

PARENTAL WARMTH AND RESPONSIVENESS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH EMOTIONAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

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It might seem obvious to most of us as parents/caregivers today that acting in a warm, loving, caring and interested ways towards our children is important – however it has actually only been in the last 50 or 60 years that this idea has been discussed and studied by researchers interested in child development.

However during this last period of time, the concept of parental warmth and responsivity has been researched and discussed extensively – so in this article I am going to answer some frequently asked questions about this concept and think about how we might use these ideas in parenting and caring for young people.

HOW IS PARENTAL WARMTH DEFINED?

There is some variation in how different writers/researchers refer to this concept, but usually warm and responsive caregiving is thought of as being when parents/caregivers consistently:

1. Act in loving, affection, interested and positive ways towards a child (sometimes referred to as parental warmth) and;
2. Noticing and responding in caring ways to a child or young person's emotions and experiences (sometimes referred to as responsiveness or sensitivity).

These ideas have also been referred to as "sensitive parenting", "positive parenting" or "attachment" parenting (more on this last concept in a minute).

WHEN DID THIS RESEARCH BEGIN?

In the late 1960's, on the back of a few decades of research about specific parental practices (like smacking and praise for example), a psychologist called Diana Baumrind identified two dimensions of parenting, one of which she called "responsiveness" and one she called "demandingness". Baumrind defined responsiveness as the degree to which parents respond to their child's or teenager's needs in a supportive and accepting manner". A higher degree of responsivity was theorized to lead to better emotional health in the young person. Baumrind defined demandingness as the degree to which parents expect their children to act in positive ways. A higher degree of demandingness was also theorized to lead to better emotional health in children.

High and low levels on the dimensions of responsiveness and demandingness were used to identify three parenting styles (and later a fourth style was added). These styles were as follows:

1. High responsiveness and high demandingness was characterized as authoritative parenting;
2. Low responsiveness and low demandingness was identified as neglectful parenting;
3. High responsiveness and low demandingness was identified as permissive parenting and;
4. Low responsiveness and high demandingness was identified as authoritarian parenting.

Authoritative parenting was theorized as being positive for young people while authoritarian (and permissive and neglective) parenting – was theorized as being negative for young people (with the unfortunately similar words describing diametrically opposite things from this point onwards, confusing psychology students everywhere!).

Around the same time, another psychologist called John Bowlby was studying the mental health of homeless children who had been separated from their parents during World War 2. In 1951 he published a seminal paper for the World Health Organisation, in which he recommended that "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment".

Over the next two decades, Bowlby went on to develop what he called “attachment theory” – in which he proposed that children are evolutionarily designed to be connected to one parent figure for protection against predators, that parents should act in warm and supportive ways in order to facilitate this connection and that this attachment was also essential for child psychological well-being and normal development.

Mary Ainsworth was influenced by Bowlby research and during the 50’s and 60’s developed a theory of “attachment styles” (how parents and children related to each other – especially at times when a child was stressed or challenged) between parents and children. She used a now classic “strange situation” experiment (in short - observing how children interact with their parents when new people come in the room) in an attempt classify children as having “secure” or “anxious/avoidant” attachment styles with their parents/caregivers. Ainsworth proposed that children who have consistently loving and reassuring parents will be “securely attached” and this would result in long term more positive outcomes for children.

In the 1980’s, William and Martha Spears – greatly influenced by Bowlby and Ainsworth - published their seminal book on attachment parenting, and suggested that parents (and at the time, this was especially directed at mothers) should follow principles of “child led” parenting, including but not limited to having bonding opportunities after birth, breast feeding, responding to crying, avoiding “sleep training” and warm and responsive talking to children.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE THEN?

In the decades since Bowlby, Ainsworth and Baumrind, there has been an explosion in the number of books, programs and courses about the concepts of attachment parenting and warmth and responsiveness parenting. The underlying principle of all of these programs/books/courses is that warm and responsive parenting leads to better outcomes for children and young people.

Even more recently, a number of psychologists, academics and other writers in child development have gone further and theorized that not only is parental warmth and responsiveness good for children/teens, a lack of this type of caregiving might exacerbate emotional and mental health disorders in young people, and in extreme cases, even lead to neurological problems and deficits in young people who are not provided with this kind of parenting.

As a result, government funded parenting education campaigns and child mental health interventions started to include components designed to increase parental warmth and responsiveness and to promote a “secure attachment” between young people and caregivers.

WHAT DOES THE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT THE LINK BETWEEN WARMTH AND WELL-BEING?

There has been many studies which have examined these theories about caregiver warmth and child well-being. Usually these studies measure a) levels of parental warmth (they use observational, self-report, child and parent measures) and also measure various aspects of child well-being (educational outcomes, emotional outcomes, social skills, physical health and so on) - and then look at the strength of the relationship between the two concepts.

