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Keys to Well-Being in Children and Youth

by Gordon Neufeld, Ph.D.



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*For more information about Dr. Neufeld and his work, consult the Neufeld Institute website:
www.NeufeldInstitute.org*

THE KEYS TO WELL-BEING IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH: *why children need to be raised by their families which, in turn, need to be supported by society and the state*

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A note about the author and his presentation

Dr. Gordon Neufeld has spent his professional career teaching and theorizing as a developmental scientist in the university setting as well as practicing as a clinical psychologist. His attachment-based developmental approach is articulated in over twenty courses he has created for parents, educators and helping professionals. These courses are available in online format through the Neufeld Institute. His book 'Hold On To Your Kids' is directed primarily to parents but does contain references to the scientific literature for serious students. His book is now available in fifteen languages. As a leading interpreter of the developmental paradigm, we invited Dr. Neufeld to address us on the subject of the well-being of children and youth. We have included some of his slides in this transcription of his address. We invite you to consult the Neufeld Institute website for more information about him, his work and his courses.

I am most pleased to have this opportunity to share with you the culmination of my life's work - making sense of children. For some reason - whether it be healthy or neurotic I do not know - I have been moved to assemble all the puzzle pieces of child development until a consistent and coherent picture emerged regarding the unfolding of human potential. The puzzle pieces come from a great many places: developmental theory, scientific research including the field of neuroscience, professional practice as a clinical psychologist, as well as the myriad of observations that come from years of being a parent of five children and a grandparent to five. I will not be making specific references to the individual dots that have been used in creating this model, but rather attempt to provide an overview of the picture that emerges when all the dots are joined. The exercise has been one of personal synthesis and distillation. The dots come from science and professional observation; the synthesis is my own.

A model or theory cannot be proved, only disproved. My challenge has been to create a model of human development that has the power to explain, has clear implications for practice, can be applied across settings, and is consonant with research findings. To the degree that this model is true, it holds the keys for the well-being of children and youth, and by extension, the well-being of a society. This, I have been given to understand, is our common purpose here today and the reason I have been invited to give this address.

From a developmental perspective, well-being is best defined as the degree to which human potential is fully realized.

We must start by defining the well-being of children and youth. There are many angles from which we could approach this from. From a developmental perspective¹, the unfolding of human potential is of utmost concern. As a developmentalist, I begin with the assumption that every child has the potential to become fully human and humane, but not every person comes to realize this potential. In other words, the unfolding of human potential is spontaneous but not inevitable. This undoubtedly is the essence of the human condition, so to speak, that we all grow older but we don't all grow up. ***To truly 'raise' a child, then, would be to bring that child to his or her full potential as a human being.*** I am not referring to individual potential but rather human potential - that which we share in common as homo sapiens. This definition of well-being must also be differentiated from societal or economic success.

What does it mean to be realize our full human potential?

In putting the puzzle pieces together, three basic themes emerge. Firstly, every single child is born with the potential to become a separate being: able to think for himself, function independently, differentiate himself from all others. This is the fundamental yearning of development whether it be of a cell, an organ, a hemisphere of the

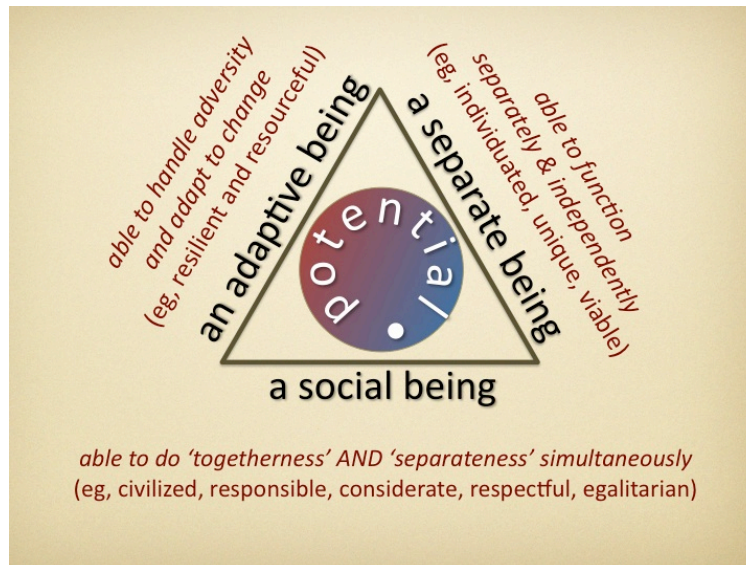


Figure 1 Overview of our potentials as human beings

¹ The term 'developmental' is unfortunately used in many different ways. By 'developmentalist', I am not referring here to those who work with children or have theories about children or do research on children, but rather those theorists, researchers and practitioners who start with the assumption of the spontaneous unfolding of human potential. Sadly, at least from my point of view, most of those called developmental psychologists these days, at least in North America, are no longer developmentalists by this definition.

brain, the fetus. This is also true across all domains of development: biological, physical, emotional, psychological. Every child has the potential to stand on his own two feet, have his own boundaries, make his own decisions. But not all children and not all adults come to realize this potential.

Secondly, every single child is born with the ability to adapt to circumstances that are beyond their control; to be deeply transformed by that which they cannot change. Adaptability is an essential part of our human nature. But once again, it is not inevitable. Children and adults vary tremendously in the realization of this very basic human capacity.

Thirdly, every child possesses the potential to become truly social, capable of seeking togetherness while maintaining a sense of separateness, at least to some degree. Our social potential as humans is for much more than simply being together or getting along with each other. We can be nice to each other for quite neurotic reasons, sacrificing our integrity out of a fear of upset or out of our need to impress or to be liked. Our potential, however, is to experience togetherness without a loss of separateness, and conversely, our separateness without a loss of togetherness. An example would be to have integrity without a loss of diplomacy or to be diplomatic without losing one's integrity. This is no mean feat and takes years to develop. Consider, for example, how hard this kind of maturity is to achieve in marriage. Children and adults vary tremendously in how much they have come to realize this integrative capacity.

We should all want our children to become viable as separate beings, capable of adapting to circumstances they cannot change, and considerate of others without losing themselves. This is the essence of developmental well-being. Can you imagine a society characterized by such people?

How do children come to realize their full human potential?

Given that this is our human potential and is the developmental objective in the raising of our children, how is this to be realized? I can't think of a more pertinent question for us to answer in today's society. This question has been on the minds of developmentalists for generations and certain conclusions are emerging. We certainly know that the realization of human potential is not automatic. It is not a matter of age-and-stage as we once thought. We also know that we cannot blame genetics when potential is not realized. We are truly all equal in our potential to become fully human and humane. We also know that we cannot command growth, in others or even in ourselves. Telling our spouses or our children to grow up, although tempting, never works. Wishing for maturity or even willing it, does not make it come true.

