

The Role of Parental Emotions in Parenting

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Abstract

A new parenting technique – emotional balancing – is described. Emotional balancing is conceptualised on a continuum from emotional disengagement to emotional enmeshment. It was developed to help parents make meaningful emotional connections with their children/adolescents, and to promote choice and responsibility in children and adolescents. Guidelines for emotional balancing are provided.

Introduction

Theoretical foundations for parent education and counselling have traditionally favoured cognitive behavioural interventions over interventions that focus on emotions. For example, a review of the literature shows few if any parenting tools that can be used to conceptualise emotions. Mooney (1995) provided a review of the research on parenting programmes. He posited that the two most common forms of parent education are behavioural and those that foster democratic family living. Behavioural and “democratic” oriented parent education programmes tend to focus on helping parents develop appropriate behaviours and attitudes with essentially no mention of parental emotions (Mooney, 1995).

Counselling strategies have also tended to favour cognitions and behaviours over emotions. For example, cognitive behavioural theories such as Ellis’s (2000) Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Beck’s (1976) Cognitive Therapy emphasise cognitions and behaviours over emotions. These approaches attempt to change emotions indirectly (i.e. cognitive restructuring results in emotional change).

An exception to the cognitive behavioural trend is Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) (Dankoski, 2001; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Johnson, 1996, 1998). EFT represents an integration of experiential and systemic theories and has been primarily used in marriage and family therapy. The goal of EFT is to assist couples in expanding and structuring emotional responses that foster secure attachments and emotional engagement (Johnson, 1998). EFT recognises the role of emotions as an important change agent rather than simply a manifestation of marital distress (Johnson, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to address the role of emotions in parenting. Guidelines for establishing emotional balancing are also provided.

Theoretical antecedents of emotional balancing

Emotional balancing is a parenting technique developed by the author which can be used to foster family cohesion, secure attachments, autonomy, intimacy, and appropriate affective involvement. The theoretical origins of emotional balancing can be traced to Minuchin (1974); Olson et al. (1989); Epstein et al. (1982); and Sullivan (1968). A brief review of each of these theoretical perspectives follows.

Minuchin's (1974) concept of boundaries provides a basic framework for conceptualising emotional balancing. Boundaries are the unwritten rules that determine which family members participate in family life and how they do so. Minuchin describes boundaries in terms of a continuum from disengaged to enmeshed, with clear boundaries occupying the middle of the continuum. Disengaged boundaries are "rigid", not adjusting to the emerging needs of the family system, and resulting in detached or disengaged family members. Enmeshed boundaries are essentially the opposite of disengaged boundaries. They are "diffused" and lack a clear sense of the role and function that family members have in relation to each other. Clear boundaries represent the middle ground or normal/healthy range between these two extremes. Clear boundaries are reflected in mutually understood expectations and facilitate unobstructed participation in family life.

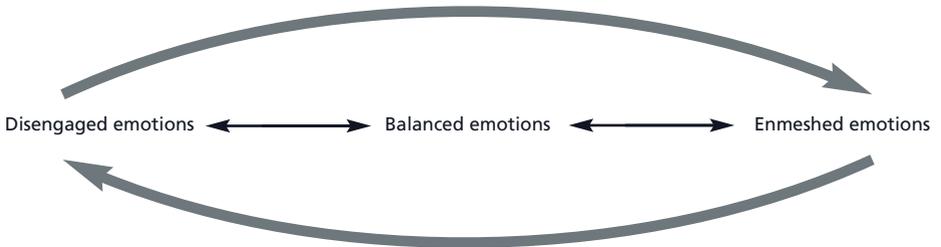
Barber & Buehler (1996) identified several other theoretical perspectives, which have provided additional information on the role of emotions in family relations. For example, Olson et al. (1989) proposed a model based on the concept of family cohesion, with cohesion defined as the degree of emotional bonding between family members. Moderate levels of cohesion are ideal, allowing for emotional bonding and support while also permitting individualisation and differentiation between family members. Epstein et al. (1982) developed a theory based on the concept of "affective involvement", that is, the degree of emotional engagement between family members. According to this theory there are six levels of affective involvement: lack of involvement, involvement with no feeling, narcissistic involvement, empathic involvement, over-involvement, and symbiotic involvement. Empathic involvement is considered ideal and involves communicating love, caring and compassion to family members.

