6 Relationships that support human development

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When Susan was one-and-one-half years old, she had been playing the "lion game" with her mother for the past few months. With a lion puppet on her hand, Susan's mother made the lion roar, tickle, bite, and tease Susan, who seemed delighted to be aroused and frightened. Susan and her mother first concocted this curious blend of happiness and fear, approach and withdrawal, when they discovered tickling games. Susan was only six months old at the time. As her mother loomed in for the tickle, Susan would pull away, turn her body to the side, and at the same time reach out for her mother, look at her, and laugh heartily with her mouth wide open. From early in the first year, simple games create emotional challenges – such as a conflict between approach and withdrawal – that are negotiated in the long-term parent–infant relationship.

Emotions are good for us, a kind of psychological workout. Joy, fear, surprise, and sadness move us internally, shifting our body chemistry and lighting up our brains. Babies are more emotionally alive than most adults: they feel and respond to everything. As people leave infancy behind, however, they learn not to feel as much or as intensely. People who are repeatedly left alone as children, for instance, experience powerful fear and sadness during the separation. Without someone present to whom a child can turn to relieve them, these emotions had to be suppressed because they would be too overwhelming. People who were abused have to put their spontaneous joy and love away because there was no one with whom those feelings could be shared.

Families cannot protect children from feeling loss or fear, and they cannot indulge all their needs. Families can, however, provide a place where such feelings are permitted, talked about, and resolved. A family atmosphere of love and acceptance allows children the safety to really feel fear or sadness, for example, without running away and hiding.

The tension between the fear and joy of tickling is emotionally healthy so long as it remains safe, so long as the child can catch her breath, so long

as it is done with love and surrender, so long as it is part of an ongoing relationship in which all the emotions are welcomed. Play mixing fear and joy became a permanent part of the relationship between Susan and her mother, finding its way into new games as Susan got older, like the lion game. When Susan was eighteen months old, she tried for the first time to put the lion puppet on her own hand and she pretended to scare her mother. Here is a description of that moment of change.

Mother and Susan are sitting on the floor. Mother hides the lion and Susan follows the lion, looking for it. Suddenly, the lion comes out of his hiding place and roars! Susan screams and steps back, a little more frightened than usual. She stares at the lion for a few seconds. She then abruptly grabs the puppet from the mother's hand and tries to pull it off. The lion resists and screams, "No! No!"

After a short and playful fight, Susan is able to slip the puppet off mother's hand. She smiles victoriously and explores the puppet. She turns it around looking for the opening to put her hand in. The mother comments, "Oh, *you* are gonna do it!" Mother helps her to put the lion on her hand. Susan smiles with confidence and says, "Roar!" Mother laughs and comments, "Scare mom." Susan then carefully observes the lion. She turns the lion toward her own face and makes it open its mouth. She first smiles and then watches the lion. She looks surprised and a little confused. The mother intervenes: "Ahh! You scared me!" Susan then moves the lion toward mother a little more tentatively and says, "Roar!" while smiling. Mother pretends to be scared, screams, and then comments, "Scare mommy."

During this episode, Susan is experimenting with being frightened and being frightening. There is something compelling about having the puppet she is herself holding for the first time stare back at her. There is still some fear yet Susan herself is the agent. It is confusing and yet fascinating. Susan also begins to realize that she can be the lion, that she can scare her mother, yet pretend is not quite real and real is not quite pretend. Still, she bravely gives it a try, not sure if she can really scare mommy even as she is being invited to do it.

The importance of relationships for human development

Susan's emotions in this episode can only be understood with respect to the long-term relationship she has with her mother and in the context of their experiences playing games together. During the first two years of life, children acquire ways of relating, of being-in-the-world, that are foundational to every later experience of relationship.

- Children establish a connection with themselves, with their physical bodies, senses, and feelings including emotions.

- Children establish a connection with the important other people in their lives.
- Children establish a connection with the natural world.

All living systems are dynamic networks of relationships both within the organism and between the organism and its surround. Relationships are integral systems in which individuals develop. An example is the relationship between plants and animals. Plants have receptors for carbon dioxide. They are waiting to be completed by an animal's exhalations. Animals need the oxygen given off by plants. Animals cannot be complete as living beings without oxygen. They would die but it's not that trivial. We animals have a blank spot, an incompleteness that must merge with something from our planetary companions. Flowers and bees, grazing animals and grasslands: these are relationships whose inherent processes (large herds allow only grasses to survive and grasses sustain the herd size) define the evolution of individuals through time. Human interpersonal relationships are sustained for long periods because each person provides what is needed to help their partner feel more complete.

