



APC - Canton

Attachment Parenting International

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The Healing Gap

By Scott Noelle

The tiny examination room at the Planned Parenthood clinic was too small for three people. Nevertheless, Beth and I stood awkwardly against the wall as the door opened and the gynecologist squeezed in. The stiffness of her white lab coat was audible as she maneuvered around the exam table. Her vocal inflection was deliberately neutral when she finally announced the results: "The test came back positive."

It took me a moment to figure out that "positive" meant my wife was pregnant with our first child.

My mind exploded with thoughts of alternate futures, and the walls of that tiny, windowless room seemed to be contracting around me. As we left I felt my life as a childless adult come to an end, and I was born into the world of parenthood.

But it wasn't a planned parenthood (well, we didn't plan it) and my emotional reaction was an unfamiliar mixture of joy and terror. I had always looked forward to raising children, yet I had expected to "get my act together" before anyone would call me Dad. Though I was 32 years old, I felt completely unprepared for this journey. How could I raise a child responsibly when I was still recovering from my own troubled childhood?

That feeling, over seven years ago, came from an awareness of what I now call the healing gap, a phenomenon that arises when a person consciously seeks a healthier path than the one he or she is currently on. In parenthood, it's the gap between the healthy parenting ideas you embrace consciously and what you're actually capable of doing, here and now.

Real-life parenting does not emerge solely from the parent's conscious intentions; it involves the whole person — mind, body, emotions and spirit — as well as the social and cultural context in which it takes place. In other words, it's easy to change your mind, but implementing a change in your whole self is far more difficult, especially when going against the grain of society and culture.

The gap between parenting theory and practice is filled with "stuff": each parent's unique collection of fears, attachments, emotional wounds, unmet needs and obsolete strategies — plus external, sociocultural pressures — that impede our efforts to do what we believe is best.

Consider homebirth, for example. In most industrialized countries the idea of intentionally birthing outside of a hospital or other medical setting would not even occur to most expectant parents, and some cannot fathom why anyone would choose not to have an epidural. When these parents are exposed to research about the benefits of a natural, non-medical homebirth, most will reject the idea. Some, however, will decide on a homebirth despite their culturally induced mistrust of nature.

Thus, a healing gap is created: the mind logically and/or intuitively senses something "right" about the new choice, but the body, emotions, etc., are not "there" yet. In order to close the gap and realize the new vision, the parents must face their fears and work through them, preferably before the birth. They surround themselves with supportive people to offset the influence of naysayers. Mother learns to trust her body. Father learns to trust the process. When such healing occurs — and often it occurs during the birth — the birth experience is significantly improved no matter where it finally takes place.

Ideal # 8: Maintain balance in your family life

Parents need to nurture themselves as well as their children, especially when meeting the intense, immediate needs of infants. Balance is the key to avoiding "parent burn-out". All family members need exercise, quiet time and healthy eating. Adults, whether married or single, need a social support system.

For Infants and Toddlers:

- * Whether you are married with several children or a single parent with an only child, it is important to remember that finding balance is the key to a healthy family life. It is important that parents not be isolated. They should seek out support systems within their communities. This can be achieved by creating a type of extended family of like-minded friends, or participating in an API parent-support group that provides opportunities for not only for support but for more experienced parents to mentor newer parents.

- * Being a new father often requires helping mom to develop a relationship with her newborn. During the first few months of life, the baby will often be the mother's sole preoccupation. Be sure Dad is included in daily baby activities. The support of fathers helps mothers become more confident and competent in their role as a mother and helps them to be successful in breastfeeding.

- * It's easy to feel "burned out" and "touched out" by the demands of parenting. The early months of a baby's life can be very intense and time consuming. Try to be patient and sensitive to each other's needs.

- * Be creative in finding ways to spend time with your spouse/partner without compromising the needs of your infant. Candle-lit dinners or a picnic in the living room can be fun and help couples reconnect.

