

Transforming modern revolution in human science into guidelines for effective parenting

(Innovative ways of influencing, and connecting with, teenagers)

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Summary

Since a revolutionary shift in the sciences of human behavior from the focus on cognition and intellectual functioning to understanding emotional functioning, both from intrapersonal as well as from interpersonal perspective, that influence is also reflected in psychotherapeutic work with children and adolescents. Following that approaches, we¹ have developed a way to shift perspective from child/adolescence – cognitive and behavior – symptom-focused to systemic and emotionally-focused impacts of relationships. In that perspective, work with parental influence on child and adolescence development is seen in a new framework. As we put parental influence in the central perspective, the main dilemma in our work was how to effectively bring all new scientific knowledge into the context of domestic everyday life. One part of our answer is in shifting the style of narrative from scientific and professional language to pragmatic discourse. The second part is related to focusing on the preventive influence of parental emotional responsiveness in the period of development when the most significant behavior changes are recognized, the beginning of teenage years.

*We prepared our contribution through a decade of educational work and training of skills with parents, which we summarized in our book *Connect with Your Teenager: A Guide to Everyday Parenting*. In that perspective, we developed a unique style of presenting the*

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- 1 I must mention the important influence and share of my wife, co-therapist and coauthor Leonida Mrgole, who invented numerous creative and effective solutions in our parenting role as well as in therapeutic work and parenting training courses. We are a coherent team in our live presentations and appearances.

messages through stories in typical everyday situations, where parents can identify with, and recognize, the most influential moments.

The book works as a self-help and self-reflective guide with some therapeutic inputs, as well as a pragmatical and supportive tool. As only an emotional self-experience creates a permanent change, we designed the content so that parents can come in touch with their own transgenerational parental patterns and become aware of it, and consequently, they can manage it differently. On another level, they receive help to regulate their spontaneous emotional responses, in which parents lose the attachment influence through connection and bonding. As a very effective way of demonstrating what is going on in the behavioral and cognitive part, we identified typical repetitive cycles and named them parental dances with underlying important emotional dynamics. Through live stories, we demonstrated pragmatical responses, in which parents can grasp key moments with their children to keep and repair safe connection and influence.

Key words: Parenting, teenagers, parental influence, emotional regulation, parenting power, parental dances, systemic and emotionally-focused understanding

Povzetek

Odkar se je na področju znanosti o človekovem vedenju zgodil revolucionarni premik od kognitivnega in intelektualnega k razumevanju čustvenega delovanja, tako v notranje-osebnem kot v med-osebnem, se ta vpliv odraža tudi v psihoterapevtskem delu z otroki in adolescenti. V sledenju novih pristopov, sva² razvila način za premik perspective od fokusa na simptome otrok/ adolescentov k sistemskim in čustveno usmerjenim vplivom medsebojnih odnosov. V tej perspektivi je videti delo z vplivom staršev na razvoj otrok in adolescentov v novih okvirjih. Ko sva postavila starševski vpliv v središče, je bila glavna dilema najinega dela, kako učinkovito prenesti vsa znanstvena spoznanja v kontekst vsakdanjega domačega življenja. En del najinega odgovora je v premiku narativnega stila od znanstvenega in strokovnega k pragmatičnemu diskurzu. Drugi del pa je povezan z osredotočenostjo na preventivni vpliv čustvene odzivnosti staršev v razvojnem obdobju, ko opazimo največ vedenjskih sprememb, na začetku najstništva.

*Svoj prispevek sva ustvarila skozi desetletje v edukativnem delu in usposabljanju veččin pri starših, kar sva povzela v svoji knjigi **Connect with your Teenager: A Guide to Everyday Parenting**. Na ta način sva razvila edinstven način predstavitve sporočil prek zgodb iz tipičnih vsakdanjih situacij, s katerimi se starši lahko identificirajo in v njih prepoznajo najbolj vplivne momente.*

2 Omeniti moram pomemben prispevek in vpliv moje žene Leonide Mrgole, koterapevtke in sovtorice, ki je v najini starševski vlogi iznašla veliko ustvarjalnih in učinkovitih rešitev, prav tako pa tudi pri terapevtskem delu in na treningih za starše. V zasebnem in strokovnem življenju delujeta kot usklajen tim.

