

Coherent Parenting

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For an introduction to the concept of emotional coherence, please see:

[Introduction to the Emotional Coherence Framework.](#)

Can you imagine what it would be like if we therapists could go back and replace the corrupt mental models our clients developed in their youth, both of themselves and of the world around them, with undistorted and positive mental models? That is what we have the opportunity to do with our own children, as parents. Research in neuroscience has shown that positive and secure early experiences with our children can create healthy brains, and healthy future relationships. So how can we provide these? Coherently, I would and will argue.

There are several hallmarks of a Coherence-based approach to therapy. Alongside the centrality of being non-counteractive, two others that are key are: the importance of being transparent, and the importance of not pathologizing behavior...same with parenting. A friend of mine once laughingly said, "Rolling their eyes is the only exercise my teenagers get!" Mine did not do much, if any, of that. I was not a fly on the wall in my friend's household but, knowing her as I did, I would be willing to wager that she'd done a fair amount of eye-rolling herself across their formative years and karma is, indeed, a beast! This is not to say that I never got vexed and lost my patience; my two sons were not angels and I was not a saint. That said, for the most part, I always looked for the coherences in their non-cooperative or seemingly illogical positions and most often found them. This was the case even, and especially, in adolescence, when non-cooperation was a developmental necessity. It takes courage, heart and wisdom to bestow this level of respect upon a younger being, especially one whom it is our responsibility to nurture. It involves a kind of radical acceptance that should not be confused with "overly permissive" or mindless parenting; it is actually *mindful* parenting. I am inviting readers to consider the job of parenting as one that allows and encourages children to discover their true nature, rather than imposing one upon them and, in so doing, inculcating ease, rather than dis-ease.

Having been an educator, coach, theatre director, college dean, therapist and parent, I can say without hesitation that all forms of *good* leadership and guidance require the same basic skill set: the ability to listen; the ability to "follow from in front;" gentle authority when needed; the humility to admit missteps; the courage to initiate repair; vision; presence; comfort with discovering and not already knowing; the generosity to provide positive affirmation; the strength to maintain useful boundaries; excellent communication skill; authenticity; empathy; and last but not remotely least... curiosity and creativity.

When I told a colleague of mine two decades ago that I was thinking of having a baby, she said, "You will love parenting...it's so creative." This is not something we hear often about parenting, but it should be. An early clinical supervisor of mine echoed this sentiment when he noted that my clinical work was uniquely effective because I was "so creative." Again, not a quality one hears the need for often in the profession but, again, it should be. I wrote an article about the

importance of creativity in clinical work, ([The Neuropsychologist, October 2016](#)), using the research findings of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his seminal work *Creativity*, in order to demonstrate that the key ingredient shared by all creatives was “curiosity”. Childhood is the peak time for curiosity, when everything is new. As poet Grace Gluck has so beautifully said: “We look at the world once, in childhood... the rest is memory.” This is what the Buddha realized when he had the epiphany of Beginner’s Mind. For parents, our sacred job is to be mindful of what those first looks, and feelings, are experiencing, and what meanings are being made of them.

As a narratologist, I have come to know well that when early narratives are made coherent and held in the light of day—without shame—“big T” trauma can be healed, and much ordinary trauma can be avoided. This kind of overt meaning-making requires parents to think, feel, and love out loud, which is uncomfortable for those who believe that holding information close provides the power base of strong parenting, as well as for those who are not comfortable with their own stories. Neuropsychologist Dan Siegel astonishingly asserts in his book *Mind* that a child cannot have a truly secure attachment to a parent if that parent hasn’t come to terms with, and shared, the story of his or her own childhood. In other words, without this shared narrative, parents remain something of a stranger, to themselves and to their children. This kind of transparency is not necessarily natural to most people in guiding or helping positions of *any* kind. When I train therapists to help their clients shape coherent narratives, I am always encouraging them to share all of their insights, confusions, worries, discomforts and hypotheses about the clients’ sharings as they go. It is not an impulse that is comfortable to most of them. Nor is it for parents. When clients tell me about the ways in which they press their power on their teenaged children or, conversely, withhold their own feelings of helplessness and fear, I hear the seeds of power struggle and I know they are headed for trouble.

It always seems counterintuitive, at first, for parents to imagine telling their son or daughter that they are not sure how to proceed in the face of destructive behavior, as if this admission will topple the already fragile balance of power in the home. However, it is that very vulnerability that will open the door to a collaboration between parent and child; one that will bestow agency on the budding adult and help relieve the burden on the beleaguered parent, who is both dizzy from surfing the waves of hormonal seas and exhausted from being alternately pulled in and pushed away. It’s a tough time for everyone, not unlike the infamous “terrible twos” of their shared yesteryear, and while parents have the responsibility to keep their minors safe, emotional safety also matters, which involves having a say in one’s own destiny and an expertise in one’s own persona.

