

# Introduction

## Why Making Sense Matters

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*To understand a child we have to watch him at play, study him in his different moods; we cannot project upon him our own prejudices, hopes and fears, or mould him to fit the pattern of our desires. If we are constantly judging the child according to our personal likes and dislikes, we are bound to create barriers and hindrances in our relationship with him and in his relationships with the world.*

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**A** NUMBER OF YEARS ago, I was invited to speak to a group of new parents on the subject of attachment and young children. The room at the community centre was crammed with mothers nursing their babies, rocking them to sleep, or changing their diapers. Car carriers, strollers, and baby bags were piled on top of each other, all with blankets bursting forth. Meredith, the coordinator of the weekly support group, invited the parents to sit on chairs arranged in a circle. She began her check-in with a warm welcome and asked everyone how they were managing. A number of parents replied that they were getting out of the house, some said they had managed to take a shower, and others replied that breastfeeding was going better. A tired-looking mother spoke up and said, “My baby cries every time I put her down. I nurse her until she falls asleep,

but as soon as I put her in the crib, she wakes up. I'm so exhausted." There were nods and sighs of agreement as Meredith responded, "Yes, it is hard. You just want some rest and they always seem to need you." More nods of agreement ensued as Meredith paused before continuing, "I imagine it is hard for your baby, too. They are transitioning from being inside you 24/7, feeling your warmth, hearing your heartbeat, to never being able to hold you close like that again." The room was silent for a moment and I found myself travelling back to when I first became a parent. I began to feel the mothers' apprehension, excitement, and exhaustion viscerally.

Meredith then formally welcomed me to the parent group and introduced me as someone she had invited to speak on the topic of attachment. She emphasized to the mothers the importance of human relationships and said this process of attachment was already unfolding between them and their babies. She had forewarned me that I would have 15 minutes to convey my message because of limited attention spans. I watched the mothers' tired and distracted faces as I spoke about what a good attachment looks like and how it serves development. The mothers were thoughtful and attentive, absorbing what they could while focusing on their babies' needs.

I stopped after 15 minutes and asked if there were any questions. A mother with a baby snuggled against her looked at me and said, "What should I do to discipline him?" I was taken aback—what had her baby done to require discipline? My face must have conveyed surprise because she quickly added, "What I mean is how do I discipline him when he is older?" The truth is her question was not unlike many I'd had as a new mother or that I routinely hear from parents. The questions usually start the same way: "What should I do when my child does \_\_\_\_\_?" "What should I do when my child doesn't listen?" "What should I do when they won't go to sleep?" "What should I do when they hit their brother or sister?" Yet as I looked at this room bursting with new life, I was unsettled by her question. There was something more critical that I longed to be asked. I

wanted her to ask me about the secrets for growth and the unlocking of human potential. I wanted to share with her the wonder of development and her role in it. Her question about discipline could be answered only by first considering how young children thrive and flourish. I wanted to take a step back from focusing on what to do in the moment and consider what she could do to create the conditions for healthy development. I wanted to focus on maturity as the ultimate answer to immaturity and how parenting is about patience, time, and good caretaking.

The message I wanted to convey isn't one new parents typically hear. I wanted to reveal that the secret to raising a child isn't about having all the answers but about *being* a child's answer. I wanted to share with them that parenting isn't something you can learn from a book, though books can help when you're trying to make sense of a child. I wanted to express that parenting isn't something you learn from your own parents, though great ones are wonderful templates. I wanted to reaffirm that caring for a child knows no gender, age, or ethnicity. I wanted to reassure them that their feelings of responsibility, guilt, alarm, and caring were the instinctive and emotional underpinnings of becoming the parent their child needs. I wanted to convey that what every child requires is a place of rest so that they can play and grow. This doesn't require perfection from a parent, or knowing what to do all the time. What it requires is a yearning to be their child's best bet and to work at creating the conditions to foster their growth.

