Influencing the adults around our clients

Sue Campbell *describes the Nurturing Parent programme – devised with colleague Georgia Cooper – which is a project in Leeds to help parents understand the role they have in their children's emotional wellbeing, and how their own state affects the family*

'There's something wrong with him. I've always said it, right since he was little. Owen's not like the others. We've never had a spot of bother with his sister or his brother!'

'Owen's got an anger problem. He needs anger management. He's just like his dad!'

We have all heard something like this in a parent meeting before starting work with a child or young person. But getting a parent to consider that their child may be behaving the way they are because of the parenting they have experienced – without that parent feeling blamed – is a tricky communication. It's sometimes easier to explain to parents how trauma can influence a child's behaviour, but even then, we have to tread lightly.

Most counsellors working with young children will have the opportunity to speak to a parent before they begin work, to gather information on the family situation and find out the history of the child. They might ask questions about the pregnancy, birth and any significant life events or traumas. It's a vital opportunity, and we need to make the most of these meetings, while ensuring that what we say doesn't trigger the parent's own defence system. With this in mind, there are three major things we can do:

- Get parents to consider the parenting they experienced and understand their own attachment patterns.
- Educate parents in basic neurobiology, explaining about brain development and its systems.
- Offer a parenting approach that can help repair attachment disruptions.

Of course, I am not suggesting that all this is possible in one or two sessions. However, I do believe there are some basic messages that we are able to pass on, even in the limited time we may have.

My colleague, Georgia Cooper, and I have worked with children and parents in Leeds for a long time. Our counsellors were able to refer parents of the children they were seeing for counselling, if appropriate, and the system worked well, but Georgia and I felt it needed more.

Georgia is a trustee for The Open Nest charity, and they had asked her to attend Dan Hughes' Dyadic Development Psychotherapy (DDP) training,[1] an attachment-focused therapy with foster-adoptive parents and their children.

Dan advocates an approach to foster and adoptive parenting using a model called PACE,[1] as a way of promoting an attachment relationship with the new carers. This model resonated with us; we could see its potential and imagine coaching any parent or adult to use it. So the development of our new programme, Nurturing Parents, and the workshops we developed for therapists and school staff, were informed by Dan Hughes' course, his and Jonathan Baylin's new book, *The Neurobiology of Attachment-Focused Therapy*,[2] and the excellent Margot Sunderland book, *What Every Parent Needs to Know*.[3] Six brave parents signed up to our first programme.

We are passionate in our belief about the need to *nurture* our parents so that they can begin to explore their parenting styles and their own parenting. We make the theoretical content easily accessible and, crucially, we set out to model the PACE approach with our parents. PACE stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy. Understanding and practising these four ways of being make up much of the course content.

Play

We are sitting in a comfortable room in a local children's centre. I look around at the worried faces. I introduce myself and take a beanbag from under my chair. This feels risky, but I toss it across the circle and call out the name of the parent. She looks surprised but

does the same to another parent, and soon the beanbag is flying across the circle. I introduce a second one and then a third. The atmosphere changes; the energy increases, and there is laughter, especially when one group member ends up with all three.

Dan Hughes says: 'Playfulness conveys the attitude that you are safe and I want to share our experience and get to know each other. It brings in spontaneity, which tends to evoke trust more than a well-scripted, narrowly focused conversation.'[2]

We talk about the amygdala being like an antenna (see diagram), always on the alert for safety or danger messages, and we teach about two main systems: the alarm system (red) and the social engagement system (green), encouraging carers to aim to keep their children in the green area as much as possible. The importance of play is that it has a natural anti-stress effect; it releases opioids that activate the social engagement system, promote powerful positive emotional states, and at the same time soothe and quieten our alarm system.

Feedback tells us that our playful approach with each other and group members puts people at ease and helps to keep them in 'green'. Anxious parents, with their own attachment styles, may have strongly developed connections to their own alarm system, which might send them into the flight, fight, freeze or floppy response. This might show itself by someone leaving the group (flight), becoming defensive or disruptive (fight), being unable to join in (freeze) or not engaging and just enduring the group (floppy). Using the PACE approach has proved successful in avoiding this. It can sometimes be hard work – and it certainly helps to have two of us.

Acceptance

We are doing a check-in and have asked our group members to tell us about a time in the week when their child has done something they couldn't understand.

'Well that's pretty much everything he's done this week then!' Emma says with a smile. We all laugh and everyone visibly relaxes. She goes on to say that her son claimed she doesn't like him and that she likes her daughter better.

'What did you say, Emma?'

'I told him he was being silly, that it wasn't true and that of course I liked him as much as her.'

This response is likely to intensify her son's belief, and the reassurance is unlikely to be believed, leading him to mistrust her and share less with her. He may lose confidence that his mother will listen and understand him.

We practise some alternative responses:

'Wow! I didn't know that's how you were feeling.'

'If that's what you believe, no wonder you're feeling hurt and angry.'

This response shows her son that Emma has heard what he has said and that she accepts that is how he is feeling, without agreeing with him. The word 'if' at the beginning of our responses can be useful in conveying this message. The belief that he is loved less will begin to decrease as he experiences being loved through the empathy and acceptance.

