

Emotionally atTuned Parenting

An Easy + Fun
Guide to Helping
Your Child Through
the Tough Stuff
of Life



BriAnna Simons, M.S.W.

POWERED BY



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Foreword

It is an honour to introduce this book, *Emotionally Attuned Parenting: An Easy + Fun Guide to Helping Your Child Through the Tough Stuff of Life*. BriAnna Simons has written a helpful examination of parenting in a time replete with how-to-parent books, guides, workbooks and on. This book is written from the philosophical stance of respect for the child, argues for the importance of both parents and children learning to become emotionally attuned and offers a practical set of tools for achieving an environment of emotional well-being through practices that demonstrate caring, curiosity about the life of the child and compassionate behaviour, the hallmarks of attunement. This concept of attunement in action is what distinguishes her contribution.

I have known BriAnna's work for many years. Her dedication to creating a healthy helping space through play-based therapy begins with her recognition of the significance of the therapeutic relationship and the incredible capacity of children. She has been a profound support to children and families/caregivers through her therapeutic practice. As well, as a faculty member at Acadia University, I have invited her to present her work to students in courses taken to complete a Master's degree in Counselling. Her careful presentation of the emotional life of the child and the tools she has practiced over the years in her capacity as a play-based therapist have been instrumental in helping students understand, as well as inspiring further education in play therapy.

This is a ready resource that is built on integrity in the treatment of each person in our lives. Several aspects of the book stand out to me. Her discussion of the importance of play in the life and experience of the child is a significant contribution to our times of screens and media

BRIANNA SIMONS

accessibility. Presenting research (Greer, Pearce, Rogers, Steiner etc.) that argues that the "work" of childhood is play, matters; it recognizes the forces of understanding, creative expression and healing that occur as children "play" out what they learn and feel while they live and interact in their worlds. Another is the courageous decision of the author to share authentically her biography. BriAnna's respect for her reader is shown in her teaching about the power of her history and how she chose to change her life. She invites us, parents and all who are involved in the lives of children, to engage in a transparent review of our lives.

Finally, I will note, that as well as introducing references, resources and the many interventions and strategies parents/caregivers can offer children, her thoughtful attention in finding these many tools and her analysis of their right use illustrates support and capacity in helping children in the transformation of the "tough stuff."

This book adds to the literature that advances our humanity, interrupts unhealthy power relationships and seeks to honour our youngest. We can assure our children that we care about them – their everyday lives, struggles and futures. We want them to know we too are persons, hoping against all that can interfere, that they understand we are saying:

"Above all else, I want you to know that you are loved and loveable. You will learn this from my words and actions – the lessons on love in how I treat you and how I treat myself."

—Brené Brown, *The Wholehearted Parenting Manifesto*

—Linda Wheeldon,
MA, Education Faculty, Acadia University
Nova Scotia Registered Counselling Therapist





Acknowledgements

BRIANNA SIMONS

I would also like to extend gratitude to Gerry Robert and Black Card Books for entering my life during this time in my career, and sparking the passion to get my knowledge and thoughts down on paper to reach the masses about the importance of childhood. I always had a desire to write a book in my lifetime and Black Card Books helped to make that happen!

Daily, I think about my work: who I'm going to meet next, how I'll get to help, new strategies I'll use, toys I'll play with, the ins and outs of running my own business and how I'll create a positive life balance. I knew early on in my education and career path that providing individual therapy and working with little ones to resolve challenges during their childhood was exactly where I was supposed to be. Upon having children of my own, I also knew I wanted to be home to raise my children. This has been a conflicting set of goals; it's a work in progress with lots of tweaking. Since becoming a mom, my passion to help other children through their challenges and healing process has grown even stronger; I see day-to-day the importance of having happy and healthy childhoods.

In this book I speak about the role resilience plays in our journey. People and connections are key to resilience. Childhood resilience was a factor in my own life, and there are a number of people who solidified beneficial relationship connections for me; each one of them will receive a copy of this book as acknowledgement of the role they played in where I am today.

Much love to my kiddos for strengthening my drive to find new and creative ways of reaching as many parents and children as I can, within the busyness of our life. Also, a big loving acknowledgement to my husband for standing with me as we push our life's desires and the time in a day to the limits; and for always encouraging my career endeavours, including writing this book!



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Introduction

As a clinical social worker specializing in child and play-based therapy, I believe childhood is a sacred time that must be valued by parents and society as a whole. Who we become as adults, begins with our early experiences as a child, inevitably determining how we are able to navigate through and cope with challenges that occur in life.

As a therapist, my goals are to provide beneficial services to children and families who are experiencing challenges that hold them back in some way. Children look to the adults in their lives to help them navigate the world around them. Because of this, I aim to help educate caregivers to support children through their own individual process of self-discovery and growth. Ideally, the services I provide should not be a lifelong necessity to live a healthy and happy life. I aim to help children and families gain new skills, learn their internal resources, and identify and connect with their community that they can call upon during bumps in the road.

This book is another means to share knowledge and resources to help guide you as a parent or caregiver in helping your child through the tough stuff of life, some of it inevitable, some of it preventable. Regardless of how tough stuff happens, children need support and guidance to help them come through these challenges on the other side without debilitating emotional wounds.



1

The Significance Of Childhood

Childhood – everyone reading this book right now has had one. You're likely reading this book because you have a child who exists in the realm of childhood at this moment. But, how would you define what childhood is? Would you reflect upon your own childhood experiences as positive or negative? What more would you have hoped for in your childhood? What do you want for your own child's experiences through childhood? What can you do to change these childhood experiences for your child?

The period in which childhood occurs can be defined differently depending on one's culture, traditions and beliefs. However, I think it can be agreed upon that childhood is a period of our lives in which early development occurs. There is rapid growth physically, mentally and emotionally. Childhood is also a time of perceived innocence. Our childhood experiences shape us, and it's such a significant point in who we become that as a parent it can almost feel debilitating to believe it's impossible to not "screw up" our child. It's very true that childhood can be a "make it or break it" experience; however, it's also not a guarantee that two children who have similar experiences are going to have the same outcome in life. Why is this?

There are so many mitigating and contributing factors to how successful, happy, productive and well a person will become. It is nearly impossible to predict with certainty the outcome of our mental



Your child will not exist in this realm of childhood forever, but as parents we help shape our child's ability to return to their childhood memories with positivity versus despair.

health, financial outcome, relationships and overall well-being based solely on those childhood experiences because so much happens before, and there is much to come after. Yet, without help along the way in some form, there is a high probability that a child who had negative or traumatic experiences during childhood will be affected by those experiences into adulthood if there has not been the opportunity to process and resolve those experiences.

As you read this book, I'd like you to put all the self-doubt, blame of others and excuses on a shelf and focus on the piece of this that is most important. Right now, I want you to put your focus on the things you can actively do now to help your child through the tough stuff of life. This is their childhood, happening right now. As I'm sure you already know (unless you are super keen and reading this book before your little one is even out of the womb), time flies by. Your child will not exist in this realm of childhood forever, but as parents we help shape our child's ability to return to their childhood memories with positivity versus despair. As parents, we are often the first and sometimes only means to navigate information to determine what kind of help our child needs, and then seek out that help. The fact that you have picked up this book and read this far shows the value you have for childhood, so let's do this!

One of the primary reasons I do the work I do with children is because I strongly believe that who we become as adults, begins with our early experiences as a child. I've seen countless adults struggling in life: stuck,

angry, depressed, anxious, repeating generations of abuse and addicted to a multitude of substances just to get a break from the emotional pain that is within them. And where did that start? In their childhood. Maybe you can relate, and deep down you know that you have emotional wounds directing your life and influencing your daily existence. Maybe you see it within family members, or are in a relationship with someone who is truly struggling because they never had the opportunity to work through the tough stuff of their childhood. There are resources and support in most communities for adults who are struggling. However, I'm not going to tell you to stop reading this book right now and fix that, because right now you need to make a shift towards how you can stop that way of surviving from playing on repeat for your child. There are millions, maybe even billions, of self-help books to help adults, but now is your child's time because childhood doesn't last forever. This I know.

In my private practice, I have become skilled with "use of self" in a therapeutic setting. So, I'm going to take a step back and tell you a little bit about how and why I became specialized in child and play-based therapies.

When I was working on my undergraduate degree at Niagara University in the Bachelor of Science in Social Work program, we had to complete a practicum as part of our course requirements. I was placed under the supervision of a clinical social worker who worked as a mental health clinician for children and youth within the hospital system who required mental health supports. Through this placement I was also connected with another clinical social worker whose area of focus was outpatient mental health, and her area of expertise was in child and play therapy. I attribute my guidance to this path to her. However, like in many



I strongly believe that who we become as adults, begins with our early experiences as a child.



I'm passionate about the need for children to have the same opportunities as adults to process the emotional barriers that come with the tough stuff of life.

of our life experiences, opportunities and choices, we are the captain of our journey. An opportunity was presented to me and I took that opportunity and dove in. I successfully completed a child and play therapy training program offered through the Canadian Association for Child and Play Therapy. This was when I knew exactly what I wanted to do for

a career and my passion was ignited. I then continued forward to get a Master of Social Work degree from Memorial University to become a clinical social worker specializing in child and play-based therapy.

I'm passionate about the need for children to have the same opportunities as adults to process the emotional barriers that come with the tough stuff of life. It pains me to see so many adults who are stuck, angry, depressed, anxious, repeating generations of abuse and addicted just to get a break from the emotional pain that is within them. Based on my experiences, the knowledge I've gained in my education, and the work I've done with children, I KNOW life doesn't have to be that way for everyone who's struggling.

You know that saying "children are our future"? Well, I believe childhood is the key to solving this mass existence of despair. I could talk endlessly about the significance of our youth, yet as a society we don't value childhood. Look at our health system, our education system, the disbursement of wealth and funding within Canada and North America as a whole. Not to mention the fact that 1.3 million children in Canada live in conditions of poverty (that's one in five!), according to the most recent report outlined by Canada Without Poverty. What of any of that shouts, "childhood is sacred, and children should be valued"? As a nation we

are failing children, and ultimately failing ourselves. Whether you believe the cultural climate dictates individual financial success or individuals manifest their own total life success, something I believe is, as parents we have the CHOICE of what kind of parent we WANT to be.

If your parents did not help to facilitate a childhood you can happily reflect upon, you STILL have the choice to seek support, get help and make changes within yourself to make it different for your children. Actively participating in valuing childhood does not require money. If you are aware that your childhood had a negative impact on your existence in adulthood, there are countless blogs, websites, books, services and resources to raise knowledge and awareness to the point where anyone can actively work towards change.

I'm not talking become a billionaire kind of change; instead, I'm speaking specifically about SHOW UP FOR YOUR CHILD and connect with your child on an emotional level. Do this so they know you are present and are someone who can support and guide them through the tough stuff of life. Yes, it requires some upfront work on your part, but if you don't have enough value in yourself to want to make that change, please take the step forward to do it for your child.

Now, I'm going to take an even further step back and tell you about my childhood. I didn't happen upon this path as a child and play-based therapist by sheer coincidence. I've experienced enough tough stuff in those sacred years to develop a keen awareness of the significance our childhood plays in who we become as adults. Sure, right at this moment you may be thinking either, "it couldn't have been that bad, look where you are now," or "GREAT! My kid is going to be just fine regardless of their experiences." It's far more complex than that, however, and throughout this book I am going to unpack what builds resiliency in children and how parents and caregivers can practice emotionally attuned parenting to

give children a solid emotional foundation. My challenging experiences in childhood certainly had an impact on who I've become, and this has been both negative and positive. Growing up, I learned early on things weren't quite right with the way childhood is "supposed to be". I did not have an emotionally attuned parent, and that along with having a parent with untreated mental illness and another who struggled with alcohol use contributed to the challenging experiences I endured throughout childhood and into adulthood.

I no longer reflect on these experiences and hold a grudge about them. I actually see most of them as a benefit because of what I am now able to do with these experiences. But this has taken work.

These experiences have added value to my knowledge, awareness and ability to connect with children and their caregivers. They have become a marker for what not to do, and what I want my kids to experience instead. It's built emotional strength and in some instances pride, as well as been a topic of connection for some great relationships I have today. There is value in that. However, it was certainly a gamble. Had I have been someone different, not had the resiliency factors that I did, or chosen a different career path, these experiences could have contributed to the things I mentioned earlier that many people later struggle with in their lives.

Growing up, I was exposed to a lot of "adult stuff" and was placed in the role of confidant for my primary caregiver. I was parentified and often took care of my younger sister. Healthy emotions were not modelled at home. I witnessed domestic violence. I was made to keep adult secrets, live a lie for many years to cover up an adult's mistakes. I had to try to make sense of a misconstrued reality created by a parent living with untreated mental health issues.



I am a child of a hate-filled divorce. I experienced emotional abuse by a parent and witnessed emotional abuse of my siblings. I grew up not always knowing if the bills would be paid, and went along with my parent to food banks. I've experienced loss and death. I've had step-parents and all that comes with blended families. I had a parent who struggled with addictions. I've seen many versions of unhealthy adult relationships. I've even been taken to the police station and court to be a support to a parent whose emotional needs came first. I grew up with older siblings and younger siblings and we didn't always get along. I moved a LOT! Academic and life success went unnoticed. I had worries that were not acknowledged. I've also witnessed a sibling unravel emotionally, turning to substance use due to their own childhood experiences. I've been through the tough stuff of life, some of it inevitable, some of it preventable.

I share this not for sympathy or comparison. I share this because I remember those experiences and the impact they had on me as a child and youth. When I meet with children to help guide them through life's challenges, it comes from a place of understanding the complexities of what children may experience.

I didn't magically come through my childhood experiences and land here by chance; rather, it was by choice, with extended family support,



Now is the time to take this as an opportunity to become emotionally attuned to your child and help them through the difficulties ahead.

resiliency, positive relationships in school, therapy in adulthood and determination to not put that childhood on repeat for my children. I speak to you now, to express the importance of seeking out the resources you and your child need to work through the tough stuff happening in their life at this very moment and the new stuff that may come up.

If this book isn't enough to guide you in helping your child on a path of well-being, please reach out to local service providers to find what it will take to get your child there. If you're reading this book and you happen to have the child welfare system involved in your life, my advice to you would be to take any services you are offered and ask for more. Childhood is so important. Now is the time to take this as an opportunity to become emotionally attuned to your child and help them through the difficulties ahead.

2

What is Emotionally Attuned Parenting?

What is emotionally attuned parenting, you may wonder? Have you ever had a conversation with someone where you felt they were really listening? Like, not just nodding their head and saying, "yeah," "uh-huh," but really hearing you and really being engaged and interested in what you are sharing. They were making eye contact, smiling when you smiled, and they visibly looked sad in the moments you expressed difficulty. You felt connected, heard and genuinely cared about.

If you haven't had a moment like this with someone else, I'm truly sorry, as everyone should have people in their life that make them feel this way. If you have experienced this before, then you have a reference to engage in emotionally attuned parenting.

This book is going to guide you in how to use those skills to bring depth into your everyday parenting so that you can help your child through the tough stuff of life. What I'm about to share with you are elements of emotionally attuned parenting. Every element does not need to be a part of your engagement with your child at the same time in order for it to be emotionally attuned; however, the more elements that are combined, the more impactful the engagement will be.

You're likely not going to be surprised about the components of emotionally attuned parenting, and you also likely do most or some of them already. It is, however, the consistency and frequency in which these engagements with your child occur. Ready?