So what then is the answer to the unfolding of human potential? Those

uninformed by developmental processes assume that children must learn to become truly human and humane. They must learn to become separate, to become independent, to form boundaries, to adapt to circumstances, to become resilient, to get along, to become considerate. In short, children must learn to become mature. If this was true, intelligence would certainly be the major prerequisite for the unfolding of human potential and school would be the venue where human potential would unfold. We all know very bright people, however, who have never grown up. And research in the United States finds home-educated children demonstrating significantly more maturity than children receiving their education in school.²

When all the dots are joined, the answer to the unfolding of human potential is in the process of maturation itself. The surprise however is that there is not just one maturation process, but rather there are three distinct processes corresponding to the three human potentials. These natural growth processes have been discovered and rediscovered and rediscovered again, by many developmental theorists over the years and now yet again by today's neuroscientists. This has led to a mass confusion of terms with a plethora of esoteric names and labels. I have come to see my role as mastering these esoteric languages and hopefully replacing them with a language that is closer to human intuition. Good science should always resonate with inner intuition, but before it can do that, the language has to be accessible.

So what are these three maturing processes that are responsible for the spontaneous unfolding of human potential?

The most well-known of these processes is the emergent process, also known as the separation process, the differentiation process, the individuation process, or the actualization process. When there

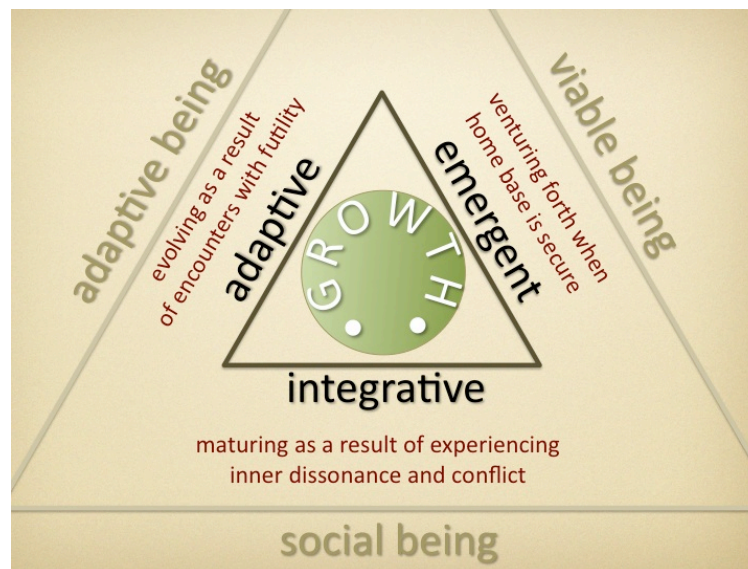


Figure 2 The three maturing processes involved in the unfolding of our human potential

² This was the conclusion of various reviews of home-schooling studies, including an extensive one by The Peabody Journal of Education, Volume 74, April, 2000 as well as by Patrick Basham of the Cato Institute of Washington, D.C.

is some release in a child from the pursuit and preservation of proximity or togetherness, there is a venturing forth kind of energy that springs forth, manifesting itself in the spontaneous forming of separate boundaries, a quest for independence, a predisposition to explore the world outside of his attachments. This shift in energy is more likely to come once a child's emotional home base has been securely established. The process is deeply emotional, not rational or even volitional. In other words, the child must have the right feelings for Nature to have its way with the child.

The second of the trilogy of maturing processes drives human adaptation. This too is a deeply emotional process, requiring the right kind of feelings to get the right kind of results. The key to this process lies in what happens when a child encounters futility, that is, something outside the child's control. There are dozens of these kind of experiences everyday in a young child's life, the most common being a parent's 'no'. Other everyday experiences of futility include not getting one's way, not being best at everything, not being first all the time, not being able to possess mommy for oneself. If everything unfolds as it should, the futility that is encountered will be felt deep within the limbic system, the emotional part of the brain. As futility registers emotionally, the energy being directed toward changing things or making things work comes to rest. In emotional and physiological terms, the automatic nervous system shifts from trying to make things work (via the sympathetic nervous system) to letting go (via the parasympathetic nervous system). In the wake of these experiences, resilience grows and adaptability increases.

Encounters with futility should be highly moving experiences emotionally, ultimately leading to our own transformation when we cannot change the circumstances that frustrate us. The body language of felt futility in a young child is tears of futility. How this works is rather remarkable.³ When futility is felt, the limbic system sends signals to the lacrimal glands, making the eyes water. There are other reasons for crying of course, including onions, pain and upset. The tears of futility however are rather distinctive in their chemical composition, occurring as we come to rest from trying to make things work that won't. There is always an associated letting go that is required before the brain discovers that one has survived not getting one's way. Of course the big futilities in life usually require many tears for adaptation to occur. These include the loss of a loved one, the inescapability of death, the irreversibility of time. The Greeks referred to these futilities as tragedies and created plays to draw the tears out, believing that this was key to a civilized society. In traditional societies, tears were always a part of parenting. I am sure our predecessors were not satisfied that the encounter with futility was truly over without some evidence that the tears of futility were

³ The discovery of the role of tears in human adaptation is chronicled in A. Vingerhoets' book "Why only humans weep: unravelling the mystery of tears" as well as William Frey's "Crying: the mystery of tears".

forthcoming. We have lost the wisdom of tears and with it our capacity to adapt to that which is out of our control. Too many parents today are afraid to upset their children, afraid to say 'no'. They are failing to act as agents of futility or agents of comfort, and are no longer realizing that children need to have their sadness about the things that are outside of their control. As a result, we are giving rise to a generation of children who are entitled or spoiled, who have to get their own way, who cannot adapt to their circumstances. In keeping with this, we find that the most common syndromes children are diagnosed with today are tearless syndromes. The tearlessness isn't the cause of the root problem, but it certainly interferes with the brain's ability to find a work-around for the deficit or dysfunction. What is lacking is brain plasticity: the adaptive process. These children are not coming to realize their full potential as human beings.

The third maturing process is called integration, the catalyst for which is the experience of inner conflict. This understanding has a very rich history in developmental science, including the likes of Freud, Erickson, Jung and Piaget. Piaget discovered that young children lacked the capacity for cognitive dissonance and that the experience of conflicting ideas and thoughts was the motor for the unfolding of intellectual development. Conflicting signals are key to developing depth and perspective in many arenas of growth, including vision, muscle tone, sensory integration, problem solving, brain hemispheres, and so on. We have found the role of conflict to be absolutely pivotal in emotional development, the current subject of interest in neuroscience. Before the age of five, children are only capable of experiencing one feeling at a time. They have no 'on-the-other-hand' experiences and seldom are given to 'part-of-me-feels-this-and-part-of-me-feels-that' kind of statements. If developmental conditions are conducive, mixed feelings begin between the ages of 5 to 7 and have a remarkable civilizing effect on the child. The part of the brain responsible for mixing the emotions is the prefrontal cortex. If conditions are not conducive to healthy development, the child remains impulsive and inconsiderate, lacking self-control. The tragedy is that there are so many adults in our society who lack mixed feelings, who are devoid of inner conflict. They have failed to realize their potential as human beings.

