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# Therapeutic Parenting Journal

A Resource for Parents and Professionals

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Adoption Recipient!



# Pearls of Wisdom

## Therapeutic Parenting Insights from Lawrence B. Smith

By Lawrence B. Smith, LCSW-C, edited by Julie Beem

*Editor's Note: Those of us within ATN have known and loved Larry Smith for years, as a constant and consistent voice of wit and wisdom. You may have discovered his writings on the website he maintained, Attachment Disorder Maryland (www.attachmentdisordermaryland). Since his death in August, we have missed him a great deal on our Board of Directors and have heard from several colleagues and former clients who feel the same loss. I was so fortunate to have traveled with him and several board members last June, as we launched our Trauma-Sensitive Schools professional development trainings. It was there, when another professional praised his collection of wisdom about parenting, teaching and treating children with attachment disorders, developmental trauma and EASD, that I was reminded of the treasure trove he had placed on his website. This article is a "compilation of excerpts" from his webpage called "AD Parenting". We could think of no better way to pay tribute to Larry than to reprint his wisdom here for you. The entire content is much too long to print in entirety, so I pulled the pearls of wisdom that I thought would be the most globally valuable and invite you to visit the Attachment Disorder Maryland website for more. If you'd like to view our memorial page and/or leave a tribute or donation in his memory the link is <http://www.attachmenttraumainetwork.org/passing-lawrence-b-smith/> The donations received through the Lawrence B. Smith Therapeutic Parenting Fund will be used specifically for parent training in 2017.*

**W**hile love and parental common sense are necessary ingredients to successfully parent a child with attachment difficulties, they are rarely sufficient. Most children with attachment problems are too guarded and too distrustful to receive the love and support that parents are offering. Their foundational issue is "felt safety" – without feeling safe, love becomes an unaffordable luxury.

It is the pursuit of safety that leads these children to behaviors that are labeled "controlling". Often parenting children with attachment disorders is conceptualized as a "battle for control" that the parents must win. But control is not the problem or the goal – it is a symptom. The problem is the lack of feeling safe in the world.

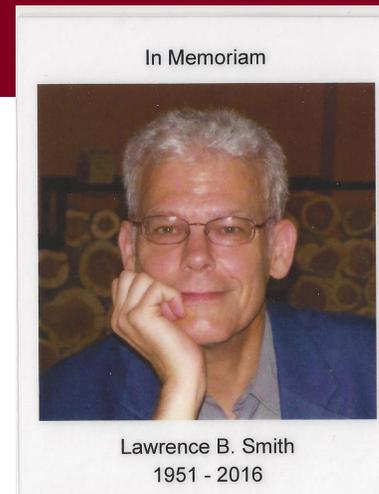
Parents must remember that creating a feeling of physical and emotional safety that their child has not previously experienced is the goal.

With safety in place, a bridge develops across which love can flow. Safety converts the "unteachable" child into a teachable one who can start to learn the lessons of love. The specialized parenting techniques outlined below are aimed at gradually creating that "felt safety". Even when parents understand and use these techniques faithfully, it can be very exhausting to parent children with attachment disorders. If you have reached the point of feeling ineffective and discouraged, that's a warning signal that professional assistance is needed.

**Safety is the top priority.** The physical safety of people and property should always take precedence over doing everything else.

**Teaching Boundaries.** Children with attachment disorders struggle with personal boundaries including things like personal space and ownership of possessions. They often manifest their defensiveness about boundaries as opposition. While the child may present as not caring about others, at the same time they seem to absorb the emotional states of others and project their emotional states on others. Behaviors such as hoarding or being overly reactive to others are all boundary problems, rooted in fear. Consequencing these behaviors doesn't help. What is needed is repeated, overt instruction in the concept of boundaries to slowly change their internal working model (IWM).

**Empathetic Reflection.** Parents are taught to be empathetic and to attune to their child. The key to





“being present” with a child is to be able to reflect back their internal state. It requires the parent to be aware of where they are placing attention. For example, if a child expresses that he doesn’t believe his parents love him, the adult may respond by offering reassurance of the parents’ love. But this is not an attuned response. A precisely attuned response would communicate that the adult understands that it’s hard for the child to believe her parents love her, because of all the hurt she feels inside. This response makes no attempt to shift how the child is feeling – just reflect it. This type of reflection has a powerful emotional impact on deeply wounded children and is actually much more soothing than the reassurance often offered. Parents should also become skilled in non-verbal empathy (i.e. voice qualities, body gestures, facial expressions and physical proximity) to help communicate empathy with the child’s internal state.

