

Guide for Parents: The Loving Family: Developing Emotional Closeness

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Preface

I have recently felt there was a fierce need for me to share in writing with the public at large, consisting mainly of parents, the wealth of experience I have garnered over time as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist working with children and their parents. True, the market is already saturated with pop-psychology works on childrearing, but these chiefly suffice with general recommendations, totally ignoring the child's personality, his and his parents' background, and the emotions that accompany a parent when he is raising his children.

Today there is an awakening in the field. There are more parents attending lectures and reading Internet psychology articles on this topic. For a while, parents do manage to function with what they gain from those books and lectures. Yet they quickly forget what they have learned and revert to the established parenting practices they are familiar with.

I'm sorry to say that hearing a lecture or reading a psychology article has no lasting impact. The only thing that can change a person's mindset and behavior is life experience (the shortcoming being that it could take many years), or long-term psychological therapy.

My book is intended for those parents who harbor uncertainties over how they are raising their children, and who are starting to ask questions. Some may even feel disappointment over how they, themselves, were raised, leading them to a stalwart decision to raise their own children differently. Thus, to fulfill their dream and become "ideal parents", they are determined to change their ingrained parenting practices.

Reading this book will make you active participants in a treatment process called "family therapy." You will become familiar with, and will learn to apply independently, some of the psychological approaches I use in my private clinic.

Prepare to set out on an involved journey in which you will ask yourselves various "bizarre" questions and will sometimes come up with surprising, unexpected answers. I understand that in some parts of the book, the reading and exercises may prove difficult. Yet I promise that once you succeed in coping with that, you will come to know your own expectations, fears and desires. Armed with these new insights, you will develop love, empathy and compassion for yourself. Only later, after you learn to love and accept yourself, will you become loving, empathetic people to those around you as well.

I implore you: Please take the exercises seriously! Make sure to perform them according to the instructions provided. I believe that a thorough, focused reading of the book and full performance of the tasks and exercises

will expand your horizons. So, don't rush. Take it slow. There are no shortcuts with psychological processes. Take your time. Invest thought. Take breaks between chapters.

I would like to add that when we become engrossed in a particular topic, our efforts do not end in a single day. They continue over time. Our brain continues to mull over the topic, processing it for hours, days and sometimes even weeks. During this time, memories, thoughts, or dreams which you previously tried to repress may crop up out of your distant past. So, take the time needed to think about and digest the information. Allow yourself to do a thorough job.

I recommend using a notebook to record all the thoughts, feelings and physical sensations you experience while you read and work. Moreover, when you do the exercises dealing with "guided imagery" use a mobile phone and record your voice in a slow, relaxed manner. It is important to note that the names of my patients and other identifying details about them have been changed to protect their privacy.

EED

Several years ago I was working as a school counselor in an elementary school in one of the larger cities in the Israeli south. There I decided to devote four or five lessons for first graders on the subject of "family." Introducing the topic to the children, I asked them to raise their hands if they had frequent conversations with their parents, openly divulging to them all that had happened to them during the day and seeking their advice.

There was silence in the classroom. Suddenly a bright-eyed redhead jumped into view, raising his hand with genuine pride. "I tell my parents everything, both when I'm sad and when I want to tell them about something happy that occurred," the boy burst out, a broad smile on his face. I smiled back, expecting more children to share similar experiences with the class, but all the pupils were silent. They looked at the redheaded boy – the "chosen" one – with open admiration, waiting eagerly to hear him talk about the special bond that had developed between him and his parents.

To my utter amazement, the same story repeated itself in the other two first grades where I raised the topic. In each class there was only one pupil who felt loved and admired, and who was sure of the unconditional support and love of his or her parents. Three pupils in total knew how to involve their parents at all times, and when they knew that a parent was busy and was not free to listen to them, they would find creative ways to convey their need to the parent and receive the assistance they needed at the given moment.

The results of my little experiment made me think about the uniqueness of those pupils who testified regarding their emotional closeness with their parents. On the one hand, the three were very different from one another

as far as background, culture, and their parents' socioeconomic status. Despite these essential differences, all three were among the most prominent pupils in their class and shared several traits: they all had a lot of self-confidence, actively participated in class, and were very friendly and sociable with their classmates. Moreover, they demonstrated curiosity, creative thinking, enjoyed expressing themselves and conversing with older people (teachers). Finally, they all excelled scholastically.

During my long years working in primary and secondary schools, I noticed something very significant:

A child's social skills and scholastic success are directly influenced by the nature of the child's relationship with his or her parents, or, more precisely, by the child's emotional closeness with his parents.

