

THE MASTER Series

THE SCIENCE BEHIND PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

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CONNECTION AND MENTAL HEALTH

What is the relationship between connection and mental health? This is the fundamental question that I will discuss in this text. As a parent myself, I am interested in exploring the idea of attachment through looking at the parenting experience.

Attachment is how our relationships directly impact the development of a child. Parents play an important role in children's lives and continue to be active in them as they grow into adolescents and young adults. Using science, we will think about the impact of connections through parenting and what happens in the mind of a child as they grow up.



WHAT IMPACTS CHILD DEVELOPMENT?

I will begin by asking this: Building on science, what can parents do to support the healthy growth and development of a child? In order to answer this question, let's discuss a couple of general points about what child development means.

We have the experience of change across a lifespan - that's what the word development refers to. However, how do you as a parent actually influence the development of your child? The way a parent may answer this question could be through saying that it's the genes that are passed on to the child. Similarly, adoptive parents may think that

it's the genes that are given through the sperm or egg of the child's birth parents.

It is important to note that I use the word birth parents rather than biological parents. This is because if you are a foster or adoptive parent then you are in fact a biological parent. Why? Because relationships are biology. When we are in a relationship, through communication and caring, we shape the development of a child. The genes received through the sperm and egg are one part of what builds something called our temperament. However, experience then becomes a dominant influence on a child's mode of being. This is why adoptive or foster parents should be seen as biological parents.

