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HAPPINESS IN A TIME OF UPHEAVAL: LIVING A PURPOSEFUL AND MEANINGFUL LIFE

Abstract. The paper elaborates on Donald Winnicott’s concept of “good-enough” parenting, highlighting that consistent but imperfect caregiving fosters resilience and emotional development in children. The emotional attunement between parent and child—when flexibly applied—shapes secure attachment and healthy brain development. Both under- and over-attunement can hinder a child’s ability to cope, potentially resulting in long-term emotional difficulties. Importantly, parents also benefit from embracing imperfection, using everyday relational “mismatches” as opportunities for meaningful repair and growth.

Keywords: Good-enough parenting, Parental attunement, Self-regulation, Attachment, Resilience, Dyadic interaction, Neurodevelopment

Donald Winnicott showed us, half a century ago, that perfection is not the ideal to which we should strive. He argued that “perfect” is not perfect enough. Rather than perfect parenting, it was generally-consistent parenting that builds frustration tolerance in a child. He called this “moderate matching” or what we might also describe as “good enough” parenting. How does that make sense?

We are not born “able”. We adapt to the world progressively through life and gradually find our place in it. From infant to toddler, child, adolescent, and deeply into our adulthood it is family we have and build around us that affects nutrition, physical activity, and attachment style. We are embedded within a particular society and within a cultural context. All these factors contribute to our “self”-organization.

How we bond with our parents is important and when there is poor connection, or what is called no-attunement, which can occur in situations such as maternal depression, the effects can be devastating. Essentially, children of depressed mothers develop depressed brains with over-active right hemispheres and underactive left hemispheres.

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They can also suffer delays in brain growth. A number of neurobiological issues can develop including lower levels of crucial neurotransmitters as well as higher levels of stress hormones. All these factors contribute to depression and anxiety, which erode "self"-organization.

Parents may feel that it is their task to be there immediately the child is in need. It would seem to be a natural instinct to want to soothe the child the moment that anything upsetting happens. This is, however, not the best parenting strategy. By offering instantaneous soothing, their child may have a limited opportunity to develop the vagal "brakes" that are necessary to activate the parasympathetic nervous system that acts to counterbalance the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) during or after stressful experiences. This is not to say that children do not need soothing. Winnocott was clear in promoted consistent but flexible soothing. It is the flexibility of application in the context of the circumstances that is the key.

Children who receive excessive attention and coddling often become spoiled and narcissistic. As adults they may have a tendency to become pessimistic and passive-aggressive, having been trained by their parents that they can, and perhaps should, be gratified with no effort on their own to achieve goals. Some will learn to simply whine in anticipation of others providing comfort. This passive behavior tends to over-activate their right hemisphere, which can promote withdrawal and negative emotions, and under-activate the left hemisphere with its associated positive emotions and proactive behaviors.

By allowing momentary space for a child to develop the proper resiliency skill-set, a parent is supporting their child's success later in life. As well as being a conscious decision to hold back, it is also simply not possible for a parent to be at exactly the right place all the time. The child needs to learn that they are loved and cared for either way. Good-enough parenting offers moderate matching which bolsters the resiliency of the child's autonomic nervous system. This allows them to rise to the challenge of stressful situations, then calm down afterward to recoup – to "self-regulate". Good-enough parenting means that when there is a little time before the parent swoops in to soothe, it allows the child to develop their own capacity to self-sooth. Their brain and their body knows how to activate their parasympathetic nervous system to calm themselves down.

The quality of the reciprocity within the parent-infant dyad—referred to as synchrony, matching, coherence, or attunement—offers the emotional nourishment critical for healthy development. The rhythm and timing of the interaction between mother and infant are key for the developing child to build the capacity to negotiate the nuances and subtleties of relationships. Sensitivity in the midrange is most predictive of secure attachment (Jaffe, Beebe, Feldstein, Crown, & Jasnow, 2001). Bonding/attachment is enhanced by repairing these passing mismatches. Healthy development progresses and, just as Winnocott hypothesized, good-enough parenting offers flexible matching and reparation. It is beneficial for the child to encounter many moderate, well-coped-with stressors, with good-enough parental engagement. That is how the child best develops approach behaviors, stress tolerance, and resilience.

On the other hand, parents who offer low levels of affective matching are likely to spawn insecure attachment. If there no assistance or engagement from the parents at all and the child struggles to self-repair or when repair does not occur or there are repeated unsuccessful attempts to repair the ruptures, the child develops defensive and avoidant

coping behaviors that undermines later relationships. These interactions for approach or avoidance correspond to the ability to differentiate between pleasurable and painful experiences (Berridge & Kringelbach, 2008). Low levels of affective matching and poor development of self-regulating skills can lead to a dominance of painful experiences due to both a sense of failure and a sense of parental abandonment, isolation, or rejection.

Either the extreme of high or low-sensitivity reparation may promote insecure attachment. Low-sensitivity reparations can occur during long-duration mismatches when infants are constantly overwhelmed with stress and so fail to develop coping skills. High sensitivity involves intense vigilance, where matching lasts too long, with little opportunity for reparation. Infants not given a chance to confront sufficient amounts of stress - with support - fail to develop effective methods of coping (Tronick, 2007).

It is not only the child that benefits by developing better coping skills and resiliency. The mother, too, has an opportunity to find the midrange of comfort for herself. High or low matching forces the mother into one extreme or the other, blunting her affect or leading to excessive stress. Parents, often the primary carer, can develop disturbed and distressed states, including anxiousness or dissociation, that have the potential to negatively impact attachment.

A good-enough parent, therefore, is better than one who pretends to be perfect. Your imperfections model the real world. It is how you use your imperfections that determines the quality of your parenting. Using the misunderstandings, conflicts, and points of tension in the relationship as the focus of resolution builds positive outcomes. Mismatches are a plus when resolved.

The reparation of the "messiness," rather than synchrony, is key to change in therapy and childhood development (Tronick, 2007). Inherent to complex adaptive systems, we thrive as open, curious people who strive to resolve misunderstanding, and this is a messy process. Through self-organizing interactions we become greater than we were before.

The parent-child dyad is a self-organizing system, so too are many of our relationships in life. We continually adjust to one another in a mutually regulated process. Each of us identifies and makes use of increasing amounts of meaningful information emergent from higher levels of shared understanding achieved together.