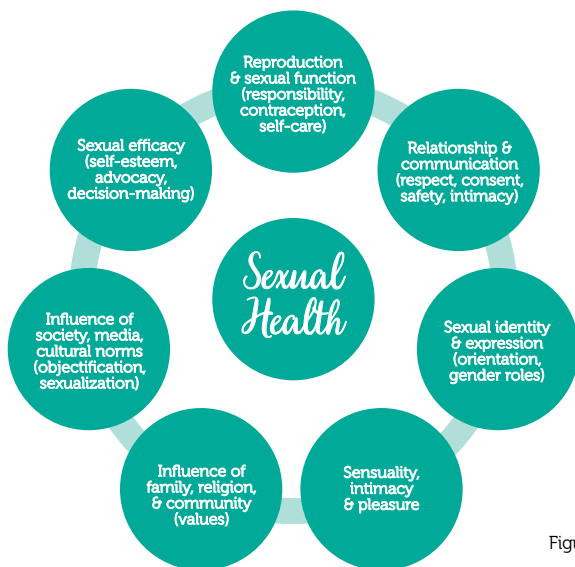


Figure 1

Go Ahead ... Ask Me Anything

Parents and caregivers are the best primary sexuality educators as it is their role to share their values; support the development of self-esteem and pleasure as it relates to the body; teach skills of communication and consent; and introduce a healthy sense of gender. Early childhood is an ideal time to establish a foundation of accurate and open communication about aspects of sexuality. When parents talk to kids openly (including, but not *only*, about sexuality) and listen warmly and non-judgmentally, young people report feeling closer to their parents and having healthier peer relationships. Surveys demonstrate that these youth engage less often in risky sexual behavior, often delaying and reducing frequency of intercourse; demonstrate a decreased risk of both committing and/or experiencing sexual abuse and assault; have a reduced number of sexual partners; and show an increased use of condoms. Although it can feel uncomfortable at first, when parents talk to kids early and often about sexuality, the discomfort recedes and conversations become more natural as the topics get more difficult, significantly reducing the *ick* factor of having “the talk” at age 13. This approach is also more likely to produce adults who engage in safe, pleasurable, and responsible sexual expression. An “askable parent” is someone who:

- » Is warm, honest, and respectful with their children
- » Is open to communication; avoids laughing or getting angry when children ask questions
- » Seeks to understand what is behind the question being asked; listens with engagement
- » Is willing to admit and navigate discomfort
- » Keeps explanations simple, age-appropriate, and leaves the door open to more questions
- » Is willing to acknowledge when they don't have the answers, and is open to seeking them out

Healthy Basics

Talking about sex need not be explicit, especially when we consider all the facets of sexuality. From an early age, children develop a sense of values and norms from their family of origin, media, and their community. How they are touched and spoken to, and what they see modelled affect their attitudes, values, and behaviours. “Responsive”

parenting (i.e. empathy, affection, and modeling clear and consistent boundaries) contributes to strong self-esteem and healthy intimate relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Skills of conflict resolution, decision making, problem solving, communication, and consent can be supported in many contexts; these are transferable skills that can be applied throughout the child's entire life. Teaching about consent, for instance, can range from the innocuous, “What colour cup do you want to use for lunch?” to the potentially more involved, “Mom, Sally is into high-fives right now instead of hugs,” which invites a discussion about respecting others' right to dictate how they are touched. Acknowledging and celebrating good sensations that a child feels (a cool breeze or touching a puppy's fur) and empathizing with discomfort establishes an expectation of healthy sensual pleasure. Prompt changing of diapers in infancy and practicing good hygiene during toileting teaches children to care for their bodies properly. It is normal and natural for infants and children to explore their bodies, including their genitals. Older children can be taught that touching their genitals feels good and is totally okay to do, but should be done in private.

“Wee-Wees” And “Ginies”?