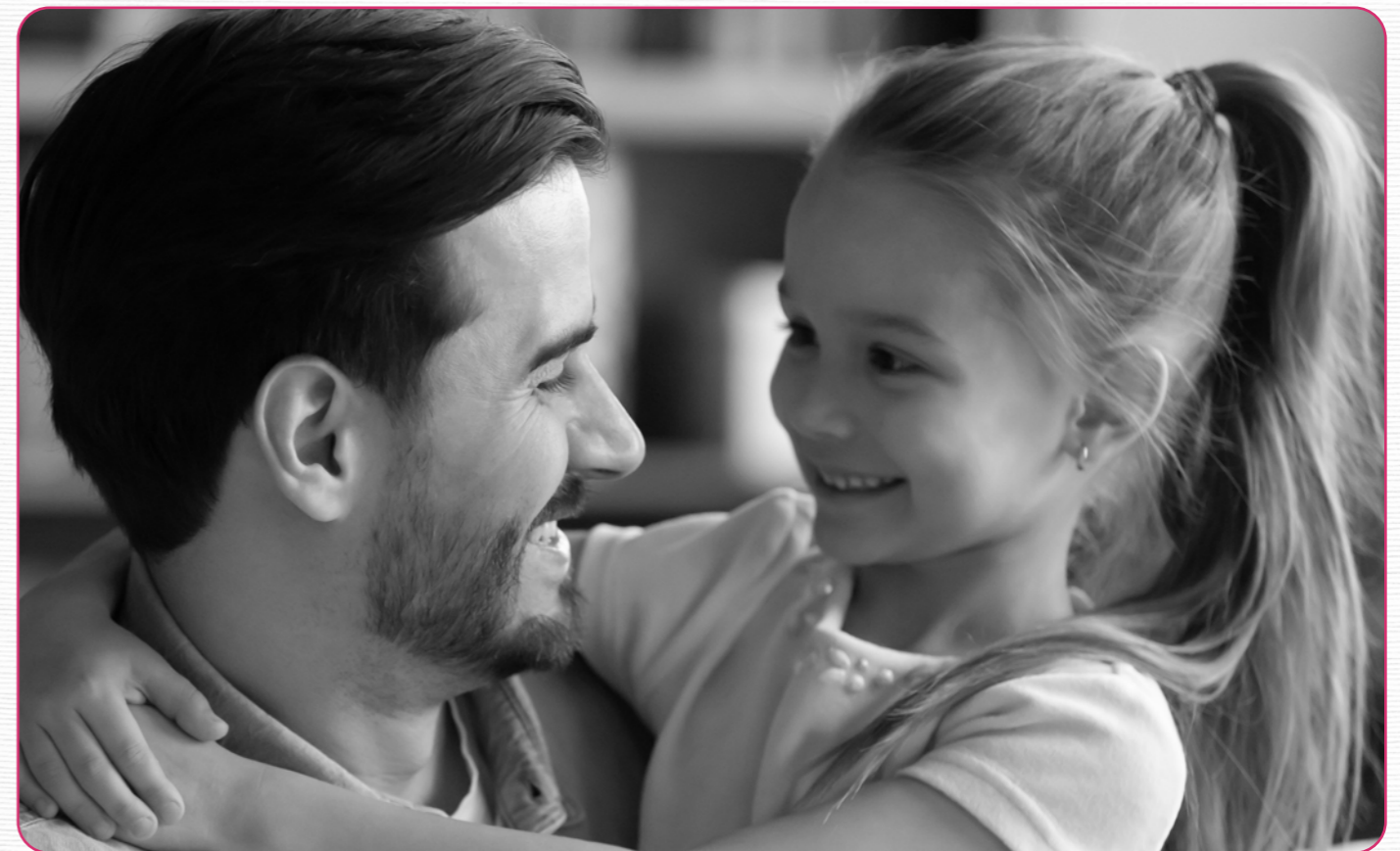


THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

Experience has such a vital impact on a child's development due to the energy patterns called communication that occur when parents connect with their children. If a parent tends to communicate with a child in a certain pattern, the outcome for a child will be one way. If the parent communicates in a different way, the outcome will also vary. Communication shapes development. In order to understand this fully, we must first dissect what communication really means.

Communication is how we connect through energy and information sharing. For example, right now I can say a word like 'attachment' or 'love' out loud. This is happening through sound, a form of energy.

Love, neglect and abuse are all patterns of attachment and communication that shape the development of a child. In exploring this, it is important to define what I mean by developmental influence or developmental impact.





The way that a parent communicates with their child is going to influence:

1. How the brain of your child becomes activated. This means how energy flow will be moving across the neurons, and its connection throughout the whole body. I call this the embodied brain.

2. With repeated neural firing, brain activation that's stimulated by communication will lead to brain growth. In other words, the way you communicate in the moment activates your child's brain in certain patterns.

When repeated, that activation will actually turn on genes. By this, I mean that we get those genes to be expressed into the production of protein. This leads to the growth of connections. It alters not just the activity of the brain in the moment, but the structure of the brain long term.

Parenting is therefore very important, on top of the genetic influences from the sperm and egg. Along with temperament and genetics, patterns of communication also stimulate the brain's activity. With repeated experiences, that activity becomes brain structure

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATION

As a parent reading this, you may feel like there is a lot of pressure to create the exact kind of connections needed in the brain. You may feel worried and unsure of how to achieve this. However, you should be reassured in the knowledge that there is an instinctive movement of the child's brain toward integration.

Integration is how different areas of the brain become linked together, and there are multiple contributing factors. Some of these connections are based on genetic

information. Some are based on brain activity that a parent helps to inform; and some as your child finds a way to adapt. The good news is that we can learn the patterns that are helpful. We can also try to unlearn and avoid the patterns that are harmful.

Integration in the brain is the basis of many things. Kindness, intelligence, focused attention; the way you regulate your emotion and mood so you can be morally happy; the way you conduct yourself in relationships. All of these things, and many more, relate to integration in the brain. It is the basis of thriving. It is also the basis of resilience, well-being, happiness, and health.





When I was revising a textbook I wrote called *The Developing Mind*, I had eighteen interns work for me. At one point I asked them to try to find a study that goes against the statement 'integration is well-being', because it sounds too simple to be true. They searched, but couldn't find a single study to disprove this statement. There are, however, many studies in support of it.

Relational integration leads to brain integration. This is the basis of all regulation, which allows for people to flourish, have resilience and be happy.