These three maturing processes are all spontaneous but none are inevitable. Conditions need to be conducive in order for these processes to unfold. To repeat, development is not a matter of age-and-stage. In fact, there are many adults who will never show much evidence of true maturation, especially on an emotional or psychological level.

The fruit of the maturing processes

The maturing processes bear fruit in abundance - personality attributes that we would all love to be characterized by. No child is born with these attributes; nor

can these characteristics be trained into a child.

The ultimate outcome of the emergent process is viability as a separate being, the capacity to fully function outside of attachments. Children who are emerging as separate beings also are full of vitality, interests, curiosity and a venturing forth kind of energy. Such children are rarely bored. The fact that boredom seems to be escalating among our children and youth is indicative of the lack of this emergent energy. Also troubling is the fact that there are more children showing curiosity in the first grades of school than the latter grades, yet the curricula of today's educational systems assume that all children are curious.

Included in the characteristics of emergent children are a sense of agency and responsibility, a quest for independence, and ultimately a relationship with one's self. These fruits cannot be commanded from the outside. Nor are they a result of training. Should

one attempt to reinforce curiosity for example, it actually undermines it. When these fruit are missing, it is indicative of developmental stuckness in a child.

The fruit of the adaptive process includes resilience and resourcefulness as well as the ability

to recover from trauma. To truly adapt is to be changed for the better as a result of adversity. Once again, children are not born with these attributes. What they are born with is the potential to become changed by that which is out of their control. Adaptation is a journey of tears, at least on the inside, involving feelings of sadness and disappointment. If children should lose their tears of futility or lack a safe place to shed their tears, they get stuck, and fail to adapt to circumstances that are out of their control. I have worked with many such children, adolescents and adults.

The fruit of the integrative process are also highly valued in our society. The attributes deriving from this maturation process include being well-tempered,

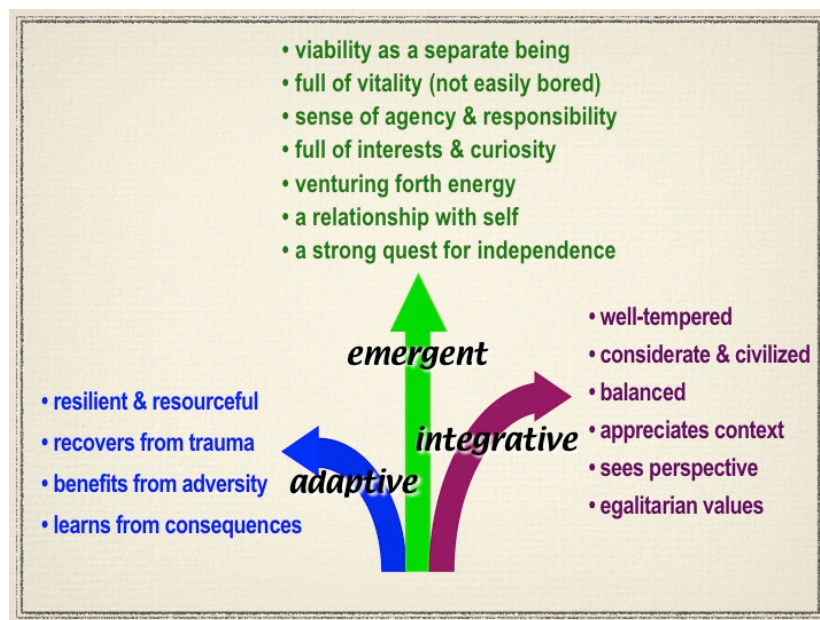


Figure 4 The fruit of the maturing processes

considerate, civilized and balanced. Other characteristics include the ability to appreciate context and see perspective and the predisposition towards egalitarian values. Once again, no child is born with these attributes and school cannot produce these traits. The fruit of integration take years to grow and the conditions must be conducive to get results. Unfortunately there are many adults in our society who lack these attributes.

To reiterate then, it is true maturation, NOT schooling, learning or genetics that is key to becoming fully human and humane.

Unfortunately immaturity is epidemic in our society. Imagine what our society would look like if a significant proportion of the population demonstrated a modicum of maturity. So why do some people mature while others remain stuck in immaturity? Childhood is the stage of life during which most of our growing up should be accomplished. What are prerequisite experiences required in order for children to come to their full human potential?

WHAT CHILDREN NEED TO TRULY MATURE

No question could be more important for the raising of our children and the future well-being of our society. In putting the pieces of the puzzle together, four experiences emerge as key to maturation. I will devote most of my time to discussing the first prerequisite as it is foundational to the other three.

1) For maturation to result, children need to ATTACH deeply to the adult(s) responsible for the them

The foundational prerequisite has to do with the preeminent need of children - a sense of contact and connection with those responsible for them. The first agenda of development is not growth but creating a context of connection in which the child can be taken care of.

a) to find the NURTURANCE required to support growth

The child's attachments however serve a second purpose as well. They create an external womb within which growth and maturation can take place. To use a plant analogy, before growth can happen and fruitfulness take place, the plant needs to be well-rooted in order to glean the nurturance from the soil. What do these attachment roots look like in a child? I have spent my professional life putting these puzzle pieces together and am pleased to share with you the picture that has emerged for me.

The most significant discovery regarding human attachment is that the capacity for relationship takes years to unfold and goes through about six stages before reaching its full potential. If conditions are conducive, a different way of holding on should develop in each of the first six years of life. I have found however, that it is never too late for the capacity for relationship to develop. The early

attachment theories of Bowlby, Lorenz and Harlow missed this depth aspect of attachment as their theories were based primarily on observations of mammals and birds and babies.

I shall use a plant analogy to describe how the capacity for relationship develops in a child. Like plants, what we are typically more aware of is the maturation aspect of things as outlined above. The attachment roots are hidden from view or from our consciousness at least. As a result, we tend to lack words to describe attachment. My book - *Hold On To Your Kids* - is currently translated into 15 languages and in each language there is a challenge to find the words to describe attachment phenomena. The wisdom of attachment historically has been embedded in rituals and customs but when our culture comes undone, we can only find our way back through words and consciousness. I believe this is the challenge of science today - to find the words that both reflect reality and resonate with our inner intuition.

Like most plants, humans can have multiple ways of taking root or holding on. The deeper the attachment roots, the more capable they are of gleaning the kind of nurturance required for growth and maturation.