Emotionally Attuned Parenting in a nutshell:

- Making eye contact with your child when they are speaking. (You can't necessarily do this in the car while driving, but you get the point.)
- Mirroring your child's emotions, but not overidentifying. (I'll go into more details in the next pages, but imagine your face as a reflection of your child's.)
- Listening, like REALLY listening, to your child so you can hear them (not looking at your iPhone, not thinking about what you're going to make for dinner, not thinking about what you're going to say next).
- Answering your child's questions. (Have you heard the phrase "there's no such thing as a stupid question"?)
- Asking questions and making comments to show interest. (Be genuine, don't fake interest; your child knows the difference.)
- Avoiding shaming. (Shaming a child does the opposite of what you are trying to achieve... ALWAYS.)
- Establishing boundaries but giving freedom for growth. (This can be a balancing act but it will come.)



Connection is key to survival. On a daily basis, think about how many points of contact in one form or another you have with others. Now think about which of those interactions made you feel happy/content/fulfilled and which made you feel sad/frustrated/isolated. Why? What was so different about those interactions? Now look at the list on the previous page. How many of those points were a factor in the positive interaction you had, and how many were missing from the negative interaction you had? Doesn't it just make so much sense? As human beings we are intimately linked through sharing interactions and emotions.

The parent-child connection is one of the most cherished, significant and researched relationships. It can heal in ways seen as a miracle, has the power to change us deeply, can ignite superhuman strength and can even give a sense of purpose to life.

Have you ever heard of mirror neurons? According to Italian researcher Giacomo Rizzolatti, “Our survival depends on understanding the actions, intentions, and emotions of others. Mirror neurons allow us to grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but



A parent/caregiver connection with a child is so important to their survival, growth and overall well-being.

through direct simulation – by feeling, not by thinking.” Mirror neurons ignite in the brain when a person acts and when a person observes the same action performed by another. Although the exact function of mirror neurons is argued amongst researchers, they serve a purpose in our interactions with one another and in connecting.

A parent/caregiver connection with a child is so important to their survival, growth and overall well-being. Engaging in emotionally attuned parenting not only benefits the child but also creates beneficial social habits for the parent who engages in this form of parenting. It’s a win-win all around. It’s a way of connecting and interacting with your child that is beneficial to you both, and has lasting positive outcomes that could be passed on for generations. Using Murray Bowen’s multigenerational transmission concept in his family system’s theory, it can be assumed that as with unresolved emotional attachments, positive family patterns will be carried over into the next generation as well.

Establishing an emotionally attuned relationship with your child does the following:

- Creates a bond that lasts over time
- Builds their confidence and self-esteem
- Makes them feel valued
- Teaches them beneficial social skills
- Instills self-worth
- Models understanding and positive expression of emotions
- Establishes emotional security and well-being
- Fosters autonomy and independence
- Furthers developmental growth
- Opens a pathway to resources
- Encourages positive behaviour
- Enhances tolerance

As you read each element of emotionally attuned parenting, ask yourself:


- How regularly do I do this with my child now?
- Was there ever a time when I did it more, or did it less? What changed?
- What’s happening in my life when it seems to happen more authentically?
- What are my barriers to doing this all the time?
- How do I feel when I do this?
- How does my child respond?
- What can I do to make sure it’s part of the way I engage with my child regularly?
- How would life be different if this was how my child and I engaged?

- Did my parents engage with me in these ways when I was a child? How did it feel?
- Which three would I like to improve upon the most right now?
- What is my plan to make this happen?
- What do I need to put in place to keep me accountable to making these changes?

MAKING EYE CONTACT WITH YOUR CHILD WHEN THEY ARE SPEAKING

How many times as parents have we said to our child, “look at my eyes” or “look at me when I’m speaking?” Well, you know exactly why you do it. You’re unsure if your child is hearing you, and by getting them to look at you, you’re capturing their attention. Communication is not only auditory; it also includes body language such as gestures and facial expressions to convey a message. When you’re looking at someone who is speaking, you are more likely to get all the information possible, for a more accurate understanding. So, the same goes for parents when we don’t make eye contact with our child while they speak. We miss

pieces of information that could change how we respond and engage based on what is being expressed. When we don’t take a moment to look at our child when they are speaking, over time that can develop into a whole other message that we likely were not intending to convey: the message “I’m too busy for you,” “what you have to say isn’t important,” “I don’t care about your feelings,” or even “you aren’t good enough.”




When you’re looking at someone who is speaking, you are more likely to get all the information possible, for a more accurate understanding.

In Western culture, making eye contact during communication conveys respect, interest, value/importance and connection – all things that kids deserve to feel from their parents. Feeling these things on a regular basis builds positive self-regard and the internal feeling of **‘I Matter’**. The good news is... if you have made a habit of not making eye contact with your child when they speak to you (for whatever reason), you can now choose to make a habit of it and your child can still experience the positive benefits.

As with a child’s development of attachment, it is the consistency of needs being met which is significant. We can’t be “on” all the time. There are going to be moments when your child is seeking/demanding your attention and it’s not a time where you can shift it all over. That’s okay; just communicate that. Express that you are not able to give them your full attention they deserve, so you will connect with them in ten minutes/ after lunch/before bed, etc. Then do what you say and give your child that time and emotional space to let them share their thoughts, feelings and ideas with you. When you say nothing and simply reply, “I’m busy, not right now,” they will either keep trying over and over until they get it, start using behaviours to get any response positive or negative, or worse, learn to not even try to connect anymore.

MIRRORING YOUR CHILD’S EMOTIONS, BUT NOT OVERIDENTIFYING

Empathy. As defined in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, empathy is “understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another without having the feelings, thoughts and experience communicated in an



As with a child’s development of attachment, it is the consistency of needs being met which is significant.

objectively explicit manner.” Sometimes kids have a hard time identifying and understanding how they are feeling at a particular time or in any given situation. With the use of empathy and emotional mirroring, you can help your child put into words what they are feeling. Emotional mirroring is what it sounds like, a reflection of our child’s emotions. By taking note of your child’s behaviours, demeanour, expressions and



Parents often want to “fix” things for their child to make the hurt go away; however, children often just want someone to listen and understand what they are experiencing.

responses to a particular event, you can surmise what your child may be feeling even if they aren’t expressing it. You can assist by bringing it to awareness by saying, “You seem disappointed that your friends didn’t play with you today,” or “You look worried that Grampa was taken to the hospital.” Then you observe and respond according to their verbal or physical confirmation or correction of your emotional mirroring.

Parents often want to “fix” things for their child to make the hurt go away; however, children often just want someone to listen and understand what they are experiencing. Mirroring your child’s emotions does this by offering them your attention (time), and emotional understanding (compassion), which shows them they are important and their feelings deserve to be understood.

Dr. Haim Ginnot states in the book *Between Parent and Child*, “When one of our children is distressed, afraid, confused, or sad, we naturally run to judgement and advise. The clear, if unintended message is: ‘You are too dull to know what to do.’ On top of the original pain we added the new insult.” Rather, we want to convey a message of, “You and your feelings are important to me and I want to take the time to understand,” which can be achieved by mirroring your child’s emotions.



Remember, however, these are your child’s feelings, not your own. If you overidentify and become submerged in the same emotions of overwhelming sadness, anger or worry, you are then adding a new layer to your interaction in which your child may put aside their own feelings to tend to yours. If this happens, what you have intended to do to help your child has been undone.

“When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions,
it’s our job to share our calm. Not join their chaos.”

—L.R. Knost

LISTENING, LIKE REALLY LISTENING, TO YOUR CHILD SO YOU HEAR THEM

“Yeah, uh-huh, oh cool!” I’ve done it, you’ve done it, we’ve all done it. We’re busy and our child comes to us with something they want to show us, and it seems easier to “multitask” and pretend we are really listening, but we aren’t. For younger kids, you may be able to “fake” listening, but eventually you are going to get caught and this is a really poor social habit to get into. For the 30 seconds it takes to put down your phone,



Your child will walk away with a feeling of satisfaction that you really listened to them.

shut the lid of your laptop or take a break from putting away the groceries, you can pause and actually listen. Reflect back what you heard or comment about a time you remember when you were a child and did the same thing. Your child will walk away with a feeling of satisfaction that you really listened to them.

If you thought it was going to be brief but it turns out more listening is required than you originally intended, refer back to the section about “Making eye contact with your child when they are speaking,” and how to go about establishing a time when you can give them your full attention.

We all know what it feels like to be listened to but not really heard. Have you ever heard of active listening? Active listening shifts the mental focus on listening instead of our natural habit to put our focus on planning a response. Active listening involves repeating what is being said to us in our head and internalizing the meaning in our own words, followed by summarizing what we heard, sometimes rephrasing or simply repeating it back as we heard it. This is to verify that what we heard was accurate and gives an opportunity for it to be clarified if we were off.

You can then seek to understand the meaning of the message, taking in body language, tone, connection and asking yourself things like:

- What is the point of what they are saying?
- What do they need?
- Where are they coming from?
- Is there more to it?

You can further display your engagement and active listening by asking questions to clarify your understanding or to seek additional context when your child has finished their thought. Listen with openness, compassion, understanding and acceptance. Listen to what they have to say without trying to negate, refute or correct based upon your own thoughts and opinions.

ANSWER YOUR CHILD’S QUESTIONS

“There’s no such thing as a stupid question” is a statement most of us have heard before. In the context of emotionally attuned parenting, I would say, “There’s meaning behind all questions children ask,” whether it be curiosity about a particular topic, empathy and emotionally checking in, anxiety or worry, seeking help, or seeking connection. As parents we need to pay attention to this meaning that comes in the form of questions. Stepping outside of the idea that questions are just part of reciprocal dialogue and thinking of them as being more meaningful and having a purpose can help us to better understand and be more attuned to our child. Once you’ve determined the meaning behind the question, you can then figure out how that question should be answered.



There’s meaning behind all questions children ask.

There are many people who believe that if a child is old enough to think to ask a question, they are old enough to receive an answer. I am one of those people. Yes, it's possible that children ask questions because they get bits of information that perhaps they are too young to know, or that they heard someone else ask, but we can't filter everything our child experiences and the least we can do is put these blunders in context for them. Once a child has experienced something or heard something, it is now part of their awareness. As parents, if that needs to be corrected or processed, it should be. So, if your child is asking you something that you think they are too young to know about, you should explore the meaning behind the question and answer it based on their developmental needs.



If a child is old enough to think to ask a question, they are old enough to receive an answer.

There are times when children need to know about components of death, suicide, drugs, illness and sex. You can craft an answer that is developmentally appropriate and meets their needs for why they asked the question so that they are not left to fill in the blanks on their own, which can create more detrimental outcomes.

Another reason answering a child's questions is so significant is that it shows that you acknowledge them, and that their thoughts are important. It shows you respect them as a thinking human being that has things to contribute to the world around them. They matter, and their voice matters.



ASK QUESTIONS AND MAKE COMMENTS TO SHOW INTEREST

Be genuine; don't fake interest. Your child knows the difference. Kids are smart. They eventually learn social engagement and they can tell when you aren't really interested in what they have to say, what they are doing or what they like. There is a game I play regularly with kids/youth in therapy sessions called The Ungame, created by Rhea Zakich. You can purchase it online. There is a component to the game where there are designated spaces with the word "Comment" and a question mark above the word. These spaces are there to give you an opportunity to make a comment or ask a question about something the other person has said. Why? Because it's a game about engagement, connection, sharing, relating, trust and expression; and this is done through communication and showing interest and care. I recommend this game to families all the time, as it draws out things that you may otherwise not learn about a person. It's a great way to reconnect, check in and deepen a relationship.

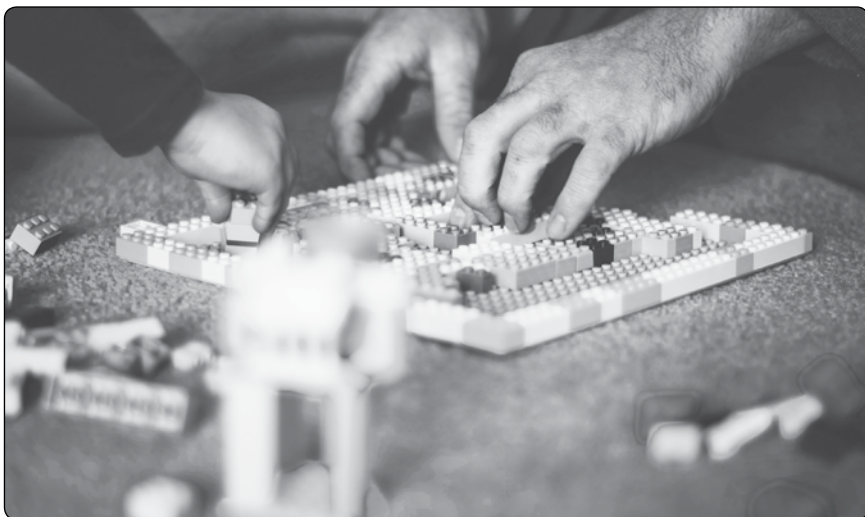
By sharing things about yourself with a child/youth, it sparks connection rather than a sense of a grown-up being a superior figure of authority. It brings down emotional and social walls, and some pretty amazing conversations can be sparked.

Let your child know what you like about them. Love can be believed to be inherent to the parent/child relationship (even if it isn't expressed in the ways we expect or crave); however, liking something is a choice. Choose to let your child know what you notice about them, and what you like about who they are. Tell them why you like it and how it makes you feel. Expand this within their world by noticing the things they create, the thoughts they have and the things that they feel. Ask



Let your child know what you like about them.

questions, and make comments to show interest. Then expand it further and ask if you can join in with their chosen interests, projects or activities, and ask more questions, allowing your child to be the authority of their world and teach you.



AVOID SHAMING

Oh, the ongoing debacle of what is punishment versus discipline and which works best in correcting unwanted behaviour. I finished writing this book in 2019, so I hope there has been enough parenting information widely shared with the population reading this book to have an awareness that punishment does not result in the overall well-being of children, lead to lasting positive behaviours or raise thoughtful kids. Discipline is about correcting and guiding a child towards more appropriate behaviour, whereas punishment is a form of shaming. Shaming comes in many forms, including:

- imposed guilt (not to be confused with a feeling that comes naturally)
- physical punishment (spanking, hitting, using aggressive force)
- getting even ("an eye for an eye," "you broke my _____, I'm going to break yours so you can see how it feels")
- public humiliation (you know, those Bristol board videos where a child proclaims to all on social media what they did...)
- verbalizing a deficit or labelling ("you're bad, stupid, trouble, dumb etc.")
- belittling ("What were you thinking?", "Do you ever think?", eye-rolling, sighing intentionally).



Shaming comes from a place of entitlement, a place where your feelings are more important than your child's, and from self-righteousness. Shaming is often a knee-jerk reaction fuelled by unchecked emotional responses. With time, often the intensity of the emotion subsides and thought factors back into our response, but it can be too late at that point. If as parents we give in to the initial emotional reaction every time (and sometimes it only takes one significant shaming reaction), our parenting

can become ineffective and damaging. As children develop, it takes many years to be able to distinguish between their impulses and actions. When shaming is used, there is no distinction between the behaviour being condemned versus the integrity of the child. Shaming is internalized on a number of levels that a child cannot sift through.



Shaming comes from a place of entitlement, a place where your feelings are more important than your child's.



As emotionally attuned parents, it is our job to help our child develop positive/healthy strategies for expressing their feelings and needs. It is our job to teach them how to set their own limits and establish boundaries. This can be established through the use of natural or logical consequences. In short, natural consequences are those which happen automatically as a result of the action/behaviour and are not decided or imposed by a person (you threw the ball in the house and your LEGO city smashed apart, or you jumped in the puddle and now your socks and shoes are wet). Not everything has a natural consequence, however. A secondary consequence can be a logical consequence, which is decided upon and imposed by a person and directly related to the action/behaviour (you have delayed bedtime by not cooperating, so we no longer have time for LEGO, or you hit your sister with the toy, so you can no longer play with it today).



