

Foundations for healthy living Strategies to consider for young children

These are strategies which help parents to provide the foundations for a home life which supports healthy, unhurried growth for very young children. When these foundations are in place, they act as a buffer against stress and difficult circumstances in the child's life, including the coming of a new sibling, new child care arrangements, moving house, parent illness and so on, all of which can be particularly stressful for young children. They also support the family when the adults are in troubled times as well. While these are similar to many of the strategies suggested for older children, they have a slightly different focus.

Foundation 1. Staying Centred.

It is a characteristic feature of life today that many people are hurried, stressed and sleep deprived. Both physical and emotional stress affects our health, our feelings of wellbeing and our sleep. In addition, parenting is one of the most challenging tasks most of us ever do. It is not a task which can be walked away from when things get tough.

Unfortunately children absorb and reflect our stress and our state of wellbeing, and the younger the children the more they do this. It is important, for their sake as well as our own, to consider what we can do to make our lives less stressed and less hurried so that we can increase the possibilities for enjoying the beauty of the moment. Consider the following:

Cutting down on stress. Ask yourself what can you do to cut down on stress in your life for at

least this transitional healing period. Prioritise. What can you let go of? Ask yourself if it really matters if you don't do this? Can you say: 'Let go'? What is important? What is urgent?

Consider your needs—what do you need in order to feel together and inwardly at peace? How can you give those things to yourself more often? Being mindful also empowers us, even within stressful situations.

Adult Relationship Stresses—for those in partnerships, especially if there is tension between you, it may help to negotiate a short personal sharing each day with each other. Three questions can help to start a deeper sharing: What has been most important today? What has been most enjoyable? What came as an unexpected delight today?

Foundation 2. Providing emotional warmth & safety

To provide warmth and emotional safety, we need to create a mood of love and mutual respect within the family. Love and respect flourishes when the self esteem of adults and children is consciously nourished.

The basis for self-esteem is created very early in life. Basic self-confidence and expectations to be successful and loveable are in place, and can be observed, even in a child as young as eight months.

Consider the following that can help nourish love, respect and self esteem:

Respect. It helps to treat your children from birth (and expect them, as they grow older, to treat you and everyone in the family) with love, respect and politeness. With young children this starts with trying to understand their needs and behaviour and not assume adult motivations. It helps to remember that children actually want to be good and mostly will be when their needs are being met.

From early on, it can be a rule in your family that there be no name calling, even in fun ('You little ratbag!') This can be hard at times for adults, who use put down language a lot for humour. But the 'no put downs' rule protects everyone's dignity through childhood.

"Sacred time" – time shared (even 15 minutes) with an individual child, young or old, with no interruptions (turn the phone off if necessary) can bring real healing. Give extra time when a sibling arrives or when life circumstances are distracting you. Talk to your children, do things together and let them know that your time together is special. When you give them time they do not have to demand it.

Remember that when the children are with you, especially after being away from you, they want you to really be there for them. Include them in your household work, talk with them and listen to them. This builds confidence, competence and language skills.

This does not mean you have to play all the time with young children but it does mean you have to be available in your consciousness! They will quickly recognise that you may be available as you cook or clean but you are not with them when you read or talk on the phone!

Love. It helps, especially in problem times, to very consciously surround your child with love, with physical and emotional warmth. This means not only being conscious of your love for them, but also making sure you tell them that you love them. Sacred time is one way we do this, but speaking your love often, and physical affection are also important for making children feel loved.

Foundation 3. Providing protection & nourishment for the senses

Young children particularly need protection and nourishment for their senses.

The very young child absorbs everything, good and bad, into themselves through the senses and through their imitation. Today our environments are overstimulating and their

senses are being damaged. Our challenge as parents and carers is to find ways to nourish the senses and protect them from damage and to discriminate between nourishment and stimulation.

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It is helpful to consider all the senses, even the subtlest senses not normally acknowledged. Rudolf Steiner described twelve senses through which we create an integrated picture of our inner and outer world. Consider what might be nourishing for each of these:

1. Sense of Touch: "Me" in relation to the world (provides religious feeling)
2. Sense of Life: Inner well being (provides inner comfort)
3. Sense of Movement: Kinaesthetic sense (provides the feeling of freedom)
4. Sense of Balance: Finding our place in space (provides inner calm)
5. Sense of Smell
6. Sense of Taste
7. Sense of Sight: Colour
8. Sense of Warmth
9. Sense of Hearing – Tone: Voice, music
10. Sense of Word – Language: Articulate sounds and the gesture of language
11. Sense of Thought: content sensed through language, gesture, mime & direct perception
12. Sense of Ego: sense of "the other individuality"

It is useful to consider what are helpful experiences for healthy sense development. Nourishing activities may involve play, nature, beauty, imagination, creativity, enjoyable practical everyday skills, which help them to feel capable, or healthy physical activity, which allows free movement. It also includes everything rhythmic (skipping, nursery rhymes etc) artistic work (drawing, painting, music, movement etc), gardening, craft handwork, time to digest experiences, variety and subtlety in sensory experience, contact with human beings who have a strong sense of self & authority, care

for human speech, love of language, imagery; acoustic (versus electronic) music and subtlety in human interaction.