- * Have a friend, relative or mother's helper (a trusted teen-ager) that the baby knows, come over to play and entertain while the parents have some quiet time together somewhere else in the house. Take them with you if you go out. They can help with the baby, but the baby will be comforted by your close proximity.

- * Realize that in the early years your child's needs are at their most intense and "this too shall pass."

- * Sometimes it can be difficult for parents to find the support they need. Professional counseling can be of great benefit in helping families regain balance and in linking them to resources or other services in the community.

For School-Age Children

- * Don't overdo extra-curricular activities

- * Allow your child some free time. Avoid scheduling every minute of your child's time. Children love to have time to hang around the house, read, have their friends over, talk, play games or be creative.

- * Have regular family meals together. This is an important time that helps families reconnect after a busy day.

- * Emphasize to your children the importance of family time and family traditions, regardless of the type of family you may have. If parents act as if family time isn't important, the children won't value it either.

- * Individual children need individual time with one or both parents. Make a "date" on a regular basis with each of your children for special time together.

- * Create special family nights, like "game night", "movie night", or "music night". Most young children look forward to special times like these.

- * Parents need to nurture themselves and their relationship. As children get older, parents can find more opportunities to have time alone together as their children develop trusting relationships with friends and family outside of the immediate family. Parents can also develop their own hobbies, interests, or volunteer work they may have put 'on hold' when their children were younger. Set an example for your children, and include them if possible.

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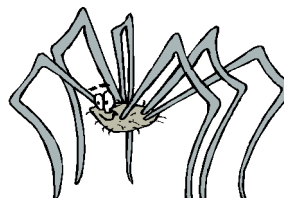
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**API-Canton
Websites:**

Home Page:

<http://www.orgsites.com/oh/apicantoncircle/index.html>

Discussion Group:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CantonCircleofAPIfamilies/?guid=214031996>

Now consider a new mother practicing Attachment Parenting. Here, the potential is great for a widening of the healing gap, especially if the mother herself was left in a crib to "cry it out" and her natural attachment needs were ignored or belittled when she was a baby. The gap may show up as resentment of the child and an overwhelming desire to "get my life back!" If she finds the courage to face and heal the deeper roots of those feelings — and gets the social support she'll need along the way — she will indeed get her life back. But it won't be her old life, it will be a new lease on life in which she feels more whole, free, compassionate and healthily attached to her child.

Beth and I both have gone through similar experiences over the last seven years. The gap doesn't close overnight; for us it has been a gradual, long-term healing process with occasional leaps forward and frequent backsliding.

Fortunately, the forward leaps provide inspiration that sustain us through the inevitable backslides. When my older daughter Olivia was four, there was a point at which I was losing my patience with her seemingly ceaseless, "spirited" behavior. Desperate for calm and quiet, I was tempted to misuse my power to stifle the behavior, but then I read this passage from *Giving The Love That Heals*: "You know you are face-to-face with the unfinished business of your own childhood when you respond with strong negative feelings to your child's behavior." (Hendri and Hunt, 1997) I realized that a large part of the reason Olivia's behavior had bothered me was that much of my own childlike spirit had been suppressed. My heart softened, and I learned to appreciate Olivia's spiritedness — and my own — even when the daily chaos makes me yearn for simpler times.

Anyone who questions the status quo, who consciously seeks healthier ways of living, is going to experience these gaps. So why is it that many of us are hard on ourselves or others — sometimes even harshly judgmental — when the parenting is less than ideal?

First, our culture doesn't acknowledge the healing gap. Once we realize how things "should" be, the pressure is on to get it "right" — NOW! There's little room for process in a product-driven society. Even more, our culture's competitive, win-lose paradigm compels us to hide our healing gaps for fear of being tagged a "loser." But such hiding actually prevents healing.

Knowing that we all have our own healing gaps can help us see beyond the judgments of ourselves and others. The gap is neither good nor bad; it's a natural aspect of healing, analogous to Maslow's second stage of learning — conscious incompetence — a step forward that seems like a step backward because you become more aware that something is "off".