**Rule Setting.** While being empathetic and focusing on the child’s emotional state are important healing strategies, all children need structure. Children with attachment disorders need to have behavioral rules that are specific, clear and phrased in a positive way (i.e. what the child needs to do vs. what he should not do or stop doing.) By stating the rule positively it helps the child’s subconscious avoid focusing on what is being prohibited. When a child with attachment difficulties is told “no” or “stop” their subconscious may become stuck on the undesirable behavior that then occurs/reoccurs. Rules need to be communicated with the expectation that they will be followed; this is best done ahead of time, with a matter-of-fact tone of voice. Example: “Right after dinner, you will go to your room and finish your homework.” In general the interaction is broken off after the parent has communicated the expectation. (i.e. not reacting to any pleas for negotiations, repeating the directions, or questioning.)

**The Intersection of Discipline, Shame & Empathy.** When imposing a consequence as part of discipline, parents should offer emotional support (empathetic reflection) for the hardship (negative feelings) that the

consequence will cause the child with attachment disorder. By communicating that you understand the humiliation (shame) that the child is feeling internally at being “told no” and then incurring a consequence, you are building this empathy bridge to preserve attachment. Children with attachment difficulties very often respond to correction of their behaviors with shame-based misbehaviors. Parents can help break that cycle by expressing a vote of good faith that the child has the resources necessary to handle the consequence given and will make a good choice even though she doesn’t want to. The parent needs to let go of any anger from the misbehavior that may remain while/after imposing the discipline as quickly as possible, to avoid sabotaging the relational/attachment work that has already been done.

**Difference Between Appreciation and Praise.** When a child with attachment disorders makes a cooperative choice, appreciation is often the better parental response than praise. Appreciation puts parent and child on the same level for that interaction. Praise can suggest that the one offering the praise (parent) is the more powerful one and therefore able to pass judgment on the less powerful one (child). Praise can be viewed as much as a judgment as a criticism. Parents report that children often “sabotage” situations in which they’ve just received praise, which could be because the children feel the parents are “rubbing it in their faces” that the parent is more powerful and has “won”. Expressing appreciation for the child’s positive action generally will avoid these risks and can strengthen the parent-child relationship. Still, too much positive attention can trigger internalized shame in a child with attachment difficulties and paradoxically the adult can end up being viewed as cruel rather than



supportive. (Editor's note: This is why we often tell parents that "drive-by compliments" or telling a third-party how much you appreciate a child's actions are ways to "soften" this while still providing the positive experience to help change the child's IWM).

**Eye Contact.** As long as a child with attachment difficulties does not have consistently good eye contact with his parents, working on this should be a priority. Good eye contact is the basis for the child being able to "take the parent in emotionally". Without this, the child is less likely to develop a healthy emotional connection to the parents. Verbal cues, such as "look at my eyes", sometimes supplemented with hand gestures, may be sufficient. Don't force eye contact over strong opposition. This sets up a power struggle that will only contaminate the act of making eye contact with tension and conflict. Also remember that extended eye contact in a parent-child relationship can be experienced as a power differential, with one of the participants feeling less powerful and defensive. Do express appreciation when eye contact is given.

**Physical Touch.** Children with attachment disorders are often touch avoidant (due to their early trauma histories). Parents should not let this knowledge intimidate them into rarely touching their child – because touch is the cornerstone of attachment. Always be looking for opportunities for physical touch during calmer moments. Schedule times to hold your child in a nurturing way (like bedtime rituals, for example). Just like eye contact – don't force it, because this sets up a power struggle that contaminates the physical affection. Children with trauma histories have to be taught how to relax when being touched in a nurturing way, and of course have to feel safe while this is occurring.

**Motivation to Change.** A word of warning: Do Not Care about your Child's Problems More than She Does! Nothing about your child's behavior is likely to change if you are more anxious about the situation than your child is. So parents have to be careful to not take on the anxiety that truly belongs to your child for the child to change. As parents, you cannot make your



child better; you cannot make your child successful' you cannot fix them. In the spirit of counterintuitiveness, acknowledging that your child has the freedom and power to throw away opportunities given to her increases the chances that she won't.