Knjiga učinkuje hkrati kot vodnik za samopomoč z nekaterimi terapevtskimi vložki in kot praktično in podporno orodje. Ker samo čustvena izkušnja na sebi ustvarja spremembo na daljši čas, sva ustvarila vsebino na način, da lahko starši pridejo v stik s svojimi lastnimi transgeneracijskimi vzorci in se jih zavedajo, posledično pa jih lahko spremenijo. Na drugi ravni pa jim pomagava, da lahko uravnavajo spontane čustvene odzive, v katerih starši izgubljajo vpliv navezanosti prek stika in povezanosti. Kot zelo učinkovit način, da staršem predstaviva, kaj se dogaja na kognitivni in vedenjski strani, sva orisala ponavljajoče se zaplete, ki sva jih poimenovala vzgojni (starševski) plesi, v katerih pod površino poteka pomembna čustvena dinamika. Prek življenjskih zgodb sva pokazala praktične odzive, v katerih starši lahko ujamejo ključne trenutke v odnosu z otroki, da ohranijo in popravijo varno povezanost in svoj vpliv.

Ključne besede: Starševstvo, najstniki, starševski vpliv, čustvena regulacija, starševska moč, vzgojni plesi, sistemsko in v čustva usmerjeno razumevanje

The background of the approach

In the last 20 years, we have been witnessing a revolutionary change in the understanding of emotions. Through discoveries in neurobiology, social psychology, mindfulness practices and new approaches in work with emotions in psychotherapy, namely with Sue Johnson's contribution in Emotionally Focused Therapy, the new knowledge has been persistently spreading to all other fields of human sciences. The focus is significantly shifted from previous rational, cognitive and intellectual to new understanding of the emotional part of human functioning. That is a paradigmatic shift influencing the whole field of social sciences. The Bowlby's attachment theory is reconceptualized. In the field of work with children and adolescents, we are dealing with new perspectives on safe responsiveness of parents and influences on emotional regulation of children through parenting (Porges, 1997; Meins, 1997; Meins et al., 1998, 2002; Slade, 2005; 2006; Schore, 2016).

We live in a time rich in knowledge development with science repetitively proving that the concept of the safe responsiveness of parents is the foundation for shaping the child's most important life experiences (Allen & Fonagy, 2006; Cooper, Redfern, 2016; Hughes, Baylin, 2012; Schofield, Beek, 2005; Siegel, 2001; 2007; 2011; 2013). Attachment, which is the most important basis for parental influence on children, also shapes within this concept. Safe responsiveness enables parents and other important people to participate in the shaping of interpersonal integration, which then facilitates the shaping of the meaningfulness of all events that take place within such interaction (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988).

Remaining in safe connection with the parents is the child's fundamental need. Without it, the child's independence won't be successful. Research shows that the experience of safe attachment is directly related to healthy development in many areas: emotional flexibility, social functioning and cognitive abilities (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Safe attachment builds resilience when tackling distress during development. On the other hand, research confirms that children who are not safely attached show emotional rigidity, problems in social relationships with others, poor concentration, problems understanding mental event in others, greater risk when managing social situations (Siegel, 2001; 2013; Schofield, Beek, 2005). Unsuitable experiences with attachment lead to greater vulnerability of children. The most unfavorable among experiences with attachment when safety is at risk is disorganized/disoriented, confused attachment which contributes to the shaping of behavior of growing children and requires clinical treatment (schizoid episodes, psychopathological results, violent behavior).

With speedy development of new knowledge on parental influence, some new questions are to be answered. Who is the most important subject of psychotherapeutic work in the case of symptomatic child or adolescent? Who has the most important role in child or adolescent development changes? In our work, we focused on the issue how to transfer all knowledge to parents who are in direct contact with their children. How can we improve and change everyday interactions, and the mentality of everyday domestic life?

