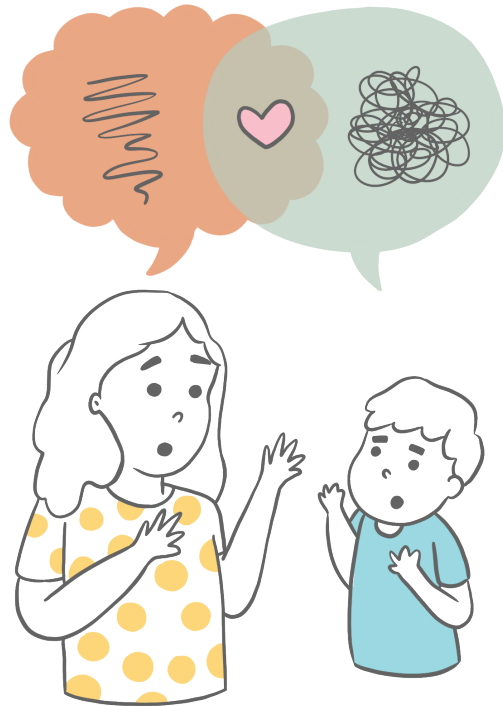


The Connected Parent

An initiative by Psych Connect



The propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals is a basic component of human nature

John Bowlby, 1969)



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Parenting

Have you ever tried to make sense of your relationship with your child, or wonder about the bond you have with your parents?

Have there been moments where you told yourself that you would not pass your emotional problems to your child, or swore to not repeat the mistakes of your parents?

Parents have the best intentions for their children. However, with little understanding about the underlying mechanisms of parenting and attachment bonds, parents consciously or subconsciously go back to the ways of their parents as that is the only familiar way to them.



"When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment that it grows. Not the flower."

— Alexander den Heijer





Attachment needs

Attachment between a parent and a child is a bio-behavioral system (Zeanah and Boris, 1994) which impacts the child.

As a child enters the world, s/he starts with a blank slate. The child's emotional relationship with his/her parent helps to shape his/her lens of the world. Based on his/her interactions with his/her parents, the child develops the concepts of self and others (Fonagy & Target, 1997).

We, as children, become the "the carriers of (our) parents' unconscious fears, impulses and other repressed parts of themselves" (Lieberman & Pawl, 1999).

The lens that we experience as a neonate, toddler, and infant becomes the magnifying glass on how we view the world.

From my relationship with you, I learn what I need to be or do to form and sustain close relationships with others as I grow older. From my relationship with you, I learn about whether I am a person worthy of love and good things. From my relationship with you, I learn about whether the world is predictable, and I can trust others. These are not just thoughts that I have when I learn to speak or think. They are the building blocks that start forming as early as 3 months old (Bowlby, 1982), and affects me all the way to adulthood, like how your parents have.

Maybe, as parents we can reflect: How can I provide a relationship that my child can use in his understanding of people and the world?

"It is at the end of each crying episode that the infant learns about whether, on average, the caregiver can be counted on to be available as the infant achieves a calm state or whether the infant typically must stop crying alone" - Dr. Susan S

Intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns

Your attachment style with your parents affects how you respond to the needs of your child. This determines how your child makes sense of his/her relationship & attachment. This is known as intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns.

When your child displays natural attachment behaviors (eg. cries, ways to get closer to you. to get comfort from you), it activates your own beliefs (and perhaps, anxieties) about attachment behavior.

