



Child Development Leading to the Pursuit of Virtues and the Avoidance of Vices

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Optimizing the social, emotional, moral and cognitive development of children will support prosocial behavior and peaceful societies. To accomplish these goals, efforts need to start from birth with authoritative parenting to achieve secure attuned attachment between caregiver and child. Such parenting should eliminate the toxic stress associated with the authoritarian approach and the lack of direction seen with permissive or uninvolved parenting. Early literacy is the key to building character using the vehicles of modeled behaviors, reading stories with a moral and that teach a lesson and Human Relations Programs for Children. Benevolent mindfulness characterized by emotional empathy, compassion and helping behaviors will result from proper parenting and successful character education. The resultant ability to think in a complex fashion where virtues are pursued and vices avoided should facilitate resistance to false narratives and non-violent conflict resolution. Avoiding Adverse Child Experiences has been shown to minimize depression, violence perpetration and other problem behaviors and disorders. When there are educational and professional resources in play to support the development of children in communities, a responsible, caring citizenry can be anticipated.

Keywords: *Parenting; emotional empathy; modeling caring behaviors; moral development.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Optimizing social, emotional, moral and cognitive development for all children is a goal towards which most individuals would agree is worth striving. Such an achievement would likely solve many problems that humankind confronts on a global basis. Examples of these problems include domestic abuse, avoidable enmities, some mental illnesses, crimes, wars, genocide and others [1-5]. Attaining benevolent mindfulness is a key result of any process leading to mature, healthy character development. At the same time, avoidance of insults that lead to selfish, malevolent behaviors is critical if human potential is to be optimized [6]. This paper is meant to provide a "roadmap" to the process of fostering child development, so that virtuous helping behaviors are the rule and vices actively avoided. The Flow Chart on Benevolent Mindfulness [7] provides an outline of the necessary stations along the road, while the Flow Chart on Malevolent Mindfulness indicates the pitfalls that need to be avoided.

2. AUTHORITATIVE PARENTING

Experts generally agree that authoritative parenting is critical to the healthy mental development of children [8,9]. With this type of parenting, confrontation with responsiveness characterizes the approach to discipline. Confrontation involves identifying and counseling regarding misbehavior. At the same time, recognition and management of stress associated with misbehavior and certain life events is regularly attended to, in order to prevent long lasting adverse mental sequelae. Shaming, coercion, intimidation and corporal punishment are not utilized, as they are in authoritarian parenting. This is to avoid the "toxic" stress that is a product of preventable adverse childhood experiences [2]. With authoritative parenting, the communication set up between parent and child leads to healthy interpersonal attunement that serves developmental progress [10]. Unfortunately, authoritarian parenting often is passed from generation to generation. Adverse sequelae, including mental illness and violent behaviors, are often seen. For this reason an active effort to break the cycle of authoritarian parenting and teach authoritative parenting is vital. This effort may start while couples are attending prenatal education classes [11-13]. In societies where authoritative parenting is not the rule, a child development team may be organized to promote

desirable parenting practices [14]. Lastly, permissive and uninvolved parenting also needs to be avoided, due to the lack of direction for desired behaviors associated with these parenting types.

3. INTERPERSONAL ATTUNEMENT

With authoritative parenting, reciprocal communication between parent and child is established. In the newborn, this begins with "en face" eye to eye contact, especially during feedings. Later, it may involve reciprocal smiling, singing, talking lovingly to the infant and play activities, before elementary communication with language is possible. The interpersonal attunement that develops describes how caretaker and child are responsive to one another's emotional needs, thoughts and moods [9]. When well developed, this "interpersonal neurobiology" involves a resonance where the thoughts, needs and feelings of the other are regularly appreciated.

Appropriate responses are often the result of such attunement and lead to the strengthening of the bond between caretaker and child.

4. ATTACHMENT

Imprinting describes a situation where a young animal comes to recognize another animal, person, or thing as a parent or other object of habitual trust, often shortly after birth [15,16]. In humans, we usually use the term attachment to describe the trusting relationship that develops between child and caregiver. This trusting relationship strengthens over a period of months to years due to ongoing interpersonal attunement with caregivers being responsive to the child's needs. In order for attachment to be successful an initial bonding of love and tenderness the caregiver feels for the infant needs to occur. As Andrea Hollingsworth has stated, "Over time, secure attuned attachments with other persons may enable us to love more and fear less, rendering us progressively more capable of sharing in the suffering of others and increasing the likelihood that we will take action to alleviate their misery [17]." It is these secure attachments that allow caregivers, teachers and mentors to influence the child's developing mindfulness or intrapersonal attunement.