Children deprived of emotional closeness with their parents experience difficulties, both socially and academically, starting from a very young age (in adolescence, starting from 11 or 12, there is marked deterioration in their functioning). They feel unwelcome, burdensome and superfluous in their families, and they complain that no one loves them or wants them. In order to stop the flow of suicidal thoughts, these children learn to deal with their emotional distress by way of such acts as self-injury, alcohol/drug abuse, and/or promiscuity.

Unfortunately, I, personally, have borne witness to a scenario in many families akin to that described above – despite the families being different in origin, education, and socioeconomic status.

My intensive work with these families led me to an insight: **Those parents were incapable of forging emotional closeness with their own children for one simple reason – they, themselves, did not know what that is, because they, themselves, had never experienced it in their own childhood.** Hence, with all their good intentions to be the most important and significant person in their child's life, they really did not know how to do it.

Most of the childrearing books on the market provide a broad overview of developmental norms or general recommendations. Yet those recommendations do not discuss the parent's reservations and fears. Moreover, they ignore emotional blocks that sometimes paralyze parents, preventing their raising their children according to the principles appearing in those books.

I developed EED (Emotional Closeness Education) to help parents enrich and deepen their relationship with their loved-ones. The exercises in the book will help improve the relationship between you and your spouse, such that by joining forces together – you will succeed in educating a (mentally and physically) healthy, successful, happy child.

Emotional closeness is the cornerstone of building healthy, satisfying relationships between family members. Those who share emotional closeness with others testify that they feel secure, loved and understood by their loved-ones. Emotional closeness makes us happy when we spend

time together with our loved ones, while raising awareness of the basic rights of the person and his relatives to their private space. It further provides a deep understanding that each and every family member has needs and desires that must be respected. Families blessed with emotional closeness are characterized by their superb ability to initiate an open dialogue and share thoughts and feelings (even if those involve fears and failures).

EED, for developing emotional closeness, is founded on five axioms:

1. **All family members influence all others:** In your individual work and as you do the exercises in the book, you will be exposed to the profound, meaningful impact that your family (parents, siblings) have had on you and to the way you continue to influence your spouse and children.
2. **Respect for and Acceptance of those Around You:** Understanding and accepting your personal thoughts and feelings as well as the various motives that led you to one behavior or another will allow you to examine yourself with both compassion and empathy. Once you understand yourself better and begin to love and accept yourself, you will be able to love, understand and accept those around you.
3. **Honesty and Openness in Relationships:** Sometimes we are falsely convinced that sharing certain information with those close to us will lead to a predictable (and often unpleasant) reaction. Due to this concern, many of us will prefer not to share information that could trigger such a response. Unfortunately, this cautious, ineffectual behavior within the family unit does not promote the development of emotional closeness between people and their loved ones. Quite the contrary, it engenders alienation, estrangement and a feeling of loneliness among each member of the family. Only if family members can open up and talk candidly with one another will there be a basis for establishing relationships of trust within the family. That, in turn, will lead to a greater ability of the whole family to accept less pleasant situations such as criticism, punishment and conflict.
4. **Showing Your Loved Ones Patience:** This becomes possible only through an understanding of the objective psychological and physiological processes that a person undergoes during various situations in his or her life. Often, we interpret the reactions and behaviors of the other through our own personal worldview. Yet once you enrich your knowledge, you will be start to see the whole picture and realize that sometimes people (like many others in that particular situation) behave one way and not the other. This broadened understanding of the extent reality is essential for developing relationships based on emotional closeness.
5. **Managing Healthy Communication within the Family:** The exercises you do as part of reading this book will provide you with

tools to help you express yourselves in a healthy, optimal manner, manage conflicts and empathize with your loved one. With EED, you will know how to appreciate the enormous power of latent (nonverbal) communication.

These five axioms will allow you and your loved ones to feel that you are indeed seen, understood and accepted as you are. Via these axioms, each family member will feel valued and significant in the eyes of the others and will feel that he is capable of affecting his immediate environment.

Get ready. You're about to start a journey in time. The work will carry you back to your distant childhood, your adolescent years, your present adulthood and parenthood. Along the way, you will remember and recognize (perhaps for the first time) your dreams, your expectations, your fears and your doubts. You will have the opportunity to understand what motivates you to behave one way or another, and how the decisions you make in your daily life leave their imprint on you and affect your immediate surroundings.

