

# Touchpoints of Development as Emergent Phenomena of Complex Systems: Culture, Community, and Context

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*Pathways to Child Flourishing: Contexts for Development and Child Flourishing*

University of Notre Dame

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Joshua Sparrow, MD

Harvard Medical School

Boston Children's Hospital

Division of Developmental Medicine & Department of Psychiatry

Director of Planning, Strategy and Program Development,

Brazelton Touchpoints Center

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[www.brazeltontouchpoints.org](http://www.brazeltontouchpoints.org)

[joshua.sparrow@childrens.harvard.edu](mailto:joshua.sparrow@childrens.harvard.edu)

# Overview: It's about time and space

Human development is an emergent phenomenon that:

- proceeds through periods of disorganization and reorganization (Touchpoints),

Information and affective energy connect and flow among system members (mutual regulation) promoting mutual adaptation and development.

- evolves in complex systems (ecological model) e.g., communities organized by evolutionary biology, environmental context, and culture.

# The Brazelton Touchpoints Center Vision

is for all children to grow up to be adults who can

cope with adversity,

strengthen their communities,

constructively participate in civic life,

steward our planet's resources, and

nurture 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 babies and children?

Humans are biologically wired to organize themselves and adapt to ensure their reproductive success and that of their offspring.

# Why first priority?

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

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 is this the work of the Brazelton Touchpoints Center?

somebody's got to do it, right?

# 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

# The Touchpoints Approach: Key elements

- **Developmental**
- **Preventive**
- **Relational**
- **Strengths-based**
- **Systems theory based**
- **Culturally informed**
- **Evidence-based**

# Why Touchpoints in the United States?

## 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

# Why Touchpoints? – A relational approach

- **Reaffirm parents' expertise**

# Childrearing is a social and therefore culturally-rooted process

Professional cultures over-estimate

- universality of Western child development knowledge,
- possibility of a single “science of parenting”, and
- capacity of professional institutions and systems to promote healthy development in the developing world, and the US.

# Childrearing is a social and therefore culturally-rooted process

- Local knowledge of child development and childrearing, and community capacity for promoting healthy development are often overlooked or under-estimated by professional cultures.

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LeVine, R. 2004. Challenging Expert Knowledge: Findings from an African Study of Infant Care and Development. In: Gielen, U.P. & Roopnarine, J.L., editors. *Childhood and Adolescence: Cross-Cultural Perspective and Applications*. Westport, CT: Praeger. 149-165

# WEIRD

Behavioral scientists routinely publish broad claims about human psychology and behavior in the world's top journals based on samples drawn entirely **from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD)** societies. Researchers – often implicitly – assume that either there is little variation across human populations, or that these “standard subjects” are as representative of the species as any other population. Are these assumptions justified? Here, our review of the comparative database from across the behavioral sciences suggests both that there is substantial variability in experimental results across populations and that WEIRD subjects are particularly unusual compared with the rest of the species – frequent outliers.

**Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine and Ara Norenzayan (2010). The weirdest people in the world?. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 33, pp 61-83 doi:10.1017/S0140525X0999152X**



# What is Science?

It is just like ordinary magic, except performed by academics.

Gervais Mbarga, Jean-Marc Fleury

(<http://www.wfsj.org/course/en/L5/L5P00.html>)

# Indigenous Science: *We are all researchers*

What is knowledge?

- the information and understanding that an individual or group uses as it engages the world

What is research?

- the act of collecting information for a specific purpose;
- an act of learning

*Allen J; Mohatt G; Ching Ting Fok C; Henry D; People Awakening Team. (2009). Suicide Prevention As A Community Development Process: Understanding Circumpolar Youth Suicide Prevention Through Community Level Outcomes. International Journal of Circumpolar Health 68:3, 274-91*

*Kovach M; (2009). indigenous Methodologies. Toronto:University of Toronto*

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# **How does developmental change emerge?**

- **What processes lead to the emergence of developmental change?**
- **Can understanding how developmental change happens lead to better preventive interventions and more effective promotion of healthy development?**

# Touchpoints: A Developmental Model

Development is characterized by  
**regressions, bursts, and pauses.**

# Touchpoint: developmental disorganization and reorganization

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

- developmental disorganization for the child, and as a result, the family, followed by
- reorganization, and the emergence of new developmental capacities in complex systems – family, and community.

Heimann M. (Ed.). (2003). *Regression Periods in Human Infancy* (pp. 57-80). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum

van de Rijt-Plooij, H.H.C. & Plooij, F. X. (1992). Infantile regressions: Disorganization and the onset of transition periods. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 10, 129-149.

# 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

van de Rijt-Plooij, H.H.C. & Plooij, F. X. (1992). Infantile regressions: Disorganization and the onset of transition periods. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 10, 129-149.

