

Just Listen to your children!

“You’ll be surprise how they will grow”

by

mike o’sullivan

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BACK COVER

Back cover ideas

Based on his experience of living through three generations - child, parent and grandparent - the author of this book is presenting a personal view of parenting that challenges conventional wisdoms and norms.

He believes the following four perspectives of parenting will help you bring up your child with a more authentic and healthier personality, which must be every parent's dream for their child:

- the influence of the **nature vs nurture** debate - where you position yourself on the nature-nurture continuum affects the way you parent
- the **natural evolution** of the human brain - your parenting will be greatly enhanced when you know the three stages your child's brain goes through as they grow
- the '**autonomic nervous system**' impact on mental health - a human brain function that restores your child's mind and body back to a relaxed and stable state, and
- the astonishing effect of '**just listening to understand**' - parents who listen to understand and educate help their children develop more productive and effective adults.

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About the author

We are by nature skeptical of authors we don't know. Especially, if the subject matter is very important to us, such as bringing up our children. Any book that offers new ideas or challenges old ideas is more likely to be welcomed when we understand the background of the author.

I propose therefore to start by giving a summary of my background and experience. I want you to feel reassured by my engagement with and passion for this important subject of bringing up our children.

My qualifications include: Re-evaluation Counselling, Neuro Linguistic Programming and Adult Education Certificate. I am also trained in Transactional Analysis, Personal Construct Theory, Metaphor Therapy and Clean Language. They all helped me along my pathway of becoming an Executive Counsellor in the early 1990's.

My experience of running personal and management development workshops for corporates and individuals started over 30 years ago. During that time, I mentored managers and senior professionals which led on to the development and delivery of mentoring programmes for corporate organisations.

I wrote my first book in 2015 entitled 'My Mental Jungle'. It is a semi-autobiographic study of the evolution of my mind (mental jungle). It also tackled the challenging subject of personal change. My journey of self-discovery emboldened me to be more authentic and more accepting of myself.

My experience and qualifications are a source of reference for my work as trainer, mentor, facilitator and counsellor. Although I have no formal medical training, I am informed by and reference the works of many highly respected research psychologists whose findings form the basis of modern mental health practices. You will find them listed in the reference section at the end of this book.

Working with my good friend Jeremy Clare, a qualified counsellor and consultant, we evolved an innovative approach to personal development and decision making in the mid 1990's. In workshops entitled 'Whatever next...?', we set out to transfer the responsibility and management of time and process to the delegates, trusting they would find their own pathway and arrive at the best decision for themselves.

It took a little while for the delegates to release us from the traditional roles of facilitator and expert. But when they did, they were always surprised by how much more they gained from the day.

We called this approach 'advanced facilitation'. It required us to listen to their thinking and mental strategies for working through their issues. Our job then was to support them to follow their own thinking. We went on to run an 'advanced facilitation' workshop for coaches, mentors and counsellors to share the benefits of 'advanced facilitation'.

Without doubt, my biggest learning curve was being a parent and step-parent to six children and grandparent to nine. It was as a parent that I made the most mistakes, and as a grandparent I learnt the most.

Basically, I learnt that I was not born to parent naturally, rather I become a more effective parent when I was prepared to learn and not rely on nature alone - I believe that is true of all of us.

Regarding my background, I started out as a young motor mechanic, working along side my father. As I grew older, I gravitated towards computer engineering in the 1960's when computers were in their infancy.

I had a career in computers up and until the 1990's when my focus changed from 'things' to 'people'. As with cars and computers, it was essential that I knew how the components of the human brain worked and interacted. In my research, I was intrigued by the evolutionary stages of the human brain from birth to adulthood, and I still am.

It was understanding how our brains and mental faculties interacted that began to shift my mindset on the nature vs nurture debate. More specifically,

I became more aware of the differences between ‘who we are because of our ‘genes’ (nature), and ‘who we are because of our ‘upbringing’ (nurture).

This book is not about the nature-nurture debate per se, but we do need to understand how it affects our parenting. I want this book to help you the reader to understand the contribution your genes (nature) and your upbringing (nurture) make in the development of your child’s personality (who they are or who they become).

My reason for writing this book is to assist parents raise children as mature and effective adults.

About the book

We all experience upset, grief, anxiety, even mental illness at some time in our life. We also experience the calming effect of someone listening to us as we speak out our thoughts and feelings. It is this act of someone listening to us which soothes and calms our troubled minds. When someone listens, shows empathy and wants to understand, then we can naturally (without medication) start the process of recovery.

This is also true for children growing up. They too experience grief, anxiety, and even mental illness as part of their early years' development. And like adults, they will recover too from these experiences when listened to, shown empathy and understood.

By just listening to your children as they journey through their early year's development, you will assist them to recover from the many pitfalls that will befall them. And, you will also have the opportunity to nurture their mental skills needed to become a confident and effective adult.

The sole premise of this book is to offer the knowledge and skills needed to become that kind of listener to your child. It will cover the three stages of evolution that signpost your child's brain early development. It will explore your own learnt attitudes to being a parent and how they help or hinder your child's development.

In Chapter One, I want to explore your personal attitude to the 'nature-versus-nurture' debate because it will influence your parenting.

I will present the 'nurture' side of parenting as 'virtual genes', which is how society passes down via our parents whatever it prescribes to be valid and important. As opposed to the 'nature' side of parenting, which is how our 'biological genes' pass down our physical and biological characteristics.

In Chapter Two, I want to throw some light on how our brains evolve and work to keep us healthy. In particular, I want to examine the three stages of evolution that your child's brain goes through as they develop. Knowing this

will help you make better decisions about how to parent them as they go venture through the different stages.

It is a part of our brain called the 'autonomic nervous system' that works to restore our minds back to a stable state after an episode of anxiety or panic. Children make good use of this system when they run to mummy or daddy after hurting themselves.

As parents, we can unknowingly suppress this important function when we inadvertently override their anxiety with another, such as chastising them for 'doing something stupid' instead of 'just listening' to them as they recover from 'doing something stupid'.

Our job is to maintain this system in good working order, and teach our children how to take advantage of it throughout their life rather than suppress it.

In Chapter Three, I will explore 'listening to understand' as a basic skill of effective parenting. It is a matter of not only listening to what they are saying, but also how their minds are working and how they are recovering from their anxiety.

The more we listen to them as they grow, the more we help them to become effective adults - the goal of parenting. It is the skill of listening to our children's thoughts and feelings rather than our own that enables us to help them grow effective mind management skills - the basic skill of parenting.

In Chapter Four, I want to build on 'listening to understand' by offering a more active approach to listening which I am calling 'listening to educate'. I want to expand your listening skill to identify misinformed or misguided beliefs that have embedded themselves in your child's minds and behaviours. By reflecting back their thinking and mental processes, you are teaching them how to challenge misguided beliefs or misinformation - another skill of effective parenting.

At the end of the book I have listed the research psychologists and their books that informed my writing. You may find their books useful to further explore the subjects covered in this book.

Lastly, by integrating the ideas proposed in this book into your personal style of parenting, I believe you will be better equipped to assist your child to grow into an authentic and effective adult.

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We make progress when we...

...listen to understand.

We don't make progress when we...

...listen to blame.

Chapter One

Are we natural born parents?

You will be surprised by how many people believe we are born natural parents, as if there is a 'biological gene' for parenting. We certainly have biological drives to love our offspring and to protect them, but that is not the same as parenting them. For me, this is one of the influences that confuses our minds when we take on the role of parenting.

The Nature vs Nurture debate

In this chapter, I want to explore common attitudes to the 'nature-versus-nurture' debate in the context of 'parenting'. I want to differentiate between the 'nurture' side of parenting, that which is passed down via our parents, and the 'nature' side of parenting, that which is passed down via our biological genes.

Do you believe part of your role as parent is to pass down the customs and rituals which over generations make up the fabric of your society?

If you do, then you are talking in terms of nurture and not nature. Cultural art forms such as national dress, dance, music, food and language are examples of things that are passed down from generation to generation.

Where are you with religion?

Is it a factor of our 'biological genes' or is it the passing down of religious-related beliefs, customs and rituals. As far as I know there is not a 'biological gene' for religion, whatever form it takes, neither is there a gene for nationality.

Although, our 'biological genes' do predispose us to have physical characteristics such as colour of our skin, eyes and hair, and faculties such as 'eye-for-detail', 'nose-for-scents', 'heart-for-stamina'. And it may appear true that certain physical characteristics define people as coming from a certain nationality or religion. But, as the human world becomes more mobile, national characteristics become more mixed and diffused.

Nonetheless, it is highly likely that there is a gene for 'following a higher authority'; one that has served the human race very well and enabled us to become the most successful species on the planet. We only have to draw comparisons with the insect world or the animal world where working together as a society has made them successful. Within these successful societies there is probably a 'follow the leader biological gene'.

Just as the natural world strives to survive by means of its biological genes (nature), so does the societal world strive to survive by means of its virtual genes (nurture).

From the nurture perspective our parenting will be dependent upon how our minds are programmed by our parents or carers - the previous generation. As a result, we are programmed to propagate what our society deems to be important for its survival which includes the right way to bring up our children.

Interestingly, how we are programmed is dependent on our birth-place, birth-religion, birth-language, birth-values and parental status. That alone, tells me that parenting is highly influenced by our nurture (virtual genes).

