The Child with Special Needs: How Families Learn to Cope

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www.brazeltontouchpoints.org
Brazelton Touchpoints Center Vision:

IMAGINE a world in which all children grow up to be adults who can:

• cope with adversity,
• strengthen their communities,
• constructively participate in civic life,
• steward our planet’s resources, and
• experience the joys of nurturing the next generation to be prepared to do the same.
What is the work of the Brazelton Touchpoints Center?
To restore the position of babies and children as the first priority of communities and societies everywhere
Why first priority?

When babies and children are first priority, everything else falls into place, and the future comes into focus, the babies and children of our children, and theirs, and theirs.

For example:

• Natural and built environments
• Infrastructure
• Economic development, employment
• Health, education, social services
• Community structures, processes, resources
• Culture
Why restore?

Powerful, and often, inadvertent, unrecognized forces can overwhelm this biological imperative and throw human systems off course.

In many communities and societies around the world, priorities have deviated from the biological imperative of the protection and nurturing of children.
Why Touchpoints?
Stressors on Families

• Workplace demands on families
• Changes in family structures and roles
• Increased family mobility and isolation
• Increased economic challenges for families
• Stressed education, health and social services
• Erosion of family traditions, neighborhoods and community connections
Challenges: Threats to the Development of Living Beings
(Remember the 12 Stressors on Families Today?)

• Climate Change, natural resource scarcity, natural disasters
• Inter-nation/inter-ethnic conflict
  (the bloody intergenerational cycle of fear, trauma, hatred)
• Inequitable economics
• Displacement of family and community cultures

Risks and opportunities of
• Globalization
• Digital technology – race to the bottom of the brainstem---
  Disruption of human interactions and relationships
• Artificial intelligence
The change we strive for... we know how to do this
How do we do this work?
What is Touchpoints?

- A dynamic, developmental theory with implications for practice change in pediatric health, early education and care, early intervention and social services
- An approach to working with children and families
- An approach to professional and organizational development, and community self-strengthening
- An international learning community
Why Touchpoints? – A relational approach

• Reaffirm parents’ expertise
Why reaffirm parental expertise?

Professional cultures over-estimate

• the universality of Western child development knowledge,

• the possibility of a single “science of parenting”, and

• the capacity of professional institutions and systems to promote healthy development.
Technical vs. Adaptive challenges or

• Parenting is primarily an adaptive challenge
• Technical challenges in parenting that can be handled with techniques that can be taught, learned and replicated, for example
  – changing a diaper
Parenting is primarily an adaptive challenge

Adaptive solutions emerge based on
• specific contexts, e.g., the specific, parent, child and circumstances

Adaptive solutions depend on
• specific resources, conditions and capacities.
• The parent is the expert on their child

Attribution theory, Explanatory models, Co-creating meaning:
Telling the story together
Why reaffirm parental expertise?
Professional cultures overlook or under-estimate:

- Local knowledge of child development and childrearing
- Community capacity for promoting healthy development

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Scientific Revolution: Old Paradigm for Human Development

• From scientific reductionism - linear causality

A causes B
Scientific Revolution: (not so) New Paradigm for Human Development: complexity and emergence

To Systems theory

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Three core capabilities of systems leaders to foster collective leadership

1. See the larger system
2. See taken for granted assumptions, hear different points of view, recognize the beginnings of solutions within them
3. Shift from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future
Why Touchpoints? – A relational approach

- Rehumanize healthcare
- Transform childcare into family care
- Shift social service from child ‘rescuing’ to family strengthening
- Building relational teams: parents, early interventionists, teachers and healthcare providers

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Stressors for Parents and Providers

GATEKEEPING
Pasion y Lucha Competitiva:

The natural competition felt by any two adults who care passionately about the same child
¡Hay un bebe adentro de todos nosotros!
Sally Provence, MD
– Yale Child Study Center
Death Without Weeping

• Threats to Attachment when Survival is Threatened
Why Touchpoints?
A common language, shared values and dreams

• Break down barriers between service providers that fragment care
• Refocus health and human service workers on needs, strengths, problems, solutions as understood by those we serve
• Connect professional cultures through reflective practice with cultures of those we serve
Why Touchpoints?
– A relational approach to caring for each other and ourselves

• Overcome burn out, protect and restore sense of mission
What is Touchpoints: Key elements

- Developmental
- Preventive
- Relational
- Strengths-based
- Systems theory based
- Culturally informed
- Evidence-based
How does change happen?

- What processes lead to developmental change?
- Can understanding how developmental change happens lead to better preventive interventions and more effective promotion of healthy development?
Touchpoints: disorganization and reorganization

The term “touchpoints” was first coined by T. Berry Brazelton to describe temporary periods of

• developmental disorganization for the child and family, followed by

• reorganization and the emergence of new developmental capacities.