Thanks to EED, you will learn to understand, accept and love yourself as you are, as well as your spouse and children. You will begin to show compassion not only to those around you, but first and foremost to yourself. You will develop the ability to regulate your emotions and set limits without guilt. The emotional closeness that will be created between you and your loved ones will work wonders for the mood in your home. Life will become warm and pleasant, and you will become the perfect parent to your lovely children.

Chapter 1 – You, as Part of the Family

Many people start considering psychological therapy when they feel themselves falling into a deep abyss – with no bottom in sight. They feel despair, disappointment, helplessness and negative thoughts over their failure at coping singlehandedly with everything happening to them. Beset by these painful emotions, their relationship with their loved ones hits an impasse and the career they have built with great effort ends up on the rocks. Their chronic quarreling with their children leads those children to harsh, violent outbursts against their peers, self-hatred, doing themselves harm, and to talking about their wanting to die. In addition, those children suffer from learning difficulties and concentration problems in school. Thus the parents find themselves scampering around among professionals demanding immediate solutions to all the problems that have recently cropped up with their children.

Those determined individuals who boldly make their way to a first therapy session usually complain about the lack of support and hostility they suffer at the hands of their spouse, the jarring, unfathomable ingratitude of their children, and the expectations that have crossed the bounds of good taste coming from their parents. I am sorry to say that focusing on the behavior of others and looking for guilty parties regarding a situation that has arisen does not help one bit. Moreover, that same futile focus on others just makes the therapeutic process all that much more difficult and closes off the one chance for meaningful, substantive change in one's life. Once patients internalize this (albeit with great hesitation), they agree to undertake a journey that penetrates to the very depths of their souls. At the same time, they fear that journey, lest new thoughts they have never had or new emotions they have never experienced destroy the world they have constructed with so much effort and care.

Often, people who invest their best efforts at preserving an illusory equilibrium in their families are subconsciously choosing to give up on their own aspirations, needs and desires while evincing self-sacrifice for their loved ones. The great effort they invest in trying to adapt themselves to their fantasy of marital and family harmony only makes their situation deteriorate to the point where they are not interested in (or unable to) convey their thoughts, desires and disagreements. Paradoxically, their martyr behavior evokes in them feelings such as frustration, loneliness, disappointment, and deep emptiness. Those feelings make them ask themselves many questions about themselves, such as, "Who are the people who truly love and care about me?" and, "What is the meaning of life?" The answer to these questions can result in a serious disconnect in the relationship. Children who grow up in such a family develop emotional, social, and educational difficulties, which just adds fuel to the fire, worsening their parents' dysfunction. In the end, the family falls apart.

To create emotional closeness with your family and become the ideal parents to your children – you must first develop emotional closeness with yourself!

Personality Test - Do You Know Yourself?

The longer I work with people, the more I think many of them do not know themselves at all. For the most part, they see themselves the same way they think society perceives them – and unfortunately, this perception does not always correspond to reality. It was precisely on this topic that I had an interesting conversation with my patient, a fellow named Ron (age 34).

"I'm terribly impulsive," declared Ron, confidently.

"What do you mean by 'impulsive'?" I ask, treading gently.

"I get upset right away if something doesn't work out the way I want."

"Do you get violent?"

"No! I didn't mean that. I just get angry, talking loudly if something annoys me ..."

"I think it's great that you know how to stand up for yourself, to talk to others about what bothers you ... So please tell me, how were you when you were little?" Ron paused for a moment and answered angrily, "As a child, I was very problematic!"

"What do you mean by 'problematic'?" I asked.

"I was an impulsive child. I could shout, demand, kick. As a child I was concerned only with myself, only with my own needs, I was really egotistical!" Ron's term "egotistical" echoed in my brain.

"Could it be that as a child you heard someone call you that?" I asked.

"Did I hear it from anyone?" Ron thought for a moment, "Yes, I heard it many times from my mother. But I agree with her - there is truth in what she said. I really do not care about anyone but myself. I spend most of the day at work, and my wife is the one who takes care of the house and the kids."

"And why do you spend most of your day at work?" I asked.

"Why?" The man blushed with embarrassment. "Because someone must work, make money. My wife does not work. She stays at home and takes care of three children."

"That means you support your family. Isn't that called, 'taking care of your loved ones'?" I asked with a smile.

"You're right!" Ron nodded and smiled a little timidly.

"So, what kind of egotist are you, if you are the one who takes care of your wife and kids?" I asked in amazement.

In most children, the ability to show empathy and compassion for others develops around age seven to eight and not before. Those parents who expect their children from a very young age to demonstrate an ability to listen, sensitivity, and caring and concern for the needs of others, may be sorely disappointed. Almost certainly, a child who does not meet his parents' exaggerated and unrealistic expectations, will be accused of insensitivity,

cruelty, and egotism – traits probably having nothing to do with the child's true personality.

