

Philippa Perry: the most important thing for parents to know

The psychotherapist on how to make the relationships with your children work

Philippa Perry MARCH 8 2019

When I was about 12, one of my parents' friends asked me whether I was having a happy childhood. I replied that no, I wasn't having a particularly happy time of it.

My father overheard and was furious. "You have an idyllic childhood. You are very happy. What nonsense!" And because he was my father, my beloved but scary father, I felt I was somehow wrong and bad.

[Parents](#) so want their children to be happy that sometimes they try to scold them into it. What my father missed back then, something we can often miss, was an opportunity to connect with his [child](#). After our guest had gone, my father could have asked what I was feeling and decided not to take the answer, whatever it may have been, as an attack on him.

To understand and validate a child's feelings is invaluable to them. I'm not saying he had to let go of his perspective; after living through the second world war and witnessing terrible things, he would have seen my childhood as idyllic. But that would not preclude his helping me to articulate what I felt and trying to see things from my point of view.

Unfortunately, a child's unhappiness can make a parent feel like a failure and therefore discourage them from exploring the child's feelings, wanting to close them down instead. [Parents](#) can find themselves arguing with their children because they cannot perceive the feelings behind their words or actions.

Suppose you are a parent catching up on some work after spending a whole day the previous week with the kids at a theme park, when your child says to you in an unhappy voice, "We never go out". It is a saint of a parent who can resist replying, "What rubbish! We went to Legoland last week."

But suppose you found your saintly side and said instead, “You sound bored and fed up. What would you like to be doing?” The child might then feel seen and understood. They might say, “I’d like to go back to Legoland again.” You would then have a moment of connection when you’d reply, “Yeah, that was fun wasn’t it.”

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Of course, I’m not saying that parents can give a child everything they want, or that it is desirable to do so, but in being kind to children as they face up to life’s inevitable disappointments, we can teach them to cope with frustration better. Moments of connection, of being seen and understood, are important to all of us.

Children will often feel differently than their parents might about any given situation, but it is important that their feelings, whatever they may be, are not dismissed. When our feelings are

considered and validated, it helps our self-esteem and this is even more important for children as they develop and grow.