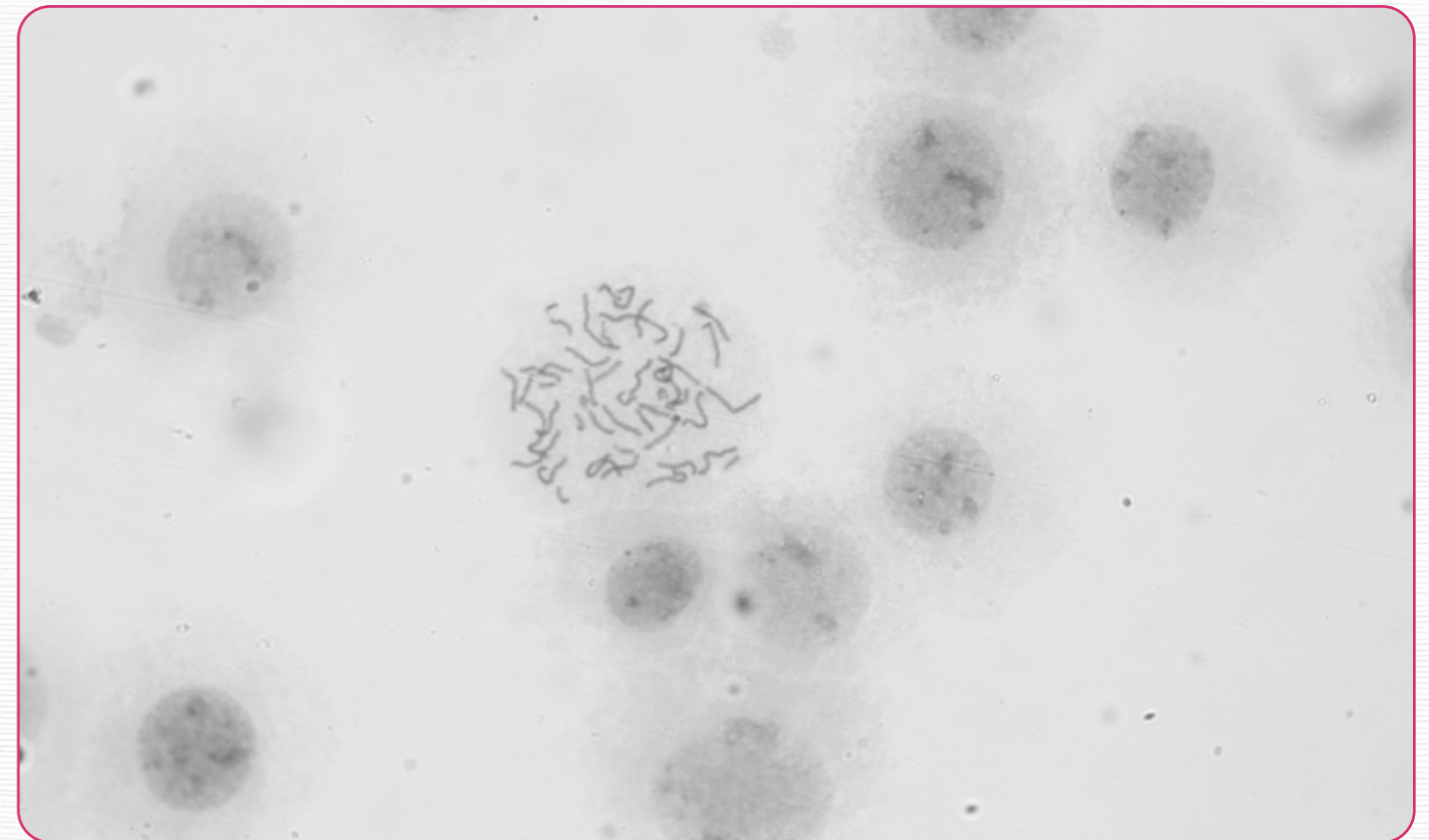
In many studies, the common predictor of every measure of well-being was how integrated the brain was.

At the other end of the scale, impaired integration was a common factor in every study of someone with a significant psychiatric disorder. This was not necessarily from anything that they experienced with their parents, but just as a sign of poor health. However, attachment experiences of abuse and neglect called 'developmental trauma' do lead to impaired integration in the brain.