The first stage of attachment is all about the senses. The child seeks to be WITH those attached to: to be in touch, to be in sight, to be in hearing, to be in smell.

This kind of contact is foundational to all attachment but is particularly urgent when other ways of preserving connection have not yet been developed. The fundamental human problem, when viewed from the perspective of attachment, is *how to hold on when apart* (i.e., how to preserve a sense of connection when apart from one's attachments).

Today's digital

devices have become so popular because they provide an instant answer to this basic human problem of physical separation. The digital answer is not Nature's

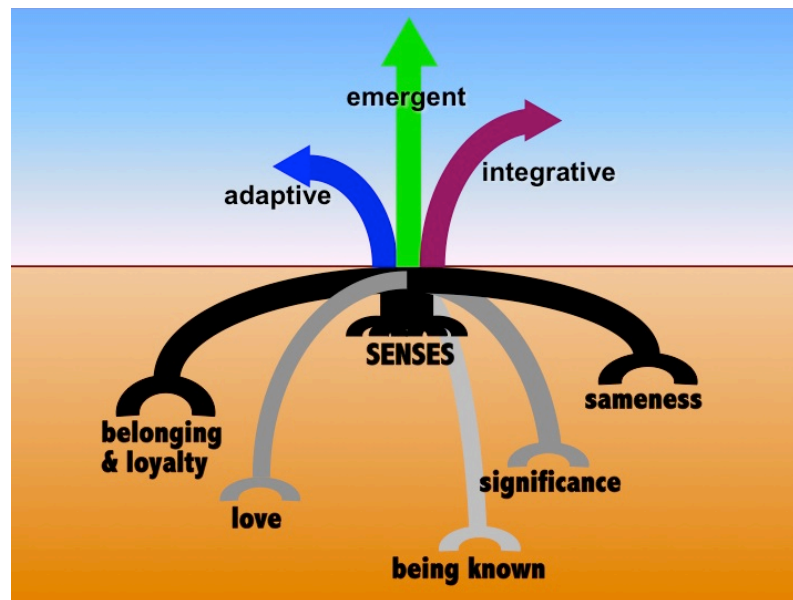


Figure 5 Neufeld's six stages of attachment

answer however, and in extending our reach, we run the risk of thwarting the true solution to this human dilemma - a fully developed capacity for relationship. Research is pouring in that not only finds digital intimacy empty of nurturance but also having the effect of preempting and preventing deeper human connection.

A second problem with digital intimacy is that it pulls children out of orbit from around the adults in their lives, replacing these adults with their peers. The phenomenon of peer orientation actually predated the digital revolution, setting the stage for digital devices to become as ubiquitous as they now are. When children are peer oriented, they prefer to be with their peers rather than with the adults responsible for them. Although peer orientation is now rather typical in our society, this aberrant attachment phenomenon completely interferes with the conditions required for human growth and development, leading to massive developmental arrest. This is exactly what our research is finding - many of today's children and adolescents are not growing up as they get older. The epidemic of immaturity is escalating.

Children now seek to imitate, to emulate, to take on the same form as those to whom they are attached. A toddler interprets closeness now as being LIKE, not just being with. This dynamic allows us to stamp our own form on our children without even trying. This is also the key to language acquisition. Very simply, as do all creatures, we make sounds like those to whom we are attached. This very simple understanding, far more generally known, would revolutionize our educational systems. It is widely understood that we are losing the war on illiteracy. The adolescents of today have a poorer vocabulary than the adolescents of yesteryear. When we look through the lens of attachment the reason becomes obvious - today's adolescents are more likely than previous generations to be attached to their peers rather than to the adults in their lives. They are not only talking like each other but also looking like each other, dressing like each other, and walking like each other. The secret to literacy then would be simple and powerful: cultivate working attachments between students and their teachers. For example, when I was involved in a cultural restoration project with one of our Canadian aboriginal peoples, the Haida, to resurrect their language, we developed a program that attached the children to the elders who still spoke their tongue. The language recovered spontaneously.

If attachment bears fruit at all, the toddler will begin to sense his differentness. Nature now has to find another way of holding on when physically apart from his attachment figures and when feeling different from them. Ideally, by the third year of life a child begins to interpret closeness as belonging, or being part of another or a group. As soon as this happens, usually another avenue of connection reveals itself as well. To be close to is to be on the same side as. So youngsters are inclined to take the side of those to whom they are attached: to agree with, to stand up for, to serve and obey. These are instincts of loyalty in our children and

without them we could not do our job as parents and teachers. No matter how skilled and informed we might be, we still need the child's deepening attachment to us to empower us to take care of them.

If all goes well with the foundations of attachment, a fourth way of preserving a connection unfolds in about the fourth year of life. At this time, it should occur to the child that mommy and daddy hold close that which they hold dear. In response, the child begins to try to be dear, to be special, to matter, to be significant, to those to whom he is attached. I have this root coloured grey (in the illustration) because it is more tentative, more vulnerable, more susceptible to injury. Attachment always sets us up for getting wounded, but when we want to matter to someone, we get deeply hurt by any sign that we don't matter. If attaching deeply is not safe, the attachment roots stay superficial. The cost however is less ability to hold on and less ability to glean the nurturance required for growth and well-being.

If all unfolds as it should and the relationship can deepen without too much wounding, a remarkable phenomenon unfolds in about the fifth year of life. Of course, if the capacity for relationship is not developing properly, this can be delayed significantly or sadly never take place. The limbic system - the emotional brain - pulls out all its stops so to speak, pushing the child to the very limits of emotional vulnerability. Very simply, the child begins to give his heart to those to whom he is attached. We call this emotional intimacy. Sadly, there are many adults who have not become capable of this depth in relationship. Having the hearts of our children enables them to preserve a sense of closeness with us when other ways may fail. This is also true in our marriages and our friendships. This emotional intimacy greatly increases our reach, enabling us to hold on with each other when far apart in many different ways. Unlike digital intimacy, however, this answer takes conducive conditions and years to unfold.

When children become emotionally attached, they may express the desire to marry the parent. Not armed with the insights of attachment, Freud interpreted this phenomenon sexually and called it the Oedipal and Electra complex. Wanting to marry us is no more and no less than children wanting to hold on to us forever, the same reason we marry each other. It is a matter of attachment and holding on.

I am convinced that we were never meant to deal with children whose hearts we did not have. This quest for attaching through the heart not only creates for the child the potential for deep nurturance, it provides for us as adults a context to raise them to their full potential. This is even true in the school system. As parents we wait with bated breath during the first couple of weeks in the school year to find out whether our child likes the teacher and thinks the teacher likes him or her. This intuitive understanding is reflected in the research, namely that

the student-teacher relationship is the single most important factor determining a student's performance and behaviour. This simple truth, if taken to heart, would transform our approach to education.