Shaming is internalized on a number of levels that a child cannot sift through.

When you get into unrelated and illogical consequences, you have entered into “punishment” territory. This is both ineffective and often results in more negative behaviour. It’s also important to be aware that if anger or “mean spiritedness” is a part of imposing a logical consequence, that too becomes punishment.

ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES BUT GIVE FREEDOM FOR GROWTH

Easier said than done, right? Part of being emotionally attuned to your child is having an understanding for their individual personality, developmental stage and physical abilities. Some children have a keen ability to assess situations and determine risk, while others lack the same degree of foresight. Some children are extremely organized and limit themselves during play, while others take in every opportunity and experience with eagerness, using play as a means for creativity. Autonomy and self-exploration are so important for developmental growth and a child’s overall health and wellness. To make life even more challenging as a parent in the midst of our busy lives in our modern-day society, we must



Autonomy and self-exploration are so important for developmental growth and a child’s overall health and wellness.

strike a balance. Countless articles and studies of the needs of a child outline that children thrive with routine and structure, yet equally available parenting books and research indicate the inherent need for children to have freedom to explore (especially outdoors). “So, what is it then? How do I strike this balance for my child?” you ask.

First, practice a little self-attunement. How balanced do you feel your life is right now? Do you take time for yourself, your family and your child from everyday tasks and work? Do you laugh, play and have fun? Do you have enough structure in your own life, or does everything seem up in the air all the time? Are you a grounded person, or airy? How much stress do you feel in your life right now?

These are just a few questions that, upon answering, will let you start to create a picture of how structured or unstructured your life is. Not surprisingly, our child’s life tends to be a reflection of this, or a result of it. Now think about your child: who they are, their emotional responses, their daily rhythm and flow of high and low energy times, their awareness of the world around them, awareness of themselves and ability to self-regulate. What do they need? A big question, I know, but if you break each one down and think about what strengths are there and what is lacking, you can create a blueprint for how to go about establishing the boundaries they need as well as devise a plan to encourage freedom for growth.

Now this isn’t a one-time deal. Being an emotionally attuned parent means you are taking into account the changes that occur with developmental growth, emotional maturity, environmental factors and relationship dynamics. When you are emotionally attuned to your child, you observe, have empathy and are responsive to their needs. This is probably one of the more challenging components of emotionally attuned parenting as it requires a fair bit of intuition – and I don’t mean the picking up vibrations or spiritual energies kind.

One of the key pieces of educational knowledge I remember from my first (maybe second) year of my undergraduate education was stated by Professor Lynn Bird at Niagara College. She said, “Intuition is your knowledge plus your experience.” As parents, we all have some degree

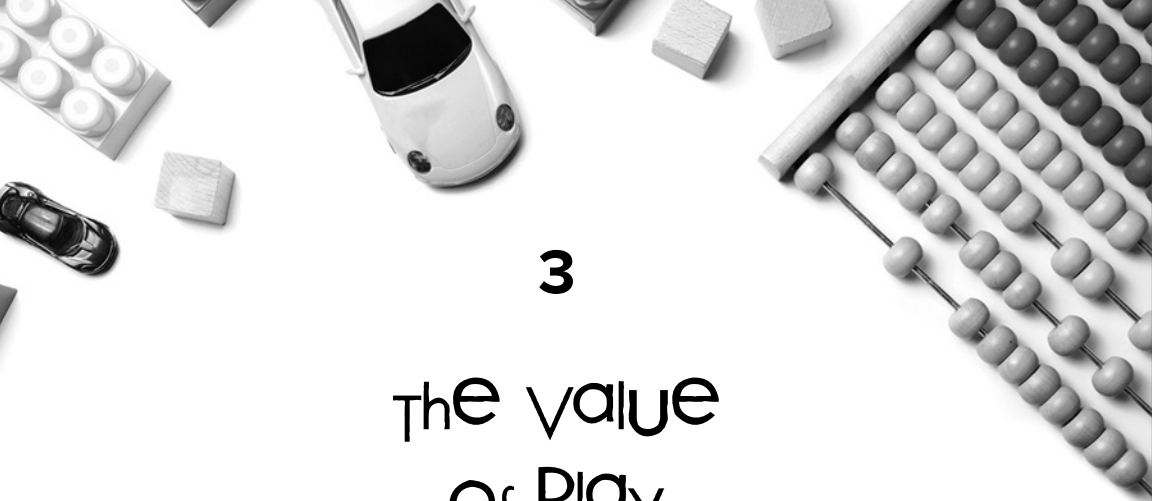
of parenting knowledge, whether passed on from those in our lives, shared in parenting groups or sought out in books and articles when we felt we didn't have a clue about raising another human. We also have ample amounts of life experience. Throw that together with your new-found knowledge and experience with your child, and you now have a whole lot of intuition. You just need to tap into it and listen to it.



Throughout this section you may have been surprised by the lack of discussion about physical contact and affection. This is not to say that physical contact and showing affection to your child is not important. I want to go deeper because sometimes parents think that they can make things better by simply giving a hug or saying, “I love you” as if that makes up for other areas of emotional connection that are lacking. It's somewhat assumed that if you are actively engaged in the components of emotionally attuned parenting you are also picking up on your child's needs for physical connection and affection.



Next, you will read about the value of play, followed by easy and fun ways to help your child through the tough stuff of life; which utilize both emotionally attuned parenting and play to maximize the healing potential for your child.



3

The Value of Play

In childhood, children have a resource that they are born with and that is invaluable. That resource is PLAY. Play is not something to balk at; rather, play is one of the most significant, if not THE MOST SIGNIFICANT, parts of childhood. Fred Rogers said it best when he said, “When we



Play is a vital part of what it is to be human and achieves many things.

treat children’s play as seriously as it deserves, we are helping them feel the joy that’s to be found in the creative spirit. It’s the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives.”

Play – such a simple term yet, so complex in the many forms in which it takes shape. With many daily tasks in life, they are a means to an end goal. With play, it is both the action and the goal within itself. Play is a vital part of what it is to be human and achieves many things that oftentimes we are unaware of, making it an invaluable experience.

BRIANNA SIMONS



Through play we:

** Discover how to think creatively. * Develop fine and gross motor skills. * Determine what risks to take. * Learn cooperation. * Discover how to rely on our senses. * Learn about the world around us. * Expand our cognitive growth. * Build problem-solving skills. * Discover ways to communicate. * Establish our likes and dislikes. * Build internal motivation. * Can expand on self-expression. * Grow our imagination. * Build and strengthen relationships. * Learn conflict resolution skills. * Develop a love for learning. * Learn how to self-regulate. * Gain new perspectives. * Build our self-confidence. * Establish curiosity. * Connect with ourselves, others and the world around us!*



“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”

—Fred Rogers



“Play is the only way the highest intelligence of humankind can unfold.”

—Joseph Chilton Pearce,

Magical Child: Rediscovering Nature’s Plan for Our Children

While I was interviewing educator Anne Greer, B. Ed., M.A., she spoke about the importance of play as she has observed it in her 40 years of experience as parent, educator and teacher. Anne sees free play as an opportunity for children to work through life’s challenges.

A particular memory stands out for her from a kindergarten observation. She described a small girl who had recently returned from being hospitalized with appendicitis. As Anne watched, the girl helped four of her classmates drape tables to form a bed. The other children took on the roles of nurse, doctor and even worried parents. The girl climbed onto the table, clearly the patient. At one point in the play, the girl stood up and said to her classmates, “OK. Now, I’ll be the doctor. Who wants to have their appendix out?” Anne recalled the teacher said that the game had been going on for several days, with the girl maintaining her role as patient. It was clear that on this morning the child had worked through what had been a frightening experience and was now able to move beyond it.

In Anne’s experience, very often, kindergarten teachers are aware that a new sibling is expected or has arrived by observing a kindergarten child insisting on being the “baby” during play. The teacher will have a talk with the parents and after several weeks or even a few months of adjustment, the “baby” is usually ready to play parent and nurture a doll. Anne went on to say that creative play is a worldwide spontaneous activity among children and, as far as we know, always has been. It is essential for a child’s healthy development: physically, emotionally, intellectually



Free creative play in the early years, both indoors and outdoors, builds a solid base for a lifelong love of learning and overall well-being.

and socially. For the past two decades, there has been an explosion of interest in play. Hundreds of articles, research papers and videos are available at the touch of a button. For most, these concepts seem common sense, yet now this knowledge is being presented as backed by research, as if to sway non-believers of the significance of

play for children (and humanity for that matter). In spite of the abundance of evidence proving its importance, play seems to be disappearing in many homes and early childhood classrooms, as Anne sees it.

Happily, Anne announced, there are families who still value the importance of play as well as schools where play remains a vital part of learning, such as Waldorf schools. The founder of the first Waldorf school in 1919, Rudolf Steiner (scientist and philosopher), recognized that play in young children was a physical need comparable to eating and sleeping. This urge to play, according to Steiner, is like the flow of a river, a continuous forceful movement. Play in young children is not premeditated, Steiner observed, but occurs moment by moment with total engagement and is a source of joy.

Anne shared that researchers, including Jane Healy, David Elkind, Joseph Chilton Pearce and Stuart Brown, among many others, have written extensively on the importance of play for healthy holistic development.

Free creative play in the early years, both indoors and outdoors, builds a solid base for a lifelong love of learning and overall well-being. Anne Greer is passionate about play in childhood and beyond, and as a member of the board of directors for the South Shore Waldorf School in Blockhouse, Nova Scotia, she is able to help ensure that children experience lessons rich in play, connecting emotional involvement with continued cognitive development for the growing child.

I asked some parents to share with me their thoughts on “What makes PLAY valuable to you and your child?”

- “I feel that play creates trust within each other. You have a chance to connect with your child. With life being so crazy all the time, it puts the brakes on for everyone, so to speak. You enjoy seeing

your child, with no interruptions, in turn your child enjoys that as they have undivided attention and feel like they matter (and it's free). Later in life you will continue to have a better relationship with your child if you always set aside some time; they will share more with you instead of trying ways to cope by themselves."

- "Freedom of creative expression."
- "Self-expression and imagination."
- "I think play sets a tone for early learning. Play allows children to realize that learning new things can be fun and gets them hooked on that feeling at an early age. When a child is playing with other children, they are learning through play how to work together as a team, which also establishes a key skill for later in life."
- "Our family prioritizes self-directed, unstructured play with loose parts and other open-ended toys and materials to help foster independence, creativity, social skills and problems-solving skills. We make time daily for play in nature, avoiding overscheduling our children so that they have space and time to be free to play in their own chosen ways."

As a clinical social worker who specializes in child and play-based therapies, you can imagine the significance play has in my private practice and the therapeutic experience working with children and families. As with natural play engagements, child and play-based therapies come in many different forms. Under the play therapy umbrella there are two main methods, Directive and Non-Directive. Under these key methods there are a number of models, including: Child-Centered Play Therapy, Developmental Play Therapy, Dynamic Family Play Therapy, Filial Play Therapy, Gestalt Play Therapy and Family Theraplay, to name a few. Within these models there are nearly countless techniques used that align with the particular model and method used.

When educating others about child and play-based therapy, I find play therapy best described in the *International Handbook of Play Therapy* by Schaefer, McCormick and Ohnogi as "an interpersonal process wherein a trained therapist systematically applies the curative powers of play to help clients resolve their psychological difficulties." Furthermore, they explain that "it has the power to not only facilitate normal child development but also to alleviate abnormal behaviour."

With play being such an innate quality of being human, it was only a matter of time before scientists, philosophers, psychoanalysts and researchers began exploring its value. Pioneers in the use of play in child psychotherapy were Anna Freud, Margaret Lowenfeld and Melanie Klein. Carl Rogers, Erik Erikson, Virginia Axline and Gary Landreth also played significant roles in the further development and awareness of the value of play in childhood and the role play has in therapeutic interventions with children. They all recognized the importance of play and the therapeutic value it had in working with children and families; this shaped the theoretical basis for play therapy.



Play is the
natural medium of
communication for
children.

As a child therapist, it is firmly believed that play is the natural medium of communication for children. Children act out their internal conflicts through play; this allows for the ability to observe themes and trends that emerge, and also by using play as an enjoyable way of engaging, children can gain insight about themselves and others.

As parents, we play a bunch of roles, including sometimes "personal therapist" for our children. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. We are complex, relationships are complex and, heck, kids are confusing and complex at times.

My hope is that the next chapters of this book will:

- provide you with tools that are easy, fun and play based that can further establish that bond with your child;
- break down some communication and connection barriers to help you relate to your child; and
- allow you and your child to laugh together, and lessen the burden of the thought, “Is my child going to be okay?”

The ability to play should never end. We all need to continue playing to feel alive, continue growing mentally, work through our problems and support the overall health and well-being of our families. I love Brooke McAlary’s description of playing hide-and-go-seek with her kids in her book *Slow*. She speaks about her journey to become more mindful, and about gaining self-awareness of her automatic reaction to tell her children she would play with them later in the hope they would forget and she could continue the busywork of life. She tells how she noticed the accepting response of her daughter when she said no to playing with her. Brooke surprised her children when she later found them and asked them if they wanted to play hide-and-go-seek with her. Brooke describes that moment playing with her kids: “the thing I remember most is the tingly, giggly sense of excitement I had while hiding behind doors



The ability to play
should never end.

and under beds and in cupboards. It was a giddiness I hadn’t felt since I was a kid, and it was a gift freely given from my own children that I could never repay. They’d helped me wake myself up to joy and wonder, and playfulness.”

While reading these next few chapters and trying out some of the tools and strategies with your child, I hope you practice emotionally attuned parenting and also tap into your playful side.



An Easy + Fun Guide to Helping Your Child Through the Tough Stuff of Life

Now for the sections many of you picked this book up for! You can read each chapter one by one as you go, flip to the ones that are relevant to you now, and pick the book back up again as new things pop up. As you read on, keep in mind that these are very condensed chapters to highlight knowledge and information to capture the essence of common experiences families have. This is not to simplify or minimize individuals’ challenges. Every child’s experiences are different, families are never the same, and thus a book cannot be written to capture your exact experience and provide you with individualized advice. That is what therapists are for!

As you review each section, I provide an overview of what each section speaks to: a “How Parents Can Help” section, a “Parent Tip” section, and a “Resources You Should Check Out” list. If you are questioning whether or not your child needs some extra help beyond what you are able to provide, that is typically a good sign that your parental intuition is telling you something.

Formal disclaimer: If you ever experience an emergency, call 911. If you or your child is in need of immediate mental health support, contact your local mental health crisis line (a Google search with your location followed by “mental health crisis line” should send you in the right direction). If you are a youth reading this and need support, call the Kid’s Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868. If you live within Nova Scotia and would like more personalized support and guidance from me, you can contact me using the various methods found on my website www.briannasimonstherapeutic.com.

In the next section I will share with you some of the strategies I use in my therapeutic play room with children and their families, strategies that have been proven quite successful, as expressed by both the children and their parents. When engaging in any of these activities with your child, make sure you make space in your own mind to be present to the process. Actively engage in emotionally attuned parenting as this will be a key contributor to the successes that you will have with your child. Now for the fun stuff! Read on! 😊



4

How to Help Your Child with Big Emotions Including Worry

Now that I’ve captured almost every reader... This is such a significant challenge in parenthood at some point or another. If I was to give a rough estimate, about 70 percent of the kids I see fall within this category. Their parents initially reach out because something emotional is happening for the child. The parents don’t know what exactly is going on, but they are seeing a change in their child’s emotional response and/or their child is experiencing more than normal amounts of worry.

