

The Power of Parental Presence by Jane Mitchell

Dear fellow Therapeutic Parents

Further to some recent posts I thought I would just put in some thoughts about Parental Presence over the next few days - so here is my first set of thoughts. Hope you like it!

Parental Presence

This is one of the most important tools we have, allowing for many different levels of healing to take place alongside a whole host of implicit messages which help to develop strong foundations as our children assimilate new ideas from simple consistent interactions.

I believe there are several aspects to this and will address them over the next couple of weeks:

Aspect 1 - "Being There"

It is really easy to underestimate the power of our calm, empathic physical presence. No words are required – children assimilate knowledge on a sensory level – sometimes words get in the way. Simple physical presence can convey a world of meaning to a child that does not have trust in adults. If a child is overwhelmed, your calm presence can calm them down. If a child is unhappy, your empathic presence (including appropriate physical contact, if the child will accept it) will reassure them. If a child feels worthless, then spending time with them lets them know you are important to them. As a therapeutic parent, we can use your body language, our facial expression and proximity to convey emotional messages of acceptance, love, empathy, calm and reassurance. This is the essence of co-regulation – words should be kept to a minimum. During the attachment cycle, when a baby has a need the first job of the adult is to regulate the baby's emotional state, and this is what we still need to do for your challenging children. This then allows movement into meeting the need. The child then begins to experience:

Being important to the adult

Adults can help

Experience themselves as worthy

Experience themselves as cared for

Beginnings of trust can develop

Child feels contained

Child feels accepted

Don't forget – repetition builds brains. This is a healing strategy for the long haul!

NB You must be in a calm and receptive state to be able to do this, otherwise the result may be an experience of escalation and further experience of shame.

Good morning Therapeutic Parents!

Parental Presence No 2.

Aspect 2 – Keeping the Child "in mind"

Many of our children have issues with separation and show behaviour generally exhibited by younger children – clinging, shadowing their carer, standing and yelling for their carer repetitively, following you into the toilet, stealing personal items from significant people – to name just a few. We always need to bear in mind that these children have experienced inappropriate care and

therefore may not have the developmental building blocks that allow them to separate. We need to remind them all the time that we are “There” for them, even if we are physically somewhere else. For this purpose we can use sensory transitional objects – spray an item of clothing with your favorite perfume: better still, take something like a handkerchief and wear it next to your skin to absorb essence of you, then give it to the child; have key rings with a family photo in; keep many visual reminders of family around the home – lots of happy family photos; and remember to give them reminders for when they are at school or out – leave messages in their lunch box (short and simple is good “love you!” or “Hope you are having a good day”), and if they are able to manage a mobile phone send texts, emoticons, reminders (especially if they are out!). One TP I know keeps a happy memories album, and when her child is feeling shamed and rejecting, she just leaves it for him to look at in his room. It gives him a less intense way to remember and reconnect. You can also use a narrative to let them know you have been thinking about them in their absence – “I was in the shop, and noticed this (small treat or item) and I know how much you love them, so I have bought one for after tea” for example. The subtext here is:

- I think about you even when you are not here
- I pay attention to your likes and dislikes – because you are important to me
- I think you deserve treats (unconditional expressions of love and approval)
- You are good

And if the child is older and you are texting reminders:

- I care about you
- I want you to stay safe
- I want you to come home where you belong

(Narrative in general is a very useful tool, and will be the subject of a later post).

As always, try to keep your patience – as I have said before (and will say again!) repetition builds brains. If we think about how babies and small children assimilate learning by repeating the same small tasks or games endlessly, then we can maybe get an insight into why it takes so long for a child who has missed the brain building that a secure attachment gives you to learn things. They are reframing their world, one step at a time, with your help and love.

Dear fellow TPs!

Starting the week off with another Parental Presence post: I hope you all enjoy this one! Very practical and simple. As always - repetition builds brains!

