

Changing History, One Baby at a Time

Therapists attempt to resurrect
parents' ancient wisdom

BY LARRY SHOOK

When parents gaze into their infants' eyes, a mysterious thing happens: it helps the young brain develop. Caressing a baby lowers a stress hormone known to damage the developing brain. And caregiving, the evidence now shows, even influences DNA production during the first year of every human life. Findings like these have been among the more electrifying

discoveries of neuroscience over the last decade or so. To Spokane psychotherapist Dr. Kent Hoffman, they suggest a new understanding of the human condition. "It's nature *and* nurture," says Hoffman. "With 11 million neuron pathways developing each second in an infant's brain, you could say that caregivers are literally co-creating galaxies of neuro-connections with their children." Those connections play an important role in events that follow. Apparently, they affect a person's ability to lead a satisfying life, to form healthy relationships, to make ethical decisions. But this bright new neurobiology coin has two sides: it also offers hard evidence about why disrupted childhoods set the stage for big-ticket government programs. Mounting evidence clearly implicates inadequate early caregiving as a root cause of exploding prison populations, teenage pregnancy, runaway divorce rates, drug abuse. Hoffman and two of his colleagues at Spokane's Marycliff Institute, Glen Cooper and Bert Powell, spent most of the 1990s intensely studying the new data on early childhood's importance. At midlife, all three therapists had reached the same conclusion. By practicing psychotherapy with individuals, in their entire careers they could really help only a handful of people. Was there any way, they wondered, to be more helpful than that? Their inquiry led them into the field of psychology known as "attachment theory," a large body of research describing the process by which

children bond with their parents. By the mid-'90s they were applying their new understandings to experimental classes for young mothers and fathers in Spokane. The work was being done in the eye of a revolution — an international childhood development movement focusing on the first years of life — and it got noticed. The preliminary Marycliff results were so promising that, with the encouragement of Patt Earley, district director of Spokane County's Head Start programs, the researchers received a small federal grant to help develop their work. The Marycliff colleagues enlisted their mentor Dr. Bob Marvin of the University of Virginia, one of the world's foremost attachment authorities, to lead the project. Attachment research began in the late 1940s and early 1950s with British mental health professionals. They began to study problem behavior in children separated from their parents, war orphans, and juvenile delinquents. According to Marvin, the common thread was “a history of very disrupted or maltreating relationships with their caregivers.” Three decades of rigorous scientific inquiry produced evidence so compelling that it launched the early childhood development revolution that swept up the Marycliff therapists. Now, another 10 years have passed, and the body of evidence just keeps growing. By understanding what happens when early caregiving relationships go well, says Marvin of the original impetus for attachment research, “We'll be in a much better position to say something about what happens when they go awry.” Beyond that, today's researchers want to know, “What can we do about it?”

Marycliff's Head Start-funded three-year research project was launched in 1998 to try to help answer that question. By the end of this year at least 75 Spokane parents, with their toddlers and preschoolers, will have participated in the study. The eyes of the world are on them.

Strange situation

One fall morning during the project's first year, a young Spokane mother and her three-year-old daughter arrived at Marycliff's quiet setting — a refurbished basalt gatehouse under the towering pines of a century-old Age of Elegance estate. There, they found a big, soft-spoken man waiting for them. It was Glen Cooper. In tones pitched deep in reassurance, Cooper quietly reminded the mother what was about to happen.

Downstairs there was a room with a two-way mirror. In front of that mirror were surroundings simulating a pleasant living room. There was a chair, a couch, a box of toys. On the other side of the mirror, in a darkened observation area, was an unseen video camera and microphone system. The mother and her daughter, and in a few minutes a strange visitor, would spend a little time together in the room. Their interactions would be recorded. It would take only about 30 minutes.

The mother, who was 20 years old, listened to Cooper attentively. She was slightly nervous, but Cooper's manner inspired trust, and she followed him down the stairs with her toddler.

Cooper had a budding faith in the drama that was about to unfold. His friendly banter belied his expectation that in a few minutes a kind of x-ray of the psyche would reveal what he and his colleagues consider the primal force in human history. This force, not at all subtle, would be easily captured on videotape.

