

Parent / Child Relationship Work

When working with parents and children on relationship challenges, there are several unique factors to take into account.

Basic considerations

1. Developmental Stages:

- Children go through different developmental stages (e.g., early childhood, adolescence, etc.), which affect how they communicate and interact. A therapist must tailor their approach based on the child's age and cognitive development. Even teens, are still developing their frontal lobes (till mid to late twenties), especially the prefrontal cortex. <https://hms.harvard.edu/news/deciphering-teenage-brain>

- Parents may have expectations based on their own experiences or what they think is appropriate for their child's stage. Education on child development can be warranted along with resources may be helpful.

Just a few “Thinking” milestones to keep in mind:

- Understand basic symbolism (IE: pretending a stick is a spoon) – between 2-7.
- Start to rationalize – between 5-7.
- Begin to understand metaphors (IE: Holding onto anger is like stuffing trash in a basket.) – between 6-8.
- Understanding delayed gratification for themselves – around 5.

We need to focus on being literal and in the moment with younger children.

2. Hierarchical Authority:

- The parent-child relationship inherently involves a power imbalance, albeit healthy and necessary, as parents are typically the authority figures. This dynamic may affect how a child expresses themselves, particularly if they feel their voice is not being heard or respected. This authority, can also be unhealthy when used to control and even become abusive.

- The therapist must be mindful of ensuring that both the parent's and child's voices are equally valued, and foster an environment where the child feels safe to express their feelings. Deciding who is truly the client is important here. Often parents want the child to have therapy, yet in reality it is the parent who needs the guidance and support to manage frustration, expectations, and relationship change. Personal work and teaching the 5 Secrets can be the change that ‘fixes’ the child as well. Use your clinical judgement case by case.

3. Parenting Styles and Beliefs:

- Parents bring their own values, beliefs, and experiences into the relationship with their children. These influences shape their parenting styles, which may differ significantly from the child's needs or developmental stage. Many parents try to rationalize with their young children rather than giving simple instruction. The child can't truly rationalize at this age so the results are not what the parent expects. Then when the child is old enough to rationalize, the parent has already created a pattern of talking and the child not listening.

- Helping parents understand how their approach might be impacting the child's emotional and behavioral responses is a key aspect of therapy. What kinds of things can the parent expect at this age? If already in a pattern (with older children) how to address that pattern now to break it. Relationship work can be very helpful, Rules vs Roles, Relationship Journal, and the 5 Secrets, all for the PARENT to learn can be very helpful here.

4. Family Dynamics:

- Parents and children often have intricate, complex family dynamics that can affect their relationship. Sibling relationships, extended family influence, and past family history (e.g., trauma or attachment issues) can play a significant role. We are human, and parents are no different. One parent may find they relate better to one child over another because of interests or personality. This is normal but since we don't talk about it much in society, other than, love all your children equally, it can feel like favoritism to the child and bring feelings of guilt and shame for the parent. Learning to be open about these matters (tactfully and limited to just the basics) can break down these unspoken barriers. We can love 100% all our children, but how that is expressed needs to reflect that child's needs.

- Any, we'd focus on the parent and using the 5 Secrets to bridge this gap. If the parent is refusing to seek therapy, then we can teach the child the 5 Secrets with lots of I feel statements to let the parent know what the child is experiencing. You could also talk about personalities, love language, and attachment types.

5. Boundaries and Respect:

- Teaching parents and children about healthy boundaries is crucial. For example, ensuring that parents understand when to offer autonomy to older children or how to encourage independence in a healthy way. Boundaries are for the person setting the boundary, this is missed in society and even in mainstream psychology. It is rarely effective to set boundaries for other people. In TEAM we recognize we can't make anyone do anything, but we can choose what we do! I can't stop my mom from calling 3x a day, but I can stop myself from answering the phone or getting upset it is ringing. HOWEVER, in close relationships like parent / young child or in a marriage, or very close friends, we can ask for wants and needs.

- There may be times when parents need to learn how to respect the child's privacy, while children need to learn respect for authority and household rules. Respect flows both ways. We get what we put out and again, relationship tools can help the parent navigate this with much better results and just expecting it.

Differences from Working with Couples:

Nature of the Relationship:

- Couples are usually peers with equal footing in terms of authority and responsibility in the relationship, whereas the parent-child dynamic involves an inherent power structure.

- Couples might be dealing with issues such as communication breakdowns, infidelity, or differing values, which are fundamentally different from parenting challenges like discipline, control, or emotional support.

Similarities with Couples:

1. Communication Skills:

- In both dynamics, improving communication is essential. A therapist may work on teaching both parents and children, or partners, how to listen actively, express themselves effectively, and show empathy toward one another.

- Both relationships involve navigating conflicts. While the content of the conflict might differ (e.g., discipline vs. relationship disagreements), the therapist works to help both parties resolve issues in a healthy, constructive manner.

2. Empathy and Understanding:

- In both cases, fostering empathy and understanding is key. A therapist helps individuals in both relationships better understand each other's feelings, needs, and perspectives, whether it's between a parent and child or between partners.

- Both parent-child relationships and romantic relationships are deeply influenced by attachment styles / languages of love / personalities. Therapy might explore how these affect motivation, communication, and emotional responses.

Some resources recommended:

How to Talk So That Kids Will Listen series by various authors including Julie King, Joanna Fabor, Adele Faber, and Elaine Mazlish. Books for little children, teens, and more. While not exactly the 5 Secrets, they get pretty close but with children in mind.

Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers by Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté MD. Examines how children increasingly look to their peers for guidance instead of parents, leading to negative effects on family bonds, school environments, and youth culture. The book discusses how social media and video games contribute to this trend and offers solutions for parents to regain influence.

Skills Training for Struggling Kids: Promoting Your Child's Behavioral, Emotional, Academic, and Social Development by Michael L Bloomquist PhD. Explains that children with emotional or behavioral struggles are not misbehaving on purpose, but are often behind in key areas of development. The book offers practical strategies to help children (ages 5–17) improve skills like following rules, managing anger, making friends, and handling stress. It includes checklists, worksheets, and tips for parents to address specific needs and build their own parenting skills.

Mental health professionals, see also the related title *The Practitioner Guide to Skills Training for Struggling Kids*.

Other resources recommended by group members:

Thomas and Chess "Goodness of fit" FREE Handout (Thanks Anat). https://www.arizonaschildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Temperament_Goodness.pdf

"Parenting styles" see Diana Baumrind work -which deals with the tension between boundaries emotional support and giving autonomy to the child. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parenting_styles

Development Chart by the Responsive Classroom. <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/common-traits-by-age-chart/>

Development Chart, Washinton Unv.

<https://depts.washington.edu/dbpeds/Screening%20Tools/Devt%20Milestones%20Table%20%28B-6y%29%20PIR%20%28Jan2016%29.msg.pdf>

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