Almost all of these studies have found that higher levels of parental warmth and responsivity are linked with positive child characteristics and lower levels of warmth have been linked with negative child characteristics.

For example, studies have linked higher levels of parental warmth and responsiveness with lower levels of conduct problems, anxiety symptoms, drug and alcohol use, depression, learning problems, symptoms of impulsiveness – and many other problematic child factors. Studies have also linked higher levels of warmth with higher levels of emotional regulation, school achievement, self-esteem – and many other positive child factors.

There have also been a few experimental studies using rats in which they have been experimentally placed into either more or less nurturing (animal) parental environments. The animal equivalents of warm and responsive parenting leads to better outcomes for rats too.

WHAT ARE THE LINGERING QUESTIONS IN THE RESEARCH?

Despite the many hundreds of studies as described above, it is still worth acknowledging that we don’t yet have the answers to some lingering questions and there are reasons to be cautious about the research we do have. Here are some important points and questions to keep in mind.

1. IS PARENTAL WARMTH MORE IMPORTANT THAN OTHER FACTORS IN LEADING TO CHILD WELL-BEING?

Although all these studies have found strong relationships between caregiver warmth/responsivity and child well-being, it is worth acknowledging that there are many hundreds of scientific studies which have found equally strong relationships between child well-being and other non-parenting factors. For example, other bodies of research have found strong links between child well-being and genetic and physiological factors, peer, sibling and school influences, nutrition, sleep and exercise, socio-economic factors and other factors which have nothing to do with parenting.

2. DOES PARENTAL WARMTH ENTIRELY CAUSE GOOD STUFF IN KIDS -OR IS PARTLY THE OTHER WAY AROUND?

By ethical necessity, parents/caregivers are never assigned in studies to provide “warmth” or “no warmth” caregiving to children. The studies only look at the links between parenting and children which already exist. This means we can’t know for sure that it warm and responsive parenting causes children to “do better” in all the areas examined. There are two alternative theories to explain all the findings between positive child characteristics and warm parenting.

First, it could be that something about children who have more positive characteristics and outcomes in these studies which caused their parents to be able to act in more warm and responsive ways. In other words, when kids are “easier” for example, it might be that parents feel more able to be warm towards them. In support of this idea, there have been studies of identical and non-identical twins (same upbringing, different amounts of shared genetic material), have found that different children born with easier/different temperaments caused their parents to either act in more or less warm ways towards them.

A second theory to explain the research finding associations between warmth and good outcomes for young people, is that it is not parental warmth which causes good things to happen in young people, nor is it that something about the young person which causes more or less parental warmth – but instead that there is a third factor which causes both more warmth in parenting AND better outcomes for young people.

For example, it might be that higher levels of social and financial resources (including access to good food, higher levels of education and more social supports) lead to parents providing more warm and responsive parenting, and also to young people who have better outcomes. Supporting this idea is the body of research showing higher levels of warmth and better outcomes for young people in better resourced families.

3. IS PARENTAL WARMTH AND RESPONSIVENESS IS MORE OR LESS IMPORTANT THAN OTHER, DIFFERENT TYPES OF POSITIVE PARENTING BEHAVIOURS?

Another question unanswered by the current state of research is whether parental warmth and responsiveness is a particularly important aspect of parenting – in other words is being a warm and responsive parent important “above and beyond” other potential positive parenting behaviours – or whether there are other aspects of parenting are equally (or perhaps even more?) important than being warm and responsive. Many studies have looked at parenting behaviours other than warmth – like limit setting, and helping children feel a sense of control and autonomy over their lives for example – and have also linked these parenting behaviours are also linked to good outcomes in children.

4. HOW “MUCH” OR “OFTEN” DOES WARM AND RESPONSIVE PARENTING NEED TO HAPPEN – AND FOR WHICH CHILDREN?

Another question we don’t have an answer to yet is “how much” of warm and responsive parenting is required to make a positive difference to children/teen’s wellbeing.

This is a lack of research looking at this question, however, recently there have been a couple of studies suggesting that parents/children can be connected well (“securely attached”) to each other even if parents/caregivers were not continuously warm and responsive – as long provided they provided support when children were most upset.

Another question is whether some children/teens need more warm and responsive parenting than others. Some research suggests this might be true – but we don’t know enough about it.

Some writers discuss a concept of the “good enough” to suggest that warmth and responsiveness is needed some of the time – but not all the time – and different children need different parenting.

WHAT IS THE TAKE AWAY FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS – AND ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WITH CHILDREN AND TEENS WITH EMOTIONAL HEALTH CONCERNS

As outlined above, there are still a number of unknowns about parental warmth and responsiveness. We certainly can't conclude with absolute certainty that children or young people's mental health concerns are or have been caused by a lack of caregiver warmth.

