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Child abuse

Complementary points of view

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Your Competent Child

Respect-Based Relationships

by

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A) Introduction

Some weeks ago I listened to a young man telling the story of his life for a bunch of high school pupils. His name was Joe and he was just about 25 years old. He was telling in a very openhearted and personal manner of his experiences with domestic violence, his troublesome years at school, the way into drug abuse, crime, and so on. There were all the ingredients for a really bad ending. Yet, this guy was standing there, looking OK, and he seemed to be in control of his life. I was very touched by his story. I got goose bumps all over and I realized that I don't know anything about child abuse. The direct experience with violence at home, where you're supposed to be secure and in a safe environment, the experience of all these negative feelings and thoughts, the bad relationships, and so on... I can't share them.

Somehow, it feels disrespectful toward all the people who have gone through such a kind of story that I am speaking here today. On the other side, I really think that there is something I have to contribute that may be of worth. What I can share with you is my experience with the opposite: I am working every day with what positive psychology calls "flourishing relationships".¹ Child abuse and child maltreatment are first and foremost relational issues and I fail to see a fundamental difference between abusive relationships and flourishing relationships – they just are extremes on the same spectrum between very positive and very negative relationships.

We consider child abuse and child maltreatment unethical because of the negative impact they have on the child's development and wellbeing. The point I want to make is that relationships do not need to match the definitions for abuse and maltreatment to lead to such an outcome. There is more and more research suggesting that much of what we usually consider "good upbringing" may be as destructive in the long term as "abusive" relationships. And, I am convinced that the same "laws" are valid for negative relationships as for positive relationships. If we try to improve our relationships, we need to consider the same principles, no matter if we speak about abusive relationships or good relationships.

Similar to current definitions of health, we shouldn't define "good" relationships easily in terms of what is missing.² The missing of maltreatment or abuse does not constitute that there is a positive relationship. Since we like to think in opposites, we may make a quick distinction between the people who abuse children and the others that don't. The truth is that we all have violated the integrity of our children many times and that we may struggle every day in our attempts to form good relationships with our partner and other important persons in our lives.

In my opinion, it is impossible to identify a clear boundary between abusive and non-abusive parenting. There is no doubt that certain well-defined behaviors like physical or verbal violence are harmful for the child's development, but there are many other behaviors that may be much more subtle but still have a similar effect on the child.

¹ Snyder, C. R. & Lopez, S. J. (2007). *Positive Psychology. The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

² Antonovsky, A. (1987) *Unraveling The Mystery of Health - How People Manage Stress and Stay Well*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

An example: In Scandinavia the focus has been on a new kind of parents that is called “curling parents” – it has been characterized by the parents intentions to eliminate every single obstacle in their child’s lives. They wipe the way in front of their children in the same way as curling players wipe the way in front of their stones. This kind of parents does not directly harm children in any physical and emotional way, however, their behavior may be as harmful for their children as any traditional form of maltreatment.

There was another aspect of Joe’s story that seemed to be significant to me. When Joe told about his behavior at school and how the people around reacted, it was obvious that nobody had responded in a sensitive or helping way. Everyone just blamed him for not behaving himself. Nobody had been able to establish a positive relationship with him, what might have helped him to deal with the situation at home or in school in a more constructive way. He was telling about all the meetings at school with lots of teachers and parents. The only point with the meetings was to tell him how bad he was. The parents of his classmates even claimed that he should leave school.

This part of his story was interesting because it illustrated the fact that it isn’t possible to separate the abusive situation from its surrounding. Abuse and maltreatment don’t happen in empty spaces. We can’t just blame the parents for creating a violent home and think that the situation is not of our business. What if a sensitive teacher had understood the horrible situation Joe was caught in and supported him instead of accused him?

Joe was lucky because he had a grandmother who took care of him when times were hard. He is convinced that this was what had saved him in the end. But what if she hadn’t been able to react in this responsive way?

I am convinced that the issues of child maltreatment and child abuse are in many ways similar to the issue of bullying. If you read the current literature on bullying you will find that the waste majority of intervention and prevention programs are stunningly ineffective.³ Therefore, the latest approaches suggest new strategies that may be surprising: instead of focusing on the bully and the victims, they suggest to focus on what they call “the school climate”.⁴ They suggest that if we want to make an impact on the way children relate to each other, we may start with ourselves – the way *we* relate to other adults at school and the way *we* relate to children.

Example concerning maltreatment and abuse of children: It is common that persons who experienced abusive relationships in their own childhood tend to continue this pattern. Research showed that three kinds of positive relationships helped young adults to escape the cycle of abuse: An emotionally supportive relationship with an adult outside the family of origin (in Joe’s case it was his grandmother), a positive relationship with a psychotherapist, and a positive relationship with their partner in adulthood.

³ Smith, P. K., Pepler, D. J. & Rigby, K. (2004) *Bullying in Schools - How successful can interventions be?*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

⁴ Cowie, H. & Jennifer, D. (2008). *New perspectives on bullying*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

Another example: One kind of interventions against maltreatment consists of home visitation programs that try to help mothers to provide adequate care for their children. Interestingly, the success of these interventions depends strongly on the relationship the home visitors were able to form with the mothers.