**Choice, Consequences & Responsibility.** The IWM of children with attachment challenges may contain little or no sense of personal responsibility or may not see choices, instead seeing predominantly victimhood. However even "victims" make choices. So "choice" is a concept that needs to be taught, experientially (not by telling them). To do this, the parent must first establish what the child did and simply define it as "a choice" (giving them responsibility for their behavior). The next step is to make a best effort to establish the reason the choice was made. If the choice was a positive one (the parent's view) then parents should acknowledge (appreciate) it. If the choice was a negative one (parent's view) parents should avoid the temptation to encourage better future choices. This is quicksand for parents as they cannot elicit better choices if the child doesn't wish to make them. A child should be held accountable for the choice and if a consequence is determined to be needed, it needs to be imposed as quickly as possible (no later than the second time the negative behavior occurs). Although many children with attachment disorder will test any consequencing, the process is still worth it because it lays the groundwork for the child taking responsibility for choosing the negative behavior a second time. The linkage between each choice (positive or negative) and its outcome should be made explicit (reminding them each time that their choice was what produced the outcome).





## A Couple of Pitfalls

**1. Parents as emotional echo chambers.** Parents of children with attachment disorders often experience the negative feelings that truly belong to their children but that the children are not acknowledging. If the parent understands this, that can help prevent over-personalizing the reaction to the child's behaviors. (In other words – it's not about you, even though it feels personal!) Recognizing that you are like an emotional echo chamber gives you important information about your child's hidden feelings in the moment. When parents' reactivity is reduced and there's greater understanding of the child's feelings in the moment, the parent can be more therapeutic –reflect empathy and provide a safer, more nurturing response.

**2. Emotional contagion.** Emotions can be passed from one person to another like colds. This is driven partly by nonverbal mimicry, particularly of others' facial expressions. This phenomenon occurs in infants as young as a few days old. Once people start mimicking facial stimuli, they often rapidly experience the emotions associated with those expressions. So parents can counteract this by being aware of their expressions when interacting with children who have attachment difficulties (providing positive facial expressions).

### One More Advanced Therapeutic Parenting Pearl:

**Unfairness for Parents.** *(Editor's Note: I was curious about this one from the title and it does sound so counterintuitive. But oddly enough, I experienced this with my daughter just last night... and will explain.)* This counterintuitive technique can serve to both connect with children with attachment disorders and to disrupt their negative interactions. The task for the parent is to "complain" to the child that she is being unfair to the parent. This complaint of unfairness must be attached to something specific the child is doing or saying. Otherwise vagueness renders this technique ineffective. The parents must also convey this in a neutral way. Irritation in the voice will sabotage the intervention. Since complaints of unfairness are familiar in the child's IWM, they recognize the parent's position immediately, and when this intervention works, may actually have a bit of an empathetic reaction.

Last night I saw this pearl of Larry's in action. Our daughter was mildly rude at dinner with family friends last night. So her dad and I called her on it during the car ride home. Recognizing the potential for humiliation, we remained as matter-of-fact as possible, but she escalated anyway. By the time we were home she was yelling and being very obsessive about the discussion of this rather minor incident. We are still not therapeutic at times, so first we tried reasoning with her (to no avail) and tried ignoring her rants (again to no avail). Frustrated that this had gone on so long, I just said to her (as calmly as possible), "You know, it really sucks for me when I'm in this situation. When you do something rude and don't recognize it, it's my job as your parent to try to help you with that. But if I point it out to you, then I have to endure a bunch of ranting and raging either about how stupid I am or about what a failure you are. Neither of those things is true. But it's really unfair that I can't just do what mothers are supposed to do and try to help you."

She was silent for a moment, like it was all soaking in, but went back to some mild ranting about what an awful person she was and eventually went off to bed. This morning, she came into my office as I was working on this article and said, "Mom, I'm sorry last night for getting so upset when you were just trying to help me learn to not be so rude. It's not fair that I take all my negative feelings out on you. I know you're on my team." Wow...it was almost textbook Larry...and was a perfect opportunity for an attachment-building hug!



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