In psychology circles, the encounter that followed is known as an Ainsworth Strange Situation. Named for its inventor, attachment pioneer Mary Ainsworth, it was developed as a technique for precisely meting out mild doses of psychological stress — a kind of treadmill for the nerves — in ways that reveal caregiving and coping strategies among parents and children. Over the last four decades, thousands of Strange Situations have been conducted by specially trained professionals “on every continent but Antarctica,” as Cooper puts it. The results are remarkably similar; the map of a hidden world has emerged.

Researchers consider the technique's revelations to be so accurate that one respected authority, clinical psychologist Dr. Robert Karen, calls the Strange Situation “a Rosetta stone of sorts,” enabling researchers to “decipher the traces of an infant's experience with his parents.” Karen, an award-winning author and clinician at Adelphi University, has written that the Strange Situation allows researchers “to correlate attachment style

with self-esteem, cognitive abilities, with persistence in solving problems, with peer relations, with romantic love, with maternal depression, and with just about everything else that seemed relevant...”

In all cultures, Strange Situations expose attachment-related behavior patterns ranging from healthy to nettlesome to potentially serious. While poverty doesn't help, by no means does affluence guarantee secure attachment. In western societies, according to the definitive text, *The Handbook of Attachment*, “a considerable number of infants (up to 40%) have been found to be insecurely attached.” There is evidence that such endemic insecurity results, not just from the stresses of economic disadvantage, but also from social values — prioritizing career over family — and parenting methods that are simply uninformed.

For instance, a survey published in October 2000 by pollster Daniel Yankelovich contained findings which appall child psychology experts. Called “What Grown-ups Understand About Child Development,” it showed, among other things, that 44% of the nation's parents believe a crying three-month-old infant will be spoiled by being picked up. Nothing could be further from the truth, suggests attachment research. The October 16, 2000 *Newsweek* quoted Dr. David Fassler, chairman of the American Psychiatric Association's council on children, adolescents and families, as saying, “You can't spoil a baby at three months of age. It's impossible.”

My notes on that mother and toddler who walked into Marycliff two years ago, camouflaged to protect their privacy, read this way:

Mom and child enter room. Mom sits in chair, child goes directly to toys, begins play. Child seems a little rough. Mom — gentle manner — picks up a toy, makes overtures. Child mostly ignores her. Toys, though, don't really seem that interesting to child; she seems to use them to avoid interaction with mother. Stranger enters, child ignores stranger, too, but she picks up a hand puppet.

“You go on!” the puppet orders a dinosaur. Dinosaur bites another toy.

Stranger sits on floor with child. Child interacts with stranger agreeably enough, but her play with the toys retains a certain sharpness, not destructive but aggressive...

Mom gets up to leave. “Good-bye,” she says. Child ignores her. As soon as door closes child picks up toy phone. “Mommy,” she says into receiver. “Gone,” she says wistfully. Child seems reassured by stranger's presence. Interacts pleasantly enough but not extensively.

Doorknob turns. “Mommy!” cries the child, but she doesn't look up. Mom enters, stranger leaves. Child plays with toys. “Watch me,” she commands her mother. But child doesn't seem to want interaction with mother. Mom begins to play. Play quickly becomes competitive. Child snatches at toys in mom's hand, mom pulls them back. Mother and child parry each other with toys. Child mostly ignores mom. Mom says she has to leave again. Child tips over bead frame in protest, turns back on mom as mom leaves. “No,” says child as door shuts. She begins fussing. “No, no,” she says. Goes to door, kicks it, slaps it, cries weakly. Then, angrily: “Come back, Mommy!” Then plaintively, “Please, Mommy! I want you, I want you, I want you! Mommy, come back!” Child flings herself on couch. Gets up, picks up a toy, throws it to floor. Stomps toy until it breaks.

Mom has stepped into the darkened room with Cooper. She watches this scene through the mirror, and she is confused. “I didn't know she would do that,” she says

Until this moment the mother has never noticed evidence that her child needed her. In fact, as she will later confide to five other parents in the follow-up parenting group sessions facilitated by Cooper, she felt rejected by her little girl. She believed the rejection was caused by her own shortcomings as a parent. But now Cooper has brought her face to face with what the Marycliff researchers see as the primal force. Need. The human need for connection. With her own eyes the mother has seen its raw truth.

