

THE LISTENING THERAPY

Trevor Eddolls explains about helping clients, especially youngsters, to feel 'right' so that they act 'right'

One of the most important actions for a therapist is to help their client to accept their feelings and control their behaviour – so that the client is able to act in the way they want to, so that they are in control of their life.

While this sounds very laudable, it can sometimes be harder than we think. Sometimes we just find ourselves responding to a client's admission of a feeling or emotion in a way that doesn't help them and doesn't help the therapeutic support that we offer them. So how can we find out what's the best thing to do? Well, there are some excellent suggestions in a twenty-year-old book on bringing up children called *How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

Why would a book about children be any use? Well, the answer is because what works on children still works on adults – you just need to be a little bit more subtle about it. And besides, many of us find ourselves working with youngsters.

So let's look at some of those (all too common) wrong responses to a client talking about a feeling or emotion they had:

- ◆ Denial of feeling – there's no reason to feel so upset.
- ◆ Philosophical response – life is just like that!
- ◆ Advice – you know what I think you should do?

- ◆ Questions – didn't you realize he'd be angry if you didn't do it.
 - ◆ Defence of the other person – I can understand their reaction.
 - ◆ Pity – oh you poor thing.
 - ◆ Amateur psychology – have you ever thought that the real reason you're upset is because they remind you of a father figure...
 - ◆ Empathic – that sounds like an unpleasant experience.
- To help with feelings, the authors suggest:
- ◆ Listening with your full attention.
 - ◆ Acknowledging their feelings with "Oh", "mmm", "I see".
 - ◆ Giving their feelings a name – everyone likes a diagnosis or just having their emotion named. It normalizes it.

◆ Give them their wishes in fantasy. The authors suggest saying things like, "If I had a magic wand there would be <insert breakfast cereal here>, but we'll have to make do today with <insert some other cereal name>". In a way, this is bringing about something similar to the miracle question we use. It makes clients see possible alternatives.

The point is that you don't have to agree with the feelings (as a therapist or parent), you're just acknowledging their existence. Having accepted the feeling, it's then possible to move on to controlling the unwanted behaviour.

And when it comes to changing a person's

behaviour, the books advises us on things to avoid:

- ◆ Blaming and accusing – “how many times do I have to tell you?”
- ◆ Name calling – “you’re just stupid.”
- ◆ Threats – “if you don’t stop, I’ll come over there and ...”
- ◆ Commands – “I want you to xxx right now!”
- ◆ Lecturing and moralizing – “do you think that was a nice thing to do?”
- ◆ Warnings – “watch out or you’ll fall!”
- ◆ Martyrdom statements – “stop xxx or you’ll give me a heart attack!”
- ◆ Comparisons – “why can’t you be more like your sister?”
- ◆ Sarcasm – “is that what you’re wearing today, you’ll get a lot of compliments!”
- ◆ Prophecy – “do you know what’s going to happen to you? You’ll end up like xxx.”

Now, again, that’s aimed at parents, but so much of that applies to therapists too. We may not use direct threats (“I’ll come over there and give you a smack”), but we may use indirect ones (“if you carry on like that you could end up in police custody”).

The book gives advice on how to engage cooperation:

- ◆ Describe what you see or the problem – “there’s a wet towel on the bed.”
- ◆ Give information – “the towel is making my bedclothes wet”
- ◆ Say it with a word – “the towel!”
- ◆ Talk about your feelings – “I don’t like sleeping in a wet bed.”
- ◆ Write a note – (on towel rail) “please put me back so I can dry.”

Again some things will be different with clients and their behaviour won’t affect the therapist directly, but using the first couple of items on the list would work.

There is a section on alternatives to punishment. This again includes techniques that we therapists could make use of:

- ◆ Point out a way to be helpful.
- ◆ Express strong disapproval.
- ◆ State your expectations.
- ◆ Show the child how to make amends.

- ◆ Give a choice.
- ◆ Take action.
- ◆ Allow the child to experience the consequences of his misbehaviour.

Simply, if we ask clients to listen to the CD and they don’t, we can use many of the above techniques. The last one on the list probably wouldn’t apply to clients.

The book’s section on how to problem-solve mirrors many of things we might do:

- ◆ Talk about the child’s feelings and needs – we start with the client’s needs and feelings.
- ◆ Talk about your feelings and needs – no match with this one.
- ◆ Together, brainstorm to find a mutually agreeable solution – once the client has run out of ideas, the therapist might offer some ideas from their experience.
- ◆ Write down all ideas without evaluating.
- ◆ Decide which ideas you like, which you don’t and which you plan to follow through on – in this case the client decides what they want to do and we can help ‘future pace’ his or her new behaviours.

It’s important to encourage autonomy with children, and similarly, we want our clients to be able to make the ‘right’ decision about how to behave rather than emotionally respond to situations:

- ◆ Let children make choices – “red or blue shoes?”
- ◆ Show respect for a child’s struggle – “sometimes it can be hard to open a jar.”
- ◆ Don’t ask too many questions – “welcome home!” People are more likely to tell you things when they don’t feel defensive because of your probing questions.
- ◆ Don’t rush to answer questions – “that’s an interesting question, what do you think?”
- ◆ Encourage children to use sources outside the home – “let’s ask the pet shop owner.”
- ◆ Don’t take away hope – “so you’re thinking of trying out for the team. That should be an experience.”