When the school system was still inside a child's village of attachment, this pivotal student-teacher relationship was cultivated by the rituals and customs in society. Educators did not need to know the secret of their success because, for the most part, culture took care of the attachment factor. Unfortunately during the last couple of generations, our schools have drifted outside of the student's village of attachment, with disastrous consequences to the learning equation. The primary issue in education has always been the degree to which our teaching results in a child's learning. Despite significant advances in curricula, pedagogy and technology, less and less of our teaching is resulting in our students' learning. What is to blame is the loss of student-teacher relationships. Simply put, teachers need to have the hearts of their students to have access to their minds.

Once a child has given his heart to those who care for him, it should follow that he would want to share all that is within his heart with them as well. If all unfolds as it should, a child will seek to be known and understood by those to whom he is attached. Prior to this, if the attachment has been at all fruitful, the child will have formed a sense of self and an inner world of experience that feels hidden from view - a secret self as it were. This natural human development results in a deep sense of separateness and isolation. To feel close for such a child is to not be a secret to one's loved ones, nor to possess any secrets that would divide. We call this psychological intimacy - a powerful sense of closeness and connection that comes from feeling truly known. A child now can be deeply nurtured as well as having an ultimate way of holding on when all else fails. This way of attaching also takes care of sneakiness in children, enabling the adults in charge to better take care of them. Too many children today are an enigma to their parents. Unable to read their children, these adults have taken to reading parenting books. Unfortunately, the secrets of parenting are rarely revealed in books.

To summarize, children were meant to fall into attachment with the adults responsible for them. This not only preserves a vital sense of connection for the child but also creates the psychological umbilical cord through which we can nurture our children and the psychological womb in which to raise them. Although the well-being of children and society depends upon the degree to which maturation is happening in a society, attachment is the prerequisite for maturation and therefore must be the utmost priority and preeminent concern of a successful society.

b) to render children receptive to being taken care of, managed and taught.

A second reason children need to become deeply attached to the adults

responsible for them is to render the children receptive to being taken care of, managed and taught. Children do not come into this world universally receptive to being taken care of. In fact, just the opposite is true. When children are not attached to the adults attempting to raise them, two defensive instincts are provoked in the child. The first is shyness. It is important to note that children are never shy with those to whom they are attached. Children only shy away from contact and closeness with those outside of their village of attachments or when their attachment instincts are not engaged. To be shy is to reserve one's eyes, one's words and one's friendliness for those to whom one is attached. To put it another way, when one is shy, it doesn't feel right to make eye contact with, make conversation with, or even get along with, those to whom one is not attached. We have been dreadfully mistaken to think that there was something wrong with this dynamic or with children who exhibit shyness. In the United States in fact, shyness has been pathologized as social anxiety disorder.

When viewed through the lens of attachment, shyness makes perfect sense. Shyness is meant to keep children inside their village of attachment until they are developmentally ready to be dealt with outside of their attachments. This protective shyness response begins in the wake of stranger protest, usually manifesting itself about 5-6 months of age. Nature is saying, in effect, that once a child's working attachments have formed, it is now the time to go for depth in the attachment and only add new attachments through the child's existing attachments. This is how the village of attachment should ideally be formed, naturally protecting a child from forming competing attachments that could pull the child out of orbit from around his first attachments. Understanding this dynamic would provide the key to forming new attachments with those who are shy - making friendly contact first of all with an existing attachment of the child's in order to open the child up to forming the new attachment. The attachment rituals in our society that are consistent with this are 'introductions' and 'matchmaking'. If we honoured attachment, we would not attempt to work with a child unless the child had attached to us. If we honoured shyness, we would not attempt to cultivate working relationships with children without piggybacking on their existing attachments. Shy children were never meant to function outside of their village of attachment. Early research with shyness and intelligence revealed that shy children scored significantly less when tested by adults they were not attached to. Once again, the importance of working attachments to the raising of children would revolutionize our educational systems and our day-care system, contributing to the well-being of our children as well as of our society.

The second impediment to working with children outside of their attachments involves a powerful dynamic that has no name. The instinctive reaction is deceptively simple: children are allergic to coercion when their attachment instincts are not engaged. A Viennese theorist, Otto Rank, created a word for this dynamic in the German language. Translated into English, the word is

counterwill. Given that the greatest force impinging upon children is the will of the adults responsible for the child, the term *counterwill* fits perfectly as a label for this dynamic. When viewed through the lens of attachment, the purpose of this defensive reaction becomes obvious.

Counterwill is meant to protect our children from outside influence and direction. As creatures of attachment, children were never meant to be influenced, directed, taught or managed when their attachment instincts were not engaged. The problem in our society is that

children and adolescents are less and less attached to the adults responsible for them, including their teachers, step-parents, care-givers, grandparents, and even their own parents.

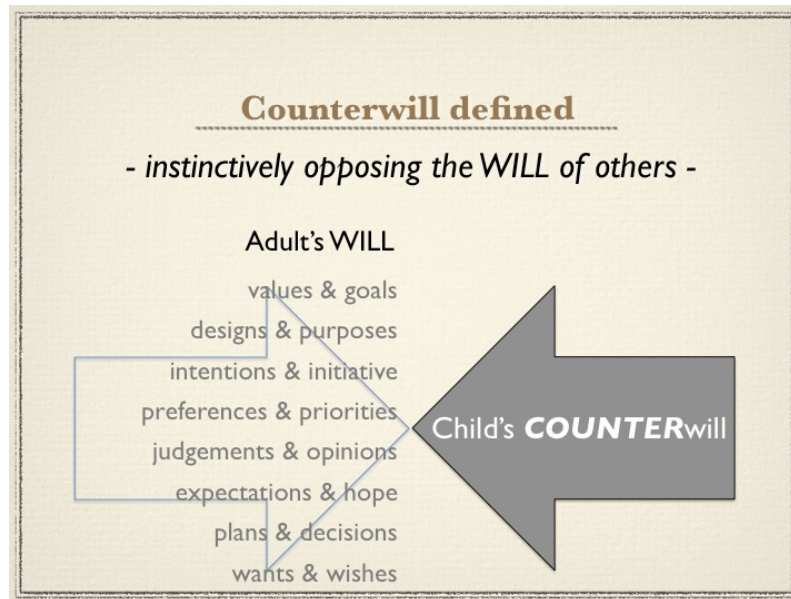


Figure 6 The counterwill instinct

Our educational system and day-care systems, having drifted outside our childrens' villages of attachment, are being crippled by the protective attachment instincts of shyness and counterwill. In ignorance of these dynamics, today's parents and teachers as well as policy makers think that the answer to dealing with children lies in training. We couldn't be more mistaken. Only children's attachments render them receptive to being raised. The well-being of children and society depends upon our ability to support these working attachments.

c) to evoke within the child the desire to be good

The third reason for being deeply attached has to do with the motivation to be good for those responsible for one. The desire to be good is a powerful motivation for behaviour and not to be taken for granted. Long gone are the days when we thought children were inherently evil or alternatively, inherently good. The fact of the matter is that like all creatures of attachment, children are only moved to be good for those to whom they are attached. Further, if counterwill is strong, they can even feel inclined to be bad.