Whereas our 'biological genes' endow us with basic biological function, it is our 'virtual genes' that give us our beliefs, which are the main contributor to the survival of our society/culture. They function like 'biological genes', in so much as their job is to perpetuate our birth culture/society and eliminate any threats to its existence.

It is not difficult to comprehend that our 'virtual genes' dictate so much of our personal disposition in regard to our ambition and our education. It will also influence our predisposition towards race, gender, disability and age. As far as I know there is no 'biological gene' that dictates our attitudes toward race, gender, disability or age, apart from the generic human fear of difference.

You could say that in coining a new phrase 'virtual genes', I am wanting to begin a new line of scientific research, one which differentiates between 'biological genes' and 'virtual genes'.

Trained therapists, counsellors and psychiatrists would say that is what they do, i.e. assist clients to modify their 'virtual genes' - although they may call them something different like past traumas, distresses or neuroses. And I agree, the essential work of these professionals is to help many people to overcome depression, mental health issues, and dysfunctional behaviour.

I want to be make a clear statement about where we place ourselves on the nature-nurture continuum:

"if we take the attitude that we are born natural parents then we have little choice in how we parent. Whereas, if we take the attitude that we must learn to parent, then we have the chance to become more effective parents."

As parents or potential parents, I want this book to focus your mind on how we can stop dysfunctional 'virtual genes' becoming embedded in our child's mind. Rather than, we retrospectively grapple with them using medication and therapy later in life.

This may look like an attack on parents when I put the focus on misguided parenting. But solving any problem, requires us to focus on the cause which in the case of misguided parenting is the lack of effective education on how to parent.

Why not a qualification for parenting?

Professionals like therapists, counsellors and psychiatrists must be trained in the workings of our minds, so why not parents!

Parenting has to be the most important profession in our society, and yet it has no professional status or qualification nor formal training. It relies totally on what society/culture passes down to us and reading books, if we are lucky.

Maybe its time to formalise education as a pre-requisite to parenthood. For example, in the world of driving, you must pass your theory test before you can apply for a driving test. Although it may appear unacceptable as an idea for parenting, it would present us with some interesting challenges, such as:

“You cannot get pregnant until you have passed the parenting theory test!”

“When you have passed the basic theory, you are good to parent a child up to the age of twelve only!”

“To keep your child beyond twelve, you must pass the advanced parenting test!”

I hope you see the funny side of the above, and at the same time see the serious side too. We wouldn't want to be counselled by an untrained, unqualified counsellor, nor would we want an untrained surgeon performing an operation on us. There are many professions where we expect to see qualifications for the job, for example a gas installer or electrician. So why does that not happen with the most important profession of all - parenting - a bit bizarre, don't you think?

Let me return to the nature-nurture debate. If you believe we need to be trained to be a parent, then parenting is a factor of nurture. On the other hand, if you believe we are born natural parents, then parenting is a factor of nature.

Where do you stand on the nurture-nature debate?

From my experience of talking with people, most don't see the need for training, let alone a qualification. They are of the view that 'parenting is natural' together with 'what was good enough for me is good enough for my children', and 'I make it up as I go along'.

Here is a very interesting perspective of parenting taken from the BBC A-Word TV (Series 3 Episode 4)...

“The first rule of parenting is everything you do is wrong”

This statement challenges everything we believe about ourselves as parents. And maybe it challenges what we believe about our parents' parenting. It also challenges beliefs such as *“parenting is natural”* and *“what was good enough for me is good enough for my child”*.

It does shed an interesting light on parenting by raising questions like...

- What sort of parent are we, if we can never make a mistake?
- What do our children learn, if we can never make mistakes?

It leads on to the bigger question, “what is my job as a parent?” I like the word ‘job’ in this context because like employment it has a purpose with practices that support its purpose plus a reward for completing the job successfully.

It goes without saying that there are disparate views on what the purpose of parenting is. But are we comparing purpose or practices? When you compare the many religions that exist in our world you will notice they have many varied practices, and yet they appear to have the same purpose.

I believe it is no different for parenting. Whatever parenting practices are ‘handed-down’ to us there will be a lot of commonality in what we believe our purpose is for bringing up our children.

So what is my purpose as a parent?

I want to share with you my view of my job as a parent...

“I believe my job as a parent over time is to gradually transfer ‘taking responsibility’ for my child’s well-being and development from me to my child, as and when they are ready.”

When a child is newly born, we automatically take 100% full responsibility for their well-being and development, and they are born 100% dependent on us for all their needs.

As they develop, we must continually assess their readiness to make decisions for themselves. For example, we may ask our 3 year old questions like: “do you want to go to bed now?” Or “what do you want for dinner?”

At this early stage in their development, are they ready to make these types of decisions, do they understand the implications of not going to bed on time or always eating chips? I suspect not.

These examples may be simplistic and not bother you too much, but they are examples of when we should be directing rather than asking because we understand the implications of the decision and they don't - not yet anyway.

Much later when they understand the value of sleep and nutritious food, we can let go of that responsibility and pass it on to them.

The job is, therefore, to gradually enable our children to take responsibility for their lives until they reach a point where they are fully responsible for themselves and we can let go - much to their relief.

Taking responsibility for our parenting

Do you remember an advert, where a mum was smoking standing at the open door to the kitchen, blowing the smoke out into the garden? It just shows us how much our culture has changed, in this case 'we no longer smoke in our houses'.

Then the camera zoomed back and into view came the back of a child sitting at the kitchen table doing homework. In her hand was a pencil with which she mimicked the smoking of a cigarette in synchronisation with her mum at the door.

The moral of this advert is whoever we are and whatever we do, our children will see it and copy it, as the story in the advert demonstrated. I am sure you are already aware that they copy all our behaviours - both good and bad.

And, yes we do deserve a pat on the back when they behave well. But, we also need to look at ourselves when they don't. Do you remember the television series called 'House of Tiny Tearaways' with Dr Tanya Byron?

In this series, Dr Byron demonstrated how to help children and parents function more effectively together. In an interview in the Psychologist (December 2005 Vol. 18 pp. 742-743), Dr Tanya Byron was posed the following question:

"Yes, in your programmes it's never really child-based, it's always something the parents are doing?"

To which she responded:

"Parents are very relieved when they realise it's about themselves. I'm a parent, I'd much rather it was about me. The key message is if you want to change your child's behaviour you have to change your own – it's not rocket science!"

Sounds simple, doesn't it.

In summary...

If we want our children to grow up successful, happy, with confidence and healthy mental well-being then it seems to me we must take responsibility for our parenting and listen to our children as they develop.

It requires us to dispel the illusion that we are born 'natural' parents and children grow up 'naturally'; and to accept that learning how to parent will not only benefit us and our children but is an essential part of being an effective parent.

In the next chapter called 'Your Child's Brain' I want to provide a layperson's explanation of how our children's minds develop in their early years. It will give you both insight into their capabilities to learn and understand, and help you decide more appropriately the best parental intervention.

Chapter Two

Your child's brain

How your child's brain evolves...

As a child growing up in the 40's and 50's, I remember how easily my mind was confused by many of the things that happened. There wasn't the availability of information then as there is now, and most parenting was either a product of one's own experience of being parented or a presumption that parenting would come naturally.

Understanding the psychology of a child's mind back then was not seen as an essential skill of parenting, but complying with societal norms was.

Even today with better education and extensive access to information, we are still under pressure to comply with societal norms. I am mystified by the lack of knowledge available to parents on how our children's brains evolve.

In this chapter, I want to fill the gap in our education by providing a 'guide to how our child's brain changes as they grow'. With this knowledge, we are better prepared to manage effectively the transitions our child goes through as they journey from birth to adulthood.

We all have more than one brain...

We start life with a primitive brain system, called the 'reflex system'. This system has direct neural connections between the senses and our muscles. An example is: when we touch something very hot, a signal to remove our hand is given, and we pull our hand away quickly.

Later, our 'limbic system' is activated by a hormone change around the age of two. The limbic brain uses our newly activated emotions to learn and make decisions. It is not as fast as the reflex system, but it does give us the capability to make decisions based on an emotional response.

Our third brain, the cortex, becomes active much later in our development, usually between the years of eight and ten. In humans it is very large and

can store huge amounts of data. It relies on meaning and logic to make decisions. It takes longer to make decisions than the limbic and reflex brains. But, it does provide the most flexible and most appropriate response to any situation.

So there we have it. We are all born with three brains, each has its unique selling points. Reflex for speed, limbic for emotional response, and cortex for the more complex analysis and understanding of our situation.

What differentiates the three brains is not speed alone, but also how well we interpret the sensory information and make decisions. Let's explore further this phenomenon happening in our child's mind.

Reflex Brain - the basic survival brain

When first born your child relies solely on their 'reflex brain' for survival. It is made up of several nerve centres located strategically in our bodies to reduce the time for neurons to travel between our senses and our muscles.

You may remember having your reflexes tested by a doctor with a small hammer. When they tapped your leg just below the knee or your arm in the hollow of your elbow, your leg and arm jerked, showing you had good 'reflexes'.

When first born, your baby only has their 'reflex brain' to communicate with you. And, as your baby's carer you learn to recognise their 'reflex responses' and provide the help or comfort they need.

This is your child's 'dependent stage', during which you are fully responsible for their wellbeing.