'The problem is that he's kind of right,' says Emma wistfully. 'She [her daughter] is so much easier than he is.'

In relation to this, Dan Hughes[2] talks about Blocked Care and Blocked Trust, which can occur between a carer and their child. When both carer and child remain mostly governed by their alarm systems and the carer has mostly negative feedback from their child, a state of blocked care can occur. In some cases, this can result in a carer no longer being able to show love for their child. They may be providing for their physical needs, but little else. In return, this can lead to blocked trust, where a child no longer turns to their carer for soothing and comfort.

Understanding this concept has enabled another parent to completely change her attitude towards her son. Having been unable to show him any physical affection, she says that now her whole family have become 'big huggers' and the atmosphere in the home has been transformed. This parent has returned voluntarily to our second group to help out and share her experience. We believe she is our greatest asset in future training.

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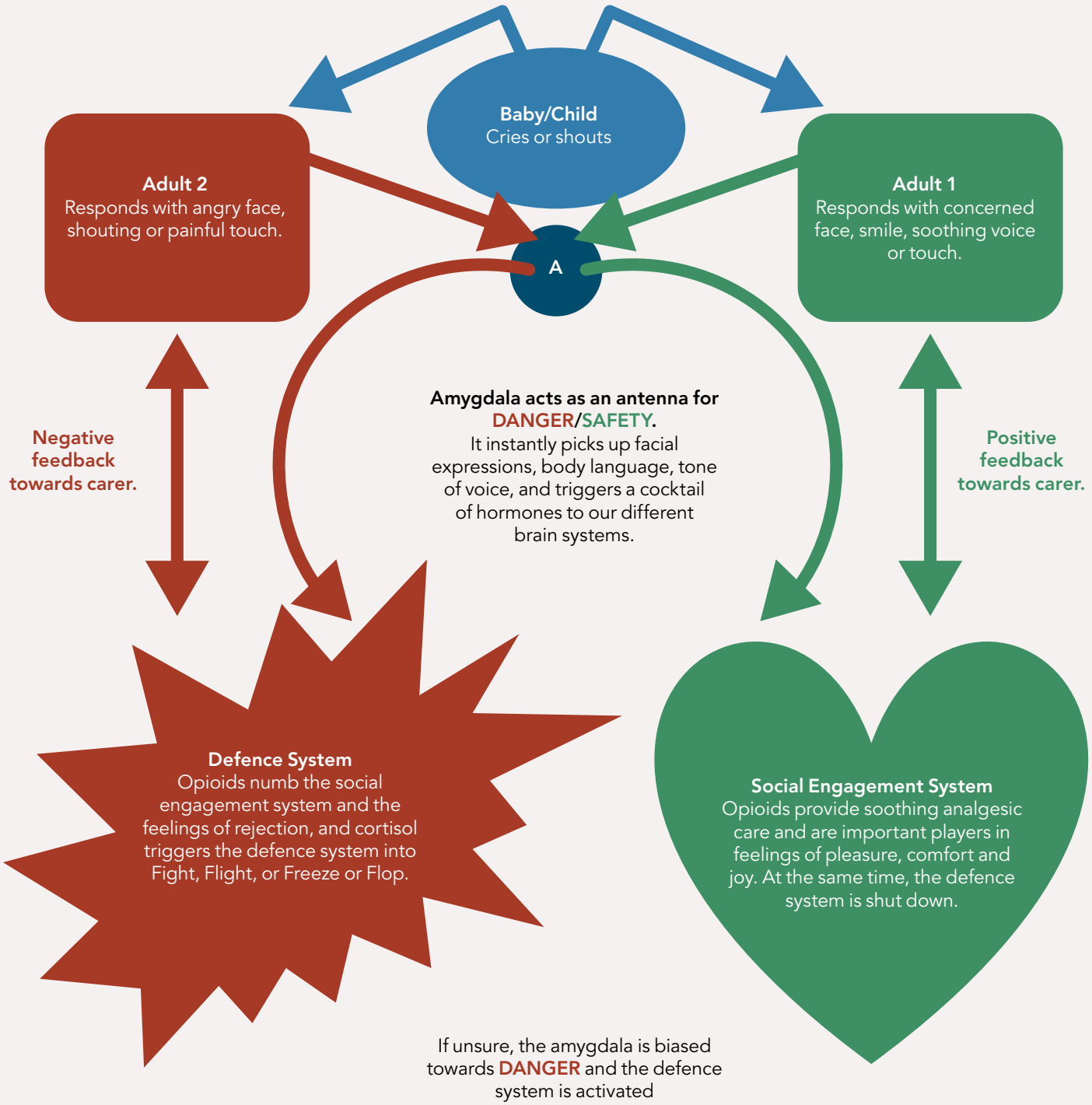
The Amygdala as an Antenna



Curiosity

'This week we are looking at curiosity,' Georgia explains, and asks the group for some examples of when they might have used curiosity with their children.

'I'm always asking my son why he behaves the way he does. He just says he doesn't know!' says John, one of our dads on the programme.

'And what do you think, John?'

