

CHAPTER TWELVE

ONCE WE WERE CHILDREN: FATHERING WITH OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE IN MIND¹

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Your past

No matter how far, how fast or how hard we run, our childhood follows us. To a lesser or greater extent, we are all a product of our past. Situations, events, certain people and even certain moments in life can act as conscious and even unconscious reminders that suddenly take us back in time, to an earlier age, to a different place. For some, the past and in particular childhood was a time of freedom, discovery and adventure. For others, it may have been a mixture of sweetness and sadness. Some people struggle to clearly recall their earliest memories, while others struggle to forget. What are those earliest memories for you?

When you recall the face of your mother or father while growing up, are you overwhelmed with feelings of love, rage, security, fear, indifference, or hate? Maybe you feel a mixture of emotions. Maybe you lived with extended family or a step-parent or in institutional care. Who was important to you, who made you feel special, who was it in your life that made you feel safe, and who was the person you went to when you were scared?

Now you are the parent. How do your children view you? When you look into their eyes, do you see love, do you see fear, do you see confusion or maybe you just haven't really looked. A famous doctor that specialised in working with infants and children said, when a baby looks into the eyes of their parent what they see is themselves (Winnicott, 1971). That is, how we view ourselves, particularly when growing up, comes from how we believe others view us. As an infant, child and young person, it is the world around us that teaches us who we are, what we believe and how we should act. As a parent, we are the first mirror that our child looks into.

Their present

How you relate to your children, what environment you provide for them, whether you are the person they go to when frightened or whether you are the person that causes their fear will have huge consequences. As a parent, you have tremendous significance in shaping the lives of your children. Infants and children form very strong attachments to fathers and to mothers, whether or not those attachments prove to be positive or damaging. You are instrumental in laying either a strong, healthy, flexible and solid foundation in their emerging personalities, or contributing to a fragile, uncertain, or distrustful basis for how they think about themselves, others and you.

Living in an environment where there is ongoing violence is traumatising to infants and children. Depending on the length and extent of their exposure to violence, children can experience a range of disturbing symptoms. These can include depression, low self-esteem, eating problems, sleep disorders, bedwetting, self-destructive or avoidant behaviours, poor concentration, flashbacks, aggressive or antisocial behaviours, and learning difficulties (Fletcher, 1996). The list is lengthy and not at all encouraging.

When the trauma experienced by a child is perpetrated by an outsider or stranger to a child's family, the impact can be devastating. However, the trauma experienced may be counter balanced by the protective, healing capacity provided by the child's family or carer (Pynoos & Nader, 1993). When the perpetrator of the trauma is within the child's family, the child may have few, if any, other places to run for protection.

¹ This paper was originally written for fathers attending men's behaviour change programs.

When an infant or young child is in great distress, they will almost inevitably seek out their parent or carer so as to be physically connected to another human being. The terrifying dilemma for some children is that it may be this very parent or carer who has created their fear and alarm in the first place (Schore, 2001). Children will continue to seek out a relationship with their parent, even if they are the perpetrator of violence. It is not often the relationship that a child wants stopped, it is the violence.

How children develop

So why is a family environment where there is violence so damaging for infants and children? The brain begins to grow within the womb and is not fully formed at birth. In fact, there is a huge growth spurt in the first two years of life which continues to a lesser degree up until around sixteen to eighteen years of age (Greenfield, 1997). Most people would now be aware that physically shaking a young infant can cause irreparable brain damage. What is not so well known is the emerging scientific data that indicates early emotional trauma also damages the developing brain (Teicher, 2002).

The brain is a sophisticated and complex organism that at its most basic is responsible for ensuring survival. Humans differ from other animal species in that we are totally dependent on others for our care in the first few years of life. As we develop, we are capable of wonderful creativity, complicated problem solving and thoughtful reflection. To ensure we develop to our full capacity though, we need a healthy diet, and this involves more than just eating nutritious food.

A brain needs a diet of healthy relationships to assist us in reaching our full potential. If the infant's world is dominated by stressful and terrifying experiences then all the resources they have at their disposal are preoccupied with sheer survival. The brain secretes specific chemicals during times of severe stress. These chemicals are there to protect the brain by 'numbing out' and reducing pain, or by increasing levels of arousal and the capacity to respond and take action (Schore, 2003b, 2001).

When in extreme fear or pain, an infant can do little other than cry out in protest. Should an infant's environment consistently fail to respond and offer protection, the infant may cease to protest and move from an excited state into one that becomes silent (Schore, 2003b, 2001). It has been argued that it is as though the infant is willing itself to become 'invisible' (Schore, 2003b, 2001).

When men and women recall the events that have occurred during a violent episode in their relationship, the child/children, if they are not being used as a shield or an object in the conflict, often seem to be invisible. The parent/s or step-parent may struggle to remember where the children were while the violence was occurring. A common statement in these circumstances is, "the kids were in bed and didn't hear a thing".

When you ask older children what they remember about the same event, their ability to recall every single moment of the episode can sometimes be staggering. The younger the child, the less they may recall consciously. However, as our research and knowledge into the brain expands, many experts believe that at a pre-verbal level, our body stores and remembers traumatic events (Perry, 1977; Streeck-Fischer & Van der Kolk, 2000).

The longer an infant or child is forced into extreme states of arousal in an effort to regulate incredibly stressful emotional events, the more likely it is that these emotional states will become intertwined into their emerging personalities as traits (Perry, Pollard, Blakely & Vigilante, 1995). An unprotected or unsupported child is left to manage their stress reactions alone. The more they are left to manage this by themselves, the more they may adopt primitive ways of coping, for example, to psychologically disappear, to attack before being attacked or over-responding to even the smallest amount of conflict. This means as they mature they may revert back to this habitual response with an unhealthy level of withdrawal, over-reaction or a mixture of both during times of high arousal.

Our future

The job of the carer is to provide the infant with a secure, safe and responsive environment that soothes the infant when distressed, listens when they cry and

ensures the developing infant can healthily attach to others as they mature in life.

It is the interaction between the caregiver (the mother and/or father) and the infant that slowly builds the little personality that grows within the child (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 2000). These relationships can either deprive or provide an infant with the food needed for their emotional world and the brain's development. A mother as well as a father contributes to their child's capacity to cope with tough times, to feel safe enough to ask questions, and to know that they are loved and special.

The magic thing about humans is our capacity to change, grow and learn, even when we are old and grey. Any sustained, respectful and caring relationship with another person provides good emotional, psychological and neurological nourishment (Cozolino, 2005 & 2006; Schore, 2003a; Lonie, 1999). Naturally, the earlier this starts in life, the better the emotional health of the individual. Good relationships with others can be healing and allow an opportunity to safely explore who we are and what we think without needing to resort to fearful, damaging and aggressive behaviours.

Children are traumatised by family violence. A violent environment focuses a child's attention in life on survival rather than on exploration, play, wonderment and growth. Children who live with or have access to family members who are violent don't necessarily want the relationship to stop. They want the violence to stop. They are powerless to choose alternative connections other than with those immediately around them. Good or bad, these relationships are very significant (Bunston, 2001). When your child reaches the age you are now, how do you want them to remember their childhood?

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VIOLENCE PROGRAMS

GROUPWORK INTERVENTIONS
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