Limbic Brain - the feeling brain

From about the age of two, the 'limbic brain', is activated by hormones. It gives your child a new way to experience the world. Often called the 'terrible twos', they now have a new way to communicate and control their world. You know how powerful their emotional outbursts can be, often referred to as 'having a tantrum'. But, they now have a brain that is capable of learning.

Learning takes place when hormones are present in the brain to form new neural links. This is a very important job of emotions. As parents, we need to understand that learning requires an emotion to be present. Our job therefore, is to help our children use their emotions effectively, as opposed to suppressing them. A subject for more discussion later in this book.

The Cortex - the thinking brain

Later in your child's develop, between the ages of 8 to 10 years, their third brain kicks in. It is called the 'Cortex'. It has the facility to store much more information than the 'reflex' and 'limbic' brains.

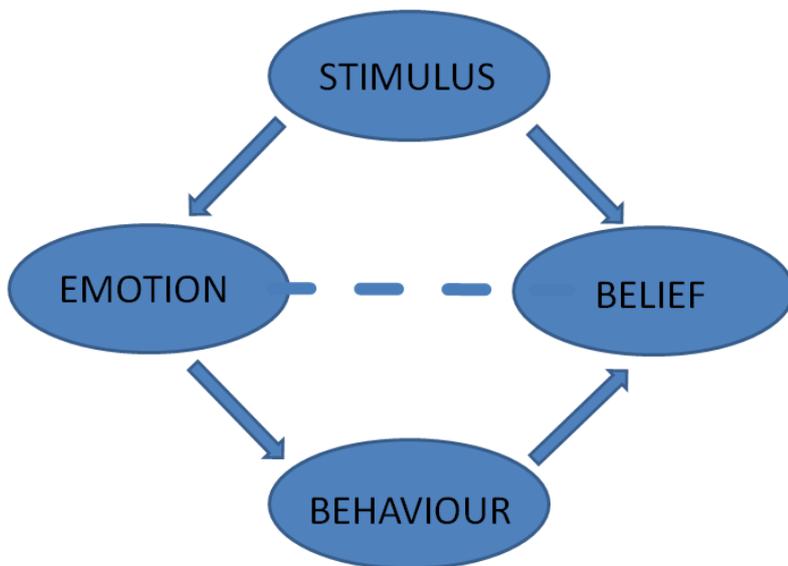
Up until now, they have only had their 'reflex' and 'limbic' brains to make sense of the world. With their new brain, the 'cortex' coming into play, they have the capability to understand meaning and make logical appraisal of their experiences.

Our job is to make sure, as they grow into adulthood, that they make best use of their three 'brains' to become effective adults.

Making sense of our reflexes, feelings and thinking

This is where life starts to get interesting for you and your child in terms of how they make sense of themselves and their world. In order to make sense of anything, they need to form beliefs based on their new experiences. So how do they do this?

I want to use a model to give a language and a structure to hang this discussion on. Earlier, I wrote about the three types of brains – reflex, limbic and cortex - Using the diagram below, I want to show how they work together.



Starting with the word STIMULUS at the top of the model, it represents any information arriving at our brain via our senses: sight, smell, hearing, touch. Everything we experience is a combination of these four sensory inputs.

Given our brain has a priority is to keep us safe, it will search our brain for a similar STIMULUS in order to react. Our 'reflex brain' has the fastest response to any stimulus that may appear to threaten us. I am sure you have experienced the jerk 'reflex response' to something that startles you.

Our 'limbic brain' stores the EMOTION felt at the time of the original STIMULUS. This connection gives us the ability to be more discerning with our responses.

It is not as fast as the 'reflex brain' because it has more to search and therefore takes a little longer to find a 'match'. I say 'match', it only has to have a small resemblance to the STIMULUS to be re-stimulated.

The next label in the diagram is BEHAVIOUR. This is the action we took that enabled us to survive the original event. This BEHAVIOUR is now connected to the EMOTION and STIMULUS and will be stored in our memory as a successful strategy for surviving events like this (assuming we survived).

We now have a survival strategy for handling a potential threat, proven in the past to be successful, that is ready and waiting to be repeated. Let me give an example or two...

Whenever I am asked to give a speech (STIMULUS), I feel panicky (EMOTION) and pretend I am busy that day (BEHAVIOUR)

Whenever I make a mistake on my computer (STIMULUS), I feel guilt (EMOTION) and blame the system (BEHAVIOUR)

Whenever someone cuts me up when driving in my car (STIMULUS), I feel angry (EMOTION) and chase them to cut them up (BEHAVIOUR)

So where does the BELIEF come into this?

It is BELIEF that enables us to make sense of our survival strategy. It is how we can mentally explain it to ourselves and anyone who enquires about it. Let me reveal the BELIEF which was embedded in my examples above...

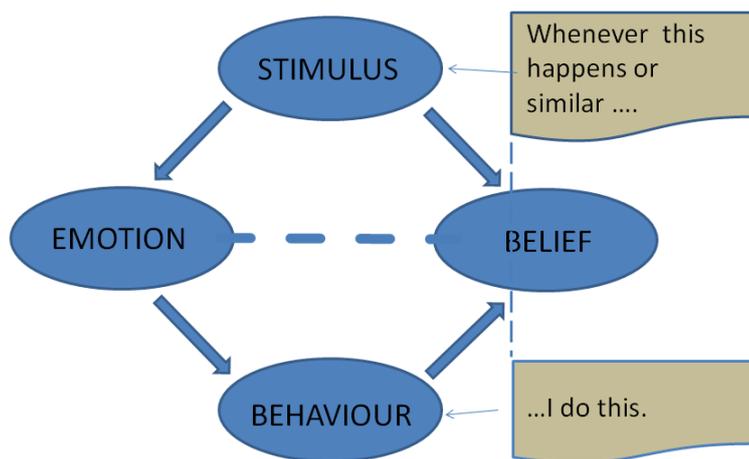
Whenever I am asked to give a speech, I pretend I am busy.

Whenever I make a mistake on my computer, I blame the system.

Whenever someone cuts me up when driving in my car, I chase them to cut them up.

These beliefs are formed at the time of the originating experience by connecting the stimulus, emotion and behaviour. Unless we change it sometime later in life, it will remain as one of our beliefs and controlling patterns of behaviour.

From the diagram below, you can see how we can repeat behaviours from previous traumas on a regular basis because we believe we are about to experience the same situation.



You now have a simplified explanation of how your child’s brain evolves and how easily they form beliefs that may be the cause of dysfunctional behaviour later in their adult life.

I want to move onto to another function of your child’s brain, which if left to do its job will recover them from a state of anxiety or distress.

Your child’s restorative function

When a child falls over and hurts him or herself, he or she immediately cries and ‘runs to mummy’ (‘mummy’ here is used to denote anyone who the child sees as a safe person to go to). Within minutes the tears stop, the child regains his or her composure and goes back to playing.

When an adult feels hurt or stressed, they are usually too inhibited to cry and ‘run to mummy’. Their cry is more of an inward cry, rather than an outward cry with tears. And, ‘running to mummy’ is replaced with distractions or addictions, such as a ‘good night out’ or a ‘tub of ice cream’.

So how did we lose that innate ability to recover ourselves from anxiety or distress?

It begins in our child’s early years. Instead of listening to our child expressing their anxiety or distress, we believe we are helping them when we distract them with sweets, toys or television, or override their feelings of anxiety with comments like, “don’t be silly”, or “for goodness sake, stop moaning”. It is

the beginning of our child learning to suppress his or her feelings and not allowing the brain's restorative process to do its job.

Maybe if we understood how the brain's restorative function worked, then we might be in a better place to help our children recover from an upset or moment of anxiety.

It is helpful to understand how a part of our brain called the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) carries out this function.

The Autonomic Nervous System regulates our internal organs and some muscles within our body. Its primary function is to set up our response to a threat. It also has a subcomponent whose function is to restore our mind and body back to its original stable state of calmness.

The following description of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) comes from the Free Wikipedia. I have shortened it in places to keep it relevant to our discussion on the restorative function of our brain.

Our Automatic Nervous System

(Start of extract from Free Wikipedia)

Our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) controls the automatic functions of our body. It is sometimes called the 'involuntary nervous system'. It uses two subsystems to control our bodies' response to threats and stresses.

- The **Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS)** is activated when we perceive a threat or feel stressed. It is part of our "fight or flight" response. The sympathetic nervous system can increase heart rate; make bronchial passages wider; decrease movement of the large intestine; make blood vessels narrower; cause pupil dilation, goose bumps and sweating; and raise blood pressure. Everything needed to make our survival more certain.
- The **Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS)** does the opposite, It works to reverse the "fight or flight" stress response such as slow the heart rate down and lower blood pressure. When the parasympathetic

nervous system is activated, it produces a calm and relaxed feeling in the mind and body, and returns us to our previous stable state of calmness. In this way, the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems balance each other's effects.

(End of extract from Free Wikipedia)

These effects occur involuntary when your child's autonomic nervous system reacts to a threat. To recover from this state of anxiety, the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS) has to return your child's mind and body back to a state of calmness.

As parents, we can unknowingly suppress this important function when we inadvertently override their anxiety with another, such as chastising them for 'doing something stupid' instead of 'just listening' to them as they recover from 'doing something stupid'.

The challenge for parents is to maintain this system in good working order, and teach our children how to take advantage of it throughout their life rather than suppress it.

Brain versus mind...

I want to differentiate between the function of the brain and the workings of our mind. It is analogous to an automatic car that can perform many functions by itself (our brain), and the driver (our mind) that chooses how to use the functions of the automatic car.

