

Child Development and the Parental Relationship¹

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As most parents have discovered, having a child, particularly in the early years, puts enormous stress on even the best of relationships, with resulting tensions, frustrations and discord. Few fail to notice the negative effects such tensions have on their child, and on their ability to optimally parent their child. And yet, pervasive as this problem is, most of the parenting literature focuses on how an individual parent should relate to the child, and very little is said about how a parent should relate to the other parent, or about how the parents' relationship with each other affects the child. This post will take a brief look at how parents' relationship with each other affects their child's development, and at how important it is to make the parents' relationship with each other a high priority.

It's helpful to remember that babies come into this world totally open, utterly undefended, little sponges of Being. It will be years before their emotional buffers are in place, the boundaries that can protect them from the full emotional impact of interacting with significant others. Being completely open, babies and young children pick up on what's going on around them emotionally and energetically. They not only feel their own feelings intensely, they feel *your* feelings intensely. They get your and your partner's feelings towards each other. They get the vibe in the home. You cannot hide what's going on between you and your partner from your child.

Children not only pick up on, but are also strongly affected and influenced by what is going on between the parents, in both direct and indirect ways. On the positive side of the equation, a loving and respectful relationship between the parents directly affects the child by creating what might be called a "parental holding environment" which, like the maternal holding environment described by Donald Winnicott, acts as a kind of energetic womb in which the child begins to find itself as a human being. Though by no means as powerful a determinant in infant development as the mother-child bond, the parental holding environment nevertheless exerts a profound influence on the developing child. The extent to which the parents openly and genuinely are loving and affectionate with one another shapes both the child's world and its developing sense of self. It also affects the child's sense of safety and predictability, and becomes the model and archetype for the child's future relationships by providing the basic schemata for the child's internalized images of closeness, intimacy, dispute resolution, expression of emotions, and respect between the sexes.

Indirectly, a good relationship between you and your spouse benefits your child by acting synergistically with and upon the mother-child and father-child relationships. That is, a loving marital relationship significantly increases the odds of you and your partner getting your basic

¹ For purposes of simplicity of expression this article assumes the most typical parental situation, that between a man and a woman in a committed relationship, living in the same house. This, of course, is not the situation that all children are born into or remain with. The author believes that the concepts articulated in this article apply equally well to other parental arrangements.

emotional needs met, which in turn increases the odds that each of you will be optimally available to parent and fully show up for your child. While we can get some of our emotional sustenance from our friends, there are some kinds of support that can only come from our spouse, particularly those related to our own attachment needs. When our own needs for connection are being met, we are a lot less likely to get reactive with our children and with our partner, and are better able to respond positively to the needs of the entire family.

On the negative side of the equation, children's profound undefendedness leaves them vulnerable to significant harm when their parents do not get along, again both directly and indirectly. *Direct* negative effects include children's mimicking of dysfunctional parental behaviors, failure to learn appropriate social interaction skills, and internalization of negative parental- and self-images. Unable to make sense of or cope with the feelings being stirred in them in response to their parents' discord, young children instead tend to act out in a wide variety of ways (usually in an unconscious attempt to relieve stress and restore equilibrium to the family system). Research has shown that frequent, intense parental discord is linked to a myriad of developmental problems in children, including insecure attachment, poor self-esteem, conduct disorders, antisocial behaviors, difficulty with peers and authority figures, depression, anxiety, and academic and achievement problems.²

Marital conflict has *indirect* effects on children via the mother-child and father-child relationships. Persistent marital disharmony and dissatisfaction pervasively undermine the quality of parenting, including limiting the parents' emotional availability, diminishing their ability to discipline effectively and appropriately, and increasing the likelihood of parent-child aggression. Research indicates that parents in high-conflict marriages tend to be less warm and empathic toward their children, are more rejecting, are more erratic and harsh in discipline, and use more guilt and anxiety-inducing disciplinary techniques, compared with parents in low-conflict marriages. Fathers in high-conflict marriages tend to withdraw more from the parenting role and from their children than do fathers in low-conflict marriages, and are more likely to feel excluded from parenting functions by their partner. Parents in high-conflict marriages tend to be more depressed than those in low-conflict marriages, and depression is linked to more impaired family functioning.

