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FIVE RITES OF PASSAGE IN CORE EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The newest point in the evolution of parenting can be best referred to as ‘natural parenting’,² because of its accent on trusting children’s emotional needs as natural and appropriate to each stage of childhood development — and responding to those needs. Natural parenting aims to offer what the child’s growing brain, heart and body ask for in order to grow in physical *and* emotional health. We are currently in the early days of an era in which aspects of natural parenting are increasingly filtering into mainstream childcare policy and practice.

In Part VI, we will be looking at ‘natural parenting’ approaches as they would apply to five stages of emotional development in early childhood.

Five rites of passage

The following chapters provide a map of early childhood emotional developmental needs. Although these core rites of passage follow each other along the same lines for all children, there is considerable overlap between the stages, and some variation across individuals

regarding the exact duration of each stage. The account assumes normal physiological development, and thus may not necessarily apply in the same way to children who are very ill, handicapped or otherwise developmentally impaired.

Our core emotional development takes place roughly over the first seven years of life, while important neural pathways are still rapidly being established in the child's brain.³ It is during these first seven or so years that the deepest — and therefore the most enduring — aspects of our character are formed. There are of course later, key developmental stages, but these are beyond the scope of this book.⁴

Chapters 25–29 are assigned to each of five key stages of core emotional development, tracing children's developmental needs as they change through each stage. Each rite of passage or developmental stage is organised into the following sections:

What happens at this time

This section will be an account of the developmental changes taking place in the infant's, baby's or toddler's emotional reality.

Child's emotional needs at this time

This will be an account of the most basic and universal core emotional needs that need to be met to ensure the child's emotional health.

What baby (or child) is learning at this time

Specific relationship skills that the child is trying to master and that will prepare the ground for self-image and later relationships, will be examined.

The most wounding experiences

This is a non-exhaustive list of some of the most common hurtful experiences that can cause stage-specific emotional wounds.

How experiences shape emotional make-up and beliefs

Here we look at the personal and relational strengths that grow as the core emotional needs are met, and the kinds of attitudes and unconsciously held beliefs that arise from injurious experiences. For each rite of passage, I list some of the stage-specific personality traits or relating styles that children tend to develop as adaptations to adverse circumstances that they might meet along the way.

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How emotional wounds affect behaviour

Here we look at the kinds of defences that children develop in response to their emotional needs not being met, and how this contributes to their unique character profile and their way of relating to others. There are positive attributes as well as problematic attributes that arise as compensations for emotional wounding.

Social impact of wounds

Our personal journeys through each of these five rites of passage have profound consequences for our relationships — and hence for society as a whole. The social repercussions will be discussed here.

Why learn about these five rites of passage?

The main object of the developmental map offered here is to help parents and professionals that work with children relate to and understand children's emotional needs. This map can help readers identify the kinds of experiences that can be emotionally wounding for children, as well as gaining insights into how to address their changing emotional needs at each stage.

The more we familiarise ourselves with these stage-specific emotional needs, the better we can understand our children's behaviour, their responses to emotional hurts, and what we can do to provide healing.

Since we all have gone through these rites of passage, the following chapters can also be used to deepen our understanding of personal emotional issues affecting our lives and relationships that might have origins in our individual childhoods. This will in turn help us as parents, teachers or carers. The more we tune in to how it felt for us to be children, the more we can tune in to our own children's needs. Nothing can contribute more to our effectiveness as parents than a clear and grounded sense of our selves, and a sense of our own emotional histories.

Myth of 'perfect parents'

A rather large reservoir of psychological energy is needed in order to consistently (and pleasurably) nurture our children. I doubt that any parents exist who can constantly meet their children's needs, as outlined herein. At times, our children's needs seem too great for any of us, and you should not feel surprised if some passages in the following chapters feel a little daunting to you. We all fall short of being able to meet our children's needs from time to time, for all sorts of compelling reasons that are circumstantial, social, medical,

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psychological or material. The main reason is, however, that no pair of parents is meant to care for their children unaided; nature has designed us to rear our children in supportive groups (this will be discussed in depth in Part VII).