When I use the word 'mind', I am referring collectively to our different states of 'mind' such as our emotional, spiritual and intellectual. It is not obvious which state of mind is connected to our anxiety until we start talking about it.

What I learnt is: if we repeatedly pay attention to our threats or anxieties (controlled by our minds), then it will inhibit the healing effect of the Parasympathetic Nervous System (automatic function of our brain).

This vicious cycle of 'fight or flight' will lead inevitably to a worsening of our mental health and well-being.

The questions it raises are:

- What can we as parents do to prevent our child getting stuck in this vicious cycle of 'fight or flight'?
- If they are stuck in this cycle how can we help them break out?
- What happens when a chronic pattern of behaviour is subsumed into their identity, i.e. they have an alternative sense of identity that has become part of who they are and we can see it but they may not?
- And lastly, what if this chronic behaviour brings benefits which they want to keep?

In summary, your child's brain has a restorative function which works to keep their minds and bodies in a healthy state. To benefit from this self-healing process, we as parents must understand how it works to keep our children healthy and stable, and to pass on its healing power to recover from anxiety or depression.

Next, I want to provide a layperson's explanation of how children make use of their evolving brain functions. It will give both insight into their capabilities to learn, and help you to choose appropriate parental interventions.

How children make use of their brains in their early years

In the beginning, we learn by copying the people around us. It does not mean we understand what we are copying, but our innate curiosity drives us to learn about the world we now inhabit.

At around the age of 2 years when your child's limbic brain becomes active, they now have the capability to learn by experiencing the world through emotions. They are now able to make connections in their brain that become beliefs - things they believe to be true. They now have the facility to make judgements about themselves and the world they inhabit.

In our early years, we learn most of our beliefs from our parents, people we trust and believe. It was Milton Rokeach who got me thinking about this when he wrote...

“No person is personally able to ascertain the truth of all such things for him/herself. So, he/she believes in this or that authority, parents, teachers, religious leaders, scientists. And, he/she is often willing to take some authority's word for many things.” (Rokeach)

This is how many of my beliefs as a child were formed. I took on my father's (an authority figure) version of the truth without question. From then on, my life was controlled by the beliefs my father had imparted to me - whether well-informed or misguided.

As an authoritative figure in our child's life, we must recognise how much we inform our child's early beliefs. Our challenge is to recognise when we misinform or misguide our children in ways which will become issues later in their adult life.

By the time they are seven or eight, they are beginning to experience their third brain - the cortex. Now they can make sense of their experiences using meaning and logic, but they have a challenge. Most of their understanding is based on beliefs formed in their limbic brain and are therefore can be highly emotionally connected.

This is where we, as parents, must get to grips with helping our children to make effective use of their three brains by teaching them how to manage their emotions - this is referred to as Emotional Intelligence.

How to educate your child about Emotional Intelligence

Research shows that Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is a big factor in achieving happiness and success in life. It has more to contribute to building strong relationships, successful careers than Intellectual Intelligence (IQ), even though the latter has been used for many decades as a measure of suitability for a job.

What does it mean to have emotional intelligence?

It starts with recognising and controlling our impulsive feelings and behaviours. Also, we need to pay attention to others' emotional states from the cues they give us. This understanding enables us to relate better,

whether that be at work, at home or almost anywhere we come into contact with other human beings.

So when and how do we learn this important skill of controlling our emotions?

Let me start by asking you if you agree with the following statement...

“How you judge yourself today was how you were judged as a child.”

Do you agree or disagree?

If you agree, then ask yourself this..

“How do you feel judged today?”

I not asking you to share your the answer, but if that is how you feel judged then think about the following statement...

“How you judge your child today is how he or she will feel judged as an adult later in life.”

An important message for us as parents is to be aware of the judgements we make and communicate to our children at a vulnerable age when they take whatever we tell them as the truth. It is this vulnerable age of 2 to 8 years that they rely on us for the judgements we make, and how we manage our emotions.

So the **first lesson** in teaching our children to manage their emotions is to be a good role model of managing our own emotions. And remember, they learn by copying!

Do you remember the mother smoking at the kitchen door advert?

The **second lesson** is keep your judgements of them and their behaviour in perspective. What do I mean? We may be mistakenly judging their behaviour as bad or naughty, when actually they need to learn something. So rather than being their judge and jury, shift to being their listener and educator.

The **third lesson** is to help your child to explore their emotional experience. Help them move from venting his or her emotional upset to understanding what is causing it and why.

How do we do that?

It starts with listening to them without judging. When they stop, feedback what you heard, both the emotion and the reason for their emotion, for example: “I can see you get very angry when you are not treated fairly.”

Next check it out with them by asking, “Is that right?” They will either agree with you or say you are wrong. If it is the latter, then ask them to correct it.

They are now beginning to think about their experience rather than just regurgitating it. By learning to talk about their emotion, rather than just re-playing it, they are beginning to develop their emotional intelligence.

As they continue to delve into their experience, you can start to lead them into thinking about strategies for handling their feelings next time with questions like:

“What might you do next time you feel unfairly treated?”

“How will that help you?”

“What about the person that treated you unfairly?”

“What might they have been feeling at the time?”

“How might you help someone else who was treated unfairly like you?”

Questions like the above are not only to help them explore feelings whether their own or someone else, but also to come up with strategies for handling themselves and others in similar situations.

One thing to notice about the questions above is the unspoken assumption that they can work it out for themselves, which can be very challenging to us when we feel desperate to save them.

In summary, teaching your child emotional intelligence requires you to:

- Be a role model for how to manage your emotions
- Keep your judgements of your child in perspective
- Encourage your child to explore their emotional experience
- Help your child think about strategies for handling their and other's feelings

In summary

If we want our children to grow up successful, happy and with confidence and a healthy mental well-being, then we must take responsibility for understanding:

- how their evolving brains work,
- how we influence their early beliefs, and
- how we enable their emotional intelligence

With the above, we are better placed to assist our child to grow into happy, healthy and effective adults. They will make more progress when we make the assumption that they can find their way through how their minds work.

At this early stage, any misinformed or misguided beliefs are easily accessible and very visible when you listen to understand. If they are not identified and re-assessed at this early stage, then they will become buried under decades of new experiences, and that makes identification and re-assessment that much more difficult in later life.

Best we catch them at the early stage.

Chapter Three

Listen to understand...

Most of us think we are good at listening, and do not feel we need to be told how to listen. And yes, we are right to a certain degree. We know how to lend a sympathetic ear to a friend who maybe has just separated from a partner or has been badly treated at work. Yet, when it comes to listening to our child, we usually don't have the time, nor the patience, nor the empathetical place. Most of us just don't know how to listen to our children, probably because we were not listened to as a child.

Many adults still find it difficult to talk out their inner thoughts and fears. So why should it be any different for a child growing up?

Whether adult or child, it depends on how safe we feel with someone, and can we trust them enough. If our child believes that we will judge or punish them, then maybe that's not safe enough and they will not talk to us. Instead, they will probably look for someone else, someone they can trust, someone they feel safer with, such as a friend, or a sibling, or a grandparent.

Here's an extract from an eminent American psychologist, Carl Rogers (1902 – 1987), who is widely considered to be one of the originators of psychotherapy.

"To become fully functioning, a person needs unconditional positive regard from others, especially their parents in childhood. Unconditional positive regard is an attitude of acceptance of others despite their failings.

However, most people don't perceive the positive regard of others as being unconditional. They tend to think they will only be loved and valued if they meet certain conditions of worth."

This is a significant insight into how our parenting can influence our children's concept of self-worth and in order to be loved and valued they must meet our expectations of them otherwise they are not loved.

This must affect our child's relationship with us and any future significant relationships. So who can our children trust?

Children don't start out in life with trust issues, they learn overtime who to trust and who not to trust. That must be our biggest concern, how does our child decide to trust or not trust us?

In my opinion, it is the way we listen to them that influences whether they trust us or not. By that I mean, do we listen to blame or do we listen to understand? That might sound too simple, but I believe it is that simple. We will be seen as a safe person when we listen to understand and give positive acceptance of them including their failings. Otherwise, if we listen to blame and punish then we will be seen as an unsafe person and someone not to trust.

In the BBC Radio 4 programme Life Scientific, Peter Fonagy said the following..

“One of our core human needs is to be understood.”

Peter Fonagy wrote about the process of ‘mentalising’ our thoughts and feelings in his book ‘Mentalisation Handbook’. (More on Peter Fonagy and Mentalisation in the Appendix)

If I go with Peter Fonagy’s findings then a core human need of our children is to be understood. Surely, that is motivation enough, given our primary parental purpose is to provide for our children’s every need.

If you know that you listen to blame or judge, then your challenge is to change the way you listen. You need to move from listening to blame to listening to understand.

How do you do that?

1 - Dedicate time to listen...

... this is often all that is needed.

Having grandchildren taught me the importance of time to listen. They helped me to see that I am a good ally and resource to them because I am not obsessed with my parenting anymore, and I have plenty of time to listen.

But that may not be the case for many parents today. Modern life is full of time-grabbing activities which makes giving unlimited time to our children an almost impossible task. Nonetheless, it is always a matter of priorities.

For example, is my work commitment so high that I short change time with my child? If this is the case then perhaps you need to delegate listening to your child to someone else, maybe partner or grandparent.

