

WARM LOVE – THE PARENTING CHALLENGE

Parenting is perhaps the most everyday and commonplace of tasks. We all do it; our parents did it before us. Yet it is without doubt, one of the most challenging and life-changing journeys we will ever take.

Living with our children brings us wonder and joy, it also brings frustration and challenges. Living with our children, fills us and empties us. We also know that the way we live with our children, the experiences we give them, influence them for their lives.

What are our young children asking of us as parents? How can we respond in ways that enrich their experiences so that they go on to live fulfilling and responsive lives in what surely are demanding times?

What follows is based on a talk Lynn gave to parents on Understanding The Young Child quite a few years ago when she was the kindy teacher. She speaks about the tasks of childhood in terms of growth and development, and also about the challenges of parenting, especially in relation to managing difficult behaviours.

In sharing this, our thinking is it may support parents during this time of isolation to understand their child/ren's behaviours in the bigger context of the childhood task of growing into their body and being; and provide some clues for managing the inevitable stresses of managing tricky behaviours.

*Warm regards,
Lynn and Kirsty*

I'm Coming Home

"My grandad is the man of the Moon. I'm the man of the Sun. No, I'm the man of Mars!" (6 year old child)

When you move into a house, it is not yet a 'home'. You have to live in it, inhabit it, and get the sense of how you can live in it. What are its features? Its good points and shortcomings. Gradually, you make it your 'home'.

This is how it is with the young child. S/he 'inherits' a house, a physical body, genetically patterned after the parents. The soul/spirit of the child has to inhabit this body, to find out how it can live in it, how it can make it home. Sometimes it's a squeeze – a big soul/spirit finding itself in a little house may lead to frustration, crying, restlessness, and in time, defiance. Luckily for the child, there is help! They have love and devotion around them. Love soothes. Love delights. Love hatches out the organs, which will be the foundation of health for the rest of a child's life. In time, the child begins to feel comfort and a sense of well-being in this body. Everyday it can do more. Life for the young child is in reality an unceasing series of adventures and explorations. This is how the house becomes a home.

"A love which as it were streams through the physical environment of the child with warmth may literally be said to 'hatch out' the forms of the physical organs...Pleasure and delight are the forces which most rightly quicken and call forth the physical forms of the organs." (R Steiner)

The quality of the loving environment that surrounds the child, makes all the difference as to how well the child can grow into the physical body, as to how well s/he can make it a healthy place to spend the rest of his or her life. In the first seven years, looking after the physical body (the child's house), needs to be done in such a way that it can continue to grow and develop, so that it can be a suitable dwelling (a home) for the rest of the individual's life.

We parents and carers can't build it for them but we can provide some of the materials needed –nourishment for the body, the soul and spirit of the child. It begins with food for the body (nutrition, hygiene, sensory experiences), for the soul (warmth, joy, love, kindness), and for the spirit (recognition that someone, an individual, looks out from those eyes, someone who is here to unfold in surprising and wonderful ways). Who is this child? Who are you? Who are you becoming? You have chosen me to be your parent, your helper. There is something I have that you need. I will give the very best of myself to you so that you can become the best that you can be.

The child takes everything that is in its surroundings and with true artistic capacity, sculpts its own home, bringing form, movement and rhythm to its whole being. It takes indiscriminately. If a child is immersed day and night in healthy and natural rhythms; for example, the morning chorus of birds, the sweeping of the wind, the joy and bubble of a warm and loving family life, these are incorporated into the child's

being. If the child is surrounded by hostility, erratic noise and disturbance, these become part of the child. In the first seven years, when the child's primary task is to take hold of and sculpt its physical body, it lays the foundation for physical and emotional health and wellbeing for the rest of its life.

After days of rain, the sun comes out; it is also this kindy child's birthday: "The sun didn't want to miss my birthday", he says

By the time the child enters the kindy garden, the personality of the child is emergent. The warm, loving and nourishing environment provided at home, is extended. The child now has the opportunity to learn and express itself in a wider social context. This is often the time when parents are looking for ideas about how to meet the more individualised needs of their children, including managing challenging behaviours which are often on the rise at this age. In what follows, there are four archetypal profiles of children, their characteristics, their gifts and challenges. It is unlikely any child fits wholly into any one profile, but hopefully you will recognise tendencies and qualities of your child within the range of these, and possibly gain some further insights that will enable you to help your child to grow and develop in healthy ways, within their ever expanding world.

