

The Four Pillars Of Childhood.

Author: Zoë Harcombe

The four pillars of childhood are the four necessary conditions for a person's esteem to develop positively in the key formative years (generally seen as up to the age of 5).

There is almost a Pillar 0 – a precursor to the others being possible – and this is that our own parents and primary carers had high self-esteem and good mental health, during our formative years. It is very difficult for an adult to give a child the healthy nurturing that it needs, if the adult's own childhood was not a nurturing experience. Some particularly unaware adults can even 'take out' their deficiencies on children in a particularly destructive way. This is quite a hurdle to set at the outset, and then four more are needed. It is little wonder that one in four people in the UK will experience mental health problems in the course of any year (The Mental Health Foundation).

1) Unconditional love and positive reinforcement from our parents and primary carers in our formative years (up to 4-5). The child has to know that they are completely loved and valued, without conditions, otherwise a sense of feeling worthless can so easily develop. Conditional love occurs when a parent places a condition on their love for the child e.g. "I don't love you when you're naughty" (this implies the child is only loved when they are 'good', whatever good means). "Only children who eat their greens are allowed to have ice-cream" (this directly links food into emotional situations, at a formative age and it sets conditions such as – I will only do nice things for you (give you ice-cream) if you do what I want (eat your greens). Such conditions are confusing for a child, let alone destructive.

2) Discipline – All children need accompanying boundaries to go with this unconditional love. A dog cannot be content without knowing their place in 'the pack', as, in the absence of direction they think they are the master and stress about the responsibility this comes with. A child, similarly, needs to know what they can and can't do, or they get overloaded with decision making. They will push the boundaries – this is part of growing up – but the boundaries need to be there and reasonable and consistent. No boundaries can be as stressful as too many (the dog example); unreasonable boundaries are harmful (e.g. children have to be out of sight when adults are around) and inconsistent boundaries literally mess with the poor, young child's mind, as they are trying to get some sense of order in the world around them. A strict bed time of 5pm one night, then 9pm another, then 7pm another – without any reasonable reason for this – is destructive discipline.

3) Encouragement and respect from our parents and primary carers, during the formative years (and beyond) for our own personal development.

Acknowledgement that we are important, our opinions count, adults not being dismissive and so on. Sports coaches learn that you should deliver positive at least six or seven positive messages for every one corrective message. Even where the corrective is helpful, e.g. "you need to commit earlier to the tackle", the sports person needs half a dozen other "well done's", "Great job" to get the right balance of encouragement. We almost can't tell children too often how wonderful they are, how well they have just done, and so on, to cement this pillar of esteem.

4) Self Control – By this we mean "control of the self", the sense of control for oneself – feeling safe and having one's own space. If any seriously negative conditions are present for the infant, like abuse, hunger, and cold or serious neglect, for example, this will violate the heart of any sense of having control of their self. Abuse of a young child can take many forms and it is well-documented that possibly the worst kind of abuse is neglect and ignoring the child. This goes to the core of a person not being 'validated' and therefore not feeling 'valid' or entitled to be part of the world. In order, a child would much prefer 1) positive attention and good parenting; 2) negative attention and bad parenting (at least they have some attention) and the worst case scenario is 3) no attention. I am always fascinated by the parallels with animals and children – particularly dogs, a man's best friend. A dog too would rather be beaten by its master (attention) than abandoned or ignored. Being ignored by the master is the dog's worst nightmare.

The four pillars (and ground zero) can provide such a useful model for individuals (and counsellors) to understand quickly and measurably whether there are esteem issues to address and where the roots of these esteem issues may be. Doing this first helps the individual understand what they are about to set out in black and white – that their parenting was not good and it helps them to understand a bit about 'why' this may have been the case, at the outset. This is not about blame, or forgiveness, but about understanding what actually did happen in the formative years and how this may be impacting anxiety, depression, emotions and emotional eating today.

When we know why we are the way we are, we can start to be the person we want to be.

Zoë Harcombe

July 2010

www.zoeharcombe.com

www.theharcombedietclub.com