I know we will all have valid justifications for allocating our time to priority activities. Maybe, we need to work to pay the rent and bills, and that's the most important task we have - to provide a safe and warm home.

Whatever we decide is our priority, raising our child is among the most important undertakings that we will ever have in our lives. And yet, for whatever reason, we short-change this important relationship. We over-commit our time to activities such as furthering our career, enjoying leisure activities, being with friends, and many more activities.

This short but critical period in your child's early development will form their character and personality for the rest of their lives. It is our duty to ensure they get the best opportunity to learn how to grow their independence, self-reliance and emotional intelligence.

If we are unable to provide time to listen to our children at this critical time then we best provide an alternative for them. Whoever you assign to be their good listener, you will enhance their chances of growing up without a mental health issue or dysfunctional behaviour including self-harming and suicide.

Another perspective to consider is:

“What sort of relationship do you want with your child when they are adult?”

It seems a more selfish and less altruistic perspective when we make our parenting about **our** future. But so often, we regret the way our relationship with our child has turned out.

Are we too consumed with today's challenges that we leave the future to take care of itself? I leave this discussion with you to think through, I know where I stand.

2 - Listening to ourselves...

Our most common mistake is 'listening to interject' so we can express our own thoughts and judgements. If we are to make progress in this area then we must shift our mindset from listening to ourselves to listening to our children.

Where do we start...

We start by paying attention to our own thoughts buzzing around in our mind as we listen. We may need to practice this with a supportive friend or ally. Until we become consciously aware of our busy mind, we will always be waiting for the next moment to interject with our own thoughts.

A simple way to practice this is to ask an ally (someone willing to help you with your listening) to talk for five minutes about themselves. As you listen, make note of your own thoughts or questions you wanted to ask. Then, tell your ally what was going on in your head. This is the beginning of becoming aware of your subconscious listening processes. Try it again and see how better you are at listening the second time.

Once you have become proficient at 'listening' in this way, you will be surprised by how much more your child will tell you about themselves.

A helpful principle is:

"Your child will disclose more when you listen to understand."

By listening to their thoughts and not yours, you are listening to understand rather than listening to direct or judge. There is another phenomenon that happens when you listen in this way and that is:

3 - Solutions have a way of revealing themselves

It is surprising how many times an answer to a problem pops up in our heads when we are listened to in this way. It takes the pressure off of us to 'find the answer' or to 'make the right decision'. As a parent listening to your child in this way, the solution to your child's issue will reveal itself to either you or your child or both - but it is better if your child comes up with the solution.

4 - Assisting your child to explore their minds...

If your child dries up, you can prompt them to continue by asking simple exploratory questions, like: “tell me more?”, “what was that like?”, “how did that make you feel?” and “what does that mean to you?”

The aim of these questions is not to inform your curiosity, but to assist your child to explore his or her mind. Remember, you are wanting your child to build trust in you as one of their ‘safe’ listeners.

Listening to your child in this way is not a counselling session, but may have a similar outcome because the process is similar: a safe environment to talk, someone paying attention and not judging, plus the built-in healing mechanism of our autonomic nervous system.

5 - The right relationship...

A barrier to listening is possibly how we see the relationship. We are brought up to engage in hierarchical relationships, such as teacher-student or manager-employee and of course our most important relationship parent-child. If we want to listen to understand then our relationship must not be hierarchical. We must not set ourselves up as the expert, the authority nor the owner of their genes.

Interestingly, we were never taught how to listen in this way as part of our education at school, nor were we taught at home; unless we were very fortunate in our choice of parents or work.

If we are to listen to our children in order to understand then best we learn how to be that non-hierarchical and non-judgemental listener. Depending on your previous experience of listening and being listened to, you can experiment with the following ways to ‘listen to your child’..

6 - Passive listening...

Passive listening is a form of listening where you make no interventions other than to encourage your child to talk. The challenge we must overcome is the

belief that we must help them, save them or correct them. Here are some ideas:

- As you listen, you may be prompted to ask a question, give advice or criticise - well don't. Just park those thoughts and allow your child to continue without interruption. The more they talk without interjection from you, the more they will reveal. The more they reveal, the more you will understand.
- Even if your child becomes upset, continue to listen - don't be tempted to stop them feeling upset or emotional. Remember to be listened to and understood is one of our basic human needs. That includes how we feel as well as how we think.
- Be aware that any sound or body movement that you make that implies disapproval or criticism will stop them talking. The chances are they will stop telling you anything ever again.
- If your child stops talking, gently encourage them by saying, *"It's OK, continue when you are ready"*. You could also ask questions like: *"and"*, *"tell me more"*, *"what happened next?"*, *"can you explain that?"*. These type of questions are called 'Clean Language' because they do not pollute your child's mind with what is going on in yours. (See the Appendix for more on Clean Language)
- At the end of the exchange, acknowledge their capacity to be open and share their thoughts and feelings with you.

7 - Underlying processes of listening...

Listening to understand may be the goal of your listening. But, there are other benefits that you and your child will experience as you pursue this goal. It is better to know these benefits as they will help you to continue the process of listening to understand.

- By listening to understand, you will enable trust to grow in your relationship, and this will encourage your child to talk more openly and reveal more about themselves.

- By helping your child talk out their thoughts and feelings, you assist your child to see their situation more objectively. That alone will help them to review and re-evaluate their situation.
- By providing nonjudgemental attention you create the right environment for your child's Parasympathetic Nervous System to restore a more relaxed and stable state to their distressed mind, and not overlay their current state of mind with another state of anxiety.
- Lastly, by helping your child to find their own way through their issue you enable them to build trust in their own thinking and decision making.

Summary

- Just listening to understand will help your child to grow in self-awareness and self-confidence.
- Just listening without making your child feel shame or guilt, will help your child to see themselves and their issue more objectively.
- Just listening alone will enable your child's Parasympathetic Nervous System to return their minds to a calm and stable state.

Chapter Four

Listen to educate...

The previous chapter was about 'listen to understand' which is a prerequisite to any effective communication. It very much relies on a passive listening approach where the interventions are questions to prompt more disclosure. The goal is always to encourage someone to speak out their thoughts and feelings, knowing that talking to an attentive listener might be all that is required.

In this chapter, I want to explore the strategy of 'listen to educate'. It is one of the key skills needed as a parent to help our child achieve a healthy personality.

So why listen to educate?

Children are not born with strategies for managing their thoughts and emotions. They start out with none, but soon start to learn mental strategies by copying the people around them. Usually, they are the most significant people in their lives, such as older siblings, childminders, parents and later teachers. Whatever they hear or see from their role-models, they usually see as the truth about themselves and world they inhabit.

You can see how important our job is now, knowing that they learn by just copying our behaviour and believing what we say. It is a passive form of learning, where we may be unaware that we are their vital source of learning.

As well as being a passive educator, we must also be a pro-active educator. There are mental tasks our children must learn if they are to become a confident and successful adult. As well as passively educating our children, we must actively educate them in tasks such as 'analysing and assessing information', 'understanding meaning', 'deciding what is important and what is not' leading onto 'making good decisions'.

We are not only responsible for educating their mental skills, we are also responsible for educating their emotional management skills. Being able to 'manage their emotions' is often referred to as 'Emotional Intelligence' which is an essential part of becoming a confident and effective adult.

I hope you can now appreciate your job is to both listen and educate your child to make good decisions and take control of their emotions. So, where do we start...

We start by challenging misguided beliefs...

Most of our beliefs are formed in our early formative years. Some are misguided or ill-informed and will be the cause of anguish in later years. Let me give an example

At an early age, this young man experienced the death of his father, someone whom he loved and who had made his childhood a very happy one. Whilst his father was dying, he was sent away to stay with his aunt. On his return, his father had already died. His mother in her very distraught state chastised him for not being more thoughtful towards her. She made him feel guilty for his lack of compassion.

Now we understand why his mother was very distraught and in need of comforting for her loss. What was not understood was her son's needs.

After years of dysfunctional relationships, counselling and mental health issues, he took the initiative to talk openly and vulnerably to me. In his disclosure, he clearly described the time in his life around his father's death.

His emotional need was to tell his father he loved him before he died. But, that was not understood by his family and he was not given that chance to do so. Instead, he was made to feel guilty about not thinking about his mother.

Now this guilt played a big part in his adult dysfunctional behaviour and mental health. He did not want to get close to anyone because he didn't feel he was a very nice person (not true of course) and he never felt good enough. He created a facade so no-one could make him feel this deep rooted guilt, and underneath this facade was his feeling of pain for the death of his father.

If this young man had someone to listen to him at that critical moment in his life, he would've released his grief about his father at the time and he

would've been able to tell his dad before he died that he loved him. Instead, the people around him not only suppressed any opportunity to speak to his father, but they also overlaid his grief with guilt.

At his young age, he was not able to understand that he had a right to express his grief and anger at his father's death. He also had a right to be treated compassionately and not made to feel guilty. He had a right to be listened to and understood.

Our children look up to us and take on board whatever we tell them because in their early formative years they do not know any different. His mother made him feel guilty because she was not aware that he too was experiencing grief and had a right not to be dumped on.

The tragedy is the guilt he carried and his suppressed grief moulded his strategies for living which included his facade.

The moral of this story stands out.

“If you want your child to grow up free of dysfunctional behaviour and mental health issues, then as a parent you must listen to your child and not yourself. And, if you are not able to listen to your child, then someone else must do it for you!”