When we use the word "relationship" we are talking about a living, developing system. To say that people are inherently relational means that they are inherently incomplete. People must find themselves in the other, become who they are through the other. Because people require something from other people to complete themselves, people are inherently open to being altered in the company of others. The act of communication changes the other and the self. The person one began to get to know is not the same person later but rather the composite of their history of relationships with others. This is true not only in parent–child relationships but also in romantic relationships, friendships, and professional relationships.

The conventional viewpoint is that relationships are linkages of individual entities. There are senders and receivers who exchange signals. There are innate and acquired characteristics. There are mothers and children who have endowments to reach out toward the other. In this perspective, the entities are primary and the relationships are an afterthought, a way of connecting these autonomous parts. Each person is complete in itself and could be fully described and known if enough time and effort were expended to exhaust its list of characteristics.

A dynamic systems viewpoint, on the other hand, emphasizes that people are inherently connected and that development occurs through creative communication. When one approaches the other with an acceptance of their own and the other's incompleteness, however, both

people change. All such communications are inherently creative. People make discoveries about themselves and about the other person. Call it creativity, or emergence, or discovery: something new arises when people approach each other with acceptance and a willingness to be affected.

The lion game between Susan and her mother shows how change can occur in relationships in which both partners are open to being changed by the other. The moment Susan put the puppet on her hand is an instance of personal self-discovery, an "ah-ha" experience. It led to a creative process in which she discovered that she too could pretend to be a lion, and this moment will lead to further discoveries as Susan explores what is possible with this new way of relating to her mother.

How did this change happen? First of all, notice what did not happen. Susan did not go off in the corner and think about this on her own. Her mother didn't just hand her the puppet at some point and say, "Here, let's see what you can do with this." The discovery, in other words, did not occur in an isolated mind that spends time alone thinking about an abstract problem.

What actually did happen is considerably more complicated and it has taken my research team years to decipher this sort of complexity. Perhaps this seems odd. After all, what is simpler than a mother and child playing an innocent little game. It is a perfectly ordinary, everyday occurrence. Scientists, however, have a habit of looking in ordinary places for extraordinary things. Indeed, we found that locked in this apparently everyday exchange is the secret to understanding individual differences in human development, the secret to understanding why some people grow up successfully and others do not.

Susan gets the puppet. That seems simple but it isn't. Mother had frightened Susan more than usual, which seemed to precipitate what followed. Susan pulled back a bit from the game, which was unusual for her. Perhaps in that moment of relative distancing that was created between her and her mother, she decided, and this was a spontaneous insight, that she wanted the puppet. Notice that Susan stood and looked at the puppet for a few seconds but even here, the mother is part of the process. She had the grace to wait and to observe quietly. Suddenly, Susan grabbed the puppet but her mother didn't give it up so easily. Why not? Because she knew from their history together that there was something engaging about an emotional dynamic between them that heightens the tension: release is combined with a struggle, enjoyment with conflict.

During the playful tug of war, it may have been obvious to both of them that Susan would get the puppet. But the game transforms a

simple grabbing of the puppet into something much more meaningful for Susan: a victory for herself, for her initiative taking, a new sense of self as the protagonist of the game, which her mother quickly reinforces by helping her with the puppet and asking to be scared.

Conventional scientific approaches want to isolate cause and effect. Thinking along these lines, one would search for a sequence of prior maternal actions that can be said to cause or to lead to Susan's newfound sense of initiative. Alternatively, one might presume that something internal to Susan, such as her brain development, is the cause of her advances in self-understanding and initiative taking.

In dynamic systems approaches, on the other hand, it is fruitless to attempt to separate cause and effect in these kinds of communicative sequences. A more descriptive metaphor is co-creation. Mother's behavior is just as responsive to Susan as Susan's is to hers. But in addition to responsiveness, there is a constant creation of emotional meaning and interest that heightens the salience of the newly emerging sense of self. Susan's mother waits or withholds, not in order to respond to Susan, but in order to *play* with Susan so that Susan may come to feel herself in the process of growing.

Understanding successful and unsuccessful developmental pathways

Other infants we have observed have relatively little play and creativity in their relationships with their mother. Our observations show that under these conditions, the infant loses touch with his or her own body, sensations, and emotions. One mother did not like her infant son, Jimmy, to suck on his hand. Even when he was as young as three months of age, she used strong prohibitions and pulled his hand out of his mouth. This was not playful. The infant resisted and pulled away but without any signs of accompanying joy, such as might occur in the normal conflicting emotions of a tickling game.