For this reason, I am convinced that knowledge about the nature of close relationship is of greatest significance for preventative efforts as well as for interventions. My aim for the following hour is, to present you what I consider the most promising work on this subject: the one of the Danish family therapist and writer Jesper Juul.

Jesper Juul has for almost two decades been one of Europe's most influential writers on the subjects of family life and upbringing. Some years ago, he founded family-lab international, a private organization that aims to support and inspire parents and families. Family-lab is growing rapidly and exists now in more than a dozen countries around the globe.

Juul's writings focus prominently on relationships between adults and children, and he offers a lot of valuable insights for everyone trying to establish positive relationships within the family or in pedagogical institutions.⁵ He is convinced that there is something you can call *relational competence* and that this competence can be learned.

This lecture will make you familiar with Juul's ideas about relational competence. Since child maltreatment and child abuse are *relational* issues, I really hope that this will be an inspiration both for your professional and private lives.

- A) The family as a system
- B) Relevant research on close relationships
- C) Relational competence
- D) Your Competent Child

In a first step I will turn to the family as a system. I will quickly examine the relationships within and around the family that may play a role for the quality of family life. I will show some examples of how relationships play a major role for the development and wellbeing of everyone in the family. In a second step, I will analyze some prominent findings on the subject of close relationships. Third, I will explain how Jesper Juul understands the term relational competence. The last step will be to examine the term "Competent Child". It shall be a positive and inspiring final conclusion for these days. My aim is that you leave this conference, not only with new perspectives in your mind, but also with new hope in your heart.

⁵ Juul, J. (1999). *Här är jag! Vem är du?* Stockholm: Bonnier; Juul, J. (1995). *Ditt kompetenta barn*. Stockholm: Månocket; Juul, J. & Jensen, H. (2009). *Relationskompetens i pedagogernas värld*. Stockholm: Liber

B) The family as a system

„There is no such thing as an infant. There is only an infant and his mother.“

Donald Winnicott, *The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship*⁶

This statement by Donald Winnicott highlights one of the most important findings of developmental psychology, neuroscience and clinical experience during the last fifty or sixty years. We humans are fundamentally social and our development is deeply related to the interactions we participate in. The family is our closest social environment and therefore of greatest significance. Current theories look at the family as a system.⁷ It is made up of several people who affect each other in a mutual responsive way. The interactions within a family play an eminent role for how everyone develops and thrives. In other words: the quality of our relationships and especially our close relationships define strongly who we are and who we are to become.

“So what does research suggest about parents’ role? Overall, it suggests that parents’ behavior and efforts are the most important, though not the only, influences regarding children’s growth and competence.”

Jane Brooks, *The Process of Parenting*⁸

It is well known today that the way parents relate to their children can be associated with important outcomes. It has an impact on how children interact with peers, on their self-esteem, on social competencies, the intellectual development, and so on. Research on mental disorders also suggests that the parenting style is an important factor for the maintenance of mental health. Even disorders with proven biological origins (e.g. schizophrenia) depend to a certain degree on the family and the way the family interacts. Research suggests that good parenting buffers offspring against the negative effects of their genes.

The marital relationship is not the only relationship that matters. The family system begins with the relationship between the parents, and that relationship is the basic support for each parent as he or she deals with the challenges of life. Parenting behaviors and children’s wellbeing depend strongly on the quality of parents’ relationship to each other. Parents living in happy marriages generally have effective parenting skills and their children function well. Mothers and fathers

⁶ Winnicott, D. W. (1960). The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship. *Int. Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 41, 585-595

⁷ Brooks, J. (2011). *The Process of Parenting*. (pp. 102-104). New York: McGraw – Hill

⁸ Brooks, J. (2011). *The Process of Parenting*. (p. 19). New York: McGraw – Hill

who are warm and sensitive marital partners tend to be warm and sensitive parents, too. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Parents who have a hostile relationship with their partner have difficulty in giving their full attention to the child. Whereas the infant's crying may cause them to pick up and soothe their baby when they feel calm, their inclination when they are under stress may be quite the reverse. Taking account of all the available research, it has recently been estimated that the risk of child abuse is between three and nine times greater in homes where adult partners hit each other.

It is important for me to make clear that this doesn't mean that there shouldn't be any conflict. Far from it. Conflicts are not a sign for bad relationships. They just show that two persons with different intentions are meeting each other. And that they are able and courageous enough to express what is inside – which is a good sign. It is not conflicts that are the problem, rather the way we cope with conflicts. I will return to this issue later. I just want to say it here because I don't want to get in trouble with all the ones who divorced in here! As you will see later on, a good relationship doesn't mean that you need to live in the same apartment or that you must live in a legal status of being married.