5. INTRAPERSONAL ATTUNEMENT

Intrapersonal attunement or mindfulness involves noticing and respecting oneself [18]. It refers to a

self regulation of attention where one pays attention to the events of the moment. This process requires an orientation to learned values represented in cortical areas of the brain. Intrapersonal attunement enhances the capacity for emotional empathy, if certain values related to a particular circumstance are internalized. It is clearly necessary to provide a moral learning process that will enhance emotional empathy and serve as the impetus for helping behaviors. Developing a moral compass should insulate persons from blindly following a group who are caught up in inadvisable behaviors. Thus, moral learning should provide protection from deindividuation, so characteristic of authoritarian societies [19,20].

6. MORAL LEARNING

Moral learning can be transmitted in a number of ways. Basically, the exercises involve either

classical or operant conditioning. Every effort should be made to eliminate the corporal punishment and shaming that are commonly used by some “educaters” in certain situations. Such reinforcement often results in repressed fear and anger that serve as a well of energy waiting to be discharged on targets that may be established by false narratives [21]. Moral learning is taught by either dilemma ethics [22] or plain moral facts [23], with several vehicles commonly used for such teaching. These vehicles include the modeling of caring behaviors, reading stories with a moral and human relations programs for children. Moral decision making that results from such learning becomes emotional, intuitive and “automatic”, when dealing with a familiar issue [24]. Alternatively, decision making may involve conscious controlled reasoning based on prior or new learning, when an unfamiliar moral issue is encountered.