Hidden world

They meet for an hour and 15 minutes once a week for 20 weeks. Each class is a careful blend of theory and practice. There are six parents, the group leader (Cooper, Hoffman or Powell), and a Head Start family service counselor or two. The parents are given a crash course in the hidden world of children's needs, coupled with pointers in how to meet those needs.

In the first session, the VCR shows selected scenes of real life, taped during the Strange Situation. A medley of images from each of the six parents' experiences with their children captures the bedrock truth of humanity's story: kids need their parents.

For each of us, explains Powell, the universe first comes into focus in the reflection of a caregiver's eyes. The intensity of an infant's need to get its bearings there, the inclusiveness of that need, is so absolute, so transcendent, says Powell, that words can't convey it. Videotape can show it, though, and the therapists put it right there on the TV screen for the parents to see in living color. There's no mistaking the language of the children's gestures and expressions. That first tape segment is accompanied by theme music—Joe Cocker singing “You Are So Beautiful.”

“This is the song your children sing to you,” the leader tells the parents. The parents always get it.

“It's kind of magical,” says Cooper.

The parents leave the introductory session jump-started with key ideas. They have been introduced to the secure attachment formula: “Always be bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind. Whenever possible, follow your child's need. Whenever necessary, take charge.”

They also receive the “Circle of Security” schematic (see below) reflecting the organizational framework of the course. The “Circle of Security” premise is that kids have two basic types of needs. First, they must feel supported to explore the world. Second, they need to know a safe haven always awaits them when each episode of exploration is complete. Childhood learning is a saga of these episodes.

The first week's homework is for the parents to take home the children's book *Bunny My Honey* and read it to their kids.

Hoffman ended a recent introductory class by reading the little book — a sweet, emblematic tale — to his students. For the first few pages a mommy bunny and a baby bunny delight in each other's company. Then the baby goes out exploring, gets lost and scared, and cries out, “*Mommy! Mommy! I want my Mommy!*”

Over a bush the tips of rabbit ears appear. “*Bunny my honey,*” calls the mother's voice. The story ends happily with a safe reunion.

“Why do you think I read that?” asked Hoffman.

“Because it's about exactly what you've been telling us,” answered a young father.

Midway through the Marycliff training, a pivotal concept is introduced. The leader presents the new material with a handout called “Welcome To The Club.”

The point is that every parent struggles, no parent is perfect, every parent is weaker on one half of the “Circle of Security” than the other. Some parents are more comfortable giving their kids the freedom to explore, but for some reason aren't as effective at helping them handle their emotions when upsets come along. Other parents face the opposite challenge: letting go is hard; offering emotional support comes naturally.

Almost always, the reasons have to do with parents' own childhoods, with the way they themselves were parented. The Marycliff researchers want them to know that this is normal. They don't want them to feel guilty—in fact, Cooper stresses that all of this information can be so emotionally laden for parents that it should be rated PG, for “Parental Guilt.” Join the club, say the therapists.

The way to overcome the guilt, the way to build parenting skills, the way to change the future, is a two-step process. Step 1: learn how to recognize and meet your child's needs. Step 2: recognize that your natural interpretation of a child's actions — or anyone else's for that matter — can be wildly inaccurate based on your own childhood experiences. A mother whose own mother repeatedly told her to “stop whining” may have

learned to repress her own needs to be comforted. That could cause her to unintentionally do the same with her own children. Similarly, a parent reared by a fearful, overly protective caregiver is likely to repeat that pattern unless a conscientious corrective effort is made.

Marycliff uses videotape to, in effect, turn time against itself, to loosen the grip of the past. The researchers do this by showing parents that yesterday doesn't necessarily mean what they thought it did.