When Rachel was two and my son was seven, my grandfather, who was 89, in the early stages of dementia, and hard of hearing, came to our home for a visit. As we were chatting, Rachel fell on her ukulele and let out a shriek. While no serious damage was done, Great-Grandpa asked what happened. “She hurt her *vulva*,” explained her concerned older brother. “Her what?” replied Grandpa. “Her vulva!” emphasized my son. “Her what??” ... and it went on. We're not sure if the confusion was that Great-Grandpa couldn't hear what Noah was saying, or if he simply didn't know the word, but the scene made me laugh, as it spoke volumes to the fact that my seven-year-old-son confidently knew the correct name of his sister's body parts, and had no shame in speaking it. Healthy sexual development requires knowing what body parts are called, and having accurate information about bodily functions, including erections, puberty, menstruation, and reproduction. Children should be encouraged to use accurate terminology for all their body parts to allow for relaxed and open communication; this protects them from sexual abuse, as well.

RACHEL SAYS:

Parents should explain puberty and sexual function at an early age so that kids have a better understanding of how things work when they're older instead of being taken by surprise. It can also help to have age-appropriate resources around. Our favourite books are the series by Robie H. Harris, but there are many on the market; spend some time browsing your local library or bookstore and find something that speaks to you.

Gender Matters (Or Does It?)

Parenting is also an opportunity to examine conscious and subconscious biases about gender roles and sexual diversity as they are powerfully communicated to children, even wordlessly, and can influence sexual behaviour and experience in profound ways. A sense of low sexual power (most commonly experienced by females and LGBTQ youth) increases the risk of coercion and violence in sexual relationships. Adolescent males who hold traditional views of masculinity are more likely to engage in riskier sexual activities and foster less intimacy in

relationships. They are also more likely to coerce their partners or act violently in a sexual relationship. Parents can be mindful of potentially gendered language they might use to speak to their children.

RACHEL SAYS:

Kids should be allowed to “choose for themselves what they want to wear or play with,” and when kids are too small to pick for themselves, parents should choose toys and clothes that aren't directed towards a certain gender. Even shampoo, body wash, etc. have different products for boys and girls—and girls' products are sometimes more expensive than the boys'! If they grow up using stuff directed towards their gender, then when they're older and they're into different stuff, they might think that something is wrong with them.

I have a lot of friends that are non-binary, transgender, gay, bi and lesbian, and they aren't any different than my friends who aren't. I feel safe and loved whatever my sexual identity is.

It is difficult to encourage others to make gay or trans friends while avoiding tokenism; however, being open to diversity is an important value to communicate. This could be as simple as seeking out books and shows with diverse characters (Google is your friend here!), or attending family-friendly Pride celebrations.

Media Matters (It Does)

Monitoring and curating what shows kids are watching, what video games they're playing, and what music they're listening to can reduce harmful messages they might be getting around diversity and gender norms; studies have shown diverse exposure can actually delay sexual activity. Even better is watching/playing/listening *with* them, making observational comments, and talking about their thoughts. This allows parents to communicate their values, and teaches skills of media literacy and critical thinking. This strategy might start while watching *Sesame Street*, but the skills are transferable to *Riverdale*. A close relationship with a parent makes it more comfortable for a young person to ask questions about sexual content – especially important if the child happens to view pornography.

You Matter (You Do!)

Parents can acknowledge the pleasure of sex, especially in the context of a committed intimate relationship. Kids benefit from seeing their parents share healthy affection with others. When youth expect, and feel entitled to, sexual pleasure, they are more able to advocate for their sexual health. Furthermore, when youth are empathetic to the experience of others, they are more likely to be attentive to the sexual health of their partners. Attributes of self-advocacy, self-esteem, and empathy are associated with orgasm, pleasure, and reciprocity in sexually-active youth. Although it is best for young people to delay having sex, I would always rather any sexual experience be a pleasurable one! A close relationship with a parent also increases the likelihood that sexual activity will be conducted in a safer manner, occur in a trusting and consensual relationship, and result in a higher quality experience.