### **Becoming a Child's Best Bet**

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YOUNG CHILDREN ARE some of the most loved people around, but they are also some of the most misunderstood. Their unique personalities can be challenging for adults, as they routinely defy logic and understanding. They can act brazen, noncompliant, and defiant one minute, only to turn around and light up a room with their

infectious giggles and joy. Given the unpredictable nature of young children, it is understandable why parents long for techniques and tools to deal with their immature behaviour. The problem is, instructions won't help a parent make sense of a child.

Becoming a child's best bet requires understanding them from the inside out. It requires insight, not skill. It is more about what we see when we look at our child than it is about what we do. It is about being able to hold on to the big developmental picture instead of getting lost in the details of daily living. Simply put, perspective is everything. If we see a young child as being in distress, we may seek to comfort them, but if we see a child as being manipulative, we may back away. If we see a young child as being defiant, we may move to punish them, but if we understand that children have instincts to resist, we can find a way through the impasse. If we see a young child as being too emotional, we may try to calm them down, but if we understand that strong emotions need to be expressed, we will help them learn a language of the heart. If we see a young child who cannot focus as having a disordered brain, we may medicate them, but if we see them as being immature, we may give them some time to grow up.

When we make sense of a child—when we start to understand the developmental reasons for their actions—their aggression can feel less personal, their opposition less provocative, and our focus can turn to creating the conditions that foster growth. It is hard to make headway with behaviour when we don't understand what is driving it, or when our own emotions cloud the picture. Charlie, a father of two young children, said, "I used to be the most laid-back person around. You could ask any of my friends and they'd say I was the most easygoing out of all of them. Now that I have children, I think I have an anger management problem." Similarly, Samantha, a mother of two young boys, wrote, "I have come to realize my kids aren't trying to grate on my single last nerve and I have started to enjoy them again." The bottom line is, our reactions to young

children are based upon what we see, which ultimately informs what we do. Most importantly, what we do informs our child about the type of care they can expect from us.

Young children represent immaturity at its best and illuminate the raw beginnings from which we grow. Although we may watch their immature ways in horror, we may also be filled with awe and wonder as human life renews itself again. The secret to unlocking the ancient patterns of human growth lies not in *what we do* to our young children but in *who we are* to them. Within our children is the promise of a mature future we play midwife to—and this is why making sense of them matters.

### **The Neufeld Approach**

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REST, PLAY, GROW is grounded in the integrated, attachment-based, and developmental approach to making sense of kids created by Gordon Neufeld. Neufeld is an internationally acclaimed and respected developmental psychologist whose work has been the creation of a coherent, cohesive, comprehensive theoretical model of human development. Neufeld has put the pieces of the developmental puzzle together based on more than 40 years of research, as well as practice. His theoretical model is drawn from many disciplines, including neuroscience, developmental psychology, attachment science, depth psychology, and cultural tradition. It provides a road map to understanding how human maturation unfolds from birth to adulthood as well as the failure to psychologically mature. Strategies for intervening with children are neither contrived nor divorced from natural development or human relationships. At the centre of the Neufeld approach is the primary developmental agenda of making sense of the conditions required for the realization of human potential. The goal is to put adults back into the driver's seat by making sense of a child from the inside out. In other words, a child's best bet is a parent who is the expert on that child.

My involvement with Gordon Neufeld began more than a decade ago, as a result of the many hats I wore: researcher, professor, counsellor, and, most importantly, parent. After decades of studying development, teaching students, and counselling clients, I encountered his work at a presentation on adolescence. Within the first hour, I was captivated by how he had made sense of my own adolescence and explained the behaviour of so many of the students I taught and counselled. His work became transformational in my understanding of human development, especially vulnerability, attachment, and maturation. I realized that my focus had become too narrow, as I considered behaviour without making sense of growth. I was working with people diagnosed with disorders without fully understanding human vulnerability. I was offering treatment and giving advice for problems I needed to make sense of at the root. I had become, without knowing it, lost in research results and practices divorced from insight, with no way to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Listening to Gordon Neufeld returned me to common sense and put insight at the fore again.