As Susan Golombok, the Director of the Family and Child Psychology Research Centre at City University, London, states after an examination of different family structures: "What matters most for children's psychological well-being is not family type – it is the quality of family life."⁹

Another important relationship is the one between the parents and the members of their families of origin. Becoming a parent is an incredibly intense experience. It turns your life upside down and may make you familiar with many existential realities you did not know before. You will also learn to know sides of yourself and your partner you didn't know before. Being a parent can feel like heaven and hell at the same time. You may spend a lot of sleepless nights trying to soothe your child because of sickness, you feel inadequate, you worry about the economical situation, and so on. In this situation it is of great significance that you receive help from outside, and this help usually comes from your family of origin. The kind of help as well as its amount depends strongly on the kind of relationship you have with your parents. The situation is another one if you feel lovingly connected to your parents and your siblings than if they come and criticize you for how you cope with your new role as a parent. But it is not only the current relation that counts. It is known that important psychological factors like attachment or maltreatment run in families. The way your parent interacted with you when you were a child will have a major impact on how you relate to your own children when you become a parent.

Relationships between children and other adults than the parents also play an important role. As I already pointed out, research shows that a positive relationship with a grandparent, a teacher, or any other adult may be an important protective factor for children in abusive homes. Just one person that is able to create a positive close relationship may make a huge difference.

⁹ Golombok, S. (2000). *Parenting: What really counts?* (p. 104). East Sussex: Routledge

It is the quality of all the relationships within and around the family that are important for the child's development and growth. I believe that a straightforward approach focusing on the general improvement of relationships is meaningful for different reasons:

First, it may directly decrease the risk for child abuse by helping the parents to establish a positive relationship with their children and with each other.

Second, it may have an indirect effect on the parents' ability to form a positive relationship by providing support and positive models, as well as by helping them to break abusive cycles.

Third, it may help to increase the likelihood of protective, positive relationships between the child and other people around the family.

Fourth, it may help to increase the success of interventions by helping therapists, foster families, and so on, to establish positive relationships with the people involved.

Fifth, children who are treated with respect treat others with respect. Children who are cared for care for others. Children whose integrity is not violated don't violate the integrity of others. The way in which we behave toward our children will determine the way they treat others. And one never knows how important this may be in the future.

C) What makes relationships flourish?

This brings us directly to the next question: How can we improve relationships? It is not my aim for today to discuss the practical issues of this question. Instead, I will focus on conceptual issues. As you will see, there is a lot of work left to do. C. R. Snyder and S. J. Lopez, for instant, wrote recently in their textbook on positive psychology:

“The study of insecure attachment, lost love, and failed relationships has produced significant findings that are relevant to our lives. Indeed, relationship researchers have been successful in uncovering what does not work and have attempted to teach people how to correct their relationship problems. Nevertheless, most would agree that we all struggle with identifying *the right things* to do in relationships.”

C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez, *Positive Psychology*, emphasis by me

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I think that you all agree that we generally have poor knowledge on the difficult issue of “relationships”. Yet we know less about the nature of close relationships. We may know something about international relationships, about public relationships, and so on, but concerning private, intimate relationships we must accept that this knowledge is not very useful.

Despite the fact that we all experience relationships of different qualities every day and that we know about the great significance of relationships, we still don’t know what really matters. We don’t learn in school or at university how to establish positive close relationships and often we sadly fail when we try to help our friends to improve their relationships. Although millions of people suffer daily as a direct or indirect consequence of bad relational competencies, science seem not offer much of help.

One main problem is that there is a big difference between “normal” relationships and “close” relationships. In order to be successful in the everyday interaction with people at work, in a restaurant, and so on, we may learn some formal rules that help us to avoid to continually trespassing on other people’s boundaries. These rules may vary from culture to culture as well as from one social group to another, but they are always about keeping some kind of *distance* in order to avoid hurting someone. We call it being “well mannered” and it serves us well in social contexts. The problem, though, is that our life together within a family or with close friends is about the opposite: *intimacy*.

In the psychological literature, social skills describe skills that enable us to handle social situations. However, I am convinced that you all know many people with excellent social skills

¹⁰ Snyder, C. R. & Lopez, S. J. (2007). *Positive Psychology. The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths* (pp. 320-321). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

who still have disastrous relationships with their partners or children. They are socially very successful, for instance at work, in clubs, at meetings, with their neighbors, and so on, but they do not know how to establish a loving and intimate relationship.

In order to find out what matters for *close* relationships I will take a look at some prominent research that concerns pair relationships and parent-child relationships. I hope that these findings may help us to understand better what close relationships are about.

John Gottman, for instance, has done extensive research on marriages.¹¹ He has thin-sliced the way couples interacted and related their interaction styles to divorces and other marital troubles. He found that marriages can go wrong in different ways, but also, that troubled marriages have some things in common: the couples in trouble were much more likely to criticize, blame and be angry with each other than to show affection, agree and give approval. Couples in trouble were also more likely to respond to anger and criticism from their partner by directing even greater anger and criticism back toward them.

You probably don't think that this is very surprising. These findings seem to be evident. But there is an important question to ask: why shouldn't they also be valid for the relationship between adults and children?

And soon trouble starts: the very idea of upbringing is not much more than criticism. The very idea of upbringing is to take the child and change it to something that is better. The fundamental assumption of upbringing has always been that children are not "real" people from birth. Both the scientific and the popular literature tend to regard children as potentials rather than actual beings – as some kind of antisocial "semi-beings". We assume that they need to be influenced and manipulated from adults before they can be regarded as equals and real people. I wonder what Gottman would say about a couple having this kind of attitude to each other. Would this marriage last? Unfortunately, children have difficulty to divorce their parents.

