

The Inner Dimensions of Parenting and Self Parenting

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The definition of parent is 'parer', to bring forth and 'ent', agent, forming. Parenting is about bringing forth and forming relationships with partners, children and other family members. Relationships are not a luxury, or an add-on, they are essential for survival. For instance, a newborn baby has an innate and overwhelming capacity to relate. Relationships are at the very core of development and life and are especially crucial in developing families.

Parenting is a journey of the heart-of developing new capacities for relationship, as our children are not passive objects, but partners in life. Raising children can be a joy and a challenge which offers the possibility to learn from our children through active observation and participation. Parenting offers many opportunities, of not only having to face and address issues happening in the outer environment around us but also of facing and coping with the variety of unresolved feelings, and unwanted reactionary behaviours that may emerge within us, as part of living with others. These inner reactions are part of the journey of developing the freedom to choose how we would really like to behave, to bring forth and form ourselves and our children into the human beings we can become. The consequence of over-reacting is that we can affect the people around us in negative ways. It seems at times we can behave more like a child than as an adult. These layers of ourselves are waiting for us as the adult now to take notice of unresolved experiences, to take on the job of being a parent of our own inner life, as a starting point for parenting others.

How can we find practical ways to become the parent we want to be with the children in our care, whether they are our own or others, and how can we maintain our sense of sanity and well-being as we go on this journey of parenting a future generation of adults/parents? How can we do this without letting emotions and judgements be more in control of our behaviour than we wish them to be? How can we heal unresolved hurts and be more in charge of how we behave, so we can together be more hopeful and encouraging, not just for others, but also for ourselves?

Emotional Literacy

We need to accept the responsibility of self-parenting, of dealing with our own unresolved issues. Our children need us to help them find different ways of coping in this fast changing society, with its increasing pressures on the individual and with many past ways not necessarily as relevant now. In many cultures there are new ways of relating emerging, which need new capacities, more based on the free choice of the individuals or families concerned, with clear communication skills so we can better understand the other from their point of view. We are at a stage in history where there is constant change and movement, with very little in the outer world today being secure or predictable. However, a secure foundation must still be built so that families can be encouraging, respecting each other in their uniqueness and finding creative ways to deal with life's issues.

This foundation has to be built on the inside now. Parenting is demanding us to become more intimate with our children and with ourselves, to understand the language of a soul journey. This language includes developing our heart, our feelings, how we express and take care of ourselves and each other as the basis for learning, relating with others and doing things in the world. Feelings are what binds or separates us in relationships, as feelings connect or disconnect us with each other and influence close or distant friendships.

From my work as an early childhood teacher, parent educator and as a psychotherapist working with children and parents, the greatest and most sustainable changes or improvements in families have been where the parent/s have taken responsibility for looking at their own experiences and learning how to better understand themselves, as the basis for encouraging their children. This becomes a very empowering exercise for parents to experience the idea that we can no longer force others to change, but if we understand and develop ourselves, by changing the way we respond rather than blindly reacting, then this automatically can affect others and change the dynamics of relationships.

It needs to be said that the significant events in parents' lives such as separation, transitions, loss and abuse, are not in themselves significant in terms of leading to difficulties in relationship. More important is the way in which we as parents have dealt with our experiences. This is what will make the difference. If we have learnt to face difficulties and not avoid them, found the help we needed or were able to understand what happened and could contain this experience, then this is what potentially gives relationships a depth of understanding, self-knowledge, and a sense of

truth. We can see that gaining support at critical stages in parents and children's lives is vital and what a difference this can make to traumatic and abusive experiences.

Five aspects of emotional intelligence have been identified and developed as the heart of parenting emotionally intelligent children¹. These aspects include: The ability to know our own emotion; to manage our emotions; self-motivation to contain emotions in order to reach important goals; to recognise emotions in others; and handling relationships.

