



**CULTIVATING RESILIENCY IN CHILDREN**

# 1. EMPATHY

**Empathy** is defined as the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, it means to see, feel, and understand another's emotional experience. This is radically different than sympathy, which means simply feeling badly for someone.

While we do feel bad when our children are in pain, in order to calm children when they are in a heightened emotional state, we need to give them empathy, not sympathy. Simply put, sympathy tends to make people feel worse and empathy makes people feel *seen, heard, and understood*. At a neurological level, empathy calms the emotional or limbic brain, which is the source of our big emotional experiences. We can show empathy through what neurologists, psychiatrists, and developmental psychologists call a "right brain connection"<sup>2</sup> (as it is the right side of our brain that is activated when we have an emotional response).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>

<sup>2</sup> Siegel, Daniel J., and Tina Payne Bryson. *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind, Survive Everyday Parenting Struggles, and Help Your Family Thrive*. 2012.

# 2. REFRAIN FROM DISCIPLINE THAT CREATES ANXIETY IN CHILDREN



## What does this look like as a parent? We can:

- (1) describe what we see or repeat back what our child has told us
- (2) get close to our child or use light touch to give proximity
- (3) use feeling words (i.e., happy, sad, frustrated, worried, mad) to validate their experience
- (4) use a short narrative to convey that you have been there too

## Examples:

*"I can see you're really scared right now."*

*"You're very mad right now, you're throwing things and saying things we aren't supposed to say in our family."*

*"I know what it's like to feel left out. When I was little..."*

*"So what you're telling me is that she just said she didn't want to be friends anymore...that must have really hurt to hear that."*

## Does the following sound familiar?

*"Your child is just manipulating you."*

*"Just ignore them; they're looking for attention."*

*"You need to teach your baby to self-soothe."*

*"Time-outs force children to think about what they did wrong."*

*"You need to show them who's boss or they'll walk all over you!"*

*"If you give a child attention when they're having a meltdown, you're reinforcing the behavior."*

## THE MESSAGE:

**Children are inherently bad, deceptive, and manipulative—we need to straighten them out.**

I think all parents do the best with the (often limited) information and tools we have given to us. Our parents, social media, and schools (amongst other influences), even with the best intentions, often convey to us that our children need punishment (and are deserving of it) in order to behave.

What many people don't know is that *discipline* actually means to *teach*, not to inflict pain so a child learns to behave. Attachment, a child's relationship with the adults in their life, requires connection and for the child to feel that no matter what they do, they are still valued and loved - *nothing can separate them from their parent's/caregiver's love*. However, when adults use shame (i.e., "what's wrong with you?!"), distance (i.e., *time-outs, the silent treatment*), or physical punishment (i.e., *spanking*), they are advertently or inadvertently conveying "my love and the safety you feel in my arms is conditional on you behaving well".

Anytime a human being feels shunned, shamed, or isolated from those who mean the most to them, it initiates a primal surge of **anxiety and fear**. In our brains, this is experienced as **fight-flight-freeze-collapse**, a survival instinct created to keep us safe when there is danger lurking (i.e., to protect myself I need to run away, fight for my life, freeze in place to figure out if there is really danger, or collapse to numb/tune out from whatever is scary so I don't have to deal with it).

<sup>3</sup> Siegel, Daniel J., and Tina Payne Bryson. *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind, Survive Everyday Parenting Struggles, and Help Your Family Thrive*. 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Eanes, Rebecca. *Positive Parenting: An Essential Guide*. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Siegel, Daniel J., and Tina Payne Bryson. *No-Drama Discipline: The Whole-Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*. 2014.



### 3. VALUING YOUR CHILD'S ABILITIES

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For children, *attachment is a survival instinct* - as long as they are attached to their caregiver, their caregiver will keep them safe. Children can only truly learn when in a state of calm and when they can "think" and are in a receptive state to learn a better way of being (and when the emotional/limbic brain is not firing so much that it overwhelms their ability to think logically and access the thinking part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex<sup>3</sup>). If children don't feel safe in their relationships with their caregivers, their brain is in a constant state of alert and they are consumed with anxiety and fear from the brain's fight-flight-freeze-collapse response, which can morph into tantrums, violent behavior, anxiety, and other negative mental health outcomes.

Some great alternative parenting books that have wonderful strategies:

- **Positive Parenting: An Essential Guide**, Rebecca Eanes<sup>4</sup>
- **No Drama Discipline**, Daniel Siegal & Tina Bryson<sup>5</sup>
- **Listen**, Patty Wipfler<sup>6</sup>

If we turn to one of the countries in the world with the happiest, most well-adjusted, and resilient children, we would find Denmark.

One of the reasons researchers think Danish children are so well-adjusted is that in Danish culture, children are valued for **who they are** and their innate, individual gifts and qualities versus asking a child to be someone they are not.

