

CCCH / R.E. ROSS TRUST EARLY YEARS SEMINAR  
31<sup>st</sup> August 2006

## **PROMOTING EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN: RELATIONSHIPS AND PROGRAMS**

**Tim Moore**

Centre for Community Child Health,  
Murdoch Children's Research Centre,  
Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Author and lecturer Leo Buscaglia once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four year old child whose next door neighbour was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked what he had said to the neighbour, the little boy replied, "Nothing. I just helped him cry."

Where does this ability to understand other's emotions and states of mind come from?

### **OUTLINE**

- Family and social context
- Nature of emotional development
- Importance of the development of emotional intelligence and empathy
- Neurological basis of the development of emotion and empathy
- Promoting emotional development and empathy
- Conclusions

### **FAMILY AND SOCIAL CONTEXT**

Significant changes in families and family circumstances have occurred over the past few decades:

- Both nuclear and extended families are smaller - children have fewer siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins
- Children have fewer opportunities to mix with other children of different ages
- As a result, children have fewer experiences of being cared for by older children or caring for younger children
- Young people may enter adulthood never having held a baby

## **IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPATHY**

'There are many well-trodden pathways to misery. People may choose to eat too much or too little, drink too much alcohol, react to other people without thinking, fail to have empathy for others, fall ill, make unreasonable emotional demands, become depressed, attack others physically, and so on, largely because their capacity to manage their own feelings has been impaired by their poorly developed emotional systems.'

(Gerhardt, 2004)

## **IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The development of emotional intelligence and empathy have long-term developmental implications:

- 'A growing body of scientific evidence tells us that emotional development begins early in life, that it is a critical aspect of the development of overall brain architecture and that it has enormous consequences over the course of a lifetime' (NSCDC, 2005)
- 'The foundations of social competence that are developed in the first five years are linked to emotional well-being and affect a child's later ability to functionally adapt in school and to form successful relationships throughout life' (NSCDC, 2005)

## **EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT**

The development of emotional intelligence has long-term implications for learning and academic achievement (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner and Masterov, 2006: Heckman, 2006):

- Ability is multidimensional – both cognitive and non-cognitive skills affect academic achievement and long-term socioeconomic success
- Non-cognitive factors – motivation, perseverance and emotional self-regulation – have been shown to be more important for long-term academic achievement than ability
- Ability gaps in cognitive and non-cognitive skills open up early and tend to stay stable beyond the age of 8

## NATURE OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPATHY

### PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

- Young children develop through their relationships with the important people in their lives: these relationships are the 'active ingredients' of the environment's influence on human development
- Nurturant caregiver-child relationships promote the development of emotional intelligence and empathy:

'Children who have healthy relationships with their mothers are more likely to develop insights into other people's feelings, needs, and thoughts, which form a foundation for cooperative interactions with others and an emerging conscience' (NSCDC, 2004)

### DEVELOPMENT OF EMPATHY

- Empathy has two components:
  - a cognitive component – being able to take another person's perspective
  - an affective component – being able to understand and be concerned about others' emotional states
- The development of empathy occurs through attachment relationships that are collaborative and non-intrusive

### CORE FEATURES OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The core features of emotional development (or 'emotional intelligence') are the ability

- to identify and understand one's own feelings,
- to accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others,
- to manage strong emotions and their expression in a constructive manner,
- to regulate one's own behaviour,
- to develop empathy for others, and
- to establish and sustain relationships

*National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005)*

As Sue Gerhardt (2004) notes, the attitudes we learn to towards feelings are crucial:

'If they are seen as dangerous enemies, then they can only be managed through exerting social pressure and fear. Alternatively, if every impulse must be gratified, then relationships with others become only a means to your own ends. But if feelings are respected as valuable guides to the state of your own organism, as well as that of others, then a very different culture arises in which others' feelings matter, and you are motivated to respond.' (p.30)

'Emotional life is largely a matter of coordinating ourselves with others, through participating in their states of mind and thereby predicting what they will do and say. When we pay close attention to someone else, the same neurons are activated in our own brain; babies who see happy behaviour have activated left frontal brains and babies who witness sad behaviour have activated right frontal brains.' (p.31)

## **EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION**

Our feelings and emotions are communicated to others in conscious and unconscious ways:

- ***Conscious communication of feelings*** is done by telling others what we feel
- Our ability to do this effectively depends upon our 'emotional intelligence', that is, our ability to register and articulate our feelings
- Children benefit when we express our feelings directly, simply, and in non-threatening ways: they want to know not only what their parents think, but also how they feel
- When we express our emotions, our children learn what is important to us as well as witnessing a model for the healthy expression of emotion
- ***Unconscious communication of feelings*** is done nonverbally through facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice, gestures, posture, and the timing and intensity of response
- We are constantly communicating our feelings in these unconscious ways, and constantly (albeit unconsciously) registering such expressions in others
- Tuning to each other's internal states links us in a state of emotional resonance that enables each person to 'feel felt' by the other
- Neurological and neurochemical processes make this possible

## **THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Key aspects of this neurobiological perspective are that

- Children develop in the context of interpersonal relationships – early development is determined by the quality of their attachment experiences
- Later development continues to be shaped through relationships – the brain can be reprogrammed through positive relationships (although it becomes increasingly difficult to do so)
- Children’s relationships with non-family carers and professionals such as teachers can also ‘reprogram’ their brains
- These programming and reprogramming processes involve two complementary aspects of brain functioning: ***hormonal and neurochemical reactions*** and ***mirror neurons***.

## **HORMONAL AND NEUROCHEMICAL REACTIONS**

- ***Hormonal / neurochemical reactions*** are involved in all aspects of brain development and functioning
- When we are babies, the positive looks and smiles we see in our parents trigger the release of pleasurable neurochemicals (opiates) that actually help the brain to grow
- Relationships can also protect young children from the damaging effect of toxic hormones and neurochemicals.
- Children whose relationships are insecure or disorganized have higher stress hormone levels which may alter the development of brain circuits and make them less capable of coping effectively with stress as they grow up

## **THE POWER OF A SMILE** (Gerhardt, 2004, pp 41-43)

By toddlerhood, the human child has started to use his mother’s and father’s faces as an immediate guide to the behaviour in his particular environment. In infancy, these looks and smiles have an even more powerful role to play: they trigger off pleasurable biochemicals (opiates) that actually help the social brain to grow. These biochemical responses, in turn, trigger an enormous increase in glucose metabolism during the first two years of life. This glucose metabolism, in turn, facilitates the expression of genes.

The exact sequence is as follows:

- When the baby looks at the mother (or father), he/she reads their dilated pupils as indicating that their sympathetic nervous system is pleurably aroused
- In response, the baby’s own nervous system gets pleurably aroused and his/her heart rate goes up

- These processes trigger off a biochemical response: a pleasure neuropeptide (called beta-endorphin) is released into circulation, specifically into the orbitofrontal region of the brain
- Natural opioids like beta-endorphin help neurons grow, by regulating glucose and insulin, as well as making you feel good
- At the same time, another neurotransmitter called dopamine is released from the brainstem and also makes its way to the prefrontal cortex
- This also enhances the uptake of glucose there, helping new tissue to grow

## **MIRROR NEURONS**

- ***Mirror neurons*** are found in various parts of the brain and function to link motor action to perception: they fire if you watch someone else doing something intentionally, and will also fire if you do the same action.
- These neurons don't merely fire in response to any action seen in another person: the behaviour must have an intention behind it.
- Mirror neurons show that the brain is able to detect the intention of another person, that is, to 'read' other people's minds
- Mirror neurons also enable us to 'read' (and share) other people's emotional states: when we perceive another's emotions and intentions, even though we do so automatically and unconsciously, that emotional state is created inside us.

## **HELPGIVING SKILLS**

- There are three elements of effective help-giving: technical knowledge and skills, personal qualities, skills and values of service providers, empowering and strength-building strategies
- All three elements need to be present to provide truly effective service
- The second and third components provide value-added benefits, but cannot be faked:

'Research indicates that help receivers are especially able to "see through" helpgivers who act as if they care but don't, and helpgivers that give the impression that help receivers have meaningful choices and decisions when they do not.'