However, it is really important to go back a few paragraphs and remember there are hundreds of studies showing links between parental warmth and good outcomes for kids and teens. This suggests that it is very likely that at least some degree of parental warmth and responsiveness will be important for most children and young people. It is also likely to be particularly important for those with emotional, psychological health challenges.

This means, as parents/caregivers, prioritising acting in warm and responsive ways is likely to be a smart move, and especially if your child/teen has some extra challenges

How do we do this? Here are some ideas which might help:

KNOW WHAT WARM AND RESPONSIVE CAREGIVING LOOKS LIKE

First, it's important to know what warmth and responsive parenting actually looks like. Here are the specific behaviours psychologists/researchers in this area have used as examples of high parental warmth and responsiveness when they are measuring this concept.

1. Asking questions and show interest in children and teen's opinions and lives.
2. Noticing and saying positive and caring things about what children and young people do, say and think (genuine compliments/praise, saying thank you, expressing love and appreciation)
3. Showing physical affection towards children/teens
4. Spending regular "child/young person led" time with children/teens (following their lead about what they'd like to do or talk about, paying positive attention to them during that time)
5. Paying attention to when children/young people are experiencing difficult times and difficult emotions
6. Saying and showing empathy when we notice these difficult times happening (saying we care and are sorry they are having a tough time rather than ignoring it or just trying to solve the problem)
7. Making sure children and teens do not feel shamed, fearful, physically or psychologically hurt when helping them to behave in more positive ways

FIND ROLE MODELS

It's easier to show warmth and responsivity to kids when we have a picture of what this looks like. Some parents/caregivers have been fortunate enough to experience this in their own lives, and others haven't.

If you haven't seen it, it can be helpful to consciously seek this out as much as you can. Take note of when you feel cared for by others, and think about what the person did to make you feel cared about. Watch other parents showing love and care to their children. Notice it on TV and in the media.

Finding parents/caregivers (for example support groups, Facebook pages, self-help books, peer support workers) who have children with additional mental health or social challenges – and noticing how they provide warmth and responsivity to their kids can be particularly helpful.

FIND THINGS WHICH WORK FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

As you've seen above, there are many different ways to show warmth and responsivity. It's okay to find behaviours which suit you and your family.

- Some children/teens don't respond well to hugs, but are okay with brief "I love you" texts.
- Some parents/caregivers find it hard to know (or have the energy) to ask lots of questions of their child/teen but are okay with sitting close on the couch and watching a TV show together.
- Some children/teens get even more upset when/if we try to empathise with them when they are upset – but respond better to it later when they are calm.
- In some families it can be very hard to find a lot of child/teen directed time, but parents/caregivers are able to provide daily doses of praise/appreciation to their young people.

USE REMINDERS AND SYSTEMS TO HELP YOU BE CONSISTENT WITH WARMTH /RESPONSIVITY TOWARDS CHILDREN/TEENS

If you are trying to establish a new habit of more often being warm and responsive, don't rely just on your memory nor your level of motivation or energy in any one moment. Instead, think about what systems you might use to remind and motivate you to do this.

Reminders in the environment can help – you might set alarms, put up subtle visual reminders or ask someone else to keep you accountable.

Think in advance about situations in which it is hard to provide warmth and responsivity and planning for those situations. For example, if you know that your child/teen's challenges lead to you being overwhelmed/frustrated in the morning and unable to provide warmth and responsive caregiving, you might want to think about strategies you can use to reduce family demands at that time of day, get help or find ways to look after yourself better before the day starts (easier said than done – but possible). If you know that your child/teen really struggles with talking about a particular issue (friends, screen time, homework) – and you find it hard to be warm and responsive during these conversations, you might jot down some phrases to use to help you take breaks when you notice yourself getting upset.

WATCH FOR PARENT GUILT

Finally, it's important to make sure you are kind and compassionate towards yourself in working on these behaviours. To do this:

1. Notice and remind yourself of the warm parenting you DO provide.
Remember, parental warmth/responsivity doesn't have to be done every moment of the day. If you don't act in caring ways at certain times, this is not going to do any long-term damage to a child (providing you are not being extremely harsh or abusive).
2. Notice and remind yourself of the positive (but not necessarily warm) parenting you do.
Remember, warmth is important, but other parts of a being parent are also important. If you happen to be good at helping your child think independently, coaching them in life skills and limit setting – this matters too.
3. Remind yourself that you can probably only influence about 50% of your child/teen's well-being (if that).
All kinds of stuff will impact kids' well-being. Their genetic profile, their temperament, their friends, their physical health, how much sleep/good nutrition/exercise they get and their personality style. It's definitely not just about how warm and responsive we are as parents.
4. Prioritise self-care.
Keep thinking about how you look after yourself and give yourself what you need. This will help you do the same for your children and young people.

I hope this provides an overview and balanced picture of the concept of parental warmth and responsiveness. All the best in working on caring for your children in ways which are good for them, and which suit them, and your family as a whole.

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