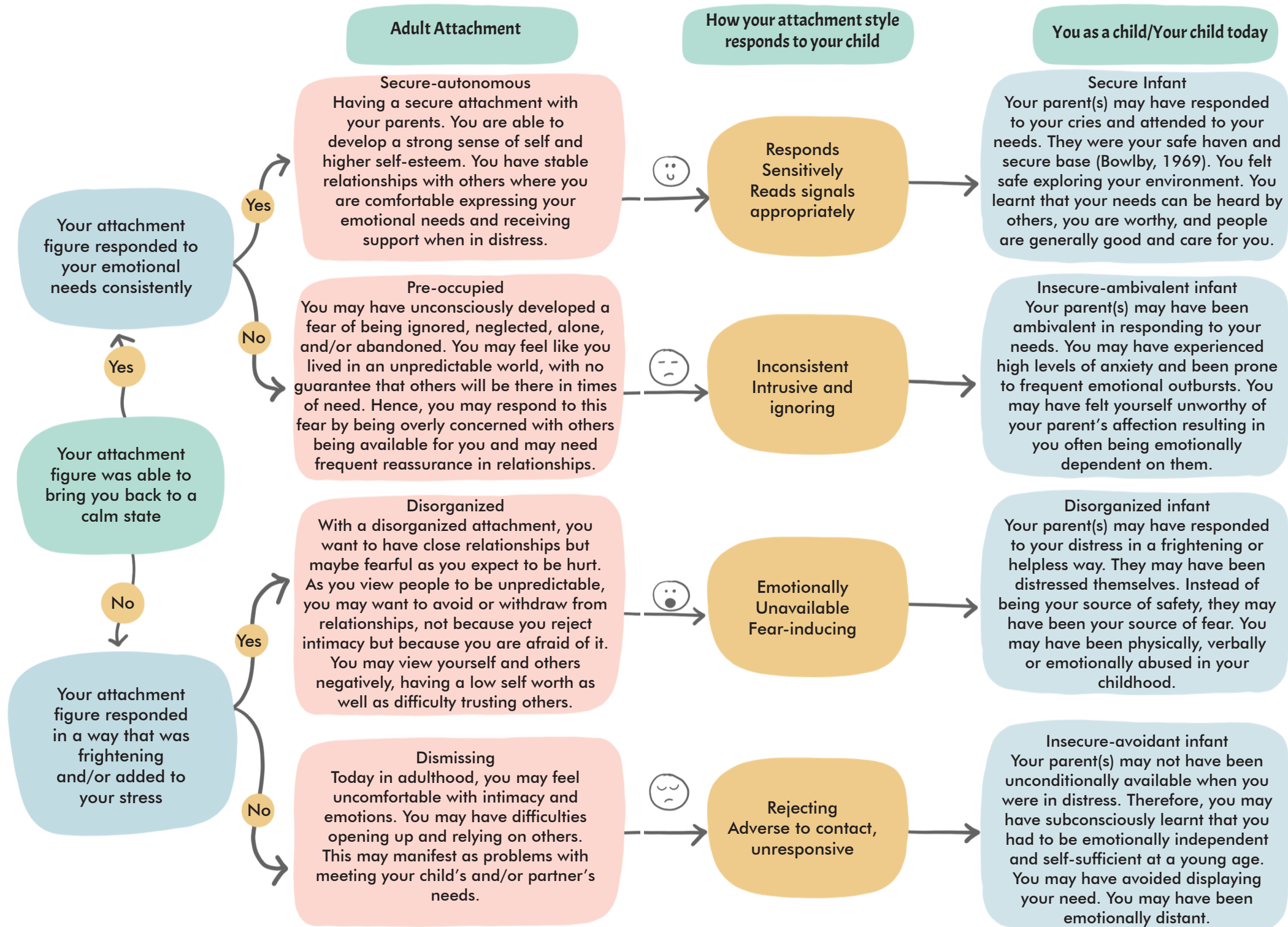
Adults, whose parents were not consistently present to attend to their needs, may present themselves as emotionally independent and distant. When required to attend to their child's emotional needs, they may feel a sense of discomfort.