During the "Welcome To The Club" segment, the group leader shows a video clip of a beautiful coastline accompanied by soft music. He asks the parents what they see. Restfulness, serenity, the gentleness of nature—these are typical answers. When the same scene is shown again to the soundtrack of "Jaws," the mood turns menacing. In this way, parents learn how subjective their perceptions can be, how their minds are full of old pictures. Those pictures tell old stories. Parents (not researchers) call this their "shark music." The parents learn to recalibrate their perceptions based on improved understanding of their children's emotional needs. They learn to change their stories. This helps them become "bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind."

Such insight isn't as elementary as it might seem. The Yankelovich survey, for instance, found that "40 percent [of parents] believe a 12-month-old who turns the TV on and off repeatedly while her parents are watching is 'trying to get back at them.'"

In the Marycliff argot that's an example of "misinterpreting a child's cue."

"This class teaches you to see parenting through your child's eyes," one of the young mothers told me.

Another said the class "has made me more aware of my relationship with my daughter."

"Why is that important?" I asked.

"Because that's all there is," she said. She explained that without being aware of the relationship itself, as something parents create with their interactions with their children, "you're not noticing and responding to what's happening in the moment. You're just going through the motions."

The Marycliff parents I spoke with all said the training opened their eyes to their children's needs.

"It's scary to think that if I hadn't seen that — what could I be doing to damage her? Who would she become, and how many insecurities would she have because I constantly pushed my needs and insecurities on her?"

Other comments:

"A lot of parents think they'll learn as they go along. This is a way to learn to follow your child, not your parents."

"I didn't always look at my son, or make facial expressions. Now I try to look at him more. If I'm feeling happy I try to really smile. He used to get really frustrated, then start crying. Then I would get irritated. I realize now that if he's asking me something, if I look at him and talk to him, he doesn't have as much frustration."

"It helps me understand why if I just hold my daughter for five minutes before I put her in the car seat, we'll have a good ride home."

"It helps me break the cycle and not pass on certain things from my parents."

"It re-routes your thinking."

For 20 weeks Marycliff's parents watch themselves on videotape in front of other parents. The tapes have been edited to showcase the parenting strengths they already have, plus the areas where improvement would help. They take turns sitting in what they call "the hot seat" (the researchers don't call it that), as everyone evaluates their taped interactions with their child. They play games like "Name That Need" — as the group leader freeze-frames the tape every few seconds. Parents study eye contact, expressions, gestures, interactions. They begin identifying what had been invisible at life's normal pace. They learn that children's needs, and parental opportunities for meeting those needs, are like a flowing river.

In theory it sounds overwhelming. In practice, a little coaching soon triggers latent parenting instincts. In no time, understanding and handling the children's needs starts coming naturally.

But isn't it scary? I asked a group of parents. What about that PG, parental guilt warning?

"This isn't scary. It's awesome."

“Any parent could do this. We had one girl [mom] who was 100% reserved. Now she’s probably one of the most outspoken. It’s such a safe environment. You’re not put on display.”

“You are never criticized as a parent. Situations are analyzed. Questions are asked. It gives you different ways to look at things, more solutions. Things go smoother with your child.”

“It helped me understand other parents have the same struggles I do.”

“It’s nice to learn from each other.”

“It’s impossible to put this class in words.”

“Bert makes it really easy. He’s not some quack who sits there and judges you. He was more like our friend.”

“Yeah, I might feel guilty about some part of my parenting, but now I have the tools to change it.”

“No emotion is ‘bad.’ It’s just a signal for looking at something and asking yourself, ‘Why?’”

“It’s so *not* heavy. It’s fun. You have intense moments, but they make you feel good. They make you feel like you can be a good parent.”

“It’s a purely positive program.”

Four million-year-old genius

Veteran attachment experts like the University of Maryland’s Dr. Jude Cassidy, co-editor of the prestigious *Handbook of Attachment*, consider the documented rate of learning of the Marycliff parents nothing short of stunning.

“At the end of five or 10 minutes [of analyzing tape]... these moms have gotten this incredible message that their babies’ behavior is something that can be observed, that it has meaning, that they are central to their child’s life.”

Cassidy says the Marycliff work shows that parents can quickly become so adept at understanding and appropriately responding to their children’s actions that it’s as though they’re demonstrating a graduate school level of application skills.