USEFUL INTERVENTIONS

Interventions such as learning to meditate and mindfulness are incredibly helpful and healthy. Mindfulness meditation leads to growth of integration in the brain. Not only does it do that, but it also allows

your whole body to flourish because it reduces stress and improves the immune system's functioning. It also helps the heart to function well, reduces systemic inflammation, and optimizes an enzyme called telomerase. Telomerase repairs and maintains the ends of your chromosomes.





Childhood adversity encompasses many things. At the extremes are developmental trauma such as abuse and neglect. However, it also includes situations such as a parent who is a substance user; divorced households; or an incarcerated parent. Childhood adversity can lead to medical problems and the issues that arise often relate to the following five factors:

1. Elevated stress hormones
2. Your heart and head don't work very well together, in something called Heart Rate Variability Coherence
3. Weakened immune system
4. Increased inflammation
5. You age faster. This is because this enzyme that repairs the ends of your chromosomes that keep your cells' genetic machinery working stops functioning so optimally.

If we're struggling with the lasting effects of childhood adversity, we can do a practice called 'Three Pillar Practice'. I wrote a whole book called *Aware* that teaches you how to do this. It involves is a type of mindful meditation and focuses on:

1. Learning to focus attention
2. Open awareness
3. Building kind intention

The Three Pillar Practice builds mental resilience and calmness, and combats the medical problems caused by childhood adversity previously mentioned.

If you feel that you did not have optimal childhood experiences, you'll be relieved to know that you can grow integration in your brain at any age. It is never too late to begin. Using mindfulness techniques, you can do practical things in order to improve your health and happiness.

RELATIONAL INTEGRATION

Now that we've touched on how to improve your own wellbeing, how can you improve the wellbeing of your child? I am trained in a field of psychology called 'attachment research'. In this field, we study the interactions and communication patterns of parents and their offspring. It is important to note that a child does not solely have to 'be attached to the birth parent. A child can also be attached to other caregivers or significant attachment figures. This is known as alloparenting, which is something that is not common to most mammals but it happens in humans.

So, what is relational integration? Let's begin by considering a relationship. You may have a partner in your life. This could be, for example, a romantic partner or person you're co-parenting with. Integration would be the way in which you allow yourself to be different and unique to your partner, yet simultaneously linked. This linking could be through spending time together to stay connected. It could be by listening to each other's needs and responding to them. In this linking, you do not lose your differentiation. A good way to think about this is through the following analogy: Integration is not like a smoothie, blending and mixing everything up until you can't tell the different fruit. Integration is more like a fruit salad, where the fruit is all together in a bowl but you can still see the different items.





Relational integration is about honouring different opinions and coming together as a family to explore options that consider both points of view. There is a sense of harmony that arises from this. We can say that we agree to disagree, or we can come to a joint decision about how to move forward with a plan. Either way, we are respecting one another and creating harmony.

A lack of relational integration does the opposite. This is where we clash with our partner and do not respect their view, potentially resulting in negative reactions. It could then spiral, either through someone shutting down or exploding into chaos.

A good way to visualise this is through imagining a choir. In the choir, there are ten members. The choir is brought up on stage and each member is told to sing the same note in the exact same way. They are hearing each other, but the tune is rigid and unchanging. There is no differentiation.

The choir now covers their ears and thinks about a song they want to sing. Without being able to hear each other, they are told to sing the song in their heads. As you can imagine, it would be chaos. There is no linkage, only differentiation. In the first song, there is rigidity and a lack of differentiation. In the second, there is chaos and no linkage. Either way, integration is impaired.

For the next song, the choir is asked to sing a song together. There is no conductor as this is not needed for what is called optimal self-organization, which is where the idea of integration comes from. They sing 'Amazing Grace', which is apparently one of the most harmonious songs in the Western canon of music. The harmony sounds beautiful because the singers are differentiating their voices but there is also linkage. And in this linkage, the differentiation is not lost. This example gives a sense of how relational integration works.

The best gift that you can give to your child is to try to understand how your own childhood experiences either supported or didn't support your integrated growth. Looking at emotions, memory, thoughts, and behavior can help you make sense of your life and try to adapt to experiences.