By five months, this form of interaction evolved into the mother grabbing toys from Jimmy and teasing him by pretending to give back the toys and pulling them away at the last minute. Jimmy never had a chance to participate equally. When his mother finally did return the toy, he grabbed it in anger and withdrew into himself. Jimmy showed severely restricted and tense facial expressions. His smiles were strained and brief, lacking evidence of joy and spontaneity. His infrequent attempts to resist were subdued and barely visible, very unlike the ready availability of Susan's active defiance. Jimmy's affect was flat and his behavior often seemed aimless, as if he was not aware of having his own intentions.

How can we explain the different pathways of emotional development and sense of self between Susan and Jimmy? From the conventional perspective, one or the other person is thought to have an unchanging characteristic of non-responsiveness or responsiveness. Susan's mother would be called responsive and Jimmy's mother would be called insensitive. There is good parenting and bad parenting. Good parenting produces joyful, spontaneous, and self-assured children and bad parenting does not. Or one might explain the difference by saying that Susan was temperamentally happy and Jimmy temperamentally withdrawn.

From a dynamic systems perspective, however, different types of people can develop relationships based on mutual creativity and fulfillment. Mothers with relatively low levels of responsiveness and infants who are relatively withdrawn can still meet each other as equals, share emotions, and use their relationship to expand the range of their emotions with each other.

According to dynamic systems thinking, all interpersonal relationships tend to evolve or grow into a number of recognizable patterns, some of which lead people into a fuller and more creative relationship with the self and others of which lead to a more constrained and apparently painful relationship with the self and others. The two different patterns are characteristics of the relationship – what actually occurs between the partners over a long period of time – and not of the individuals per se.

Notice, for example, that after a few months, both Jimmy and his mother continue to co-create this emotional dynamic. The more withdrawn Jimmy becomes, the more the mother feels the need to invade his space in order to make contact. This makes Jimmy even more unreachable and confines him inside a shell of self-protection. The relationship system creates an emotional trap in which both people are caught or it can create an emotional aliveness that inspires both people toward creative advancement.

But where does it all start? Dynamic systems of relationship evolve into patterns that stabilize over long periods of time but it may not be anything big that predisposes a couple to one or another developmental pathway. It could be something barely noticeable at the start, like the way the mother and infant play the opening moves of their games with each other.

It may have been that Jimmy was temperamentally difficult to reach from the beginning. Coupled with a mother who may have interpreted Jimmy's withdrawal as a rejection of her mothering, little by little they evolved a pattern of communication that was not playful, one in which mutual tension escalated rather than being metabolized by the kind of

joy and creativity shown by Susan and her mother. Research on patterns that form in nature, everything from the shape of galaxies to different forms of mental health and illness, shows that big differences may begin with very tiny differences that over time become amplified into seemingly permanent structures.

The dynamic systems approach and the conventional approach offer different perspectives on treatment and intervention. The conventional view may try to teach mothers to be more sensitive to the unique characteristics of their infant, who may have turned out differently than she wanted. Or, it may prescribe individual psychotherapy for the mother or child to help resolve their conflicts about the other person. Conventional approaches to working with families may intervene in the relationship, suggesting activities to facilitate the couple to heal themselves together. Making a videotape of a mother playing with her baby and then discussing the communication process with her has been shown to improve the relationship radically. Introducing simple games that balance tension with enjoyment can also result in dramatic changes.

A dynamic systems approach, on the other hand, may use any of these traditional interventions with an additional crucial element: opportunities for mutual creativity. Parents can be encouraged to engage in activities with their children that are playful. When there is a specific goal or outcome, spontaneity is lost. In the conventional approach, Jimmy's mother, for example, might be taught not to pull his hand out of his mouth and to give Jimmy a chance to explore his hand. A dynamic systems intervention would not give the mother a specific directive (don't pull your child's hand away from his mouth). Instead, she could be told how self-exploration is a creative activity for infants and taught to observe Jimmy's behavior in a way that allows an appreciation for Jimmy's growing abilities. She could be encouraged to invent playful games that inspire creativity in both herself and her baby, such as imitating Jimmy's sucking on his hand, giving him objects to explore with his mouth and hand, and sharing that experience with her. Finally, she could begin to notice that with this kind of creativity, children will naturally and spontaneously develop away from habits or patterns that may initially seem undesirable. Once a relationship system recovers the possibility for play, even for play with negative emotions, it is enough to set each person free to discover themselves through the other.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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