When it comes to praise and self-esteem, the book suggests that you don’t evaluate:

- ◆ Describe what you see – “I see books on shelves and a bed that’s been made.”
- ◆ Describe what you feel – “it’s a pleasure to walk into this room.”
- ◆ Sum up a child’s praiseworthy behaviour with a word – “that’s what I call organization.”

Too often it’s tempting to offer empty praise. Saying, “That was good” to a client may raise self-esteem, but it can quickly be taken away by saying, “That was bad”. Descriptive praise can never be taken away or negated like that.

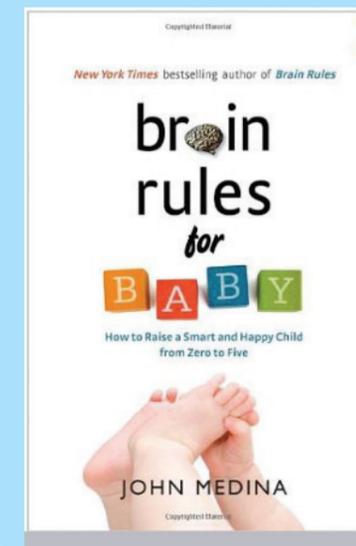
Lastly, the book suggests looking for ways to free children from playing the roles that they can be forced into:

- ◆ Look for opportunities to show the child a new picture of themselves.
- ◆ Put children in situations where they can see themselves differently.
- ◆ Let children overhear you say something positive about them.
- ◆ Model the behaviour you’d like to see.
- ◆ Be a storehouse for your child’s special moments – “I remember the time you...”
- ◆ When your child acts according to the old label, state your feelings and/or your expectations.

In terms of clients, describe them behaving in the new way that they’d like to adopt. With trance you can put them in new situations and describe their behaviour. It’s not possible to let them overhear you commenting about them – and that’s probably unethical too! And it may not be possible to model the behaviour they want. You should try to remember times they’ve told you when they have successfully behaved in a particular way and remind them of those times. And if, during a session, they tell you about slipping back into their old ways, you could suggest that by this session other clients have usually managed to maintain the new behaviour.

Obviously there are huge differences between parents dealing with children, and therapists dealing with clients, but there are so many overlaps, and the lists supplied in the book seem so good, I thought it was well worth sharing ■

BOOK REVIEW



Brain Rules for Baby by John Medina

Brain Rules for Baby is the follow-up book to John Medina’s excellent Brain Rules book. This one is subtitled: How to Raise a Smart and Happy Child from Zero to Five. In nearly 300 pages, Medina covers topics such as Pregnancy, Relationships, Smart baby, Happy baby, and Moral baby, and he does that across seven chapters.

John Medina is not only an engaging writer, he’s a developmental molecular biologist and research consultant. He’s also affiliate professor of bioengineering at the University of Washington School of Medicine. And he’s director of the Brain Center for Applied Learning Research at Seattle Pacific University. So he should know what he’s talking about!

When looking at pregnancy, Medina mixes his own experiences, exploding myths, and the latest neuroscience findings to illustrate such things as when a baby can first hear and smell its mum, that their memories are being formed, and tips to help the baby’s brain – weight, nutrition, stress, and exercise.

His relationship chapter has the tag line: “start with empathy”. We’re reminded of Harlow’s work on monkeys – how they prefer comfort to food. And Meltzoff’s work on memory and matching. Medina talks about the four reasons parents fight – sleep loss, social isolation, unequal workload, and depression. But he does give some hints and tips on how to protect a relationship.

When it comes to learning, Medina tells us that babies need to feel safe first. He spends some time looking at IQ, and then tells us that being smart relies on crystallized intelligence (the ability to record information) and fluid intelligence (the ability to problem-solve). For babies, intelligence depends on their desire to explore, self control, creativity, verbal communication, interpreting non-verbal communication.

We’re told that the prime role of the brain is surviving – and that learning is a good way of achieving that prime directive. Medina recommends breast feeding, playing with babies, and talking to them lots. His big suggestion is to always praise effort not the result – say things like: “You really worked hard”. And don’t pressurize children into learning things that they’re not ready for.

When it comes to happiness, there is emotional happiness, moral happiness, and judgemental happiness. But happiness research indicates that the only thing that makes us happy is our relationships with other people. Medina also stresses the importance of naming emotions for children – everyone feels better once they have a diagnosis! The best parenting style is demanding and warm.

We’re told that children are most likely to internalize moral behaviour if parents explain why a rule and its consequences exist. The last chapter of the book is full of practical tips.

It’s a brilliant book if you have a child under 5 in the family. It’s also incredibly insightful for people working with children in any capacity ■

Brain Rules for Baby: How to Raise a Smart and Happy Child from Zero to Five.
By John Medina
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REFERENCES: How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. Piccadilly Press. ISBN-10: 1848123094
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