Ultimately, although every family will have different values around sexuality, there are some foundational principles that will promote sexual health and well-being in youth, and are great talking points to get the conversation started!

- » You have the right to be loved and cared for, and to feel safe and protected.
- » Your body is yours and no one else has the right to touch it or comment on it without your consent.
- » You are valuable and worthy, no matter who you love or are attracted to.
- » If you are ever uncomfortable with the way someone is looking at, touching, or talking about your body, tell an adult who you trust.
- » Body parts should be called by their correct names.
- » It is your responsibility to take care of your body.
- » Sexuality is a natural and healthy part of life.
- » Everyone has the right to sexual safety, privacy, and pleasure.
- » You are responsible for expressing your sexuality in a way that is respectful of others.
- » You have the right to have your questions and concerns about your body answered honestly and accurately. Communication and trust are key. If you cannot talk to a potential partner about having sex, you should not be having sex with that person.
- » Masturbation is a natural and healthy way of exploring sexuality, delaying sexual intercourse, and learning about your body.
- » You have the right to access confidential health care resources regarding sexuality, reproduction, contraception, and health. If you are going to engage in sexual activity, a barrier method (e.g. condom) should be used every time.
- » Sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) lead to serious consequences and are preventable.
- » Abstaining from sexual intercourse is the most effective way of preventing pregnancy and STIs. •



© Can Stock Photo / creatista

For references and websites to check out please see ecoparent.ca/extras/FALL18

THE EMOTIONAL *roots* OF ANXIETY

Healing through CONNECTION

by **deborah** macnamara, phd, rcc

© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [koca777]

From waves of panic to uneasy feelings that rise up from the gut, anxiety is a universal human experience. It comes as no surprise, then, that anxiety continues to be one of the most commonly diagnosed mental health issues in children and adults today, with the World Health Organization naming it as one of the leading concerns among children ages 4 to 17 worldwide.

What is anxiety? It is usually accompanied by symptoms such as agitation, incessant worrying, trouble focusing, panic, feeling full of fear, nightmares, and clinging behaviour. My 5-year old daughter once asked, “Mommy, why does it feel like my tummy is making butter?” That churning feeling that comes with anxiety, along with many other physical and emotional symptoms, alerts us to the fact that we are stirred up. Despite reassurance from others that there is nothing to worry about, anxiety can sink its teeth in deep and hold on.

When the mind and body are in turmoil, anxiety will follow wherever you go – from your bed to the dinner table, and to school. The problem is that its symptoms tell us very little about what is at the root of the feelings. Parents often turn to their kids for answers asking, “What is the matter?” When they are met with blank stares, puzzling explanations, or protestations of, “*I don’t know!*” it can elevate a parent’s anxiety as well.

The problem with anxiety is we cannot make headway unless we can make sense of it at its root level, as asserted by Gordon Neufeld, an internationally respected developmental and attachment-based psychologist. There is an epicentre to anxiety, but we often dance around its symptoms instead of reaching into its core, where the real problem lies.

Perceiving past the symptoms

The key to understanding anxiety is to name the emotion that drives it: alarm. When a threat is detected by the brain’s surveillance system, it responds by releasing a cascade of chemicals that literally changes our physiology and enables us to quickly respond. When separation has opened up, the brain will respond with increased alarm, frustration, and pursuit in order to close the distance.

To do this, we need to first identify the most fundamental need of all humans. The one non-negotiable thing that all children and adults require for healthy emotional growth and well-being is *attachment*. As an interdependent species, we were designed to hunger for contact and closeness from each other, and it is through attachment that we are able to raise children, to care for each other, and create a civil society.

The purpose of attachment is to ensure that children depend on their adults to guide and protect them and that we, in turn, provide these things. When children lean into you for caretaking, they are willing to follow, listen, attend, orient to, and obey. The deeper a child’s attachment roots, the greater their capacity to reach their potential as a social, separate, and adaptive being.