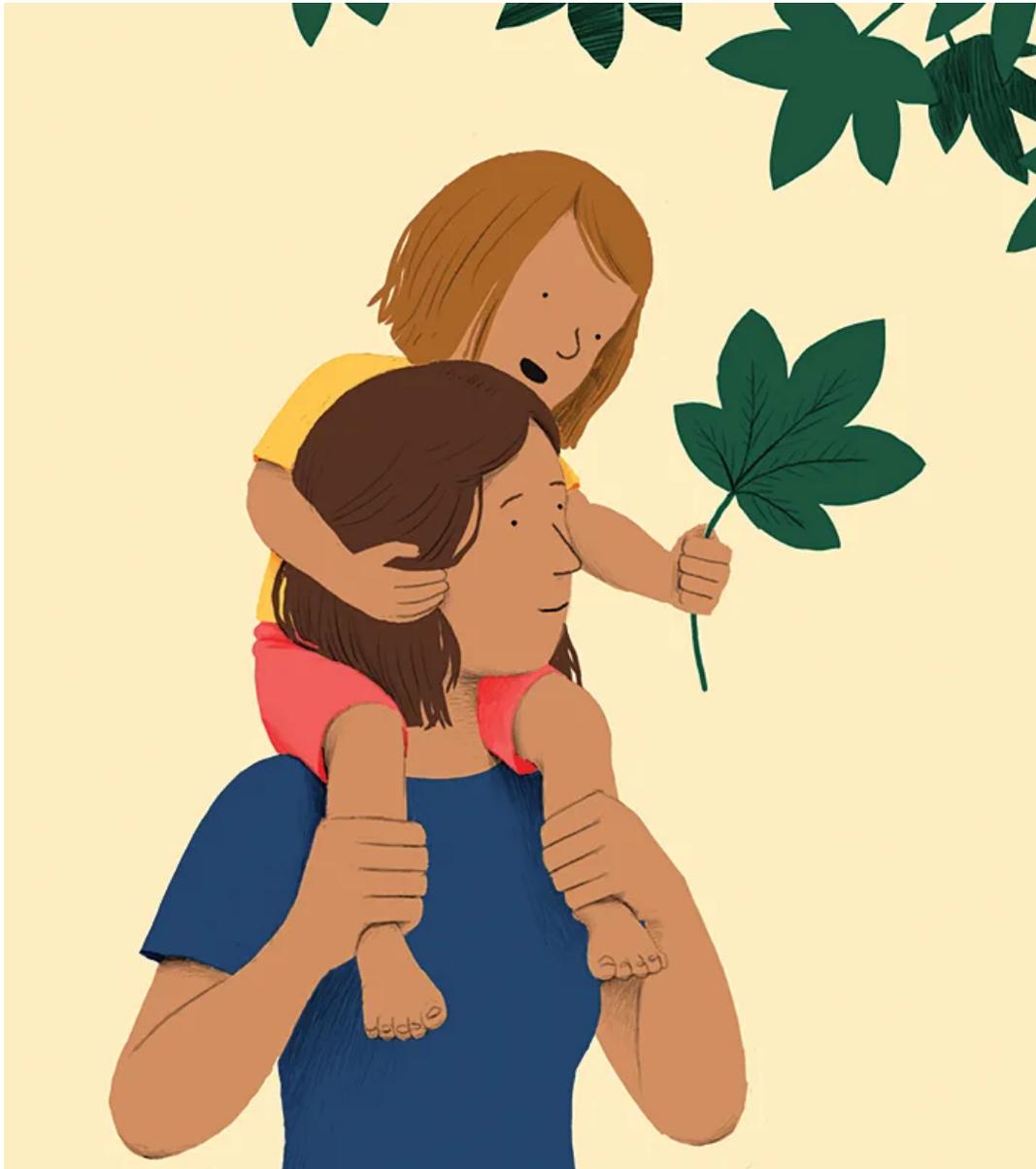


As a psychotherapist, I have sat with those coming to terms with both what they experienced, and what they didn’t, in childhood. A lot were frustrated that their parents never seemed curious about their lives. Some felt loved because their parents saw them as an extension of themselves but never felt their parents found them likeable. If you could redo your childhood, what would you wish for?

Almost all parents are good people, and yet too often they never really get to know their children, or their worlds, resulting in relationships where too much is hidden and where they are driven more often by a sense of duty than by love.

A child should know they are a priority and that they can show and share their feelings, that they are taken seriously. Monsters under the bed are not silly — they are a way of children showing their parents that they need them close, calm and accepting.

Children are not projects — something we get right or ruin — or chores to get through, but people to relate to. This is the crucial, most important thing for a parent to hold in mind. That what they need consciously to treasure, think about and work on is not so much their child, but their relationship with their child. It is nearly the same thing, but too often by focusing only on the child, parents cannot see how their own responses affect their offspring. They need to respond to each child as the individual they are, not to fall back on labels such as “the girl”, “the boy”, “the oldest”, “the youngest”, or generalisations about children.



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Parents tend to be good at thinking about their children’s future and what opportunities they can create for them when choosing schools and setting targets, but it is even more important to be in the present with them — to see, understand and accept them where they are now. If parents go with what works for their child in the present, the future is often a lot easier.

One of the most important indicators for the good mental health of a child is a strong bond with their parents — a healthy, functioning relationship. But how do you make that attachment as rewarding as possible for both parties, and one that is most likely to create the capacity for a child's happiness?