My conversation with Ron demonstrates an inability to achieve fully objective self-perception – something characterizing many of us. Everyone, starting from early childhood, adopts the beliefs and attitudes regarding himself, his personality and his behavior, that he heard from his parents and those around him. Over the coming years, he subconsciously does all he can to adapt himself and his personal life to those strange beliefs. In the end, the supreme effort a person makes to fit into shoes that are not his "pays off." Just like his parents and siblings, his current family and those around him learn to recognize and perceive his behavior and traits in precisely the same way they were perceived when he was still in early childhood. Even in the case involving Ron, his wife confirmed that she, too, sees in him those same egotistical qualities he had talked about earlier, although just like him she could not enlist a single example or explain to me how these negative traits found expression in their daily life together.

Therefore, in order for you to begin to know your true personality, and to become familiar with your virtues and not just the negative traits with which you were labeled in your past, I ask you to perform the following exercise:

Test: "What Sort of Imaginary Character Are You?"

I want you to think back and try to recall a story you loved from childhood. It can be a legend, a fairy tale, or it can be taken from a book or movie you liked back then. Try recalling that beloved story you used to read over and over, that movie you watched continuously, or that book you constantly asked your parents to read to you. And now, answer the following questions: What did you like about that story? Who was your favorite character? What did you like about him? What traits of that character did you particularly like?

I think that analyzing a beloved imaginary character from the past is the best personality test there is. That's because we usually bond with and "fall in love" with a character whose moral qualities and values correspond to our own. We understand that character and accept his motives and worldview, and we agree with every act or step the character takes.

Thanks to this psychological test, you will discover your true qualities and make a distinction between your "true self" and the "false self" your childhood relatives dressed you up in.

By the same token, make sure you don't label your own children! Watch out for this and make a distinction between age-related behavior and a child's character and innate personality traits. At one year of age, teething and bad stomach aches may leave a child irritable and restless. And age two, he may express his natural need for independence by rebellious and sometimes aggressive and uncompromising behavior. All these unpleasant behaviors correspond to the child's normative developmental stages. And just as every developmental stage comes to an end, the child's behavior is dynamic and changes over time. Thus, when the child ultimately reaches age five, he will be standing before you as a person – with a sufficiently cohesive, well-formed personality, with his own salient personality traits that distinguish him from you and from his brothers and sisters.

Ask your child (age five and older) to take the above test, and together with him you will discover what personality traits are already rooted and inborn in him today, and what traits will develop during his lifetime.

When you ask the child what imaginary character he admires, be sure also to ask him the reason for his choice. What does it signify? Be careful not to assume the child is misinterpreting something. As you approach the child and let him explain himself, prepare for the fact that you may be surprised by what you hear. And the characteristics you attribute to a particular hero may turn out to be the exact opposite of the child's most prominent characteristics. It is very important to look at that hero from the child's perspective.

During this exercise, your son may tell you that his favorite character is "Aladdin" – for the courage and boldness he exudes. Your daughter may turn out to admire "the Little Mermaid" (Ariel), for her compassion, humility and unconditional love for the prince. Or, it may be Ami (from the story of "Ami and Tami"), a story that attracted your children's attention due to his intelligence and curiosity, as well as his ability to survive in situations of danger and stress. Or, it may well be Cinderella - kind and compassionate in every situation.

Write down your son's/daughter's answers:

Reframing or Changing Thought Patterns

Each person has different cognitive schematic systems (thought patterns) subconsciously based on the experiences one has lived through and dealt with throughout his life - unique to him alone. These thought patterns have a great influence on how we understand various aspects of thinking and behavior in human life. They affect first of all the type of information a person will absorb from all the stimuli in his environment, will relate to, and subsequently will allow to influence his behavior. Those thought patterns make it possible to assess, based on prior knowledge and past experience, what is right and wrong. It is they that are responsible for consolidating modes of behavior, expectations and attitudes towards a specific person or towards one event or another. It is they, in fact, that determine a person's modes of action and behavior according to his own interpretation. These thought patterns generally make our lives easier, but sometimes have the opposite effect. Then, instead of advancing us, they become a factor that blocks and inhibits us in our lives, because they are liable to harm our self-confidence and self-concept and make decision-making processes that benefit our lives more difficult. Reframing allows us to learn to observe that person or event that makes life difficult and makes us miserable, from a slightly different perspective. Once you have tried the reframing tool yourself, you will be surprised to discover the positive side of a particular event that until recently you had perceived as a threatening event with no way out. Or, on the contrary, you may notice the less positive aspect of a certain occurrence that you previously perceived as very positive. In other words, you will learn to amass all the small pieces of information you have into one big puzzle, and to observe what happens in your life as objectively as possible.

