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First Friendships: Foundations for Peace

Darcia Narvaez

First friendships shape children's brains and thereby their self-regulatory and social capacities. Mothers and others who offer our species' evolved developmental niche, or evolved nest, provide the appropriate support for growing a cooperative, prosocial community member. Unnested children are less likely to develop our species-typical prosociality and instead be prone to authoritarian tendencies.

Keywords friendship; child development; mothering; evolved developmental niche; cooperation

What if our first friendships matter more than any others? What if first relationships guide us toward peace or violence? What if the ways we are treated in the earliest months and years of life matter for how we treat others as adults? Converging evidence suggests that these issues should of concern to peace studies.

THE PSYCHOSOCIALITY OF FRIENDSHIP

Being present to one another –emotionally, mentally, attentionally—is a powerful bonding activity pervasive in our ancestral context, nomadic foraging society, where humanity spent at least 95% of its existence (Sorenson 1998). Characterized by authenticity and communion, being present to another reflects the "I-Thou" relationship Martin Buber (1970) advocated and described, an orientation that contrasts with what he called "I-It." Friendships involve mutual affection, respect and trust—an I-Thou relational orientation.

Martin Buber emphasized the quality of the personal encounter –are you recognized in your uniqueness or are you categorized according to some particular characteristic and thus objectified? In other words, do you matter as an individual rather than as a category? Respecting the encounter with another, as I-Thou, means taking in the whole of the other—the

gestalt of form, energy and beauty —not separating out, identifying, and abstracting the "contents" of the other.

I-Thou relationships align with the notion of *mattering*, the feeling that one is significant in the eyes of others. "The person who matters is secure in the knowledge that he or she has meaningful connections with other people and that close social bonds have been forged" (Flett 2018, 31). Indeed, mattering to others is a fundamental protective factor against self- and other-harming (Drabenstott 2019; Prihadi et al. 2020; Rosenberg and McCullough 1981; Schlossberg 1989). Mattering studies (Flett 2018) identify several elements that characterize mattering, including attention (being noticed), importance (being cared about), and ego extension (emotional investment in what happens to you). Developmental research indicates that babies and young children are especially impacted by being treated as mattering, as Thous instead of Its, because the psychobiology of their being is in formation, shaped by social experience.

Attachment theory (Bowlby 1988) was advanced for its time in drawing scientific attention to the importance of the caregiver-child relationship as an interaction between nature and nurture that establishes a child's pattern of social relations, often carried forward into the rest of life. As Kagan and Fox (2006) point out, all phenomena in the psychological realm emerge from biological properties, yet most biological, psychological and social systems that develop over the course of childhood are not genetically fixed. Instead, like attachment style, they are profoundly shaped by experience in early life. That is, the type of human nature developed emerges not only from the individual's genetic history but their life history.

Early life experiences shape embodied systems, psyche and personality. For example, particular caregiving practices that foster secure attachment appear to bring about well-regulated, happy, healthy people who are agreeable and cooperative (Kochanska 2002; Sroufe et al. 2005). Early life attachment relationships are vehicles for the child's development, forming a bridge of connection for fostering psychosocial as well as moral character development (Narvaez 2008, 2014). The regulation of an individual's stress response and vagus nerve, both related to social capacities, is based on the quality of early care received (Lupien et al. 2009; Porges 2011). Of course, some plasticity remains throughout life, but early childrearing practices are fundamental for optimal hormone, immune, stress and neurotransmitter system development, as well as prefrontal cortex functions, all of which undergird personality and everyday functioning (Narvaez 2014; Schore 2019). The human brain/body is understood as a dynamic system that is "experience dependent" (LeVay, Wiesel, and Hubel 1980), with "heightened epochs of brain plasticity, during which sensory experiences produced long-lasting and large-scale

change in neuronal circuits," an appropriate environment is necessary for normal development (Grosjean and Tsai 2007, 106). A child's first relationships are fundamental to a healthy and prosocial trajectory for life.

The Evolved Nest: Context for First Relationships

The human species evolved a system for optimizing child development, inheriting characteristics tens of millions of years old, transmitted through the tree of life, that promote successful adaptation (Konner 2005). Humanity's evolved developmental niche or nest (EDN; Narvaez 2014), documented worldwide by ethnographers (Hewlett and Lamb 2005), includes soothing perinatal experience, breastfeeding on request for several years, a welcoming supportive social climate, positive nurturing touch, responsive care by multiple adult caregivers, self-directed play, nature immersion and connection. Each component has neuroscientific, developmental and clinical science to support its importance for fostering wellbeing (e.g., Narvaez et al. 2013). Initial evidence indicates that the EDN also supports sociomoral development (e.g., Narvaez et al. 2016, 2019).