It was not long after this that I began immersing myself in earnest in the study of human maturation, attachment, and vulnerability through the Neufeld Institute. Two years later, I sat across from Gordon on his patio on a beautiful spring evening as he interviewed me for a postdoctoral internship with him. I had asked him prior to the meeting if there was anything I needed to do to prepare, and he'd told me, "No, what is needed is already inside of you. Just show up." His questions that evening were deceptively simple but sought understanding of why I wished to study with him. I told him the theory he had constructed had brought the human condition into focus for me; I was more effective as a counsellor in getting to root issues and in building relationships with students, and it had transformed my parenting. I told him I felt compelled to ensure that his work never got lost and that I wished to help parents and professionals make sense of kids. He obviously liked my answer because

I am still here more than ten years later, writing about all I have learned.

The theoretical content and images throughout *Rest, Play, Grow* are used with permission of Gordon Neufeld and are based on course material created by him. This material spans more than 14 courses offered through the Neufeld Institute, totalling over 100 hours of instruction. I am grateful for his permission to generously borrow and follow on his pioneering work as a theorist and teacher. For further information on the Neufeld Institute and its courses, please see the back of this book.

Although *Rest, Play, Grow* is based on Neufeld's theory, it is illustrated from my own experiences as a parent and professional. It is the book I wish I'd had when my children were younger, and the one I hope to give them when they become parents. It is based on stories about young children shared with me by parents, teachers, child care providers, Neufeld parent educators and faculty, and health care professionals, and on my own experiences as a mother. My approach as a researcher and writer has always been qualitative, bringing a phenomenon to life with rich examples to increase insight and understanding. I have shared the material on young children here through this lens to make it relevant to adults, to foster insight, and to help make sense of the child who is right in front of you. All of the identifying information has been changed, so any resemblance to real people is purely coincidental. The one exception is Gail's story in chapter 3. Gail was a cherished faculty member at the Neufeld Institute who loved to teach about play and young children.

### **What Does It Mean to Rest, Play, Grow?**

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THE PHRASE "Rest, Play, Grow" represents a developmental road map that paves the way for understanding how children reach their full human potential. This potential is not about academic achievements, social status or good behaviour, individual talents or gifts.

The developmental road map is about leading a child to maturity, to responsible citizenship, and to considering the world around them from multiple perspectives. It is a road map for growing a child into a separate, independent being who assumes responsibility for directing their own life and for the choices they make. It is about the unfolding of a child's potential as an adaptive being with the capacity to overcome adversity, persist in the face of difficulty, and become resilient. It is a road map to a child's potential as a social being who shares thoughts and feelings in a responsible way; develops impulse control, patience, and consideration; and considers the impact of who they are on others. It is a road map to guide what parents, teachers, child care providers, grandparents, aunts and uncles—any adult with a significant role—do so that a child can develop as a whole person. It lays out how an adult must **WORK** so that children can **REST**, so that they can **PLAY** and then **GROW**.

*Rest, Play, Grow* is meant to provide depth and breadth in understanding the young child while pointing to how adults create the conditions for healthy development. Although each chapter is distinct in focus, together they bring the young child into view and reveal how growth is the ultimate answer to underlying immaturity. *Rest, Play, Grow* discusses how play is critical to a child's development, how attachment provides the context in which to foster rest and raise a child, how emotions are the engine that drives growth, and how to deal with issues such as tears, tantrums, anxiety, separation, resistance, defiance, and, of course, discipline. The final chapter discusses how parents grow as a result of raising a child; I hope it alleviates concerns that you have to be fully mature before you become a parent.

This book is not about tips, techniques, mantras, instructions, or directions, though strategies are provided to help parents find their own way based on personal insight. It reaffirms parenting intuition and common sense, and brings comfort that you are not the only person who is baffled by your young child. It offers clarity



where there is confusion, perspective where there is frustration, and patience knowing there is a natural developmental plan to grow a young child up. It is a book about taking care of young children as they are—egocentric, impulsive, inconsiderate, delightful, curious, joyful. It is about realizing that their immaturity isn't a mistake but the humble beginning from which we all start. *Rest, Play, Grow* is about using insight to make sense of a child, having confidence in what you see, and having faith to take care of them from that place inside of you. Although this book is a road map for parents who want to be their child's best bet, it is also what every young child wishes their adults understood about them.