Aspect 3 of Parental Presence: Giving a Narrative

Aspect 3 – Providing a Narrative

I believe that this is a way to underline all the reframing messages that we are sending to our children and helping them to benefit, and again this is as a result of my reflection on the way that we give information to and interact with babies and small children, especially when they are pre-verbal.

Whilst children are still in their first stages of life, operating at a physical and sensory level we automatically fill in the gaps for them by providing a constant narrative, whether it is discussing with a baby whether they need feeding and reassuring them about each step you take, or teaching a child

about appropriate clothes by reminding them to get their wellies on because it is raining, we constantly give information. Given at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way, this is assimilated easily in the context of the loving and stable relationship. Because our children may well have missed some of this educational narrative, I believe that we give our children useful psychological information about their emotional and other states if we give them a narrative. To put the cherry on top, if we then let them know that we have observed this in them, we also underline our parental presence and give implicit information that we care for them, and are observant of their needs. This is powerful stuff, indeed! Sometimes this is also referred to as “shining a light” on the child. I believe it is important to also include the extra message that you have “seen” your child – they are important and visible to you.

So instead of “Dinner time!” you might say “I can see you are hungry now. good thing that dinner is nearly ready!” “you look to me like a boy/girl that could do with a hug! Is everything all right?” “I am really happy to see you looking so happy!”

So the implicit message:

- I can “see” you
- You are important to me
- I understand your feelings
- I accept you in whatever mood you are in
- I notice your needs and take care of them

Dear Therapeutic Parents

My 4th aspect of Parental Presence is all about the gift of acceptance - very Dan Hughes! Also puts into play the things we have discussed already. Enjoy!

Aspect 4 - Acceptance

Straight from the Dan Hughes handbook, this aspect of parental presence offers the fabulous gift of accepting the child and loving them unconditionally – this does NOT mean no boundaries and allowing a child free range which would only increase a child’s insecurity and anxiety, but it does mean understanding the child, helping them to understand themselves and encountering adverse behaviours in ways that help the child to move on from previously held survival strategies. So this is clearly a big ask!

1. Bear the child’s history in mind – use your own reflective capability to help you to understand or have curiosity about the behaviours they are demonstrating. Again here an appropriate narrative helps the process and enables you to work with the underlying anxiety – “I wonder if you do not feel safe in your bed because you were left alone by your birth mum. That must have been so hard for you. Remember I will always keep you safe”. Or in the case of crazy lies – the Sarah Naish approach “I know that you took the (biscuits, money, personal item), but I can see that you are finding this very difficult. I will be ready to talk with you whenever you are ready.”

2. Keep developmental cues in mind and accept your child at the age they are showing, whatever their physical age. It is perfectly possible for our children to be teenage and still exhibit much younger behaviour in social/emotional/cognitive areas which may be shown by for instance: Needing baby comforts shown sometimes by making baby noises or needing a bottle or even by suddenly showing very young toileting – wetting or soiling. Displaying 2-3 year old reactions to frustration – temper tantrums, throwing things around, biting, spitting. 3-4year old behaviours – incessant chatter, tall stories, getting overexcited and overwhelmed, unable to calm down without help. Try to give them emotional information to help them, using your narrative and “I can see... “

skills and containing them in a strong structure while they are working it out. You would not leave an 18 month old to play alone, so if your 10 year old is showing 18month old behaviours (jealousy, striking out at siblings) then keep them near and tell them “I can see you are finding things difficult just now. I am going to keep you near to keep you safe”.

3. Pick your battles. Your adopted child did not grow up with your values and rules – it will take time to learn. In the meantime, decide which behaviours you can “let go of” just for now. This will reduce stress all round.

4. Repair the relationship after a rupture – this is more important than the rupture itself, as it teaches that disagreements and arguments do not inevitably lead to abandonment and rejection, relationships based on acceptance are resilient and strong. For us as parents it is so useful to remember that our lapses from the ideal are actually as necessary for resilience and modelling as all the times we get it right! This gives the child acceptance in the face of all their behaviours.