The Twirly Whirler

The twirly-whirler child has sparkly eyes and a hint of mischief glints in them. She is light in her body and so in a moment can lift off. We find ourselves, tugging at her ankles, bringing her down to earth, (in the manner of Mary Poppins).

She plays with everything including words. She tumbles, wrestles, twirls, skips and flits. She is all movement, not with the force of a tornado or a tidal wave, more 'on the air'. Her nimble fingers can be gentle and skilful, other times they poke and tease. This child is social and sociable and wants response; she is a master at getting it one way or another.

The twirly-whirler is generally loving, spontaneous, open and joyful. She is the "inner child" we adults seek to re-connect with. She is good natured, a Puck – if I have offended, I pray you forgive. And she is forgivable. She may be annoying, mischievous, teasing, but not mean or destructive. She has the playful cub inside her and the romp of the puppy. She is funny and fun to be with.

The twirly-whirler's actions say to us, I just want to have fun and...how far can I go? How high can I climb? What will happen if....? She wants adventure but she wants to come home for dinner. She loves to lift off but once airborne she wants to know someone is holding the kite string.

She says, show me, don't tell me. She doesn't want to talk about why she poked her sister, why she pocketed her friend's crystal. Talk of this nature oppresses

her...yet she does seek guidance. In her adventures and explorations, she is balanced and grounded when that invisible force field (the parent) provides her with the feeling of being safe and secure, of knowing what is right from wrong. Of course, when she strays she expects to be forgiven and she will herself readily forgive when some untoward thing is directed at her.

So what else does the twirly-whirler child seek from us, as parents and carers? She wants primarily for us to enjoy her. We can let our inner child meet hers. Surprise her by tumbling down the hill with her, getting out of your adult boots for a moment to ride her bike, by having fun together. You can help the twirly-whirler by going with the flow of movement. Give her lots of opportunities to move! She is a wind after all, mostly a breath of fresh air. Riding bikes, climbing trees, tumbling, running, dancing, jumping, swinging, swimming...whatever comes naturally in your child's environment. At this age, the child has no need for organised games with rules and competition, he or she is an unfolding circus act in one!

Provide opportunities for inner mobility also. This is the world of play, play and more play, and of stories, verses and songs. Nourish the child's imagination with quality. The touchstones are warmth, wonder, joy and a sense of well-being. Keep the play environment simple, natural and unplugged. This provides the opportunity for the burgeoning inner forces of the imagination to develop and find expression. Children need very little by ways of toys, the less they have, the more their imagination works out.

When the twirly-whirler lifts off, as she does, it is your job to gently bring her down. On windy days (the wind can be all her own making and bear no resemblance to the day's weather) keep her close, know what she is doing and saying. If there is a collision course ahead, a conflict or accident waiting to happen, anticipate and distract, steer to another course, bring in the jib sail. Let her help you with practical tasks in the garden or kitchen. Set them before her as the most exciting tasks for the day. Give busy hands (especially straying fingers) useful things to do. Give high energy times a focus and a challenge – let's see if you can sweep the whole pathway *and* the verandah.

Another way of dealing with challenging behaviours is through imagination. Keep adult nagging and instruction to a minimum. Instead, enter the child's world, through the doorway of imagination. Stories of mischief winds and misdeeds done are the hook, but then in the end, the little wind is all blown out and stranded, which is when Gentle Puff or Comforter Calm come to assist, and amends are made all round. Puppy dog stories are also good for twirly-whirlers. Someone always gets hurt in puppy play, of course he doesn't mean to hurt and he always tries to do better the next time. Through stories, the consequences of children's unsociable behaviours can be depicted and ways to resolve these explored, all in the warmth and gentleness of a story moment, and with the child's rapt attention (you don't get that when you nag or reprimand).

