

NVC Parenting: A Transformative Path

I was at around five months of pregnancy when it dawned on me: I was about to raise a human being. This was the most exhilarating and daunting responsibility I had ever embraced.

Many years later, I encountered the words of American psychiatrist, Dr. Bruce Perry, *“Being born a human being does not ensure a child will become humane. Humans become humane. The capacity to care, to share, to listen, value and be empathic – to be compassionate – develops from being cared for, shared with, listened to, valued and nurtured. Humane caregiving expresses our capacity to be humane. Inhumane caregiving can decrease or even destroy this capacity.”* These words capture for me what made my journey into parenting awe-inspiring and breathtaking at the same time.

A new quest began. I longed to empower myself to maximize the possibilities that I would contribute to my son becoming fully humane. I attended La Leche League meetings to learn about breastfeeding. I fondly recall attending my first meeting where I listened to stories about co-sleeping and using strategies to invite a child’s cooperation without resorting to blind obedience. I felt quite dumbfounded by it all. But I kept attending, learning, and growing. After my son was born, I chose to breastfeed, follow my baby’s cues, baby-wear, and co-sleep. I continued to learn and grow and became a La Leche League leader. As my son grew older, these early strategies slowly faded away. I found myself longing for ways to continue nurturing our precious connection.

Another quest began. I encountered Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I embarked into a new journey eagerly learning from Inbal Kashtan, a certified trainer who was deeply committed to integrating NVC in family life, especially in relationship to children. Distance was an issue, so I relentlessly persisted with my request of her to organize a long-distance program for parents and professionals who work with youth and in 2006 Inbal launched the Parent Peer Leadership Program (PPLP). I have been connected to this program, first as a participant, then as an assistant, and for the past 9 years as a lead trainer.

Now with 3 children between the ages of 12 and 20, I continue to deepen my commitment to cultivating a mind that is deeply attuned to inter-dependence and power-with my children. I am also soberly aware that learning new skills to connect and reconnect when disconnection occurs is very much linked to my

ability to regulate and re-regulate myself when experiencing intra-personal or inter-personal dysregulation.

Neuroscientist L. Cozolino writes, *“Their skills as parents will depend on their empathic abilities, emotional maturity, and how they themselves were parented as children. [...] We can say that caregiving transmits the childhood experiences of parents to their children, making a parent’s unconscious a child’s first reality.”*

In other words, what is not transformed in us is transmitted to our children.

“Experiences that are not fully processed may create unresolved and leftover issues that influence how we react to our children. These issues can easily get triggered in the parent-child relationship. When this happens our responses toward our children often take the form of strong emotional reactions, impulsive behavior, distortions of perceptions or sensations in our bodies. [...] At this time parenting seems to ‘bring out the worst in us’ ” warns neuroscientist Dr. Daniel Siegel.

I appreciate that Siegel goes on to share strategies to make the unconscious conscious and heal -i.e. naming, processing and sharing emotions and experiences: *“Bodily awareness and self-reflection [...] enhance the healing process. Writing in a journal can be integrative and healing. Having trusted others bear witness to our pain and struggle can also bring a new sense of clarity and coherence to our lives.”*

It is through practice and repetition of certain connecting/regulating practices that we transform our unfinished business deep inside ourselves and empower ourselves to parent with a greater sense of integrity. The PPLP offers opportunities to develop and practice skills to support that transformation.

A powerful practice that I first learned through Inbal Kashtan and the PPLP is self-empathy which I define as the capacity to relate to ourselves with understanding, care and compassion.

Through the years my understanding and practice of self-empathy has deepened and become more spacious. From the initial questions of “What am I feeling?” “What am I needing?” I now start by taking a few breaths to invite myself to open up to my sensory experience: I observe what I see/hear/smell/touch and uncouple that from my perceptions and evaluations. The mind is quick to ascribe conceptual labels to people, objects and sensory data. I value understanding how my sensory experience is stirring life in me.

An example: I walk into my son's room, and I am taken back by all I see. My mind immediately thinks "What a mess, his room is always total chaos!" These thoughts, if I believed them unexamined, would tip me into a state of overwhelm. I take a few mindful breaths, and bring my mind back to my sensory experience: I see papers on the floor, the bed left undone, clothes lying on the chair and what appear to be used socks on the nightstand.

I then mindfully inquire about the general feeling tone: is it pleasant? Unpleasant? Neutral? Definitely unpleasant, I really do not like seeing all this. Naming resistance to what I see right now. Looking deeper, I realize I feel discouragement.

I observe any impulse that arises in me. I continue to breathe, making space for my reactions to just be, without translating them into action. My impulse would be to call my son and ask him to immediately take care of his room.

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." writes Viktor E. Frankl the Austrian founder of Logotherapy and holocaust survivor.

I breathe, connect with my sensory experience, my thinking process, my emotional landscape in the moment until I sense my body and mind regaining some sense of balance, which happens when I redirect my mind to those NVC self-empathy steps rather than following a habitual spiraling down of thoughts which might look like – the room is messy... he is messy... will he ever learn... maybe I did not teach him well... there is something wrong with me... I am a bad mother.

Attention regulation leads to emotional regulation. It is like when I shake a jar full of water and sand. As long as I shake the jar, the sand is stirred up and the water is cloudy. I am unable to see through. But if I pause the jar and allow the sand to settle, the water clears, and I can see through. When I sense my body and mind have reached some sense of balance, I look deeper into myself: what is the life-value that is present in me? I whisper the value silently to myself: order, harmony.

I let the attention rest on the life value. I let go of assessing whether my need is met or unmet. I know that cognitive assessment comes through the filters of my consciousness which is constructed and informed by past experiences and conditioning. I am aware that my unconscious narrative informs and shapes the present experience.

Nothing needs to change. Wanting things to be different than what they are is still a form of resistance... And that is not my understanding of the energy of a request, the last step in NVC when self-empathy may lead into inter-personal dialogue. I want to ask while being wholeheartedly receptive to the life that is already happening in me and around me. The focus is not on making my son any different than how he is. If my request is based on some type of resistance or of holding on to a certain preference, the energy that I come from and that I convey is still an energy of demand that will likely lead to disconnection in our relationship.

Each time I believe the story that I should get what I want, I am drawn back into a world where I solely focus on my needs. I am unable to hold myself and the other with equal care and to recognize how inter-connected we are.

Connecting with the value that is present in me empowers me to recommit to living by it. Values are mine to live by and to offer: "I own it, I am responsible for it", Rita Herzog, one of the earliest NVC pioneers, reminds me.

Self-empathy allows me to cultivate a mind that is directed towards intimacy with myself, my child, the whole of life.