

## Making Sense of Your Own Family Narrative: A Key to better parenting

The attachment relationship between parents and children takes many forms and is expressed in many ways. Research in this field has identified four primary attachment relationships that are characterized by parental responsiveness patterns.



1. Secure attachment relationships are the result of parenting that is consistent, emotionally attuned, and allows children to feel connected, understood and protected. Children will feel safe, soothed, and secure.



2. Insecure avoidant attachment relationships are the result of parenting that is non-attuned, lacking in predictability of consistent connection, understanding and protection, and may include rejecting or unavailable parenting practices. Children will adapt by avoiding closeness and emotional connection to the parents. An emotionally barren relationship is the result.



3. Ambivalently attached relationships are the result of parenting that is inconsistent and at times intrusive. The child cannot depend upon the parent for attunement and connection. Children develop a sense of anxiety and uncertainty about whether they can depend upon the parents. They are not sure what to expect. They may look for attachment elsewhere.



4. Disorganized attachment relationships are the result of children having repeated experiences of parents being overwhelming, frightening, and chaotic. Children are wired for attachment, but they find themselves having a desire to attach to a parent who is also very frightening for them. How can they love “the monster”?

## Savage Chickens

by Doug Savage



Very few of us have experienced perfect parenting, and we know that sometimes we default to parenting strategies that our own parents used with us. They are familiar patterns of behavior, and often reflect the type of attachment relationship we had with our own parents. So, if we had “bad parents”, are we destined to be bad parents too? Not necessarily!

Attachment research shows that those parents who have made sense of their own upbringing raise the most resilient children who experience more success in their lives. Making sense of your family history allows you to break maladaptive patterns of interaction with your own children, thus

ending cycles of poor attachment (and even neglect and abuse) that often run in families. When we, as adults, find a way to resolve our histories, we make a brighter future for our children.

With this in mind, I will ask you to give the following questions some careful thought and write down your answers. These questions are designed with the aim of deepening your self-understanding. Don't be surprised if some of these questions are difficult to answer in words. Much of your own childhood experience and learning happened prior to you having complete command of your language. Just try to remain open to your feelings, sensations and the memories as you perceive them. You may also benefit from sharing these memories within your intimate relationships, either with a partner (husband/wife) or a trusted sibling or friend.

## Questions for Parental Self-Reflection

Taken from *Parenting From the Inside Out* pp.146-147

Please use the lined paper at the back of this handout to answer these questions.

1. What was it like growing up? Who was in your family?
2. How did you get along with your parents early in your childhood? How did the relationship evolve throughout your youth and up until the present time?
3. How did your relationship with your mother and father differ and how were they similar? Are there ways in which you try to be like, or try not to be like, each of your parents?
4. Did you ever feel rejected or threatened by your parents? Were there other experiences you had that felt overwhelming or traumatizing in your life, during childhood or beyond? Do any of these experiences still feel very much alive? Do they continue to influence your life?
5. How did your parents discipline you as a child? What impact did that have on your childhood, and how do you feel it affects your role as a parent now?
6. Do you recall your earliest separations from your parents? What was it like? Did you ever have prolonged separations from you parents?
7. Did anyone significant in your life die during your childhood, or later in your life? What was that like for you at the time, and how does that loss affect you now?
8. How did your parents communicate with you when you were happy and excited? Did they join with you in your enthusiasm? When you were distressed or unhappy as a child, what would happen? Did your father and mother respond differently to you during these emotional times? How?
9. Was there anyone else besides your parents in your childhood who took care of you? What was that relationship like for you? What happened to those individuals? What is it like for you when you let others take care of your child now?
10. If you had difficult times during your childhood, were there positive relationships in or outside of your home that you could depend on during those times? How do you feel those connections benefited you then, and how might they help you now?
11. How have your childhood experiences influenced your relationships with others as an adult? Do you find yourself trying *not* to behave in certain ways because of what happened to you as a child? Do you have patterns of behavior that you'd like to alter but have difficulty changing?

12. What impact do you think your childhood has had on your adult life in general, including the ways in which you think of yourself and the ways you relate to your children? What would you like to change about the way you understand yourself and relate to others?

## **How Your Attachment Relationship as a Child May Affect Your Own Parenting**

The way that we were parented as children affects how we function as adults. Our parents were responsible for programming our brains with beliefs, routines and a worldview, whether they did so intentionally or not. So we learned their concepts of right/wrong, safety/danger, and how to do things. In doing this, they also encoded our triggers for judgment of others and situations. Those triggers often lead to intense emotional reactions such as anger and anxiety.

