



HELPING CHILDREN GROW
a short read for parents

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This booklet provides some broad strokes of the ordinary struggles in parenting children and helping them grow. By ordinary I don't mean easy and routine. I mean to say that alongside the moments of joy, fulfillment, and connectedness with our children, there are inevitably great difficulties, pain, regret, confusion and guilt. To be present and engage with our children means also to encounter the full spectrum of these experiences. When we can better withstand and understand these ordinary and inevitable struggles, we are better able to use our innate capacities for fostering their development and deepening the parent/ child relationship.

The following suggests a way of thinking about our children—a parenting perspective over a parenting technique. Imagine parenting like gardening and our children to be like one-of-a-kind plants. As gardener-parents, we have unique sensibilities. Our plant-children have differing needs at different seasons, requiring distinct kinds of garden and plant management. Gardeners encourage growth by paying attention and managing soil and water and food—but they don't make it happen. There are innate qualities in each plant that propel its own growth, when the environment is adequate. These one of a kind plants don't need our perfect gardening techniques, but our persistent effort to care and pay attention. Like a parent, a gardener gets dirty, fails, gets discouraged— a gardener also feels pleasure and delights in witnessing the beauty of the growth.

To better understand our children's experiences, I'll begin with a very general overview of child development and the child's point of view in the growing process. While there can be extraordinary circumstances throughout the course of a child's growing up like disease, prolonged illness, traumatic separations, the following will focus on ordinary development.

DEVELOPMENT IS CUMULATIVE

As we grow, the present moments build upon earlier moments. In the beginning, there is an absolute need on the part of the baby to be accommodated—in the womb the temperature is perfect, nothing is sharp or too big, noises are tempered, food comes as it's needed, waste is eliminated with minimal effort. Then at birth, from the baby's point of view the environment changes in a shocking way. Parents often take great efforts to make this change feel less abrupt—they offer accommodations reminiscent of the baby's life before birth—swaddling, singing, holding, feedings at the right moments. Despite a parent's best efforts, the world will inevitably feel increasingly frustrating to a growing baby. By 12 months of age, the baby has accumulated a complex set of experiences, feelings and thoughts. While he or she will not remember these early moments like we experience explicit or cognitive memories as adults (recalling images and events, a sense of time, space) the memories of this period are stored implicitly in our bodies, in our bones, and in our feelings—they provide the basis for our sense of self in the world and in our own skin. These early experiences lay the foundation for how we will manage our interior emotional lives as we grow and how we will relate to others in the world. This period is not wholly definitive, yet it is formative.

When we look at rings on a tree, each ring is formed around the previous—the rings together tell us something about what it's been like for the whole tree to grow across seasons—together the rings make up the whole of the tree. Donald Winnicott, a child psychiatrist once said, "Each child of four is also three and also two and also one, and is also an infant being weaned, or an infant just being born, or even an infant in the womb. Children go backwards and forwards in their emotional age." In this sense, development doesn't look linear neither does it feel linear.

We can see this backwards and forwards nature of growing up playing out at the beginning of preschool—children bringing in blankets or stuffed animals from home, clinging to parents' legs, sucking thumbs, crying, potty accidents. Our present moments have within them the accumulation of previous moments—we ourselves can be 50, and also 25 and also 5, and so on. Becoming parents can remind us of what it was like to be a child—sometimes this helps us understand our children better and sometimes it can get in the way of seeing through our child's eyes.

BEHAVIORS HAVE MEANING

In moments when we can register our child's feelings, this informs us on how to respond in ways they need. Consider behaviors as you would poetry. Sometimes, an understanding of a poem may not immediately occur to you. Or maybe you understand the words and even have a sense of the themes, but the understanding is more of an intellectual kind. Or, there are times when you may read a poem, and it registers—it makes its way inside you and lands somewhere meaningful. It may even provoke an internal shift in your feeling or thinking.

Registering our children's experiences is a fundamental struggle for us as parents. We are often just trying to stay afloat with a 24-hour-a-day-job of raising children—make dinner, get children to different engagements, working jobs, managing conflicts between sibling children (“He started it”, “She got more than me”, “That's mine”). We are often dealing with difficult behaviors from our children throughout the day. Then bedtime comes around and we hope we'll have a minute to ourselves and it just continues—“I need water”, “I need to go to the bathroom”, “I'm scared”, “My toe hurts”. As parents, it can be easy to experience a child's acting out as an inconvenience or a manipulation to get attention. Our own family histories, our present states of mind after working all day and many other things can stand in conflict with our capacity to reflect and register our children's experiences. Even the most experienced gardeners with the best of intentions make mistakes in pruning, planting or fertilizing, or can't always predict a late spring frost.

