



# **Supporting resilience and child development**

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# Empathic attunement

*“The way we communicate with children has a profound impact on how they develop. Our ability to have sensitive, reciprocal communication nurtures a child’s sense of security, and these trusting relationships help children do well in many areas of their lives... Children who have positive connections in life have a source of resilience for dealing with life’s challenges.” (Siegel, D)*

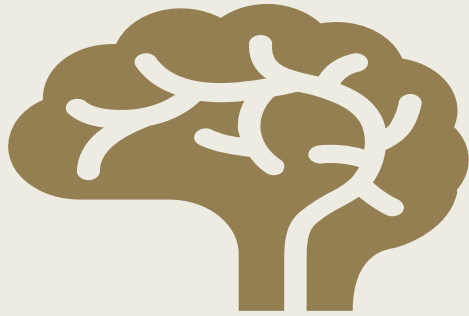
*“It is the need for empathy, the need to be seen, understood and attended to that drives loving connections, which in turn support concern for others and the development of prosocial understanding and skills”. (Fonagy, P)*



# Defining our terms

- **Child development comprises the development of a wide range of skills and abilities and grasping the interconnectedness of their development.**
- **Child development begins with the recognition of the highly dependent nature of infants and children.**
- **Resilience in children and young people can be understood in terms of supportive relationships.**
- **Resilience requires children and young people to call upon a range of prosocial skills.**

# Attachment and recent developments in neuroscience



Empathic, supportive attachments and relationships are essential to optimise brain development as ***'the attunement of emotional states is essential for the developing brain to acquire the capacity to organize itself more autonomously as the child matures'***



experiences support the development of the architecture of the brain, ***-the elaboration of neuronal networks, hormone functioning, and development of vital neural pathways to support balance between the emotion and thinking parts of the brain (Pre-frontal cortex).***

# The Social Brain: the role of mirror neurons

Architecture of the brain and metabolism of hormones is hugely influenced by relationships in first years of life

***Important role of oxytocin*** (referred to as ‘bonding hormone’) in supporting loving relationships and promoting ***relaxed states and counteracting stress.***

Brains do not exist in isolation, just like people, they are intrinsically linked to one another –the baby’s and caregiver’s brain are relating to each other all the time.

Evolution endowed us with ***‘mirror neurons’***, parts of the brain, which reflect activities of people we are watching –our brain linked to another brain through ‘mirror neurons’ –supported by oxytocin.

Crucial to ‘secure base’ –person we turn to when feeling threatened, but ***also person you are watching all the time.***



# Social brain (continued)

Through watching and observing the caregiver, a connection mediated by the mirror neurons, the brain of the infant and the caregiver are connected. ***What is watched is internalized.***

We can all identify feelings –fear, misery, excitement, happiness (located in the limbic system). We need feelings to survive. ***We also need to think, plan and regulate feelings to co-operate with others.***

Relationship between thinking brain (prefrontal cortex) and feeling brain (amygdala) is vital in regulation of feelings. Thinking brain is social brain –very much connected to other people –***our relationships with other people enhances our capacity to regulate feelings.***

Healthy brain development supports oxytocin release to calm the amygdala; also, importantly strong pathways back from prefrontal cortex to soothe and calm --GABA bearing fibres, ‘top-down inhibitory pathways’ (stress regulating executive functions)