I propose that our issues are not just personal ones, they belong in the world, as part of what the world is calling us to develop as new capacities. Therefore, we can take this idea further in the development of the two sides of relationship between outer parenting and inner self-parenting. Outer parenting relates to the outer environmental and social situation and how we communicate and relate with our family and others. Inner parenting is about our relationship with ourselves, where we can change, the power of this and its effect on outer relationships. For example, the 'power of one' person developing new capacities for changing within, of taking responsibility by not blaming others and understanding differences, and how this can have an effect on the whole family as a learning experience.

Four types of children's misbehaviour and capacities to be developed

| Child's behaviours | Attention seeking Defending behaviours | Power | Revenge | Escape by withdrawal |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| Examples of behaviours | Teasing, annoying behaviours, wants to be noticed, doubts he/she is okay. | Bullying, 'I can do whatever I like', covering feelings of powerlessness | 'I will get even', feeling deeply hurt | Solitary, idle, incapable, 'I am hopeless', 'leave me alone' |
| Obstacle to overcome | Doubt | Fear | Hatred 'I hate you' | Sense of having some deficiency, despair |
| Typical adult reaction | Annoyed by child's behaviour | Anger | Feels personally hurt | Gives up, 'it's hopeless' |
| Capacities to develop: what needed by child from parent/ adult | Creativity, building on strengths of what does know, so can experience success & build self-confidence | Courage & interest to face difficult situations, with a process of learning provided for how to access support needed. | Warmth, and enthusiasm needed to heal the hurt, don't give up on the child: unconditional love | Having faith and hope in the child's ability to learn and succeed |

Adapted from Balson (1988), Dinkmeyer (1989) & Steiner (1994)

Other parenting approaches² utilise the emotional aspects of children's misbehaviour and parents responses to this as a source for awareness and parenting skills development. This information

¹ Goleman (1995) identifies five aspects of emotional intelligence which Gottman (1997) developed further as the heart of parenting emotionally intelligent children.

² Dinkmeyer et al (1989) & Balson (1988)

can also be an entry point into dealing with the inner/self-parenting issues, triggered by a child, as a basis for better parenting of one's own children.

Who are the inner children? How do we recognise them?

The inner aspects are part of our everyday lives, in the present and can also influence our future. They are not somewhere in the past, they live within us in the present, as means of coping, of surviving difficulties. They make themselves known and come to expression through the body: in the angry knot in the stomach, in the withdrawal from facing some fearful confrontation or in the sudden angry outburst, or when we behave in ways we really don't like as an adult/parent ('that wasn't me' type of feeling); becoming vague, numb, needy, embarrassed, judging, victimised, manipulative, or compromising³. Often they appear in the repetition of unwanted behaviours that are just like our own parents. Most important of all, is that our own children often trigger in us aspects of a similar age in our memories, causing us to behave in ways we don't really want to until we do something to develop new ways to change these reactionary behaviours (refer to the table above for possible ways).

The repetitive patterns live in our experiences in the body and we carry the traces and echoes of our lives within us. They can determine our behaviour, responses, how well we connect or are cut off from our inner resources, energy, relationships, well-being, creativity, purpose and depth of meaning in our life⁴. When we were in a powerless position we instinctively coped and survived any perceived or real threats by developing defences and strategies of protection. These defences stay with us because they worked for us and only become a difficulty when we have a need to change or life presses us to change, to behave differently. Our interactions with our children as they grow and go through the different ages can activate all these layers. However, the most important thing to remember is that this is all about developing new capacities and the potential for this growth is hidden within these inner struggles. It is an opportunity presented by life to awaken and is presented to us in the guise of a personal 'problem'.

For this development to occur we need first to acknowledge that it is happening and to observe the activity in the sensation of the bodily experience, how we are triggered. This attention can begin to break the cycle of behaviours from repeating and protect our children from any destructive reactions. To understand these patterns we can use the non-verbal languages of experience which are: Sensing bodily sensations, Gesturing/movement of these sensations, Visualisation and Sounds. These elements are the major tools of Psychophonetics counselling and

³ Tagar (1996)

⁴ Ibid

the combination of verbal and non- verbal ways of communicating become useful in developing the skills of inner communication, as the following example shows:

A man despairing to make a real connection to his nine year old son. He feels blocked and cut off from him, unavailable as the loving close father he wishes to be to him. It breaks his heart; it is not in his control. A non-verbal conversation evolves between the mature man and his inner-child, the one who at nine years old was completely cut off from his father who was not there in his life, and with the pain, hurt, anger and resentment still alive as they were then. The man finds a way to take care of, to father his inner-child. Soon after, his relationship to his son picks up, and they can start to relate to each other, closing the gap with love and warmth. The bridge is created inside first, then bridging to the outside is made possible⁵.

