Professor Henning Rye,

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The Foundation of a Healthy Psychosocial Development.

When we talk about social-emotional health, it is already implied in the term "social-emotional" that emotions and social experience are central and closely related aspects of human life. Social experience and emotional experience are complementary and reciprocally influencing each other. Some researchers present emotions in distinct categories where each emotion is associated with a "core relational theme" that may be evaluated as harmful or beneficial, and strongly related to motivation, whether conscious or unconscious, and are therefore important driving forces in the dynamic engagement with the social environment and the goals we are aiming at, (Lazarus 1991). In Lazarus' "relational model" of emotion, the self is the central organizing instance that makes sense out of experiences, considers their importance, and how to cope with the situations one is facing. Lazarus refers to this coordinating psychological functioning as "ego identity".

In a similar way the "functional model" of emotion, formulated by Campus et al. (1994), underline the social significance of emotions, and mention that the relationship of the event to our goals, the social responses from others, the hedonic tone of the event, and our memories of similar events, are determining our emotional experience related to our social interaction. Campus et al. are specifically mentioning the importance of social influences on development of emotions, and how infants and toddlers through "social referencing" learn the emotional meaning of many otherwise ambiguous transactions. In the "functionalist model" of emotion emphasis is in particular on the social context of experience of emotions.

In the "social-constructivist model" of emotion there is in addition to social context, particular weight on the fact that we learn to give meaning to our social experiences. This implies that each person's learning of emotions is related to his or her personal experiences, age, cognitive functioning, and social situation. So in addition to our unique personal background, we also have to consider the importance of social and cultural context in order to understand a person's emotional experiences. All these personal, social and cultural factors contribute to learning what it means to feel something, and how our emotions are related to our feeling of self, our relationship to others, and what we are involved in together.

The three theoretical perspectives mentioned above, are in many ways complementary, and together they convey an understanding of emotions as dynamically organized by the "self" in relation to the social environment, developed and learned in each individual's social and cultural context. The three models' emphasis on the social embeddedness of emotions, and their mutual contribution to a holistic perspective on emotional development, is well described by e.g. Saarni (1999).

Emotional experience accompany our social interactions from the beginning of life. The continues variation of emotional quality, the waxing and weaning of emotional intensity, inform us of the meaning and importance of the social interactions we are involved in. Form the earliest stages of development when emotional experience may easily flood our mental functioning and often is in control of our behavior, we gradually learn to recognize, interpret, consciously reflect on, and appraise our feelings in the social context of experience they were aroused. This growing ability to reflect on one's own emotional experience, as well as being able to infer emotional responses in others, are seen as important aspects of maturing social-emotional functioning.

This understanding of social-emotional experience in one self as well as in others, reflects the influence of socialization and culturally embedded systems of meaning related to emotions in every culture. Children normally learn about emotions involved in daily social interactions, and incorporate that learning into their "map" of when to feel, what and how to feel, and how to express feelings in different situations. The family, and still in many cultures – the extended family, is considered the most important setting for the process of socialization of emotional experience and behavior. With increasing age and maturity peers, kindergartens, and schools become increasingly important contributors to this process of socialization.

The socialization of children's social-emotional behavior is embedded in the history of relationships within the family, and with the wider contexts of experience that constitute daily life, including the kind of peers that children associate with.

In children within the normal variation of mental resources, growing up in favorable families within positive and established social and cultural contexts, one would expect to find children with a healthy social-emotional development and normal emotional competence. But as human interaction and relationship may span a wide variation of qualities, from the above mentioned most favorable circumstances, to the most inadequate of family relationships, located in unsafe environments with negative peer influences, so may the outcome regarding social-emotional development vary according to the extent children's basic psychological

needs are met by the social environment in the socialization process. Children's development of social-emotional abilities depends on the quality of the total context for social experience and learning. This process encompass the quality of personal attachment and interaction, the quality of the social context of family and neighborhood – including peers, and the family's relationship to the sub-culture or culture where it is located. The basis for this contextual perspective on development is however above all the social-emotional experience within the family during the formative years. This is the time in children's development when one should place a maximum emphasis on prevention of social-emotional problems through developing adequate support to families and communities in need of help. Such support should include help to improve the quality of interaction experiences in families as well as in kindergartens and schools, and helping communities in developing opportunities for participation in positive social activities and network building in the neighborhood.