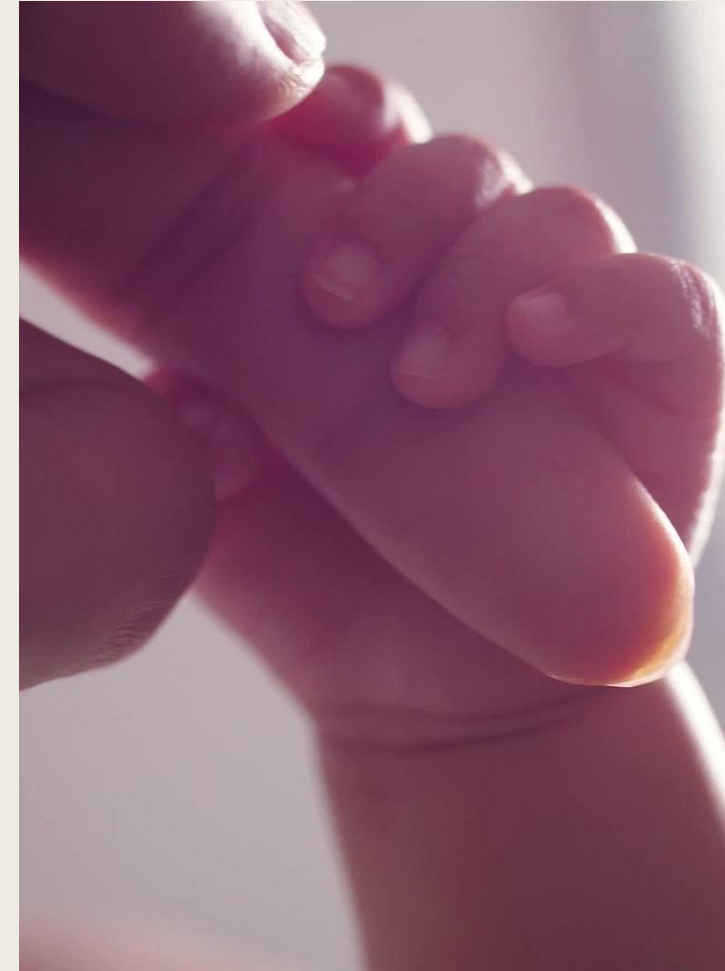
# Regulation of emotions

When baby is distressed, and cries and cannot regulate the feelings – it is a signal to the caregiver to respond to the baby ***and do the thinking for the baby by taking action -holding, containing Co-regulation.*** Together the infant and caregiver regulate the emotion –in response the baby is soothed and calmed and stops crying because the problem is solved, (supported by oxytocin).

This process is internalized through mirror neurons and so infants gradually can do more themselves –soothing and calming.

By time gets to school children can do a lot of self regulating and calming (internalized sense of safety safety)

The move from co-regulation to self regulation is mediated by attachment, which is described as the ***'the hidden regulator'***.



# Brain functioning and attachment

The part of the brain where feelings are located is the limbic system, in the mid brain. One structure, the amygdala, scans the environment for danger, and generates responses to danger (fight or flight). ***It is also the centre of our emotional learning & interactive social processing.***

Amygdala assesses every experience including relational ones for safety or danger, pleasure or pain (pairs them with emotional charge for approach or avoidance in future).

These processes may not be part of awareness or conscious memory. ***They may set stable and unconscious patterns of attachment in first 2 years of life, which may last over time.***

Amygdala is both the fear centre and centre for social and emotional processing; **safety is the first priority** (evolutionary reasons for this since safety relates to survival)





# Soothing and calming functions within the brain: role of oxytocin



Hormones are released from hypothalamus to regulate the amygdala –most important for attachment is oxytocin

Oxytocin (bonding hormone) production is supported by calm, soothing and loving attachments/relationships.

Oxytocin also spurs the pre-frontal cortex to grow GABA bearing fibres back down to the amygdala, these in turn allow the pre-frontal cortex to quell strong negative emotions, supporting soothing and calming functions.

These are referred to as ***'top-down inhibitory pathways'*** developed in the pre-frontal lobes and go to the amygdala to calm the brain's alarm systems, inhibiting primitive impulses of fight of flight. They are called ***'stress regulating executive functions.'***

# Neuroscience and early development: summary

- **Brains are built up over time from bottom up**

Quality of early relationships affect architecture of brain by establishing either fragile or sturdy foundation for later development

The *'social brain'*; brains do not exist in isolation but are linked to the brains of others via mirror neurons. (Parent/child brains)

- **Serve and return relationships are vital for development**

Young children reach out for interaction in many ways –is vital *that signs recognized & responded to in attuned & sensitive ways.*

- **Flexibility of development decreases with age**

Easier/more effective to support young brain than rewire later.

- **Brain functions operate in richly coordinated ways.**

Emotional wellbeing & social competence provide strong foundation for emerging cognitive abilities, curiosity and joy in exploring.

- **Toxic stress damages developing brain architecture**

# Neuroscience and early attachment: key messages

Warm, attuned relationships and interactions build infant's brain & support emotional & social development

Reciprocal interactions & relationships support development of neural pathways & mirror neurons, which support understanding of & concern for others (empathy) and are calming and soothing

Connectedness, relationships and attachments are vital in the development of brain architecture, neural pathways, including regulating systems, and support all aspects of learning and development of the mind

We need to understand how to build social & emotional capacity in parents/carers to care for infants and children, in order to support health, joy, achievement and resilience & break cycles of dysfunction, and underachievement.



# Resilience and supportive relationships

- Children remain dependent upon adults for their emotional & social development for much of childhood. Key determinant of child's ability to manage anxiety is parent's ability to convey calm and safety. (Hostage to fortune).
- Development of resilience in children is best understood in relation to supportive and attuned relationships rather than simply in terms of internal attributes and resources
- Resilience refers to the availability of support from trusted and emotionally attuned adults as well as being able to call upon a cluster of positive attitudes, skills and resources.
- Prosocial development and skills relate largely to the quality of early relationships.



