

## Selections from the Readings in The Hakomi Method

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### Is It Good for Children?

I've been reading this morning and my reading reminded me of why we do this work. During the Vietnam war, I went to hear some speeches in San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, a very large, beautiful church. It was the right setting for what was taking place there - a protest against the war. Though I'm not particularly religious, I felt awe inspired by both the setting and the topic. The people who spoke were also of a grand scale. The head of the church, Norman Vincent Peale, was a famous man who had written several popular books. Two other speakers were Nobel prize winners. One was a physicist. The other was neurophysiologist, George Wald. Both argued eloquently. Wald said, "We can ask a very simple question about this war: Is it good for children?" The answer was obvious. War is not good for children. He went on to name other things like atomic weapons, air pollution, the destruction of the environment and of each he asked, "Is it good for children?" To me it seemed a very sensible criterion, this clear and simple question: Is it good for children? I remembered that speech this morning. I asked myself, "What is good for children?" Here's my answer.

I've been reading a book called *The Developing Mind* by Daniel J. Siegel. The chapter that came to mind is about attachment. It's about the patterns of emotional connections that children develop as a result of the kind of parenting they receive. These attachment patterns are the primary determiners of the kinds of personalities and relationships children grow up to have. They shape every child's life.

One of the things Siegel stated was this: if a parent has unresolved trauma or grief, it will negatively affect the children. In other words, it's not good for children. Unresolved trauma or grief creates pain and suffering not only in these distressed individuals, but for their children as well. Siegel says, "... lack of resolution can permit dysfunction to continue across the generations." Children affected by this kind of dysfunction have a marked inability to regulate emotional responses and the flow of states of mind. The trauma or grief of the parents needs to be resolved before the children can be affected by it.

When the parent's issues are unresolved, the parent cannot regulate his or her emotional responses. The parent is then unpredictable for the child. The parent has unpredictable mood swings. The child cannot find a secure way to be with that parent. A child has a primary need for a parent it can depend upon. If the parent is unreliable, the child cannot create a reliable world for itself. The child forms what is called an insecure attachment pattern. This is a disturbance of a basic kind, a painful deficiency in the development of the self, a defect in the ability to control (regulate) emotions which places gross limitations on all relationships. If and when the disturbed child later becomes a parent, the unresolved disturbance gets passed to his or her children.



So, when we ask, “What’s good for children?” one answer is clear. Caregivers who are reliable. Reliable in this way: the caregivers can form a relationship with the child in which the child can rely upon its needs being consistently recognized and met. Among these needs is the need to live in a world that makes sense. If the parents’ world makes sense, then the child can create a world for itself that makes sense. That’s not all though. The child needs to learn to regulate his or her emotions. Consistent affect regulation on the part of the caregiver makes that possible. So, we know what is good for children. It is good for children if the parents are reliably calm, reliably available, reliably sensitive to the child’s needs, and reliable providers.

In therapy, when trauma and grief need to be resolved, the therapist must have exactly these same qualities: calm, presence, sensitivity, availability, and the skills to help the client create a world that fits together and makes sense, a world the person can find safety, comfort and meaning. These are basic to psychological and emotional health. And, it needs to be said, psychotherapy is care giving. One or all of these basic experiences - safety, comfort, meaning - are missing for disturbed people. Providing these things is how the chain of grief and trauma and troubled lives is broken.

These qualities of availability and kindness can be present, not just in therapy and not just between children and their parents, but in all our daily interactions. In all our relationships, where we are reliably calm, sensitive and available, we help create a better world, not only for our children who especially need that, but for everybody. A field of kindness, love, caring and availability is good for you, it’s good for me —and to answer George Wald’s clear and simple question — it’s good for children.