BIG EMOTIONS

The ability to understand and express emotions (effectively) is something most adults struggle with, let alone children. A significant factor in developing the ability to do this well is being taught by those around us either directly or by observing it in our environment through modelling. Dr. Meg Meeker asserts, “The key to establishing emotional intimacy with your kids is creating an environment where they feel safe about expressing their feelings.” If your household isn’t “big on feelings”, this is the first thing that needs to be explored. So many families come to my

office with a variety of challenges, and the majority of parents tell me that their child doesn't express how they feel and keeps things bottled up inside. The first question I ask parents is how well they do with sharing their own feelings. More often than not, this is a moment of reflection in which parents acknowledge they don't talk about their own feelings in front of their kids, if at all, and they try to keep the big emotions away from their child because they don't want them to have to worry about mom's or dad's stuff.

The last statement is understandable; however, kids are perceptive and, in most cases, they pick up on subtle changes. Without having any understanding about what may be occurring, they may start to develop their own explanations, and this can create anxiety, fear, sadness or anger. There are ways you can let your child know about your own feelings without burdening them with adult details or the need to take ownership for or change those feelings. It goes back to creating an environment where they feel safe about expressing their feelings.

It's also important to understand at what point a child is developmentally able to gauge the depth of conversations. You can often do this by reflecting on their everyday thoughts and expressions. How detailed are their conversations? What things do they think about? What level of social connection do they understand? This should give you a good idea of where to start with modelling understanding and

expression of your own feelings, and encouraging their own. I created a Feelings Word List poster that I give to all the families I see as a starting point in encouraging the whole family to get into the habit of regularly expressing their feelings with each other.



Kids are perceptive and, in most cases, they pick up on subtle changes.

Feelings Word List

SURPRISED

Astonished
Confused
Curious
Exhilarated
Impressed
Playful
Shocked
Tense

SAD

Alone
Burdened
Disappointed
Guilty
Hopeless

SCARED

Afraid
Cautious
Frightened
Horrificed
Insecure
Lost
Nervous
Terrified

.....

How many feelings
do you have a good
understanding of?
Tell about a time you felt...

.....

HAPPY

Appreciated
Cheerful
Excited
Grateful
Hopeful
Loved
Optimistic
Proud
Thankful

MAD

Angry
Bitter
Defensive
Frustrated
Hostile
Impatient

+MORE

Accepting
Comfortable
Hungry
Hurt
Sensitive
Sick
Tired
Uncomfortable
Understanding

Created by BriAnna Simons Therapeutic Services

There are a variety of “homework tasks” I give depending on the child and their family’s needs, but the general idea is to create consistent space in your day where you do a feelings check-in. Whether it be after school, at supper time, or part of your bedtime routine, try to stick with a regular time, as routine is important for children in many ways. Then, ask everyone to share three feelings they had that day and tell about what



Participating in playful activities is far more engaging, less intimidating and ignites the mind in ways that simply talking doesn’t do.

caused that feeling. Parents need to participate in this, too! Encourage variety by using various feelings yourself, and if your child has a tendency to use the common Happy, Mad, Sad, then explore with them if it’s actually a different but similar feeling under those main feelings. Do this every day until feelings expression becomes more natural for your family and your child.

As you read these next few strategies, you may think, “Gosh, my partner could benefit from doing this, or I need to do this, too.” And you would be right. Many adults have also become stuck emotionally from their own childhood experiences and participating in playful activities is far more engaging, less intimidating and ignites the mind in ways that simply talking doesn’t do.

Feelings Creatures Drawing

During some one-on-one time with your child, bust out some markers, crayons or, if you are really keen, some of those smelly twistable crayons. Sit with your child and start out by drawing some fun things with them. This is not the time to be making excuses that you can’t draw, because the fact that your drawing of a horse looks like an overweight cat with

an underbite adds to the humour and overall experience of this activity. Then express that you have a fun idea and announce that you would like to draw some Feelings Creatures with your child. You can ask your child if they want to start or if they want you to. Then think of a feeling that you have and imagine it as a little creature. What would it look like, what colour would it be, would it be all mixed up or really bold in its appearance? Give it a name. After you and your child take turns drawing, write about the Feelings Creatures. You can even create a story about them. What does each Feelings Creature make you/your child think (e.g. “I can’t do anything right” or “I’ll be all alone”), and then what does it make you/your child feel (e.g. sad, angry, scared or excited)? Then talk about what the Feelings Creature makes you/your child do (e.g. want to run away or not want to go to school). Externalizing and personifying feelings can help in gaining new perspectives and awareness. It can be helpful to see big emotions broken down into their smaller parts so they can be explored in new ways.

Feelings Ribbon

You and your child can get as creative as you want with this one. Hang a piece of fancy ribbon, braided yarn, fabric scrap or a simple rope somewhere in your home that is visible to you or the whole family. Take some time with your child to make a list of all the feelings you can think of. Then draw a picture that represents the feeling, cut out images from a magazine, print an image from online and colour it, or make a 3D creation with art supplies. Next, attach these feelings images or items to a simple wooden clothespin. Once finished, place them all in a basket below where you have hung your ribbon and practice placing all the feelings you or your child has at any given time on the ribbon to engage in feelings identification and expression. Show curiosity about what they have chosen each day.

Pictionary Update

I often use this strategy when I am looking for a shift in perspective with a child or assessing changes in mood or behaviour. It can be a helpful way for parents to check in with their child in a non-confrontational and more playful way. It's easy + fun, just like playing a game! You could do this after school, after supper or even as a before-bed hangout activity. You get out a few pieces of paper and drawing supplies, then write at the top of each page one word: HIGH, LOW, LOOKING FORWARD TO and PROUD. Let your child know you are going to play a drawing game similar to *Pictionary* where you are going to see if you can guess what they are drawing. You ask them to think about their experiences over the last week and draw a picture of their high moment (the best thing that happened to them/made them most happy), their low moment (the most challenging thing that happened to them/made them sad, disappointed or angry), something they are looking forward to the most, and something that happened that they felt proud about. While guessing the drawings, you can ask questions as hints, comment on any expressed emotions during the drawing process and use your emotionally attuned parenting skills!

Pillow Squeeze

This is a body awareness tool I teach kids and parents to use to help regulate a child's emotions when they are known to go from 0–100 in minutes, or if they need a way to expel emotional energy. The key to success with this easy-to-use calming strategy is PRACTICE! Some parents have come back and said the strategy didn't work because they tried using it once their child was already in a heightened state and they wouldn't do it. You need to REGULARLY PRACTICE this strategy when your child is in a calm or slightly agitated state so they can feel the calm it

brings to their body, and they can form a habit of using it prior to situations becoming their most volatile. So when practicing, you get a squeezable pillow, sit on the floor with your child and tell them you are going to count to three and then throw the pillow to them. When they catch it, they are going to squeeze the pillow with all their might (arms, legs, head, knees, everything). You are going to count to five while they are squeezing, and when you get to five, they are going to toss it back to you. Then, they are going to relax their body and make it all wobbly like a piece of spaghetti, shaking it out for three seconds. REPEAT until your child isn't frustrated anymore, is exhausted, starts laughing or a combination of the three.

These are just a few activities you can start with to help your child become more aware of their feelings, learn how to identify them and become more comfortable with expressing their feelings. Let this be the start of your creative endeavours in bringing feelings into your home in a more creative and fun way. You can head over to my website www.briannasimonstherapeutic.com and click on the shop link to get a FREE printable copy of my **Feelings Word List Poster**.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

You can help facilitate your child's mastery and successful movement through big emotions by:

- encouraging the expression of emotions even if they are challenging or "big" ones;
- talking about your own emotions regularly and in the presence of your child;
- engaging with your child in activities to help understand and express feelings;

- not telling your child they shouldn't feel a feeling they express; if the feeling seems to be out of context explore it and see if you can help them identify what the feeling actually is that they are feeling (Note: anger is often a superficial feeling for something else, look up the Anger Iceberg); and
- reading books to your child about feelings or telling social stories.

PARENT TIP

If you experience the following with your child, reach out to a professional who specializes in working with children to discuss resources or services that may be beneficial to help your child:


- My child is crying all the time and expressing anxiety about their inability to control their emotions.
- My child gets explosively angry, often.
- My child is harming themselves or others when they are experiencing big emotions.
- My child is expressing their wish they were dead/not alive.

RESOURCES YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT

- Website: Hey Sigmund, Dealing with Big Feelings (Teaching Kids How to Self-Regulate) – www.heyigmund.com/how-to-self-regulate
- Website: The Pragmatic Parent (Parents: 5 Steps to Teach Kids How to Manage Big Emotions) – www.thepragmaticparent.com/teach-kids-to-manage-big-emotions
- Book: *The Way I Feel* by Janan Cain
- Book: *Today I Feel Silly & Other Moods That Make My Day* by Jamie Lee Curtis
- Website: Kimochis (Tools for Big Feelings) – www.kimochis.com
- Game: The Ungame created by Rhea Zakich

WORRY

Just like adults, children experience anxiety in the form of worries, fear, stress and apprehension. These moments of nervousness or worry are a way of telling children that something is unfamiliar, unsafe or that they are not confident in a particular situation. Worry can be an important signal that protects us or directs us to proceed with caution. An anxiety response is normal and necessary throughout life, and there are key developmental points in which children experience similar fears/worries. Typically, these concerns are resolved as children learn, grow and master a particular situation. Healthy movement through fears/worries results in building confidence, providing a frame of reference for future situations and has no lasting ill-effects. In this section you will gain additional information on how to assess if your child's worries are a part of normal childhood development, and how to assist them if they become something bigger and detrimental to their well-being.



Just like adults, children experience anxiety in the form of worries, fear, stress and apprehension.

TYPICAL CHILDHOOD FEARS:


- **Infancy** – Stranger anxiety, develops around seven to nine months and typically resolves around one year old.
- **Early Childhood** – As healthy attachment grows, separation anxiety develops around a year and improves over the next three years, resolving in most children by preschool. As children's worlds expand beyond their parents, they may fear new or unfamiliar situations (real and imagined). It isn't until three to six years that children master what is real or not. As children learn how to manage and put aside fears, their ability to sleep alone improves.



- **School-Aged Children** – As children gain new information, they begin to fear real-world dangers, and with time they learn that these risks can exist without being a direct or immediate danger. In middle school, social status and identity become important to children, which leads to comparisons and worries about social acceptance and performance. Again, as knowledge increases, concerns about risk and safety can come and go. With age, concerns about the larger world, moral issues and future successes are common.

Worries are a normal part of being human; they can prepare us and enable us to act in emergencies, or get us ready for the emotional responses that come during loss. However, sometimes worries start to consume us and interfere with daily living. Imagine how big worries can feel for little ones who are still making sense of the world around them.

I'm a firm believer in positive self-talk, affirmations and mantras. Our thoughts and internal messages are powerful and can impact us physically in a negative or positive way depending on our state of mind. I have used mantras during my toughest experiences. If self-defeating thoughts arise, I attempt to inject positive messages as a replacement. I also do this with my own children. Some days just don't start off well, and if we don't find a way to turn it around, it just snowballs. This is similar to how anxious thoughts work. Once the mind starts spinning with anxious thoughts, it can be challenging to slow it down.



Worries are a normal part of being human.

For those who experience anxiety or depression, affirmations and mantras can be a key tool in battling the debilitating waves of dread, fear and darkness. It's not like a magic pill, though. Using self-talk takes practice, and you have to be willing to believe it can make a difference, or at least be hopeful that it will. Like with many other things, the more you do it, the better you get at it. Kids, teens and adults alike can benefit from learning the skills of positive self-talk and the use of affirmations.

I can accomplish anything I set my mind to.

I am willing to step out of my comfort zone.

I am letting go of all my worries and fears.

Now if I was to give another rough estimate of what percentage of children I see who experience anxiety that falls outside of the healthy range (regardless of the initial reason for connecting), it would be closer to the 90 percent range. Almost all children I see are experiencing anxiety/worry to the point it is having an effect on their life at home, at school or with friends.

From my experience, anxious responses are often modelled and learned from a child's primary caregivers. In most cases when a child is coming to see me specifically because of anxiety, one or both parents identify that they have experienced significant anxiety in their lives and many of these parents are taking medication to help regulate it. These families often express high levels of stress, overwhelm, limited supports and limited skills in overcoming their anxious thoughts. If you are feeling at this moment that you can really relate to this description, and you can see the effects it is having on your child, then it may be an indication that you need some extra support from a professional. A big piece to working through anxiety is learning about it and how the brain works so you can challenge the "false alarms" being set off in your mind.

Dr. Dawn Huebner, is the author of a great children's workbook titled *What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety*. She, too, speaks about the importance of anxiety in helping children pay attention to the world around them and she speaks positively about how anxiety can be both energizing and motivating. When worry starts getting in the way, however, it is important that you address it before it becomes all consuming. Because anxiety is a thought process of the brain, you very much need to target the brain with therapeutic processes when addressing it. Through these processes you are rewiring the brain to deal with worries in a different way. Similar to the *Feelings Creatures Drawing* activity in the previous section, personifying your worries to determine what they make you think, feel and do can be a helpful first step in challenging them. Here are some creative strategies I use with kids that can also be incorporated at home to start breaking through worries!

Creating Your Worry Monster

Again, you can get as creative with this as your child wants to get. Your child can simply create a drawing of their worry monster, or you can pull out the recycling and art supplies and create an environmentally friendly worry monster. This activity externalizes worry and is the start to helping a child learn that they are not their worry. Moreover, as expressed by Dr. Huebner in a talk about worry, "It allows the parent to join the child's side in pushing back against their worry" instead of the child feeling as though their parent is upset with them when worry creeps in. While guiding your child in creating their worry monster, use humour. How many eyes does the monster have? Is it furry, stinky? Does it have horns, big feet, polka dots? Have your child give it a name. What is the Worry Monster like? Does it like to dance, or eat pickles dipped in peanut butter? Then start talking about and writing down what your child's Worry Monster makes them think, feel and do. When does the Worry Monster get bossy and tell your child to worry? How can your child boss the Worry Monster back, or help the Worry Monster so it can stop putting its worries on your child? Once the Worry Monster has been created in detail, make reference to it at times when your child's worry thoughts and feelings start to creep in.

Muscle Clench and Release

This relaxation strategy can help particularly at nighttime when worries seem to be their most active, when the body is still and the mind has the space to wander. Teach it to your child first, then guide them through the process the first few nights until they can practice it on their own. Have your child lie comfortably in their bed, close their eyes and begin taking deep breaths, inhaling through their nose 1-2-3, and exhaling out through their mouth 1-2-3. As they continue with deep breathing, they start with tightening the muscles in their toes and releasing them, repeating this

movement five times. Then they tighten and release the muscles of the sole of their foot, their ankle, gradually moving up one muscle area at a time, focussing on each one five times each. It takes focus to try to isolate each muscle individually without using the others, all the while continuing to do deep breathing. Your child should continue up through their belly, chest, shoulders, arms, fingers, neck, head and face. Taking the time to do each muscle in progression should take 10–15 minutes. Some children even fall asleep before they get to their head! Directing focus and attention to the body in such a way doesn't allow the space to wander with worry thoughts, so this can give your child a break at night.