Teyber (1997) provided a description of Sullivan's (1968) interpersonal theory of psychotherapy, which can also be used to conceptualise emotions. Interpersonal psychotherapy contends that healthy psychological functioning relates to one's ability to fluctuate appropriately between relatedness (secure attachment) and separateness

(autonomous-independence). From this perspective, emotional maturity corresponds to one's ability to maintain appropriate levels of relatedness and separateness and the flexibility to move between these two variables.

Parental emotions model

The parental emotions model is based on the theoretical perspectives of Minuchin, Olson and associates, Epstein and associates, and Sullivan. The parental emotions model can be conceptualised in terms of the following parental emotions continuum.



The lines on the parental emotions continuum suggest that a person can move from emotionally balanced to either emotional extreme, from one emotional extreme to the other, or from either emotional extreme to emotionally balanced. An overview of these three points on the parental emotional continuum (enmeshed, disengaged and balanced) is now provided, along with information regarding levels of emotional intensity.

Emotional enmeshment

Emotional enmeshment represents one extreme in parental emotions and is characterised by high levels of togetherness and dependence. It can be defined as “family patterns that facilitate psychological and emotional fusion among family members, potentially inhibiting the individualization process and the development and maintenance of psychosocial maturity” (Barber & Buehler, 1996, p.433). Emotional enmeshment involves parents engaging in inappropriate emotional responses that undermine the parent-child/adolescent relationship and autonomous responsible behaviour. For example, a parent who expresses excessive anger and makes unrealistic demands when a child/adolescent misbehaves, creates opportunities for the child/adolescent to avoid taking responsibility for their choices. In these instances, the focus is not on what the child/adolescent has done, but is instead on how mean or unfair the parent is being.

Emotional disengagement

Emotional disengagement is the other emotional extreme on the parental emotions continuum. It is characterised by high levels of independence and separateness. It involves parents psychologically distancing themselves from their children/adolescents, which can leave them feeling abandoned. An emotionally disengaged parent can feel discouraged, with little interest in having involvement with the child/adolescent. Disengagement can be a response to avoid making an intimate commitment or to overcome feelings of inferiority or a fear of failure. Some parents may have a history of avoiding children/adolescents, because they do not have the patience required or they become easily annoyed with them. Other parents may have recently had a negative experience as a result of emotional enmeshment and have given up on trying to discipline or be of assistance to their child/adolescent.

It is not uncommon for parents to shift dramatically from one emotional extreme to the other, such as from emotional enmeshment to emotional disengagement. For example, a child/adolescent may slam the door on the face of a parent who is trying to discipline them. When this occurs, parents may become more emotionally enmeshed and make threats to their child/adolescent that they should “never do that again”. Shortly thereafter, it is not uncommon for parents to feel very discouraged and “emotionally drained”, with thoughts such as “I’ve had enough ... I just don’t care anymore.” A parent who has reached this state can be prone to engage in emotional disengagement as a means of coping with the frustration, hurt and disappointment associated with parenting.

Emotional balance

Emotional balance is the range of parental emotions between emotional disengagement and emotional enmeshment. Emotional balance is the optimal position on the emotional balancing continuum. It is characterised by clear boundaries, autonomy, intimacy, secure attachments, and a moderate degree of connection and cohesion between people. Emotionally balanced parents are involved in the activities and interests of their children/adolescents in a manner that is neither overly intrusive nor overly detached. Emotional balance represents a normal-healthy level of affective involvement communicating positive and negative emotions such as love, compassion, support, caring, anger and disappointment while still allowing individualisation of family members.

Table 1 summarises the three points on the parental emotions continuum in terms of key characteristics and outcomes.