Current research on the way adults communicate with children is shocking: most of what parents say to their children is of negative character. It is either telling them that they do something wrong, or that they mustn't do something, or that they should do something they don't (even though they should know better), and so on. The basic assumption still is that children should be influenced and manipulated by adults in order to become real human beings. One prominent way of doing this is to tell them how bad they are and hope that this will motivate them to change. This assumption has never really been questioned. Grown-ups have only been concerned with finding different strategies in which to bring up children easiest. The different styles have been labeled from permissive to authoritarian, but the validity of the assumption has never been questioned.

¹¹ Gottman, J. M. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail and how you can make yours last*. New York: Simon & Schuster; Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York: Crown

“I believe most of what we traditionally understand by the term “upbringing” is both superfluous and directly harmful. Not only is it unhealthy for children, but it also hinders adults, precluding their growth and development. Furthermore, it has a destructive influence on the quality of relationships between children and adults.”

Jesper Juul, *Your Competent Child*¹²

Criticism, blame, and other negative attitudes toward the child, even when expressed through behavior or “between the lines”, have negative effects on the relationship, the child’s self-esteem, the child’s motivation to explore the world and to take responsibility, and so on. Yet, it is very common.

At this point, I want to return to the beginning of my lecture. It is not only child abusers that fail to give their children what is best for them. Our daily attempts to bring up our children may be similarly destructive.

Another well-known body of evidence on the subject of relationships between adults and children comes from the research on attachment theory. It has become quite clear that certain kinds of interactions are related to secure attachment, which means in the long term: with a lot of positive outcomes. I think that these findings are very interesting, not only for the issue of effective parenting, but also for the nature of close relationships in general. You may guess that they don’t emphasize the importance of “upbringing”. Again, the decisive factor is that we don’t downgrade or criticize the other and the signals we receive from the other.

Belsky and Pasco Fearon describe the factors leading to a secure attachment in the *Handbook of attachment*.¹³

Secure attachment style:

- sensitivity
- prompt responsiveness to distress
- moderate, appropriate stimulation
- interactional synchrony
- warmth
- involvement

¹² Juul, J. (2000). *Your Competent Child. Toward New Basic Values for the Family*. (p. 6). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

¹³ Belsky, J. & Pasco Fearon, R. M. (2008). Precursors of Attachment Security. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of Attachment. Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications* (pp. 295-316). New York: The Guilford Press

It may be of help to take a look at the opposite, too. Factors that have been related to insecure attachment are:

Insecure attachment styles:

- intrusive, excessively stimulating, controlling interaction style
- unresponsive, under-involved approach to care giving

If you allow me to make a short summary of these findings, I would say that it is important that we respect the other's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts, and that we take the signals and reactions we receive from the other seriously. Persons in our family don't try to fool us, they try to tell us who they are, which means how they feel, think, reason, and so on. Establishing a positive close relationship is only possible if we listen and respond in a way that makes it possible for the other to feel loved.

Traditional psychology has often questioned people's emotions: How much do parents love their child? This is not wrong. But it is important to underscore that the problem rarely is that parents don't love their child. More often, the problem is that parents do not know how to convert their loving feelings into loving behavior. Most often this starts with parents who do not listen.

At this point I would like to take a look at another well-known area of research – the Baumrind studies of rearing styles.¹⁴ Diana Baumrind has conducted her groundbreaking studies in the end of the seventies. Since, they have been slightly modified and extended, but in general they still are considered valid. She examined different parenting styles and related them with outcomes in children. Rearing styles refer to relatively stable patterns of interactions between adults and children. Therefore, research on rearing styles may be able to tell us something about the nature of close relationships.

Baumrind distinguished three general styles of parenting: The authoritative style, the permissive style and the authoritarian style. Let us take a look at what characterizes these styles and what outcomes they were found to contribute to.

¹⁴ Baumrind, D. (1978). Parental disciplinary patterns and social competence in children. *Youth and Society*, 9(2); Baumrind, D. (1988). Rearing competent children. In: Damon, W. (red.). *Child Development Today and Tomorrow*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Authoritative style:

The parents exert firm control over the child's behavior but emphasize the independence and individuality in the child. They have a clear notion of present and future standards of behavior for the child, but still they are rational, flexible, and attentive to the needs and preferences of the child. The parental influence on the child's behavior happens rather through negotiation than punishment and exertion of power.

Outcome: These children become self-reliant and self-confident and explore their worlds with excitement and pleasure. They are also more likely to be self-controlled, responsible and co-operating.

Authoritarian style:

The parents exert firm control in an arbitrary, power-oriented way without regard for the child's individuality. The emphasis is on control without nurturance or support to achieve it.

Outcome: These children become relatively unhappy, withdrawn, inhibited, and distrustful. They often are considered socially incompetent. Repeating disapproval and insult also lead to low self-esteem.

Permissive style:

The parents set few limits on the child. They accept the child's impulses, granting as much freedom as possible while still maintaining safety. They love their children, but make few demands of them.

Outcome: These children become least independent and self-controlled. They seem to be immature, aimless, and uninterested in achievement.

