Heart to Heart: Caregiver and Child Connections in Times of Challenge

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April 2020
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Infant Mental Health Definition

‘Infant Mental Health’ refers to how well a child develops socially and emotionally from birth to three. It is the developing capacity of the child to experience, regulate, and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment and learn – all in the context of family, community and cultural expectations.

ZERO TO THREE

Infant Mental Health remains contextual as it is held within a relationship with a caregiver, a community, a culture and a global society

Note: my work is with children birth to five. Older children that have a significant trauma history often respond or engage like younger children
The Interaction Effect

The baby is reading your feelings and responding to them
You are reading the babies non-verbal cues and responding to the baby

Adult
- My Feelings
- My Actions

Interaction
- What Adult/Baby Gives
- What Baby/Adult Receives

Baby
- Feelings about Adult and self
- My Behavior
Culture and the Young Child

**Culture**: Belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes (e.g., language and care-taking practices) and organizations (e.g., media and educational systems). Culture has also been described as the embodiment of a worldview through learned and transmitted beliefs, values, and practices, including religious and spiritual traditions. Moreover, culture encompasses a way of living that is informed by the historical, economic, ecological, and political forces in a group.

American Psychological Assoc. 2017
The infant is simultaneously in relationship with multiple caregivers, their family culture, local communities (school, neighborhoods, governance) and a larger global community which includes: societal norms, environmental responsibility, global understanding, and more.
Caregiving Relationships Should

Protection from harm – keeping everyone safe in relationship
Demonstrate sensitivity to the child’s needs – accurate cue reading
Teach emotional understanding – naming feelings in the moment
Co-regulate in times of distress – soothing when upset
  ◦ to build a healthy stress response system
Infuse cultural identity via the relationship – family culture
  ◦ Trauma informed cultural responses
Delight in the child’s successes – share joy
Infants/ Young Children Seek Connection

Infants are born seeking connection and learn from the adult’s specific contingent responses (aka sensitive to the child’s needs)

Before language young children are learning how caregivers see them, who they need to be to maintain a connection to caregivers, and developing an internal story that becomes their blue print for relationships – You are the teacher of relationship skills

Young children are reading the adult’s emotional rhythms and learning from you when they can be safe, when to worry or enjoy relationships based on the adult’s non-verbal cues

The story or memory of the relationship is written by the caregiver & the child
Relationships Move Development Forward

Relationships that Protection us and keep us safety

- Am I safe in this relationship and will I be safe in the world (physically & emotionally safe)

Relationships that take the time to Look – Listen - Learn

- **Watching** – I am not alone in the world, others care about me, my ego is intact, I matter in this relationship and in the larger social network that is my family & community culture

- **Listening** – What I say and do is worth your time and attention, listen to my story, do not rewrite my story with your ideas, help the infant form their story

- **Learn about me** - what I like, dislike, and begin to anticipate my responses, respect my voice – I can say no
Creating Emotional Connections

Building an attachment/bond to the child creates an emotional link that lets the child know they are loved and cared for in and out of your presence.

This attachment is formed by the positive interaction effect of you noticing and responding sensitively to the child’s needs.

In order to be present to the needs of the child, your emotional needs must also be supported.

Foundational to child development, learning, and successful relationships is the ability to understand and manage ones’ emotions (aka emotional regulation).
Social Emotional Development

- To **experience and express** emotions in an adaptive manner
- To accurately **read and respond** to the emotions of others in a culturally appropriate manner
- To **manage** intense feeling states such that they do not interfere with social relationships and learning
- **Demonstrate empathy** for others
- **Establish and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships**

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004
Attentive caregiving for this discussion will be brain based caregiving

- **Cortex/ Thinking Brain** - Rational
- **Limbic System/ Emotional Brain** - Relational
- **Brain Stem/ Stress Response** - Reactive

Mental Flexibility

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Emotion Regulation is Key to all Learning

Co-Regulation leads to Self Regulation

Emotional Understanding

Learning

Thinking & Ideas

Feelings & Memories

Reacting Surviving

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVRO7PdYRnM&t=6s
Thinking Brain

Emotional Brain

Emotional Distress Fear-Anxiety-Rage

Protect

Connect

Reflect

Narrating Events - Telling My Story

Emotional Management / Co-Regulation

Safety & Trust

* © 2019
Where are You in Your Brain?

Where you are in your brain impacts how you respond:

• We protect from a place of fear - the need to survive
  • To protect another you must feel safe
  • When you feel safe the child feels protected
  • What helps you (or bio parent) feel emotionally safe?
• Connection is emotional engagement
  • Caregivers need emotional connection just like the children in your care
  • Who listens to you and supports your emotional needs?
• Reflect is telling our story or hearing another’s story
  • Children are telling us their story through their actions and feelings – What is this child or teen saying?
Connecting to the Other’s Brain

Cortex engagement is verbal narration, skill building, explanations, and making choices.

Limbic System engagement is from the heart, pure emotion, not always having words to express the experience.

- young children often move from feeling to behavior with no access to words

Brain Stem engagement is protective, automatic, survival mode, not by choice but by instinct.
Brain to Brain Communication

Child’s Brain

Cortex
Mid-Brain
Brain Stem

Adult’s Brain

Cortex
Mid-Brain
Brain Stem
Brain to Brain Communication

Child’s Brain

Adult’s Brain

Cortex

Mid-Brain

Brain Stem

Cortex

Mid-Brain

Brain Stem
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Child’s Brain

Adult’s Brain

Cortex

Mid-Brain

Brain Stem

Cortex

Mid-Brain

Brain Stem
Somato-sensory = bottom up strategies
Prefrontal cortex = top down strategies
What does this child most need from me?

Remembering individual differences and culture as significant to identity development

Everyone needs an emotional regulation tool or skill but not the same tool or skill

In a moment of challenge – listen and hold the feelings (mid-brain) more than you direct and explain (cortex)

Engage the sensory systems – young children learn from their sensory world (touch, smell, taste, hearing & sight)

Acceptance when holding ‘Big Feelings’

‘you may have done a bad thing but you are not a bad person’
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