# Parental resilience

- Children's resilience reflects parental capacity to support them in calm, empathic and hopeful ways. Parents need to model resilience.
- This enables them to be calm around children; regulate then co-regulate their children. Contain and soothe the fears and anxieties of their children. This enables them to think and reflect and plan.
- Parents need to be able to prioritise the needs of their children; be able to delay gratification; manage disappointment & frustration, regulate their own emotions.

***Many parents need understanding & support in this because of their history of adversity and trauma.***



# Resilience in children: key resources

- Seek support and care from trusted adults
- Able to regulate emotional states; able to reflect and plan
- Empathy; interested in and able to see others' point of view
- Good coping and problem-solving skills; enjoy challenges!
- Optimistic outlook; playful and uses humour; hopeful
- Able to manage & overcome disappointment and frustration
- Able to delay gratification; enjoys warm friendships
- Emotional and social flexibility; sense of independence.
- Self esteem and autonomy; having a purpose; enjoying activities
- Finding and trusting one's own voice; trusts others



# Supporting Prosocial Development (4-11 years)

Support importance of truth telling in communication

Respect for belongings of others (not stealing)

Sharing and co-operation with extended groups

Turn taking; understanding complex rules in games

Self-calming skills & emotion regulation

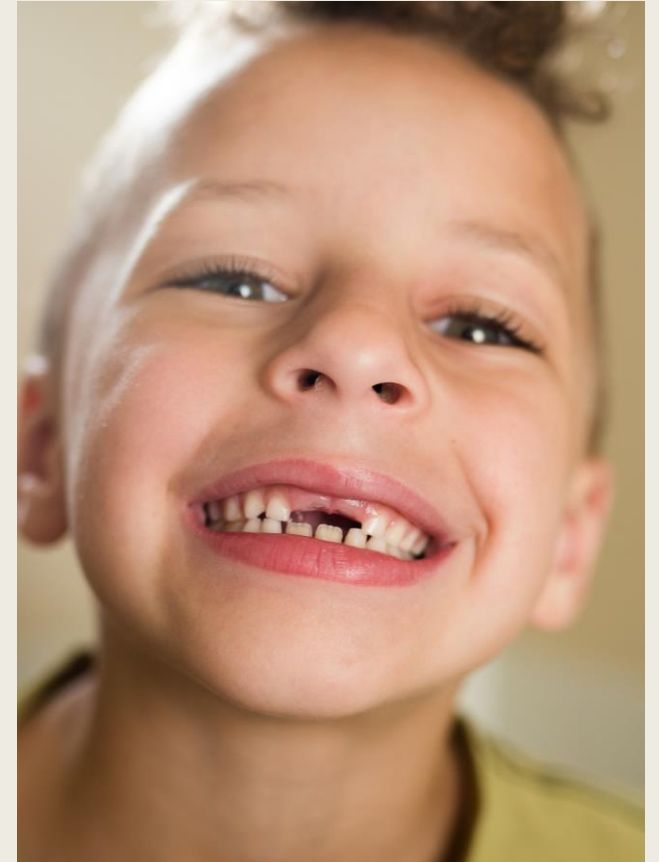
Impulse control increasingly important

Perspective taking; **shift from egocentricity (Piaget)**

Awareness of emotions & feelings of others

Impulse control and the regulation of feelings

Moral development (Piaget; Kohlberg; Eisenberg).



# Roots of truth telling & respect for other's property

- Key question: '***What is the function of language?***' Developmentally it is not about truth telling but about safety, getting needs met and keeping out of trouble.
- Gradual shift in trust and using language to tell truth; to take responsibility; to face consequences. This shift requires safe, loving, supportive, positive & proactive parenting; it is not supported by fear, anxiety and punishment.
- Gradual shift in taking what one wants to understanding what belongs to others and respecting that and sharing. ***This requires fairness; trustworthy parents; having ones needs attended to fairly & justly. Adults who support .***
- Children who have experienced harm; trauma; unfairness; not having their needs met; shame; or whose parents have not worked to support these developments –will find it very hard to make these shifts.



# Ways to support prosocial development

*“In summary parents, teachers, and other adults can increase the likelihood of children behaving prosocially by helping children understand others’ feelings, and how their actions affect others; by modelling prosocial actions; by providing supportive rather than punitive socialisation and discipline; by providing children opportunities to assist others and by attributing children’s prosocial actions to the child’s personality. Moreover, helping children regulate their own emotions likely not only promotes children’s sympathy, but provides them with the resources to deny themselves when it benefits others”.*

# Social & Emotional Challenges facing adolescents

Puberty, including bodily changes associated with moving into adulthood; changes in the developing structures of the brain

Increased emotional and relational volatility (ups and downs in our feelings and relationships) and the increased need for emotion regulation skills

Increasing independence and separation from early family ties, developing peer group friendships, finding new interests and making plans –without feeling lost and lonely.

Establishing identity, including sexuality (identity and preference) and developing more intimate relationships.