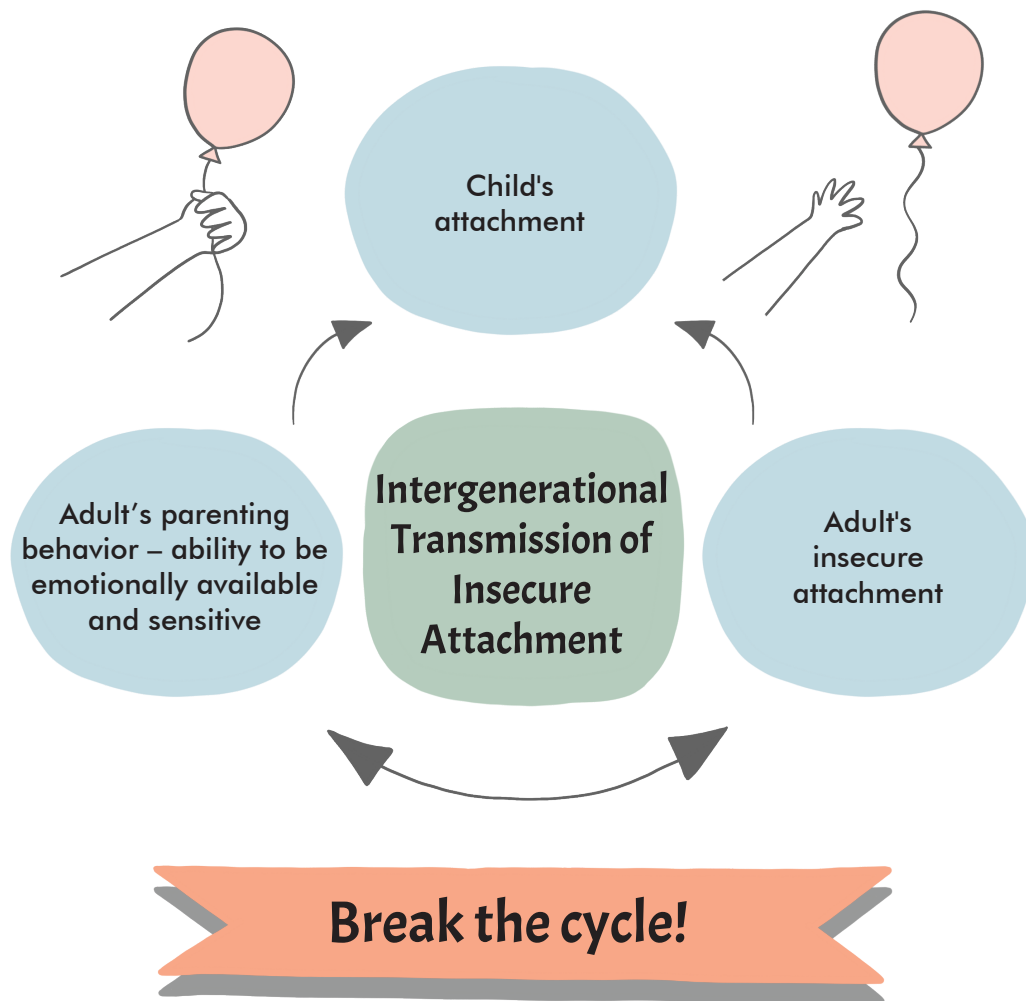
Are there times when you had difficulty in attuning to your child's needs?

Think about a time when your child seeks for physical and psychological availability.

How do you feel or react when your child seeks proximity or comfort from you?

What is your attachment style and how is it affecting how you respond to your child?

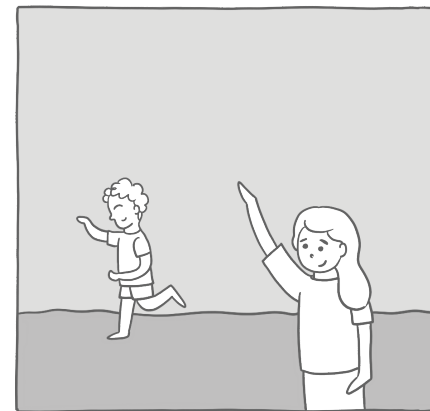




The ability to be available from a physical and psychological perspective and at the same time allowing the child to explore the world with safety and proximity (Zeanah and Boris, 1994) may help repair the wounds of attachment and help develop a secure attachment with you.

When a child feels unsafe and is in distress, the need for safety in proximity (attachment system) is activated. S/he cries and engages in different behaviors to signal his/her needs to you. When s/he successfully receives comfort and feels safe again, his/her attachment system is deactivated (Sroufe & Waters, 1977).

In a secure attachment, I experience empathy, warmth, attunement and nurturant emotions. I am provided with emotional availability (Zeanah and Smyke, 2008) and emotional regulation when I am confronted with uncomfortable emotions or experiences.



You provide a secure base that supports my exploration of new experiences.



