

Emotional Warmth Parenting

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'Does exactly what it says on the tin' for children in public care

The knowledge base of psychological theory and research relating to good parenting is not easy to access. Confronted by the www-fueled avalanche of information, parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, children's home staff, and anyone in the parenting role, will find it difficult to sort out what is useful and valuable from worthless hot air.

One way to highlight good parenting qualities would be to use clear terminology which accurately describes what's needed. The three words - Emotional Warmth Parenting - tells the child what to expect from the adults in the parenting role, while spelling out to the adults, how they should behave towards a child in their care. Good parents are sensitive to their child's emotions, warm and kind and provide the love, protection and resources to meet the child's parenting needs.

Of course, there is more to understand, but emotional warmth parenting is a good starting point. By understanding the research and theory behind 'Emotional Warmth Parenting,' adults in the parenting role can translate ideas into good practice.

The 'Emotional Warmth Parenting' approach captures Authoritative Parenting Style combined with informed and sensitive, Attachment-led relationships, which are strengths-based, trauma-informed and



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encourages Self-management behaviour while explaining challenging behaviour. Expanding on each of these areas based on research and theory provides practical pointers and critical training material.

Authoritative Parenting Style

When we first read the research of the late Prof Diana Baumrind's work on parenting style, we were shocked at her frank bluntness. Her measures of parenting success started with the young person staying alive long enough to reach adulthood! She also included parental achievements like the young person was not locked away, dependent on drugs or alcohol, and not involved in prostitution. In contrast, the English government's measure of a successful childhood in care, is a few pass grades in their General Certificate of Secondary Education.

Baumrind (1991) asserted that an authoritative parenting style offered the best chance of long-term parenting success. This is achievable by following two basic principles to inform and reflect on parenting decisions- showing interest, sensitivity, and responsiveness to and for the child and having high but realistic expectations of a child's learning and behaviour.

Attachment-Led Relationships

Attachments occur when the adult and child spend quality time getting to know and trust each other, enjoying each other's company, and having fun together. While this special relationship is usually between the child and his or her biological parents, children in public care are no different from all children: they also need sensitive, responsive, emotionally warm parenting that is protective and provides for emotional and physical needs.



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The traditional view that 'attachment styles' are fixed has been challenged by Dr Patricia Crittendon's (2006) 'Dynamic Maturation Model of Attachment'. Optimistically, her research has demonstrated that children are adaptive and learn from experience, change (dynamic) and grow in response to new people and situations (maturation).

In the world of public care, this is the light at the end of the tunnel. Children will attune with their new, kind, responsive, emotionally warm person or people in the parenting role; however, it may take time related to their traumatic past.

Strength-Based Development

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Most people are aware of their weaknesses and strengths, but we also have hidden strengths that we may not know about, although other people will be well aware of these. These signature or character strengths are particularly powerful because we are almost always successful when we use them.

Common signature strengths will include trustworthiness, fairness and generosity, but hidden strengths are often subtle, like loyalty, humility, stickability, determination or forgiveness. Uncovering such character strengths in children and considering how these can be used more effectively is empowering for the child or young person and improves their social behaviour, well-being and self-worth. Peer-reviewed research by Alex Wood (2011) and his colleagues confirms that using our strengths builds self-esteem and improves long-term well-being.



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Trauma-Informed Support

The positive effect from attachment behaviour may not be immediately apparent. A child who has experienced trauma and abuse from adults will have difficulty trusting other adults. What may appear as challenging or disruptive behaviour may be testing behaviour, as the child tests adults to see if they are safe and predictable. Responding to the child with sensitivity, kindness, understanding, and responsiveness with consistency about learning and behaviour expectations are likely to reassure the child, that they can trust the adult.

Depending on each young person's history of trauma, their 'testing time' will be related to the extent and duration of the past emotional trauma. Linking this to Crittenden's work, abused traumatised children will have used their intelligence to develop strategies to adapt to their hostile environment. They may have dozens of strategies that they have used over the years to keep themselves safe. A wise adult should teach the child adaptive tactics for the new caring environment, rather than wasting time trying to take away their old strategies, as they may need them again in future hostile situations.

Being trauma-aware also calls upon adults to regulate their own emotions to prevent new traumatic experiences for the child. We need to challenge the common misguided beliefs that children are tough and will bounce back from trauma. Dr Bruce Perry explains this: 'It is an ultimate irony that at the time when the human is most vulnerable to the effects of trauma – during infancy and childhood – adults generally presume the most resilience' (Perry, 1995, p. 272).



Self-Management Encouragement and Explaining Challenging Behaviour

When faced with challenging behaviour, parents and carers are often at a loss to know how to respond. Helping the child develop flexible thinking and self-control builds their executive function (i.e., emotional regulation, problem-solving and planning), encourages self-management of behaviour and decreases self-defeating behaviour. To better understand and manage challenging behaviour, adults can consider the following five questions:

1. What is the most likely need that the child is communicating with this behaviour?
2. Is there anything triggering the behaviour?
3. In what situations does the behaviour occur most frequently?
4. What circumstances encourage the behaviour?
5. Is there a missing skill that would reduce the need for disruptive behaviour?

Finding the answer to these questions can indicate which factors maintain unwanted behaviour and point to practical ideas to reduce or eliminate it.

Sharing Our Life with Children Is A Privilege

Emotional Warmth Parenting enables good parenting decisions and choices for the child in your care. By finding the best in children and looking for their strengths, we switch from a problem-focused approach to a positive, possibility perspective.



This is not just wishful thinking, research shows that this approach can make the positive difference for the child or young person in care (see Cameron, 2017; Cameron and Das, 2019). Children deserve high-quality support, which can lead to a successful future. To quote Nelson Mandela (1997) 'The true character of society is revealed in how it treats its children.'

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