



PARENTING AND BLOCKED CARE

In their book 'Brain Based Parenting' Dan Hughes and Jonathan Baylin explore the neuroscience of caregiving and consider what this means in terms of parenting. The book describes how the various parts of the brain come into play during parenting and highlights their inter-relationship. In many ways it replicates what we know about how children's brains develop both when parented in a safe and secure way and when their brains are impacted by trauma. Indeed Dan and Jonathan describe how stress can 'lead to the development of mutually defensive feelings between parent and child, when the child mirrors the parent's stress and then exhibits signs of his or her own distress that the parent, in turn, mirrors back' (secondary trauma).

Dan and Jonathan use the neuroscience of caregiving to consider what goes on for parents and carers in the task of parenting and describe the 'systems' that are inherent components of parenting. They consider what happens when there are difficulties in some or all of the systems and suggest that this can lead to 'blocked care'. They differentiate between parental and non-parental feelings and associate non-parental feelings with blocked care.

Parental Systems:

There are at least five 'systems' that enable fundamental aspects of the care of children to occur:

1. The Parental Approach System enables parents to be close to children without becoming defensive. It allows parents to feel safe and stay open and engaged while interacting closely with a child.

In order to sustain an empathetic style of parenting, you have to have a visceral sense of safety as you interact closely with your child both in times of quiet joy and in times of conflict'. Dan and Jonathan recognise that this is not always possible in safe and caring families. It is more of a struggle when parenting traumatised children who challenge parental authority and act out their early traumatic history in challenging behaviours. A natural result of the threat this poses to parents' sense of efficacy as parents is to retreat to a defensive stance which involves withdrawal from the child. The amygdala is the part of the brain that mediates rapid assessment of safety or threat, thereby playing a key role in moving us instinctively towards, or away from, our children. Dan and Jonathan describe how parents can employ different aspects of their brain to 'tame their amygdala' and over-ride the amygdala's natural defence system by use of their 'Smart Vagal System'.

2. The Parental Reward System makes it possible for parents to experience pleasure from parenting. It is turned on by interacting with our children and is needed so that we can remain engaged and highly motivated to care for our kids. It is an anticipation system related to a parent's expectation about how it will feel to interact with a child. Stress can suppress the reward system making it difficult to sustain the caregiving process. Parenting a difficult child can be stressful and unrewarding in the short term; however we have the capacity to activate our reward system by over-riding short term goals in favour of deferred gratification and from the belief that we are doing a meaningful job well.
3. The Parental Child Reading System supports the ability of a parent to understand, empathise with and attune to a child's inner subjective experiences. This is more difficult to do in foster/adoptive families especially if carers lack information about their children's early trauma history. It is also more difficult when children express their inner subjective experiences in contradictory and challenging behaviour. Added stress reduces parents' ability to access their child reading system.

The Parental Child-Reading System is fundamental to the process of attuning to a child's internal states. Parents need to be able to understand what their child is conveying non-verbally to ensure their Child Reading System is functioning well. This indicates how important it is for foster carers to be given as much information as possible regarding their children's early experiences.

Mirroring strengthens parents' ability to attune to their child's conscious or unconscious intentions as part of the parent's child reading system. However when there hidden negative influences these can impact mirroring. Parents may intend to convey positive messages but show subtle negative facial expressions that are detected by the child's mirroring system.

4. The Parental Meaning Making System allows parent to construct a working narrative or story about being a parent. It arises from the ways in which parents understand and ascribe meaning to themselves as parents, about the nature of their children and about the relationship between them.

In a healthy well connected brain the meaning constructed tends to be nuanced, complex and coherent. In contrast, stressed out brains create polarised, black and white stories of an 'either-or' rather than a 'both-and' nature.

Being able to create a coherent narrative involves the higher regions of the prefrontal cortex. This may not be available to stressed parents who are acting primarily from their limbic systems.

The Parental Meaning Making System is greatly influenced by parents' own histories; their histories of brain development and their attachment histories which begins its development during childhood.

For this reason it is important that parents/carers are open to exploring and making sense of their own experiences of being parented as a stepping stone towards creating the coherent narrative that allows them to make sense of themselves as parents.

5. The Parental Executive System helps parents regulate the lower more automatic brain processes; allowing them to regulate their internal states. It helps parents to monitor their feelings and actions as well as their attachment or mis-attunement to their child. It is crucial for resolving conflicts between parental and un-parental feelings and for reflecting on experiences of being a parent.

Executive systems are dependent on the functioning of the prefrontal cortex which is the last part of the brain to mature. Indeed it takes at least 20 years before your prefrontal cortex is developed enough to give you the powers of self-regulation that you need to parent well. It allows you to shift your attention in a highly flexible way in response to your child's changing needs and to changing circumstances.

Executive systems pave the way for the parental self-monitoring that can alert you that all is not well with your child or with the state of your relationship and prompts you to pay more attention to what is going on so you can respond more effectively, in a more attuned way.