If relational attachment is the greatest of all human needs, then what is the most impactful and alarming of all experiences? The answer is separation—to find yourself apart from your attachments, which pushes the brain’s alarm system into full tilt as it tries to close the void that has opened up. You can witness a young child’s desperate pursuit to get back into attachment when you tell them it’s time for bed and

they begin clamouring for one more drink of water, a snack, a trip to the bathroom, another story, or plead, as one clever boy told his father, "Please come back—the spiders keep throwing me out of bed." Separation is provocative because attachment is key to our survival.

What sets off alarm bells?

There are many sources of separation that children can experience, from the obvious ones like moving houses, starting school, parents divorcing, or the loss of a loved one. But there are other surprising sources such as healthy growth, which pushes the preschooler to explore and use their imagination, the middle-schooler to try new things, and the teenager to figure out who they are and what they want to do with their life. At every age there are different developmental issues to face, each bringing an element of existential alarm with it. As Gordon Neufeld states, we don't teach 3-year-olds about monsters which they then become afraid of, it is their fear that creates the monsters in the first place.

Other sources of separation for kids include discipline that uses what a child cares about against them, euphemized as "consequences", "tough love", or "time-outs". These techniques use separation to alarm a child so that they will behave better but they backfire as they render an adult an adversary and, with this, reduce a child's desire to please or work towards meeting their adult's expectations. Relationship is the vehicle for getting a child to drive in a different direction, but separation discipline throws this off-course and leaves relational insecurity in its wake.

Separation alarm is also created when our children fuse with friends to the exclusion of their adults. Referred to as "peer orientation", this gives rise to children with alarm problems because their peers are largely immature and impulsive, sometimes hurtful, substitutes. One day your child belongs in the group, the next day they don't, and the fickle friendships and wounding ways of kids especially hurt those who are more dependent on their same-age friends than their adults. Friends are important, but children weren't meant to be the answer to each other's fundamental attachment needs.

Separation alarm can also be attributed to physical separation like the loss of a parent to a new job, travel, injury, sickness, or the introduction of a new partner. Even success can create alarming feelings as the child lives in fear that they could lose the advances they have gained. Sensitive children who feel they are too much for their parents to handle are often full of anxiety because exasperated adults convey they don't know how to take care of them, leading to insecurity.

Separation alarm has the power to drive temporary anxiety symptoms to more chronic levels that can pervade all areas of life. The fall-out from chronic anxiety may lead to additional behavioural problems such as anger, agitation, feeling overwhelmed, disconnection, and depression, which can be misinterpreted, or overreacted to, by adults. While the symptoms of anxiety and sources of separation for kids become better understood, concurrent research suggests that if separation is the problem, then surely connection will be the cure.

*"When the mind
and body are in
turmoil, anxiety
will follow wherever
you go – from your
bed to the dinner
table, and to school."*



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [dolgachov]

Bridging the void

What if we stopped for a moment and considered whether anxiety was, in fact, *exactly* what the brain wanted and intended? What if we looked at the emotion of alarm as having a very important job to do by noisily alerting parents that something isn't right in a child's world? And what if the brain is actually working *well* when it is alarmed and the problem is not the alarm, *per se*, but rather how long and how hard the brain has to work to gain our attention by way of anxiety symptoms, which serve to draw people close to increase connection and close painful separation voids?

There are many things adults can do to increase connection and reduce alarm, but the guiding objective should be to bring a child to emotional rest. This can be facilitated by coming alongside and conveying a desire to be with them, to show care and read their needs, and take the lead in fulfilling them wherever possible. For example, if they are anxious at night-time, being generous with contact and closeness will help them rest better. When a child closes their eyes at night, they are separated from you. Bridging this divide can involve telling them about the plans for the following day, staying with them until they fall asleep, or tying invisible strings around your beds to hold you together; if only in your child's imagination. Making room for their alarm and letting them know it's your job to worry about their sleep—not theirs—can go a long way in helping your child see you as in-charge, and able and willing to care for them.