This story is not the only story I have listened to. Most people's lack of self-esteem or self-confidence or self-acceptance links back to a time in their childhood when their parents were guided by their own emotional states and not their child's.

Listening with an underlying principle in mind...

I now what to talk about a mental strategy for listening. Without letting go of the rules of listening described in the previous chapter, this strategy will enable you to engage in a more interactive dialogue with your child by asking questions which challenge misguided or ill-informed beliefs.

This strategy I have entitled: 'listening with an underlying principle in mind'. It is a method of asking questions linked to an underlying principle which will challenge any misconception or misbelief your child might have.

This approach enables us to ask questions that are guided by a principle relevant to your child's situation. Its purpose is to enable your child to see their misguided beliefs or misinformed beliefs for what they really are - usually someone else's beliefs or one mistakenly taken on board.

An 'underlying principle' can be in a general form and apply to most situations, or in a specific form and relevant to a specific situation. You will know which one to choose as you listen to your child and read between the lines.

I will start by taking you through an example of a general 'underlying principle' followed by an example of a specific 'underlying principle'.

In the examples, I will describe the 'underlying principle' in a general sense, as it applies to all of us - because they do. Then, I will make it relevant to our job as a parent and our child as a growing and developing individual. Here is my first example of a general principle...

1 - Where you are is where you have chosen to be

You will hear many people say, *"its not my fault, they did this to me"* or *"you don't understand, I didn't ask for this to happen to me."*

These are examples of putting the blame for one's situation outside of oneself. Children learn to blame others for their situation very early on, mostly to avoid the criticism or punishment which usually follows. And, they certainly do not want your disapproval nor the possibility that you may not love them.

You need to recognise that they talking about their situation as if they are a 'victim' of some kind. Be aware that although they are *choosing* to take the victim place, they don't understand it or want to admit it. But, they did learn it from someone (who, I wonder?).

That means where they are (victim place) is where they have chosen to be.

Now, if by taking that place proves beneficial, then they will continue to refine it as one of their successful strategies in life. Our job is to help them

see that they are choosing to take this place, and that it will inhibit their ability to take full control of their life.

Why?

The benefit of the 'victim' place is they have avoided blame, but in order to benefit in this way they have to give up control of their situation to someone or something else.

We are too often guided to support their place by joining them in blaming another for their situation. Now you can relate and ask questions that help them see their situation for what it is and take back control.

Below I have listed questions you might try and added possible follow up questions which depending on your child's response will enable more disclosure.

Keeping this underlying principle in mind will prompt questions such as:

"Is this where you want to be?" (possibly followed by "so where do you want to be?")

"Do you want to change your situation?" (possibly followed by "so you are choosing not to change your situation, tell me more...?")

"What is the benefit of keeping your situation as is?" (followed by "tell me more about...?")

"What might you not have if you changed your situation?" (followed by "what will happen if you did let go of ...?")

Remember, the purpose for asking these questions is not to inform your curiosity. Rather, it is to assist your child to explore and re-evaluate their reasoning for maintaining their victim place.

It is important not to listen to your own thoughts and emotions as you listen to theirs. If you find this challenging, best you learn emotional intelligence or pass the job over to someone who can....

Next, an example of a specific underlying principle.

2 - You limit your child's growth...

This underlying principle has a specific purpose which relates to anyone who has the role of assisting someone to grow and develop, and that includes a parent, teacher or counsellor. In the case of a parent...

“You limit your child’s growth... to the extent to which you take responsibility for them”

Whatever role we have, when we take responsibility for another, we are not only limiting his or her growth, but we are also making them dependent on us. We may want to be their rescuer, but in so doing we are reinforcing their victim place.

Perhaps it is what you want. Having your child dependent on you makes you feel important and loved. If that is the case, then it is at the cost of their self-reliance and autonomy, without which they will never trust themselves nor take responsibility.

This is an important underlying principle for parents who wish to see their children grow in self-confidence and self-reliance. It needs you to suppress any communication that implies taking responsibility or giving advice, and to take every opportunity to hand back responsibility.

Listed below is a series of questions you might want try, and examples of what not to say:

“What are your thoughts on...?” instead of *“Have you thought of trying...?”*

“What do you think should happen...?” instead of *“Can I suggest you...?”*

“What do you need to think about?” instead of *“You should think about...?”*

“What is the right thing to do?” instead of *“I don’t think that’s right, do you?”*

The key to this underlying principle is:

“To not take responsibility for your child means listening without giving advice or finding solutions or making judgement.”

You can help your child understand their situation and decisions by asking questions rooted in and supported by this underlying principle.

In summary, you can either apply a principle to a general situation or to a specific situation. Your task is to choose an underlying principle that is relevant to your child's situation and will best help them grow in self-reliance and emotional intelligence.

There now follows more underlying principles for you to try...

3 - For every complex event...

"For every complex event... there is always a simple explanation"

For some reason, we humans like things to appear more complicated than they really are. Maybe our EGO needs stroking, or we want to hide something, or perhaps we feel the need to protect ourselves from feeling vulnerable. Whatever the reason, we have all learnt ways to create a facade of complexity to cover up whatever we need to keep hidden.

Sidney M Jourard, a research psychologist, presented what I believe is a very controversial observation on keeping secrets when he wrote the following in his book entitled *Transparent Self*:

"Neurotic and psychotic behaviours might be seen as 'smoke screens' placed between them and the outside world, or put another way 'devices to avoid becoming known' (Jourard, 1971).

His use of words here are fascinating. He is describing a mental health issue as a defence mechanism against being known. The chances are we learnt our defence mechanisms at an early age. Our job as parent is to stop these defence mechanisms at the earliest opportunity. Otherwise, they will become rigid patterns of behaviour, and very difficult to identify and change later in adult life.

I know the above will be seen as controversial, but I want to raise the possibility that 'strategies for not being known or blamed' may be seen and supported by a medical diagnosis as a mental health condition. I have

worked with too many people who, in my opinion, use their mental health condition to get the attention they really seek.

Assisting your child to reveal the simple explanation or hidden secret is helped by keeping in the mind the principle: ‘for every complex event there is (always) a simple explanation’. Here are some questions that will help you focus on revealing the simple explanation, such as:

“what does that mean?”, or

“how does that work?”, or

“how does that help?”, or

“what is behind that?”, or

“what do you believe about that?”, or

“if there were a simple explanation for this what might it be?”, or

“if you could change any part of your situation, what would it be?” or maybe

“it seems to me you do not want to change your situation, as you continually find reasons not to reveal the simple explanation, is that true?”

This last question is often a game-changer. It is possible that receiving ‘your attention’ is what they really want and they are desperate to keep. If that is the case, one option is to make them aware that you know what they are doing and that it will not work with you anymore.

The risk is your child will find strategies to get the attention they desperately seek in other ways. Maybe a secret cult or street gang that prey on people seeking attention. The essence of this underlying principle is your child needs to understand that behind their smoke screen of defiance or secrecy is the simple explanation - the need for attention from another human being.

Maybe this is a good time to talk about ‘stroking’ and our basic human requirement to be stroked.

Stroking and recognition hunger

In his book 'Games People Play' Eric Berne describes our basic human need is to seek the physical intimacy that we initially experienced as a baby.

As part of growing up, society forces us to change our need for physical intimacy to 'recognition intimacy' instead. As we become more grown up and more sophisticated, so does our quest for recognition.

It is this hunger for recognition that is the simple explanation behind many people's behaviour. So is this dysfunctional? No, we all seek recognition. Every role we take on within the society relies primarily on our hunger for recognition. But if we hide our recognition hunger behind a smoke screen then it becomes manipulative and dysfunctional.

You can read more about recognition hunger and stroking in Eric Berne's book entitled 'Games People Play'.

We must be alert to our children growing up with strategies that manipulate the world around them to get the recognition they desperately seek. Sidney M Jourard called these strategies 'smoke screens'. And this we can achieve if we help them to reveal the simple explanation behind seeking recognition.

4 - The more you reveal...

"The more you reveal... the healthier you will become"

This is a simple and general underlying principle which relies on the direct connection between 'how much you reveal about yourself and your healthy personality'. Sidney M Jourard sums this up in his own words in his book as:

'Openness (transparency) with at least one significant person is an essential requirement for a healthy personality.' (Jourard, 1971)

In general, this principle applies to everyone, but what is important is that we apply it to our children. Just knowing that 'helping your child to be known' alone will help them acquire a healthy personality will lead you to ask questions like:

“and?”

“tell me more?” or

“what happened next?”

“it’s OK, I’ll wait until you’re ready to tell me more?”

This simple principle alone has proved such an effective tool for me as counsellor, mentor and parent. If you were to keep this principle alone in your mind and none other, you will be helping your child to develop a healthy and confident personality.

Remember: to observe carefully the impact of your listening. Any judgment on your part whether spoken or implied by body language will stop them disclosing themselves. Ask yourself this question as you are listening: Am I enabling my child to tell me more or am I causing them to shut down?

5 - Whilst you work to be ‘liked’...

“Whilst you work to be ‘liked’... you will not achieve your purpose, unless it is your purpose”

This is a specific and yet simple principle, but in my experience it is one that needs a lot of self-awareness and discipline. Too often, we are guided by our ego (or recognition hunger) and not the real purpose of our work.

Note: you can change the word ‘liked’ to any other word that fits the situation, such as, ‘feel good’, ‘praised’, ‘rewarded’ or ‘loved’, the principle still works.