At this point, we faced a dilemma in what language and in what style we can reach the language of parents and their way of understanding. We decided to speak in the pragmatic language of domestic stories with a simple commentary. So we wrote a manual for everyday use instead of a professional book. During literature review, we found out that most parental guides still focus on the cognitive and behavioural dimension of the understanding of interpersonal relationships (Steinbeck, 2002; 2013) and most parents are not aware of emotional dimensions that accompany what they know on the behavioural and cognitive level. In our psychotherapeutic work, we got very pragmatic questions from parents, who wanted to know how to respond in very specific situations to respect the principles of a healthy and safe response, for years. By elaborating, we found out that significant ruptures occur by the beginning of puberty, when children become teens. What are key momentums?

In everyday life of parents and adolescents, situations occur, in which parents lose their influence, their parental power and connection, and on the other hand, children consequently lose their purpose, which leads to lack of motivation and life engagement.

Out of transgenerational influences, parents persist in certain behaviors. Changes in parenting styles and mentality of parenting create new conditions, in which old patterns are no longer effective.

Many parents are lost in that changes, they lose their authority and the child's reactions worry them.

Advice and parental practices from the past do not work anymore. Parents do not have any ideas how to keep their authority, connection, how to follow modern parental paradigms and how to manoeuvre between so many parenting ideologies.

On the basis of our own experience with four children as well as our therapeutic work, we have researched for years the influence of a lost connection and how some unwanted forms of behavior develop, from difficult behavior, emotional problems, loss of motivation, school drop-out, self-harm, depression, deviant behavior and others.

The most difficult task for parents of teens³ is how to establish a safe emotional connection and bonding with their kids in everyday life. Not what, but how! As they try to find an appropriate solution, it seems that they are somehow lost between their dysfunctional patterns and new ideologies of parenting.

All that is mentioned above is the reason that we, my wife Leonida Mrgole and me, wrote a parenting manual *Connect with Your Teenager*, which first became a bestseller in Slovenian language and then we had it translated into English. In the book, we demonstrate, through more than 200 stories and examples, how to create an effective parental

3 We use the term 'teen' to describe young people at that age and keep the context of interpersonal-ity. There are also concepts of puberty and adolescence, which have a more biological and sociological connotation. (Siegel, 2013; Mrgole & Mrgole, 2017).

response, how to regulate the influence of own transgenerational patterns, in which parents can solve their unfinished stories from the past, to typical complications with teens, when the connection is lost and consequently children miss the support needed for a healthy development. It is a systemic regulative that potentially creates pathological forms in adolescents' mental health.

We need to find updated answers on already known questions. Is parenting art or science? What influence do parents have on the safe development of a child, especially in adolescence? What are preventive patterns that can provide safe development in adolescents? Can we prevent conflicts between parents and adolescents that become a daily routine, and normally guide the relationship towards wounds, distance and broken intimate bonds and lead to problems in adolescents' mental health? Who is responsible for deadly habits in our relationships?

In our book, we illustrate a lot of useful and functioning solutions and tips with regard to parental initiative for connecting and reconnecting with teenagers (Mrgole & Mrgole, 2017).

Parental influence, i.e. how parents imprint the child's experience with the emotional quality of their responses, is one of the most important statements and orientations in our therapeutic work. It means that parents' changes in a relationship, particularly in emotional, reflective and empathic responsiveness, can make a big difference in influencing adolescents' behavior and mental state.

Parental responses are mostly driven by intensive emotions. They act spontaneously and out of awareness. But we can create responsiveness where parents can influence, in a preventive way, and where they can maintain the teens' motivation for cooperation. In the first chapter of our book, we discuss some of topics that can help parents with the awareness of their spontaneous reactions. There are many mindfulness-based approaches to influence the change in the parental mindset, the awareness of our own patterns, the awareness of a safe base, the function of a safe launching pad, a child as the owner of his/her own experiences and achievements, parents as a safe haven (Porges, 1997; Siegel, 2013; Mrgole & Mrgole, 2017).