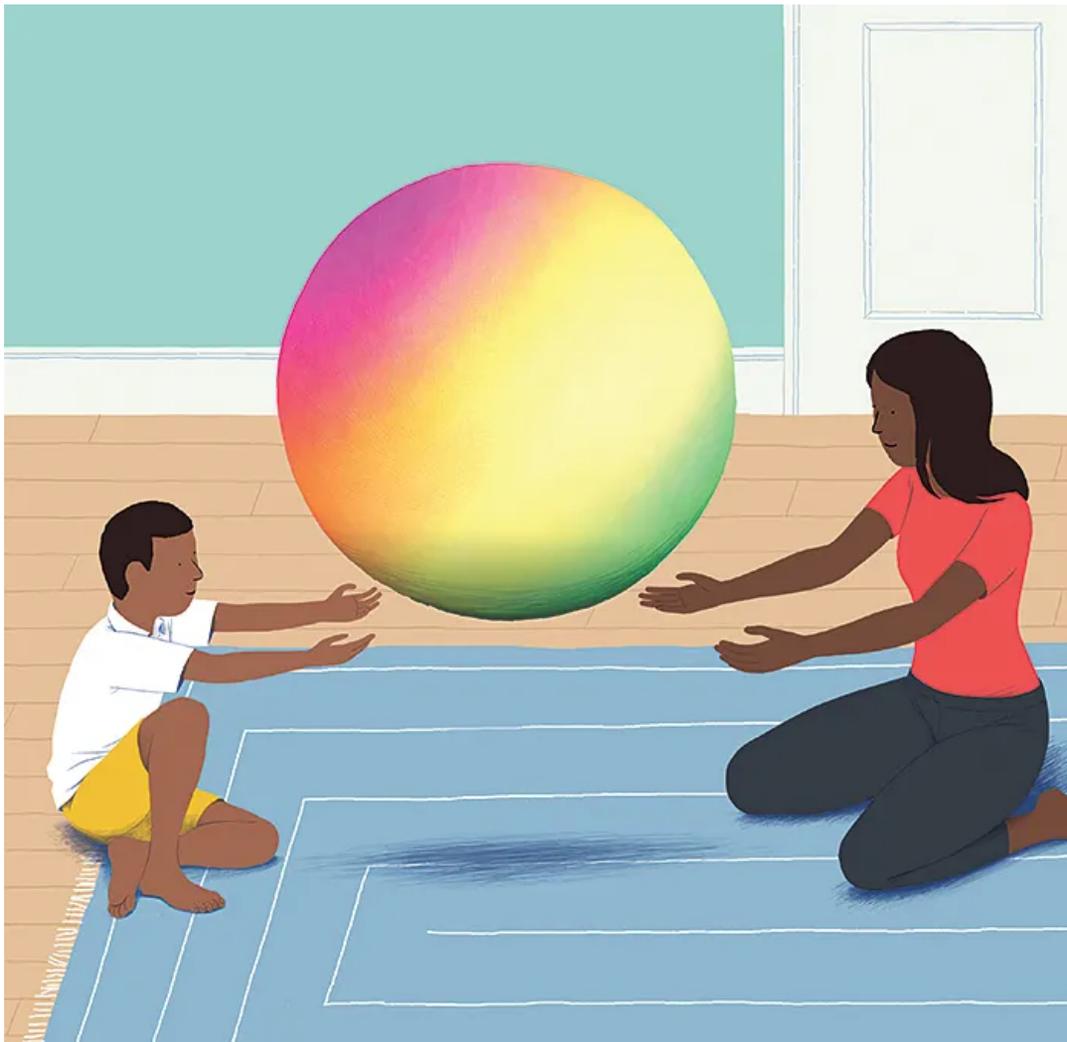
From the beginning, children are primed for dialogue. A parent and baby will naturally take turns with facial expressions and noises. This sort of interaction usually happens spontaneously, without even thinking about it. It's the beginning of dialogue, of speech and of being mutually affected by each other.

These patterns of reciprocity are crucial. It is too easy to fall into a habit of just doing all the necessary things to the baby or to the children, such as cleaning and feeding them, rather than relating to them and being influenced by them. Which relationships frustrate you more than others? It is probably those where you feel you make no difference and feel unheard.