It challenges one's intentions in one's work and relationships whether personal or professional. Are you carrying out your profession to look good, win approval, get strokes for your ego or maybe just to be rewarded? Are you trying to impress someone to be liked or maybe employed?

On the other hand, if you know what the real purpose of your work is and regardless of what people think of you or the reward, you carry it out, then you are truly achieving your purpose.

How does this principle relate to your role as parent?

Assuming our purpose is to assist our children achieve a healthy and confident personality then the principle would read as follows:

“Whilst you parent to ‘be loved’, you will not achieve your purpose (assisting your child to achieve a healthy personality), unless it (being loved) is your purpose”

In other words, if your purpose is to be loved by your children then you will reduce your chances of helping them to achieve a healthy personality. On the other hand, if your purpose is to assist your child to achieve a healthy personality then you will have enhanced their chances of achieving it. Once again it is a shift of focus from yourself to your child.

Here is another version of this underlying principle:

“If you listen to win then you won’t achieve your purpose unless it is your purpose.”

For example, If you listen to win, look good or impress, then you won’t achieve your purpose unless it is your purpose, so what is your purpose? To help your child or for you to look or feel good?

6 - Solutions have a way...

“Solutions have a way of revealing themselves”

In decision-making workshops, I asked participants to consider their situation whilst holding in their minds this principle.

Without exception, they told me that the pressure of finding a solution was lifted. They talked about their situation in a different way, as if it was no longer theirs but someone else’s. It enabled them to see their situation more objectively.

This underlying principle will stop the pressure on you and your child to come up with an answer or make the right decision. Mostly, it is our anxiety to ‘make the right decision’ or ‘find someone or something to blame’ which

impedes our progress. It also limits our creativity to find the simple solution or explanation.

As our anxiety grows, our Sympathetic Nervous System is being triggered and re-triggered which only compounds our anxiety. By reminding yourself that 'solutions have a way of revealing themselves', you free up your and your child's Parasympathetic Nervous System to do its job. In this way, you free up your subconscious mind to reveal the solution.

You and your child will think more creatively when you allow your minds to muse without the stress and tensions of 'having to find a solution' or 'making the right decision'.

7 - Communication is less judgemental...

"Our communication is less judgemental... when we use 'verbs' instead of 'nouns'."

We usually respond negatively to criticism or judgement because it basically threatens what we believe to be true about ourselves. More importantly, it either stops us talking or stimulates an angry response.

As we grow up we learn to use many words to describe people and events. Mostly, we use labels, such as: 'She is a martyr to her children' or 'he is a tyrant to his work colleagues.' When we could just as easily have said: 'She gives her children all her love', or 'he keeps his workers on their toes.'

Can you see the difference?

Using words loaded with judgement leaves it open to varied and subjective interpretation as to what is meant by 'martyr' and 'tyrant'. Whereas using verbs informs us exactly as to what they do. So here is a principle that helps with using less contaminated language:

"Our language is less contaminated when we use 'verbs' instead of 'nouns'."

How is this useful? It is natural to respond to any feedback that implies criticism. Usually, it will stop us talking or at least limit what we might say from then on.

For example:

'Sounds like you were a bitch to your friend, is that what you want to be?'
or...

'Sounds like you treated your friend badly, is that what you want to do?'

Which one would you prefer to receive?

The moral of this principle is...

"People respond more positively and productively when feedback is observational (what you see or hear using verbs) and uncontaminated by subjectivity (nouns which imply judgement)."

8 - What benefits you the most...

"What benefits you the most... is what matters the most."

For example: if what benefits you the most is the attention you receive from having an illness or condition, then it is likely to be what matters the most.

The idea that someone might believe they benefit from their illness or condition more than getting well needs to be out in the open. I know people who use their condition to get the attention they seek so desperately, and talking about it was only token agreement to 'getting well'.

The danger is over a long time our illness or condition, because it matters the most, becomes subsumed into our identity. Therein lies our real challenge - changing our identity back to what it was. Anyone who wants to challenge someone's 'alternative-identity' takes the risk of losing their friendship or significant relationship.

Just to remind you that this happens when one's identity has coalesced around a condition or illness and one benefits from the sympathy or special attention one gets, and it will not be easy to give up on it.

I recall a conversation where someone told me all about their mental health issue and how it had affected their life. Later, she revealed how her family had responded to her situation and had moved back to living with her. In

later conversations, I raised the possibility that her mental health issue gave her what she wanted most - the love and attention of her children. At this point our conversations ceased, which told me what mattered most.

As parents, we must be alert to early signs of our child subsuming a condition or behaviour that benefits them in some way becoming part of their identity. Our job is to help our child reassess what really matters to them. Questions like the following can help:

“What really matters the most, ‘getting attention’ or ‘getting well’?”

“Is this who you really want to be?”

“What needs to happen for you to let go of this behaviour?”

“What do you need to help you change?”

“Do you really want to change?”

The moral of the story is we are all driven by what matters the most to us. It is a human driver that is therefore an important element of who we are. Unfortunately, if we are not guided to make good decisions in our early years about ‘what matters the most’ then it can easily become a dysfunctional driver that creates an unhealthy personality.

9 - There is no such thing as naughty...

This is the most important ‘underlying principle’ for us as parents. If we ignore it we will contribute big time to our child’s dysfunctional behaviour in later life.

In a recent conversation about parenting with a grandmother, she said to me, *“Parents don't have the time to do what you are talking about, and what's more important, they do not want to feel that bad about themselves.”* I replied, *“You are right about the importance of not feeling bad about ourselves.”*

As working parents, we can easily feel bad about our parenting, or even worse if someone else tells us. It is not easy to take, especially when we feel we are doing our best and feel we have given our 'all' to our children, and yet they are not living up to our expectations.

My simple explanation is we are too quick to blame. Whether it's our children we blame for misbehaving or ourselves for not being a 'good parent'. Neither is helpful. A friend said this to me once:

"There is no such thing as naughty"

Try saying this phrase to yourself when you are about to scold your 'naughty' child, and see how it changes your approach. I know how it changes me, I see them as making a mistake, and I immediately take a different approach towards them. It works with everyone, not just children, because we all make mistakes, and a different response makes all the difference.

Whether we make mistakes or not, for certain we want our children to have a good life, a successful future, and we want to help them to achieve that. It therefore makes sense to focus on what needs to change, and less on how bad we might feel because we or our children make mistakes. We will achieve more if we focus on the solution and not get trapped in the game of blame and feeling bad.

As parents, we make choices which impact our children every day, and as we do, we cannot avoid making mistakes. It is how we respond to mistakes, that matters. If we can learn from mistakes then we have an opportunity to try a new approach, which is the purpose of this book.

In my first book, *My Mental Jungle*, I wrote the following

"Who said it was going to be easy?"

I sent my book to Marty Jourard, son of Sidney M Jourard, to review and this is the feedback I got:

“This line jumped out at me from your book. That’s a great point to make. Why place ease above all? My father [Sidney M Jourard] told me of a dialogue in his private practice, “But Dr. Jourard, what you suggest I start to do/don’t do, that will be hard!” [Sid] “That’s right. It WILL be hard. But you can do ‘hard.’” He always maintained that all true growth is painful. If it isn’t painful on some level it isn’t true growth.”

The moral of this story is: no one said it was going to be easy, being a parent that is. But if we are to successfully raise self-confident and self-reliant children, then we may have to do “hard”. It is a question of ‘what matters most?’

In conclusion

Ever since I realised the beneficial effect of increased self-perception and awareness, I have wanted to learn more about myself and how my mind works.

It hasn't always been easy. There were moments when I wished I had never started this journey of self-discovery. Especially when I became aware of my many dysfunctional traits. It did diminish my desire for change, but once I realised the beneficial effect of being authentic and genuine I was no longer put off.

I am reminded of the book written by Dr. Susan Jeffers, 'Feel the fear and do it anyway'. She wrote about how to change the negative thoughts that stress us into more positive thinking that calms and relaxes us. I believe she is right about 'feel the fear and do it anyway'. Unless we confront our fears, we will always be slave to them.

As you can tell from this book, I am highly influenced by past and present writers on the psychology of being human (see the Appendix for more information). And, I believe when we understand how we become who we are today, we are better placed to help our children become who they want to become.

Without this quest for self-awareness, I would have spent the rest of my life engaged in 'pastimes' and 'games' as documented by Eric Berne in his book Games People Play. In his view, we learn to play 'games' in our significant relationships in order to avoid 'real intimacy', something we have been programmed out of. In his book, he says...

*"For certain fortunate people there is something which transcends all classifications of behaviour, and that is **awareness**; something which rises above the programming of the past, and that is **spontaneity**; and something that is more rewarding than games, and that is **intimacy**."*

You now see how he has inspired me, and I want that to inspire you too. If you haven't already, I recommend starting the journey of self-discovery that raises your awareness, spontaneity and intimacy too, and enables you to be a better role-model for your children.

Moving on to my all-time hero, Sidney M Jourard. He helped me start my journey of self-discovery by giving me the simplest principle of all for achieving a healthy personality...

'Openness (transparency) with at least one significant person is an essential requirement for a healthy personality.' (Jourard, 1971)

This principle alone proved to be the one most powerful learning of my journey of self-discovery. By implementing this principle and nothing else, you would make massive progress to achieving a healthy personality and well-being. And this one principles underpins the message of this book which is:

"Just listen to your children, so they too can achieve a healthy personality and well-being"

There you have it, simple higher level principles have the potential to help you and your children achieve a happy and healthy life where more complex techniques and detail may not.