You provide a safe haven that welcomes me back and provide protection when I am in danger or distress. This builds me a resilient schemata of attachment.

"I need you to support my going out, welcome my coming in, be the hands that keep me safe"

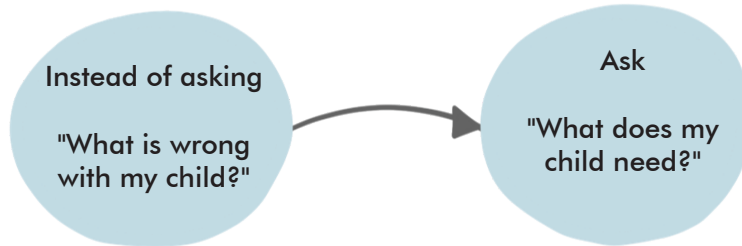
(Marvin et al., 2002)

Being Attuned

From an adult attachment perspective, we realize that people of all ages have attachment needs. Revisiting our personal history from an attachment angle allows us to better recognize our own possible struggles, feelings of abandonment or rejection that is linked to our childhood. This may have contributed to our "unexplained" anxieties or insecurities that we may experience today.

Attunement, or sensitivity to the inner world of the child, is key to a secure attachment. A parent denies or distorts his or her child's painful experiences when he or she has trouble grasping the inner world of the child – the emotional and mental states underlying behaviour (Fonagy et al., 2002)

Every distressing behaviour reflects a need.



However, in Singapore where emotional intimacy is not always encouraged, as parents do we reflect on how attuned we are to our child's inner worlds when they grapple with uncomfortable emotions or situations?

What happens to our children, when expression is frowned upon and suppression becomes the common way of dealing with "negative" emotions?

"Say yes to feelings, even as you say no to the behaviour"
- Dr. Daniel Siegel

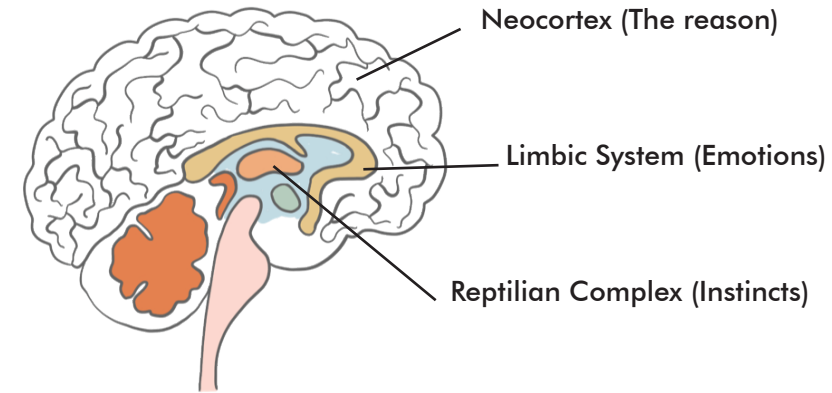
"New mothers are often told that once they've fed, burped, and changed their baby they should leave them alone to self-soothe if they cry because all their needs have been met.

One day I hope all new mothers will be able to smile confidently and say, 'I gave birth to a baby, not just a digestive system. My baby has a brain that needs to learn trust and a heart that needs love. I'll meet all of my baby's needs – mental, emotional, and physical – and I'll respond to every cry because crying is communication, not manipulation'
- L.R.Khnost



Attachment is a neurobiological system

Our emotional connection or your attunement to my emotional needs as a child determines how my brain develops and its structures. Hence, it has long lasting effects on how I am like as a person.



The Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) in our brain is considered as the “thinking center” as it is involved in higher cognitive decision-making. The Anterior Cingulate Cortex acts as a “hub” for social interactions by connecting our “emotional” limbic system and the “cognitive” PFC. When exposed to stress, the amygdala- which is part of the limbic system- is activated and we enter “fight, flight or freeze” mode.



When I am in distress or feel unsafe, I go into fight-flight-freeze mode and my limbic system is activated. When you are not attuned to my emotional needs, my attachment system remains activated for a long time, and I continue to progress with the limbic system. This is what looks like to you as being “out-of-control” without self-regulation.