Table 1: Range of parental emotions

Type of emotional involvement	Key characteristics	Outcomes
Emotional disengagement	Psychological distance; detached family members; high levels of separateness and independence, low levels of cohesion and affective involvement; rigid boundaries; excessive separateness	Discouragement; parental avoidance and abandonment
Emotional balance	Clear boundaries; moderate level of cohesion; appropriate levels of separateness and relatedness; autonomy; empathic communication of love and compassion	Positive parent-child/adolescent relationships; autonomous-response of attachment; and capacity for mature individualisation
Emotional enmeshment	Inappropriate-excessive emotional responses and affective involvement; psychological and emotional fusion; obscure boundaries; excessive relatedness; high levels of dependence; high levels of cohesion	Impaired parent-child/adolescent relationships; undermined autonomous-responsible behaviour: choices are obscured

Levels of emotional intensity

Emotional balance can be maintained by communicating emotions on different levels of intensity (on a continuum from low to high). Different levels of intensity will be necessary depending on the situation. Low to moderate levels of intensity can be useful to create “emotional space” for a family member to foster personal autonomy, appropriate levels of separateness and individualisation, and enhance awareness of choice and responsibility. High levels of emotional intensity can be necessary to get a family member’s attention and to communicate clearly what a parent’s concern is regarding his or her child or adolescent (for example, when an adolescent has taken a car without permission and stayed out late).

The key to promoting and maintaining emotional balance (in terms of emotional intensity) is not what you communicate but how you communicate. Appropriate communicating of emotional intensity can be fostered by promoting and maintaining parent “core conditions” in the parent-child/adolescent relationship and using

effective communication skills. Parental core conditions are related to Rogers' (1961) core conditions of empathy, respect, genuineness, and concreteness. Other parental core conditions can include such processes as unconditional love, caring, and compassion. Parental core conditions can be conceptualised as facilitative of positive parent-child relationships and optimal development.

Appropriate communication of emotional intensity can also be promoted by using effective communication skills such as being clear, specific, constructive and relational. An example of this type of communication is the use of "I" messages instead of "you" messages (see Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1989). "I" messages allow parents to clearly communicate concern to their child/adolescent in a manner that minimises defensiveness, whereas "you" messages tend to focus on blame and increase defensiveness. "I" messages are relational, because they communicate how the parent feels in relation to the child/adolescent. "I" messages also describe what the behaviour is that is bothering the parent, and why it concerns them. For example, the parent could use an "I" message to communicate high levels of emotional intensity to the adolescent who took the car and stayed out late by saying, "I really get angry when you come in late. I end up staying up worrying, and you could get into trouble or get hurt." "I" messages should be designed to foster constructive outcomes, whereby children/adolescents can learn from their choices and become responsible/autonomous individuals. "I" messages should also be developed to help children/adolescents become aware of how their behaviour affects others in terms of the anger or other emotions the parent may be experiencing.

"You" messages are not relational, tend to focus on blame, and generate defensive reactions in children/adolescents. A "you" message in the example above could be, "You really are inconsiderate. You have really done it this time, taking the car and staying out late. Now you are going to get grounded for a month."

Without positive communication processes, parents can allow low levels of emotional intensity to become emotional disengagement, and high levels of emotional intensity to become emotional enmeshment. For example, parents who do not communicate caring or compassion to the child/adolescent may psychologically distance themselves to the point where they may lose interest and become emotionally disengaged. At the other extreme, parents who are inappropriate with their emotional intensity (for example, use "you" messages to attack or pity their child/adolescent) may end up in an emotionally enmeshed position and rob their child/adolescent of a chance to become aware of choices and assume responsibility for their behaviour.

Emotional balancing technique

The parenting technique of emotional balancing is composed of four steps or procedures, which can be used by counsellors or parent educators. These steps can be adjusted and modified as necessary to meet the unique needs of parents, children and adolescents. An overview of these steps follows.

Step one: Provide an overview of the role of parental emotions in parenting and assess where the parents are functioning emotionally.