Ideally, that "off" feeling would simply motivate us to develop a higher level of competence, but often it merely triggers feelings of shame and inadequacy. We may feel "not 'AP' enough" or "not 'enlightened' enough" as parents, for example. Such feelings are the most important ones to face: they prevent us from harnessing the power of the healing gap to propel us forward. As we free ourselves from the shackles of judgment and shame, we feel more at peace being right where we are on the path, even as we embrace an idealistic vision of how we want to be. We can be realistic about how steep a learning curve (or "healing curve") we can handle. Defensiveness, blame, justification and other means of protecting ourselves from feeling ashamed are no longer needed, and this can free up a lot of creative energy to further accelerate the healing process.

Another endeavor that can benefit from acknowledgement and integration of the healing gap is "creating community." From parenting support groups to homeschooling co-ops to "intentional communities," nothing exposes the healing gap as dramatically as our attempts to rise above the norm of isolated, single-family life. We dream of belonging to a modern "tribe" in which parents are respectful and sensitive to the children's needs, children have easy access to many playmates, and someone is there for you in times of need. Why do attempts to create community so often go down in flames?

As "alternative" parents, we are already challenged by our individual healing gaps. We are accustomed to dealing with that in the relatively simple context of the family, but as we coalesce into larger social groups, the social complexity increases exponentially. (Do the math... A nuclear family with one child has only three interpersonal relationships: mother-father, mother-child, father-child. In a group of ten parents and ten children, the number of possible relationships rises to 190!) This increased social complexity tends to bring individuals' "stuff" to the surface, makes dealing with it more complicated, and creates a collective healing gap — the chasm between the ideal of the healthy, interdependent community and the reality of our fragmented society.

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In order to survive and thrive, a fledgling group or community needs to be clear about its shared ideals and it must acknowledge and accept its individual and collective healing gaps. With this clarity, group members can develop a practical, compassionate way of handling current realities as they work incrementally toward their vision.

As with most of life, the healing gap is like a hologram in which the pattern of the whole is embedded in each part. There are healing gaps at the level of the individual, the family, the community, the nation and the world, and there is an upward ripple effect from individual toward global healing. You create this ripple effect every time you embrace a higher vision for your own expression of parenthood, accept where you are now, and let the gap inspire healing.

Scott Noelle lives near Seattle, with his wife Beth and their two daughters. A longtime advocate of conscious, holistic, instinctive, natural parenting, Scott offers telephone-based coaching to support progressive parents worldwide. His free E-zine, Transforming Parenthood, is available online at www.scottnoelle.com

Web address of this article:

<http://www.scottnoelle.com/parenting/healing-gap>

ATTENTION:

PLEASE remember to return any slings or books that you have borrowed. Remember, slings are for RENT at \$3.00 per month. Both slings and books should be returned as soon as possible so that other members can borrow them.

Join API

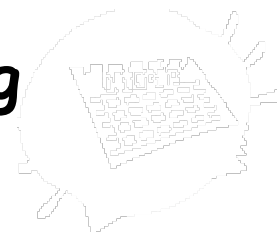
Attachment Parenting International (API) is a tax exempt, 501(c)(3), nonprofit, nonsectarian, and nonpartisan organization. API membership is not required to attend API group meetings but is encouraged to sustain the activities of the group and support the work of API. All donations to API are gratefully accepted and are tax deductible.

Individual/Family Membership , \$35.00 (one-year membership includes four complimentary quarterly issues of the Attachment Parenting: The Journal of Attachment Parenting International).

Our Mother's Helper

We have a Mother's Helper that joins us to care for the older children while we chat, through games, stories, and crafts. If your child plays with her, we ask that you be prepared to donate at least \$1 per child for her valuable and playful time!

Upcoming Events



July 31 - Aug. 6 - World Breastfeeding Week

Aug. 13 - Canton World Breastfeeding Walk -4:00 pm at Stadium Park

Aug. 19 - Mom's Morning Out, 10:00a.m at Westfield Mall Food Court

Sept. 9 - Waldorf Workshop