In my opinion, these studies have something in common with the ones before: they underline the significance of a general attitude toward each other which we may call "respect". It is important for the quality of a relationship that both sides treat each other with respect. This means that every side takes the other seriously and meets the other with a fundamental trust that his or her signals and responses are meaningful and valuable.

We must be careful when we use the term "respect". It can be understood in at least two different ways: One is that one must "earn" respect through achievements, a social position, and so on. I use the term in another way, which is fundamentally different: it means that respect is the acknowledgement of the existential worth of a person's individuality, the value of being the way we are, independent of what we may achieve or what social position we have.

In meetings between different humans, respect starts with interest. It starts with our attempt to see

the other's reality, how she or he is "having it", how she or he seeing things, how she or he is feeling, thinking, and so on. This interest in the other entails that we try to understand the signals we receive from the other, which means that we take seriously what is expressed, and that we assume that her signals are meaningful, even if we don't understand them.

This doesn't mean that we're supposed to take the other's side and that we always must agree. It just means that we are interested and that we accept that the other's way of seeing things, of feeling, and thinking is as valuable as our own.

Generally speaking, respect is about the acknowledgment of what *is*. The individuality of everyone is valuable and has its own right to exist. There is no "objective" good or bad. This doesn't mean that we need to like everything, but that it is important to be aware of the fact that, on an existential level, we shouldn't judge. Consider these examples, which I borrowed from Jesper Juul:

Child: I don't like onion.

Respectful Dad: Aha! I like onion. I think you ought to try it.

Disrespectful Dad: Now don't be silly! You usually like onion.

Or: Now don't you be so fussy! You eat what's on your plate just like the rest of us.

Child: Daddy, I'm freezing!

Respectful Dad: Are you? I'm just fine... Well, let's see about getting you something else to put on.

Disrespectful Dad: Don't be silly. It's not cold at all. Just look at me. I've only a T-shirt on like you.

Child: Mom, I don't like my new English teacher.

Respectful Mom: Oh... that surprises me. She seems nice to me... What is it you don't like about her?

Disrespectful Mom: What's the matter now? I suppose she's insisting that you hand in your work on time.

All the inappropriate adult replies have two things in common: they discount the child's competence, and they attempt to "educate". In effect, these comments say, "You should not feel and experience things the way you do. It would be better for you to feel and experience as I do."

This is the opposite of what respect means. Respect means that we tell each other that we are interested in who we are and that it is OK to be as we are.

It is in the nature of relationships that they happen *between* people. Therefore, I want to underline that a good relationship demands that the respect is mutual, which means that both sides must have the same attitude of respect for each other. Otherwise a positive relationship will not be established. We shouldn't forget this fact, and especially not when we relate to children. It is not enough that they respect us. We also must respect them!

Of course, it is not possible to be interested, open, and respectful all the time. This is not a problem. But it is problematic if we generally assume that children should not be taken seriously or if we believe that we must manipulate them in order to change them from being a "semi-being" into a "real human".

However, beyond the narrow world of being right or wrong, there is another attitude, which is of great value for relationships and the wellbeing and development of the persons related to each other: joy. I recommend to actively enjoying each other as often as possible, especially when it comes to children. Just take some moments during the day, go on meta-level, look at each other from above, forget all the demands and challenges of everyday life, and be happy for what you have.

D) Relational competence

The examples we just have considered show that the way we communicate is important. Therefore, communication trainings may be of help. Yet, they are not enough: having learned some techniques that help us to improve our communication skills does not mean that we are able to establish positive close relationships. Respect for the other is not in the first place an issue of communication; it is an issue of attitude! People feel after a very short time if we really are interested in them, or if we just learned in training what to ask or to say in order to give other people the feeling that we are interested in them. Relational competence goes deeper.

It is neither a method nor a technique. Instead, it is some kind of a code of ethics for our relationships, according to which we keep our ears and eyes open for the blunders that we inevitable make, and openly assume responsibility for them.

According to Jesper Juul, this ethical code consists of four central aspects: responsibility, equal dignity, authenticity, and dialogue.

Relational competence:

1. Responsibility
2. Equal dignity
3. Authenticity
4. Dialogue

1. Responsibility

The process of interaction within a family, which we sometimes refer to as its “tone”, or “atmosphere”, refers to the quality of the exchange between the people in a family: how they relate to each other and how they feel. It is the decisive element for the physical and emotional health and development of both children and adults.

If a relationship gets stuck in an unsatisfactory situation, it is of greatest significance that we take responsibility. This means that we accept the fact that something in the relationship is not working and that a change is needed. Furthermore, it means that we start a dialogue, which hopefully will help us to find out what the problem is. Taking responsibility means that we don't accuse or blame the others for the trouble. Instead we recognize that we also are part of the relationship and that we affect the relationship as much as the other. Blaming and accusing does never help. Every negative relationship is negative because of both parties. This is not an issue of guilt, but an issue of taking responsibility. We must take an active step and reconsider the way we

behave in this relationship, in order to change the destructive pattern. We can never change the other, but we can change ourselves. This seems to be so simple, but the truth is that most of us tend to look for the problem somewhere else: “If only my wife wouldn’t...!”, or “If only he finally would see that...!”, or “I have told him a million times, but...!”, and so on.