I can't think of a greater concern among today's parents or teachers, then

children being good, regardless of the euphemisms we tend to use for this outcome including 'well-behaved', 'compliant', 'cooperative', 'responsible' and 'acceptable'. This question has been the most common presenting problem over my 45 years of consulting with parents and teachers. My response has usually been something to the effect of "Do you sense within your child/student the desire to be good for you?". This response usually takes the adult by surprise and after some reflection, the answers are often sadly indicative of the state of the relationship. Children only feel like being good when their attachment instincts are engaged. The deeper the relationship, the

more multi-faceted this drive. The impulse to be good isn't always enough to get the desired behaviour, but on the other hand, without this motivation, there isn't much of a chance. And when a child does desire to be good for us, there is little need for contrived tricks such as bribes and sanctions to make them behave. This kind of coercion not only insults any relationship that does exist but also undermines the child's natural desire to measure up to the expectations of those to whom they are attached. When children fail to attach, or fall out of attachment with the adults responsible for them, there is nothing to move them to do our bidding. To bring out the best in our children, we must support their working attachments to the adults responsible for them.



Figure 7 Human instinct to be good as a fruit of attachment

more multi-faceted this drive. The impulse to be good isn't always enough to get the desired behaviour, but on the other hand, without this motivation, there isn't much of a chance. And when a child does desire to be good for us, there is little need for contrived tricks such as bribes and sanctions to make them behave. This kind of coercion not only insults any relationship that does exist but also undermines the child's natural desire to measure up to the expectations of those to whom they are attached. When children fail to attach, or fall out of attachment with the adults responsible for them, there is nothing to move them to do our bidding. To bring out the best in our children, we must support their working attachments to the adults responsible for them.

d) to prevent the problems that arise from facing separation

There is still another reason a child needs to become deeply attached to the adults responsible for him or her. Nothing affects children more than facing separation from their attachment figures. The separation they face can be physical, emotional or psychological. When children are unable to preserve the connection with their attachment figures, stress hormones are released and powerful emotions are evoked in an attempt to fix the separation problem. Feelings of alarm attempt to move the child to caution. Feelings of pursuit create the impetus to close the gap they are experiencing. Feelings of frustration move

the child to effect change. If these emotions cannot fix the problem of separation, defenses are evoked in the brain to protect against a separation that is too much to bear. The primary defense is a flight from vulnerability, resulting in the loss of tender feelings. Some children respond by becoming more dominating as it is less vulnerable to dominate than to depend. A frequent response to facing too much separation is to transfer the attachment to others or to things. Peer orientation is one of the most devastating attachment phenomena of our day and is the subject of my book - *HOLD ON TO YOUR KIDS*. I have described this phenomenon briefly earlier in this address.

The resulting separation complex underlies most troubling behaviour in children. The problem is that even in our most advanced societies today, children are facing more separation than ever before, leading to an escalation of these common childhood concerns. Aggression and suicide among children have been escalating in the last fifty years. Problems rooted in alarm such as anxiety, agitation and adrenalin-seeking behaviour, are becoming common place among children. Pursuit addictions, like making digital contact, are increasing among the digitally connected. If these problems are any indication of the well-being of children, we are not making progress. Sadly, we are losing ground. To reverse this trend, we would need to support children's attachments to the adults responsible for them.

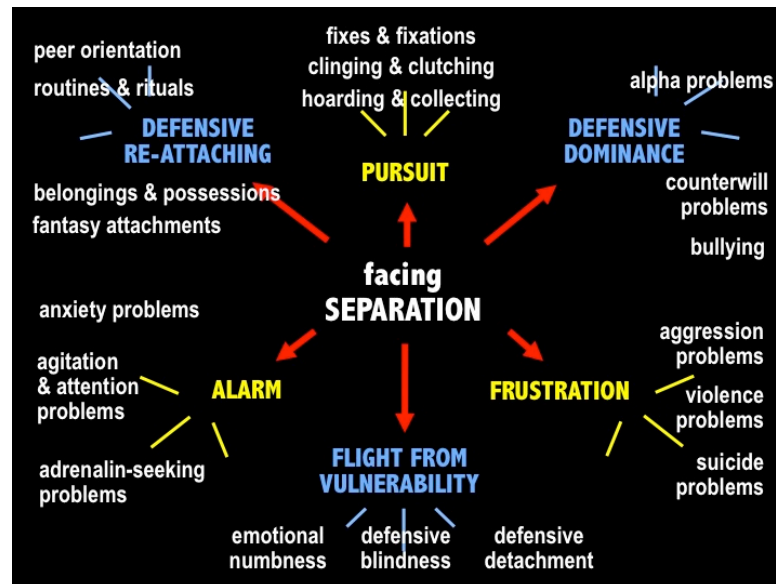


Figure 8 Overview of the impact of facing separation on troubling behaviour

To summarize, for their well-being and the well-being of society, children need to attach deeply to the adults responsible for them. They need to do this to find the nurturance required to support true growth and maturation. They need to do this to reverse crippling shyness and neutralize instinctive counterwill. They need to do this to feel like being good. They need to do this to reduce the separation they face. Like plants, children can never be too attached. Like plants, our children can be too superficially attached or too insecurely attached. The answer to

development is always more attachment, not less. This is even true in adolescence. The deeper the attachment, the more room for personhood, individuality and independence. It is only at the superficial levels of attachment that being attached and becoming one's own person are in conflict.

2) For maturation to result, children need to find REST from the work of attachment.

A child needs to find some rest from the relentless pursuit and preservation of proximity, in order for growth and maturation to result. Attachment, as the preeminent need of children, always takes first priority in the brain.

As paradoxical as it may seem, all growth emanates from a place of rest, even physical growth. As mentioned earlier, our autonomic nervous system is roughly divided into two parts: one associated with work (the sympathetic nervous system) and the other associated with rest (the parasympathetic nervous system). Developmental headway is made when in a state of psychological rest: memory is consolidated, learning is solidified, problem solving networks in the brain are formed, venturing forth takes place, recovery systems are activated.

Since attachments are what most need to work for a child, pursuing and preserving contact can easily preoccupy a child. Our challenge as adults is to do the work of attachment so our children can be released from this preoccupation. It is not enough for a child to seek sameness, belonging, significance, love or being known. They need to find what they are seeking for and find it in abundance. Like food, they must be able to take it for granted before they can be released from the pursuit. Our children must have confidence that we are the answer to their attachment needs. In order to find rest, they cannot be working for our love or our approval. To find rest, they must not have to measure up to find significance. To keep us close, they must not think that they have to be good.

