

It's all about relationships: Understanding Communication, Behaviour & NES Parenting Offers

Relationships in all their forms speak to what it is to be human. They connect us to the world around us, enrich our lives and are fundamental to our mental health and wellbeing. We are born seeking to connect with others; we need this for our physical and emotional development and like many aspects of human development, a predisposition to connect with others is built upon, and developed through our experiences. How these connections and relationships develop are shaped through our many interactions; we are not born knowing how to 'be' in a relationship; rather this is learnt from infancy and throughout our lives.

Our first relationships are where we experience and learn about relationships. This is most often with biological or birth parents* but can include alternative caregivers. Babies are born with big emotions, which are communicated through their behaviour. A parent's task is to understand and help their baby with these emotions, through their own communications and behaviour. From the early days through to childhood we make sense of our emotional experiences within relationships, for example our experience of joy, anger, frustration, comfort, fear, contentment, sadness, guilt, and shame. Relationships are where we learn how to understand, communicate and ultimately manage these experiences - what am I feeling, why am I feeling this way, what do I do with this feeling? What we 'do' with and how we communicate an emotion is learned – How do I act or behave when I have this emotion? This is how we learn what works, what is effective in meeting our needs, what is ok and what is not ok. Our relationships with our parents or carers provide the template that we take out into the world. Love, value, safety, consistency, and predictability in a parent¹ child relationship is communicated through behaviour. The child experiences, watches and learns.

There are many things that can affect how we communicate and behave with our children, and how our children communicate and behave at home, at school and with their friends. At times, for all of us, things can be difficult, and it is not always easy to make sense of what is happening, and how best to help our child with big emotions and at times they might be struggling. Through the work of the Parenting workstream, NHS Education for Scotland (NES) aims to make more widely available supports to parents which build positive relationships. This is done through training practitioners across Scotland in parenting supports and interventions spanning infancy, childhood and adolescence such as the Solihull Approach and the Incredible Years and Triple P interventions. These interventions support parents to focus on understanding their child's behaviour and the need that is being communicated. Parents are then able to make changes to their own communication, emotional expression, and behaviour. These interventions all start from the understanding that spending time with children in a way that communicates that they are valued, safe and loved is the best way of bringing about any changes. The interventions then move to exploring consistent, predictable, calm responses to a child's communication and behaviour. These help the child to learn about change without feeling overwhelmed and provide parents with safe and planned ways of responding and supporting their child to learn. These interventions are grounded in well-established psychological theory and supported by a strong body of research. They help parents or caregivers to think about how to provide secure, loving and

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containing relationships for their child through changing the way in which they communicate with and respond to their child. These experiences in their early and ongoing caregiver relationships allow children to develop the knowledge and skills to navigate relationships in the wider world.

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