Stress can impair parental prefrontal cortex even after it has matured. Indeed all of the parental systems are impacted by the consequent child systems. If the child is not responding with an attitude of valuing the parent it's harder for parents to maintain a positive reward system and consequently all of the other systems that, together, make for positive parenting.

Blocked Care (the stressed-out survival-based brain mode):

Blocked care' describes 'how stress can suppress a well-meaning parent's capacity to sustain loving feelings and empathy towards his or her child'. It stems from a need for self-protection and defensiveness and fosters a reactive style of parenting that is narrowly focussed on the immediate behaviour and most negative aspects of the child. In blocked care there is a tendency to overreact to a child's nonverbal communication; nonverbal communications are processed faster than verbal communications and therefore blocks verbal communication.

Blocked care has a tendency to be judgemental towards the child and to oneself. It makes rapid appraisals and judgements about what is going on between parent and child and produces simplistic cognitions, black and white thoughts about the child and parent. There is a shift from a 'we' interaction to a 'you' and 'me' interaction.

Parents from unsafe childhoods are likely to experience limbic reactions to their children that are inconsistent with their intentions as parents. However the stress of living with a traumatised child can also lead parents to develop a reliance on their limbic system and therefore blocked care.

Dan and Jonathan describe four different types of Blocked Care:

Chronic: This is likely to be the case for parents who had difficult childhoods. They have not developed the basic parenting systems that prepare them for parenthood. They have a poorly developed care system and an under-developed self-regulation system. The core caregiving domains of approach, reward, child reading and meaning making are under-developed making the basic caregiving process difficult to activate. The Parental Executive System is also under-developed meaning that it is harder to learn from experiences and make adaptive changes.

Acute: This can arise as a result of a major traumatic event; perhaps a death in the family. As a result previous good parenting might be compromised.

Child Specific: This is especially relevant for foster carers and adoptive parents. The Parental Reward System is an important aspect of the natural parent-child bonding process. Children who cannot respond to parents' overtures may trigger a defensive response in parents which can lead to parents feeling resentful and angry and lacking in empathy.

Stage specific: This may occur at times when children are going through a particular stage of development; perhaps adolescence.

Ways to enhance parenting:

Feed your brain with PACE:

Stay in an open engaged stance when with your children, rather than sliding into a defensive, self-protective stance.

Befriend your amygdala:

Your amygdala has the function of keeping you safe by detecting the slightest threat to your well-being. However it can provide misleading information about your child's intentions and can lead you into a defensive stance when there is no need for you to fight, feel or freeze. You need to learn to take a second look at what your amygdala is saying so that you don't go into a defensive stance and therefore susceptible to blocked care when there is no real need.

Welcome the elephants in your attachment history:

Our attachment history is likely to contain many elephants (defensive, self-protective stances) that we try to avoid and when we can't we defend against them. Fear, anger, discouragement and shame are at the core of these defensive stances. Parents who work with their elephants are more able to put them in the past where they belong and develop a coherent narrative which opens us up to generating a similar narrative for our children.

Think with your heart and feel with your mind:

We need to work towards integrating our emotions and our more cognitive-reflective areas of our brain. This allows us to develop empathy for our children, intuition about the deeper meaning of their behaviour and the larger meaning of what it is to be a parent.

Have a friend or two:

For optimal benefit your friends should be able to discover the best in you and remind you of your strengths, helpfulness and openness when you forget AND comfort you when times are tough. Using your professional support network can also be very helpful in allowing you to develop a sense of efficacy as a parent and understanding of your child.

Be mindful:

Accept yourself and your child. Be fully present when with your child so that there is no doubt that they are in your mind and that they will remain there when you are separate. Be mindful of the 'big picture' of your development as a parent and of the uniqueness and individuality of your child. This will help you put the smaller difficulties into perspective.

Discover your child with comfort and joy:

This will facilitate the development of your relationship with your child across all of the challenges, opportunities, ordeals and celebrations you are likely to encounter. Being joyful about your child will change their brain and help them develop the structure and functioning of their brain.

Connect and correct:

It is your relationship with your child that will have the most profound impact on their development within the family and throughout their lives. If your interactions with your children are regularly characterised by intersubjective experiences of learning and shared meaning your children will want to be like you and share your values, interests and habits.

When you have to provide discipline they will be more receptive to your teaching and more trusting of its value and your good intentions even when they moan about a restriction you have imposed.

When you reconnect with your child after discipline this is not rewarding bad behaviour; it's emphasising that your relationship is more important than any behavioural conflict and that he or she is not the behaviour.

Tinker and repair:

We need to remember that what worked yesterday might not work today. We need to be open to the uniqueness of the situation and respond in the best possible way. It requires flexibility.

Be prepared to apologise when you make mistakes. This will enhance your relationship because it will show your child that you are honest and willing to acknowledge that you are not all knowing or always right.

Work to repair the inevitable disruptions in your relationship with your child. Disruptions will not damage children if you repair. In fact they can deepen your relationship with your child and increase their sense of safety.