THE IMPACT OF SHAME

Through adapting and making sense of life experiences and their effects, the feeling of shame may arise.

When our needs are not being met, we sometimes have a belief that we're defective. And that belief protects us from thinking that our parents are not reliable. Shame is a developmental attempt to survive childhood. Rather than realize that the parents are not reliable, a person may look to the self and think that the self is defective.

Shame is a very painful emotion. Unlike guilt, where you can feel like you have done something wrong but can correct the behavior, with shame there's no way to correct the defective person deep inside that you believe you are.

Sadly, shame is often an unrecognized emotional state that goes beneath the surface of consciousness. However, it can pop out in secondary behaviors, such as defensiveness or anger because certain actions can highlight your belief that you are defective. All sorts of physiological sensations accompany shame, such as a heaviness in the chest or your eyes turning away. However, the cognitive belief is that there is something wrong with yourself.

The defence against shame is itself something that alienates people because it can be very reactive. It can even seem narcissistic as a defence: you may begin externally to say to people how great you are, when this is not in fact how you feel deep down. However, you don't want anyone to know that because there is nothing you can do about it.



MAKING SENSE OF EXPERIENCES

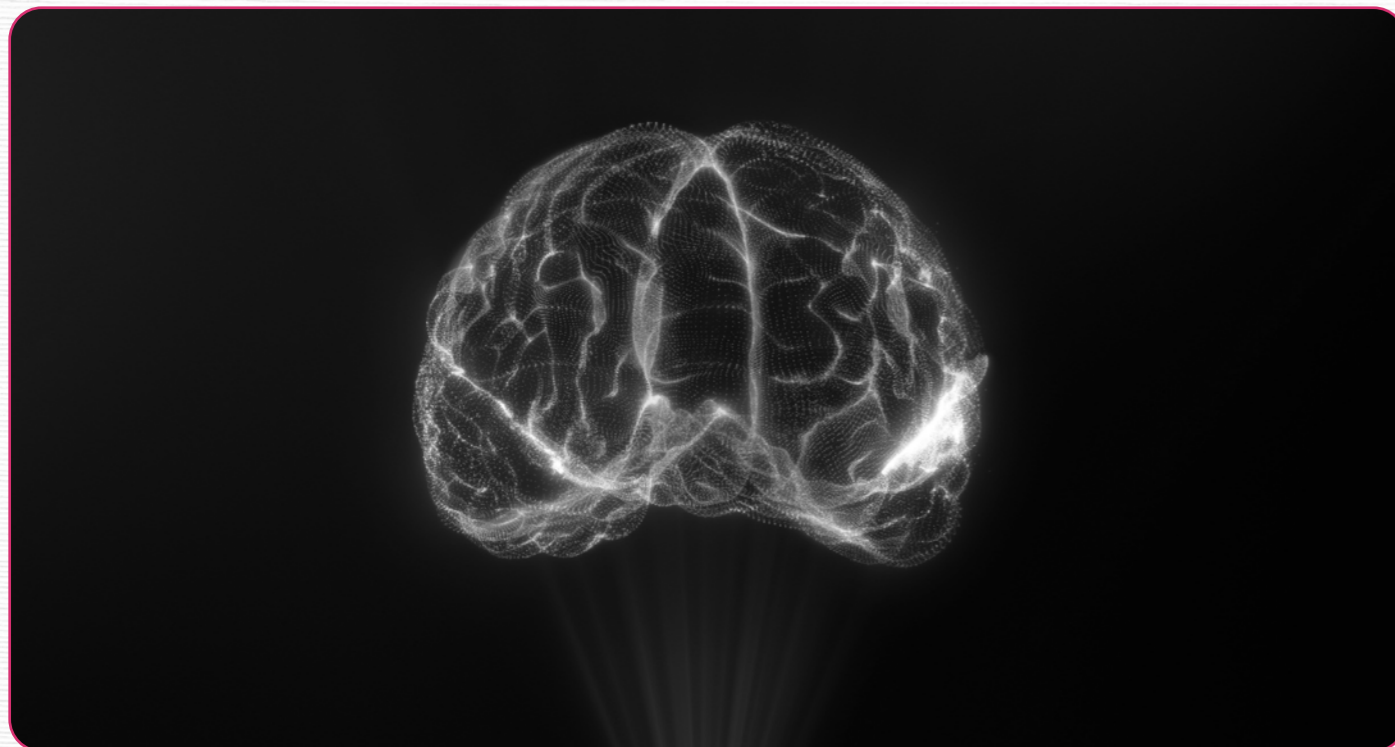
It isn't so much what happened to you that will have an impact on your child, but how you made sense of what happened to you. When parents have had horrible things happen to them, and have made sense of them, they don't pass on those patterns to their children. However, if horrible or suboptimal things have happened but they have not worked through them, there's a high likelihood that they will pass it on to their children.

