

Is mental health a product of nurture?

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I want to pose the possibility that mental health in children and later in their adult life is linked to their nurture as opposed to their nature. This proposition challenges the view that the origins of a mental health illness is rooted in our biological inheritance and raises the possibility that mental health illness is a result of the nurture and environmental influences we experienced as a child.

Before I explore this proposition further, I need to differentiate between conditions we are born with and conditions that are as a result of the nurture we receive. There are conditions that are attributed to our inherited genes, such as autism, dyslexia and learning difficulty. But there are many more that exist because of our nurture and environmental influences, such as anxiety and depression. Sometimes, it is hard to make that determination and sometimes it is a combination of both nature and nurture.

Nevertheless, understanding how mental health conditions can be nurtured into our children will give us a better chance of stopping it in the first place or resolving it when it happens. The focus of this articles is: how can we avoid mental health conditions originating in our children based on nurture and environmental influences.

Why us?

That's simple, it is something we non-medically trained parents can do something about. If nurture and environment are factors in our child's mental well-being, then we have control over both and can do something about them.

How do we do it?

As parents, we are without doubt the biggest influence over our children's nurture and environment. Therefore, by understanding how our parenting impact upon our children's mental health, we can help them grow with a healthier personality and mental well-being.

There was a project run in Southwark that demonstrated this idea called:

"Be a better parent – and improve your child's mental health"

Parents were helped to develop nurturing skills on a pilot course which had a long-term benefit to the mental health of their children. Here is an extract from The Guardian article on this subject:

“One in 10 children in the UK suffers from a diagnosable mental health disorder, and mental health issues for young people are an increasingly urgent concern. Now a pilot project in Southwark, South London, has found that teaching parents skills and techniques to better care for their children is having impressive consequences. The Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities course offers training in parenting, then teaches the mothers and fathers how to pass on what they have learnt. The results, for families in one of the most deprived boroughs in the country – where children have an above average likelihood of mental health problems – are being described as “inspirational”.”

The full article can be read at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/24/parents-improve-childrens-mental-health>

An important question for us to think about:

“How equipped are we to help our children to develop their emotional and mental well-being?”

It seems to me that guidance on this part of our role is in short supply, apart from being on the receiving end of our own parents that is. There will, of course, be plenty of willing advice givers as how to look after our new-born. But what happens when our child starts to develop their mental and emotional capacities, and form of their identity and personality. Where is the advice that helps us provide maximum opportunity for our child to grow up with a healthy personality and mental well-being?

As a young child, I often felt ‘unworthy’ and sometimes even felt ‘unloved’ as a result of my parents’ parenting. I can only assume that they were unaware of how I felt about myself, and that they believed they were doing the ‘best’ for me.

Here’s the bigger question:

“If you knew the way you parented caused your child to feel ‘unworthy’, unloved’ and ‘unsafe’, which could lead to a mental health issue in later life or suicide, would you change the way you parent?”

When I asked a friend this question, their response was “No, I don’t want to do that”. And then she asked, “Tell me how not to do that [cause my child a mental health issue].”

This article is not about telling you, “How not to do this”. But it is about taking responsibility for educating ourselves and recognising our part in our children’s mental well-being. When we understand how we impact our children’s emotional and mental

well-being, then we will be better prepared to help them avoid mental health issues later in their life.

The well-known child psychologist, Dr Tanya Byron, said the following:

"Parents are very relieved when they realise it's about themselves. I'm a parent, I'd much rather it was about me. The key message is if you want to change your child's behaviour, you have to change your own – it's not rocket science!"

When it is put like that it sounds simple, doesn't it! Or is it?

Where do we start?

We could start with some simple strategies which we are already capable of putting in place, and will bring results straight away:

Listen to your child – when something distresses them, such as feeling angry or frustrated, it helps to listen to them talk about their distress, their anger, their frustration. It helps when we resist from taking charge or judging, and it is also useful to assume they are capable of understanding their distress once they have talked it out. Here is a story of a young boy who got frustrated and angry when his brother invited a playmate round to play. Fortunately, nearby was his grandparent who listened intently throughout his upset, and by being listened to and not rebuked he began to see that he had not really lost his brother as a playmate.

Describe behaviour, do not label it – we often hear ourselves labelling our child's behaviour with phrases like 'good girl or bad girl' or 'naughty boy' or 'clever boy'. Labels identify us, and if subjected to the same label often and frequently enough, it begins to stick, and we internalise it and become it. That is one way we impact upon our child's personality. It is more helpful to tell them more specifically what they did, and if need be what you want them to do instead, for example, "you handled your upset really well, and learning to control your emotions like that will help you a lot." In this way you are not making a judgement about who they are – their identity.

Explain what you are doing – We always find it helpful when we understand why someone is saying something to us, the same is true for children. It is important your child understands what you are saying and why, so explain what you are doing. Whatever age your child, it is helpful to assume they can understand and as they develop they will learn to understand.

Taking the direction offered by Dr Byron above, the most important area to focus on is ourselves and our own mental well-being, without which the above will be made more difficult to achieve:

Take care of yourself first – remember the safety instruction given to passenger before an aeroplane takes off, “put your oxygen mask on first before you help your child.” The same rule applies to parenting. When we are in good shape, then our children will be in good shape. When we are not in good shape, our children will usually get the sharp end of our tongue.

Mental health - what is the key message for parents

Whatever kind of parent we aspire to be, our children's future happiness and mental well-being is paramount. The key is educating ourselves on how not to set up our children for mental health issues later in life and knowing that taking care of ourselves first gives our children the best chance of a happy and healthy future.