



By Dr Margot Sunderland : Full text of Presentation

This webinar is about optimising the skill set of the emotionally available adult, through listening skills and interventions that bring about the best possible connection with vulnerable children and teenagers and are key to the healing process.

Government Green Paper December 2017 wants a Mental Health Lead in every school (trained member of staff)..

- **Research carried out for the paper on children/teenagers age 2-18 found that to quote:**
There is evidence that appropriately-trained and supported staff such as teachers, school nurses and teaching assistants can achieve results comparable to those achieved by trained therapists in delivering a number of interventions addressing mild to moderate mental health problems (such as anxiety, conduct disorder, substance use disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder).

It's not about asking child professionals in schools and other communities/organisations, to be quasi-psychotherapists, it's about replicating what happens in best parenting

- Active listening,
 Mental state talk,
 •Affect labelling,

- Empathy,
- Attunement
- Helping children and teenagers to make sense of what's happened to them

Active listening

- Active listening requires the listener to fully concentrate, understand, remember what is being said and respond.
- *Active listening* means, actively listening. That is fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively 'hearing'. After listening, it means making an empathic verbal response which shows that you have understood the key emotional themes in what has been said.

Listening: Calms The Child's Body: Impacting Positively On Physiology

Listening (with acceptance not judgement) to 130,000 people talk about their painful childhood experiences reduced GP visits in this group in the following year by 35 percent and emergency department visits by 11 percent.

Felitti V (2019) Health Appraisal and the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: National Implications for Health Care, Cost, and Utilization. Permante Journal 2019 Jan 4

- **KEY SKILL**
 Empathy heals. In contrast, giving lectures to children/teenagers shuts them down

Ryan ran away from home when Dad moved out and Mum's boyfriend moved in. She lectured him about how selfish he was.

What Mum could have said to Terry (and particularly if someone had regulated her first)

- *I am so sorry that home is not a place you want to be, but a place you want to run from. Will you help me understand why home feels so wrong for you now after Dad moved out and Bill moved in? Perhaps we could go and have a cup of coffee somewhere now, as I really want to hear your side of things.*
- *... I guess for you home is no longer a lovely place but a painful place... will you help me understand more about that ...so together we can think of a way of changing things ?*

"Lectures make kids defensive and then they close their minds, so we don't know what's in their minds." (Dan Hughes 2018 CCMH)

Making the effort to really listen to and understand the young person's feelings and thoughts, so they 'feel felt' by you.

KEY SKILL

Children and teenagers don't want to be fixed, they want to be listened to and understood, and for you to hold in mind their mind.

Research shows that feeling understood brings down toxic stress
Feeling understood activates brain regions associated with reward and social

connection (i.e. ventral striatum and middle insula) and so bringing down toxic stress, while not feeling understood activates neural regions associated with negative affect (i.e. anterior insula)

Eisenberger et al (2014) Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci. 2014 Dec;9(12):1890-6. The neural bases of feeling understood and not understood

KEY SKILL

Empathy heals. In contrast, asking questions with no empathy brings disconnection

Asking lots of questions without empathy, brings disconnection. Here is an example:

- Practitioner : What do you feel about your Mum being in hospital?
- Child – Sad
- Practitioner - And if sad was a colour, what would it be?
- Child- Dunno, blue I guess.
- Practitioner What do you think you will feel at home without your Mum?
- Child - Sad
- Pratictioner - Your Mum has been in hospital before. Some children worry that their Mum may never come back. Do you?
- Child - I guess
- Practitioner - That must be hard for you. How do you manage that?
- Child - Can I go to the toilet please ?

Research shows that empathic listening leads to good vagal tone

Children/ Teenagers, better able:

To learn
To use life well
To concentrate
To enjoy relationships
To be kind to others

Gottman, J, Katz, L, Hooven C (1996) Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy and the Emotional Life of Families: Theoretical Models and Preliminary Data. Journal of Family Psychology Vol. 10, No. 3, 243-268

The amazing benefits of having good vagal tone (activation of the vagal nerve)

Good vagal tone is the degree of activity occurring within the parasympathetic nervous system, leading to ability to down-regulate physiological arousal:

- Brings about states of calm, social connection, pro-social behaviour, emotion regulation.
- Increased performance on cognitive tasks: attention, working memory, inhibitory control.
- Better physical health.
- Reduced inflammation, reduced risk for heart attack and all-cause mortality.
- Smaller negativity bias (the tendency to see things negatively instead of positively).
- Stronger explorative urge.