For example, let us suppose you had become used to considering yourself a "miser," because according to your thinking pattern (your beliefs and attitudes) "that is the opposite of a generous person, someone who helps others, buy gifts, donates, etc." I now ask you to go into the minute details of the definition as you understand it and to examine your "miserliness" with a comprehensive, critical eye. To this end, I would like to focus on this belief and try to be more precise: "Do you think that the generous person helps everyone around him? Or does he help only certain people? How important is it to you to help others? Do you think you must give others the shirt off your back in order to feel like you are a generous person?"

It could be that after answering these questions, you will understand that you are not exactly a miser, but perhaps choosy. I am certain that there are people in your life for whom you would do anything - give up life's pleasures, invest in them time, money or energy... At the same time, you've got other types of people in your environment as well, for you wouldn't lift a finger. Instead, you would be suspicious and cautious around them, and less open to them. Consider what would happen if you weren't choosy, the way you are today. Those around you would probably take advantage of your goodness and might even do you harm. Might it not be that this trait actually protects you to a certain degree?

The same can be said of someone who classifies himself as an "evil person." If that is you, I would like to ask you something. Do you behave evilly towards everyone around you, or only towards certain people? Does your unpleasant behavior towards those people have a reason or justification? Were there times in your personal life when you showed generosity and much consideration towards others? If so, when? Under which circumstances did those cases occur?

Exercise: "Examining Reality from another Angle"

Let's do an experiment. The purpose of this exercise is to make you reassess yourself. I ask you to try to put your finger on those character traits that you are not satisfied with. What are those traits? Under what circumstances do they come into play? Think about how your use of this trait in your actions or behavior assists you. What would have happened to you in the course of your life had you not been blessed with this trait? How would your life look? How would those around you react? Has there been a situation in which another trait (the opposite of the one presently under discussion) has found expression? When and why did this occur?

Please complete the sentence: I am not _____, but rather _____.

Life is not black and white, but a broad spectrum that includes a whole array of spectacular colors. Your personality is fashioned the same way. Sometimes you treat others with empathy and compassion, and sometimes with anger and irritation... and that's OK. It just means you are a mortal human being, and not a robot.

Reframing, or developing flexible thinking, is an essential tool for fostering benevolent communication with those around you, and for the decision-making process in general. Sometimes, to solve some a problem that has been troubling us for a number of days, weeks, months or even years, we must

reexamine it from a different perspective. I would like to illustrate my recommendation by describing the following case:

A number of years ago, a young woman approached me. She had completed her academic studies with honors, yet for some reason could not manage to find work suited to her skills. When her dream at last came true and she was offered the position she had been hoping for, she was suddenly plagued with fears. She was skeptical about her ability to hold on to the position long term. Her chronic anxiety lest she render rash decisions that would jeopardize her professional future profoundly affected her, leaving her a total wreck.

In the course of our first conversation, the woman told me that her first son had been born to her two months previous, and she was surprised to discover that she, for her part, was not yet psychologically ready to leave her infant in a house with a stranger. To solve this difficult problem, we decided to make use of reframing, seeking to break through the patient's outer limits of belief. For her, "work was life's essence, and one must not turn down a position that one craves." We thus sought to find a creative alternative, more suited to her.

Once the young woman understood that her newborn infant was important to her, no less than the dream job recently offered to her, she decided to accept the job, but only on condition that she work only one-third of the day, until such time as she might begin to rely on her son's new caregiver and agree to leave him with that caregiver more hours. Once the woman arrived at those new insights, her serenity was restored. In later meetings, she divulged how she had summoned the courage to broach that solution with the employer. She was very afraid of his reaction, but to her great surprise, the employer accepted her conditions without any hesitation or argument.

Reframing allows us to see the reality as it really is – in the most objective manner. Pay attention to the two sides of the coin (the positive and the negative) in every event that occurs and with every person we meet. Examine what is happening in your life in the most comprehensive manner possible: The situation can be rather challenging or even difficult. Yet what does that difficulty afford you? What do you learn from it? What do you gain from these experiences?

Now try to recall a difficult, challenging incident from your past. How did you deal with it? How did you profit or gain from that experience? How did the incident affect you and change you and those close to you? Did the incident contribute to an improvement in your life, or, to the contrary, did it cause you to feel regression in some aspect of your life?