This subject is of particular significance for the relationships between adults and children. Traditionally, parents have accepted their responsibility when the atmosphere in the family was good and denied it when the atmosphere was bad. It is still like that in many families. As soon as the interaction between adults and children fails, parents and teachers pass the responsibility on to the children. This is not just irresponsible, it is unethical! This behavior decreases the children’s ability to live a positive life. The alternative is *not* for the parents to blame themselves. The alternative is that the parents take the responsibility for what just happened in order to avoid that it happens again.

This aspect is so important that I want to say it again: in a loving relationship between two equal adults, both have equal responsibility for the quality of their interaction. It is always unethical to blame the other for a relationship that is unsatisfying!

And even more important: in relationships between adults and children, the adults have the complete responsibility. This applies both to the interactions between children and parents in a family and between adults and children in nursery schools, day care, schools, and in society.

“It is a psychological fact that the adults in a family are solely responsible for establishing the quality of this ethos or tone. They can neither delegate this responsibility to their children nor share it with them. Children simply cannot handle this particular responsibility. They need the parents to take the lead.”

Jesper Juul, *Your Competent Child*¹⁵

This does not mean that we need to take the child’s side. It means that even though children and young people influence the process in the interaction with adults, children are not capable of assuming responsibility for it. When children have to take the responsibility, they do not develop in healthy ways.

Modern parents meet a truly complicated task. They are in charge, but they have to give up much of their traditional power without giving away their authority. This task is exceptionally difficult and few parents get it right from the start. Most parents continually need to learn together with their children as they grow up. And this is OK. We must not be perfect from the beginning. But we must be open and listen. Otherwise things will go wrong.

This two-way learning process may lead to conflict and frustration. Both sides will be angry, sad and frustrated at times and that is the way it should be. Conflicts between children and adults are not a sign of overburdened parents or teachers, but a learning experience for both adults and children.

¹⁵ Juul, J. (2000). *Your Competent Child. Toward New Basic Values for the Family*. (p. 27). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Again, in a healthy relationship, the adults take the responsibility for these conflicts. If the parents or teachers start blaming the children, new and even more destructive conflicts will arise—as a result of irresponsible leadership.

An example from my work as a teacher: in one of the classes I started to work with some months ago, there was a boy called Nick. In the first or second lesson, I asked the students to write me some lines about who they are, what they like, and so on, and Nick just wrote his name and then that he hates books. He wrote it about ten times, and then he started to disturb the others. When I went up to him and asked him, if he hasn't anything else to write he just said "no". Afterwards he just continued in this way. He protested against everything I asked for and refused to do anything I suggested. In this situation it would have been very easy for me to get angry. I didn't do anything that possibly could have excused his behavior and there was no doubt that HE was the bad one. HE was difficult and it was my holy right, if not a duty, to go into a fight and punish him with all my power. Instead I went up to him, went down on my knees (to be on the same level as he was), I looked into his eyes, and asked: "Did I do something wrong or what's the problem. I feel that you do not feel well here, can you tell me what it is all about?" And then he said that he has a lot of difficulty with the subject and that he doesn't feel well with it at all. His behavior was not meant to be some kind of protest against me, rather a scream for help. He wanted me to be aware of the fact that he had difficulties and this was in fact very important.

What could have ended in a destructive relationship for me, Nick, and the entire class, was resolved after just five sentences because I took responsibility instead of passing it on.

2. Equal dignity

"I propose a new paradigm: Children's behavior, whether cooperative or disruptive, is just as important for the development and health of the parents as the behavior of parents is for the development and health of the children. The interaction between adults and children is a mutual learning process. The more we treat each other with equal dignity, the more we each gain."

Jesper Juul, *Your Competent Child*¹⁶

Jesper Juul suggests people in relationships to strive for equal dignity. Equal dignity between men and women and between adults and children provides in his experience the best conditions both for everyone to develop and to foster closeness and community. Equal dignity means that we respect the others for whom they are. Furthermore, it means that everyone recognizes each other's differences and regards them as an asset for the community.

As he points out, this is not easy to accomplish - especially not in the relationship between adults and children. Most of us have grown up in families and societies that consider conformity as ideal and differences as a threat.

¹⁶ Juul, J. (2000). *Your Competent Child. Toward New Basic Values for the Family*. (p. 83). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

It is not possible to ignore that differences now and then lead to trouble. You can either see this as a *problem*, or as a *challenge* that can help the family to develop. Immediately, most of us recognize it as a problem and it usually takes a while to realize the potential to growth.

The challenge is always the same: we must examine our own and the other's opinions. Why do I think the way I do? What makes you think the way you do? What kind of experiences have we made that have led to the way we behave and relate to each other? This can be provocative, and it is not always possible to avoid discovering unflattering sides of oneself.

The starting point is that nobody is right from the outset. There are two reasons for that: one is, that the partners together just have about half of what's needed for a relationship to succeed. The other half needs to be developed together. The goal isn't to create a "correct" relationship but to create "our" relationship. The other reason is, that one being right from the outset would just lead to a power struggle. Power struggles within relationships never have winners, just losers.

