



Instructor's Guide


Class Meeting 3

Reasons Parents Often Have Difficulty Sustaining a Close, Secure Relationship with their Child

Schedule of Activities

1. Discuss parents' reactions to previous class meeting. Ask about how the journaling exercise is going for parents who are willing to self-disclose. Encourage them to continue to record their critical inner voices and real point of view.
2. Discuss attuned interactions between parent and infant. reciprocity, disruptions in attuned interactions, repair, and the impact of extensive mis-attunement on the child's developing brain.
3. Show excerpt from Chapters 1. Bonding and Attachment and 2. Communication in the DVD *The First Years Last Forever* about early brain development in infants and the quality of experience and interaction between parents and their infant. **[OPTIONAL]**
4. Discuss two reasons why parents have difficulty sustaining close, attuned relationships with their children: (1) it reawakens pain from their own childhood and (2) parents feel the vulnerability of their child and fear potential loss.

15-Minute Break

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5. Show [excerpts from *Implicit Pain of Sensitive Child-Rearing and Fear of Intimacy*](#).
 6. Discuss the issues raised in the videos and ask for parents' responses to the examples shown. Could they identify with someone in the video?
 7. Talk about the process of journaling in relation to how participants might respond to the four questions in the handout: Questions for Parental Self-Reflection.

Handouts for Class Meeting 3:
[Questions for Parental Self-Reflection](#)
[8 Reasons Parents Fail to Love Their Children](#)



Guidelines for Group Process and Topics for Discussion

Reciprocity

In *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, Daniel Stern (1985) describes an important characteristic of the mother-infant relationship—synchrony, that is, the extent of dovetailing of behaviors of the infant and mother. The infant expresses certain cues as to his/her needs and the mother must be sensitive and responsive to these cues; in turn, the infant must be responsive to the mother. The development of the mother’s sensitivity to her infant’s capacity for attention and non-attention was seen as the most important rule for maintaining the interaction. The ability of the parent to hold the infant’s attention may, in turn, be based on parents’ capacity for tolerating close emotional contact with another person, particularly their children.


View “Bonding and Attachment” and “Communication” from DVD *The First Years Last Forever* with Bruce Perry, Daniel Siegel, Berry Brazelton and Rob Reiner, how attuned interactions between parent and infant help shape the development of the infant’s brain.

(OPTIONAL)

Attunement, Mis-attunement and Repair

Reference: *The Self Under Siege: A Therapeutic Model of Differentiation*, pp. 32-34

“A newborn baby needs close contact with a consistent caregiver to ensure its survival and adequate protection from separation experiences and other stimuli that might overwhelm its immature system. According to Bowlby (1982), attachment develops out of an evolutionarily determined behavioral system within the infant that functions to keep it in close proximity to an adult, protects it from harm and intense anxiety states, and later facilitates its exploration of the environment.




“The formation of a secure attachment is largely dependent on the parents' responses to cues or signals from the infant indicating its needs. When parents are sensitively attuned to the baby, they adjust the intensity and emotional tone of their responses to accurately match the child's feeling state and needs. Obviously, no one can ever be completely consistent in adjusting his/her responses to these cues; in fact, research has indicated that attuned interactions occur in only one out of three of parent/infant exchanges.

“If a parent is able to successfully repair disruptions in attuned interactions with the child, the child gradually learns to regulate his/her emotions. Repair involves the parent acknowledging the disruption, taking responsibility for it, and providing a reasonable explanation for what happened which would validate the child's reality. The child is then able to make sense of his/her emotional reactions and can begin to construct a coherent narrative of the event. When parents admit their error and try to make restitution, their child is also less likely to blame him/herself, idealize the parent, or internalize an image of being the ‘bad child.’

The Impact of Mis-attunement on the Child's Developing Brain

“Preliminary studies in the neurosciences suggest that children as young as one year are able to accurately perceive a parent's purpose or intent from his/her facial expression and tone of voice, perhaps even in the absence of other, more overt expressions of aggression. During a misattuned or otherwise frightening interaction with a parent, an infant can detect, through specialized cells in its brain (the mirror neuron system), the parent's emotional state and intentions at that moment in time.

