

EMPATHIC PARENTING: BEING SEEN

BY

MARTA FRANCA

Parents want their children to grow up to live healthy, successful, and fulfilling lives. They want their children to be happy. However, these good intentions can sometimes result in parents having high expectations for how their children should behave, think, or make choices in their lives. These expectations are particularly a problem today when children are already experiencing a high degree of pressure regarding their academic performance.

Parents too can feel overwhelmed about being good-enough parents. Pressure from society and our fast-paced world can contribute to the stress and to the high expectations they hold for both themselves and their children. High-conflict relationships between older children and parents can begin to develop, especially during adolescence when teens start to discover their own identity and begin to seek autonomy. Communication between parents and adolescents can become challenging. Many teenagers may begin to feel that their parents do not understand them, nor trust them. They may feel unheard, unseen, and alone.

To be seen is a basic human need. We probably all can remember a time when we felt seen. It is an unforgettable experience. By being seen I mean having an experience with someone who is present, who listens deeply without judgment, and who has an open heart. Being seen is being loved and accepted for who we are without the expectation that we will become someone we are not. Being seen is to be understood and to be loved unconditionally. In their book, *A Psychotherapy of Love: Psychosynthesis in Practice*, John Firman and Ann Gila call it “empathic love.” They write:

This love is of a very particular kind. This is not a love that sees the other as fulfilling one’s desires and dreams, not a love that views the other as something

to be changed or managed, not a love blinded by ideas and images of the other (whether positive or negative). So this life-giving love must issue from beyond—and at times in spite of—the hopes, fears, and designs of personality or personal ego. (Firman and Gila 2010, 4)

When children are not seen, there is a rupture in the empathic love connection between them and their caregivers. Parents and caregivers may contribute to this rupture consciously or unconsciously. In their book, *The Power of Showing Up*, child psychiatrist Daniel Siegel and psychologist Tina Payne Bryson also emphasize the importance of children being seen, and its implications for their emotional development.

Truly seeing our kids is about three main things: (1) attuning to their internal mental state on a profound and meaningful level; (2) coming to understand their inner life; and (3) responding to what we see in a timely and effective manner. This three-step process helps children “feel felt.” (Siegel and Payne 2020, 110, 234)

A longitudinal study of child development demonstrated that the best predictor for how children turned out in terms of being happy, developing meaningful relationships, and achieving academic and career success was whether they had developed a secure relationship with a person who “showed up” for them (Siegel and Payne 2020, 5). In psychosynthesis, the parental figures and caregivers who show up for children are called “authentic unifying centers.” They are crucial in the development of the whole person and in the formation of a child’s authentic personality, a personality that reflects a child’s unique gifts and talents.

Parenting is complex and challenging. As mentioned above, a break in empathic love can happen intentionally, but also unintentionally. Being aware of our actions in every moment is not possible. Wounding caused by a break in empathic love will occur even with the most loving, caring parents and caregivers. Increasing our awareness of the reactivity that we as parents and caregivers have to our children’s behaviors, thoughts, and feelings will minimize the chances of a disruption of empathic love. To begin to increase our awareness, we can ask ourselves: “Am I

parenting with empathy?” “Can I see and love my child as the unique young person they are?”

In responding to these questions, it is important to examine the interactions we have with our children. We can start by being aware of how we feel before we begin to listen to them. If we do not feel well physically and/or mentally, and are not ready to have the interaction, we need to postpone the conversation if it is possible to do so. However, if we need to address the situation immediately, taking a few deep breaths can help. We need to remember to validate and normalize our children’s feelings, and try to empathize with their experience. It helps to remember their age and developmental level and adjust our expectations accordingly. We can also let them know we are present and deeply listening.

Furthermore, we can ask ourselves, “Do we feel seen?” Are we able to identify the authentic unifying centers in our lives? Parents and caregivers tend to put others first and end up forgetting about their own needs. If our needs to be seen and heard are being neglected in our present relationships, as well as if we have a childhood history of neglect, these experiences will affect the way we parent and relate to our children. The neglect of our own needs may make it more challenging to be empathic with our children.

Psychosynthesis is rooted in the power of empathic love. When children are seen, accepted, and loved for who they are, growth—and movement toward evolution and wholeness—will occur. More than ever, the experience of being seen has become important. The lack of empathic love has disrupted child-parent relationships and the relationships we as adults have with each other, the environment, and the world. Parenting with empathy is crucial to providing children the experience of been seen, loved, and accepted so that they will then be able to provide this experience for others as they become adults.

REFERENCES

Firman, John, and Ann Gila. 2010. *A Psychotherapy of Love: Psychosynthesis in Practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Siegel, Daniel J., and Tina Payne Bryson. 2020. *The Power of Showing Up: How Parental Presence Shapes Who Our Kids Become and How Their Brains Get Wired*. New York: Ballantine Books.