For instance, a child who struggles academically, but excels in art, would not be pushed into tutoring so they could excel in math or shamed for not trying hard enough. The adults in that child's life would recognize that children derive a sense of accomplishment and confidence by engaging in activities or classes that build on their natural abilities, which fosters self-efficacy and confidence in a child. They would also accept that once they seek a career, it will likely be related to their natural talents. Thus, children feel like valued and accepted members of their families, classrooms, and communities.

The Danish believe that every child has a place in the world and it up to the adults in that child's life to help the child discover and tap into their individual potential. ***Isn't this beautiful?*** We can start doing this for our children too! Rather than projecting our own desires and hopes of who we "think" our child is to become, we see them for who they are: *a little human being with individual gifts, talents, and strengths, who has something unique to offer this world.*

**Research** shows that clutter is associated with higher levels of stress in families.<sup>7</sup> Have you been frustrated with how messy your child's room is, or yelled at your child for not cleaning up your living room that is cluttered with toys? While the act of "play" is vital to a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development, the excessive amounts of toys can actually interfere with the child's ability to play and can impede their ability to sustain attention and focus. Buy your children less and, as a result, they will be able to better filter out the "noise" and focus on the important things.

The research also shows us that quality time, family vacations, and meals spent together have a long-term positive impact on a child's happiness and resiliency.

So here's what we suggest: keep the number of toys to a minimum, and begin to teach children to value experiences and time spent together more than accumulating stuff.

## 5. DEVELOP A SENSE OF PURPOSE IN YOUR CHILD'S LIFE



### Here are some ideas:

- *Have your child volunteer with your whole family (i.e., at a soup kitchen)*
- *Travel to a new country and experience a culture where children have less*
- *Donate items in your home regularly to those who are less fortunate*
- *Before bed, ask your child about one way they helped another person that day*
- *When your child misbehaves, rather than punishing, ask them "how can you make this right?" to give them a head-start on proactive behaviors*

<sup>8</sup> Carey Wallace (2015). <http://time.com/4105664/how-to-help-your-kids-find-a-purpose/>

## 4. EXPERIENCES VS. STUFF



<sup>6</sup> Wipfler, Patty, and Tosha Schore. Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges. 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Denaye Barah (2017). <https://nosidebar.com/minimalist-parenting/>

*"The sense that your personal life is meaningful to you is a cornerstone of psychological well-being,"* says Michael F. Steger, director of the laboratory for Meaning and Quality of Life at Colorado State University.<sup>8</sup> At the Institute of Child Psychology, we hope that all children feel like they are making a difference in the world, even if it's in the smallest ways.

For elementary-aged children, Steger suggests that parents help children figure out what their strengths and best qualities are, and point their attention towards times they made a difference and did something good for someone else by relying on these qualities (i.e., made someone feel better). By junior high, we can begin to expose children to other people's perspectives, lifestyles, and circumstances, to see the world outside their limited frame of reference. By high school, Steger explains, "we hope our children see how much their lives matter, see that they are at the beginning of a compelling and strengthening life story, and have some inklings about purpose." We then start having those small conversations about how they can have an impact on the world.

**Our** lives are busier than they have ever been and it's impacting the wellbeing of our children. Our children are spending more time in school, more time completing homework, and more time in extracurricular activities.

A childhood imbued with magic and discovery is being swallowed whole by a frenetic society. We need to create a shift and push back on a culture that prides itself on being busy. In doing so, we nurture a space for children to discover who they really are. We help to quiet the anxious, depressed thoughts that emerge when a child has experienced too many accumulative stressors in a world that is moving too fast and lacking in true connections.

So, where do we even begin? Sit down and write out your family's schedule for the week. Use a black pen for activities that are non-negotiable (i.e., school), use a red pen for "active" activities, a blue pen for calming activities, and a green pen for "free time." Are the red, blue, and green activities balanced? If not, why? For many families, the blue and green activities are severely lacking. It's time to carve out time for stillness. Quieter activities and free time allow a child's inner world to develop and for them to begin to discover who they want to be in the world. Resiliency is nurtured when a child has the time and the space to emerge from the cocoon.