Protection Stick

This is an easy and fun project that will take you and your child outdoors on a nature hunt! To start, go on a hunt outside together to find a stick that will become a treasured item. You want to find a stick that is pretty straight, free from rough edges or pointy parts, with no bugs living inside, and that feels nice to hold. Then see if you can find other treasures like feathers, dried leaves or flowers, and other items that could be glued or tied to the stick. You and your child can also gather strands of yarn, fabric scraps, ribbon or washi tape. Then have your child decorate their protection stick by tying strands or fabric around it, attaching feathers tied with yarn, lines of washi tape, and, if you want to get really wild, you can even add sparkle paint! Have your child make it their own. Aside from the end result, they will appreciate the experience of the time spent creating something with you. Then talk about if this stick had special protection powers, how could it help your child with their worries, fears or when they are alone or away from their parents? What could it do? You can expand this in any way your child needs and talk about special powers they have within themselves (e.g. they are: smart, creative, brave, attentive, cautious) and create a story about how these powers help them every day.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

You can help facilitate your child's mastery and successful movement through anxiety and worries by

- acknowledging and accepting your child's concerns (Just because it is not a worry for you, does not mean it's not a worry for your child);
- listening to your child's perceptions of the anxiety/worry/fear (Take a break one-on-one and provide time to make your child feel heard);
- providing additional information if needed and appropriate (Sometimes your child doesn't have a full picture of a situation and the unknown can lead to more anxiety);
- assisting your child in determining helpful strategies or solutions to work through the anxiety/worry/fear (Ask your child what they think might make it a little easier to approach, and if they get stuck, offer some ideas); and
- patiently supporting your child in taking one step at a time until anxiety/worries/fears become familiar and manageable (Be your child's advocate and support person).

PARENT TIP

If you experience the following with your child, reach out to a professional who specializes in working with children to discuss resources or services that may be beneficial to help your child:

- My child's fears/worries/anxieties are severe and persistent (normal childhood anxieties come and go and with some assistance they are able to carry on with daily activities).

- My child has stopped doing things they were previously able to do as a result of fears/worries/anxieties (e.g. attending school, spending time with friends, doing extracurricular activities, sleeping, going to the bathroom, playing).
- My child has developed obsessive/compulsive habits as a result of attempts to resolve their fears/worries/anxieties (e.g. hand washing, ritualistic behaviours, inflexibility in how something is done, self-harm).
- My child has developed physical symptoms as a result of their fears/worries/anxieties with no other medical cause (e.g. frequent stomach aches, frequent headaches, vomiting, rashes, fainting, exhaustion).

Worry is not considered an anxiety disorder based on what the worry is about, but rather how that worry is impacting a child's functioning. If worry and avoidance become a child's automatic response and approach to life situations, they become limited in their ability to master key developmental stages. This can affect them later in life, or can become an unhealthy pattern of interaction with the world as they enter adulthood.

RESOURCES YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT

- Website: Mindvalley (80 Powerful Affirmations That Could Change Your Life) – blog.mindvalley.com/positive-affirmations
- Dawn Huebner, PhD – Website: www.dawnhuebnerphd.com;
Book: *What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety*
- Book: *The Unworry Book* by Alice James (Usborne)
- Book: *Freeing Your Child from Anxiety* by Tamar E. Chansky, PhD



5

How to Help Your Child Through Separation and Divorce

I'm just going to come right out with my thoughts about the belief in our culture that when parents decide to separate and get a divorce, they must battle it out in court. It's not true.

Parents come to me at all different stages of the separation or divorce process. Some do not even consider going to court with it, some have initiated the court process, and others have been battling it out in court on and

off for a decade. In regards to court, I respect that everyone has their own story and experiences, as well as reasons they felt justified in taking the approach they did. Typically, by the point parents come to me for assistance for their child, a lot has taken place. It has been my experience in working with families that a court order will essentially mean nothing if parents are unable to establish an effective co-parenting relationship. Regardless of the outcome of court and the decision made by a judge, it will not work if either parent doesn't value that decision. As human beings, we typically don't value decisions that are ordered upon us.

As human beings, we typically don't value decisions that are ordered upon us.



Yes, a co-parenting relationship does take time and requires established boundaries, but establishing an effective co-parenting relationship is key to your child's overall well-being.

I have seen time and time again parents get court orders during a time of tension and unresolved disputes, and in the end, the same relationship dynamics exist that got them there in the first place. There are alternatives to court such as participating in formal mediation, developing a co-parenting plan with a professional, or engaging in a collaborative law practice. Find what services are available to you locally and then go from there to see what suits your family's needs best.

Every parent in the process of separation or divorce should start out by first reading this:

BILL OF RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

- I have the right to love and be loved by both of my parents, without guilt, pressure, disapproval or rejection.
- I have the right to be protected from my parents' anger.
- I have the right to be kept out of the middle of my parents' conflict, including the right not to pick sides, carry messages or hear complaints about the other parent.
- I have the right to have a regular daily and weekly routine, one that is not filled with unpredictable disruptions, chaos or unpleasant surprises.
- I have the right not to have to choose between my parents. It is my right to not be expected to choose with whom I will live. Having to make this kind of choice will always hurt someone, and therefore, me. I have this right even when I am a teenager. I CAN NEVER CHOOSE BETWEEN MY PARENTS.

- I have the right not to be responsible for the emotional needs of my parents.
- I have the right to know well in advance about any major changes that will affect my life.
- I have the right to reasonable financial support from my parents.
- I have the right to appropriately express my feelings to my parents and expect that they will listen to me.
- I have the right to be expected not to make adult decisions. I have the right to remain a child and not replace a parent in my duties, or to act as an adult companion, personal friend or comforter to my parents.
- I have the right to like and love as many people (such as stepparents and relatives) as I want to without guilt and without being made to feel disloyal.
- I have the right to a life as close as possible to what I would have had if my parents had stayed married to each other.

Source: www.divorcehelpforparents.com May 2019

Now that you've read it, reread it again. Things typically get messy when parents decide to separate and they are faced with sharing their most cherished person, their child. If you start with this Bill of Rights for your child, you will start creating a framework of engagement in your mind.

Now, I know many people reading this are thinking, "I can do that but I know _____ won't be able to and he/she/they is/are undermining everything I try to do in the best interest of our child."

Please, please don't make this your narrative. I'm very aware there are some people who are really difficult to get along with, are spiteful, and that communication can drastically suffer during separation and divorce, but you picked up this book for a reason, right? You did so not to make excuses, let someone else control your life, or stay stuck in a place that is of no benefit to your child. So, let's find a different way. Even if you can find supports or resources to make things a little bit better than the way it was, you are moving in the right direction.



According to Statistics Canada, about 38 percent of all marriages that took place in 2004 will have ended in divorce by 2035. The total divorce rate within Canada is down slightly from its peak of about 41 percent in the mid 1980s, but slightly higher than the rate of about 37 percent recorded in the mid-1990s. It's difficult to accurately capture the true rate of children who experience a separation of their parents due to the number of common-law families increasing faster than ever.

It's estimated that 14.6 percent of children live with common-law parents. Changes in relationships within common-law families are not as easily identified or accurately recorded as with divorce rates.

You would think that with the high frequency of separation and divorce experienced by children, there would be some precise things you could do to help children through this time in their lives. But unfortunately, this is not the case, as separation and divorce experiences vary as a result of many factors. As a therapist, I have found that you cannot predict how a child is going to feel, what's going to help the most, or how long it will take to process. I believe if a child is going to experience a separation in their family, the whole family would benefit from the guidance of a trained professional from the start to help mitigate negative effects on the child.

With separation and divorce, there are things you can do that can make the experience a minor blip in your child's life, and there are things that can make it a catastrophe!



This chapter does not include its own activities because it could be detrimental to a child if there were any underlying intentions of using that information at some point to bolster a position in court. If you have concerns, please connect your child with a professional to explore their thoughts and feelings. I would also strongly encourage rereading the chapter outlining emotionally attuned parenting, as separation and divorce can often be a higher-stress time and the parenting connection can seem to get lost in the mix of it all.

When children experience the separation and divorce of their parents, it can hit on many of the other topic areas in this “how-to” section of the book (big emotions, worry, grief and loss, trauma, as well as self-esteem and confidence), so you can also utilize those sections to guide you. Now, for the list of how you can help your child.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

You can help facilitate your child’s successful movement through separation and divorce by doing the following:

- Do not put them in the middle and cause them to have to choose sides. This includes talking poorly about their other parent when they are around, as this makes children feel uncomfortable and that they need to somehow fix it.
- As much as possible, minimize the number of changes they need to experience all at once along with the separation and divorce itself (e.g. moving, changing schools, being introduced to new partners, experiencing the loss of relationships). It is your job as their parents to think things through, plan ahead and communicate with each other.
- Spend time with your child one-on-one; it’s easy to become overwhelmed and consumed by the changes and extra responsibilities, but remember: you are not divorcing your child.

- Support and encourage your child’s relationship with their other parent. Unless there are safety or well-being concerns that have been discussed with a professional and a plan is in place, children should be given opportunities to develop healthy relationships with their parents.
- Listen to your child and really hear their messages (a combination of their thoughts and feelings) and don’t inject what you think they mean based on your personal experiences or the existing dynamic with their other parent. If you are unsure of what your child needs and how to help them, or feel they may be unsafe physically or emotionally, please contact a professional who can help.
- Put effort into improving your communication with your child’s other parent; this can be done together or individually, but it should be made a priority. Lack of or poor communication in co-parenting relationships is the number one cause for nearly every difficulty encountered.
- Establish and maintain healthy boundaries with your child’s other parent. This benefits everyone.
- Be dependable for your child. There is much unpredictability for your child during this time, so try your best to be a source of dependability. Be someone they can consistently rely on who also creates an environment that is consistent and predictable when they are spending time with you.
- Do not ever ask your child to keep a secret. Secrets are intended to never be shared, and are not to be confused with surprises, which are fun and have an intended time for sharing. Children should never be burdened with the weight and consequences of a secret.
- Love and enjoy your child. They are not an embodiment of the separation or divorce.

PARENT TIP

If you experience the following with your child, reach out to a professional who specializes in working with children who are experiencing separation and divorce, to discuss resources or services that may be beneficial to help your child:

- My child is extremely emotional, and this was not typical of them prior to the separation/divorce.
- My child is engaging in self-harming behaviour (e.g. punching themselves, cutting, engaging in drug use, engaging in risky behaviour, bingeing/purging food).
- My child is isolating themselves from family or friends (e.g. is no longer able to stay the night at a friend's house, is refusing to speak to a parent).
- My child has developed obsessive/compulsive habits in an attempt to regain some control (e.g. hand washing, ritualistic behaviours, inflexibility in how something is done, self-harm).
- My child has developed physical symptoms (e.g. frequent stomach aches, frequent headaches, vomiting, rashes, fainting, exhaustion).
- My child's development or behaviours have regressed (e.g. baby talk, bed wetting, clinginess or separation anxiety, whiny, needs help to do things they could once do before).

RESOURCES YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT

- Book: *Between Two Homes – A Coparenting Handbook*, by Bradley S. Craig
- Book: *Step Families – Love, Marriage, and Parenting in the First Decade*, by Dr. James H. Bray and John Kelly
- Website: Caring for Kids (Helping children cope with separation and divorce) www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/separation_and_divorce
- Book: *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way: Based on the Program Mandated in Family Courts Nationwide* by M. Gary Neuman and Patricia Romanowski

6

How to Help YOUR CHILD Through GRIEF and LOSS

As I age, I have entered a period in my life where tragedy, death, cancer diagnoses and divorce seem to be becoming more of a regular occurrence around me, and likely most of you have had this experience, too. As parents, that means our children will also be exposed to fragments of these experiences. I strongly believe in respecting children's awareness of the world around them and validating their consciousness and feelings in a developmentally appropriate way. These events can impact them as well, and it is important to acknowledge this. When my oldest child was three years old, in the span of eight months they became aware of a close relative requiring surgery to remove cancer (and a year later passing from cancer), another distant family member passing from cancer, close family friends divorcing, and another close family friend experiencing the loss of a baby. You may think that at three years old a child does not need to be aware of illness, death and sadness; however, changes and loss are a constant. These things happen all around us all the time, and unfortunately, it's an unavoidable part of life no matter what age we are.

Many people believe that children should be sheltered or protected from the sadness in the world around them until they are "old enough" to understand it. However, there is a level of understanding that occurs at young ages, and even infants grieve experiences of separation and loss. To deny a child the thoughts and feelings they have around loss and sadness can lead to an array of difficulties later in life. In the book *It's Okay to Cry – A Parent's Guide to Helping Children through the Losses of Life*, the author H. Norman Wright outlines what grieving looks like for children at different ages.

Grief and loss do not only happen when there is a death of a family member, friend or pet. Grieving can happen with any significant change in a child's life. This can include, but is not limited to

Even infants grieve experiences of separation and loss.

- experiencing periods of separation from a parent (a parent returning to work, starting school);
- moving and/or changing schools;
- having a friend move away;
- becoming a sibling;
- being injured;
- experiencing the death of someone significant;
- having a parent be deployed in the military;
- becoming sick or being diagnosed with an illness;
- experiencing parents separating/getting a divorce;
- experiencing the loss of a pet; and
- experiencing someone significant getting sick or being diagnosed with an illness.

The grieving process is a necessary one that helps us experience and work through feelings. At times, kids and even parents can get stuck or not know what to do to move through grief in a helpful or healthy way.



Grieving can happen with any significant change in a child's life.

H. Norman Wright explains in the opening of his book, “helping our children grieve through; their loss is important business for us as parents! Children need special attention since they look to their parents for help in navigating the difficult passages of grief.”



The grief process for children can be simple or more involved. Just as adults move through grief differently, children do as well. It is important as parents that we don't put expectations on how or even when a child should grieve. Awareness of not living up to a certain expectation, on top of the grief, can create a dynamic that becomes more complex and requires the separation of multiple challenges along with the underlying grief. Hold space for your child to grieve as they need to, and if you are concerned that they are stuck in the grieving process, contact a professional who can determine if your child is experiencing complicated grief and can assist them.



The grieving process is a necessary one that helps us experience and work through feelings.

In the book *Talking with Children about Loss*, author Maria Trozzi sets out the mourning process in children: understanding, grieving, commemorating and going on. Children are naturally inquisitive, and typically when something happens, they want to know more about it. This is an important aspect of being human. It helps us grasp concepts and understand our world better, it keeps us safe, it builds understanding of others, and it even increases our understanding of ourselves.

For children, the need to understand what took place that led to a loss is important in the grieving process. When allowed the space to ask questions without the influence of adult agendas, children will ask questions appropriate for their age and development. As their parent, it falls on you to answer these questions for them. Sometimes we don't have all the answers, and that's okay. There just needs to be a willingness to acknowledge we don't know and then to commit to finding an answer. Give them an idea of when they can expect a response and stick to it. Sometimes, as parents we know the answer but we just don't know quite how to say it and need some time to get our own thoughts straight, and that's okay too. After you help your child gain a better understanding of what took place, you need to allow them time to process it and be open to the feelings that may come with the process of grieving. These may be feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, pain or even relief. All of these feelings can help a child move through to adapting to their new reality.

As you've already read regarding being an emotionally attuned parent, this is a time in particular that you want to be sure you don't project your own feelings onto your child or place expectations on how

they “should” feel. It’s okay for your child to see you grieve. You can use your feelings as a way of engaging your child in talking about their own feelings.

Typically, when I see children who need support with grief and loss, they are engaged in the task of grieving (feelings) or in need of moving through to the next stage of commemorating (celebrating and remembering). This is also a very individualized process based on the type of loss, the child’s relationship with the person/pet/thing/experience that they no longer have, and their ability to participate at any given point. When I work with a child processing grief and loss, commemorating a loss is a time of celebration and recounting memories. This is where creativity, humour, fun and finding joy can benefit you as a parent in helping your child effectively move through grief.

In the next section I will outline some easy + fun ways to do this with your child, but before I continue, I want to share the last task for children, and this is the final stage of moving on. It involves not forgetting about the loss but being in a place where the loss is manageable, where coping skills have been gained, and where adjustment to a new way of life is taking place. This is ultimately where you want to get to with your child. If you aren’t able to help them in getting there, explore the resources around you within your community and among family and friends to see who might be able to help.