The EDN, nestedness, begins within our very first relationship, with mother. Mother offers the physiological and communicative nurturing that initiates a child's entry into the community (Vaughan 2015). Mother's steadiness and tenderness build the necessary psychosocial neurobiological features that will allow the child to thrive within the community as a growing member.

But mother's devotion to her child depends on felt community support –is the mother's pregnancy, is the child, welcome? (Hrdy 2009). The effects of maternal social support begin before birth. The mother who herself is nested with community support, whose needs are met and feels the strength of the community beside her, stays calm, keeping the fetus calm, optimizing biochemistry for the development of physiological systems growing rapidly in the fetus. At birth and postnatally, the nest-providing community welcomes mother and child with responsive support. In ideal circumstances that were common in non-industrialized societies around the world, the infant is welcomed with tenderness by mother and helpers. Mothers are provided with the same kinds of support mothers provide their children (Hrdy 2009)—someone to help with meeting basic needs (e.g., for rest, nutrition, safe and stable support, a sense of competence and self-control, ability to be generous), someone to lean on when stressed, someone to carry or play with the child as needed.

The good enough community sets up the practices and policies that support the child's development. What is it they foster through the EDN? What does nestedness look like?

Responsive Care

Under normal circumstances for our species, the well-supported mother is fully engaged with the infant once the baby has crawled up, massaged her nipple and latched onto a breast—during the first hours when physiological reward systems in both mom and baby are geared up to bond deeply (Buckley 2015). The mother, who has adequate support, will be devoted and tuned in to the child's needs like her own (Stern 1985). With guidance from skilled motherers, mother becomes skilled herself at guiding baby along the pathway of optimal arousal (not cacostatic — over or under reacting), maintaining the biochemistry of growth (rest and digest) rather than the inhibitory chemistry of stress (flight, fight, freeze). Mother and motherers understand that babies rely on them to meet their needs quickly and completely at first — in the first 18 months, babies expect womb-like treatment (Montagu 1968) — but which prepares the child for autonomous independence later.

D.W. Winnicott (1987) coined the term "good enough mother." It refers to the "holding environment" for the child that ensures that during the first years of rapid neuropsychological growth the child feels appreciated, confident and trusting. Good enough caregivers know that babies need to feel secure, safe, and connected all of the time in order to grow well. Good enough care does not impose any pain or distress, which can be traumatic for a baby. Good enough care is nested care.

When the mother is in a state of "primary maternal preoccupation," she identifies with the infant and attempts to deeply respond to what the infant needs (Winnicott 1987). The "holding" of the child is not only physical but mental—how the mother holds the child in her mind, how she perceives the child. Winnicott considered "the child's impulse to share its heart with the mother … crucial for the child's wellbeing" (Hilton 2012, 81). The mother's receptiveness to the spirit or heart of the child promotes self-confidence and a sense of security right at the time when those seeds are planted for life-long growth. A mutually responsive orientation builds secure attachment, cooperation and conscience over the course of childhood (Kochanska 2002).

Alloparents[1]

The child is surrounded with a relational web of community members, first, typically, father and grandmother (Hewlett and Lamb 2005). Overall, good enough mothers and alloparents do not deny the baby's

[1]Alloparents or allomothers are I-Thou nurturers other than mother who also provide an appropriate holding environment.

need fulfillment, understanding that babies have an inner compass of what is needed for optimal growth (Schore 2019). Good enough caregivers keep a child feeling secure through human contact and positive presence. The young child is never purposefully left alone. (When the child is older, he or she will explore and leave the caregiver behind, but this is done at the child's discretion and with the opportunity to return to a trusted caregiver as a secure base; Bowlby 1988). Thus, good enough caregivers support the development of secure attachment (Siegel 1999; Stern 1985; Winnicott 1957). Good enough caregivers facilitate a cooperative personality, intelligence and health by maintaining optimal arousal in infancy (before age 3) (Schore 2019).

Babies need to learn many regulation skills which occurs from responsive care guiding the functioning of multiple systems. For example, babies need to learn to breathe with the lungs, which was not necessary in the womb. Being carried and held facilitate this. Physiological self-regulation, like breathing, is facilitated by extensive skin-to-skin contact (Bergman 2005; Bergman, Linley, and Fawcus 2004). In fact, crying can occur because not enough body-to-body contact has been experienced to help with learning to breathe.

Good enough caregivers help children develop self-regulation capacities through countless times of calming baby down when baby starts to get uncomfortable (recognized by grimace, grunts, limb movement), helping neurobiological systems (e.g., stress response, vagus nerve) establish calm patterns. The child is never left to despair (Winnicott 1957).