If you parent, or were parented from an **Avoidance and a Dismissing Stance**:

- You may be able to take another person's perspective, but your defensive state of mind will lower your motivation to listen to and validate the emotions of others.
- You may not be all that aware of your own emotions, outside of the basic ones of happy, sad, angry, fearful, or neutral.
- You may rely on rationale and reason, discounting emotions as bothersome. You may use logic and rationale in response to children having emotional reactions, rather than using empathy and emotional alignment (skills that would calm the child and bring you into relationship).
- The expression of emotions, either your child's or your own, does not feel safe because expressing emotions is thought to be shameful and was rejected by your own parents.

This doesn't mean that a parent who experienced this type of upbringing doesn't have the ability to form secure attachment relationships, it just means that the parent may need to do some work in establishing an increased comfort level in recognizing and accepting their own and others' emotions while learning new coping skills to maintain a belief that it is safe to do so.

If you parent or were parented from an **Ambivalence and a Preoccupied Stance**:

- Anxiety is the result of not knowing if you can depend on a parent.
- If children are parented in this manner, they may experience a desperate need for others and a simultaneous sinking feeling that one's own needs can never be met. This can persist into adult relationships.
- "A sense of self-doubt at times may come along with a deep and nonconscious sense of shame that something is defective about the self" (p. 150, Siegel and Hartzell, 2014).
- We may express anger at our own children in the face of their helplessness and vulnerability.

If you parent or were parented from a **Disorganization and Unresolved Trauma or Loss**:

- When you are wired for attachment (as we all are), and your attachment figure is scary, it can lead to a sense of disconnection, from others and from one's own mind, resulting in a protective process of dissociation that might include a sense of being unreal or internally fragmented.
- Once a child uses dissociation as a protective response, it will make repair of the disconnection with your child more difficult and less likely to occur. Finding a way to resolve these unresolved conditions is healing for both the parent and the child.
- Healing trauma, PTSD, and abuse issues is best done with the aid of a trusted and skilled counsellor.

Siegel and Hartzell offer these words of encouragement, "When we can take the deliberate steps to face the challenge of knowing the truth, we are ready to begin the path toward healing and growth and become more the parent we'd like to be."(p. 153)

### **The Take Home Message**

We are the products of the "programming" we received when we were growing up, and the coping strategies and beliefs we encoded during that time as a means of survival within our family of origin. It is important to note that many of us carry these memories and wounds from the past into our adult lives. We may continue to use coping strategies we used as children in our adult relationships. We may find that our own children trigger emotional responses that turn on those old coping mechanisms, or remind us of our own needs as children. We may respond in anger when our children (or even our partners) do something that triggers these old beliefs and memories from our past. Thus, our past affects our present, and often pulls us in to old patterns of behavior that do not make for effective parenting.



An example: My mother used to take me on her shopping trips for clothing. She would drag me from store to store, often spending what seemed like an eternity going through the racks of clothes and spending time trying things on and talking to the sales clerks. Can you imagine a more exquisite hell for a 5-year-old boy? After some time I would inevitably start complaining that I was tired, bored, and just wanted to go home. My whole body would fill with a sense of lethargy and my eyes became heavy. My mother's

response was to tell me to stop whining, and she might promise me a treat if I was a good boy. Although this gave me something to look forward to (although it wasn't a certainty), it also made me angry to have mom invalidate my experience and feelings. I also internalized a belief that expressing a complaint was "bad", and that whining was shameful.

How did that affect me later in life? What would be my trigger? What feelings would I express in response to that trigger? How would that affect my parenting or work with children had I not made sense of this issue?

## **Through Awareness, Toward a Goal**

Please use the lined paper at the back of this handout to answer these questions.

Without taking time to think about your answers in advance, write for several minutes completing the sentences “A good mother is....” Or “A good father is....” Now, read what you have written aloud to yourself or to someone you trust. Is there anything on the list of responses that you feel you received from your own parent? There may be many; there may be few or none. Of these responses, which qualities do you feel you give to your own children at this time?

Choose one quality that you would like to develop initially as an area of growth (p.153)

This unit has been prepared using materials from Chapter 6 of the book *Parenting from the Inside Out* by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., and Mary Hartzell, M.Ed., 2014, Tarcher Penguin, publishers. Adapted by John Downes, MC, RCC for The Kelowna Family Center, 2015.