Child’s Perspective Memory Scrapbook

I have created countless memory scrapbooks with children and guided parents in having their child create memory scrapbooks with their children as well. Nearly everyone knows what a scrapbook is, but what makes this one unique and important in the grieving process for a child is that they are the one telling the story! Start by collecting photos of the loved one or event/change that is significant to the child. Gather materials such

as a small scrapbook, patterned paper, special flat-laying items, string, stickers or fancy tape for decorating and making the book extra special. If you don’t have photos, your child can draw pictures of the person, place or thing they want to represent. Then have them tell a story about each picture. Maybe there is a page all about the person, or a story about their favourite memory or thing to do with their pet, or a story about leaving their home, or what it was like when their special person was sick. They can include an ending to their story with a message from their special person, or write what they think that person would tell them. The final picture could be of your child’s favourite time spent with their pet/family member/friend. Follow your child’s lead and don’t fuss about their recollection of things being how you remembered it. This is their story.

Celebration of Life

Children often don’t get to be the ones to plan funerals, celebrations of life or events surrounding a loss, so this is their opportunity to do so! Pick a day and tell your child that they are going to help plan a special event to celebrate! This may be a celebration of a loved one they lost, of a new beginning or an ending. Ask them how they would like to honour and celebrate. What things would make it unique to what is being celebrated? What stories and memories would be shared? How would they want to end that part of their life to make it significant for closure? Where will it take place, and who will attend? As a family, you determine what you are able to do within reason to bring this event to life. Remember to bring creativity and fun!



A Letter from a Loved One

As we've come to know someone that we really cherish, we have a pretty good sense of their personality, common phrases and even sense of humour. This activity allows a child to imagine that individual speaking to them, sharing knowledge and advice, or even giving praise for what has been accomplished. All you need for this activity is a piece of paper, a pencil and some reflective thought. Ask your child to imagine the person they are missing, and to imagine what it was like to be with them, to hear their voice, and the ways they would have helped. Help guide your child through writing a letter to themselves, as if their loved one is talking to them. How would they address your child (did they have a special nickname)? What would they tell them? What advice would they give, or how would they help with a particular challenge your child is having? What would they be proud of or acknowledge that your child has done lately? What funny story might they remind your child of? Finally, how would they end the letter? You should guide your child, but you should not provide them with the content and responses. If they get stuck, ask them questions that might help jog their memory. After the letter is written,

your child can read it out loud or you can read it to them. This letter can be kept and reread whenever it is needed, and every once and a while, if your child encounters a new struggle and found this helpful, the first time, they can write another!

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

You can help facilitate your child's mastery and successful movement through grief and loss by doing the following:

- Allow your child, the space and time to grieve in their own way. Also share your feelings. Hiding that you are sad, angry or afraid can convey that these feelings are not okay for your child to have either. Explore your child's feelings as well as talk about your own without overburdening them to "fix" yours. If you are unsure of how to go about this, connect with a professional who can guide you.
- Be honest. Answer the questions your child is asking in an age-appropriate way.
- Include them. Let your child take part in celebrations, funerals and family gatherings.
- Maintain a routine that is predictable for your child, or create a new one that will feel safe for your child, considering the changes that may take place after the loss.
- Let your child play. As you've read earlier, play has great significance for children. If your child appears happy and continues to be playful even during a time full of sorrow, or is playing out a challenging experience, allow it.

** If play becomes repetitive and a child seems stuck, connect with a professional who may be able to assist through play-based therapy to help them get unstuck with their play experiences.**

PARENT TIP

If you experience the following with your child, reach out to a professional who specializes in working with children to discuss resources or services that may be beneficial to help your child:

- My child is crying all the time no matter what is happening.
- My child is starting to isolate themselves or has stopped doing things they previously enjoyed doing.
- My child is harming themselves or others.
- My child is expressing that they wish they were dead/not alive.

RESOURCES YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT

- Book: *It's Okay to Cry* by H. Norman Wright
- Book: *Talking with Children About Loss – Words, Strategies, and Wisdom to Help Children Cope with Death, Divorce, and Other Difficult Times*, by Maria Trozzi with Kathy Massimini
- Website: Keepsake Memory Bears by Mary (Facebook) – www.facebook.com/KMBbyMary

Mary finds keepsakes made of clothing from a loved one particularly significant for children because it gives them something to hold, hug and even smell. Mary has seen children who have not been themselves since their loved one passed, completely open up when they received their keepsake. Mary's advice for parents who have a child grieving a loved one is, "talk and listen to them. Tell them that you are there for them. Every child will react differently, some will ask questions and some won't react at all. If they seem sad, upset or worried, talk to them and let them know it is ok to feel this way. Grief is something that takes time so check on them often."

7

How to Help Your Child With Known Traumas

Trauma. Sometimes even saying the word feels overwhelming or scary. I believe this is a result of the context in which we hear it and perceive it. Typically, a trauma is heard about as something like a car accident, a sexual assault, violence or death. Trauma can be the result of a lot of things and comes in a variety of shapes and sizes based on the emotional experience an individual has with an event. The Center for Addictions and Mental Health defines trauma as "the lasting emotional response that often results from living through a distressing event. Experiencing a traumatic event can harm a person's sense of safety, sense of self and ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships. Long after the traumatic event occurs, people with trauma can often feel shame, helplessness, powerlessness and intense fear." Anyone at any age can experience a traumatic event. As disheartening as it may be, trauma is a fact of life and is inevitably going to occur. Thankfully, however, there are factors that assist us in handling and processing trauma experiences. Some of the elements you read about earlier: resiliency factors, the power of play and emotionally attuned parenting can all have a positive impact on moving beyond the hardships of trauma.

I could write an entire book solely about trauma; however, that has already been done, and done well by Peter Levine and Maggie Kline in their book *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids – A Parents' Guide to Instilling Confidence, Joy, and Resilience*. This is my way of saying, go read that book. Even if you don't suspect your child has had a traumatic experience, it's likely that they will at some point, and by reading their book now, you will feel better prepared. In this section I'm going to share with you my experience as a parent, and overall experiences as a clinical social worker regarding the types of trauma I encounter with children.

Trauma comes in many forms; my first-born child had their first traumatic experience around the age of eight months. The fire alarm went off, but there wasn't a fire, just smoke from cooking, and at the time it went off I was about 20 feet away from my child. It was a foreign noise, loud, and in my child's mind something startling was happening and mom was not right there when it happened. My first response to my screaming baby was to say, "It's okay" and run to try to get the alarm to shut off by frantically waving a dish cloth in front of the alarm to disperse whatever smoke the alarm detected. To a baby, surely that just made the situation even more alarming to see their parent running around behaving in a strange way while the loud noise persisted. Eventually the alarm shut off and I was able to go console my scared and sad baby. The next response was to nurse the tears away and all was well again. Jump ahead a few months and another incident occurred where the fire alarm went off when my husband was home with our then toddler and the same thing happened: a startled child, a reactive parent trying to shut off the alarm, followed by comforting. By this time, we were starting to notice a hesitancy from our little one when moving near the alarm, looking up at it with concern. Then, just as we thought we had that minor fear under control, a doozy happened. Around 18 months of age, our child's perception of the fire alarm being a scary thing was confirmed.

Unbeknownst to us, there was dust inside the fire alarm covering the sensor, and out of nowhere the alarm just started going off while I was playing on the floor with my child and I could not for the life of me get it to turn off. It went on for so long that I had to hold my screaming child while trying to get it to turn off. Eventually I had to disconnect the whole unit just to get it to stop. In between laboured breaths from sobbing, my little one repeatedly said, "firealarm go beep beep beep!" A fear-based obsession started with the fire alarm after that day which impacted sleep and also daytime play. We tried a lot of things to help process the experience, and it took about a year before the emotional response completely dissipated.

Traumatic experiences for children aren't always violent, don't always cause physical injury, and may not occur at the hands of a neglectful parent. They can be regular life events that, coupled with an individual's personal response to stress or fear, frequency, and the way in which the experience is responded to, can create distress. In my practice I do encounter the really hard stuff like sexual assault, injury and neglectful parenting. But overall, most kids I see who have experienced a traumatic event have had it occur as a result of typical life situations: the loss of a pet or family member, watching a scary (or not-so-scary) movie, getting sick at school, mom having a baby, or their parents separating.

As part of my very first intake session with parents, I ask about trauma experiences or events their child appeared to respond to in an emotional way that was unexpected. I do assessment activities with kids to explore their recollection of such events and observe their



Traumatic experiences for children aren't always violent, don't always cause physical injury, or don't occur at the hands of a neglectful parent.

emotional responses when they share stories about their experiences. Some physical responses I take note of that may suggest the child is experiencing emotional distress regarding an event are:

- a change in breathing (shortness of breath, more rapid, a deep inhale)
- sudden shaky voice or sounding to be on the verge of tears, or crying
- widening of the eyes that continues throughout the telling of the event
- sudden anger or aggression when event details are brought up
- a response to hide or curl up in a ball when thinking of the situation
- a switch to referring to themselves in the third person
- dissociation – sudden disconnection from the conversation or their mental presence
- avoidance – changing the topic of conversation or engaging in a different activity
- repetition – repeating a particular phrase or detail

If you have observed these kinds of responses from your child regarding an event that took place or an experience they had, it's possible they are experiencing effects of trauma. It's typical to feel a need to protect our children from any overwhelm and hurt. Parents can be a great resource in processing traumatic experiences, but there are also times when professional help is needed.

In the situation with the fire alarm with my child. We tried saying, “there’s nothing to be afraid of, the fire alarm keeps us safe.” Well, that wasn’t comforting. We tried a little exposure by letting our child control the sound by pushing the button, and this wasn’t much help either. We could have lied and said, “It will never happen again, don’t worry,” but that

would have just created deeper problems of mistrust the next time it did happen. And most extreme, we could have taken all the fire alarms out of the house so our child would never experience that happening again at home, but that would put us all at risk of not being responsive in an actual fire. What we ended up doing that worked was gradually building our child’s confidence by talking about the experiences, exploring the feelings associated with the events, acknowledging the fire alarm’s existence in our day-to-day life, and giving our child some playful ways of feeling independent with what to do in the event the alarm goes off again.

** Leave this work to a professional if your child experienced a trauma that falls outside of everyday life occurrences, and if violence, injury or abuse was involved.**

Detective and Reporter

Talk to your child about the importance of moving through events that occur in our lives. Sometimes events get sticky in our mind, and that can stop us from doing things we love, having positive relationships, feeling happy or getting to just be a kid. With this activity, you and your child get to be special reporters to discover the mystery of what took place, what your child is feeling and what they need. The parent gets to be the documenter to write down all the important details. The child gets to play the detective and reporter roles. Read about what detectives do to find clues and what questions reporters ask to get answers. With a particular distressing event experienced by your child, work together to start uncovering clues like going to the place the event happened, or drawing a picture of the scene. Have your child ask and answer who, what, when, where, why, how questions. Example: What did you see? How did it feel (physically/emotionally)? Where was mom/dad?

Who was with you? What did you think? etc. Write down as many details about what took place as your child can remember. If it becomes too emotional or scary at any point, stop and try another time or connect with a professional. Once you have all the details, turn it into a story your child can read to help process what took place.

Safe Space Visualization

Our minds can be pretty amazing and, similar to the dreams we have, we can visualize scenes in our mind during the day with a little focus and guidance. Have your child get comfy and close their eyes. Ask them to take a couple deep breaths in through their nose 1-2-3, and out through their mouth 1-2-3. Ask your child to think about a place that makes them feel happy and safe. This can be a place they have been before or one they are going to create with their mind. Ask them to tell you when they can see it. Then guide them through visualizing all the details. Have your child focus on what everything around them looks like, if there is anyone else, or what they can hear. Let your child spend some time exploring while continuing to breathe deeply. When they are ready to open their eyes, have some paper and drawing materials ready and ask your child if they can draw a picture of their safe space with all the details so you can see it with them. Encourage your child to go back to this visualization any time they need to, to feel a sense of comfort or safety.

Body Scan

Talk to your child about how our body holds a lot of our emotions and sometimes we just need to pay close attention to learn where our body is holding it, to be able to let it go. Create a cozy and safe space where your child can lie down and relax. Start with deep breathing. Have your child close their eyes and breathe deeply for a couple minutes, letting their body relax into the surface below them. Ask them to wiggle each part of their body individually, feeling all their parts. Then tell them that

you are going to start telling the story about what took place, and that you want them to focus on how their body feels and changes. Ask your child to say out loud when they have a thought, feeling, or sensation and where in their body they are feeling it. Perhaps they see a colour with it. Have your child describe as best they can what it feels like (hot/warm/cold, tingly, heavy, painful, cloudy, shaky, tight etc.). After going through the story of the event, pause, and go back to some deep breathing to relax again. If it becomes too emotional or scary at any point, stop and try another time or connect with a professional.



HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

You can help facilitate your child's mastery and successful movement through known traumas by doing the following:

- Educate yourself about trauma experiences.
- Let a professional help your child work through trauma experiences outside of everyday life occurrences.
- Do not pass judgement on the feelings they are expressing related to their experience, no matter how big or small the event seemed to you.

- Encourage the expression of emotions even if they are challenging ones. If you are unable to assist your child in processing their feelings seek help from a professional skilled in working with children.
- Listen to your child's perceptions of the event; they don't have to be identical to your own as they may have experienced it differently. If something significant seems to be off about what your child believes happened, connect with a professional for guidance.
- Assist your child in determining helpful strategies or solutions to work through the trauma.
- Don't project your own trauma experiences onto your child; everyone processes things differently.
- If you ever feel unprepared for, lacking knowledge about, or triggered by your child's trauma experience, seek professional assistance.

PARENT TIP

If you experience the following with your child, reach out to a professional who specializes in working with children to discuss resources or services that may be beneficial to help your child:

- My child's fears/worries/anxieties related to the trauma are severe and persistent, limiting what they are able to do.
- My child has stopped doing things they were previously able to do as a result of fears/worries/anxieties related to the trauma (e.g. attending school, spending time with friends, doing extracurricular activities, sleeping, going to the bathroom, playing).

- My child has developed physical symptoms as a result of the trauma with no other medical cause (e.g. frequent stomach aches, frequent headaches, vomiting, rashes, fainting, exhaustion, panic attacks).
- My child cries all the time or has emotional mood swings that are unpredictable.
- My child started harming themselves after the traumatic experience.
- My child started isolating themselves, won't talk, or is expressing anger towards loved ones following the trauma experience.

RESOURCES YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT

- Book: *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids – A Parents' Guide to Instilling Confidence, Joy, and Resilience* by Peter Levine and Maggie Kline
- Website: Hand in Hand Parenting (Childhood Trauma Resources for Parents and Caregivers) – www.handinhandparenting.org/article/care-package-resources
- Website: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (Families and Caregivers) – www.nctsn.org/audiences/families-and-caregivers
- Website: Child Mind Institute (Trauma Guides) – www.childmind.org/our-impact/trauma-response/guides

8

How to Help Your Child with Unknown Traumas

Unknown traumas may be those which have not yet occurred, or they could be that feeling of a “pit in your stomach” as a parent that tells you something happened to your child but you don’t know what. Sometimes unknown traumas are also distressing events that occurred with our child in the past that we missed at the time it happened. Children go through a number of developmental stages, and it’s not uncommon for past childhood events to resurface and create difficulties that did not seem to be present before. Sometimes children can appear to be struggling with something emotionally that they don’t know how to express where it came from, and to your knowledge nothing significant took place. It’s possible a previous event that was distressing for your child suddenly resurfaced with information or a new event that occurred. As a parent, it can be stressful to believe something happened, and even more so if we later find out something traumatic did occur to our child.