Let me end by me reminding you of the life-changing principle:

"where you are is where you have chosen to be (always)."

Bon voyage

Mike O'Sullivan

Appendix

References used in this book

Let me introduce the authors and their books that inspired and informed me in the writing of this book.

In their research, they each developed their own concepts, theories and therapeutic practices. Even so, I wanted to pull out the common threads that underpin their findings and support the aim of this book.

They all rate highly self-awareness and self-disclosure as essential activities necessary to achieve a healthy well-being and personality.

They all support the concept of 'a good listening to' and the benefits that ensue. The simple notion that 'being known all the way through by at least one person' has great merit in all our relationships.

For our children, being known all the way through by at least one person is the essential pre-requisite to growing up with a healthy and confident personality. I can only recommend that you work to achieve this.

Transparent Self by Sidney M Jourard

Sidney M Jourard was a clinical psychologist in the 60's and 70's who researched and worked in the field of self-disclosure. His book entitled 'The Transparent Self' (Jourard, 1971) opened my mind to a very important concept:

'Openness (transparency) with at least one significant person is an essential requirement for a healthy personality.' (Jourard, 1971)

Simply put, a healthy state of mind is directly linked to how much we reveal about ourselves to another significant person. The more we reveal, the more authentic we are, and the more healthy we become.

For me, the word 'transparent' in 'transparent self' means opening ourselves up to someone to know us. This type of disclosure brings about change all by itself. Sydney M. Jourard identified the direct relationship between healthy well-being and self-disclosure, and promoted its use in therapeutic relationships.

Whatever your state of mental health, I highly recommend Sidney M Jourard's concept:

'Being known all the way through by at least one significant person is an essential requirement for a healthy personality.'

Re-evaluation Counselling by Harvey Jackins

Harvey Jackins originated the practice of co-counselling in the 1980's.

The Co-counselling process involves two people, trained in the fundamentals of Re-evaluation Counselling, where agreeing to equal counselling time is an important principle.

The theory of Re-evaluation Counselling has merit and stands along side other counselling disciplines as an effective way to recover from early distresses.

In my words the basic theory of Re-evaluation is:

“When we are given ‘a good listening to’ in a nonjudgmental setting, we are encouraged to talk out patterns of distress formed at a vulnerable age.

“It is this talking out and the re-expression of associated emotion in a safe setting that enables us to use our good thinking to re-evaluate the original trauma.

“It is the discharge of associated emotion together with the unconditional attention that creates the healing effect.”

What stops us using counselling disciplines like Re-evaluation Counselling is our reluctance to re-experience the original trauma and associated emotion.

As a result, our reluctance holds our chronic patterns in place. Bear in mind that the pattern's purpose is to protect us from re-experiencing the original hurt. Although good intentioned, it does hold us back from taking risks and fulfilling our potential.

The 'discharge of original emotion' has the effect of lessening the intensity of our response to the stimulus of the original trauma. We are freer to use our intelligence (rather than our highly charged emotions) to re-assess the situation and come to a new understanding and behaviour.

An unanticipated benefit is that in re-experiencing our original hurt and its associated emotion in a safe setting, we survived it, which contradicts our 'pattern's reluctance to ever go there again'.

As a result, we challenged the chronic pattern's intention of holding us back and keeping us safe. By itself, contradicting a chronic pattern frees us up to recover our original autonomy and intimacy - what we are born with.

If you want to find out more, I recommend you read his book entitled 'The Human Side of Human Beings' by Harvey Jackins.

Dr Tanya Byron

Tanya Byron is a British psychologist, writer, and media personality, best known for her work as a child therapist on television shows Little Angels and The House of Tiny Tearaways. She also co-created the BBC Two sitcom The Life and Times of Vivienne Vyle with Jennifer Saunders, and still contributes articles to various newspapers.

In 2008, she became Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Edge Hill University and is the first and current Chancellor of the same institution.

The aim of her book 'Your child, Your Way' is to help parents think about the kind of parent they are and want to be. Dr Byron also makes it clear that once you understand the meaning of your child's behaviour, you'll be able to parent them more effectively.

In summary, it's about first understanding your child, and secondly understanding yourself and the way you respond to your child's behaviour.

Her key message is:

"...if you want to change your child's behaviour you have to change your own – it's not rocket science!"

I recommend her books for any parent or parent-to-be because she lays out not only the enjoyable parts of parenthood but encourages you to face the challenges of parenthood.

Clean Language by David Grove

Clean Language was conceived by David Grove in a counselling setting to help patients resolve traumas and phobias. It basically guides us as the listener to use language that does not pollute our client's agenda but instead makes use of their own words. It shifts the focus of disclosure from the therapist's agenda to the client's.

By using Clean Language questions, people are encouraged to explore their own mental landscape based on their own thinking.

Earlier in this book I gave some example of Clean Language questions, they were:

- “and”,
- “tell me more”,
- “what happened next?”,
- “can you explain that?”,

Here are more examples of clean questions, but this time they include the words used by the talker as follows:

- "Is there anything else about... ?"
- "What kind of ... is that ...?"
- "What would you like to have happen?"
- "Whereabouts is...?"

Clean Language helps us as ‘the listener’ to keep our minds away from ‘influencing’ or ‘polluting’ the thought process of ‘the talker’. This approach helps ‘the talker’ to explore their minds without the need to react to ‘the listeners’ curiosity, or shut down because they feel under scrutiny or attack.

In summary, we make more progress towards resolving our inner struggles when we are free to explore our vulnerable thoughts and feelings without needing to contend with ‘the listeners’ personal analysis or agenda.

Games People Play by Eric Berne

An introduction to the work of Eric Berne...

Eric Berne was a Canadian-born psychiatrist who created the theory of transactional analysis as a way of explaining human behaviour. His theory of transactional analysis was based on the ideas of Freud but was distinctly different.

In his book 'Games People Play' Eric Berne describes our fundamental human need is to seek the physical intimacy that we initially experienced as a baby. Below is a quote which defines simply the use of the word 'Games' in his book 'Games People Play'

"Games are a compromise between intimacy and keeping intimacy away."

He goes on to explain that as part of growing up, society forces us to compromise our need for physical intimacy and seek 'strokes' through recognition instead.

As we become more sophisticated, so does our individual quest for recognition. It is this hunger for recognition that forms our societal structure. Every role we take on within the society relies primarily on our hunger for recognition and not on our original need for physical intimacy.

How we view ourselves (our internalised identity) is reliant on recognition hunger. We work to maintain the recognition we receive from society which relies in its early stages on others providing it, such as parents, family and teachers.

If we do not receive sufficient recognition-intimacy we will wither just as babies do when deprived of physical-intimacy. It explains our addiction to seeking recognition whether it be a title, like doctor or lawyer, or an achievement such as gold medalist or pop star.

In the survival of the species, this shift from physical hunger to recognition hunger serves a purpose. It ensures we maintain a healthy mind and body whilst our only form of physical intimacy - sexual intimacy - ensures the continuation of the human species.

Stroking...

Eric Berne talks about 'Stroking' as a way to describe physical intimacy, such as touching or hugging. It is how we satisfy our physical-hunger. Similarly, by recognising another's existence, it has the same effect of satisfying their 'recognition-hunger'.

According to Eric Berne a 'stroke' is a unit of social interaction, and when we exchange 'strokes' he calls this a 'transaction'. In his book 'Games People Play' he describes in great detail, how these 'transactions' when played out in a series of patterned communication form 'the games people play'.

His view is that these 'games' are substitutes for the living of 'real intimacy' in our relationships as they are seen as 'preliminary engagements' rather than 'real intimacy'.

In Chapter 18 of his book, he reveals (in my opinion) his feelings of hopelessness for the majority of the human race. And yet he does not completely close the door on us, by adding that there is hope for the individuals who are prepared to rise above their conditioning.

Here is an extract from CHAPTER 18 of 'GAMES PEOPLE PLAY by Eric Berne...

*"For certain fortunate people there is something which transcends all classifications of behaviour, and that is **awareness**; something which rises above the programming of the past, and that is **spontaneity**; and something that is more rewarding than games, and that is **intimacy**."*

If you are experiencing dysfunctional relationships with partners, friends or family members, then I highly recommend his book. When you can recognise a 'game being played out' then you have the possibility to stop taking part in the 'game' and freeing yourself from these unhealthy and dysfunctional relationships.

Mentalisation... by Peter Fonagy

Peter Fonagy, OBE, FBA, FAcSS, FMedSci (born August 14 1952) is a Hungarian-born British psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist. He is Professor of Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Developmental Science and Head of the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences at University College London,

Together with Professor Anthony W Bateman MA, FRCPsych they coined the term "mentalisation" which refers to the ability to talk about and understand one's mental and emotional states. It helps us understand what lies behind our behaviour. It has been described as "Thinking about our thinking".

Through the process of mentalisation, children learn to develop their sense of identity. Without this capacity, they will have trouble in later life recognising their own and others' feelings.

Mentalisation reinforces the concepts written about in this book. By enabling your child to reveal their thoughts and feelings, their true identity becomes transparent and they will become healthier because of it.

You can find more details on mentalisation in Peter Fonagy's book entitled 'Mentalisation Handbook'.