Caregivers organize the child's circadian rhythms by following the rhythms of the earth and body. In the evening, good enough caregivers provide low-level natural lighting (not blue lighting) and in the morning, exposure to sunlight.

Good enough caregivers are authentically present, providing "limbic resonance" and visceral connection that contribute to healthy psychosocial and neurobiological development along with secure attachment (Lewis, Amini, and Lannon 2000; Welch 2016; Stern 1985; Sorenson 1998). When child and caregiver become dyssynchronous, the caregiver moves in to reconnect with body-to-body and mind-to-mind connection.

Children signal developmental needs by what interests them (e.g., crawling for neurodevelopment), and good enough caregivers allow them to practice and fulfill those interests. The responsive tenderness of alloparents is a building block for the child's expansion of trust to the wider community. Following an intrinsic schedule, "a hunger to fill archetypal forms with specific meaning," children move through different interests and capacity development in infancy, childhood and youth (Shepard 1982, 110).

Biochemical/Nutritional Needs

Ideally, the child's needs are satiated with breastfeeding on request with minimal delays. As a result of their small stomachs, young babies may request feeding every few minutes at first (Hewlett and Lamb 2005). Why is breastfeeding on request important? Breast milk contains brain and body building ingredients. Children need the biochemical growth stimulation that breast milk provides (Power and Schulkin 2016) in contrast to growth-inhibiting cortisol that is released during distress (Murgatroyd and Spengler 2011). The child is growing thousands of brain connections every minute and building the immune system (which resides mostly in the gut), the "gut-breast axis" that is foundational for lifelong health (Rodríguez et al. 2021). Infant formula, an emergency food, does not have all the brain-and-gut-building ingredients of breastmilk. Evening breastmilk has agents that induce relaxation and sleep (e.g., tryptophan) whereas morning milk has energizing agents (Italianer et al. 2020).

Self-Directed Play and Movement

Good enough caregivers provide lots of time and opportunity for daily self-directed solo and social play. Such play characterizes our ancestral childhoods and turns out to be the best way for a child to learn life skills, self-control, cooperation and creativity (Gray 2013; Scott and Panksepp 2003), especially with playmates of all ages (Hewlett and Lamb 2005).

Good enough care encourages the child's free movement. There is limited use of carriers and strollers. Instead, the young child is allowed to crawl then walk as they go through multiple developmental stages of body-mind learning. Good enough caregivers avoid interfering with the movement of the child through the world. The child is assumed capable of taking care of self in normal natural environments (Liedloff 1977). (Of course, this does not hold on a busy street where a child might run out into the traffic). The child is allowed to be exuberant, honored for their dignity as a person (Cavoukian and Olfman 2006). Overall, the motivation to learn from the world is encouraged and efforts at autonomy are not punished (Panksepp 1998; Panksepp et al. 1984). The child is given as much freedom as the context allows (and contexts are selected for their safety and openness) (Skenazy 2010).

Meaningful Community

Good enough communities not only provide support for mothers or primary caregivers but immerse the child in experiences with multiple different others who provide stable, warmly responsive care (Laursen and

Birmingham 2003). They embrace the child with meaningful stories about the child's positive place in the family and community. Adults who have been well-supported are able to model self-control, generosity and all the other virtues desired. The child practices mutual sharing with community members (Widlok 2017). They welcome the child into active community membership, understanding that the child is learning their way, and developing their skills through observation and imitation (Liedloff 1977). The community understands that the child seeks to fulfill their human potential, to become a full human being, with integrated heart and mind, but also help discern what particular gift they have to offer the community. When the child is nurtured all along the way, their uniqueness will be polished and prepared for gifting to the community in adulthood. Among traditional First Nation/Indigenous Peoples, the child moves from the biological mother to the mothering provisioned by the broader community, to a feeling that the universe, traditionally concretized in the forest or desert (the landscape), also nurtures the self (Four Arrows and Narvaez 2022). Without mothers and motherers, the child's unique self would not unfold naturally and the individual may require therapy in adulthood to heal wounds and integrate mind and heart (Hilton 2012).

It Treatment instead of Thou Treatment

Human brains are susceptible to misconstruction during early life because infants are born 18 months early compared to other primates (Montagu 1968; Trevathan 2011) and are more epigenetically malleable than other apes (Gómez-Robles et al. 2015). There seems to be sensitive periods for the establishment and functioning of body/brain systems underlying sociality and morality (Narvaez 2014). We can see from attachment and clinical research that personalities can be impaired in various ways depending on the timing and intensity of unnestedness, affecting particular brain and body systems under construction at the time (Henry and Wang 1998; Murgatroyd and Spengler 2011).