We may not be able to or have the time or mental space to think and understand our children in the moment. Our children's worries can be hard to bear and can evoke guilty feelings, doubt or sorrow. But even in retrospect, understanding can serve us when the situation arises again—understanding, whether in the moment or after the fact informs our instincts. I'll give an example:

Tina, a certain precocious three year old girl would in a matter-of-fact journalistic tone describe to her mother before being dropped off with a babysitter, “You're going to take me to the babysitter's house and go to work. I'll be with the babysitter until you get back. You're going to be back later and I'm still going to cry.” This was part of their ritual each morning. Sure enough, her mother would try to leave her with the babysitter and she would cling to her mother's leg, screaming and shaking as if she had no understanding of the words she had rehearsed earlier—at least, she was not capable of using her verbal skills and apparent intellectual understanding in those moments. In fact, she made drop offs quite difficult for her mother on a daily basis. This girl had actually been through an extraordinary amount of change in her short three years, each transition and goodbye pointing to previous losses and changes. She needed some help to be able to digest and metabolize her worries—that is to say, to have her worries without feeling overtaken by them. This took time for her and for her family—her parents struggled for quite a while—bearing the anxiety of the drop offs, staying firm with her about dropping her off while also keeping in mind (often only retrospectively) what drop offs meant to her in the way of loss and change. It was her parents' posture of receptivity and persistence that shaped their responses and helped her settle in to drop offs with her babysitter over time. While it is hard to trust and impossible to just force, it's often in the bearing of their worries and our doubts over the long term that we can be of most help to our children.

It would not be possible to address each way a child might show signs of distress and anxiety in life and what they each mean. But, we can think about general ideas that could be helpful in

taking stock of what's happening around a child and how it might impact him or her. I want to emphasize that behavior is communication and that it has meaning. Children (and adults, too) show what they can't say. Outwardly, when a child is in some kind of ongoing distress, we might see sleep problems, tantrums, difficulty focusing, specific fears, inflexibility, withdrawal. Sometimes these are ways that our children can react to changes like a divorce, a move, a new school year, a new sibling, a different teacher or change in caregiver, a birthday—these are BIG happenings to a child, with particular and individual significance to each unique child. Much of the time, children don't truly understand their feelings about such things and can't say what they feel—but, they show us how they feel. To get a little more specific about where child worries and acting them out often can come from, I'd like to highlight 3 important and inevitable growing up dilemmas:

The first, I'll call the **here, then not here** dilemma. From before birth through early childhood, the bond with a parent and the parent's continued presence with the baby is mostly important in a physical way. The baby and the young child have a strong need to be WITH their caregiver. This means ordinary "not-here" events like parents going to work, babysitters, day care and nighttime present the child with difficult feelings. To a child, these everyday and necessary events can feel random and shocking. Bobby was a 4 year old having great difficulties in being separated from his parents, behaving recklessly and aggressively at school—his behaviors were so difficult for the grown ups that he was kicked out and reenrolled to several preschools over the course of a year. One way he tried to keep his worries about separation from his parents at bay was with constant activity and high energy—in a sense, putting all of his unbearable feelings on the outside for the grown ups to deal with. In my office one day, he took out some drawing paper and began to simulate a racetrack with the pencil frantically going around the paper in a circle, over and over again. He exclaimed, "It just keeps going and going and going—it doesn't stop!" Over time, it became apparent that he needed some routine, predictability, a slower pace at home and more help to transition and separate from one thing/ person to the next. Over time and throughout much struggle, the grown ups began registering his worry and responding in a way that felt helpful to him. One of his teachers at school provided him with a tent in the corner of the room where he could go when he was worried. He was able to settle in to his routines and life became a little less worrisome for him. He was a child whom had grown dependent on his parents but had great difficulty in managing his feelings about their comings and goings.

The next dilemma I'll call the **big/little** dilemma. In growing to a new stage of life, part of you says goodbye to the previous. Children and adults feel about this in different ways and have varying reactions. Winnicott alluded to this dilemma when he said, "Children go backward and forward in their emotional age." A common example may be when a child is learning to use the potty. A part of them may take to it readily—but they also may feel quite conflicted about "flushing something down the drain forever", and being responsible to know when they have to go and find a place to do so. A child could be physically capable yet emotionally unready to use the potty—it could FEEL too big. A child may feel partially brave and big, while another part of them may feel like a little baby all at the same time.