As adolescents are very provocative and conflictive in their own struggles during their development and in everyday relationships with other important people, they can provoke parents' responses, where parents lose parental influence, parental power⁴, connection and safe belonging (Pollak, Pedulla & Siegel 2014), where they misunderstand the mentalization and emotional regulation (Fonagy et al., 2002). On the other hand, when teens lose connection, it is manifested in their health, psychological, behavioral and mental issues.

4 Here we will just outline the topic. We discuss the terms in more detail in our book *Connect with your Teenager* (2017).

We describe the mutual influence between parents and teens with the metaphor of a systemic dance (Johnson, 2004; 2008; 2013; Dallos, Draper, 2015; Butler, 2015). In this dance, dancers are in a mutual relationship, the actions and emotions of one of them influence the response of the other one. And the actions and emotions of the other one will in turn influence the actions of the first one. Like we can dance in integration, connection and harmony, we can also ruin our bond by using harmful and destructive habits and responses. It is important for parents to bear their influence in mind and to step out of deadly dances. We identified some typical dances that effectively help parents and us in our therapeutic work as the first step in understanding the rational, raising the awareness and moving to effective changes in relationships. These dances are briefly described below.

Typical disconnecting parental dances⁵

It is important to mention that parents, on the rational level, are aware of the described interaction and of the fact they are caught into repetitive their patterns. But they lack the understanding of the emotional dimension of the whole process. In that sense, the dance metaphor helps them to perceive, to understand and to make a step towards the change needed.

Parents are drawn to the discussed dances since they are in interaction with their young children. They can be their established mutual behaviors which run along tracks known in advance—which they don't even realize. We usually deal with issues and our internal thoughts (for example: why won't he listen to me, why do we always have to argue, when will he begin studying, how can I make her tidy up her room, must our Sunday lunch really be spoiled every time)—but don't see the pattern or the big picture of the relationship in which we actively participate.

Let's take a look at parental dances⁶ through typical behaviors repeated by both sides. A dance begins in a mild form, and gradually progresses towards harsher and rougher ones.

5 The statement comes from our modern Slovenian (Central European) temporal and cultural context. It would be interesting to examine how common those parental behaviors can be identified in other contemporary cultural contexts.

6 The metaphor "parental dances" is used to describe the circular influence pattern that develops when parents and children interact. The similar metaphor was already used by Salvador Minuchin as "family dances," and also by Susan Johnson as "dances in partnership." In our next Slovenian book, we focus on the outline of parental dances, which are systematically arranged on the basis of parenting examples from childhood to adulthood, and shown as a search for connection and solutions in the form of safe attachment.

The sense and the motivation for it lies under the surface in emotional dynamics, where the effect is in shifting the power and influence from the parents to teens.

Dance No.1: ***“I’m afraid of the child”***

On the surface parents are afraid of their children or of conflicts.

On the other side, under the surface, teens have a growing sense of power, they disregard boundaries and rules, they disregard the authority and they seem convinced that no one can touch them.

Dance No.2: ***Inconsistency and indecisiveness***

On the rational part we can see plenty of words from parents without clear focus and true intention. Children perceive them as inconsistent and indecisive.

Such behavior of parents enables children to evade their duties (some children achieve it with blackmail; when younger children, for example, don’t want to go to bed, they provoke behaviors when their parents give in, for example they throw up, get a fever, have cramps in their stomach...). But teens just do it their own way.

Dance No.3: ***“Please do what I tell you”***

Nice parents who ask and plead nicely, beg, and repeat their pleading.

What happens in the child’s felt experience? Disregard, of course. The child doesn’t hear and doesn’t do what we ask him to do.

Dance No.4: ***Arguing (one of the most popular dances among parents)***

Parents believe that they can convince their children with words, they explain and justify.