Child tells parent about his or her emotional needs maybe by crying or throwing tantrums



Parent feels helpless and anxious

Regulation
When your anxieties get in the way of hearing your child

Attachment behaviour intensifies



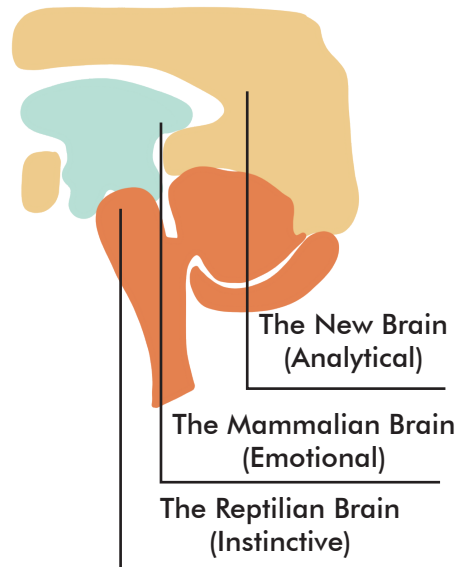
Walking away from these cries – Emotional Abandonment



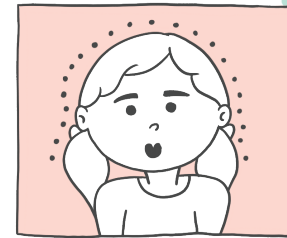
You and your child are caught in a cycle, fueling the dysregulation in each other. Coregulation is absent.

Recall the times you felt stormy as a child. Think about how your parents reacted to you. How did it feel? As a parent now, what would you change about it?

Without being soothed, I am not able to move up the hierarchy to develop the higher order parts of the brain that allows me to express and process my emotions. You may continue to expect me to think and reason, or express my emotions "appropriately", but I am more often than not in survival mode. Prolonged or constant exposure to stress wires the neuronal synapses in my brain into "fight-flight-freeze" mode. Thus being in distress, without being soothed, leads to changes in my brain circuitry.



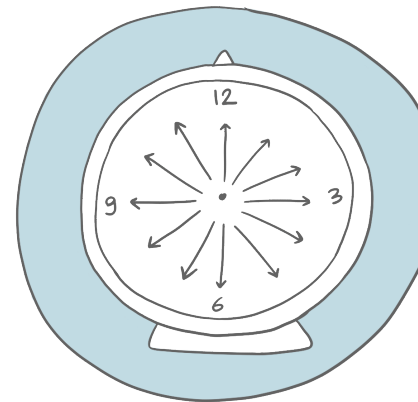
Calm me down in a way that is compatible with the limbic brain, by being attuned to my inner world.



This means being with them and attending to them fully. They are already overwhelmed. Lashing out at them, making them aware of the consequences, making demands from them, is pouring into a cup that is already over-flowing.



Hence, reasoning with me during my meltdown is often not helpful as the limbic brains are in control. Instead, hold me in your arms, and help me feel safe. Only then can I begin to process the situation. Help me to co-regulate so that I can learn to self-regulate.



Co-regulation can happen at any time. Being available should not be limited to only when maladaptive behaviours occur. Be in the space, provide a sense of containment, and let them know that they are being heard.

Attachment disorders are a type of developmental trauma



Parent Self Regulation

How parents regulate their emotions serves as a model for the child.

When parents experience overwhelming stress, they can be put in a "mindless" state where they too, rely on the more primitive brain where emotions and behaviours are not well regulated. (Hughes & Baylin, 2012)



Parent-led co-regulation

Co-regulation is the support, coaching, and modeling the parent provides to help the child understand his or her own emotions (recall the under-developed neo-cortex).

"Help me understand what it is I am feeling and what makes me act in this way."

"Help me learn what works in reducing the intensity of my emotions."



Child self-regulation

As the child learns self-soothing methods that work for him or her, their dependence on others to soothe them lessens.

Think of a time you were overwhelmed with strong feelings. How did you react? What did you do to reduce the intensity of your emotions?



"When you keep criticizing your kids, they don't stop loving you. They stop loving themselves."

— Unknown

It will happen but it will take time
– John Bowlby

It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self."

- Donald Woods Winnicott

An initiative by Psych Connect

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