If a child is anxious, it is also important to shield them from further causes of frustration wherever possible—from relationships that don't work well to avoiding introduction of new sources of separation. When a child is alarmed, it is a time to prune out unnecessary separations and focus on tethering them to the adults in their life. This can be achieved by orienting them to the invisible matrix of adults that will care for them. For example, telling a child, "When I take you to school, your teacher will take over for me. They are in charge, I trust them to care for you, and they know how to reach me if you need me. I will look forward to picking you up, too," helps to assure them that they are safe and loved, can feel connected to the adult who will take your place in your absence, and that you are never far away for long.

If separation discipline is being used in the home, it is also necessary to move away from time-outs and punitive consequences to more attachment and developmentally-friendly discipline, such as collecting a child before directing. This involves getting into their space in a friendly way, interacting with them in a positive manner, engaging in conversation, or paying attention to what they are focusing on, until you can feel the child warm up, start to listen, and want to follow. Using structure and routine to help them navigate their day also helps them feel safe. Kids who are anxious love ritual because it's predictable, thus, providing security.

Letting it out

Tears are the antithesis to alarm because they serve to drain the system and allow rest by neutralizing the chemicals associated with it. One of the most important ways we can bring our children to emotional rest is to facilitate tears when they are up against things that frustrate them. From the small things to the big upsets in their life, if an adult is willing to come alongside a child and make room for some tears, this can temporarily reduce restlessness, fear, and agitation.

To help a child to their tears, we need to meet them with empathy and warmth. Focus sincerely on what is upsetting them, despite how small or insignificant it may seem to us. Sometimes a parent may become upset by what they hear from a child, but it is best not to show these emotions and to find another adult to debrief with. Every child needs to feel confident that they are not too much for their adult to handle, that their feelings aren't too big or scary to express, and that there is no situation that they won't receive support with.

When a child is anxious, what we cannot lose sight of is how separation instigates the alarm behind it and that relationship is the vehicle through which healing occurs. When a child can safely feel their fear in a vulnerable way, they will be on the road to making sense of the emotions associated with alarm. When they can see and name what it is that stirs them up, and can freely express their emotions, they will be brought to emotional rest and find the courage to face the hard things. This process of holding onto and guiding them through alarming feelings and times will help them reaffirm the faith they have in their caregivers to love and take care of them exactly as they are. •



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [LightFieldStudios]



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [szefei]

Why You Don't NEED Your Child's LOVE

A personal journey into conscious relationship

by dr. **vanessa** lapointe. rpsych

There is a myth within parenting that we need to talk about. It is such a ubiquitous myth that unless you've done some significant soul searching about happiness and fulfillment, you probably haven't really ever given it much thought. Like most people, you've fallen into this belief without even knowing there is another option. The myth is that we need affirmation and love from outside of ourselves in order to feel complete. This is an "unconscious" approach to relationship and it stands in contrast to a "conscious" approach, which at the core has two very important components.

The first component in conscious relationship, perhaps counter-intuitively, is the understanding that healthy relationship always starts with a focus on *self*. When you can know yourself as whole, complete, and innocent, then you are freed to actualize the second component. This is when you get to focus on the *other* person in the relationship, in turn recognizing them as complete and innocent.

What does this have to do with parenting? Everything.



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [oksix]

Relationship before children

The depth of consciousness in your relationship with your children determines whether you truly grow them up or get in the way of their journey. In conscious relationship, you need *nothing* from your child. At all. You don't need their love, good behavior, or good performance at school. And still, you can be abundantly happy in your life. This doesn't mean you sit down and armchair parent, leaving them to figure it all out themselves. Quite the contrary. It does mean that you completely shift your expectations of your *relationship* with your child, which will utterly transform both of you.

In order to make sense of the difference between a conscious and unconscious parent-child relationship, you can start by thinking about how you conduct an adult relationship. For example, imagine a relationship with a spouse. In an unconscious relationship, you will *need* your spouse to behave in certain ways, be a specific kind of partner, fill a predefined role, and deliver on certain outcomes. If they don't fulfill your expectations you will be unhappy in the relationship and consequently in life. You will either end the relationship or live within it miserably.