“I’ve never seen such a transformation from an uneducated eye to a very sophisticated level of analysis of what’s going on so quickly.”

One particular tape series, Cassidy says with a chuckle, made her “feel like I was in the presence of, ‘I was blind but now I see...’ I mean, they just *got it*.”

What the Marycliff parents are “getting” is appearing with startling clarity in the preliminary findings of the first two years’ classes. “We’re seeing statistically robust indications of dramatic improvements in parenting skills with attending benefits to the children’s emotional security,” says Marycliff’s Bert Powell. “I think it’s safe to say that if society as a whole could experience such parenting gains, it would be good news for the trajectory of our species.”

That hardly seems an overstatement when the known costs of disrupted childhoods are considered. A widely reported 1998 Rand Corporation study found that 30 years of evidence proves that early intervention programs like Head Start unquestionably improve parent-child relationships, the emotional and physical health of children, their thinking skills, their educational performance. Because of that, such “negative outcome indicators” as welfare usage, criminal activity, maternal substance abuse, and child abuse dropped significantly. The Rand authors documented a host of studies suggesting savings of \$20,000 to \$25,000 per child in government spending on welfare, education and criminal justice. The report also showed that every dollar spent on early care and intervention for children eventually saved taxpayers a minimum of \$7.16.

America’s current rate of imprisonment is the highest in the world. Between 1985 and 1996, the country’s prison spending jumped from \$13 billion to more than \$27 billion. Two percent of the nation’s parents now are in jail. Against this backdrop, the significance of the Marycliff project is not lost on others.

The “Circle of Security” has been labeled an “exemplary practice” by the national office of Head Start, has won a Washington State early childhood development governor’s award, and is attracting such notice from leaders in the early childhood development field that, according to Jude Cassidy, Marycliff’s work will be adopted internationally. Cassidy has incorporated the “Circle of Security” in a major National Institute of Mental Health-funded study she has underway, and already the model is being used in England.

“We have felt greatly inspired by the project’s early positive findings, and elegant protocol,” Howard and Miriam Steele wrote of the Marycliff efforts recently. “In fact, we are promoting it as a model for early intervention work in the United Kingdom, most recently in the context of the Parent-Infant Project and Nursery School Program [similar to Head Start] at the Anna Freud Centre.” The Steeles, who lecture on psychology at the College of London, are also research fellows at the Anna Freud Centre.

Officially, the Marycliff study is called “Attachment-Based Interventions In Head Start Child-Parent Dyads.” A dyad is a pair, in this case a parent and child. In the world of attachment theory, there are only dyads. As British pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott puts it, “There is no such thing as a baby,” because babies don’t exist by themselves. They are found only in caregiving relationships. Babies are products of those relationships, as are the children and adults they grow into. As is the world those adults create.

Or, as the young Marycliff mother put it, “My relationship with my daughter... is all there is.”

The Marycliff researchers don’t take credit for the “elegant protocol” of their project. That, they say, is due to their many mentors and to the enormous body of attachment research upon which the project is based.

Clinically speaking, Bert Powell attributes Marycliff’s success to what he and his colleagues refer to as the “empathic shift” experienced by the parents.

“With the group as a secure base, attachment theory as a map, and increased observational skills, parents are able to enter into a reflective dialogue with the group leader. That means they can talk about what they see themselves experiencing with their child. This is important, because it’s only *reflecting* on experience that teaches us. It’s easy to make the same mistakes over and over if you don’t stop to think about it. It’s this reflection that triggers the empathic shift. It helps parents feel what their children feel, and that’s when things change. In other words, children are no longer aliens that have to be managed, they are human and need to be treated as you would want to be treated.”

Still, Glen Cooper thinks the real force behind Marycliff’s promising early results is what he calls “the four-million-year-old genius.” It’s the mysterious genetic knowledge, latent though it may be, that allowed humans to become human in the first place, he says. As thirst proves the existence of water, the fiery need children have for their parents proves that nature entrusted parents with an amazing power to respond. It’s an inherent circuitry, part of the natural scheme of things.

“We just need to set the genius free,” says Cooper.