Step one involves providing an overview of the role of parental emotions in parenting, including information on emotional disengagement, emotional enmeshment, and emotional balancing. Step one also involves assessing where parents are functioning emotionally with their child/adolescent, by asking them to describe a typical day in terms of parent-child interactions, beginning in the morning and continuing throughout the day.

Step two: Explore and address systemic issues as needed.

Family systems theory suggests that any change within the family system will have a corresponding effect on the family system as a whole. Parents should be encouraged to develop a systemic perspective for assessing emotional responses. For example, when one parent goes to an emotional extreme (such as emotional enmeshment), it is not uncommon for the other parent to go to the other emotional extreme (emotional disengagement). This emotional shift could occur when the enmeshed parent (out of sympathy or guilt from an experience such as a divorce) continues to give in to a child who has misbehaved. When one spouse gives in, the other spouse can become discouraged and emotionally disengaged. A parent may be even more prone to disengage if she/he is a step-parent who believes, "Since this is not my child, I don't want to interfere."

Step three: Provide appropriate parenting interventions as necessary.

Appropriate intervention procedures can be identified to help parents move towards emotional balance. For example, counsellors and parent educators can help parents overcome feelings of discouragement, so they can move from emotional disengagement to emotional balance. Professional helpers can teach democratic-authoritative parenting principles to provide optimal development and maximise positive parent-child relationships. Parents can also benefit from receiving assistance in developing parenting strategies to promote and maintain emotional balance. Examples of parenting procedures are:

- Using an "emotional cooling off" period to avoid emotional enmeshment.
- Overcoming discouragement with encouragement and a strengths perspective.

- Becoming appropriately involved in the child's interests.
- Communicating unconditional love and compassion and other parental core conditions.
- Fostering secure attachments (relatedness).
- Creating "emotional space" to focus on choice and responsibility.
- Encouraging autonomous-responsible behaviour (separateness).
- Promoting appropriate movement between relatedness and separateness.
- Communicating clear boundaries between family members.
- Utilising democratic-authoritative parenting attitudes and procedures such as mutual respect and the use of "I" messages and not "you" messages to convey intense emotions.

Step four: Putting it all together.

Step four involves helping parents move towards emotional balance by utilising a strengths-solution focused perspective and encouragement. In this process it is especially important to look for exceptions to the problems, such as when a parent is not engaged in emotional enmeshment or disengagement, and help them use what is working to move towards emotional balance. Putting it all together involves professional helpers reviewing several real or hypothetical situations to practise assessing and implementing emotional balancing strategies. Role play can also be used to work through problems and learn new skills. Step four encourages parents to explore how they can apply the four steps of emotional balance to current and future parenting challenges.

A case example

The following case provides an illustration of the use of emotional balancing in parenting. Ron and Mary have been married for five years. Mary has a son Tim, aged 16, from a previous marriage. Ron and Mary have been having a number of problems with Tim such as failing grades, alcohol abuse and staying out late at night (including not bringing the family car back on time). Ron and Mary sought counselling regarding their concerns for their son. The counsellor implemented the four-step parental balancing technique as follows. During step one, the counsellor provided an overview of the role of parental emotions in parenting. The parental emotions continuum was described, and an assessment was made of where the parents were functioning on the continuum. The parents were then asked to describe a typical day, beginning with getting Tim off to school on time. In the afternoon Mary would spend a lot of time trying to get her son to do his chores and homework. Her attempts to get Tim to work usually resulted in arguments and hurt feelings. Ron usually found things

to do to avoid these encounters with Tim (such as yard work or work at the office). From an analysis of this typical day, the counsellor and parents determined that Ron tended to function at the emotionally disengaged end of the parental emotions continuum, while Mary tended to function at the emotionally enmeshed end of the continuum. Both Ron and Mary were committed to becoming more emotionally balanced regarding their parenting.