In a conscious adult relationship, you need nothing from your spouse. Instead, you find contentment in the complete acceptance of self. You see yourself, no matter what, as whole and complete and innocent. You identify yourself as capable and as living out life exactly as required for your own growth to unfold. This restful acceptance of self frees you to then accept the same for your spouse. Whether they remember to take out the garbage, bring you a cup of tea, say thoughtful things, or not, *you* are happy. For your happiness is an inside job.

Conscious relationship comes from seeing the other—your spouse, your boss, your friend—as on their own life path, one which they can capably navigate, just as you are. All of this is playing out within the context of relationship, and relationship is the catalyst that spurs on your (and their) journey. That is the real purpose of relationship: that it gives you opportunity after opportunity to grow yourself up. Only then can you feel what it is to be restfully happy.

Enter parenthood

In parenthood you are thrust into arguably the most intimate of relationships. The myth is that this child's love will *make* you happy. However, in a conscious relationship you do not need to be *made* to feel happy. It may be a lovely by-product of the bond, but it cannot be a need. Rather, you understand that you can only find happiness within yourself, and your child has come along for the singular purpose of granting you another host of opportunities to grow yourself up, creating a context for ongoing fulfillment.

If you're living in the fog of the myth, you will expect your child to deliver on certain things in order for you to feel okay about how it is all going. You will want your child to love you, behave well, achieve, and grow in certain ways to confirm that you are doing a good job and prove your worth as a parent—as a human even. In unconscious relationship, if your child is not providing the proof, you get angry about the perceived deficiency, the unfairness, the apparent affront to your efforts. You forget that this is the gift of parenthood: The chance to cultivate happiness from the inside and grow from the experience.

Unlike in your relationships with other adults, there is a hierarchy to

WHOLE. COMPLETE. INNOCENT.

When things get difficult, choosing to orient yourself within a framework in which the individual in question is seen as whole, complete, and innocent can help keep you grounded. Believing that each person, in each moment of their lives, is doing their very best and does not need fixing or changing (whole/complete), frees us from getting caught up in fear-based narratives about the meaning of their actions, what else could follow the actions, and how we must fix it. When our children blunder, if we choose to see that they are full of good intentions and desirous of the positive (innocent), we are then able to swiftly and capably guide development with love, exactly as nature intended.

the parent-child relationship which has your child looking to you to be their captain on this excursion through life. While you have no needs of your child, your child's dependence does have him needing a lot from you. So, when it gets difficult with children, it doesn't mean you just idly stand by knowing everybody is living out their journey. Rather, it means that you step in and step up. You are the leader. With love, you define the boundaries, call the appropriate shots, create the rules, and navigate the rough waters. Your child may be angry or say they hate you for it but remember: you need nothing from them to define your value.

The psychologist, Dr. Carl Jung said, "The greatest burden a child must bear is the un-lived life of its parents." If you live unconsciously, believing how hard or unfair it all is for you, or that your child "owes" you, you are doing just that—foisting the burden of your un-lived life upon them and perpetually dangling your child over an abyss of stagnating maturity. Within conscious relationship, you see that your growth is gifted to you by your child. And as you grow, you are ultimately available to facilitate their growth.

My story

It is my heartfelt intent to grow my children up with consciousness. But even with my background, this is not a perfect path for me. I am no longer married to the father of my children. Part of my journey since this transition has been navigating it for them so that they are able to grow feeling loved and secure. It hasn't been a straight line and one son has struggled more than the other. I have had moments of falling into the trap of believing I need to "make him happy". I "owe him" some respite. He "can't cope" with the normal rules or boundaries so I should "cut him some slack". Remember that part about finding him "whole and complete and innocent"? My moments of falling into unconsciousness did not have me landing there for my son.

