

Parenting Beyond Behavior Management:
Five Fundamentals Supporting Developmentally Sound Parenting

By

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Each day more information becomes available in all areas of living, and with a few clicks we can immerse ourselves to the chin in ideas and opinions. “Parenting” is such a topic and a Google search offers 294 million results. Refine the search with one word, “effective,” and we are down to 179 million results. No wonder most seekers don’t make it beyond the first few pages.

Further, most parenting advice centers on behavior—specifically misbehavior, with the overarching tone of management. Yet developmentally, mental models of self, relationships, and how the world works are being formed implicitly in the child’s mind before they can effectively self-regulate and long before they can “use their words.” Advice, strategies, and programs that approach parenting simply as a set of skills and things *done* to a child miss the key aspects of development, attachment, and the complexity of mind. In other words, as parents we are responsible for providing the environment for a child’s developing mind until they are fully independent. This is the essence of parenting of which discipline is only a part.

Modeling and teaching are key aspects of the parenting process, but there is something deeper, a relational aspect that is often missing in the behavioral-centered approach: in the parent-child relationship we are consistently conveying who we are and who we believe the child to be. We are continually creating impressions in a child’s mind in the dance of responsiveness and attunement. Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel proposes that a mind is “an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information.” And we, as parents, are a part of that energy and information flowing in a child’s mind.

As a child’s mind develops there are fundamentals that go deeper than outward behaviors to the core of being human and being dependent. These processes are within the child and within the parent-child relationship, wired for the potential that must receive attention with intention. Neurons that fire together wire together to form more complex connections—and the elemental source of this connectivity is the *quality* of the parent-child relationship.

Here are 5 fundamental, hard-wired processes supporting developmentally sound parenting:

Wired for relationships: Children innately seek interaction and connection with caregivers. The quality of a child’s most intimate relationship, the attachment with a primary caregiver, is predictive of vital aspects of development throughout childhood and into adulthood. Secure attachment predicts higher levels of self-agency, emotional regulation, self-esteem, as well as the ability to form friendships.

We are wired for integration with others in social networks and the need of belongingness is paramount to a child's sense of self. Responsiveness within the relationship and demandingness in the form of structure and limit-setting provide a secure home base, and the predictability and mental space to explore. Children need these conditions to thrive.

Wired for Meaning: Behavior is the tip of the iceberg as underneath the actions and choices of parents and children, a set of developmental principles informs and governs the consequences that follow. Meaning is the driving force of action and as Psychologist Jonathan Haidt states, "Reason and emotion must both work together to create intelligent behavior, but emotion... does most of the work." Emotion is intimately tied to values and sets meaning in motion, for our choices reflect our values.

When we say "no" to a child we are setting a limit based on what we deem important. When we are responsive to a child, we are saying, "yes" and "you matter." When we engage and make amends for our mistakes we are acting from respect and responsibility. When we lead children to choices, we are honoring the basic need of autonomy. The authoritarian demand of "Because I said so..." misses the learning and meaning of going deeper to the principle, a step that can foster *self-discipline* down the road.

Wired for Roles: As social beings we possess the innate capacity for role-taking and learning from role-models. Not only are children forming mental models of self, but our actions as parents model roles of leading, relationships with significant others, and citizenship to name a few. Models go beyond words as children absorb the communication of the emotional and nonverbal world, and we see the priming for role-taking in their imaginative play.

As a parent, an important task is to make sense of your own upbringing so that unresolved conflicts do not intrude on the quality of the relationship between you and your child. Importantly, the strongest predictor of infant attachment is *parental state of mind with regard to attachment*. Making sense of your experience in the role of child matters greatly. A coherent personal narrative—meaning you have made sense of your experiences of being parented—is a strong predictor of parenting behavior.

Wired to learn: Children are primed for learning and the window of language is wide open in early development. Importantly children learn better when they know what to do. Clarity of expectations, and consistent feedback and consequences are great teachers. Punishment or telling children what *not* to do are not nearly as effective. In fact, studies have shown that punishment without teaching can reinforce the very behaviors you are trying to stop.

Children can't think like adults nor are they "little adults." A two-year-old is much different than a four-year-old or a seven-year-old or an adolescent. While children are wired to learn, age and developmental stage matters in our parenting approach.

Wired for Uniqueness: Temperament, developing personality, interests, and individual aptitudes are all expressions of differentiation and as unique as a child's fingerprint. The parent-child relationship is the foundation of parenting for this very reason. One size does not fit all as fairness in parenting is treating each child differently based on the principles of development. One child may be more outgoing and another more introverted yet each child needs connection—but in a different manner. Understanding the uniqueness of each child can only

happen within the relationship. And when attunement and trust prevail, the quality of the parent-child connection provides the conditions for well-being.

In summary, Children misbehave for many reasons. Their job is to explore and learn which inevitably leads to situations when things just don't work. You can't know limits unless you find out where they are, and sometimes children bump or crash into them. And we as individuals can only give what we have received. To consider behaviors only at the source of conflict, is to miss a myriad of developmental opportunities in the parent-child relationship. Keep these five developmental processes in mind through each stage of your child's life.

Resources

Dozier, M., & Bernard, K. (2004). The impact of attachment-based interventions on the quality of attachment among infants and young children. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development. Montreal: QC.*

Haidt, J. (2006). *The Happiness Hypothesis*. Basic Books.

Siegel, D.J. (2015). *The Developing Mind, Second Edition: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*. Guilford Publications.

About the Author

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LPCS, NCC, has worked in educational, clinical, and, private settings for over two decades. Presently, he balances roles as a consultant in early intervention, and as Clinical Psychologist for Carolina Developmental Pediatrics. He has also maintained a private practice for over 20 years. Dr. Panepinto has written on parenting, development, emotional intelligence, resiliency, and performance psychology. He was the keynote speaker for the 2017 National Stay-At-Home Dad's convention, and blogs on fatherhood (AFathersPath.net). Find out more at DrJohnPanepinto.com.