What are the patterns that lead to secure or non-secure attachment? In different cultures, there are different patterns of parenting. There is a way of looking at a child's well-being across cultures and the

research says that making sense of your own childhood is the healthy thing to do. The next step is to make sense of your relationship with your child.

The way you offer connection to your child in the form of communication, where you honour the differences of what your child is bringing in, versus what your expectations are is important. You really see your child and accept them for who they are but also help to guide them to develop integrative ways of being in the world. Essentially, that is a summary of attachment research.

The way that you communicate with your child is going to stimulate the growth of integration within the child's brain. This integration is the basis for your child developing wellbeing and resilience.



THE FOUR S'S

SAFETY

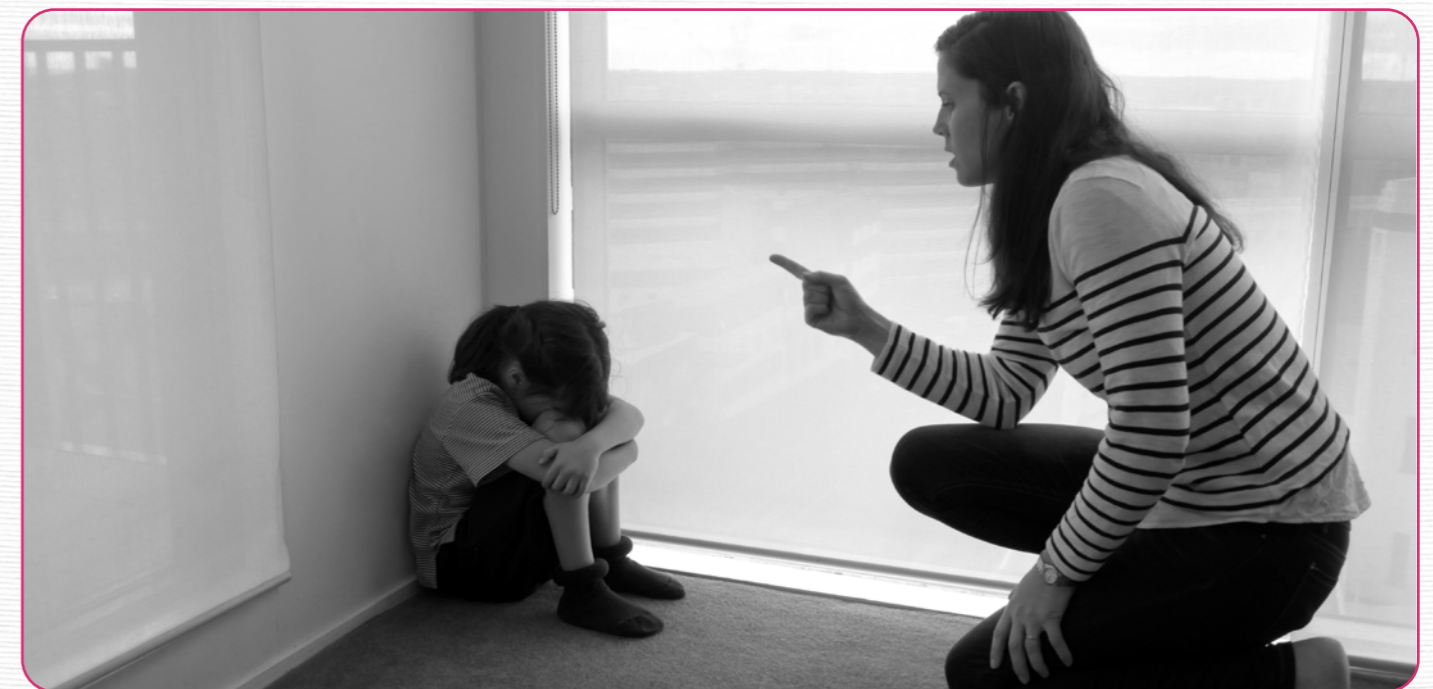
About 55-65% of the population develop a secure attachment with their primary caregiver. The outcomes of secure attachment for a child include:

- Feeling grounded
- Feeling like they are meeting their intellectual potential
- Having a positive attitude toward life
- Forming positive connections with people
- Making friendships that are mutually rewarding

- The ability to regulate emotions
- The ability to think clearly under stress.

The first S is that you keep your child safe. This is one of the primary roles of parents or caregivers as attachment figures.

Safety encompasses physical safety, but it also involves not being the source of terror for a child. For example, if you have had a bad day at work and come home screaming at the top of your lungs, or you come home drunk, it is very scary for a child and can impact their development by making them feel unsafe. Domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect are all forms of terror for a child created by the behavior of the parent.





The brain will have two reactions to this. One reaction is that the child recognizes that they're in a state of terror so they run from the source. This is a deep, protective reaction to get away from what's scaring you. The second is mammalian. The child realizes they are terrified but the instinct is to go toward their attachment figure to be protected.

How can you simultaneously run from and toward the source of terror? The brain fragments, leading to what is called disorganised attachment. This has a negative impact on the child and is something we want to avoid.

It is good to bear in mind that there is no such thing as perfect parenting, and everybody makes mistakes. The important thing is parental presence, where we can recognize a rupture in our connection and then make a repair.

Being kind to ourselves is very important. If you're beating yourself up for what you did, unintentionally, you're much less likely to make a repair. While we want to reduce the amount of times that we do things that frighten our children, if it happens we should focus on making a repair as quickly as possible.

SEEN

The second S is seen. This is where the child has a very integrative experience because the parents look beneath their surface behavior to ask: what is going on in the mental life of the child? What are their feelings, thoughts, perspective, memories, hopes, dreams, and desires?

When I was in medical school, it was often only the material nature of the world that was dealt with when treating patients. Their internal, subjective life of feelings were not considered. We have two different perceptual capacities, one to see the physical world, the other to see the world in the mind. I named this 'mind sight.' When someone's mind feels truly seen, beneath the behavior on the outside observed with the eyes, mind sight is felt with the heart. This is by focusing attention to the inner world.



Depending on individual childhood histories and temperament, when a child is in a state of distress it can come through a set of neurons that act like sponges. These are called mirror neurons, but I think of them as sponge neurons: we sponge up the emotions of other people. If you don't have clarity of mind and the capacity to hold whatever emotions your child is experiencing, then your child will feel distressed. This may cause you to react to their distress which will lead to the child feeling worse, and so it continues. This is non-integrative and is very confusing for the child. Empathy includes emotional resonance but also the ability to be differentiated. This ability to sooth means that as a parent, you will keep the child safe, see them and connect, whilst not mirroring their distressed emotions.



SECURITY

Combining these first three s's (safe, seen, and soothed) you get the fourth S; security. This involves making sense of your experiences. Children need to know that they are protected within their relationship with you. Being safe from actions and responses that might frighten them is crucial for developing a secure attachment style.