Heading down that rabbit hole, I "eased up". But not with the kind of energy and spirit born of safekeeping but rather born of fear. What if it is too much for him? What if his sensitive soul drowns in this? What if he hates me for it? What if we've ruined him? These thoughts live deep inside and then insinuate themselves into my psyche, unannounced and unbidden. This is when I become unconscious as a parent.

My easing up did not serve him—it actually made things more difficult because he wasn't assured in the expectations or the rules. Not knowing any firm boundaries, he overstepped. Several times. He went through the text messages on my phone, my purse, and my wallet. And, the final straw, he opened a private piece of mail containing sensitive information not meant for his eyes.

I let him know he had crossed the line, but without firm conviction. Deep down I was still worried about upsetting him too much. Worried about him being angry with me, since he was already angry. Worried about him sinking, because hadn't he been through enough? In conscious relationship, there would be no worry. There would be consideration born of love and compassion. And there would also be an unequivocal defining of the boundaries.

And so, with the loudest of the "gifts" he had offered to me as his parent, I realized I was operating from a place of unconscious need. I had big waves of roiling anger and hurt and upset pass through me. That was when I knew I had fallen into the hole of unconsciousness. I needed his love, his approval, the belief that he was okay, and I viewed him as incapable of that without my indulgence. I stayed in that hole long enough to mine the gold in it. I acknowledged all of that within me. I accepted the place that it came from. And I found myself once again whole and complete and innocent. To accept the gift my son had offered me. And then I emerged.

I asked the question, "What do I want?" and I found the answer. I want my son to learn to respect others. I know my son, so I know that developmentally and otherwise he is capable of that. I took back the pointing finger of blame and went inside to grow myself. It is at that point that exactly how I was to do this for my son was no longer a question. From a place of serenity—the place where I saw myself as whole—the answer presented itself. And I stepped in.

I stepped in with an energy that was all at once full of love and ferocity—"the great mother", who loves intensely and guides powerfully. Late one evening, demanding an explanation for the contents of the mail he had opened, I seized the moment. Listen for the firm energy, the lack of fear in outcome, and especially the continued message of relational connection throughout. Importantly, the response begins and ends with unmistakable love.

"You are my lovely boy. You can never do anything to change that. And, you opened mail that was not yours. You know that this is not the first time you've made a poor decision around that sort of thing. My phone. My wallet. My purse. My mail."

The focus here is not that I owe you an explanation. I am your parent my love. I owe you no explanations. And that is final. The focus rather is that you overstepped and now you must make it right. So while I do not owe you an explanation, you do owe me one.

You will figure out how to make sure you really understand what the problem in this is. You will find a way to avoid making this same kind of mistake in the future. You may not be in other people's things. You will show me what it is to respect others around you.

And, I love you. I love you more than all the stars in the sky. I love you more than all the grains of sand on all the beaches. I love you more than all the hairs on all the bears. You are my boy."

I could not find him whole and complete and innocent until I found that within myself. And it wasn't until this was taken care of that I could step in with the guidance required. He *did* not need to be treated as incapable or made to feel wrong or blamed. He *did* need to be shown the way and have the safety of my guidance to anchor him. Remember, the purpose of his role in my life is to be the catalyst that spurs on my own journey of personal growth. My purpose is to embrace that journey so that I can grow myself AND grow him. And this isn't the end. There will be another time. And another. And another. As with all growth, it simply means that I get to fail better next time.

In all of this, hold true to the knowledge that while your child has great need of you, you have no needs of your child. You do not need her love. You do not need her good behavior. You do not need her performance. She does need yours however. It is only in this certainty of your love and capable leadership that she can come to rest and truly grow. Just as the path to healthy relationship with another adult was only *after* achieving healthy relationship with yourself, the path to growing up your child is through your own growth.

And also, thank you my son. •



photos: © Can Stock Photo Inc. / [Zinkevych]

LET'S HANG OUT!



find us on **FACEBOOK**

follow us on **INSTAGRAM**

receive our **E-NEWSLETTER**

subscribe to our **MAGAZINE**

snuggle up with our **WEBSITE**