What does it mean for adults to do the work of attachment? It certainly involves taking responsibility for the relationship with our children and for preserving a sense of connection. We must aim to fulfill their attachment hunger, including their appetites for sameness, belonging, significance and emotional warmth. As we do with food, we must provide more than they seek in order to release them from their pursuit. In short, we must convey to our children an invitation to exist in our presence that is free of conditions. This is no easy task. It seems that many of today's parents have lost the confidence to present themselves as the answer to their child's attachment needs. Yet this is the only way a child can find the rest required for growth to result. There is no other pathway to the well-being of children and the state.

Before rest is even a possibility, children must first be attached to the adults

responsible for them. Providing rest is the work of family and families are in dire need of support from the state to enable them to do this work.

3) For maturation to result, children need to PLAY.

Children need to play in order to mature. Up until recently, many have regarded play as meaningless, unproductive and even frivolous. Developmentalists have discovered that play is absolutely pivotal to growth and maturation. All young mammals play and it turns out that they need to do so for development to unfold.

It is important for our discussion to have an idea what true play is. We call many things play that are not play. Playing piano can be play but often is not. Playing sports can also be play, but more often is not. Most videogames would not qualify as play. An activity only qualifies as true play if it is relatively free of outcome, is differentiated from reality, and is expressive in nature. Play is a parenthesis in real life, having a beginning and an end. It is the place in life where actions and emotions are free of repercussions, especially serious ones.

It turns out that play is where growth most happens, including even brain growth. Development requires a space free of consequences and repercussions to make headway. Fortunately this understanding is beginning to dawn on some of our educators. We used to think that schools built brains. Now we know that it is play that builds the brains that school can then use. Some progressive corporations are now understanding that most creativity happens in a context of play and not work, and so are asking their staff to make room for some play in their workday.

Play is becoming an endangered activity in our society. It is being usurped by screens and non-stop stimulation. It is also being eroded by our hurriedness as society for our children to get ahead. Preoccupied with performance and outcomes, and ignorant about where they come from, we are putting children into school earlier and earlier to prepare them for what comes ahead.

Play is also endangered because of the ignorance in our society that this is a developmental essential. The work motif is being introduced to children at ever younger ages. We think we are teaching them about reality by pointing out the consequences of their actions. It turns out that this is not how young children learn, not at least until they are capable of mixed feelings, a capacity that doesn't usually develop, as previously mentioned, until 5-7 years of age.

Culture, when it is intact at least, tends to protect a place of play. When culture is lost, play tends to disappear. In addition, many of today's parents have lost confidence in their role as a buffer to society, assuming the responsibility to provide some room for Nature to have its way with our children before society becomes the dominant force. The dictionary definition of play is "freedom of movement within a bounded space". The bounded space of course is the child's

attachment to the adults. The freedom comes from rest, both the rest from having to make attachments work and the rest from the repercussions that are part of reality.

When it comes to our children, the state is almost always preoccupied with outcomes, understandably so. Tremendous insight would be required to preserve a place of play for our children. We need statesmen and policy makers that understand the importance of true play for our children. Play is not an optional activity; it is an essential requirement for growth and development.

4) For maturation to result, children need to **FEEL** their tender emotions.

Only humans are capable of feeling their emotions and this capacity turns out to be an essential prerequisite for becoming fully human and humane. Children don't start out feeling their emotions. For emotions to be felt, they must be expressed, they must be named, and they must be relatively safe from injury. Feelings always get hurt of course, but the wounding must not be too much to bear.

Emotion has been traditionally dismissed as a vestigial left-over of our animal nature, unnecessary and unbecoming, even indicative of immaturity. We were told not to be emotional, to reign in our emotions in, to stop being irrational. Emotions were considered childish and even girlish (as if this is a bad thing), a source of embarrassment for grown-ups. Most of our medications aim at reducing emotion in one way or another.

Ironically, studies of the brain have revealed the central role of emotion in human development, even the growth of the brain itself. The emotional brain

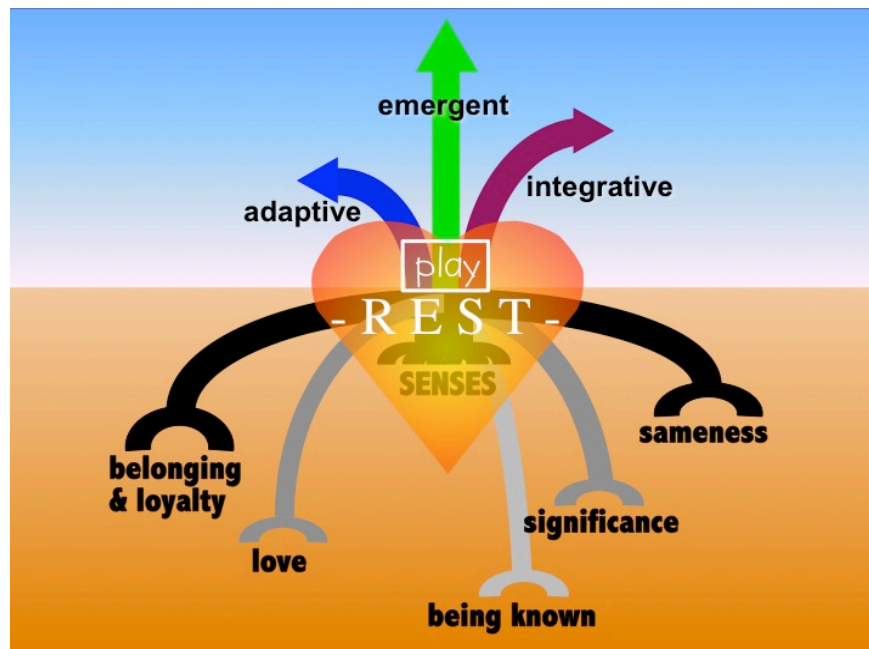


Figure 9 Factors involved in the unfolding of human potential

is at the heart of well-being.

Emotion is how the brain moves the child when stirred up in a certain way. If alarmed, the child is moved to caution. If satiated or fulfilled, the child is moved to rest. If at rest, the child is moved to play and to venture forth. If ashamed the child is moved to hide or conceal. If frustrated, the child is moved to effect change. There are hundreds of wired in movements critical to emotional health and well-being. Some of the emotions are pivotal to the maturing processes themselves, like feelings of futility for adaptation, feelings of satiation for emergence and feelings of dissonance for integration.