As irrational as the immature and inexperienced brain may appear, unless a young person is, in fact, delusional, there is almost always coherence to the actions and reactions he or she brings. That is not to say that these actions and reactions are always *rational*, but they are almost always *coherent*, and that is what a mindful and attuned parent must ferret out and then help the child to parse. For example, when a child consistently pretends to be sick in order to stay home from school, this is typically termed “school refusal” and seen as a disorder. Traditionally,

school refusal has been treated with a “sticks and carrots” approach; that is, the child is punished for malingering and rewarded for going. In Coherence parlance, that would be considered *counteractive*. *Why*, the parent must wonder out loud instead, *is my child going to such lengths to avoid doing what he or she is supposed to be doing?* This is delicate business, not just for the legality of truancy issues, but because children are not always conscious of their aversive feelings about school (or anything else they may wish to avoid), and/or may feel great shame about it. This is where the effort to not pathologize must be most acute. If the parents themselves disliked school, and most of us have in some way, at *some* point, they might share this to help normalize the behavior. If the parent has some notion of *why* the child dislikes going to school (perhaps he or she has a learning difference; is shy and has trouble speaking publicly; is perfectionist by nature and feels keen pressure not to fail; is in the minority in some way; has lost a friend recently; is intimidated by a teacher; has some situation at home that is worrisome and which he or she is loath to let out of sight, etc.), it would be useful to float out a theory about how this would make it *understandably difficult* to want to go there... for anyone. Once feeling felt, heard, and understood ensues, the doors to relationality are open. If the reasons for the avoidance are completely unknown, discovery work can then be done without hostility or defensiveness on either part.

A good part of the challenge in parenting coherently is that children traditionally have so much less agency than adults do to make *different choices*. In the above example, *we* can quit jobs...*they* must go to school. That said, they could have a different teacher, a different school, home-school even, if need be. In my experience, with my own children and those of my clients, they are far more likely to explore and face difficulties if they feel understood and if there is the space to seek a different path if needed. If we notice out loud that their aversions might, in fact, be in response to real stressors or wrongness of fit, rigidity eases and terror diminishes. In the case above, a child’s behavior might be telling the parent that he or she is being mistreated at school, is in the wrong school, or simply needs more time for privacy and solitude, or needs more time with the parent. If this is handled only as a conduct disorder, a matter of truancy, the seeds of a much larger problem are being unwittingly sown.

In coherent parenting, as in Coherence-based therapy, symptoms (I prefer terms like stuckness or hindrances) must be looked at with curiosity and creativity, not as problems but as urgently necessary *solutions* to some problem greater than the hindrance itself. That is, a child might much prefer being a truant in the safety of home to being bullied at school, despite the inherent shame and incipient consequences. Once the real problem is discovered, alternate solutions—and concomitant *juxtapositional* learnings—can be accessed. For example, if school feels like a dangerous place, an advocate can be appointed; a new school can be sought; peace can be made with an offending party; or new skills of self-advocacy can be taught and practiced. Sadly, it never gets to this point in many homes, where children are simply forced into doing what parents or society expects of them. This kind of forcing used to be thought of as *case-hardening* or *preparing good citizens*. And, in a totalitarian society it would be. In cultures that prize individualism, entrepreneurialism, and wellbeing, it is ludicrous to imagine that we

can grow that kind of self-trusting adult by responding to children with the age-old default parenting trope: *because I said so*.

Living into this kind of mutually respectful dynamic is not easy, however. It requires a kind of non-reactivity and equanimity that few of us can muster day in and day out with the pressure of life management breathing down our necks. Ironically, however, coherent parenting, when one gets in practice, actually becomes less of an effort rather than more. When I refer to a mutually respectful dynamic, I am not referring only to ferreting out the *child's* coherences, but taking the time to share our own. That same school-avoiding child may not understand that as the parent we could face legal consequences for our child's non-attendance, that there is a scary entity known as Child Protective Services that could remove a child from a home where he or she is not being forced to attend school, and that teachers and schools will also be critical of such a parent. With the admission of the parent's own vulnerabilities, it becomes not a struggle with the child, but a problem to be solved *together*. That kind of mutual problem solving also requires a sacred pause, one that will allow parents to de-escalate their own terrors and empower themselves to think more creatively. After all, students *are* allowed to transfer; home schooling *is* a growing movement; guidance counselors *can* be enlisted; and teachers and principals can be helped to manage their own reactivity by being brought into *the problem* that gave birth to the child's creative—if less than optimal—solution. This not only reinforces the fact that there are options in life and models self-advocacy; it also teaches children to take their own discomforts seriously... and that the other humans in their lives will, too. It is not unusual for my now almost grown sons to name the coherence of their seemingly irrational behaviors, and I believe there may be no greater gift of self-understanding, awareness and acceptance I could have given them.

When I was a child I hated milk, in part because of the way it tasted and in part because it gave me a horrific stomachache. At that time, drinking milk was still considered the only way to grow healthy bones, so my mother diligently forced me to drink it, despite my anguished protests. Mealtimes were dreaded, and they dragged on and on because I was not allowed to leave the table until I'd emptied my glass. My completely unconscious but very coherent solution was to spill it several times each week. Sometimes it went all over the table, sometimes all over the floor, but no matter how bad the spill—which led to both shame and consequences far greater than being forced to remain at the table—the spilling persisted. Decades later I would learn that I have severe lactose intolerance, as do my own children. None of us likes or drinks milk. I was not “difficult” or “clumsy” or “finicky,” as my childhood narrative would insist. I was trying desperately to find a coherent solution to extreme discomfort. If someone had taken my aversion seriously, perhaps cheese—which I ate in copious amounts and which did not bother my stomach—could have been deemed as providing sufficient calcium to grow my bones. Perhaps a doctor, if consulted, could have helpfully weighed in with a supplement, if needed, or a treatment for indigestion before it threatened to become an ulcer. Perhaps, if I had been heard and attended to, if there had been options—alternative solutions—I would not have had a “problem,” and would not have had to cry over spilled milk.