This chapter is different from all the others in this book and likely the shortest chapter in any book you have ever read. Trauma can be significant for an individual, especially a child. Assuming you read the

previous chapter first, you will have understood the importance of properly addressing trauma experiences. Unknown traumas are even trickier, so I have only four suggestions for how to help your child with unknown traumas.

1. Read the book *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids – A Parents’ Guide to Instilling Confidence, Joy, and Resilience* by Peter Levine and Maggie Kline. The first two chapters, and the last four chapters of their book will really assist you in the event that your child has not yet experienced trauma. Knowing that trauma is a fact of life and that inevitably something distressing may occur to your child, you will feel better prepared by reading, *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids*.
2. Don’t start aimlessly digging, as this can cause more harm to your child.
3. Seek guidance and support from an experienced professional if you suspect something traumatic has happened to your child.
4. If you suspect your child has been abused, contact your local child welfare office and report the information that concerns you. They will inform you of the next steps to take.

And that’s it, the end of the chapter.

9

How to Help Your CHILD with Bullying

There's so much buzz around the word "bully" that kids as young as three years old seem to understand the context of the word and it comes as a great insult to be called a bully by a friend. The mere mention of the word sends parents on alert as a result of both not wanting their child to be the victim of bullying nor wanting their child to be labelled "the bully". I personally don't like the word in the context we use it in. I feel it masks what's really taking place. It pegs individuals into a role that isn't dynamic, thus giving everyone a sense of an inability to change.

Using the word also leads to establishing a victim role, and that, too, isn't helpful. I appreciate Brooks Gibbs' take on bullying and his approach as a resilience educator, and he too believes the word "bully" is the problem. By calling kids bullies when a situation arises, it then creates the perception that one individual holds all the power over another. It creates a victim mentality for a child which strips away all control, and their autonomy to be anything more than



We want our children to gain emotional resilience and teach them ways to lead, not continually struggle because they feel broken and powerless.

a victim. This makes them feel powerless and essentially perpetuates the problem itself. We want our children to gain emotional resilience and teach them ways to lead, not continually struggle because they feel broken and powerless.

If you want to help your child with "bullying," first, free their mind and experience of the labels. Yes, there are going to be times when disappointing, mean or even harmful things happen to your child as a result of another child's actions or reactions. Ultimately, emotional intelligence is the key component to resolving the bullying issue. If you want to prevent your child from being a bully, or put a stop to the experiences your child is having with being bullied, then you need to shift your focus to helping your child gain emotional intelligence. Gosh, if only every parent could teach their children emotional intelligence, we'd be living in a completely different world, wouldn't we? Those emotionally intelligent children would grow up to be emotionally intelligent adults! The understanding (of self and others) and expression (both verbally and physically) of emotions is one of the first things I talk about with parents when they chat with me about their child. If you read Chapter 4: How to Help Your Child with Big Emotions Including Worry, you'll know that this is the most important area of my work.

Emotional intelligence is not something you can just teach your child once and be done with it; rather, it takes time to mature, effort to role model, and ongoing practice. As a parent or caregiver, take a minute to reflect on your own emotional intelligence, who taught you, how it was shaped, and in what areas are you lacking.

Emotional intelligence includes the following:

- perceiving emotions of yourself or others accurately/realistically
- understanding your own emotions

- using emotions to form thoughts
- managing/expressing emotions healthily/positively/productively

Emotional intelligence plays a significant part in both the bully and the victim role when it comes to bullying; as humans our interactions and responses are fuelled by emotions. If kids gained the skills to perceive the emotions of others, understand their own emotions, form thoughts based upon their perception and understanding, and then express and manage their emotions in a healthy and productive way, you would see few situations escalate to the point where “bullying” takes place.



Before going on, I want to highlight that if your child is being physically or sexually harmed by another individual, please ensure their immediate safety and speak with authorities (school/police/child welfare/therapist) about what steps to take next.

Who, What, When, Where, How, Why?

Take some time to explore the experience your child had with an individual that disappointed, upset, embarrassed, or hurt them. Together figure out the details of what took place. Who was a part of the experience? What happened? When and where did it take place? How did all those involved feel? What did everyone else do? Then the most important question is, WHY? Really take time to flesh this one out. When an experience occurs where someone is being/feeling bullied in some way, there is always a why, and that why is limited.

Psychological research on bullying shows that there are three key reasons why bullying takes place. Someone is trying to be funny at the expense of someone else, someone is trying to assert power/dominance over someone else or, lastly (and probably most importantly), someone has been upset or hurt by the person who is now in the victim role. Exploring the why can help everyone have a better understanding of how to handle the situation and move forward in resolving it. This is now where building your child’s emotional intelligence and resilience comes into effect. How they handle this situation and those going forward is going to determine if they will remain in that victim role or take steps outside of that unhealthy dynamic.



Next Steps

So, you’ve figured out the why, now what? This is where parents need to increase their knowledge around emotional intelligence and build resilience. A parent who has their own struggles with emotional intelligence is going to struggle in teaching their child how to be aware and resilient. That’s okay. No parent is perfect. The simple fact you are reading this book shows you have the awareness and motivation to move forward in helping your child. So, if this is an area you struggle with yourself, seek out the support of a professional who is knowledgeable in this area and can help guide you and your child. Explore resources online that promote emotional intelligence and resilience as a key factor in ending the cycle of bullying. Read about or attend workshops on how to build your child’s emotional intelligence. Have conversations with your child’s school about how to end the construct of “the bully” and “the victim”, and bring in student resources for how to become more emotionally aware and kind to one another. Model emotional intelligence at home both in terms of how you engage with family members as well as individuals in your community. Check in with your child regularly about their peer engagement, keep communication open, and provide support when needed. If you get stuck and don’t know how to guide your child in a particular social experience, seek some help.

Role-Play

Practice. With your child, act out some typical experiences they are having with peers that have become a challenge and allow them to act out new ways of responding/reacting/engaging. Act out what happened and explore how that felt. Then chat about what areas of the experience could have been changed at any point along the way to have a potentially different outcome. What could your child have done differently? Try it out. Practice all the ideas you come up with for how to change the story of what took place. What would happen if they didn’t react in an

emotionally fuelled way, or what if they apologised or treated the other person with kindness? Switch roles. Have your child experience what it would be like/feel like to be the person on the other side. In real life you can’t always predict when and what is going to happen. There are just too many variables to being human. But if you practice enough experiences that have already taken place or that your child is aware of that happened to someone else, they will create a helpful memory bank of communication options and solutions.



HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

You can help your child successfully move through experiences with “bullying” by

- showing your child unconditional love and support;
- fostering positive, loving and supportive relationships between your child and other family members and friends;

- helping your child develop emotional intelligence and building their emotional resilience;
- teaching compassion and empathy for others;
- stopping labelling children “the bully” or “the victim” and instead talking about the experiences, emotions and actions of both individuals; and
- practicing emotionally attuned parenting.



PARENT TIP

If you experience the following with your child, reach out to a professional who specializes in working with children to discuss resources or services that may be beneficial to help your child:

- My child is refusing to go to school out of fear, dread of ridicule, or out of embarrassment.
- My child has taken on a “victim mentality”, believing life is beyond their control and people are out to deliberately hurt them.
- My child has developed physical symptoms as a result of their fears/worries/anxieties with no other medical cause (e.g. frequent stomach aches, frequent headaches, vomiting, rashes, fainting, exhaustion).
- My child is expressing they wish they were dead/not alive.



RESOURCES YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT


- Brooks Gibbs | Resilience Educator – www.brooksgibbs.com
- Game: *SQUABBLES*, created by Brooks Gibbs
- Website: The Gottman Institute (How to Strengthen Your Child's Emotional Intelligence) – www.gottman.com/blog/strengthen-childs-emotional-intelligence/
- Book: *Building Emotional Intelligence: Practices to Cultivate Inner Resilience in Children*, by Linda Lantieri and Daniel Goleman PhD



10

How to Help Your Child with Self-Esteem and Confidence

Nothing we do that's easy will be particularly memorable; instead, it's the stuff we achieved that was challenging that will stand out. It's those memories that will drive us, and motivate us for change. If, however, we face a challenge that we experience significant struggle with and results in unresolved emotional upset, it could lead to the creation of a negative framework which is then used throughout life. This is true for anyone, even children. As their parents, we can help position them in such a way that those challenging moments lead to successes rather than endless disappointments. This helps boost confidence, a sense of optimism and empowerment.



Nothing we do that's easy will be particularly memorable; instead, it's the stuff we achieved that was challenging that will stand out.

During childhood and youth, challenging events can often lead to negative beliefs about oneself if not resolved. Early experiences can lead to the development of the core beliefs that later guide life's decisions, relationships and self-esteem. It's important as parents to be a support and a guide, but not to solve problems for a child without their input or effort. Successfully working through a challenging experience creates a foundation for the thought, "I can do this," and instils a sense of pride and ownership of the process. This is such a major factor in the work I do with children and youth. Children come to individual sessions, identify their own struggles and put in the work to process it and build new skills for how to cope. They get to own that achievement, not their parents.

The type of events that can have long-lasting effects on children and youth if support and resources are not provided, are the following:

- experiencing trauma – such as experiencing violence, being sexually abused or witnessing a death (these are just a few examples)
- having difficulty fitting in with peers (at school, in sports/activities and/or in their community)
- having a belief or knowledge that they are not able to live up to parental expectations
- not getting an emotional need met, for example, not getting enough praise/love/attention from key relationships
- having the perception of being treated differently from brothers and sisters
- experiencing abuse or punishment – which is even further amplified when the abuser tells the child/youth *"this is your fault,"* or *"I'm doing this because you _____."*
- being neglected in childhood and physical and/or emotional needs not being met
- being the "odd one out" within the family, social structure or community

- experiencing unresolved grief and loss
- feeling isolated or lonely
- having unaddressed mental health issues

In this chapter, I am going to share two stories with you from very unique perspectives that speak to how children embody self-esteem and confidence and the factors that come into play. A child's self-esteem is not fixed. Rather, it is formed, built and reconfigured based on their experiences, relationships, taught perspectives and opportunities for continued growth. Because self-esteem is ever changing, it is quite unique to the individual. They may have high self-esteem in some areas yet low self-esteem in others. Their self-esteem may have been high at one time in their life; however, following a particular event, it plummeted and they haven't been able to raise it again. There are endless tools, strategies and therapeutic models to help build a child's confidence and self-esteem, and so with that, know that there isn't a quick-fix solution. However, there are things we can do as parents that can encourage positive growth of a child's inner messages and opportunities.



Read these next two stories and pull out the messages that are meaningful for you as a parent that will help you to help your child with self-esteem and confidence.

MATT THE MUSIC MAN TALKS ABOUT SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE

As a child I was very shy. I was intimidated by anyone who was older than me, and I remember feeling like everyone was smarter. Any sort of confrontation was terrifying. Because I was so shy and lacked confidence, I was made fun of at school and was seen as the nerdy kid; the odd one with glasses who just sat quietly by himself at the back of the class. I dreaded gym class the most, as I was extremely uncoordinated and was never able to fully participate. I was teased and was the last one chosen whenever teams were made. I hated school and even considered dropping out in high school. Thank goodness I didn't. I also had trouble focusing in school, so I didn't get great marks. The only thing anyone at school knew I was good at was drawing. I think it was in Grade 7 when I won a drawing contest and got my first confidence boost at school. Sure, I was the school dork but at least people knew I could draw!

I've always loved music. Music was always played in my home. Dad played guitar, Mom dabbled on both the piano and guitar, and my sister played piano. As a child of age six, my favourite music to listen to was The Beach Boys. I moved on to the Beatles at age 10; I had all of their albums on cassette tapes. Remember those?

I looked up to my father, who used to get out his guitar and play folk songs whenever we had company over. People really responded to it; it was awesome. He was a music lover, too, with a nice collection of records, so I spent time listening to those as well. When I was 14, I picked up my mother's guitar and asked my dad to show me a few things. I used

hers because it was easier on the fingers. I caught on pretty quick and I just loved it. I have a clear memory of the first time I played a song and it actually sounded like a song! What an accomplishment. It felt great!

When I was 15, I received a compact disc player for Christmas. CDs were the next big thing and suddenly I wanted every CD I could get my hands on. The Tragically Hip was one band that stood out but there were many more. Every time I got a new album, I would listen closely and pick out some of the songs. I started song writing at age 16. I was terrible at it, but like any craft, I got much better over the years. I remember the first time I got a big boost of confidence playing music; someone invited me to a house party in grade 12 and asked me to bring my guitar. I was very nervous to play in front of anyone, but by the end of the night I was rocking out and singing songs at the top of my lungs with a little crowd around me. What a feeling it was to have them cheer me on. This was the spark that changed me!

Flash-forward another 20 years and here I am with two children's records! My newborn son inspired me to switch from playing in adult rock bands and open mics to children's music. I just love kids; their sense of innocence and raw curiosity inspires me and they are just a joy to talk with. Playing fun children's music for families is a joy, but after doing just that for about a year, I realized that I could be doing so much more with my children's music. Kids looked up to me, so I saw it as my chance to share my own childhood experiences with them to help them understand that we all need to support each other.

Children desperately need to feel connected and loved by other people, and the amazing thing is that they can actually do this for each other by being loving and respectful people. I want them to understand that they have the power to influence others in positive ways. They can be people who look out for one another; these are who I call Everyday Superheroes. As a child, I needed them. Fictional superheroes are fun

role models, but they are not able to impact a person the way real-life people can. We spend so much time fantasizing about fictional characters that sometimes we forget the importance of the real heroes around us every day. And anyone can be a hero if they want to be one.

I was fortunate enough to have been raised by two wonderful loving parents and I had other positive adult role models around me as well. But what I realized was, although I had emotional support from the adults in my life, I didn't have much from my peers, so I felt sad and lost. It's pretty hard to feel good about yourself when you feel this way. The song "Everyday Superheroes" explains that children can be those superheroes, too, not just adults!

EVERYDAY SUPERHEROES

by Matt the Music Man

You don't have to be rich or pretend you're a bat,
Real superheroes are nothing like that.
Don't need a bite from radioactive spider,
Don't need a cape, spaceship or hand glider.
Don't have to come from planet Krypton,
All you have to do is know right from wrong.
Help each other and care for others,
And you can be a superhero too!



I want to inspire kids to be better people, to help those around them... and in turn this can build self-worth and confidence for themselves and their peers. I want to bring people together. It's all about family, friends and community. Music is such a great way to connect people. I get myself out there and do educational shows and events in the community, and enjoy fundraisers because I believe in using my talents to help others. When we're all singing, dancing, laughing and enjoying music together, it connects us. Ultimately, I want to make children think about my positive messages. Even if it's just one small seed planted in their mind, I've done my job.

The end of 2019, I won Nova Scotia's Children's Artist of the Year and with that comes future goals in the music industry. My mission is to spread my own story about self-esteem and confidence and ask children to think about what they love, what are they good at or want to become good at. Everyone is good at something. I tell them that by embracing that thing, studying it and becoming really good at it, it will build them up and be exciting for them. Self-esteem and confidence will follow.

—Matt

CYNDI SWEENEY OF SIMPLY GOOD FORM CONSULTING TALKS ABOUT SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE

When I think back to memories from my childhood and my parents, the most prevalent are ones of triumph. By triumph, I mean a time when I accomplished something I had never thought possible. And those accomplishments, in my earlier years, usually came with the support and encouragement from my parents. They believed in me. By triumphs, it is more like miniature successes, but all these miniature moments were building blocks, shaping my character and who I would become.