As stated above, the social-emotional development of a child starts at the beginning of life, and continues through the manifold experiences of social interaction and social relationships throughout a lifelong dynamic process. Not even the adult human personality should be considered to be a static psychological construction. If we are lucky we may as young adults attain a more or less stable process of continuously ongoing negotiations with our social environment, that give us and others a feeling of having reached a social –emotional stability and functioning, including positive identity and self-feeling.

Whether this ongoing social-emotional relationship with our environment can be said to be healthy or not, depends on two central psychological conditions:
- To what extent our basic needs for a positive human relationship and stable self-perception, is met.
- To what extent we feel we are in a position that allows the development and use of the potentials of our human nature.

What signifies a healthy social-emotional development.

Based on clinical experience, research and current theories, some social-emotional abilities are needed in order to be able to function well within a social relationship with others:

- The ability to feel and develop a secure attachment to other human beings.
- The ability to experience a feeling of love and a need for an enduring human relationship or fellowship.
- The ability to be aware of one's own different qualities of emotions, and how they relate to experiences of daily life, and guide us in how we deal with social situations.
- The ability to understand others' expression of emotions, what they tell about feelings, attitudes and consequences for our social relationships.
- The ability to develop empathy and relationships with others, this is an important precondition for experiencing a reciprocal social connectedness, security and collective well-being.
- The ability to be aware of one's own and others' emotional communication, verbal and non-verbal, and to interpret the implications for reciprocity of relationships in terms of sympathy, mutual understanding, problem solving, and present and future interests for collaboration and problem solving.
- The ability to cope with difficult emotional experiences, distressing situations, and to overcome the turbulences of such feelings in an adaptive way that strengthens the psychological capacity for meeting later similar challenges.
- The ability through social relationships with parents, siblings, peers, teachers a.o., to learn how emotional communication and behavior is regulated by social norms and rules, age roles, gender, social status, closeness in relationships, in one's social and cultural context.
- The ability to use the "vocabulary of emotion" in verbal or non-verbal communication to make emotional experiences understood, and to regulate the emotional qualities of relationships with others.

For the above social-emotional abilities to develop, certain basic psychological needs have to be met.

The experience of:

- Being seen/ heard/ noticed/ – the need for being responded to by other human beings.
- Being met/ - the need for developing closeness and a meaningful, reciprocal relationship to other human beings.
- Being understood/ - the need for feeling others understand one's needs and situation.
- Being accepted/ - the need for feeling others' acceptance of oneself as a person, including positive and negative feelings about one self.
- Being acknowledged/ - the need for feeling appreciated for what one manages to do.
- Being respected/ - the need for being respected as a person, with personal feelings of integrity and limits.
- Being loved/ - the need to be loved as the person one is, in spite of faults and shortcomings.

A theoretical framework for an interaction oriented understanding of social-emotional development.

- Attachment theory and research tradition (Bowlby 1969, 1988; Ainsworth a.a. 1978), Rye 2001).
- Communicative development research in children (Trewarthen 1988; Stern 1985, Rye 2001).
- Mediation theory and research in children's development and learning (Vygotsky 1978; Feuerstein a.o. 1991; Klein, 2001; Rye 2001).

Based on the above theoretical perspectives of attachment, communication, and mediation of experience, and the comprehensive research related to each of these theoretical approaches to understanding children's psychosocial development and learning, the International Child Development Program (ICDP) for early intervention was developed in the 1990-ties (Rye 2001; Hundeide 2001). The qualities of interaction of central importance to children's

psychosocial development, well described in child development research over the last thirty years, are in this program formulated in eight themes of interaction:

(inn her 8 temaer)

The eight themes of caregiver-child interaction presented above, transformed to qualities of teacher-pupil interaction.

The interactive qualities discovered in caregiver-child interaction, seem to serve as channels of experiences that meet basic psychosocial needs and thereby promote a healthy psychosocial development. In adult-child interaction there normally occurs a natural and usually unconscious transformation of the eight principles of interaction takes place, as the child develops and can take part in increasingly complex shared activities. Thus the eight principles can also be applied to a school context. Although they are with regard to meaning and intention the same irrespective of age, the transformation make them recognized as relevant to the school situation, and can therefore be used as guidelines for social interplay in school, (Rye 2001). In the Sæby project in Denmark, the principles were systematically applied to teacher-pupil interaction in the local school, by reformulating them as suggestions for the teachers, and were also used in a pilot project in Norway

Applying the eight principles to school-aged children: Teacher–student interaction.