*It is the end of the kindy day. Mum arrives to collect her boy. "Shoe-shop," says the boy. His mother listens, in response she enters **his** world, "How about this pair of shoes, very good for climbing trees and how about that, just your size. "Yes," he says. She assists him to put on his shoes, there is no fuss, and they both go away happy.*

Parents and carers also need to establish clear boundaries with their children. What is an acceptable way to speak to you? To act around younger siblings? If you as an adult are clear about what is acceptable behaviour, then you will find the appropriate way to guide and maintain these boundaries for your child. Try thinking out in very clear terms, what is okay by me in regard to this circumstance or behaviour. When you have clarity, decide to uphold your yardstick, establish the boundaries, and then with firm and loving kindness, maintain them. The actual ways that you do this will vary from child to child, and what is workable for one family may not be the way in another. Trust yourself as the parent of your child to find out how you will best manage the situation. Maintaining boundaries and acceptable behaviours takes time but if you really establish something, the children experience it as a kind of force field and they do for the most part, happily live within it.

Sometimes children fall aside from our guided paths, they take unexpected sidetracks. This is normal child behaviour. We can remind ourselves, they are children and they are also individuals with will and feelings and thoughts of their own. We have to respect their right to assert their individuality and listen in to what they are telling us by their actions. We then re-establish the boundaries and continue to guide them in a respectful and loving way.

Another significant way to approach a problem situation in regard to your child is to begin a dialogue with your 'higher self' (this is the wise one who resides deep within) or with the child's angel (the spiritual being who has accompanied them into this world). Ask for help, in a quiet moment prior to sleep? Anticipate an answer. It may come from unexpected places and so you must maintain a receptive and perceptive mood within your being. This one works when all else fails, but why wait until then?

The Old Soul

"I always get hurt. Why do people have to be so mean?" (6 year old)

She has that old soul look about her, sometimes it is a pained look, sometimes a wiser beyond her years look, and sometimes it is quizzical and searching. We say of this child that she has the look of a little old woman or man. There is sometimes an out of time-ness about this child, like she belongs to some past age. Sometimes you will see two of these old soul children sitting together, sharing a moment, and it has the feeling of a snapshot from another time and place.

The old soul child often perceives the suffering in life and it pains them. They can be very sensitive to the pain of others around them and will sometimes respond with great kindness out of their own loving nature. When this old soul child is hurt and often they are easily hurt, a misplaced laugh, an insensitive word, an impatient tone of voice can be as wounding to this child as a physical blow.

At around nine years of age, these are the children who wonder if they have been born into the wrong family, they can feel misunderstood. *I am a princess but no one around here knows this.*

When they get hurt, they don't forget easily, they add it to the store of hurts, which they retrieve in a moment, the minute someone else gets hurt. Oh, that happened to me once, they seem to be saying. I know about pain. I have endured. I am in need of sympathy too.

The wonderful side of this child is that she or he has the capacity to be the great humanitarian. Sensitivity transforms into loving sympathy that can flow into deeds of compassion. Perseverance (sometimes seen in its aspect of stubbornness) is another quality that flows from the old soul, sustained attention to the perceived task at hand.

So how can parents and teachers best support these children? Firstly, by not taking their pain away from them. Suffering is after all the great teacher in all of our lives. However, we do need to ensure that we surround the child with loving understanding. We need to find ways to acknowledge their feelings, a story of some parallel incident from your own life experience, shows the child that you know about pain too. Of course, the point is not for the adult to unburden him/herself to the child in this regard, but to demonstrate empathy. Yes, I understand because something similar once happened to me.

We also can give these children opportunities to take this rich inner life and place it into service. Look what has happened to this little creature, what we can do to help...you will see that this child comes into their own through such opportunities.

Another way is to work imaginatively. Take the child through story into the cave, the dark place and then be surprised by the glow worms that bring light to illumine the path. Again, the important thing is that the child feels their feelings are acknowledged. Sometimes though, parents can overstep in this regard, somewhat wallowing with the child in the suffering. The parent needs to walk the fine line of walking beside the child and yet never actually being at risk of being lost, there must always be the light, answering the darkness. Hence, in your stories, there should always be the 'all is well' element. Yes, the billabong is flooded but kindly kangaroo taxis those in danger to higher ground, returning again and again. When all are safe, it is then she feels how every nuance of strength has been used. She is exhausted but strangely enough, she feels radiated through with the warm inner glow that comes from helping others.