One particular memory is from an elementary school speech competition. I remember my mother helping me select a topic and editing my speech. She made me practice what seemed like a thousand times. She sat attentively watching as if I was speaking to the world: "louder, clearer... hold your head high," she'd say with encouragement. I don't recall winning, but I remember being a finalist, standing on stage in front of my school. I remember feeling surprised but confident, and I remember my family celebrating the occasion like I'd won the show *The Voice*. But most importantly, I remember my mother supporting me along the journey. That memory is from Grade 3.

I'm now a mother of three children. My children have seen Grade 3 come and go, and my youngest left elementary school last year for junior high. Guiding and supporting them to be the best versions of themselves, for me, has been about helping them find their own mini triumphs through self-discovery, sport, play, etiquette and friendship building.

But nothing could have prepared me as a parent for having to rethink one of my children's gender identities. One day, I had to rethink gender identity in a nonbinary way and overhaul my ideas of parenting in a way that would ensure my child would thrive being the best version of themselves, despite who I thought they would be. It was the end of Grade 5, when my youngest walked off the bus from school. There was a look of distress on my child's face as they pleaded for an immediate heavy conversation. There was fear; more like terror mixed with determination in sharing with me that they were actually a boy. My child said with resoluteness that they had felt this way for a long time but didn't understand what it really meant. Didn't have the words.

I recall vividly, my child's eyes at that moment. Pleading, wide and watery. Scared. I looked at my child's short hair that'd gone from long to mid-length to short over the past year. My child previously told me they wanted to look more like me. I tried to take it all in; this was unfamiliar territory. One of my daughters wasn't actually one of my daughters. What does a parent even do in this situation? In that moment, I made some mistakes. We all do as parents. I haven't yet met anyone who is infallible. I asked my child if what they actually meant was, they were a "tomboy". This caused further distress and some anger. I wasn't listening.

I suppose at that moment I had a couple of options. Something about the fear and tension that surrounded me, my spider-sense, told me this was going to be huge and this was going to be pivotal. I decided to reassure my child that everything was going to be alright, even though

I felt hollow and a new sense of fear, fear of the unknown. I told my child I wasn't sure what exactly this all meant or what to do, but I promised if they would give me a little time, they could trust that we would figure this out together no matter what, and I said, "I love you." Parenting a transgender or gender diverse child is not in the manual, which we all know. There is not a real manual for parenting (at best, we get our hands on parenting books such as this one).

Our journey is still underway. But through listening to my child and supporting him in being the best version of who he is meant to be, I can say my son is now thriving. He is happy and confident, and for now, he is safe and his friendships are growing. His engagement in school has also grown and he has joy because he knows we have his back. We support, love and believe in him.

This journey is unique to everyone, but parenting a rainbow child comes with a sacrifice many parents don't have to make until their children leave home to make their own way in the world. We have to suspend our own expectations and hopes of who they will become. Without realizing it, as parents we are inclined to hold many biases and expectations for our children's futures. These come from our own family cultures, upbringing, values and beliefs. I had to suspend my biases, for my child to thrive. I knew as a family, we simply needed to support him in who he is telling us he is and what he needs to be happy. We had to let go of many things, including our own milestone expectations for him. In doing so, I realized many of those things didn't really matter. He was going to be who he was meant to be. But now he will get there with a happy childhood to boot.



We're still here to guide and create safe boundaries. But I realized early in my parenting journey, it was not for me to choose his path. Children have an incredible capacity to know their path. It's up to us as parents and caregivers to champion them, keep them safe and support them in becoming the best version of themselves. Perhaps it's a lesson every parent could benefit from. I only know wholeheartedly, it saved my child's childhood and gave them self-esteem and confidence in who they are that is immeasurable to what they would have felt had they been made to be someone they were not, just to please others.

—Cyndi

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

To help facilitate your child's mastery and successful movement through building self-esteem and confidence, you should:

- foster a growth mindset, keep communication open and show your child love;
- encourage your child's individuality and self-expression, and show love and acceptance of who they are;
- help your child explore who they are, and who they want to be by exposing them to diversity both in people and experiences;
- address any underlying mental health issues with your child (if you feel they are, or they express the need for support, seek it out); and
- be a role model for positive self-regard.

PARENT TIP

If you experience the following with your child, reach out to a professional who specializes in working with children to discuss resources or services that may be beneficial to help your child:

- My child has developed physical symptoms with no other medical cause (e.g. frequent stomach aches, frequent headaches, vomiting, rashes, fainting, exhaustion).
- My child is harming themselves or others.
- My child is expressing they hate themselves, are stupid, no one likes them and/or wishes they were dead/not alive.
- My child appears unhappy/sullen/depressed and lacks motivation in all aspects of their life.



RESOURCES YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT

- Book: *Self-Esteem – A Proven Program of Cognitive Techniques for Assessing, Improving and Maintaining Your Self-Esteem*, by Matthew McKay, PhD and Patrick Fanning
- Book: *Looking after Your Mental Health*, by Alice James and Louie Stowell (Usborne)
- Website: Simply Good Form (Resources for Families and Friends) – www.simplygoodform.com/resources
- Website: Human Rights Campaign (Talking with Kids about LGBTQ Issues) – www.hrc.org/resources/talking-with-kids-about-lgbt-issues
- Website: PFLAG Canada – www.pflagcanada.ca

“What’s been important in my understanding of myself and others is the fact that each one of us is so much more than any one thing. A sick child is much more than his or her sickness. A person with a disability is much, much more than a handicap. A pediatrician is more than a medical doctor. You’re MUCH more than your job description or your age or your income or your output.”

—Fred Rogers

11

BONUS CHAPTER

Kim McConaghy Speaks About Gratitude

Kim McConaghy was a roommate of mine for a few years when we were in college, we had both ventured out on our own to get degrees, and in the collision of life we wound up living in the same sardine-can scenario of communal student living. Kim and I have remained connected on and off since graduation and when I saw Kim take her life down a new path of wellness and self-empowerment, our connection was sparked again. Kim is a self-empowerment mentor/wellness coach, and through her journey, she crossed paths with Dayna DeKroon, who is an artist + mindset coach. Together they created the “I AM” Empowerment Project, with the goal to empower children and youth through meditation and creative mindfulness.

I have been following Kim McConaghy’s work as a wellness coach along with her collaboration with the “I AM” Empowerment Project, and saw great value in including a contribution from her in this book for you to absorb and take back to your daily interactions with your child. It’s complementary to the emotionally attuned parenting outlined in the earlier sections of this book, and if you begin living in gratitude with your children, you will be adding another layer to how you can help your child through the tough stuff of life.

Take time in this next section to absorb Kim’s thoughts and imagine yourself living in gratitude and the impact it will have on you and your child’s life. A big thanks to Kim for sharing the following thoughts.



GRATITUDE

- Boosts positive emotions like LOVE and HAPPINESS.
- Makes us KINDER and more GENEROUS to others.
- Positive emotions increase our ability to LEARN and make GOOD DECISIONS.
- When we fill our lives with GRATITUDE and POSITIVITY there is no room for anxiety and stress.

Living in Gratitude

If you spend enough time focussing on all of the things you have to be grateful for, you’ll find that some days it feels like your heart just might explode. Every time it does, your children will feel it. Starting your own

practice of gratitude is the perfect start. You can feel it by starting your own gratitude journal and writing down the things you're grateful for each day. Just feeling grateful ourselves changes our hearts and voice. Speaking with thanks is a perfect way to model gratitude for our children as well. Speaking about things you're grateful for in the moment is a great way to ground yourself in gratitude and lead by example. Next time you are spending time with your child, try these: "I'm so grateful for this time with you," "I'm so grateful for your fun ideas," or "I'm so grateful for this day, for this park so close to our home, for this cold drink on a hot day!" Feel the shift!



Speaking about things you're grateful for in the moment is a great way to ground yourself in gratitude and lead by example.

I believe so much in the power of living with a grateful heart that it was the theme of the very first youth empowerment workshop I led. Through positive affirmations, meditation and creative mindfulness, I work towards making a positive shift and a massive impact on the lives of the youth within our community.

Through this, my goal is to give youth the

tools to support their emotional well-being, and one of those tools is gratitude. For children and youth, feeling gratitude is one of the most powerful things they can do. One cannot be angry, sad or depressed when one is grateful. In the first youth empowerment workshop, children were guided through a gratitude garden meditation and they helped create a gratitude tree that you can create at home too!

Using a jar weighted down by stones and filled with dogwood branches, your family can write and draw the things you are all grateful for on cut-outs of leaves that are tied to the branches. You can water the tree, keep adding gratitude leaves to it and watch it bloom! We can be

grateful for anything, big or small, that brings more joy into our lives. It's so simple to take a moment to say thank you. To look up at the sun and feel the warmth and say, thank you. We can be grateful for the people in our lives, our favourite places, for who we are, the things we have done, the mistakes we have made and have learned from, and for magical memories and unforgettable experiences. We can remind one another how grateful we are for each other, and that's a beautiful gift. Gratitude has positive effects on the well-being of all of us. Science shows that gratitude positively affects our physical, mental and emotional health, and for children the benefits are significant.

Family Gratitude Practices

- Using a journal, your child can write or draw the things that they are grateful for everyday as an activity to wind down in the evening.
- Simply talking about the things you're grateful for as part of your morning routine to start the day full of gratitude, or as part of your bedtime ritual so your child will sleep well, grounded in thanks, are easy ways to wake up grateful!
- Around the table at breakfast or dinner, the family can share something they are grateful for that day. This is a fun and life-changing tradition that connects the family, and brings more joy!
- Decorate a Gratitude Jar for the whole family to fill with gratitude notes! Every day (more than once, if you'd like!), everyone in the family can write something they are grateful for and start to fill the jar!

Gratitude Journal and Conversation Prompts

- Today I am thankful for...
- The best part of my day was...
- I felt joyful today when...
- I can make tomorrow great by...

As with any new habit, it's the small steps we take each day that make a big difference over time. So, begin with one new family practice that works best for your family and begin to feel the great shift that cultivating gratitude nurtures for your family's well-being.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GRATITUDE AND MINDFULNESS

Gratitude exists in the realm of the here and now: "What am I feeling grateful for?" Mindfulness and meditation also exist in the same sense of self, presence and alignment with your body and mind. According to *Time* magazine's special edition on mindfulness, "Mindfulness and meditation programs are emerging as powerful ways to calm kids, sharpen their brain, and make them kinder." Research has shown that children who participated in a mindfulness program showed better social behaviour, learn more self-control, focus better, participate more in respectful ways with their peers, experience less stress and have improved well-being.

Mindfulness is nothing other than present moment awareness, or being aware of what is happening while it is happening. This mindful presence changes your behaviour and your attitude towards yourself and your children. It's a beautiful space to be in, and it takes practice, awareness and being intentional! My favourite way to bring myself and my kids into the moment is when we're outside. I might say, "Stop for a second. Feel the sun on your face. How does it feel?" Or upon hearing a



As with any new habit, it's the small steps we take each day that make a big difference over time.

bird I might say, "Do you hear that? Be still for a moment." Or I might stop what I'm doing and drop my nose to the ground to meet my little guy when he asks me to smell a flower, or feel the bark on a tree. Taking small mindful moments can make a powerful difference.

In my practice as a wellness coach working with women and children, I focus on nurturing children's authentic being by teaching them to hold positive beliefs in themselves and to know they are the one-and-only incredible them in the whole world. Through creative mindfulness I teach the power of positive thinking and self-empowerment that supports emotional well-being. Children and youth are given the space to be themselves, to create freely through art, and to connect with themselves through meditation. I teach that meditation is a natural state of mind; it enhances learning and memory, self-awareness, emotional balance, power of attention, creativity and, above all, a sense of inner peace. It makes children and youth better at being all the great things that they really are. It even helps us grown-ups feel this too!



You can incorporate elements of creative mindfulness into moments of connection with your child in an easy + fun, yet very powerful way. You and your child can use your imagination while creating a meditation of walking through a beautiful garden with the sun shining on you. You and your child can play with watercolour paints, mixing and experimenting, watching how the water moves the colours around and noticing how the

brush feels in your hands, and learn to be present in the moment. You can sit facing each other and begin deep breathing, inhaling through your nose and exhaling out your mouth. Imagine with each breath in, your breath changing colours and fading out as you exhale, only to change to a new colour with each new breath in. You can then both place your hands over your heart and take another deep breath, and say and feel, "I AM Loved." Repeat this until it fills both of you with love.



Closing Thoughts From the Author

I feel as though I could go on for days, months and even years sharing my thoughts, experiences and strategies that continuously develop over time. With new knowledge, and challenges that families present in sessions, my techniques and skills develop further. Some of you may be feeling like you want more, or that certain sections didn't have enough material because it didn't touch on your specific scenario. I could likely write a book solely dedicated to each section, and maybe one day I will. But my intention with this book was to capture the essence of what it means to be an emotionally attuned parent and the benefits of this connection with your child in helping to strengthen their resilience, along with fostering their internal coping skills. I hope that many of you will genuinely invest in a more attuned level of engagement with your child and adopt the ideals of the power of play. If you are able to successfully help your child through the tough stuff of life with the guidance of this book, then I have achieved what this book was set out to do. If you feel that you've learned your child needs extra support from a professional and you now have the know-how to reach out and seek the right resources, then that is a win too. Ultimately, I want to see future generations that aren't getting so bogged down with the difficulties they experienced in childhood, and connections between children and parents being strengthened.

CLOSING THOUGHTS FROM THE AUTHOR

If you would like to connect further for some guidance, resources or to engage in services for yourself and your family, you can find all you need on my website at www.briannasimonstherapeutic.com. Use this book as a reference at different times in your child's life, as a refresher when life gets too hectic and you need to be brought back and reconnect. Follow me on Instagram and Facebook for upcoming resources, workshops and family retreats! And give yourself a pat on the back for finishing this book! With how busy parenthood can be, finishing a book can be a feat in itself, and the fact that you stuck with it shows your dedication to helping your child with their overall well-being and success into adulthood.

You've got this!

—BriAnna



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Matt the Music Man (Matt McFarlane) is an award winning children's musical entertainer from Nova Scotia. He's also possibly the only musician around with a pirate hat and a platypus for a sidekick!

Growing up, Matt was very shy and was bullied at school. He spent much of his time having dreams about becoming a professional musician but his shyness and lack of self-confidence were too overwhelming. Today, Matt draws on these childhood experiences to inspire kids with his message of becoming self-confident and respecting everyone along the way.

After about 20 years of performing, Matt was inspired to become a children's musician upon the arrival of his first child. He has released two diverse all-original albums titled "Everyday Superheroes" (2017) and "Songs For Kids Age 1 to 101" (2014) and an EP titled "Family Fun!" (2018). He has performed many exciting shows across the Maritimes and beyond. Guitars, ukulele, banjo, harmonica, kazoo, and other instruments are played, and fun props such as costumes and puppets are used to create a fun, interactive and educational experience!

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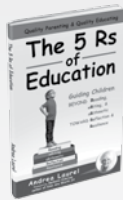
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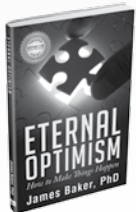
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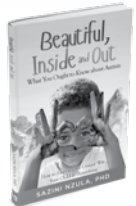
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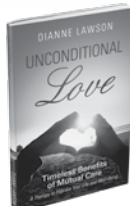
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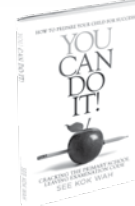
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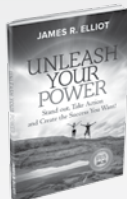


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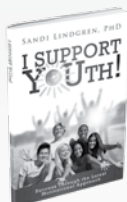
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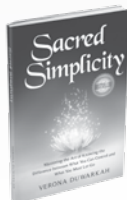
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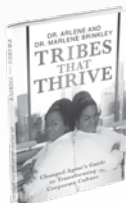
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