Mather & Thayer, 2018) (Hansen, Johnsen, & Thayer, 2003, 2009; Ottaviani et al., 2018; Saus et al., 2006). Hillebrand et al., 2013; Rothberg, Lees, Clifton-Bligh, & Lal,

2016; Thayer & Fischer, 2009; Thayer, Yamamoto, & Brosschot, 2010) Shook, Fazio, & Vasey, 2007)

KEY SKILL

Cut the clutter of unnecessary words, don't talk in paragraphs.

Often a few words are far more powerful

Often simple words and short phrases are the best

- You felt so alone.
- So it was like a huge shock
- And no one was helping you with all *your* pain about what had happened

Example: Noah has witnessed parental violence. Neither parent thought to help him with his feelings about it. They carried on as if nothing had happened.

With his emotionally available adult, Noah makes a sand play image full of fighting and smashing, with baby in a shopping trolley, stuck right in the middle.
(Always respect the child's choice of using 'protection of the metaphor').

Practitioner When you are showing me your sandplay, I see that there is a baby in shopping trolley. And it must feel so terribly unsafe for the baby in your picture, because they're is nobody being kind or gentle to them. No one to protect the baby, or pick the baby up. It must be awful by the baby. (46 words used here,- far too many)

Good interventions:

Practitioner: Baby, (pause) lost and alone in someone else's war. (8 words)

Or

Practitioner: Alone, unsafe, unnoticed...no comfort, no gentleness, no friends. (10 words)

Or

Practitioner: Baby unhelped (pause), alone (pause) ...in someone else's hell. (9 words)

(see the book Conversations that Matter by Margot Sunderland for a chapter on sandplay)

KEY SKILL

Ask open not closed questions.

The latter take children/teenagers away from what they are feeling.

(Closed questions are those which require a yes or no answer)

Ask OPEN rather than closed questions which require a yes or no answer

So avoid closed questions like this

- Are you angry about that?
- Do you feel sad about that?
- Why do you feel that?
- Instead ask:
- What did you feel about that?
- What did that make you feel?

KEY SKILL

Don't ask "Why?" Questions. They take the child/ teenager into thinking what you are asking them to think about and away from what they are feeling.

~~Why do you feel that?~~

Will you help me understand what that was like for you?

~~Why do you feel anger?~~

Will you draw/write graffiti what makes you angry about it.

~~Why do you feel scared?~~

What did you imagine could happen?

KEY SKILL

Don't use words which are too small for their big feelings

Don't use words which are too small for their big feelings

- **Lisa (age 7)** - In my dream, I was alone I couldn't find Mum anywhere. I thought she must be dead. I ran and ran but I was just lost and running.
- **Practitioner** - ~~Sounds a bit scary.~~
- **Practitioner** - How terrifying for you.

Don't use words which are too small for their big feelings

- **Emma age 10** (mother walked out on the family for 6 months when she was 7. She had no idea if her mother was dead or alive) In my dream , the wolves are howling for their mothers. But their mothers do not hear, and so they howl forever. The nights are dark and long.

Unhelpful passive listening responses..

- ~~**Adult** - This is an important story~~
- ~~**Adult** - very sad.~~
- ~~**Adult** - oh/um~~

Try it again

- **Child** - In my dream, the wolves are howling for their mothers. But their mothers do not hear, and so they howl forever. The nights are dark and long.
- **Adult**- These wolves, they know a terrible aloneness.
- **Adult** - These wolves, they have known hell.

If we only think in terms of 'sad', 'angry', 'scared', 'happy', you risk misattuning to the child's experience of far more complex and profound feelings than this.

The terror of feeling abandoned/ unwanted by your own mother is likely to include feelings of: desolation, betrayal, unbearable aloneness, total mistrust, emptiness, not belonging.

- **Why does it matter that we get to the core feeling underneath the child's defence ?**

"We cannot leave the place until we have first arrived."

(Professor Leslie Greenberg)

KEY SKILL

Don't get confluent with their small words for their big feelings.

Don't get confluent with their too small words for their big feelings

- Example- Benjamin's father has just left to live with another woman. He loves his father deeply. He gives a smaller version of the big painful feelings he is having
- **Child**- It's Ok really that Dad has left us to live with another family
- **Adult** - ~~that's good you feel OK about it~~
- (unhelpful response)
- **Adult**- And maybe part of you thinks its OK and another part of you is really hurting (correct)

KEY SKILL

Support the completion of half-said things

Support the completion of half said things ...