If going to sleep is a difficulty for this child, a little light such as a candle in a glass jar, can help. You can tell the child; this little light will help you find your dreams. A story, a verse, to help them cross the bridge safely into their sleep is also helpful. A star-horse (or unicorn) awaits, he will take you to your dreams tonight. Begin a dialogue with the child about their particular star-horse – its colour and name. Share similarly about your own (for they will need to feel that it is 'real' for you, if they are to feel a reality behind it, to feel that you too make this journey into sleep each night).

Does it all sound so terribly serious? Life is serious for the old soul child and yet he or she is also a child with all the play and joy that childhood entails. Be joyful yourself, walk the way of wonder delighting at the things you see along the way. Also, involve them in practical and useful tasks around the home. All of this fosters a connection to life and the world about them, which brings healthy balance to excessive inwardness.

Prayer can seem like an old fashioned thing in our day, but sometimes it is just a matter of finding a new way into an old form. In regard to the old soul child, as with all children, enlist the help of the child's angel, and/or of your higher self. Formulate clear questions and then await the responses. This is not a matter of belief but of developing openness. Take this beyond crisis mode, (I ask for help when I'm really struggling) to a conversation, an ongoing dialogue. These children are very perceptive, they read you well before they can read a book, and will know that you are doing this. A mood of respect and gratitude will result between you.

The Dreamer

"I didn't expect that to happen," (5 year old boy).

Sometimes this child has that glazed look. Is there anybody home? We ask. They haven't heard us, at least haven't overtly responded. There is a self contained quality about this child. A beloved quality also, like a little buddha inwardly at peace with the world and oneself, most of the time. This child has a water nature, flows around obstacles. Often the dreamer has a warm sense of humour, looks into the world in anticipation of the goodness he or she feels deeply within.

This is why it can be a shock to this child when someone is disloyal or unkind. It can wound and if there is a recurrent aspect in this, scars can form. However, the nature of this child is to keep on expecting the good. Also, when this child is roused by injustice or to annoyance, it can be with strength of feeling that surprises.

To support the dreamer child, to the best of our ability, we try to provide an environment around them that meets the expectation of goodness that lives within them. They may need time to make changes, not feeling the necessity of a changed circumstance in themselves they may put up quite a resistance. Patience on our

part, gentle persuasion and conversation about what can be expected, what lies ahead, are preparations that will bear fruit.

Change to this child is not necessarily an exciting thing. Comfort in one's own world is good enough. Of course, the growing child has to meet change as a matter of course in life. He has to enlarge his self contained world to include new circumstances and relationships. He will look for anchors and stability along the way. These children will feel great anxiety stepping into what appears to be a leaky boat heading out of a calm harbour into the wide sea. As with all children, stories can be a great way to prepare the way. Ask yourself, what does this feel like for the child? A possum journeys to the ground for the first time – oh what wonders are ahead, what shadows and snares might also be lurking. Through the story you can help the child resolve anxiety about change and become the master of his new expanded world.

A little bit of startling is also good for the dreamy child, so that he says, I didn't expect that! Again, it will help him find his connectedness to the world around him. Playfulness and humour are qualities the dreamer child inwardly feels relatedness to, this is why he is so happy in his own little world. This child will sometimes become beloved amongst his peers for his sense of humour (often a little quirky) and because he is effortlessly loyal and trustworthy in the realm of friendship.

The parent can endeavour to model what they are asking of the child. Show that you too are a social being. Be active and connected to the world and in this show that it is an important and enjoyable aspect of life. Let them be a part of your social experiences. They will see how you manage it. The child is more able to do as you do, than to do as you say.

The Force

"How fast were you running?"

"Faster than I could!" (5 year old)

All young children have something of the 'force' in them. It is characteristic of the first seven years of every child's life that he asserts and expresses himself through his will. This child has eyes, intense as fire, that leap into the world. I'm here everyone. I'll do it. I can do it myself! The child moves with intensity and purposefulness, and like the fire; flickers, flames, rages, quietens and rages again, all in the space of a moment. Everything they do has intensity about it. Sometimes it is expressed overtly, for other children it's more an inner intensity; perseverance and stubbornness being twin aspects. Then at the end of the day, they have a tendency to sleep deeply.

