The Vital Adult – Child Regulating Functions

There are some key ways to be in relationship with a child that contribute positively to the development of a significant relationship **and** to the development for the child of a healthy sense of self. These are known as the vital adult – child regulating functions or Vital Parenting Functions. They are drawn from the teachings and findings of some leading commentators on emotional, psychological and child development (Sunderland[1] 2003/2006/2007; Kohut[2] 1984; Stern[3] 1998).

These skills, when provided within a significant relationship with an adult, will provide a relational basis for a child's emotional, social and neurological development.

Attunement   Containment   Soothing   Validation

Remember to demonstrate these essential tools as part of your general way of being with the child

Be alert to how they are feeling: demonstrate attuning to their emotional state showing you can catch how they feel *through* facial expression, body language, gesture, noises: ah, oo, oh, mm, eek etc. Demonstrate that you understand the intensity, pitch, pace, volume expansiveness or spatial experience of the child's emotional state.

Be alert to how they are feeling: demonstrate containment. Show that you catch and understand the pitch/intensity/quality of their feeling or mood **and** that you can bear it. Make their deep distress or raging anger or painful sorrow a survivable experience. Catch it, match it and digest it by thinking about it and offering it back, named, in small digestible pieces. This will make bearable the strongest emotional state. This shared experience builds trust for the child: in you, in adults, in the world.

Be alert to how they are feeling: demonstrate emotional regulation. Catch the emotion, match it anx help the child to regulate the feeling up or down. You will be communicating the capacity to regulate emotional states by modelling how to do it.

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[1]Sunderland, M. (2006) *What every parent needs to know* Dorling Kindersley
[2] Kohut, H. (1971) *The Analysis of the Self* International Universities Press; (1977) *The Restoration of the Self* NY International Universities Press
[3] Stern, D. (1998) *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* Basic Books

Be alert to how they are feeling: soothe and calm their distress.
They need to experience being calmed before they can do it for
themselves.

Be alert to the child's experience: validate their perspective/
experience/feeling. This needs to happen before you move to help
them regulate it. This is the beginning of being able to think about
feelings. Avoid reassuring, persuading otherwise, contradicting.

Set the emotional tone of your engagement with the child - avoid
being pulled into a feeling by the child's state. Know how you want
your engagement to be. Consciously act to develop that.

***Separate out the behaviour the child uses from the child
him/herself*** in your response: continue committed contact with the
child even as you stop the unacceptable behaviour.

Adopt a helpful Attitude

Your attitude to the child or young person is key. Dan Hughes[4]
spells out the key features that can help children grow a healthy
sense of themselves. He suggests these 5 qualities make up the
best background atmosphere for emotional learning – PLACE:

P=Playful
L=Loving
A=Accepting
C=Curious
E=Empathic

Check for yourself: which of these is hardest for you? Does it
change according to the child? Or to the level of support you
experience?

Bringing a 'Detective Columbo' stance can be very helpful: musing
aloud about what might be going on for the child, showing real
interest and curiosity about their reaction or behaviour- seeing it as
unique to them and something you really want to understand or
find out about.

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[4] Hughes D. A. (1998: 92) Building the Bonds of Attachment- awakening love in
deeply disturbed children pub Aronson New Jersey; London