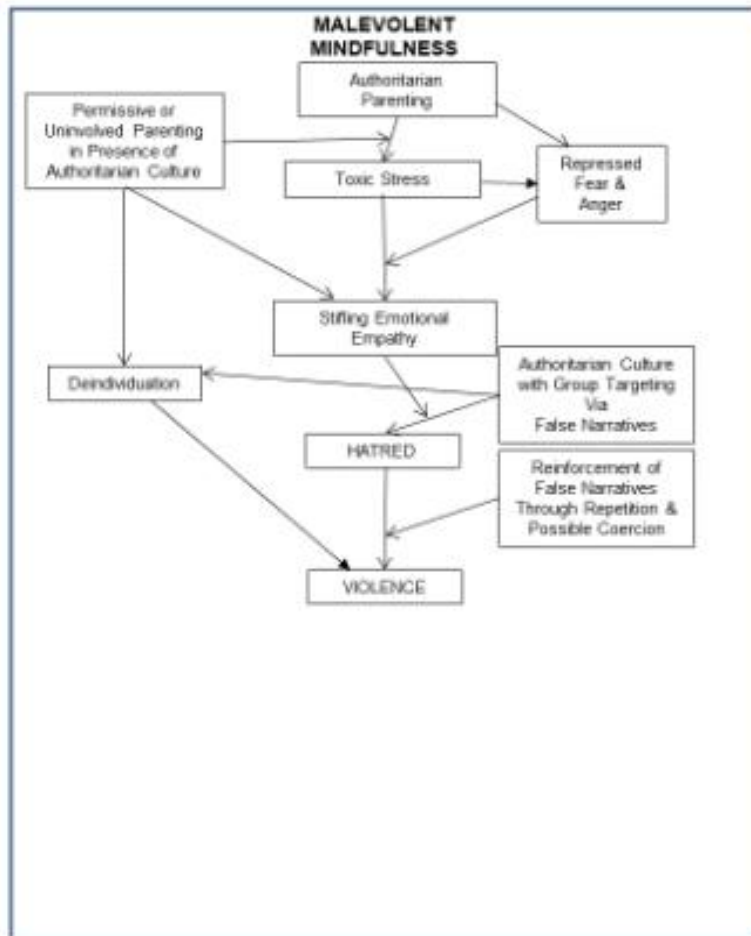


Fig. 1. Flow chart malevolent

BENEVOLENT MINDFULNESS

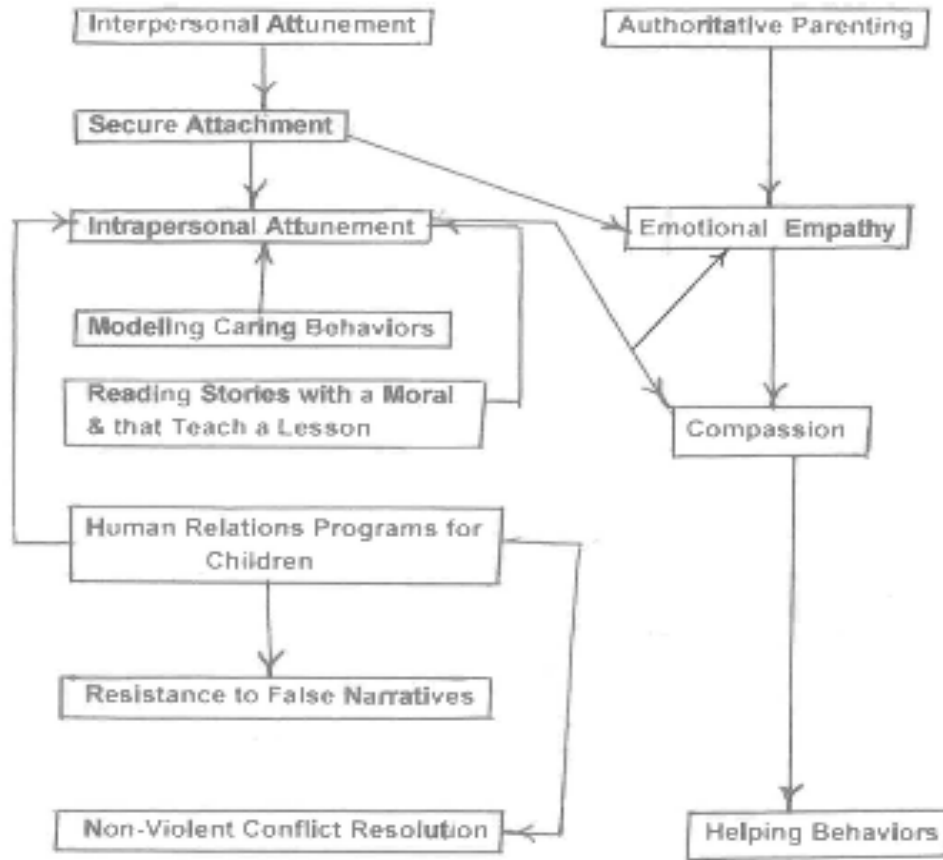


Fig. 2. Benevolent mindfulness

7. MODELING OF CARING BEHAVIORS

Samuel and Pearl Oliner’s study published as the Altruistic Personality found that parents who modeled caring behaviors inside and outside the family were more likely to have children who would take significant risk to help others [25]. Specific suggestions and techniques for modeling desirable behaviors are available through a number of sources. At healthychildren.org [26], suggestions include pointing out sharing among adults, showing ways to calm down, teaching children to express their feelings and paying attention to good behavior. At Klaschools.com [27], suggestions for modeling behaviors involve doing good deeds, being patient in lines, respecting others and their property and being a good loser. Other sites also contribute constructive ideas [28,29].

8. READING STORIES WITH A MORAL AND THAT TEACH A LESSON

Literacy is key to all learning. Early vocabulary growth comes with parents speaking frequently with their children. Brain growth is impaired when less words are spoken to children [30]. The Zero to Three Program [31] and others provide parents ideas for nurturing thinking and language skills. Unfortunately, across the USA less than 50% of children are read to daily by parents. The Head Start Program in the USA provides a vehicle for disadvantaged children to “catch-up.” However, the program is inadequately funded and staffed, so it is unable to serve all of the many children in need [32]. This lack of learning and impaired literacy in the early years may hinder the attempt to transmit “plain moral facts” through reading and telling stories. That is why promoting early literacy has the potential of

enhancing the moral and social/emotional development of children. There are many resources that caregivers and schools may use to promote moral learning as children mature [33-39]. For the lessons to be appreciated and internalized, it is obvious that comprehension is mandatory.