The birth of a new sibling inevitably presents a child with this developmental dilemma. Up until that point, he or she may have been used to being the little one, the baby, the one needing the most help, getting the most help. Often, children in this position can feel compelled to be the BIG sibling once a little one is born, despite feelings of uncertainty, pain and jealousy. Part of the child may like this new title—big brother, big sister. Another part may not always feel up to the task and feel a sense of great loss and jealousy.

A younger sibling is faced with a different challenge—early on, they don't understand time and age like an adult— they may see an older sibling as a standard bearer, always more advanced, such that they could never catch up to "big sibling". They may feel as if being younger is inferior,

not being as smart, not having as much, etc. This can make the task of learning things quite humiliating—they may carry a sense of “I should already know!”

This big/ little dilemma continues throughout life in different forms—I’m sure you’ve known of an excited kindergartner going to the first day of school and coming back saying, “I did kindergarten. Now what will we be doing tomorrow?” Or moving up in grades—saying goodbye to an important teacher and starting in a new classroom or new building with new expectations. There is a disparity between growing bigger and feeling not so big—this disparity fluctuates throughout life. Maybe you have visited your childhood primary school as an adult and had the experience of it feeling so much smaller—remembering how big it felt back then.

The third dilemma I’d like to highlight is that of **bearing frustration**. Even in the most ordinary of parent/ child experiences, disappointment and regret is inevitable and necessary, becoming more challenging as a child grows—at first, hopefully in smaller doses. As parents, we don’t want our children to suffer. However, I think it is helpful to try to distinguish between keeping our children from being frustrated and helping them bear their frustrations—it is a distinction that can be difficult to put into focus.

For this dilemma, I’d like to contrast two very different children’s stories: *The Giving Tree* and *Where the Wild Things Are*. I think the authors Shel Silverstein and Maurice Sendak are quite in tune with this frustration dilemma, highlighting two very different outcomes.

In *The Giving Tree*, a tree and a boy have a relationship. The boy at first just loves to play on the tree and the tree loves this. Then, the boy wants more and more things that the tree is not able to give without depleting herself. I think my interpretation of this story may differ from its intended message. I believe the story contains an element of despair in the boy’s arrested development and in the tree’s depletion.

The tree didn’t possess a conviction that her constancy, her firmness and tolerance of her own limitations were what the boy needed. Neither the tree nor the boy was able to consider the idea that the tree could not actually meet all his needs. The boy was stuck in his development, attempting to avoid loss and frustration—he really needed some help to tolerate these difficult and ordinary feelings. By the end, the tree is depleted and the boy is still a boy, despite many years gone by.

This story illustrates a common sentiment in Western culture of an idealized parent with infinite resources. This ideal parent always has what the child needs and keeps the child from being frustrated. This parent has no limitations. This parent never says no, always has the answer. This parent does not exist. And here in story form, the child is not even helped to grow up by this kind of attention. Parent limitations are not necessarily antagonistic to a child’s development. Our limitations and shortcomings in our child’s growing process make opportunities for mending that are much more useful to our children than always getting it right or giving them what they want. When we say we are sorry, for example, this helps a child get more acquainted with the hope that things can be repaired. When we set limits, we implicitly communicate that feeling frustrated is something ordinary. In the tree’s effort to always have what the boy needed, the two of them never got to experience these limitations and reparations in relationships.

The Giving Tree also gives us a picture of the heartbreak for both parent and child when a parent does not have a source of strength from which to draw—a parent that has nothing else but the child—one that does not feel vitalized by something outside of the parent/ child relationship. This tree was unsupported and had nothing outside of herself giving her life. It is vital for a parent and reassuring for a child when a parent has an other—when the child has the feeling of a parent couple—this may take the form of a parent’s partner, but not necessarily—it may also be a

community, stimulating interests, extended family members, etc. A parent's own experiences and relationships of creativity and inspiration outside of the parent-child relationship give strength to a family.

