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Conscious Parenting: How A Deeper Self-Understanding Helps Children Thrive

The Past and Present at a Crossroads

Why is it that some of us would like to say that our own childhood did not affect us? Why do we prefer to think that how we are today has very little to do with what we learned as little children? Or perhaps we can admit that our childhood shaped us to some degree, but we certainly do not want to be labeled as rigidly affected by the past. And why, to the contrary, do we, as parents, want to take personal credit for every positive attribute of our children...but dismiss the negative attributes as unrelated (or a fault inherited from someone else in the family)?

When it comes to looking at our own past, we can feel very protective of our history, of our experiences, of our family, and of our unseen hurts. If we reveal that family life was less than peachy, it might feel exposing and as if we are admitting some kind of problem or weakness. After all, it is our past. We came from it.

So when we talk about our own children and how we parent them, acknowledging that our past has some bearing on today can be challenging to say the least. That is, we like to think that we are different than where we came from, taking the best from our caregivers and leaving the worst behind. We may say things like "Mom was loving and kind, but passive. I will never be passive and weak like that. My kids will have it different." Or something like, "Dad was a hard worker, but he was never home and didn't know how to be a father. I'm gonna be a father that plays with his kids." These statements are examples of people who, to some degree, can acknowledge the strengths as well as the weaknesses in their parents. They can also identify to some measure how they want to be different in their own role as parents.

What We Need to Know In Order to Do It Differently

We can fairly say that having awareness of your parent's strengths and weaknesses is helpful in knowing what to pass on and what to leave behind. However, beyond this awareness, is another important level of awareness. We also want to know and understand how we coped with childhood. This is because how we defended against or welcomed emotions like anger, fear, sadness, and joy is core to understanding what unconsciously gets transmitted to our children. Generally speaking, our coping patterns were learned in reaction to our primary caregivers, to our siblings (or lack thereof), to our peers, and to the culture at large (school, religious beliefs, neighborhood). Coping was also formed to deal with hardship and loss, such as disease or illness, trauma, death, abuse, maturation issues, and a myriad of challenging shifts in the family system, such as job loss, divorce, remarriage, new siblings, adoption, etc.

There is also another level of awareness that is crucial to healthy parenting. We also need to have an awareness that old wounds can be retriggered in the present, including with our children. This is an important point and one that we will revisit in another article.

Three Levels of Adaptation to Parenting Based on One's Own Childhood

Level One : Parenting Like Your Parents

There are many ways to understand and classify parenting styles. One way is to see parenting styles as falling into three evolutionary-like categories. The first and most basic level is where a parent emulates the parenting they received as a child. This is when we model what our own parents did. Both the positive and negative aspects of our parents are passed down in relationships. This can potentially have unfortunate results, as everything is indiscriminately passed down. Since every generation tends to try to improve upon the one before, this would be considered somewhat stagnant.

Most often, a person who tends to parent exactly like their own parents has not sufficiently individuated from their family. Individuation is the process of establishing an identity separate from one's parents. When we say, for example, that an adolescent is trying to individuate, we mean that they are trying to solidify their own personhood. The result would be that they understand and experience themselves as separate from their parents. They have their own ideas, thoughts, feelings, and way of being in the world that is not exactly the same as their parents. They also experience some measure of validation and affirmation that they are different. This is challenging, because some parents are not able or do not want to validate or honor differences in their children. They may tend to struggle with this because they were not honored and validated for their differences in their childhood.

Individuation is a developmental process that takes place over time. At birth, we are fully dependent on our parents and not individuated. Newborn infants cannot comprehend

Treatment for

Depression
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 Bi-polar Disorder
 Obsessive –
 Compulsive
 Disorder
 Compulsive Behaviors
 such as sexual
 addiction
 Post-traumatic Stress
 Disorder from past
 abuse
 Relational issues
 Adjustment to life
 changes

Ages Served

Adult
 Adolescent
 Children ages 10 & up

they are a different self with different feelings than their parents. The road to individuation is long and can often involve power struggles between parents and their children. Individuation can trigger anxiety in parents. Individuation can also be scary and anxiety-producing for children, because they are renegotiating their relationship with their parents and with the world. If we are able to properly individuate from our family-of-origin, we are better equipped to establish healthy adult relationships. When individuation does not go well, we tend to leave “fly paper homes.” That is, we have technically left the nest, but, because we have not fully individuated, we find ourselves caught up with our parents in unhealthy ways. The adult children may have physically left the nest, but their emotions and sense of self-worth are still tangled up with their parents.

Level Two : Parenting Like You Wanted to Be Parented

The second level of parenting is when you parent your children as you wished you had been parented. Parents who have this style tend to have awareness of what was undesirable in their own childhoods and try to adjust what they do with their own children. Although this is an evolutionary step in the right direction because you are hoping to improve on what your parents did, this can create new problems.

With this style, we may overcompensate for what we actually lacked as children. A simple example would be if you grew up in a home that was extremely frugal to a fault and as a child you felt deprived. As a parent, you do not want your child to have to experience any deprivation, so you indulge them with whatever they want. This parenting logic fails because you are not actually parenting to your child’s needs. Rather, you are reparenting yourself *through* your child. That is, you are parenting in a way as if your child had experienced severe deprivation. In fact, they have not, and so the overindulgence is an attempt to repair something that was never at a loss for them to begin with. It was simply a loss for you. This confusion can also be related to individuation. In this case, the individuation issue lies in relationship to your own child. We get clearer on this when we allow our own children to individuate. We realize that they are not us, so we do not have to parent them as though they were!

Level Three: Parenting According to What Your Children Need

The third level of parenting is actually an improved version of level one and two. You take the best of what your parents did well, you leave behind what was undesirable, and you are mindful to apply what you notice is of most importance to pass on to your children. However, the difference is that you realize that your child never had the experiences that you did. Therefore, you do not have to compensate as if they had the same childhood as you. Instead, you are tuning in to the individual needs of your child, who has her own unique history.

The primary piece of insight needed to tailor your parenting to your child is to understand that he is responding to the environment presented to him. This includes his childhood experiences, family, relevant caregivers, culture, etc. Further, your child is responding to **you!** They are responding to your strengths, your limitations, your character adaptations, your emotional triggers, and your defenses. Therefore, your level of consciousness about who you are and how you learned to cope with emotions and stressors is crucial in being able to connect safely and well with your child. That is, what you do not understand and are not aware of about yourself, you can unconsciously pass on to your children. To the degree that you can understand yourself and can be empathic about your own struggles is related to the degree that you can potentially be empathic with your child.

The concept that effective parenting involves self-knowledge, knowledge of your child, and empathic attunement (compassionate understanding) is fundamental. A parent’s ability to provide this, along with safety and structure, directly impacts the developing child’s organization of the brain and her behavior. Over time, the culmination of repeated experiences help the child to assimilate aspects of self, learn how to regulate her emotions, and develop empathy for others. This is also how a person becomes imprinted with their understanding of love and love relationships.

In contrast, children deprived of this can have impaired organization of the brain, leading to trouble relating to others, understanding human behavior and relationships, understanding themselves, and having empathy for others. Authors Dan Siegel, M.D. and Mary Hartzell, M.Ed., focus an entire book to this, explaining the role of parenting, empathic attunement, and brain organization in child functioning in the book, Parenting From the Inside Out.

As we know, parenting is an immense task. Parenting can bring out both the best and the worst in us. As we understand ourselves and mature as ever-evolving adults, we bring blessings to our children in their maturation process. They are freed up to do the work of growing and we are freed up to enjoy and celebrate this with them!

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