'Oh, he knows! He just doesn't want to tell me. He just wants his own way.'

'So, if that's what you believe, John, it must be hard to keep calm and understand him,'

'Exactly! I get annoyed and it escalates into a huge row.'

We go back to our diagram of brain systems and wonder together what might be going on. We remind John that the amygdala sends messages for a cocktail of hormones to be released, which can fire up the alarm system while simultaneously shutting down the social engagement system. This is the system that supports powers of reasoning, judgment, and impulse control, so perhaps his son is telling the truth when he says he doesn't know.

When adults use curiosity (without judgment), it often leads to a child expressing a negative assumption about the motives behind their actions.

'It's because you don't care. You're not interested in what I want.'

This leads to the adult being able to use acceptance and empathy again: 'If that's what you believe…'

Understanding this is a powerful catalyst for John to use acceptance and empathy with his son, and results in a stronger bond between them.

Empathy

'The expression of empathy is often the intervention that enables the dialogue to continue, that begins the process of the mistrusting child beginning to sense the possibility of trust.'[2]

As therapists, we are very used to expressing empathy, but we may not have thought about the concept of 'matching affect'. This is about responding to someone with a matching affective expression of the other person's emotion. So if the other person is angry, we express our empathy with heightened intensity and rhythm; we are matching their affect but not their angry emotion. If the other person is sad, we respond in a much slower and gentler tone. If the other is excited, we become more animated and energetic.

Practising this causes a lot of laughs with our parents. We show them an advert we found, where a little boy has a tantrum in a supermarket. The mother throws herself on the floor and screams along with her toddler, who is so surprised by her actions that he stops. This allows us to explain the concept of positive prediction errors. When a child predicts a negative response, the neuron activity in the brain is habitual and there is nothing new to learn, whereas when the neurons detect a surprising response, an error message is activated in the brain, which grabs their attention and activates the higher regions of the brain.

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'Wouldn't it be great if school staff understood all this? We should be standing outside schools with placards showing these models,' says one parent. We agree with her and say that spreading the word into schools is one of our aims.

School staff

Our suggestions for school staff are similar to our approach with parents: to model PACE and seize opportunities to pass on information about brain development and its systems. The feedback from our training day for counsellors in schools was that, with a simplified version, they could see themselves explaining it to others.

Anne, the behaviour support worker, comes into the pastoral office clutching a phone. 'This is Danu's. He walked into school this morning, late as usual, blatantly still sending messages.' She is visibly agitated.

'Oh no – it doesn't look as though that was easy. You look upset.'

'I am, he went off on one when I confiscated the phone. I've had to put him in ISO.'

Inwardly, I groan. It's hard to imagine a worse situation for dampening Danu's alarm system and activating his social engagement system than to be put in an isolation booth! But Anne is bound by the school's new 'positive discipline' policy, and once Danu has sworn at her, she hasn't had a choice. As counsellors in schools, we can only gently express opinions about behaviour policies. If we have a good relationship with the head teacher, he or she may listen to our comments, but with the academisation of many schools and the power of the executive heads, they may not be able to make changes to this rigid and, quite frankly,

damaging system. The thing I *can* influence is future interactions between Anne and Danu.

Danu tells me later in our session that his stepdad came round to their house the night before, banging on the doors and threatening his mother. He is worried that his dad will come back, and now his mum can't contact him. Taking his phone from him clearly threatened his and his mum's safety; his alarm system was activated and his social engagement system shut down, and he 'went off on one'.

Anne didn't want Danu to have to go into isolation; she knows things are difficult at home and that he has witnessed a lot of domestic violence. I show her our diagram over a coffee at break time. She is very receptive to the information I am able to share with her. I don't say what Danu has told me in our session but together we wonder what might have been going on in Danu's brain that morning.

'So, Danu's amygdala saw me taking the phone as a threat for some reason,' she says. 'I'd like to learn more about this.'

I say I will come and talk some more with her, and I recommend *Teaching the Unteachable* by Marie Delaney.[4] It is full of practical ideas for school staff.

Conclusion

As counsellors in schools, we have a far greater role than 'just to see the young people referred to our service'. With time and care, we can have an influence on the culture of the school and the quality of relationships within it. Nick Luxmoore[5] talks about normalising the idea of counselling and not appearing 'weird'. Time spent in corridors and staff rooms is vital for this. His examples of interactions with staff also demonstrate the use of humour, empathy and curiosity. He advocates encouraging staff to become good listeners and to give them the confidence to form good attachments with the students in their schools. We want to dispel the belief that if a student is troubled, they always need a counsellor. There are already so many good listeners in schools, and school counsellors are there *as well as*, not *instead of* them.

Margot Sunderland[3] says: 'If we are prepared to act upon what science can tell us about parenting, we can push forward to develop more benign societies with greater compassion, capacity to reflect, and respect for difference. Perhaps, too, society will begin to see that by nurturing parents, children will be empowered to thrive.'

Sue Campbell works as a counsellor, supervisor and trainer for a social enterprise called Space-to-Grow and was formerly a teacher. Much of her work is in schools, and many of her supervisees work with young people and children in Leeds.
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