In environments where evolved nest provision is weak, typical parent-child relations are those in which parents assume superiority to or distance from the child in some fashion. For example, guided by cultural beliefs, parents may think they should be in charge and are encouraged to be less sensitive to the needs and interests of the infant to "teach" independence or avoid "being controlled" by the child. This represents an I-It relationship—distant, instrumental and manipulative. The baby is likely to be left in distress routinely, resulting in toxic stress (Shonkoff and Garner 2012).

When babies initially don't get their needs met, they move from discomfort, to pain, to rage for assistance: The sympathetic nervous system has mobilized to seek assistance in maintaining the baby's wellbeing. A baby who regularly gets help only after raging may turn into an angry or manipulative personality (since that worked habitually for getting needs met), called anxious attachment (Crittenden 1995). But if the baby is punished for raging or is not helped even when raging, the baby will lead to emotional withdrawal and despair —a signal that the parasympathetic system has been activated in order to preserve energy and life. The baby who regularly reaches this stage may develop into a shy, withdrawn personality. Babies who have inconsistent parents (sometimes intrusive, sometimes neglecting, mismatching with baby's needs) may learn to intellectualize life (detached imagination), indicative of avoidant attachment. Sometimes brain systems have gaps in development from missing experience or can be underdeveloped, leading to various forms of mental disorder based on the timing, intensity and duration of unnestedness.

Early toxic stress enhances survival systems that focus on self-preservation (van der Kolk 2014). An overactive stress response can be established (for life) when baby is frequently left in distress (Lupien et al. 2009). When the stress response is activated, it redirects blood flow away from higher order thinking (Arnsten 1998, 2009), away from social openness. The body is mobilized for self-protective action making the individual relationally and cognitively 'stupid" (Sapolsky 2004). Early life stress impairs developing psychosocial biology, seeding fear and habitual antisocial tendencies (Sandi and Haller 2015). Harsh parenting, such as spanking, shifts the trajectory of development toward habitual pre-human orientations of dominance-submission relations (i.e., authoritarianism; Milburn and Conrad 2016). Prosocial growth is curtailed. Threat reactivity can become ingrained in personality, making it hard for the child to learn (Cozolino 2013) and to cooperate (Niehoff 1999). The individual may not develop the brain systems that underlie deep reciprocity of sociality, limiting their options for the future (Narvaez, 2014). They may not develop the capacities that are otherwise characteristic of our species—the flexible, connected self who is responsive to the Other that is characteristic of "preconquest" cultures (Sorenson 1998).

As Aristotle noted, one must cultivate the right sensibilities to behave virtuously. Little did he know that this begins in infancy, in the mother-child relationship with mutual emotional regulation (Sroufe 1996; Schore 1994). The unnested—truly unfriended—baby whose relational treatment was as an It instead of a Thou will learn to treat others the same way, to categorize others as Its, to be used instrumentally as objects for particular ends. Unnested individuals will be less empathic, more self-

focused due to their underdevelopment. They will be easily triggered into self-protectionism, making them more easily controlled by authoritarian instincts. Pre-human primal instincts for hierarchical domination will be enhanced rather than the cooperative egalitarian orientation our species evolved (Burkart et al. 2009; Narvaez, 2014). I-It relations, us-against-them relations, will be perceived as more logical and the right way to behave.

CONCLUSION

Children expect friendly companionship from the beginning of life. Children learn to relax and grow (or not) in our presence. Babies expect I-Thou relations early on. They expect to be honored by having their needs met without delay or resistance and through early friendships, presence and authenticity. As Buber (1970) noted, "Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being" (63). In our arms, babies learn how to be in the world.

Being treated as an object or "It" during adulthood is condemned by ethicists. But the most important time period for such treatment may be in infancy. Babies whose needs are not met—put on rigid sleep, feeding or touch schedules despite protest—learn to not be present because it is too painful. They learn to dissociate and must learn tricks of manipulation to get their needs met, at least partially. They learn what works in the circumstance to obtain at least some attention, even, if necessary, negative attention like spanking—at least they are 'seen." If a child experiences frequent or intense treatment as an It, the child may become conditioned to expect hierarchical relationships where the bigger/stronger control the smaller/weaker. Cruelty instead of empathy may become instinctive. Cynicism instead of openness may become habitual.

Martin Buber lamented how the western world's desacralizing of everyday life left only one day (the Sabbath) that was considered sacred. He advocated resacralizing everyday life, living like our ancestors, attending to maintaining I-Thou relationships with others, including natural entities like trees. Perhaps it is time now to resacralize motherhood and mothering, honoring the dignity of babies, offering mothers and children the vital community support needed to foster the next generations of peacemakers.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I have no conflicts of interest.

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