It is also helpful to consider what is unhelpful for healthy sense development: overstimulation, crudity of stimulation, "automatic" stimulation of a mechanical, technological nature (e.g. screen time); chaotic movement, technology which excludes human contact, purely intellectual abstract thinking in early childhood and the sensory deprivation of too much screen time compared to the richness of healthy creative play. Ask yourself about your children's activities: 'Is it nourishing for the child or merely entertaining and stimulating?'

With the healthy development of the senses and stress avoidance in mind, consider doing some of the following:

Eliminate screen time for young children. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for children under 2. Children learn best and are nourished by active play and physical exploration of the world. They do not learn language well from screens. One example of this is language acquisition, which is a subtle process of imitation of movement; it needs human beings and interaction! Increases in speech deprivation and retardation is a disturbing late 20th century phenomenon.

Protect against too much noise. Avoid noisy toys or toys which encourage noisy aggressive play. Cut down on unnecessary loud music in the car or at home. If the children are used to constant noise, it may take a little while for them to be able to rediscover themselves in the silence. (The same for the adult!)

Young children need quiet, unstressed, unhurried time. 'Here we have time.' They need you to go slow – Plan ahead so that you don't have to hurry. Try to be quiet, gentle and

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

peaceful yourself. Speak quietly and more slowly if your tendency is to talk quickly.

They need protection from exposure to things which stress their senses and their feelings of security. Plan simple short outings – avoid overstimulating situations, too much car travel and supermarket shopping with young children.

They need time for inwardness. Encourage them to play alone sometimes (young children still need your presence nearby) and to enjoy the inward peace of that. They should not always depend on other children or you to play with.

Foundation 4. Bringing order to the chaos.

Young children need the emotional security of order and predictability in the day. They like to know what is coming and they like it to happen in familiar ways. Their growing bodies need the regularity of consistent meals and bed times.

The House Rules for living

Much of our behaviour is ordered by our family's acknowledged and unacknowledged rules. Young children are 'held' by this outer order. As babies become toddlers it helps to clarify, restate and firmly follow up on your family's rules regarding safety, privacy, personal care, etc. The best environment for young children, however, is one designed for them to explore their world safely without too many "no's" – where dangers have been removed and behaviour can be guided with positive statements of "Do this!" rather than "Don't do that!". Young children do not understand negative statements very well. ("Don't" may be understood as "Do!")

Create moments of quietness when you observe the wonders of nature in a little bird's nest, or when you tell a story with a candle and a gentle song. Whisper more. Let your child experience feelings of reverence and awe. Insist that the child is quiet and respectful of the wonder of the special moment. Children need to learn when noisy expression is appropriate and when it is not.

Simplify. Have fewer toys, fewer activities, fewer demands. See reference for *Simplicity Parenting* below.

House Routines

To bring a sense of order and predictability along with the beautiful quiet nourishing experiences into our children's lives consider:

Meals. Ideally, meals are home cooked (with our love in them) and are eaten together with whomever can be there. Even if we cannot always cook the meal ourselves, we can try to eat in an ordered and social way. If we begin the meal with the table, thoughtfully set, with a flower, a candle lighting and blessing, it brings order and gratitude to the meal. Even babies love an ordered beginning to a meal together, especially if one joins hands around the table for a food blessing. A calm sit-down-together nourishing breakfast gives the child a good nutritional and emotional start to the day.

Activities. It helps to order the day so there is rhythm in its activities, busy social times alternated with quiet inward times. On busy days with social activities or childcare, avoid unnecessary extra stresses like shopping with children and provide more quietening activities and unhurried time.

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

Sleeping and waking. The importance of sleep cannot be over emphasised. It is a renewing time, when much growth occurs. It is a learned response and is best prepared for so that the child looks forward to it as a peaceful and reassuring time. It is also healthier for the child to go to bed early than late. The liver rhythm, with its energy storing and releasing cycle is better supported by this. Good routines established early around bed time will help later in those times when developmentally children may have bedtime difficulties.

Bed time Quiet, loving words, gentle singing, rocking, stroking, a prayer all can bring the day to an end in beauty, rather than stress. Giving each child their own bed time can give 'sacred

time' to each child. As children grow older a suitable story (no scary ones) or quietening visualisation can be added to the end of day rhythm. For reluctant sleepers, gentle massage of the ear is quietening, or a foot massage with a soothing oil (eg lavender) can help. Michael Jones' book "Prayers and Graces" (Floris books) has some beautiful affirming prayers for children.

Waking. (Not to be forgotten!) Welcome children awake individually with a hug, kiss, stroke or an "I love you" or something which affirms them and their self-esteem. Reluctant wakers can be coaxed gently back with a rosemary foot massage (don't use the oil neat.) Welcoming the sunlight in helps too.

These strategies support us all in living richer, more fulfilling lives together. It may take some effort to establish, but the rewards in individual and family wellbeing make it all worthwhile. What begins with babies and very young children can then continue through the rest of childhood.

Further reading

Payne, Kim John, with Lisa M. Ross *Simplicity Parenting Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure kids.* (Ballantine Books Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2009)

Other articles of interest on the website

Guidelines for healthy play

Avoiding trouble with young children

A brief checklist for stressful times