"I was running so fast, the ground gave way underneath me." (6 year old)

This child is often dominating in play situations. I want, I saw it first, I, I, I, and they are powerful in their assertion. It is hard for them to take turns, to find a way into co-operative play, they can be intimidating, but when they do find a way into social play, they bring a glowing richness. In reality, this is what they long for – to be part of the social world, to impress themselves onto it. Hence it is imperative that they are guided along the paths toward self-control, and of give and take.

Young children explore and resolve so much through play. But ‘the force’ child will need help. If he is permitted to crash and burn unchecked, he will become a lonely child, some children will feel intimidated by him and may become reluctant playmates, ‘the force’ child may in time be regarded as a bully. We need to help this energetic and intense child, to find a way into the social realm that brings out the best of him and moderates the less sociable aspects. The fruit will be friendship and a happy happy, I’m so happy to be alive, kind of happiness, that is so important to this social and gregarious child.

This child really is a force and will require from his parents and teachers, patience, understanding and firm guidance (consistency in limit setting and maintenance). This child needs to see the adult has self control. This he will respect and eventually emulate. He also needs his parents and teachers to trust that he will in time direct his formidable will into healthy tasks and challenges. This child will grow up with the will to move mountains, to achieve whatever he sets his mind to doing. For now though, he needs guidance. When he is heading toward disaster, rather than try to stem his force, we can try detours, to help him find another route for his powerful drive, one that is productive and sociable. In my experience all children have within them, an orientation to doing the good, and this child in particular likes to please. Pleasing you will please him! We can take the opportunity to show him that what pleases us is doing the good. Then he can take that on like the challenge of climbing Everest. He will love you the way a blazing fire embraces a forest, and you will tap into your own indomitable love.

These children have truly boundless energy and need space to express it. They will need to climb, dig, run, ride, roll down hills, laugh out loud, and shout at the wind. Around the garden, you can set him the task of removing embedded rocks from the garden and he will be really happy. He loves strong tasks, big tasks, tasks that you tell him are really too big for a little person... And sometimes this child will want to test his strength to the point of destruction. Again, show him that strength is a force for good about the place, and be strongly pleased when he sets about doing this.

No one ignores a fire. It can start as smoke and be a bushfire in moments. Parents and teachers need to be attentive to the whereabouts of these children. We should not ignore warning signs. I can see smoke, quickly, we need a hose, elicit their active co-operation, in transforming a situation rather than just trying to block or put an end to it (which they will resist in force).

Put imagination to work where words of instruction and explanation fall to the winds. For example, the story of Strong Wind blowing up into Tempestuous Storm,

threatening to flatten sail boats and to tear Grandma's washing off the line, unless Mother Calm can send him into good service. There are beaches needing to be swept, rocks to be ground and sculpted, windmills to be turned. All jobs well done!

We should avoid meeting fire with fire. If he is angry and hurling fists and/or words, we should inwardly become watery. Water flows around obstacles, beneath the surface chop, the sea is calm and safe, and we should answer his shout with a tone of voice that is unemotional and grounded. Afterwards, when calm is restored, this is the time to talk about what happened, to re-establish the boundaries, to make clear once again the signposts to happy and sociable behaviour.

Routine and rhythm also have a watery aspect. When established, routines become part of a flowing rhythm that is directed and known. Bedtimes, mealtimes, quiet times, all become part of the daily flow of life. There is breathing in and breathing out. There are times to expand and release, and times to quieten and rest.

Parenting the 'force' child may well be your chance to climb 'Everest'! Have every confidence that you have all that you need to do so. Remember to pause once in a while, to look back and see what a mighty journey you have made so far.

In conclusion...

You will probably recognise aspects of your child in more than one of these descriptions. The intention has been not so much to categorise, as to characterise, and to hopefully offer a few tried and tested strategies for the enormously challenging journey of raising children.

As a last word, I believe children are also **our** teachers. We can learn so much about ourselves, our capacities and shortcomings, from our relationship with children. Parenting offers a time of great opportunity for our personal and social growth.

It is my belief that our children have come into this world, from lofty spiritual realms, they come "trailing clouds of glory" as William Wordsworth said. Look at these young children; you can still see the cherub in their faces. Observe the way they look on us with absolute love and trust. What are the gifts they are bringing into our homes and communities at this time? We can learn a lot from our children about the tasks of our times and those of the future.

Happy parenting! May it always be in "warm love".