9. HUMAN RELATIONS PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN (HRPC)

Individual Differences: An Experience in Human Relations for Children [40] is an example of a compendium that outlines exercises at various grade levels to sensitize children to appropriate interaction with others. Multiple goals of the exercises include furthering self-esteem, supporting virtues and avoiding vices, control of emotions, awareness of human similarities and respect for individual difference. A number of recent resources are available to teach respectful human relations [41,42]. Many school systems do an excellent job in this area [43,44]. However, it should be emphasized that there is a degree of moral entrepreneurship in all these programs. Such moral entrepreneurship involves expressing an opinion as to what is virtuous behavior and what behaviors should be avoided (i.e. vices). In this regard, virtues are defined as those traits of character that blunt mere self interest, so that one can see and actively promote the interests of others [45]. In contradistinction, vices represent those traits of character that unleash mere self interest, so that one fails or ignores to see the interests of others [45]. Certain cultures may vary somewhat in their concepts of virtues and vices. Teaching and agreeing on “plain moral facts” should be achievable.

10. RESISTANCE TO FALSE NARRATIVES AND NON-VIOLENT CONFLICT RESOLUTION

False narratives have classically been a vehicle by which societies have attempted to direct members to accomplish their own selfish purposes [46]. Such false narratives may distort history, promote false beliefs and propagate negative feelings toward ethnic and racial groups for political purposes. It is anticipated that healthy psychosocial development that includes authoritative parenting and moral learning will shield persons from internalizing these false narratives and contribute to resilience in stressful times [47]. Higher levels of literacy developed through the educational process should further

facilitate the process of “reading between the lines.” There are communication skills that include attentive listening, assertive statements and clear opinions that are essential to the success of non-violent conflict resolution [48-50]. HRPC should provide the basis for the objective thinking required to reduce enmities that have developed.

11. EMOTIONAL EMPATHY (EE)

EE refers to the vicarious sharing of emotions. The ability to feel the emotional states of others is based on the quality of interpersonal and intrapersonal attunement experienced during development [51]. Dr. Helen Riess has developed the concepts of empathic concern and empathic capacity [52]. It is secure attuned attachment, modeled behaviors, reading stories with a moral and HRPC that contribute to enhancing EE. Unfortunately, “Interpersonal relationships marked by conflict, insecurity and distrust can cause us to feel threatened, emotionally deregulated and closed off to empathetic connection with others [17].” There are many examples where recurrent maltreatment in childhood that results in fear and anger produces a stifling of emotional empathy [6]. The presence of cognitive empathy (ability to mentalize) without EE is characteristic of psychopathy where ruthless persons use others as objects to satisfy their own selfish needs [17].

12. COMPASSION AND HELPING BEHAVIORS

EE allows one to feel the suffering of others. Moral learning creates the impetus to care about such suffering. The result of feeling one’s suffering and caring about it is the desire to relieve the discomfort. That desire we define as compassion. It is compassion that leads to helping behaviors that ultimately relieve the suffering. The propensity to work towards helping behaviors is clearly dependent on the quality of experiences during psychosocial development.

13. CONCLUSION

Using the Flow Chart on Benevolent Mindfulness as a guide, it is clear that optimizing psychosocial development is not a simple endeavor. If we are to achieve Parenting for a Peaceful World [53], significant initiatives are in order. Parenting orientation prenatally has been shown to be effective [11-13]. Pediatricians can provide ongoing support to children and parents in the

office, if their services are readily available to all. Certain genetically transmitted conditions, mental disorders, congenital problems and injuries require ongoing medical and community resources for the best possible outcome [54,55]. The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child could provide a vehicle to further developmental education globally [56]. There is much work to be done as the child advances through the school system. That work includes contributions from teachers, theologians, pediatricians, political leaders and other community members who serve as role models for civility and responsible behavior. Indeed, It Takes a Village [57], if psychosocial development of children is to be optimized. For progress to be made, countries need to provide the person power and financial resources to facilitate traversing the steps outlined in the Flow Chart on Benevolent Mindfulness. Prioritizing efforts to achieve such progress is a challenge for all societies.

CONSENT

It is not applicable.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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