



## **Nurturing the Parent-Child Relationship**

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It has long been known that children thrive socially, emotionally, intellectually, and even physically in the presence of caretakers with whom they experience a secure attachment and who are emotionally responsive. But, we don't always think about the benefits of the parent-child relationship to the parent. We are social beings. Recent research indicates that ALL of our brains—including those of adults—change as the result of social interactions. So, adults are also gaining from their genuine, emotionally connected interactions with children, both in the moment (through the secretion of hormones that make us feel good and safe) and over time, with actual changes in the structures of the brain! Being “present” is as important—and as pleasurable—for the adult, as for the child.

In our work as parents, the “tool” of our trade is the self—our self. It is children's emotional connection with us and our nurturing responses that are helping them to grow socially, emotionally, and intellectually. Keeping our self “tuned up” so that we can “tune in” to our children is important to effective parenting. Of course, we do not need to be perfect at this—we are human!—but we are doing our children (and ourselves) a favor by being conscious of our emotional and physical state and how it is affecting our relationship with, and responses to, our children.

### **Contemplate the following needs we are attempting to meet, as we nurture our children:**

- children need adults around them to be “present” with them
- “Presence” requires being in a certain way with children. It means
  - a. Staying connected
  - b. Being responsive
  - c. Using active listening
  - d. Being actively engaged with them
  - e. Listening intently and responding to them
- Parenting/being present with children requires physical energy!
- to be nurturing of children's development, we need to be
  - a. Attentive
  - b. Interested in—even fascinated by—children's development
  - c. Emotionally available

### **What can interfere with our ability to be present, active and nurturing with children?**

Not taking care of our basic physical needs for good nutrition, adequate sleep, and exercise can make it difficult to have the energy, patience, and interest in being with our children in an active, participatory way.

It is also important to recognize that we have other things going on in our lives in addition to being a parent. Not effectively managing stress can interfere with the effectiveness of our parenting and the enjoyment of the parent-child relationship. To be aware of the forces affecting you, it is helpful to remind yourself to bring your attention and focus to the moment and take inventory of what is going on with YOU in that moment.

We experience stress based on what is going on outside of ourselves (a child's behavior, behavior of other adults in the household, aspects of the environment--noise level, temperature, finances).

Stress also comes from what is going on inside of ourselves (our thoughts, feelings, physical sensations). Our internal responses can cause us to withdraw to varying degrees from the surroundings and people around us—causing us to not be totally present and aware and engaged; awareness of when this is happening can allow us to take note of what we are experiencing, and then choose to re-engage in what is happening in the moment.

We have internal responses to events, interactions, individual adults or children, etc., that are based on our own histories and these can cause us to behave in certain ways—

- ❖ Practicing awareness of the moment—either of external or internal observations—can help you be present and conscious
- ❖ Staying present to external things and events and people is crucial to not only ensure safety of our children, but to stay attuned to and connected to them
- ❖ Staying present to internal things like your thoughts, feelings, and sensations, will give you clues as to how you are responding to what is going on around you—are you bored, are you anxious, are you enjoying yourself, is a child making you angry, are you feeling at ease with knowing how to respond to a child, are you feeling helpless
- ❖ awareness of our responses to internal and external occurrences can provide us with the opportunity to consider the various possibilities of ways to respond and to choose a response as a conscious decision, rather than as an unconscious reflex or automatic response

**The following breathing exercises use the mind-body connection to produce relaxation; practice of these also strengthens our ability to remain “present” in the moment:**

**For You:**

Relaxation/Healing Breath (stimulates the “relaxation response”) (twice daily, regularly; **most important breathing exercise**; Andrew Weil, M.D. recommends it as treatment for a variety of illnesses, and says, “the benefits are gradual and cumulative, leading eventually to better health of the whole nervous system.” Make this a regular part of your daily routine)

- a. place tongue so that the tip is resting on the ridge behind your top front teeth (keep it there)
- b. inhale and then exhale completely through your mouth, making a blowing sound
- c. close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose, counting silently to 4
- d. hold your breath for the count of 7
- e. exhale (quiet blowing sound) through your mouth to the count of 8

Focused breathing (5 minutes, or as long as you like)

- a. sit comfortably with eyes closed
- b. notice your breath, the cycle of inhaling, exhaling, the length of each, the pauses between
- c. when your mind wanders, simply bring it back to focusing on the breath

**For Your Children** (do these with them and you will feel more relaxed, too!):

(To transition from more active play to quiet time)

### "Wet Puppy"

Child stands and pretends s/he is a puppy that just had a bath or took a swim in a lake;  
Child wiggles her/his whole body---wobble, wobble, wobble, shaking off the drops of water  
Tell child to notice how all the tension (or excitement) leaves with each drop of water

### "Up and Down, In and Out"

Children raise arms out to side as they breathe in  
Children bring arms down as they breathe out  
(To relax into an afternoon rest or nap, or to induce bedtime sleepiness)

### "Balloon Belly"

\* Child lies on back and takes a deep breath in to fill belly, counting from 1 to 5; child breathes out slowly; tell child to notice becoming more relaxed each time they breathe out

### "Floating"

\* Child lies on back; place small toy, block, or rubber duck on tummy; tell child to watch object float up and down as s/he breathes in and out; ask him/her to notice how s/he is becoming more and more relaxed; good exercise to do in bed (or on cot), just before sleep

**Practicing awareness of the moment can help you be present and conscious. The following exercises can help:**

1. Practice the "PAUSE": just STOP and notice the moment--breathe, watching completely the inhale and exhale 3 times; think about your choices for action at the moment and consciously choose what you will do (from "Radical Acceptance," by Tara Brach)
2. **SMILE** (our children are watching!) Take a moment to bring a smile to your whole face:  
(The Smile Breath, as described by Amy Weintraub in "Yoga Skills for Therapists")
  - ❖ sit comfortably and take a deep, diaphragmatic breath and exhale completely; then
  - ❖ breathe in, through the nose, to the count of five
  - ❖ lower your chin to chest, as you close your eyes and breathe out, through the nose, to count of five
  - ❖ bring a smile to your mouth and then, lift your chin, as you breathe in to the count of five
  - ❖ open your eyes as you breathe out to the count five, a natural smile on your lips and in your eyes!

### **Remember to be a good partner in your relationship with yourself, too!**

By focusing on how we can best meet our children's needs, we should in no way be completely putting aside our own needs. By making a habit of bringing your attention to the moment, it may become clear to you that your own physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs are not being met, and that addressing these is crucial to your own happiness as well as to your ability to be a nurturing parent.

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*and Camden that includes writing informational articles and presenting workshops on a variety of psychologically-related topics. Dr. Herzog provides psychotherapy in private practice in Lafayette Hill, PA. She draws on a variety of psychological perspectives in addressing such issues as anxiety, depression, parenting, life transitions, stress management, and relationship difficulties. She finds mind-body approaches to therapy particularly valuable, and includes mindfulness-based strategies in helping people discover their own unique strengths and paths to healing. Dr. Herzog is a member of the American Psychological Association (Health and Psychotherapy Divisions) and both the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Psychological Associations. She is a member of both the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Psychological Associations' e-Newsletter Committees, and a contributor to their publications.*