Step two of the emotional balancing method involved exploring systemic issues relating to the parents' emotional responses to Tim's misbehaviour. The counsellor explored with the parents the last time they had had a significant problem with their son. The parents explained that a week ago Tim had stayed out until four in the morning when he was supposed to be home by 11.30 p.m. In addition, he had been drinking and driving. Ron and Mary were up all night worrying about him, and had agreed to be "tough on him" and take away his car privileges for a couple of weeks. The next day when the parents talked with their son, Mary became more lenient than she had planned to be. The leniency seemed to be influenced by the unresolved guilt she had about her divorce. At this point Ron seemed to lose interest in the disciplinary process and became emotionally disengaged.

The counsellor noted that Mary's guilt and resultant leniency obscured her son's choices and responsibility and appeared to move her to emotional enmeshment. In addition, the counsellor noted that from a systemic perspective, when one parent moves towards one extreme of the parent emotions continuum (as Mary did with enmeshment) it is common for the other parent to move towards the other emotional extreme (as Ron did in terms of emotional disengagement). The counsellor also noted that step-parents, such as Ron, may be more prone to move towards emotional disengagement, because they may feel they must "tread softly" and not intrude on the birth parent's "parenting turf".

In step three of the emotional balancing approach, the counsellor worked with the parents on interventions that could be used to promote emotional balancing in parenting. Some of the interventions utilised were implementing parental core conditions of unconditional love and compassion, the use of "I" messages instead of "you" messages, and learning how to use different levels of emotional intensity while fostering and maintaining emotional balance.

Mary needed extra help with how she could deal with her intense emotions of anger when Tim was disrespectful to her. The counsellor emphasised that her expression of intense emotions became inappropriate when they obscured Tim's choice and responsibility. Mary found the technique of using "I" messages and an emotional cooling-off period (usually of several hours) particularly useful to prevent emotional enmeshment.

During step four, the counsellor helped Ron and Mary put it all together in terms of promoting emotional balance in parenting. In this process, the counsellor used a solution-focused strengths perspective (such as encouragement and identifying exceptions to the problems). For example, the counsellor helped Ron identify what was occurring when he was not emotionally disengaged. Things that appeared to contribute to Ron's emotional balance included: cutting down on his coffee intake, believing that his wife really did want to discipline their son, and not thinking of his son as a stepson. Ron did cut back on his coffee intake, which had an emotionally calming effect. He also had several discussions with Mary regarding parenting and became convinced that she really did want to set clear limits for their son. In addition, during a family meeting it was agreed Ron could refer to Tim as his son and not his stepson, to help him feel a stronger emotional connection. Mary also identified exceptions to her being emotionally enmeshed. For example, the use of "I" messages and the cooling-off period described above played a key role in helping Mary maintain emotional balance.

The four-step emotional balancing approach was also reviewed to ensure that Ron and Mary could apply the procedures appropriately to future problems. Several hypothetical disciplinary situations were used in conjunction with role play to provide opportunities for Ron and Mary to gain additional practice in implementing the emotional balancing approach. After four counselling sessions Ron and Mary reported that they had improved their relationship with Tim, and that Tim was behaving in a more responsible and respectful manner. It also appeared that enhanced emotional balance played an important role in the positive counselling gains described in this case.

Summary and conclusion

Parents may function at one emotional extreme or fluctuate between both of the emotional extremes of emotional disengagement and emotional enmeshment. When this occurs, parents may need help getting emotionally balanced. The parental emotions model and emotional balancing techniques described in this article can help parents make appropriate emotional connections with children/adolescents. Emotional balancing involves parents becoming appropriately involved with the child/adolescent. Parents can communicate a full range of emotions such as love, caring, anger and disappointment at varying levels of intensity (ranging from low to high). In addition, emotional balancing can create "emotional space" so children and adolescents can learn to assume responsibility for their choices and become autonomous-responsible individuals.

Emotional balancing was described as a four-step model. These steps are: helping parents become aware of the role of parental emotions in parenting; exploring how systemic issues can affect parental emotions; providing appropriate parenting procedures, and putting it all together. Emotional balancing can be used in virtually all aspects of parenting to promote healthy family life. It can help parents overcome discouragement and learn to work together to raise responsible-autonomous children and adolescents.

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