## 6. SIMPLY SIMPLIFY



## 7. RITUALS

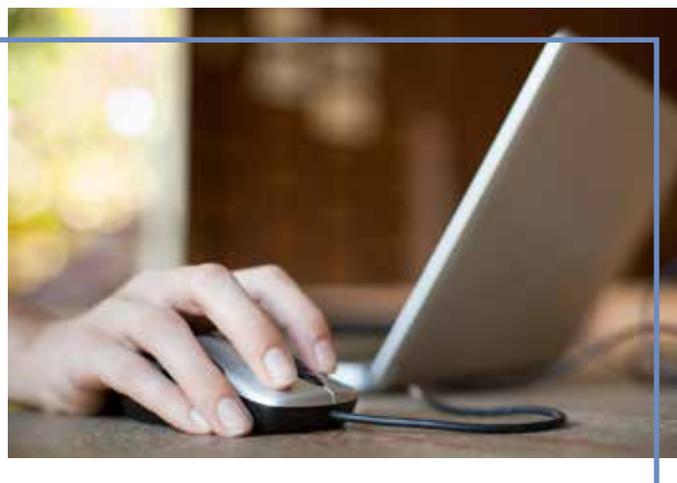
**Rituals** bring a rhythmic quality to children's lives. Rituals help to ease the stress and overwhelming nature of everyday life and help children to experience a sense of safety and belonging. Rituals include things like family dinners, special greetings, or movie nights. Let's look at family dinners: the research on the positive outcomes of regular family dinners is overwhelming. Families who eat together are less likely to have children who engage in drinking, smoking, or taking drugs. These children are also more likely to have extensive vocabularies, healthier eating patterns, better manners, and a more positive self-concept. A comprehensive study by the University of Michigan found that eating family meals together is the largest predictor of increased school achievement and positive behavioral outcomes.<sup>9</sup> In reflecting on your own childhood are you able to identify specific family rituals that were an integral part of your life? As a clinician, clients will often tell me about specific Christmas morning rituals, about Sunday evening dinners, or about a special goodnight ritual that they remember from their childhood. Find something, whether it's pancakes on a Saturday morning or puzzles before bedtime, and weave it into the fabric of your family's life. These are the moments that build your child's character and that one day will contribute to your child's inherent understanding of their story and of their family.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bakadesuyo.com/2013/10/how-to-have-a-happy-family/>

## 8. TECHNOLOGY

A survey by Common Sense Media in 2015 found that youth between the ages of 13 to 18 years old spend an average of 9 hours per day on a screen, excluding homework time.<sup>10</sup> This figure may seem outrageous, but think about your own screen use and how quickly the hours on a screen add up. Excessive screen use has been linked to impaired cognitive functioning, an increase in stress responses, and higher rates of depression and anxiety in youth. However, there are plenty of advantages to a technological world. Advantages include the ability to harness different learning styles, access up-to-date information, connect with online communities, and develop new skills such as coding or creating new content.

As a clinician, I am often asked about screen time per day for a child. The Canadian Paediatric Society has clear guidelines on screen time for different age groups, but the real work lies in ensuring that a child has balance in their life.<sup>11</sup> It's important that children are being fulfilled emotionally (deepening connections with loved ones), spiritually (pursuing passions, investing in joyful experiences, identifying and living values), physically (exercising, eating, sleeping well, and engaging in self-care), socially (exploring connections with peers, teachers, and community members), and cognitively (learning, applying new knowledge, and thinking in diverse ways). Balance also refers to shifting your perspective to consider the entire family's media usage. Children are extremely aware of their parent's use of screens and it's important that we practice what we teach. Come up with a family media plan together that outlines when and how technology can be used in the home. A media plan is a wonderful way to model leadership, negotiation, and problem solving. Your children will one day be adults in a world that is even more technologically based. Think of the values that are important to you and your family, and then live them. The way you handle technology and help your child navigate technology now will become their roadmap for the future.



<sup>10</sup> [https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/census\\_executivesummary.pdf](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/census_executivesummary.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cps.ca/>

## 9. NURTURING EMOTIONAL HEALTH

**Understanding** and being able to identify different emotional states is integral to psychological well-being. Daniel Siegel coined the phrase “name it to tame it.” When we can identify an emotional state, we are able to calm the stress response in the body. Very often, children will respond with physical behaviors because they are lacking the vocabulary to express what is happening in their inner world. When we teach children emotional awareness, we give them the gift of not only understanding themselves better, but developing empathy and compassion for others too.



Here are some ideas on how to integrate awareness into the home:

- Be aware of how you talk about your own experiences. Do you use the same three words to describe your work day? Begin introducing a wider vocabulary into your repertoire.
- Point out how different characters are feeling in books, movies, and TV shows. Children are more likely to listen if they don't feel like they are being "taught a lesson."
- Talk to children about their memories. Help them to remember and explore different feeling states associated with the memories.
- Some of the best sharing comes in the pauses between the busy moments. Sit with your children and finish off a puzzle or complete a crossword together. Quiet connections build trust.
- Our bodies hold our emotions, so it's important to find a way for your child to become attuned to their body. You may need to try a number of activities (e.g., yoga, meditation, swimming) before your child finds a way to truly connect their inner world with physical expression.

## 10. SELF-CARE



**Parenting** is exhilarating, exhausting, and humbling. It does not come with a manual and there will be many road bumps. As guides to our children, it is so important to reflect on our past experiences and to consider how these experiences may be impacting our parenting journey. Reaching out for help when it is needed is an incredible sign of courage and strength. When we prioritize self-care, it demonstrates the importance of valuing oneself to our children. Resilience is built through one action at a time; every time you engage in therapy, reflect on a challenging moment, pursue a passion, or simply make time for a long bath, you reinforce the narrative of self-care into your family's life.