- **Child** - I know what the worst feeling in the world is. It's fear.
- **Adult**- and the worst feeling in the world is fear because?

KEY SKILL

Don't assume you know what a child/teenager is feeling about something, unless they are telling you. Be curious about the meaning they have given to a life event. If they don't tell you, ask them. 'Will you help me understand.....?'

Bill age 11: " Last night Daddy hit Mummy"

If the child isn't saying what they feel about an important life event, before you empathise, ask them what they feel.

Example of inferring meaning

Adult: ~~How dreadful for you.~~

Billy withdraws from her, turning his back and playing on his own.

The adult did not ask for Billy's meaning and just assumed.

That assumption was entirely wrong. It's horrible for anyone to be 'told' they are feeling something they are not

When Billy disengaged in this way, the practitioner back tracked and checked out the child's meaning ...

Billy: I just felt, *Go for it Daddy. Big strong Daddy!*

The awful truth is that given the choice of being like violent Dad or crying vulnerable Mum, lots of boys will decide to identify with Dad

KEY SKILL

Troubled children and teenagers (and some parents) are not in the habit of thinking psychologically, so they react rather than reflect. Support mentalisation to enable to them to reflect rather than react.

Mentalisation

- The capacity to reflect on your own mind and the mind of another.

- The capacity to reflect on your own and other's mental states in terms of actions and behaviour.
-
- Thinking about feeling
- Feeling about thinking.
- Thinking about thinking .

Higher parental capacity to mentalise is associated with child's attachment security, whereas low maternal ability to mentalise is associated with the child's impairment in emotion regulation, developing anxiety disorders, and/or having behaviours that challenge

Camoirano et al (2017) Mentalizing Makes Parenting Work: A Review about Parental Reflective Functioning and Clinical Interventions to Improve It Front Psychology 2017 jan 20

School age children who were able to mentalise had far calmer physiology and better emotional regulation

Borelli et al (2018) School-Aged Children With Higher Reflective Functioning Exhibit Lower Cardiovascular Reactivity Front Med (Lausanne)

Mental state talk Speaking for the child

Emily keeps biting the new baby

Biting the baby...

We just want you to be happy

- I'll be happy if you shut up talking about my baby bother. People are always going on about him. Lovely baby this. Cuty baby that. It makes me mad. It makes me want to puke!
-
- *You just don't see I'm only 4 and I have to watch all the love going to him not meIts too hard to see all the love going to him not me*

KEY SKILL

Troubled children and teenagers are not in the habit of reflecting on, or communicating about their inner life, so they need help with that. Use pictures, images, tell them stories to convey empathy and to widen vocabulary of mental states.

Mental state talk.

Key interventions

Speaking about the child with the child in the room.

Speaking for the child " can I be you a minute"

Using Small world play to convey empathy

Use of therapeutic story (e.g Struggle by Margot Sunderland for children who have experienced trauma and shock)

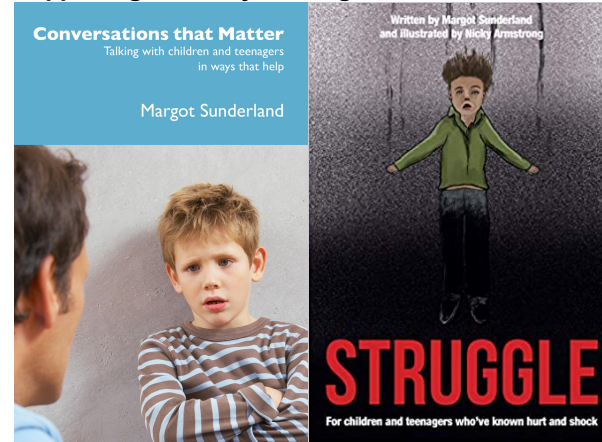
And so after the story, the child will have two pictures of the painful situation in his head....

A. The very painful and frightening images in his mind, PRE- STORY.

B. The new images in his mind, POST- STORY.....enriched by all the empathy and creative possibility, new relational options which the story has provided.

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Supporting books by Dr Margot Sunderland



(available on Amazon)

Supporting Cards by Dr Margot Sunderland Available on Amazon