What is required for optimal functioning is for the child to actually feel his or her emotions, not just to have them. The intuitive term for this would be a 'soft heart'. The problem with feeling one's emotions is that feelings can get hurt. When the woundedness is too much to bear, it interferes with basic functioning such as eating, sleeping and concentrating. So when a child has to function in a wounding environment, the brain equips the child to do so by numbing out their tender feelings. Neuroscientists have discovered defensive filters in the limbic system that reduce our ability to feel and thus our felt sense of vulnerability as well. The result is that we can perform better in these wounding environments. For example, when I worked with delinquents in the prison system, they could sleep like babies, eat what was fed them, and concentrate on what was important to them. On the other hand, being in the prison would cause me to lose my appetite and lose my sleep. I often would feel rattled to the core. Prison is a wounding environment and I was not equipped to function there. These delinquents felt significantly less than normal adolescents. They could not afford to feel. Unfortunately this is becoming true for too many of our children.

The brain is remarkable in its ability to defend its host against a sense of vulnerability that is too overwhelming. It can equip us to function in a wounding environment or it can grow us up. It cannot however do both, at least not at the same time. For most of us, our feelings will return when we get back into the arms of our loved ones and our guard comes down. When this does not happen however, these defensive filters can get stuck, resulting in a significant loss of feeling.

There are indications that children today are losing their tender feelings. Many do not feel their emptiness or their missing. Many children have lost their sadness and disappointment. Today's children are increasingly losing their feelings of alarm. Others have lost their feelings of shame and embarrassment. Interestingly enough, research reveals when children lose their blush, they also lose their empathy. It turns out that caring too is a vulnerable feeling as it sets us up for disappointment. We know that the most wounding of all experiences is facing separation. We also know that peer interaction is where most wounding occurs

for children. Unfortunately, today's children are subjected to more separation and more peer interaction than ever before. No wonder they are losing their feelings.

Since emotion is the engine of maturation, when children lose their tender feelings, they become stuck in their immaturity. Some, like the poet and author Robert Bly of the United States, believes that immaturity is the sickness of our times. Once again, we can't help growing older but we are not all growing up.

What keeps a child's heart soft? How do we preserve or restore the child's ability to feel his emotions?

Studies reveal that the most significant factor is once again, the child's attachments to the adults in their lives.⁴

When children give us their hearts and we take care not to wound them, their attachment to us serves as a shield to reduce the impact of wounding outside of the attachment. The more we matter to our children, the less it matters what others think and feel about them. The more shielded by a safe

attachment to us, the less their brains have to take defensive action. In my clinical experience, even a little bit of shielding can go along way toward restoring feelings once they have been lost.



Figure 10 Emotional attachment as a shield to external wounding

To summarize, we must have the hearts of our children to keep their hearts soft. And they must have soft hearts to find their rest and their play. Their maturation and hence their well-being, depends upon these essential experiences. Children's hearts belong to their families, not to the state.

Another way of saying this is that the irreducible needs of children are right

⁴ The role of attachment in shielding children from wounding is a theme in the resilience literature of Julius Segal, Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein and also the major finding of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the United States as well as the famous longitudinal study by Werner and Smith *"Overcoming the Odds - High Risk Children from Both to Adulthood"*.

relationships, soft hearts, psychological rest and true play. We could also envision these needs in a hierarchy, from right relationships at the foundation of the pyramid to play at the top of the pyramid, constituting the ultimate growing edge as human potential unfolds.

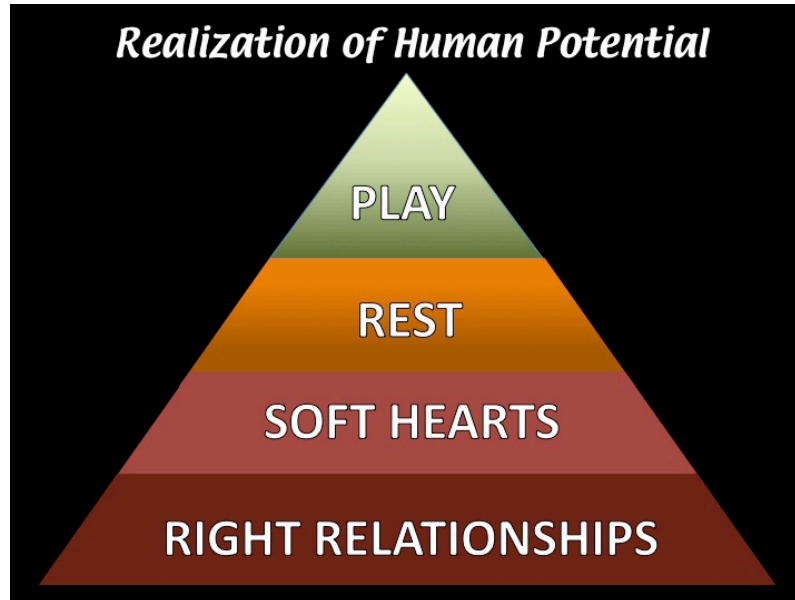


Figure 11 Hierarchy of conditions conducive to the unfolding of human potential.

CONCLUSION: children need to be raised by their families which, in turn, need to be supported by society and the state

The well being of today's children, tomorrow's adults and our future society depends upon our ability to support the family as the womb of true maturation and the natural context for reaching our full human potential. The challenge of family educators is to get this message out to parents. The challenge of our school system is to put student-teacher relationships to the fore and to find the way of re-entering the student's village of attachment. The challenge for our governments is to create the kinds of policies that give families the support they need to raise their children to their full potential as human beings.

If we took our cues from developmental science, it seems to me that the role of society and the state would be three-fold. First of all, it would be imperative to support families to do what they can do to allow the child's capacity for relationship to develop fully before requiring the child to be apart from family. Secondly, it should be the mandate of the state to support the child-parent relationship, reducing the separation a child faces when apart from the family, be it in care or in school. Thirdly, it would be important to interfere with families only when children are truly at risk, and with the knowledge that the added separation

may indeed exacerbate the problems.

The role of the state should never be to replace the family in the lives of children as attachments are family business and growth can only be home grown. The well-being of our children and the future well-being of our society depends entirely upon the willingness and ability of the state to support the family to raise our children.

My hope is, as I said in the beginning, to translate developmental science into the words that resonate with inner intuition. Without words there is no collective consciousness and without collective consciousness we will continue to act in ignorance as to what children truly need to become fully human and humane. Children need their families and their families need our support.

References and Resources

As stated in the introduction to this transcribed address, this unique articulation of an attachment-based developmental model of human growth and maturation is the result of years of personal synthesis and distillation of material deriving from scientific inquiry and clinical experience. The specific facts and findings that make up the 'dots' can easily be found in the scientific literature but are rather meaningless in themselves as they cannot attest to the whole. Their meaning is ultimately derived from the picture that emerges when the 'dots' are joined. For serious students who would like to immerse themselves in some of the dots, Dr. Neufeld offers the following suggestions.

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