

Il maltrattamento infantile: sguardi complementari

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Child abuse Complementary points of view

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Summary

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.

An example: In Scandinavia the focus has been on a new kind of parents who are defined "curling parents" –characterized their intention to eliminate every single obstacle in their children'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.

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 vast majority of intervention and prevention programs are stunningly ineffective.(1) 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". (2) 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.

In fact, it is common that people 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, a positive relationship with a psychotherapist, and a positive relationship with their partner in adulthood.

Another example: One kind of intervention 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 strongly depends on the relationship the home visitors were able to establish 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.

For almost two decades, Jesper Juul has 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, offering a lot of valuable insights for everyone trying to establish positive relationships within the family or in pedagogical institutions.(3) He is convinced that there is something you can call *relational competence* and that this competence can be learned.

Let us read the following statement :

„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* (4)

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. As humans, we 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. (5) It is made up of several people who affect each other in a mutually responsive way. The interactions within a family play an eminent role on how everyone develops and thrives. In other words: the quality of our relationships and especially our close relationships strongly define who we are and who we are to become.

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 well-being heavily rely on the quality of the parents' relationship with each other. Parents living in happy marriages generally have effective parenting skills and their children function well. Mothers and fathers 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 does not mean that there should not be any conflict. Indeed, 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 of them – which is a good sign. It is not conflicts that are the problem, rather the way we deal with conflicts. I will return to this issue later. I just want to say it here because I do not want to get in trouble with all the ones who

divorced in here! As you will see later on, a good relationship does not 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.”(6)

It is important to know that children who are treated with respect treat others with respect. Children who are cared for care for others. Children whose integrity is not violated do not 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.

“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 (7)

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.

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. (8)

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 will probably think that this is not very surprising. These findings seem to be evident. But there is an important question to ask: why should they not be valid for the relationship between adults and children as well?

I wonder what Gottman would say about a couple having this kind of attitude to each other. Would that marriage last? Unfortunately, children have difficulty to divorce their parents.

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

If you allow me to make a short summary of Belsky and Pasco Faron's findings (9), I would say that it is important that we respect our counterpart's perceptions, feelings, and thoughts, and that we take the signals and reactions we receive from our counterpart seriously. People in our family do not 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 do not 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.

Diana Baumrind's studies on rearing styles (10) have something in common with the previous ones: 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.

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 is 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 or his signals are meaningful, even if we do not understand them.

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 does not mean that we need to like everything, but that it is important to be aware of the fact that, on an existential level, we should not be judgmental.

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.

Therefore, I want to underline that a good relationship implies 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 should not forget this fact, and especially not when we relate to children. It is not enough that they respect us. We also must respect them!

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 inevitably 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.**

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.

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 for both parties 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 I mentioned earlier, positive close relationships are about intimacy. They are about meeting each other on an existential level. (...) 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.

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...

When two people's desires and needs are expressed and at odds with each other, a dialogue is needed to reach an agreement on a higher level.

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 argue against their parents. This means that the strangeness of both parts in relation to each other increases, and that both of them make the conclusion that it does not make sense to try to talk when you are in a conflict with other people.

About thirty or forty years ago, professionals who worked with families realized that what they learned from developmental psychology did not 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 were not incompetent, as earlier claimed, but that they cooperated, that they were human, that they were exactly as 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 do not understand them all the time.

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