In contrast, Max in *Where the Wild Things Are* felt his wild feelings one night. He was sent to his room for his wildness— then he imagined that he became king of his wild monster feelings. But, eventually he felt lonely and decided to come back. He could eventually smell the food back home and he felt his missing feelings. The brief exchange with his mom at the beginning left him in a position to experience the sturdiness and reliability of his mother and his distinct, important, wild monster feelings. The dinner plate waiting for him at the end left him in a position to experience his mother's resourcefulness and warm acceptance. You have the sense that he experienced his mother's limitations to his behavior that night and that he also felt accepted despite his wild retreat. I imagine that this was not the first time, nor the last time Max sailed off to other lands. Unlike the feeling of depletion in *The Giving Tree*, I think one may feel hopeful at the end of this story—Max grew a little that night. He became a little more acquainted with some of his difficult monstrous worries, and he and his mom survived it all.

The tree and the boy went along with the illusion that the boy's wild feelings of guilt, disappointment, jealousy, regret, and fear would not be useful and that they should be quelled. The tree couldn't say no—and this left her depleted and the boy stuck. Max's mother set a limit on his mischief and was not deterred by Max's wild feelings. He eventually smelled good things— things having to do with his mother's firmness, reliability, resourcefulness and love. I think Max appears relieved at the end of his story, more upright and sturdy—while the old-man-boy looks depressed and deflated.

Registering shapes our management

When we have registered our children's experiences, our response to them is more informed. Our language and posture help give shape to our children's wild, big and shapeless emotions. To a child, her emotions can feel bigger than her. I want to be clear and distinguish between registering and permissiveness. I think when we truly register our child's experience we cannot just allow misbehavior. Understanding is not the same as endorsement. For example, a 5 year-old insisting on hitting her newborn baby sister can't be permitted to do so. But, her parent can still register the pain of jealousy that she feels. When a parent can really register the pain of this jealousy, he or she is in a position to use a language of understanding that gives the child a building block for growth. In this case, it would be setting a limit, it also may include words of understanding, or a hug, some extraordinary and momentary flexibility—it depends on the moment, the child, the parent's sensibilities—none of these examples are prescriptive, just possibilities of a parent's own expression of understanding the child. Over time as the child feels more understood and understands something more about her jealous feelings, there is less of a need to act on them. Psychologist, Martha Harris said it this way, "Understanding with firmness leaves a child freer to develop a more realistic conscience less prompted by fear and more influenced by care and concern for others."

Luke, a five-year-old boy was having a hard time getting to sleep at night, acting up and resisting any of his parents' efforts to keep him in his room and his bed. His mother was pregnant at the time and especially tired at the end of each day, needing to rest at night. This left the boy's father in charge of bedtime routines for a season. If we consider the boy's point of view, there were so many wild and shapeless thoughts and feelings that could come up during this season of life—"mommy has a special baby in her tummy? What about me? What's going to happen to me? What's mommy doing now? She's tired? Cause of me?" I believe the boy's parents had an inkling of his experience, which compelled the father to lay down with his son and sing blues songs together at bedtime. This experience of singing became an important part of their routine together and I believe will get stored up as a resource for this boy as he grows up. I think this example is

particularly beautiful because of the father's choice of the blues—it implicitly acknowledged the boy's pain in a way that connected them to do something creative and ultimately enjoyable for both of them. This father did not consciously think of a technique, he was merely responding from his own sensibilities after registering his son's experience.

When we are able to extend a hand to our children and say, "let's do this together", we help develop resources within them—an internal helping hand, a part of them that can be helpful to them as they grow. Sometimes we can feel stuck in power struggles with our children—it's hard to offer a helping hand when we feel more compelled to have the upper hand. Or, sometimes it feels easier to do something for them to avoid the frustration. In the process of understanding and registering we are all the time having to sift through our own feelings, our child's point of view and feelings, what he or she needs, what limits are required in the moment, etc. It's one of our principal challenges as parents—it is very difficult but I think we are always able to learn.

Often, when our children have taken some steps backwards we worry that helping them could be indulging their dependence and jeopardizing their independence. In fact, sometimes being extra dependent for a period is what they need to feel a little more sure of themselves. As we can sometimes recognize as adults, the road to independence has come by way of dependence. So, as we help our children along this road, it is helpful when we can extend this same understanding to ourselves as we are learning and growing. As parents, we can often dismiss our instincts and can minimize the importance of our understanding, especially when we feel guilty about our shortcomings and mistakes. We can assume that "a better parent would know the answer". You are the best and only parent for your child. No matter what, these one of a kind plants are difficult to raise. But hopefully, as parent gardeners we can notice our enjoyment, our children's experiences as well as our own in a way that feels like our instincts are better informed and the garden is growing and getting somewhere even when we don't always see it happening.

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