On the other hand, children rebel using the same weapon: by arguing. The dance looks like this: the more the parents argue, the more the child argues (in the end, children always win, while parents feel powerless and despaired).

Dance No.5: ***Pursuing***

Parents try to use pursuing to get to the truth, to information about their teen, they ransack the teen’s room, browse their mobiles, enter the teen’s room uninvited...

Such behavior leads to evasion, concealment and secrets in teens.

Dance No.5: ***Intrusiveness, control***

Parents who are intrusive usually don’t even realize it. Intrusive behaviors are behaviors which don’t allow teens to have their autonomy and independence, in which they need space to explore, test, acquire their own experience. Intrusiveness is expressed as: “When will you start studying? Have you made a study plan for your next exam? How

many equations will you do today? How many calories have you eaten? Look at the way your shoes are tied. Are you wearing skateboard pads?”

Teens who perceive their parents as intrusive will rebel to, withdraw from, hide from such parents. If the parents’ intrusiveness is related to close control, teens tend to develop hidden rebellion, sabotage and other physical symptoms which usually really worry us.

Dance No.6: *Prohibiting*

We may know this dance from when we were growing up.

If our parents (or other adults) prohibited us something, we developed rebellious behavior. In teens, prohibition leads to an even greater desire to achieve the prohibited.

Dance No.7: *Using deadly habits*

When parents are aware of their parental powerlessness and ineffectiveness, they switch from a friendly to a less friendly mode. This results in behaviors whose common denominator is that they destroy connections (according to Glasser⁷ the most known are: criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, humiliating, comparing, threatening, bribing, punishing). They are the most common part of parents’ everyday spontaneous responses in relationships with their teens.

And what happens when parents or other important adults (especially teachers) use such behaviors? Withdrawal from the connection, attitude of rejection, perhaps even unplugging from the relationship. In a word: disconnection.

Dance No.8: *Power struggle*

This is an area of emotionally more intensive activity from the very beginning.

When parents face their teens with the idea of using power, along the lines of: now you’ll see, I’ll show you, we declare war on the teen. Teens usually translate the use of power into an invitation to power struggle, which they misunderstand as a fight to the end, meaning that they’ll show us that they won’t relent in their power. The more parents (and other adults) try to manipulate or control teens’ behavior by using power, the more teens will rebel using even more power, also above all boundaries.

Dance No.9: *Ignoring*

When parents run out of power, they usually give up. That’s when we hear that they don’t care about the child anymore. It is even more worrying when parents show their children with their behavior that they don’t care about them anymore by ignoring them, excluding them from the relationship and attachment.

⁷ Glasser, 2002, 2010a, 2010b.

This results in great distress and anxiety in teens which they usually don't show because of their pride. Instead, they develop behaviors with which they hide their vulnerability.

Dance No.10: *Chaos*

When parents' behaviors are chaotic, meaning that life one day is one way and completely different the next day, or when one set of rules is used one time and no rules the next, or when for example the father is sober one time and drunk the next, or when the mother is psychically stable one time and completely off balance the next, children don't get safe responses and develop a chaotic experience. In such cases, children don't have the fundamental sense of security, and in the future, they spread chaotic patterns in those areas where they themselves endured a chaotic experience.

Dance No.11: *Abuse*

This dance is the most horrible of all, and we must not let it happen. When adults abuse children, children get stuck at the level of development when the abuse took place. For children, abuse represents a trauma, preventing them from developing healthily and undermining their fundamental sense of security.

Conclusion

Delineating parental dances is the first step to help parents to make changes so that their emotionally driven responsiveness to teenagers' needs and their provocative behavior becomes healthier and safer. They need more help to change the deeply-rooted spontaneous cultural and transgenerational patterns of parenting, where, in effect, adolescents miss emotional response (Schor, 2016; Tronick, 2007) and attachment support, which are essential for their healthy development in contemporary circumstances (Arnett Jensen & Chen, 2013).

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