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# Developmental Crises, Preventive Opportunities: Anticipatory Guidance

- Predictable Stress, Conflict-within child, child-parent, among adults
- *Vulnerability as opportunity for Learning, Relationship*
- *Vulnerability as risk for Parental sense of failure, incompetence, ineffectiveness, child abuse*

# Developmental Crises, Preventive Opportunities: Anticipatory Guidance

- End of day fussing                      3 – 12 weeks
  - Discipline                                      9 months
  - Tantrums                                      12-36 months
  - Toilet training                              24-36 months
- (domestic violence prevention?)



# 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?

# *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.

Brazelton, T. B. (1992). *Touchpoints: The essential reference: Your child's emotional and behavioral development*. Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Lifelong Books.

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# 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.

The parent-clinician relationship –guided by the Touchpoints approach- is also thought to absorb stresses and worries that can interfere with emotional availability

# Human Development Emerges through Relationships

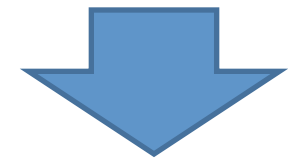
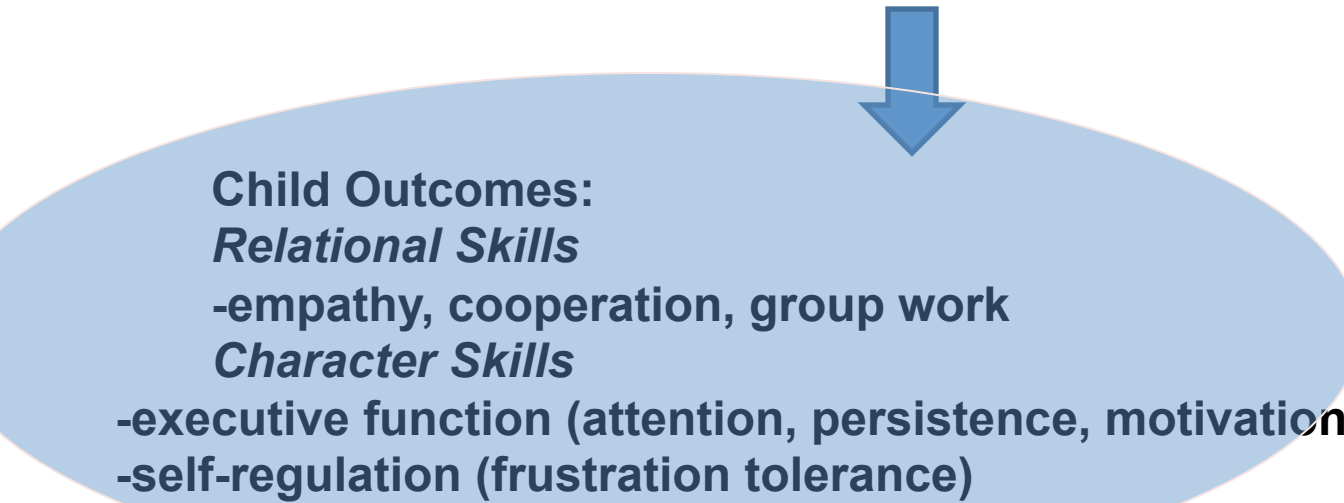
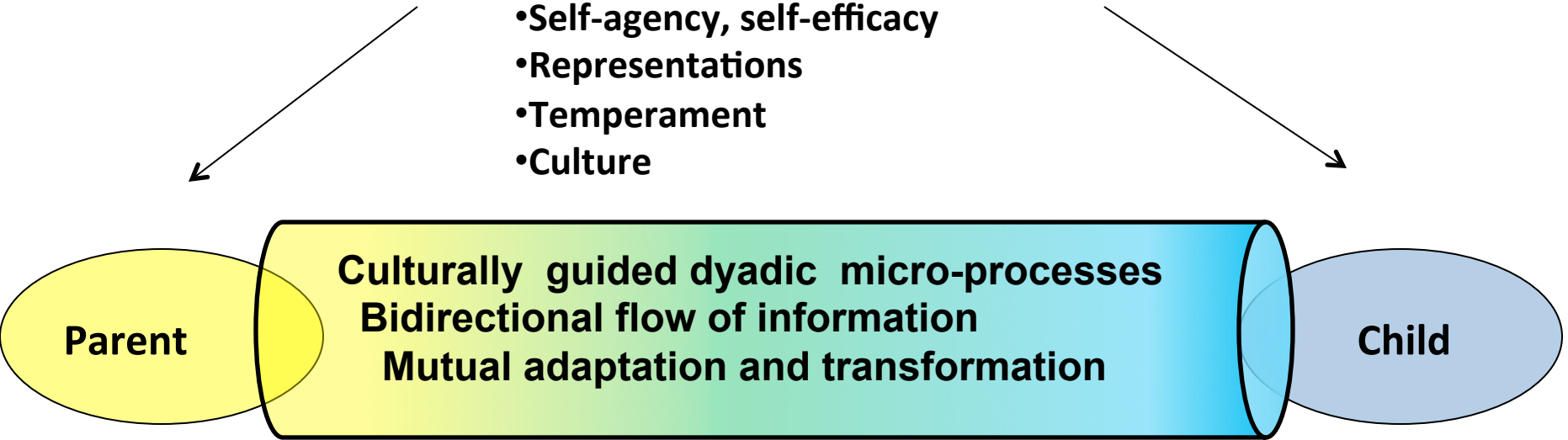
- Information and Affective Energy Flow
- Children and Adult Caregivers Adapt to Each Other
- These relational learning processes require **emotional availability**