Self-Care

By simply placing a hand on a part of the body that is tense, on a part that has a contraction, a discomfort from some reaction during the daily interactions with others, can begin to be a way of being with experience as it is. These experiences resound in us and are usually located in a particular area of the body. By noticing the bodily sensation, becoming aware of the sensations and feelings, accepting it is there, not judging, denying, avoiding or trying to fix it, is doing something to begin the process of self-care. Listening to one's body is a starting point and an opportunity for making an inner connection. If we take a moment to do this for ourselves then a feeling, a memory, an insight or a story may emerge. From this starting point, and with a basic attitude of accepting the responsibility of self care and self-parenting, the tools can be acquired to know more fully about one's inner experience, to encounter and change the inner dynamics, to take care of unresolved inner needs, hurts, and/or unexpressed speaking. By being present to our self in this way, opens new potentials of self- knowledge, inner strength and warmth of heart to be present in our relationships.

Summary of a Self-Care Process

The following process is one way for developing and learning more about being a parent with your children who need your support, as well as taking care through self- parenting. The process involves listening to the body; becoming aware of the emotion or feeling; recognising the emotion/feeling as an opportunity for intimacy and learning; listening and validating the emotions/feelings; naming the emotion/feeling; exploring options for finding the next step. This may mean just sitting with what is happening, or talking to someone about how you feel, or it may mean seeing a counsellor, or some other option that is relevant.

⁵ Tagar (1996:23)

Creative Parenting

Parenting I believe is a creative activity and changing is inevitable as these inner disturbances are not necessarily problems if dealt with, but growing points, of opportunities for us to take the next step in our development. Parenting is about learning on the job-the textbook is life itself! It inevitably means that we can learn from the child, that is, children can teach us to become parents. This means it is a process of trial and error, as parents are not made at birth but become parents over time. Love takes time. It is very much a journey of relationship, of 'intimacy' (into-me-see).

The qualities of the child are needed for the resilience and hope towards creating more meaningful relationships in our lives. For instance, we may learn through mothering to strengthen with a stronger sense of selfhood, with inner strength to be more firm in the world. Fathering may teach us to soften, to express our feelings more, to develop nurturing qualities within and become a gentle person in the world. We all face the task of balancing the qualities of both gentleness and firmness in our lives, but it is very evident in the role of parenting and especially for single parents.

The opposite of learning from the child is to deny their emotional experience. For example, it 'doesn't matter, children don't know what's going on'. If we deny the validity of emotional experience in children, and in ourselves, we deny them the capacity to develop inner resources that support them in their development. These inner resources become hidden and have to develop in a different way and may be accessed later on in life when as an adult, help is sought.

The unique contribution of anthroposophy is that each human being is seen as a spiritual being, regardless of limitations or age, with the spirit of the child present as potential. As a parent or teacher we represent this spiritually perceived 'I' of the child, when we listen to the spirit within the child⁶. Based on the attitude that we are spiritual beings having a human experience, there are three principles regarding children that can guide us:

1. *Respect the child by answering their questions until the child is satisfied.* This means being able to perceive how much a child can take before moving on. In answering a child's

⁶ Refer to Steiner, lecture 1, Aug. 1924, in '*Curative Education*'

question with respect, as much as we can, the child learns that the question makes sense, there is an answer for it; that they are taken seriously and their thinking is responded to.