3. *Authenticity*

As I mentioned earlier, positive close relationships are about intimacy. They are about meeting each other on an existential level. Mutual respect is what opens the door. But this is not enough. We also need to go through this open door. And this happens when we start to have the courage to show each other "who we really are".

True intimacy is only possible if we are courageous enough to be authentic, which means that we stop hiding ourselves behind social roles, common sense, rationalism, and so on. We must stop to filter away some of our feelings and thoughts because we consider them not acceptable for the other. I once said that the biggest gift we can give to a friend is to share our weakness with him, and I still think that this is true. If we share with others our negative sides, our fears, and so on, we show that we trust the other and that we consider her important enough to share what makes us vulnerable. In relations between children and adults this is not always easy. We often try to hide some of our feelings, thoughts, or behaviors from children, because we think that the truth is not good for them, and in most of the cases this has mostly negative effects. In general, we can say that secrets create distance, not intimacy.

Authenticity also means that we must use a personal language. The personal language is also known as I-messages, and includes expressions like:

I want to...

I don't want to...

I like...

I don't like...

The personal language makes it possible for the other to understand who we are and how we feel. Traditionally we often speak with each other in ways that tell more about the other than about ourselves. "Why do you never clean up after you?!", "You know damn well that you are supposed to sit at the table when eating!", and so on. This kind of expressions is not personal and

often it is not respectful either. It doesn't tell the other who we are or what we think and therefore it makes it harder to establish contact.

But it is important to not only exchange "you" with "I" as a technique. This is not what personal language is about. Personal language is about telling who we are, what we like and what we don't like, what we want and what we don't want.

In relationships between parents and children, authenticity also means that parents have to abandon "the automatic parental answering machine", the device that spouts educational, advisory, and "helpful" comments as soon as a child gets within earshot. The quality of these messages is often not very high. Most often, the tape contains an unsorted hodge-podge of "received wisdom" we remember from our grandparents, along with various bits and pieces of more contemporary parental advice we read in a magazine or overheard on television.

Just because the tape is automatic doesn't mean that it's harmless. Far from it. The individual words may sound harmless enough, but the underlying message is destructive: "You would not be able to function as a decent/well-bred/responsible/cooperative child unless I remind you all the time what you should do!"

The "automatic parental answering machine" is similar to other forms of theater often played by parents and teachers. They assume that their role as a parent or teacher demands that they should say or do certain things – like roles in a play. It is generally a bad idea for parents or teachers to play theater. As soon as they start to act or play a role, it is getting hard to be in contact with them. There is always a role between the child and the real person behind the role. And this creates a distance, not contact. And without contact, a close relationship is not established.

4. Dialog

"The quality of the conversation is more important for the family's wellbeing than its result."

Jesper Juul, *Your Competent Child*

When two persons' desires and needs are expressed and at odds with each other, a dialog is needed to reach an agreement on a higher level. It is of great significance to keep in mind that the quality of the *process* means most for the family's comfort and wellbeing. This quality often demands reflection and at times also that you take the time that is needed.

There isn't any "method of conversation" which all can learn by following a certain course. This may work with the democratic process, but it doesn't work within close relationships. There are some guidelines and principles, which you may consider and even try to follow, but there is no

“method”. This lack of a method is unique for human relations, which in first hand build on mutual love. Methods erase the differences and, in the same time, equality.

Therefore, we are forced to stand insecurities each day, and we need to experiment us ahead. What worked the day before might doesn't work today, because we all change and develop on a personal level. Again, compared to other social situations, in close relationships we must try to take the other's desires and needs as serious as we do take the own ones. Or, the own ones as serious as the other's - depending on the situation we start from. It is interesting that children and adults are similar even here: as soon as we feel that our desires and needs are taken seriously we realize that they do not matter so much - we do not need to be right and get our way through.

Another example borrowed from Jesper Juul:

Casper: “Can I sleep over at Fredric's tomorrow?”

Father: “No, Casper. You can't. We also want to meet you, now and then.”

Father instead: “I don't think so. Is it important?”

When Casper asks “Can I sleep over at Fredric's tomorrow?” and his father answers “No, Casper. You can't. We also want to meet you, now and then”, there are two wills against each other. If Casper's Dad answers “I don't think so. Is it important?”, he invites Casper to look closer at his wish. This is helping Casper because he feels that he is taken seriously, and it is helping his father because he gets a chance to know more about the issue he is supposed to consider.

If Casper was healthy and energetic, he may had told his father why it was important to him to sleep at Fredric's, but in that case it would have been in form of an *argument for something*. The father standing for the invitation makes Casper see the invitation as an interest in his *person*. And the father doesn't need to look for counterarguments. He can tell about who he is, for example through saying: “I will be gone all next week, and this is why I'd like to spend some time with you.”

Casper may choose to give priority to hang out with his friend Fredric and his father may choose to use his power: “I understand that you prefer to be with Fredric, but I really want you to stay at home.” It is much easier to accept that someone else is deciding if he feels that he was taken seriously. An evening together with *this* father may even be a pleasure, as soon as he is ready to say “good bye” to his plans together with Fredric.