# What is emotional availability?

The capacity of two humans  
(for example infant or child and parent or caregiver)  
to be authentically present in the moment

# Parent-Child Relationship

- Emotional availability
- Self regulation, co-regulation
- Self-agency, self-efficacy
- Representations
- Temperament
- Culture



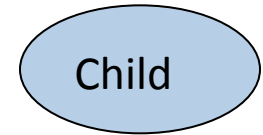
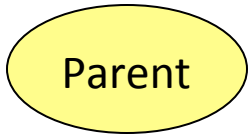
Copyright 2014 Joshua Sparrow, MD. All Rights Reserved. **Optimal development and lifelong learning success**

# interferences with emotional availability

- Isolation
- Sense of powerlessness, disenfranchisement
- Overwhelming stress
- Depression
- Substance abuse
- Domestic violence
- Threatened survival

# Parent-Child Relationship: Examples of Child, Parent, and Systemic Risk and Protective Factors

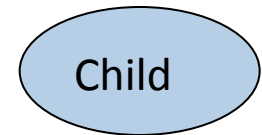
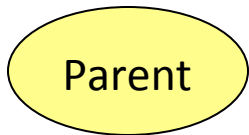
## ***Barriers***



- Social isolation
- Disempowerment
- Unemployment, homelessness
- Depression, substance abuse, other mental health challenges
- Domestic violence

- Challenging behaviors
- Hard to read behaviors
- Self-regulation challenges
- Developmental delays
- Health, mental health challenges

## ***Facilitators***



- Parental self-efficacy
- Social connectedness
- Empowerment
- Hope

- Attachment, eliciting behaviors
- Self-regulation competence
- Developmental change
- Effective communication of needs, clear cues



# Capacity for emotional availability can come from:

- support of a web of relationships that gives caregivers the strength to learn from and face their mistakes
- hope for their child's development, their future as a family, hope for the world

# Development unfolds in the context of relationships in complex systems

- A central purpose of development is to adapt the organism to specific and changing environmental conditions, while simultaneously altering that environment to arrive at the best possible fit for survival of the individual and the species.

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# Dynamic, Developmental Complex Systems - Community:

- Child well-being depends on family well-being which depends on human eco-system – community and beyond
- Development-promoting early interactions must be nested within strong communities where broader social relationships protect and reinforce these primary ones.

Sparrow JD. Child Justice, Caregiver Empowerment and Community Self-Determination  
In: Fennimore BS, Goodwin AL, editors. Promoting Social Justice for Young Children. New York: Springer Publishing; 2011

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# Community: complex dynamic developmental system

- Community collective efficacy
- Community resilience
- Intergenerational closure, mutual exchange and social control
- Functions disrupted by historical trauma

Sampson RJ, Morenoff JD, Earls F. (Oct 1999). Beyond Social Capital, Spatial Dynamics of Collective Efficacy for Children. *American Sociological Review* Vol 64, #5, 633-660

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The Touchpoints Approach: re-evaluating the roles of providers and institutions in human development

Rebuilding community: repositioning professional expertise and capacity along side parental and community expertise and capacity

Professionals alone cannot recreate the web of human relationships required for human development that has been disrupted by reorganization of labor

- prioritization of the workplace over family and community,
- colonization, forced relocation, and genocide.

# Beyond professional institutions and systems of care

- Neither professional-parent relationships, nor institutions, nor formal systems of care can suffice to hold the child and family through developmental disorganizations and reorganizations, to contain their relationships as these are reconfigured to allow for the emergence of new capacities.
- Extended family, friends, neighbors, and community members and informal helpers are also members of this system.

# To raise their children, parents need...

- 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 (neighborhood, community)
- To know about their pasts (cultural identity), to be emotionally available in the present, and to dare to envision their children's future (hope)

*There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.*

**Nelson Mandela** from the launch of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund,  
Mahlamba Ndlopfu, Pretoria, South Africa, 8 May 1995



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