2. *Respect that children may want to do something that we don't want them to do, but they do not like it, or there are things they have to do, that can't be avoided, don't like it, and scream.* This means that I can tell a child what to do but I cannot control how they feel, as the child has a right to feel upset. For example, when we put the car seatbelt on our child, we cannot expect that they will be happy about it, so they may scream. By accepting that their crying is okay, shows that we respect the feeling life of the spiritual being in the child.
3. *Respect the child's will whenever possible even if they can't explain it, for example, choosing a green or pink shirt.* Listen to what is there but not present yet within the child.

As adults, we represent their higher being, and by using imagination, inspiration and intuition to expand into this sphere, we can make choices on the basis of knowing what is best for the child, or on listening to what the child is really trying to tell us. In light of this, we can learn to relate to children as if we are equal with a full being manifesting, and we can listen to the child and represent the developing 'I' of the child.

Depression and Anxiety

It's helpful to mention the place of depression and anxiety as important tasks to be negotiated. We generally struggle to deny or overcome these emotions. We tend to not want to feel miserable and we want to avoid stressful situations. If however, we explore these emotions from a different perspective, we see they contain within them positive aspects that can contribute to our growth and development. For instance, depression or being reflective offers us the chance to slow down, to be in a more reflective mode, to have time to digest and integrate our experiences, of what we've heard and learnt.

Similarly, if we or our children are able to tolerate some anxiety and frustration, it enables our children to move from one stage of development to the next. For example, childhood illness is helpful as we learn about suffering, tolerance and perseverance, of stopping and taking care of needs. This brings us to the idea of tolerating some uncertainty and being able to allow our children to tolerate and stand some frustration at times. These experiences are important as preparation for the inevitable experiences of separation, loss and frustration which are part of life - if we learnt as children or leave our children angry and bewildered with their parents then there is very little preparation for developing inner resources.

Finally, to travel along the path of understanding the development of relationship - of the feeling heart, of emotional development and love- can be a fearful idea if painful memories are triggered. The process of containment of relationships between self, others and the world, involves holding and balancing the interdependence of all these different levels of relationship. The image of the Russian doll is a useful way of holding these layers one within the other: From the outer (world) to inner (self) layers of containment are: the community needs of family, family needs of father, father's needs of mother, and mother/baby needs. The family generally contains the family needs but also moves outwards with its own layers needing support: of individual needs of family support, of family needs from others, and from the community. However, this isn't necessarily available with many separated and divorced parents, of people feeling more alone, alienated and unloved, hence the growing need for parent educators and counsellors.

Educational and Therapeutic Supports

As part of my work I offer personal development groups as well as individual counselling/parenting sessions. In the group process a space is offered to encourage participants with practical ways of dealing with the issues that arise, to learn and develop new capacities and resources. The inner and inter-relationship needs are addressed. Self-help management skills are learnt in a supportive and safe environment, a listening space is offered where participants can share their concerns and creative forms of expression are explored. It is a creative, skills-oriented, therapeutic and educational group process based upon the participants' experiences and choices.

The individual counselling sessions allow the person to enter into the inner dynamics of their issues more deeply, using conversation, body awareness, sensing, gesture, visualisation and sound therapy, to understand the experience that resounds in their body. We can learn to use these tools and develop skills specifically designed to suit each unique situation and experience. These non-verbal tools of body awareness can become self-help skills to be used as needed in our daily life. The therapeutic process of self-parenting is expressed in the following poem, and came in response to a request by a client to the counsellor, to summarise the process just experienced in a personal counselling session.

Motto of Self-Parenting⁷

My child was once in the hands of others
 Adults who were my parents.
 My child needed father and mother

⁷ Tagar (1996:24)

As God in heaven promised me.
The adults around me did not qualify.
They were the best I could find.

Now I am an adult too.
I might be better qualified for the job:
For the job of being, for my inner child
The father and the mother whom God had promised me

But between me as the loving adult
And me as the child in need
There are the traces of the unqualified adults
Who were my parents once.

Conclusion

The hope and resilience we need for ourselves as adults involves taking care by listening to what is happening within the body, accepting and being with these soul experiences, as they offer an opportunity to know and choose options for further developing our resources and strengths. On this basis we can make a contribution to humanity by breaking old cycles of parenting and creating new forms of relationships not just with our own children but for future generations.

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