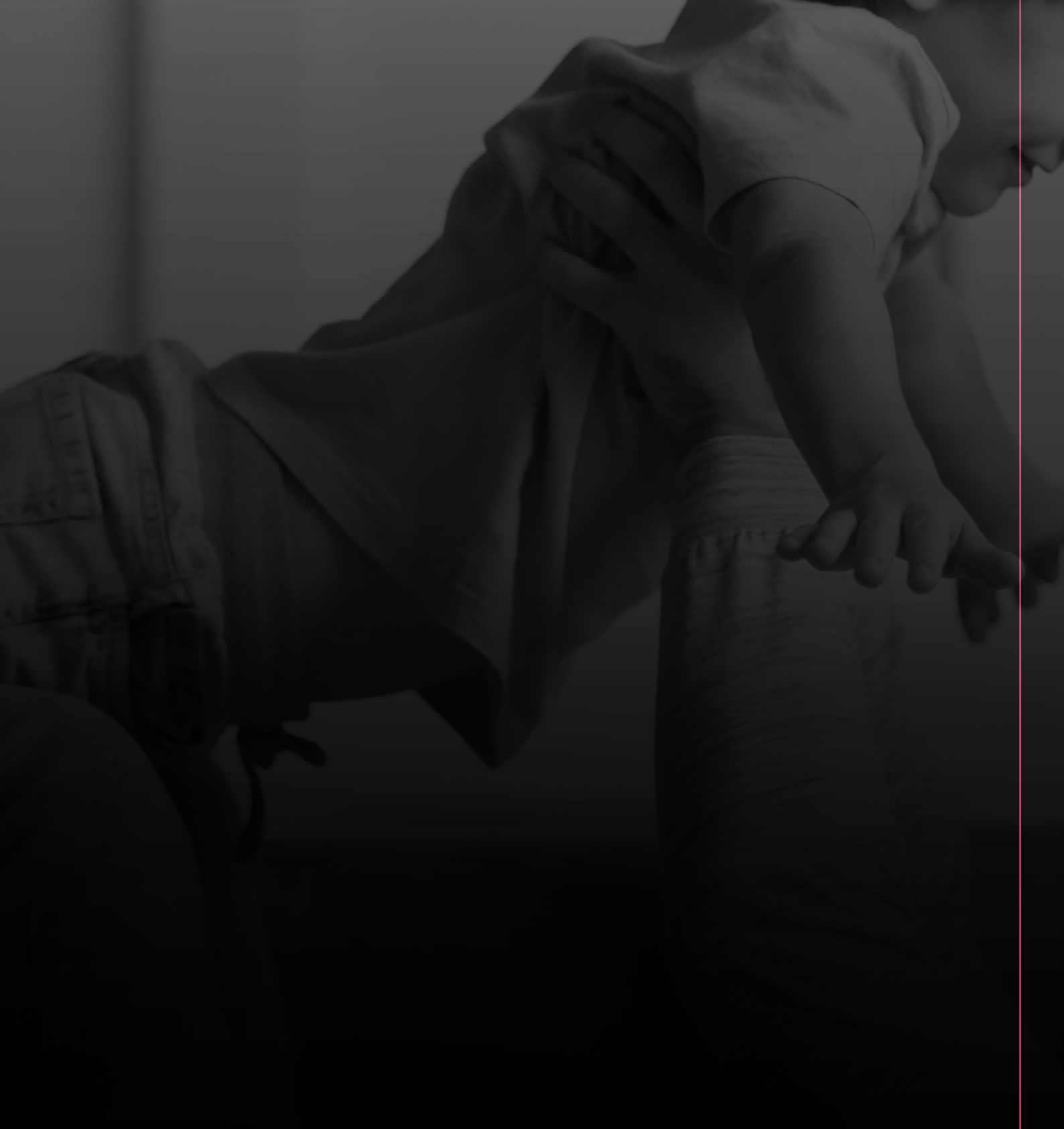


MWE

If we raise youth, young adults, and even ourselves to realise that the self is capable of being integrated beyond just the differentiated isolated me, we realise we're also a we.

We are connected to one another as a human family, but also connected within nature. When you put those together for an integrated identity, you get me: the differentiated interior experience of the self. However, ourself is also a we. To put them together: me, plus we is 'mwe'. 'Mwe' is an integrated identity we can move toward and find a more integrative way of living. As parents, we have a very important role to do just that.





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