It’s not so easy to be a “good enough parent”

Helping parents build healthy connections with their kids – and themselves

Photo: Anchiy

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It's a common occurrence. Your 3-year-old insists on eating a biscuit before bed and you don't know what to do. Tell her "No" and she might break down crying and screaming. She is upset with you, inconsolable, and eventually cries herself to sleep. Meanwhile, you may be left exhausted, sad, and feeling guilty for causing your beloved offspring all this pain and frustration. You may feel as if you did the wrong thing, or that there were no good choices. Tell her "Yes", on the other hand, and the storm may quiet, but there might be a heavy feeling inside that you "caved".

Or, you may be familiar with Donald Winnicott's concept of "the good enough parent", and see why saying "No" is not a failure, but a crucial part of healthy and effective parenting (Winnicott, 1956). Sometimes in popular culture, "the good enough parent" is presented as someone who is trying their best but inevitably missteps some of the time. But that is not what Winnicott meant.

Winnicott saw "good enough parenting" as a way of providing growing children with an environment that allows them to confront, experience, and *survive* difficult moments. He believed that children need to come to terms with the fact that nobody is perfect – not them, not their parents, and not the world. The safest place to learn this is at home, with their parents.

Many parents understand this in theory but actually being able to be a "good enough parent", and distinguish between the kind of frustration that will benefit a child and the kind that won't, can be very difficult in practice. This is especially the case, as recent findings from my RIPPLE (Research of Infant–Parent Partnership of Lived Experience) lab reveal, among parents who went into parenthood with unrealistically positive expectations of parenting. The greater these expectations of parenting were for both fathers and mothers, the more prone they were to report higher parental stress when their baby was 6 months old. This is also the case for parents who are not in touch with their own feelings. We found that when fathers and mothers do not understand what makes them upset themselves, they struggle with handling the moments when their baby gets upset.

In my practice, I have come up with two evidence-based ways that aim to help parents be "good enough": encouraging self-knowledge among new parents, and enriching the parent–child connection through observations of body language and movement.

Parents need to connect to themselves as parents first

When I learned about Winnicott's concept of "good enough" in my graduate studies, it was evident that this was a tricky concept. After I became a mother, I realised just how much this is the case. Many parents, me included, feel uncertain where that fine line of "good enough parenting" lies. This is why we, at the RIPPLE lab, created our intervention, The Journey to Parenthood™. It is a group-based programme for first-time expectant couples that was developed based on rigorous research (de Oliveira et al., 2023).

In it, expectant couples meet in a group setting once a week for an hour and half to discuss becoming a parent. The meetings are facilitated by a trained practitioner who addresses topics such as how we prepare ourselves for parenthood, what it elicits in us, and appreciating that uncertainties are an inevitable part of the journey.

We help parents-to-be connect with their own emotions during pregnancy, allowing them to share any concerns, ambivalence or fears. We also tell and show them how babies need and want to connect with their parents from the very beginning and are seeking sensitive and responsive parenting. We remind them that this sensitivity also means noticing when the baby does not wish to interact, and may not always want to be spoken to or fussed over.

Additionally, we focus on co-parent relationships. Expectant parents are invited to reflect on their values and expectations around parenthood, identify and discuss any conflicts in these areas, and consider how they themselves were raised and what they liked or did not like about it.

Having a safe space to explore these feelings is powerful and healing. In fact, for many adults, this is the first time in their lives they are making complicated feelings explicit and saying them aloud. By expressing difficult things to the group, such thoughts are less likely to control future parenting practices. Often this happens without the new parent being aware of it.

Sometimes the solutions are found in movement, not conversation

During infancy, when parenting is particularly demanding, and the infant is too young to communicate verbally, it can be especially difficult to understand and always predict the child's needs. To address this challenge, we at PEMworks™ have developed a video-based embodied intervention called Parental Embodied Mentalizing Intervention (PEMI™, Shai and Spencer, 2022).

In the PEMI™ intervention, we record a video of a parent interacting with their infant. We then watch the video on "mute" mode to allow full focus on the non-verbal communication and discuss with the parent what movement qualities we see unfold in the interaction. Together, we explore how parents interpret these interactions, and what additional layers they start to see when watching the video carefully.

Throughout the intervention, we use the language of movement qualities (far, close, fast, slow, direct, indirect, gradual, sudden, etc.) to describe what we see and feel. This descriptive, non-judgemental language seems to help parents feel safe and less defensive. This allows parents to gain more insight into their own minds, as well as into their children's, and to replace guilt with self-compassion. Our clinical experience reveals great improvements in parents undertaking this intervention, including having more attuned interactions with their infants, having an enhanced ability to regulate emotions, and feeling more competent as parents.

The premise behind this intervention is that a baby's mind – thoughts, feelings, expectations – is expressed through the way she moves her body. This is true for adults as well: the degree to which we move fast, slow, keep others away from our body or close to it, and the variation in the movement quality, all reveal something about our internal world. A

familiar example would be that when I am nervous, I will pace around the room fast; if I'm feeling low, I may find myself walking slower.

Parents and infants continuously communicate through movement. If the baby reaches very far from her body to get hold of a toy, we infer, without much effort, that she is very interested and keen to get that doll. But sometimes we miss the infant's cues, and other times we might misinterpret them, even without our awareness. When the infant's mental signals are repeatedly misinterpreted, distorted or ignored, she may begin to internalise that she does not matter, that her desires, preferences, needs or wishes are not important, and cannot be shared safely with the parent.

A body of research conducted in the last decade shows that parents' embodied mentalising capacities are predictive of their children's emotional, social and cognitive wellbeing (Shai and Belsky, 2017; Afek et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2021; Shai et al., 2022). In other words, how a parent physically responds to a child's emotional state affects the child's psychological wellbeing in the long run. It was also found that parents' ability to mentalise on the embodied level is associated with a greater sense of togetherness with their partner, and less parental stress (Shai et al., 2017).

This intervention is especially beneficial for those who have experienced trauma or have trauma in their family or community. Often, trauma survivors experience a disconnection between mind and body – a response that helped them cope with the trauma as it was occurring. In many such cases, the traumatised parent may lack self-compassion and carry significant guilt and shame, which gets in the way of them being able to respond to their children.

No matter your past experience, being a "good enough" parent is rarely intuitive. We believe parents need help getting there, and hope that others will be inspired by these interventions that meet parents where they are. Ultimately, our goal is to help parents develop curiosity about and compassion for themselves and their children.

We hope that when any 3-year-old cries about the biscuit, parents can learn to say "No" confidently, with the understanding that it's not just okay, it is good. This can only happen after we have helped the parents learn to connect with their children in a way that makes the child feel deeply connected to the parent, and able to weather the disappointment in a healthy way.

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