Children feel the same. If parents don't let them in, don't allow themselves to be altered by their children's views, then their children are less likely to take in how the parents, in turn, want to influence them.

Personally, I did not find reciprocity as a parent an easy thing to do. Maybe because being listened to and considered was not an everyday experience for me as I was growing up. It was as though I often experienced my baby's needs as a drain or too demanding. I had to work at reprogramming myself to respond to them in an attuned-to-the-baby way rather than seeing them as some sort of assault.

I think I had an unconscious belief that the adult had to be the "doer" and the child the "done-to". We tend to do what was done to us, and in some cases it seems that our innate ability to respond naturally to our babies and children has been deadened by a culture that seems to be suspicious of the normal mammalian cries of an infant. It has also unfortunately become normal to believe that if a parent naturally, instinctively responds to their cries, we will invite some sort of catastrophe.



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If we are not responded to naturally in a mutual, reciprocal way as infants and children, it can interfere with our innate responsiveness later in life. The late psychiatrist [RD Laing](#) referred to this inability to be affected by others as “diaphobia” — a fear of dialogue, reciprocity and being influenced.

For babies, children and indeed adults, being responded to is a need and the responses of a parent tend to mean a lot more to a person than attention from other sources. If parents habitually fail to respond to a child’s cries, glances or turn-taking games, there’s a danger of handing down to them a distorted pattern of how to form attachments and maintain relationships.

If you are a parent, and feel you may be diaphobic, do not admonish yourself, or be in denial about it, or be ashamed. When you recognise you are interrupting the natural process of give and take in your exchanges with your child, you can make the changes that will allow you to attune to them, like I had to.

It is easier to spot diaphobia in others than it is in ourselves, but parents should try to notice when they are avoiding contact with their baby, child, teenager or adult child. They should try to notice if they tend to talk at them rather than with them. They should try to practise being open and leaving space for them to talk or gesture, and concentrate more on observing and listening, rather than thinking about what their response will be or what they “should” be saying.

When parents slip up — and we all do — saying sorry is helpful. You can probably remember times in your own relationship with your parents when they didn’t believe you, or snapped at you out of the blue. Think of the power an apology would have — even perhaps if it came years later. It is natural on some level to idolise parents, so if children are misunderstood by them, they often blame themselves at the expense of their own confidence.

When I was talking about this, one parent asked me: “But isn’t it always necessary to be right with children, so that they feel secure?” The answer is no. It is important instead that parents are real and authentic, so that they don’t interfere with their children’s instincts.

A child will know when their parents are not in tune with them or with what’s happening and if parents pretend otherwise, they are dulling their child’s instincts. Instinct is a major component of confidence, competence and intelligence, so it’s a good idea not to warp a child’s.

We are all busy and, these days, not only are both parents likely to work, they may even have to do more than one job each. There’s a feeling of getting left behind, having to keep up. It is true for most children that you can delegate some minding of them to relatives or paid helpers, but what is true for all is that you cannot delegate the everyday love they need from their primary attachment figures, also known as parents. Children won’t form on their own like seedlings; they form in relationship with others.

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Being a parent is time-consuming. Where possible, it is better to invest that time positively by pre-empting problems rather than negatively after they have arisen. When a parent goes too fast for the pace of their child instead of respecting their rhythms of give and take, when they live too much in the future and what needs to get done rather than being with them in the

present, they risk storing up trouble that is going to take even longer to untangle and repair.

Children are our most important resource. We should invest time in them, be present for them, enter their world and let them be part of ours. After all, a child’s relationship with their parents is the blueprint for how they will form relationships for the rest of their lives. These should ideally be based on mutual trust and respect, authenticity, co-operation, collaboration and love — rather than manipulation, winning and losing, and duty — both for now and for the sake of all our futures.

Philippa Perry is a psychotherapist, author and broadcaster. Her book “The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read (and Your Children Will be Glad That You Did)” is published by Penguin Life

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