Educational pressures of learning, facing tests and exams, managing greater learning independence, and finding an educational and vocational future.

Facing movement into adulthood and increased independence, separation, belonging, - the finding internal resources and resilience to support these challenges.



# The teenage brain

- Key to supporting teenage children is to understand that the adolescent brain works in a different way to adult brain.
- Architecture of the brain changes during the adolescent years. Growth is uneven and supports important shifts in functioning <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0O1u50Ec5eY>;
- Myelination to improve connectivity and messaging across different areas of the brain. Pruning to support more focussed developing passions and interests
- Growth of parts of the brain that drives emotional impulses and reactions very active. Parts of the brain that enables reflection, weighing up of situations, impulse control, seeing the consequences of actions are less developed.
- May result in difficulties in seeing the perspectives of other and more volatility of feelings and reactions.



# Emotional functioning in Adolescence

- There is a mismatch between emotional and cognitive components of brain development in adolescence
- Brain structures mediating emotional experiences change rapidly at the onset of puberty (in amygdala).
- Maturation of the frontal brain structures (PFC) underpinning cognitive control lags behind, by several years, the growth of the amygdala (emotion centre).

***Adolescents are left with powerful emotional responses to social stimuli that they cannot easily regulate, contextualise, create plans about or inhibit***



# EXECUTIVE Functioning (EF) lags and risk-taking in adolescence

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EF (planning, organising, reflecting, thinking)- the capacity that allows us to control & coordinate our thoughts & behaviour is less developed in early adolescence. Adolescent capacity to inhibit responses & impulses & regulate their emotions is not mature and works less well.

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Adolescents tend to take greater risks than adults, as a result of developmental lags in EF.

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Adolescents tend to foresee fewer possible outcomes of their risk-taking, underestimate the likelihood of negative outcomes, and overvalue the benefits of having fun and obtaining the approval of others – and then engage in more risk-taking behaviours.

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Younger adolescents, for a period of time, find it more difficult to read the expressions of others and see the world from other points of view as part of the process of maturing –this impedes empathic response and seeing the world from others' point of view.

# Social Cognition in adolescence

- The ability to see things from others' point of view (perspective taking) is diminished in teen years –the ability to 'step into other's shoes'
- Experiment – shown a face & word, need to name the emotion (uses working memory & decision making) – ***pubertal 'dip' in this ability***
- 'Face processing' – (happy, sad, angry, fearful, disgusted, surprised) –not good at fear, disgust and anger. Young teens rely on '***gut reactions***' rather than reasoning. These abilities develop during puberty (fear, disgust, anger) and **then** they can use ***reasoning to greater extent.***



# Caring for teenage children

- Many of the challenges facing teenagers are a normal part of growing up
- Teenagers themselves are facing the challenges intrinsic to growing up, including biological changes, social, emotional and educational challenges
- Common challenges include teenager become more aloof; want more time with friends; feel misunderstood; reject your attempts to talk, spend time together, show affection, appear rather sullen or moody.
- Stay calm. Take time for self-care and rest.
- Agree boundaries and stick to them –they convey you care
- Listen to them and don't interrupt when they want to talk
- Allow them to make mistakes and learn from them.
- Do not bottle-up concerns, talk gently and caringly about your concerns
- Allow them to have space and privacy. Pick your battles!
- Stand back and reflect upon what teenage child wants/needs from you



# Managing conflict with your child

- **Remain calm and thoughtful. Try to put emotions aside.**
- **Connection and active listening. Taking the time to listen and try to understand what they mean and convey to them you want to understand from their point of view.**
- **Try to understand what is going on in the child's mind, pay attention and listen to your child**
- **Understand the perspective of your child; try to see things from their point of view & your own.**
- **Communication: Don't interrupt your child while they are speaking; check that you understand them by asking questions; Communicate your side of the story clearly and honestly**
- **Don't place blame. Collaborate & try to find common ground. Compromise with your child.**
- **Recognise and apologise for the things you got wrong.**
- **Repair the ruptures in understanding and relationships**
- **Offer solutions and choices. Pick your battles.**



# What is supportive parenting?

- Making sure they are safe & secure, that you can be trusted. Conveyed they are loved.
- Protection from harm and abuse.
- Maintaining family routines, meals, sleep times, and school times & supplies
- Show them understanding, including the challenges of growing up.
- Respect for their feelings and concerns
- Respect for their friends, clothing, sports and music choices and interests
- Prioritising child's best interests; being present, involved and helpful
- Encouraging them to do their best at school and support with hobbies and interests
- Listening without judgement and seeking to understand their concerns and challenges
- Acknowledging their achievements and supporting them through mistakes and challenges
- Setting consistent expectations and consequences to help them feel secure and able to predict outcomes. Treating them fairly & developing a trusting relationship