Touchpoints: Una matriz del desarrollo

- El desarrollo se forma de momentos de désorganización y de réorganización, de acceleracion y de désacceleracion

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Development is characterized by regressions, bursts, and pauses.
Non-human primate evidence for disorganization-reorganization developmental model

• Predictable transitional periods alternate with stable periods
• Regression: baby chimp more demanding, regresses, clingy, stays closer to mother
• Conflict: mother pushes baby –to discover new potential for greater independence

Developmental Crises, Preventive Opportunities: Anticipatory Guidance

• Predictable Stress: conflict within child, child-parent interactions, and among adults

• Vulnerability as opportunity for learning and strengthening relationships

• Vulnerability as risk for parental sense of failure, incompetence, ineffectiveness, child abuse
Developmental Crises, Preventive Opportunities: Anticipatory Guidance and Learning Together About Each Child’s Developmental Pace

- End of day fussing
- Discipline
- Tantrums
- Toilet training
  (domestic violence prevention?)
Momentos Claves
Guia Preventiva:
Prevencion del maltrato de los niños

- Inquieto, gritando al fin de cada día
- Disciplina
- Pataletas
- Adios las pañales
- (prevencion de la violencia domestica?)

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Points in time to touch into the family system

These points of time of heightened vulnerability for child and family are periods of both risk and opportunity during which health, education and other professionals serving children and their families can touch into the family system to:

• prevent developmental derailment and
• help keep development on track.
Touchpoints are times when parents worry about:

• their children’s development and
• their own effectiveness as parents.

Parents ask two questions:

• Is my child okay?
• Am I doing okay as a parent?
Touchpoints for Families of Children with Special Needs

• Unknowns, Uncertainty, Unpredictability: maintaining hope while facing reality

• Two touchpoints for every one— the typical and the atypical
• Straw and gold
  – For siblings
  – For mothers, fathers
  – For marriages, partner relationships

Focus on the parent – child relationship.

Look for opportunities to support parental mastery

Use the behavior of the child as your language

Value passion (even negative) wherever you find it
Touchpoints and Protective Factors

• Reduced parental stress
• Protection from maternal depression and improved maternal mental health
• Increased initiation and duration of breastfeeding
• Improved understanding of child development and developmentally appropriate expectations
• Improved relationships with providers and decreased social isolation
• Improved pediatric healthcare resource utilization
Effects of touching in

Mechanisms for these effects are thought to include the family-provider relationships in which

• parental competence,
• parental confidence and
• the positive power of development
are affirmed during these developmental crises.

These are times when parents worry about

• their children’s development and
• their own effectiveness as parents.

The parent-clinician relationship—guided by the Touchpoints approach—is also thought to absorb stresses and worries that can interfere with the capacity to form shared states of consciousness.

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Children (like all of us) Learn Through Relationships

Processes that require relationships:

• Attachment
• Self Regulation
• Mutual Regulation
• Shared Subjectivity

Through processes that require emotional availability of child, parent, professionals
Emotional availability in relationships promotes development
Challenges to emotional availability

- Isolation
- Sense of powerlessness, disenfranchisement
- Overwhelming stress
- Depression
- Substance abuse
- Domestic violence
- Threatened survival
Emotional availability can come from a web of relationships that gives caregivers strength and hope:

Strength to learn from and face their mistakes

Hope for

• their child’s development
• their future as a family
• their world
Child well-being depends on family well-being which depends on human eco-system

- Early attachments depend on the health and well-being of their caregivers.
- Children need caregivers whose own survival, development, and ability to nurture their young are not endangered.
- Development-promoting early interactions must be nested within strong communities where broader social relationships protect and reinforce these primary ones.


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Professional caregivers work in organizational systems embedded in human eco-systems

• Individual practice change depends on organizational and systems change
• Professional development depends on organizational development.
• Clinicians’ capacity for emotional availability depends on organizational relational functions.
What parents need to be the kind of parents they want to be for their children

• To perceive themselves as competent
• To feel empowered to make a difference in their children’s lives
• To feel connected to a web of supportive relationships – the village
• To feel connected to their pasts, to be emotionally available in the present and to dare to hope for their children’s future
Para enarmorarse de un niño los padres necesitan

• Un sentido de competencia (somos expertos pero los padres también)
• Hacerlos sentir que tienen el poder para obtener lo mejor para sus niños
• Comunidad y conexiones - una red de relaciones
• Conexión con el pasado e identidad cultural
• Esperanza para el futuro – la capacidad para proyectarse a sí mismo, al niño y la familia con esperanza para un futuro mejor
What is our role?

to make relationships with children and parents that connect
• us to them,
• them to each other, and
• to other families and members of their communities