It is a central part of the parents' responsibility for the quality of the interaction that they take the initiative and actively let the children express their wishes and needs. Otherwise, children do not learn to tell about themselves. What they learn is to argument against their parents. Which means that the strangeness of both parts in relation to each other increases, and that both of them make the conclusion that it doesn't make sense to try to talk when you're in a conflict with other people.

Formulations like:

“I don’t think that I understand... Can you try to explain a little bit more?”

“I’d like to hear why this is so important to you.”

“It is difficult for me to understand that someone wants... I am really curious about it...”

“I don’t know what to think about this. Please help me. Tell me why you’re so much into it...”

... are examples for ways parents can invite children to clarifying and to fruitful negotiations which may found their decisions.

E) Your Competent Child

“Perhaps it is the infant that learns his mother to «mother» in the very beginning of the parenthood. Perhaps it is the competent child that shows the way and triggers the answers from its close ones. Perhaps we only need to be open, intimate, emotional sensitive, and ready to attune to the child to learn being parents during the first year. If this is the case, we must consider the child as an individual that is intentional in his behavior, equipped with tools for communication from the beginning, and that has its ways to influence his situation and his relations.”

Margareta Berg Brodén, *Mor och Barn i ingenmansland*, translation by me¹⁷

About thirty or forty years ago, professionals who worked with families realized that what they have learned from developmental psychology didn't really match the experiences they made meeting the families. Observing the interactions between adults and children, they realized that the children were much more competent than what they had been told.

Therefore, scientists like Daniel Stern started to work on a new paradigm. They observed children in relations and filmed their interactions in order to be able to analyze them. What they found was that children weren't incompetent, as earlier claimed, but that they cooperated, that they were human, that they were exactly the same competent as adults concerning their mental and emotional life. The only difference was that they had less knowledge because they had experienced less.

The term competent child means, among other things, that the reactions and signals coming from children always make sense, even though we don't understand them all the time. For many adults, this fact is extremely hard to recognize and even harder to apply in practice. No wonder, for centuries, parents and professionals were told that the child's signals are irrational and antisocial and that they should be ignored.

“Children only want to test their parents!”

“Children just want to be in charge and rule over their parents!”

“Children just want to manipulate their parents!”

...was said.

Most of us have it deep inside, this assumption. For generations, we have reacted to children's signals by instructing them about how they should behave, instead of taking them seriously.

This is fundamentally different from the approach that Jesper Juul so prominently proposes: that we consider the living together within a family as a mutual learning process. Adults grow

¹⁷ Berg Brodén, M. (1989). *Mor och barn i ingenmansland. Intervention under spädbarnsperioden*. (p. 9) Stockholm: Norstedts

together with their children and they learn as much from their children as the children learn from their parents.

“When I say that children are competent, I mean that they are in a position to teach us what we need to learn. They give us the feedback that makes it possible for us to regain our own lost competence and help us to discard our unfruitful, unloving, and self-destructive patterns of behavior.”

Jesper Juul, *Your Competent Child*¹⁸

It may be the first time in centuries that we are able to reduce violations of the child’s integrity, physically, socially, and psychologically, to a minimum. And this is why I spoke about hope in the very beginning of the lecture.

The relationships between adults and children have in many countries been improving qualitatively for several decades. This change is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the fact that children and young people have become much more natural and self-aware. They are no longer automatically programmed to tolerate the infringements and violations inflicted by parents and adults, which earlier generations were forced to accept. This means that they are more likely to send us signals when the relationships turn bad. Just two generations ago, children stopped trying to tell their parents how they feel after a few years because they had learned that nobody ever listens.

The children’s signals are of greatest help for us to take a break and reconsider the way we relate to them. They are born with the abilities needed both to make us aware of their integrity and to tell us when we violate it. Children may not be able to defend their boundaries, but they absolutely are able to when we violate them. If we are sensitive to the reactions of children, we will learn after a while to distinguish normal frustration from violations, and in this way become more and more able to avoid violations toward our children, not only in the traditional sense, but also in a much more profound and existential one.

Instead of making a summary, I would like to tell you another beautiful example from Jesper Juul. It shows in a short and inspiring way many of the important points I made today:

Jesper once received a letter from a mother from Sweden. If I remember right, she had emigrated from Northern Africa and was working as an engineer. When she became a mother, she was reading all the literature about parenting she could find in order to be perfectly informed. In the end she found one approach that seemed to make sense for her: attachment parenting. She bought all the necessary equipment and did everything as suggested. After two years, she was desperate. The child had hit and scratched her for two years and she didn’t know what to do.

Jesper wrote her that his first impulse was that she seemed to have chosen the method first and then started to learn to know her child. The child’s behavior just seemed to say one thing:

¹⁸ Juul, J. (2000). *Your Competent Child. Toward New Basic Values for the Family*. (p. 9). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

“Mother, I don’t want to be that close!”

Some weeks later he received the answer: the mother wrote that she had talked to her daughter. What she said was: “Listen, I have done something for two years, which you didn’t like, because I thought that it was good for you. You tried to tell me all the time that this was not the case, but I didn’t listen. I am sorry for that.”

You know what happened afterwards?

Her daughter slowly came to her, gave her a kiss, and said: “Mom, I love you.”

Thank you.