(Dunst and Trivette, 1996)

## **PROMOTING EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPATHY**

The development of emotional intelligence and empathy can be promoted in three main ways:

- through caring and responsive relationships
- through emotional 'coaching'
- through group programs and specialist interventions

## **CARING AND RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

As Peter Fonagy has suggested, the brain is a 'social organ'. Gerhardt (2004) describes the process thus:

'Our minds emerge and our emotions become organised through engagement with other minds, not in isolation. This means that the unseen forces that shape our emotional responses through life are not primarily our biological urges, but the patterns of emotional experience with other people, most powerfully set up in infancy. These patterns are not immutable, but, like all habits, once established, they are hard to break.' (pp.15 -16)

As Gerhardt also notes: ***You need to have an experience with someone first - then you can reproduce it.***

## **EMOTION 'COACHING'** (Gottman, 1998)

Emotion coaching involves five steps:

- be aware of a child's emotions
- recognize emotional expression as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching
- listen empathetically and validate a child's feelings
- label emotions in words a child can understand
- help a child come up with an appropriate way to solve a problem or deal with an upsetting issue or situation

## **EFFECTS OF EMOTION COACHING**

- Children of parents with an emotion coaching philosophy do better on a number of developmental domains than children of parents with an emotion dismissing philosophy
- These children are more resilient / emotionally intelligent, have better physical health, and achieve better academically
- Children who are emotionally intelligent are better at responding to and recovering from emotional stress

## **CLASSROOM PROGRAMS AND INTERVENTIONS**

### ***Promotion and prevention strategies***

- Mary Gordon (2005). *Roots of Empathy*
- Carolyn Webster-Stratton (1999). *Dinosaur Social Skills and Problem-Solving Curriculum*

### ***Anti-bullying strategies***

- Evelyn Field (1999). *Bullybusting: How to help children deal with teasing and bullying.*
- Helen McGrath and Toni Noble (Eds.)(2005). *Bullying Solutions: Evidence-based approaches to bullying in Australian schools.*

## **SPECIALIST INTERVENTIONS**

### ***Emotionally Attuned Parenting*** (Flory, 2004)

Flory identifies four cognitions that a parent may hold about a child that are pivotal in determining whether the parent will have empathy with the child:

- the child is hostile,
- the child is unreasonable,
- the child is not genuine in his/her demonstrated emotions, and
- the child is not emotionally dependent on parents.

If the parents does not have empathy with the child, the child will not develop empathy for others.

These negative parental cognitions preclude an empathic interpretation of the child's behaviour. This leads to negative parental affect and negative parental behaviour, such as dismissing the child's emotion, or punitive responses, which do not meet the child's emotional needs, and thus increase the child's distress.

On the other hand, positive parental cognitions - that the child is benign, reasonable, genuinely feeling the emotions they are displaying, and emotionally dependent on parents - facilitate an empathic interpretation of the child's behaviour. This leads to parental affect such as concern for the child, and to positive parental behaviour, for example, soothing or reassuring. Because the parent empathizes with the child, they are motivated to help the child and communicate this in their behaviour towards the child. This meets the child's emotional needs, and thus decreases the child's distress.

Emotionally Attuned Parenting is designed to alter parental responses from the unempathic to the empathic pathway, and targets their cognitions, interpretations and behaviours towards the child.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Emotional development matters
- The development of empathy matters
- Emotional communication involves both conscious and unconscious processes
- Promoting the development of emotional intelligence and empathy involves two processes or pathways:
  - conscious processes (emotion coaching and programs)
  - unconscious processes (caring and responsive relationships)
- Emotional development is actually built into the architecture of young children's brains in response to their individual personal experiences and the influences of the environments in which they live
- Emotional communication is the basis of successful attachments
- Emotion is an integrative force in development: it helps integrate the various processes and neural systems of the brain and it also helps 'integrate' or link one person's brain with that of another

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**DR. TIM MOORE,**  
***Senior Research Fellow***

Centre for Community Child Health,  
Murdoch Childrens Research Institute,  
Royal Children's Hospital, Flemington Road,  
Parkville, Victoria, Australia 3052

Phone: +61-3-9345 5040  
Fax: +61-3-9345 5900  
Email: [tim.moore@mcri.edu.au](mailto:tim.moore@mcri.edu.au)

Websites: [www.rch.org.au/ccch](http://www.rch.org.au/ccch)  
[www.ecconnections.com.au](http://www.ecconnections.com.au)