1. **Demonstrate positive feelings**
   Demonstrate that you are interested in the students' as people, that you are responsible for caring for them, will cooperate with them, and will help them to both enjoy and learn in school.
2. **Adapt to the students**
   Adapt your ways of working with and relating to students so as to address and acknowledge the students' initiative and individual ways of learning as much as possible.
3. **Talk to the students**
   Let your instruction relate to what the students are interested in, and invite them to take part in dialogs on the content of the themes you are presenting so that they become personally involved.

4. **Give praise and acknowledgement**

   Give praise and acknowledgement to each student, and to the class, when the students make an effort to cooperate, follow your instruction, and work to the best of their abilities.

5. **Help the students focus their attention**

   Make sure that you have the children's full attention when you teach, advise, or otherwise work with them. Shared attention and experience is a prerequisite for communication.

6. **Give meaning to the students' experiences**

   Make your instruction meaningful – not just with respect to what you talk about, demonstrate, and explain, but also by showing your personal involvement in the subject. In this way, you contribute to the students' understanding that some things are more important than others, e.g., values, norms and traditions.

7. **Elaborate and explain**

   Help the students relate the content of what they are working on to other subjects and academic activities. This gives insight, helps form associations, helps the students achieve a more holistic "experience of reality," and inspires curiosity and motivation for learning.

8. **Help the students achieve self-discipline**

   Help the students adapt personally and academically to the school's environment and activities by clearly planning activities, and having personal, predictable attitudes and ways of reacting. By letting the students help plan activities and providing understandable explanations when something is not possible, you can help them become more motivated to cooperate. Predictability is better than continual reprimands and prohibitions.

As is clear from the above, the ICDP principles are not limited to young children. Rather, most of the principles are relevant in human interaction throughout lifetime.

Why it is sometimes difficult to apply these qualities of interaction in our efforts to help children with social-emotional problems

- Our own patterns of interaction are rooted in early personal experiences of interactions and relationships, and are gradually developed and modified as we grow up in the context of our personal social and cultural environment.
- Children who grow up in "normal" families, where social-emotional experience of interaction contribute to "normal" social-emotional behaviour and skills, possess patterns of interaction that are recognized, function in the relevant social contexts, and are accepted.

- Children who grow up in "unusual" families learn "unusual" or deviant or dysfunctional patterns of interaction. These patterns are often perceived as different, deviant, and may provoke unpleasant feelings, withdrawal, aggression or rejection.
- The basis for our patterns of interaction is developed through childhood experiences over time, and express the individual persons learned ways of relating to his or her social environment.
- The more the patterns of interaction are becoming emotional and behavioural – conscious and unconscious – established ways of relating to the environment, the more the patterns become "fingerprints" of the social-emotional adjustment that again reflect important characteristics of the personality.
- Patterns of interaction are of central importance in social-emotional relationship, and although we are not always aware of - or do not reflect upon our own communication and reaction in social situations, they very effectively reflect our emotions, attitudes and intentions in our relationship to other people.
- When we meet people with "unusual" or what we experience as unpleasant interaction patterns, these patterns may easily provoke "counter patterns" in our reactions that represent unpleasant feelings, irritation, aggression or rejection.
- For children with "deviant" interaction patterns, the negative reactions from other children and adults in kindergartens and schools, may represent the same type of negative experiences they are used to in their home environment.
- Positive interaction patterns are met with positive responses, acceptance and confirmation of a positive relationship. Negative patterns are met with "counter patterns" and a confirmation of lack of belonging and lack of positive relationship.

This is why it is important to realise that parents as well as preschool teachers, teachers and others who are responsible for helping children with special needs develop their social-emotional competence, should not take their own positive interaction for granted, or something one can easily develop or be able to improve through reading.

To be able to help children with emotional problems develop social-emotional competence, most of us need to become more sensitive to children's situations and needs, more conscious of our own patterns of interaction, and to explore new ways of extending positive qualities of interaction and integrate these in our repertoire of interactive behaviour.

To achieve this personal competence for helping children's social-emotional functioning, takes systematic practical training in the kindergarten or school situation. Theoretical studies do not necessarily change behaviour.

Recommended reading:

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