FOUR CRUCIAL FACTORS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

ATTENTION

 When we understand that environment is influencing a child’s behaviors, paying attention to how the child is interacting with their environment guides our reactions to the situation. It’s like the use of Behavioral Incident Reports (BIRs) to get ahead of a negative behavior, only it is also used to effectively interact with positive behaviors. Children can learn on their own, but when a caregiver guides the child’s curiosity, learning that will enhance the child’s life is more likely to develop.

ATTUNEMENT

 This word has become more significant due to work with attachment styles and how they are learned. Attachment styles are learned in the first weeks of a child’s life and remain into adulthood 75% of the time. Attunement is the behavior of a caregiver who notices and responds to a child’s needs whether the need is physical or mental. It’s like learning to understand communication before words are available. When a child feels that they’ve influenced their caregiver they feel smart and secure. When the caregiver is not responding to the child’s messages, the child withdraws, stops trying in order to soothe themselves. When the caregiver is too disruptive with their responses, not attuned to the child’s expressed needs, the child becomes anxious. When a child has developed a secure attachment style their life is far more likely to be filled with success.

CALMING

 We now understand that there are two areas of the brain that greatly determine a child’s behavior: the amygdala and the pre-frontal cortex. Put simplistically, the amygdala analyses incoming information from the child’s environment and determines how safe the information is. If it doesn’t feel safe, freeze, fight, or flight behaviors are initiated to do something about the danger. If the incoming information is free of fear, it is passed onto the pre-frontal cortex where a broad range of prior information will be used to determine the behavioral response to the information. Anything new in a child’s environment creates a fear response. And almost everything is new when you’re a young child. Calming a child and helping them learn to calm themselves regulates emotions and impulsivity and facilitates learning effective responses to new situations.

SYCHRONICITY

 I first saw this word used with regard to educating young children in a research article two years ago. Mothers had volunteered to train their infants to pay attention to a brightly colored glove with bells on each finger. About half of the mothers just enjoyed their infant and shared the excitement when the glove was noticed. The behavior of these mothers was called “synchronous.” Their infants paid a good deal of attention to the glove. The behavior of the other mothers was called “disruptive.” They had been focused on getting their infant to attend the glove without remarkable success. Further, and of great importance, the synchronous mothers, tested when their child became three-years-old, had developed regulation of emotions and impulsivity in their child where the disruptive mothers had not.

 I was left to assume that the synchronous mothers had also calmly been interested, with their child, when the child paid attention to the consequences of their effective and ineffective behaviors. They may have also set up other “gloves:” environments that developed curiosity that, when attention was paid to them, developed the knowledge that the child would add to the rest of their life.

ILLUSTRATION

 The first bite changes everything. Now we’re paying attention to what just happened. It was something we don’t want to have happen again. Three-year-old Emily just bit another child. We didn’t see it happen. Emily is standing by watching us comfort the child who got bit. No blood. Good, that’s simpler, but we have a frightened child who we want to always feel safe in this home-away-from-home. Adequately comforted, the bit child returns to playing with a doll. Now we attend to Emily. Our eyes are soft and our voice calm.

 *You look worried*. *Do you want a hug?* Emily looks confused, but she moves toward the caretaker. *I wonder if we can find a pretty doll to play with?* Emily gives a brief nod. Now we’re attuned to Emily’s immediate needs. *Jenifer was hurt when you bit her. What will happen if I bite your dolly?* Emily didn’t answer that one, but she looks pensive. *Let’s pretend that I’ve hurt your dolly. I wouldn’t mean to, but you’ll need to hold her tight and tell her it will be alright soon.* It takes some practice, but when questions can’t be answered with a yes or no, we have some thinking going on.

 Here we have attention, calming, attunement, and synchronicity. You didn’t see or hear the synchronicity. It was in our voice, our eyes, our squeezes. Emily was being encouraged to think about biting. It seemed to Emily to be a safe thing to do. We really had her attention because she had bitten someone at home and got attention that frightened her, and we were being safe.

 You might think that people being upset with her for biting would have taught her not to bite. Punishment as a teaching method has confused people for a long time. Punishment causes fear. We’re learning, I’m writing about, that the Amygdala reacts, when the sensory system appears to be about a danger, with fight, flight, or freeze responses that haven’t taken time for being thought through. When you’re only three-years-old someone having a doll that you played with yesterday can illicit a fear response.

 If there is a good deal of fear in a child’s environment their amygdala grows, develops more and faster connections to quick and inadequate understandings and responses. Further, the pre-frontal cortex doesn’t grow well, and can become smaller. Our job in early childhood education is to grow that pre-frontal cortex, calm children who have made a mistake, bring their attention to the consequences of the mistake, and think.

Again, readers are free to edit and use this information

In any way they see fit. I wrote it quickly, but I think it

expresses some important information.

Jack Wright, Ph.D.

alexjack@blackfoot.net