Scars come from repetitive hurts

In every home around the world, children feel hurt from time to time. I want to emphasise that the more serious social repercussions don't tend to come from one single bad experience, but from persistent or repetitive shocks that are reinforced through painful experiences across various stages. Children are often able to heal from life's unexpected wounds if they are supported to express their grief, and their anger, and if they receive comfort.

Different child: different outcome

It is impossible to predict exactly how each child will adapt to persistent wounding experiences, since there are many possible manifestations of emotional injury. While this section is a guide for how early childhood experiences affect our social behaviour, it is not meant to be deterministic. It speaks about *likelihoods* rather than certainties, about causative *factors* rather than absolute causes. We cannot always predict the outcome of emotional blows: the same kind of hurt may manifest in a number of ways across different individuals. Furthermore, some people have managed to turn their emotional wounds into gifts or talents, and many of history's humanitarians were wounded individuals who, once given opportunities to heal, used their wounds as impetus for great works.

Non-traditional families

Throughout the next five chapters you will note I mostly mention 'Mum and Dad' as the principal carers, for that happens to be the predominant model for family structure. I do not intend to leave out other types of families. Modernity has released us from rigid views of what a family ought to be, and we have become inclusive of single parent families, homosexual parents, and other models for family. Although Mum and Dad are the most important, I believe it is also crucial for children that their parents are not alone, and that they feel supported by a close-knit and loving community. We can afford to be more flexible in our beliefs about family structure once we realise that child rearing should be a communal enterprise. The human family, and loving bonds, are not limited to the 'nuclear' model.

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Children: the ultimate experts

Finally, I believe that the ultimate experts on child rearing are children themselves, if we choose to trust their cues, and to take the lead from them. Sometimes, what our children ask from us confounds our expectations. As parents, carers and teachers, we are most tuned-in to them when we listen to them closely, and when we keep an open mind.

Endnotes

¹ The material in the following five chapters is to a considerable extent inspired from the course notes of one of my most influential teachers, psychologist Chris Campbell. Other psychotherapist sources include: Brennan (1993); Campbell (1980), (1990); Conger (1994); Johnson (1994); Kurtz and Pestrera (1976); Kurtz (1990); Lowen (1969), (1975), (1980), (1997); Totton and Edmondson (1988).

² You will also hear this parenting style referred to variously as ‘attachment parenting’, ‘continuum parenting’, or as Lloyd de Mause has tagged it, the ‘helping mode’. The jargon can be confusing; but the central emphasis of learning to meet our children’s emotional needs is the common denominator. This new mode of parenting emphasises *natural* responses to our children’s biological and psychological needs; it is a commitment to following children’s *natural rhythms*. That is why some authors, like psychologist Jan Hunt, author of *The Natural Child* (2001), like to call it ‘natural parenting’. Since the bulk of research into early childhood emotional development has been conducted by ‘attachment theorists’, others like to call this new parenting mode ‘attachment parenting’. Yet others call it ‘continuum parenting’ in homage to Jean Liedloff’s groundbreaking book, *The Continuum Concept*. All these terms really refer to the same thing: a new, natural parenting approach, the first to be solidly based on scientifically derived conclusions about child development.

³ Gerhardt (2004) p 195.

⁴ Developmental rites of passage continue throughout life, and except under dire circumstances, we certainly do not stop growing emotionally at seven years of age. For instance, the period of early adolescence — when there is another surge in brain development — is quite critical to our psycho-emotional and social development, and we keep on growing well into old age. As we get older, our peers begin to be a stronger influence on us, as our parents’ influence slowly diminishes. The nature of our passage through the first five stages has a strong bearing on how we deal with the challenges we face through later stages, since it is during these first five stages that the foundation of the self is structured, and it is in early childhood that most brain development takes place.