“For example, Siegel (personal communication, 2009) speculated about what an infant or young child might experience during a fear-provoking interaction with an angry parent. Taking the role of the infant in this scenario, Siegel said:



What this looks like from my mirror neuron point of view is you [the parent] come at me, really angry and you're terrifying me with your fury. Now I see your intention. You may not want this intention to be there, but it is. Your intention is to hurt me. Even though it's not your global intention, at that moment, you have it because of your own unresolved trauma. And I look at you and my mirror neuron grouping makes the assessment that the intention of this caregiver is to do me harm.


What is a child supposed to do when his mirror neurons, like sponges, are soaking up the intention to be harmed by the one who's supposed to protect? He fragments. And in that fragmentation is dissociation of the usual continuity of the self.

“Research studies in interpersonal neurobiology indicate how the child's developing mind adapts to a parent's feeling state and intentionality. It has become increasingly clear that the way parents interact (or fail to interact) with children becomes hardwired in their children's brains, often before they are even capable of formulating words to describe what they are experiencing.”

Introduction to *The Implicit Pain of Sensitive Child-Rearing*

There are several reasons why parents have difficulty sustaining attuned, personal relationships with their children. Two reasons are:

- 1.** A child's helplessness and vulnerability remind everyone of his/her own weakness and vulnerability. A child's innocence, loving looks, smiles, liveliness, spontaneity, and cries arouse painful, primal feelings in parents who have tried to suppress these feelings (about their childhood experiences) for many years.

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2. Later, as a child develops, parents try to protect both the child and themselves from the pain and anxiety of inevitable separations and help them avoid thinking about death. In an attempt to spare the child, they often cut off and suppress the child's questions about painful existential issues. This leads to emotional distancing and children eventually stop asking these questions.

Discuss some of the other reasons: Reference *Psychology Today Blog* by Dr. Robert Firestone, "[8 Reasons Parents Fail to Love Their Children](#)," including the fact that many parents have a negative self-concept which they unwittingly extend to their children; parents may also find it difficult or intolerable to accept simple, direct loving expressions from their children. In addition, they may **have unresolved trauma in their own lives**. If so, they will tend to be mis-attuned to their children, especially when their children approach periods in their lives that were traumatic for the parent. They may react by becoming rejecting, or they may overcompensate.


Finally, having children reminds parents that time is passing and tends to increase their death anxiety. This can cause tension and even resentment in the parent and a self-protective, defensive retreat from feeling that is directly or indirectly hurtful to their children.

15-MINUTE BREAK

Introduce and View Video excerpts

View [Excerpts from *The Implicit Pain of Sensitive Child-Rearing*](#)

In the videotape excerpts, parents talk about their difficulty in really looking at their child, really seeing them, and treating them with tenderness and affection and in ways they may not have been treated as children. In the process of revealing their feelings of vulnerability and sadness in these situations, they are able to move closer to their children. By learning to value themselves and their experiences, parents then extend



these positive feelings of self-regard to their children.

Discussion after viewing video excerpts

- Do you recall your earliest separation from your parents? What was it like? Did you ever have prolonged separations from your parents?
- Did anyone significant in your life die during your childhood, or later in your life? What was it like for you at the time, and how does that loss affect you now?"

When discussing parents' answers to these question and their reactions to the video, instructors can focus on any losses parents may have sustained in their families. It has been shown that the process of protecting oneself from future loss following the death or illness of a significant other often leads to parents withdrawing from the child. For example, parents are sometimes unaware that they have become somewhat distant from their child following a serious illness or accident or death of another family member. If the instructor is aware of such a loss in a particular couple, other resource material is available that might assist them in the grieving process: (1) Selected excerpts from *Defenses against Death Anxiety* (Glendon Association, 1990).

Journaling

Encourage parents to continue to record in their personal journal and in Exercise 1.3 (the split-page format) their negative thoughts, especially in situations where they feel under stress or impatient with their child. Next, record their more realistic, rational thoughts on the right hand side of the page.

Parents can also journal about their responses to the four question for “Parental Self-Reflection” from [*Parenting from the Inside Out*](#).