Given the seemingly obvious benefits that result from a positive parental relationship, why do so many couples find it so difficult to have one? For one thing, it's easy, under the extreme stress and exhaustion of parenting, to find yourself resentful about how your other basic needs aren't being met—your need for your own professional, artistic, and spiritual expression;

² This does not mean that all conflict or verbal disagreements between spouses cause this kind of harm. Research indicates that the severity and frequency of parental fighting, the style of conflict (e.g., overtly hostile, contemptuous, passive aggressive), the subject of the conflict (child-focused or not), its manner of resolution (e.g., negotiation and compromise, reparation, non-resolution), and the presence of protective buffers (e.g., protective siblings or grandparents) are all important factors in determining whether and to what degree parental conflict will result in harm to the child.

your need for fun and play; your need for your relationship with yourself and your friends—let alone your need for your partner who is no longer as available as he/she used to be. It's easy to blame our partners for how hard parenting really is, for the ways in which no one *told* us how difficult it would be, for the isolation and the curtailment of our freedom, and the lack of support and appreciation around parenting from the culture. Add to this the confusion and power struggles that often result from the shift in power and status that inevitably accompanies childbirth: many women move from feeling hierarchically inferior to men in life to suddenly feeling that at last *they* have the power in the family, as the birther, the nurser, the one with the primary relationship with the baby—and any perceived encroachment on this power by the father can be deeply resisted and resented. On top of that there's the frequent occurrence of what might be called “emotional regurgitation” when a baby is born: issues around past sexual abuse, disappointments from past romantic relationships, and other unconscious material can erupt into awareness and can find a convenient scapegoat in our spouse, usually the safest and easiest person for us to dump on.

Given these (and other) potential pressures on the relationship, let alone the lack of sleep and other challenges facing new parents, it's easy for the relationship to be neglected. Like a garden that isn't watered, a relationship that isn't cared for will wither and die. Many relationships that do die often trace the beginning of the end to the birth of the first child. So what can or should be done to prevent such a tragedy, and get parents back into the loving relationship that usually led them to decide to have children together in the first place?

First of all, water the garden! It's essential that you make regular, weekly “date nights” for yourselves (without the children, and at a time when you're not exhausted), as well as plenty of special occasions, surprises, gifts, flowers, etc., to keep the romance alive—and to communicate your appreciation. Don't let this become boring or monotonous, like the usual movie and restaurant routine. It's also necessary to nurture the adult interests that you share: concerts, plays, poetry readings, dance performances, discussion groups, hikes in the woods—whatever you love doing together. Perhaps most important of all is nurturing your intimate connection with each other, whatever that looks like for you. Certainly keeping the sexual passion between you alive is crucial. Yet it's also vital to connect intimately in your communication—i.e., to set aside time and space for “timeless time” together in which you talk about your innermost truths, feelings, conflicts, fears, joys, growing pains, etc. This need for intimate communication must not be neglected. Parenting educator Patty Wipfler suggests setting up a childcare trade with another couple who need this kind of time too, so that the cost of getting away for a few hours isn't prohibitive.

In addition to making time for the good stuff, it's also vital to make time to address the bad stuff. It's terribly important to tackle head-on the feelings, issues, tensions, and problems in your relationship. Don't sit on resentments, don't give in to feelings of futility and hopelessness. Such feelings may say as much about your own historic responses as they do about your partner and your current situation. Keep in mind that the added stress of raising children puts enormous pressure on what might be already barely adequate communication skills, and exaggerates the

difficulties that existed in the partnership before the child was born. Learn how to fight fairly. Find a way to deal productively with your resentments and hurts with each other—as players on the same team.

Finally, through good and bad, nurture your spiritual life. Don't look to each other for what only God (whatever he/she/it may be for you) can provide. Include each other in your spiritual life, use your spirituality to connect. Aspire to connect soul to soul, versus ego to ego. The difference between the two cannot be overstated.

Take home: When it comes to childrearing, we mustn't focus myopically on the child. Maintaining and nurturing a loving relationship with the child's other parent is vital to the creation of a loving environment in which the child can optimally unfold, and maximizes our availability to our child by meeting an important attachment need of our own.

Try: (This one from Patty Wipfler) Share appreciations openly and regularly, perhaps in a nightly "success and appreciation check-in." Each parent takes several minutes to describe something they are proud of about what they did that day, and something they appreciate about their partner. No interruptions, no corrections, no disagreement allowed. This appreciation and success check-in can be extended to the children in the family, if they are able to talk. Some families make this a tradition at dinnertime.

Try: Given the inevitability of arguments and (verbal) battles, agree in advance to the rules of a fair fight. For example: Use a talking stick; only the holder of the talking stick may speak. Don't hog the stick; make one main point, then switch. Also: Watch for the three phases of a good fight: (1) the spewing phase (in which one or both partners get to vent their anger; usually coming from identification with a young, hurting subpersonality); (2) the listening phase (this is where the deeper inquiry is done, as both partners explore what underlies the initial reactivity that was vented in the spewing phase, and actually hear one another); (3) the reparation phase (this is where the healing occurs—both partners experience being held and seen and accepted by their partner as they own their own part in the dispute, as well as apologize and have the apology received).