

THE AIR THAT CHILDREN BREATHE

Taking responsibility for parent's relationship is the best contribution to children's wellbeing

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Children cannot escape the atmosphere that is being created around them by the quality of the interaction between their parents. All living beings are subject to the quality of the air that they breathe. They cannot escape from it. The children also have nowhere else to go to from their parental home where they breathe the quality of the emotional dynamics between their parents. The consequences are long-term, both positive and negative, just like they are regarding the quality of the air that we breathe, only much more long-term. Polluted air makes us sick; clean air heals us.

Caring for the physical needs of children is fundamental, but not enough. Caring for the quality of the direct relationship between mother and child, father and child, is essential, but not enough. The quality of the interpersonal space between parents, invisible to the adults, is very visible for the children. They cannot escape it. Taking full responsibility for our children must include taking responsibility for the quality of the relationship between the parents at home. Having children means that our adult relationship is no longer just a private business. It becomes the children's business as well. I am not stating this in order to make anyone feel guilty but in order to add an extra motivation to do what we have to do anyway: taking personal responsibility for the standard of our adult interaction in intimate relationship. The presence of the children and our love and care for them can remind us of this responsibility every day, even when we neglect to care about it for ourselves.

As many teachers, educators and therapists of children and of adolescents well know, most of the behavioural, social and mental dysfunction that children display at school are due not to the child's inner capacities and strengths, but to the effect of negative dynamics between the parents at home. The most effective way to improve children's behaviour and performance at school is to work directly with their parents and to improve, if possible, the adult relationship at home. That has a direct impact on the children. But as it is in all areas of life, crisis management is most costly and least effective form of management. The usual pitfalls in adult relationship are predictable, predicated on fundamentally known human nature, and they can be managed in a preventative way. But that depends on adults starting to take conscious responsibility for the quality of their interaction.

Can adults improve the quality of the emotional dynamics between them? Of course, we can, but that requires taking responsibility for one's own emotional dynamics individually, because oneself is the only reality that one can change.

After many years of relationship, couple, marriage and parental and educational counselling in a few countries I came to consolidate a list of core principles required for sustainable adult relationship that can uplift, maintain and upgrade the quality of life and health of children. The following is a list of principles for taking conscious responsibility for adult relationship at home.

- 1) Relationship challenges are not a pathology, they are normal, to be expected and to be dealt with wisely. Adult relationship is like a garden: however beautiful it is to start with - when we fall in love with each other– it needs constant nurturing, care, cultivation, weeding, pruning, replanting, fertilising, sunshine, air and watering. The intelligent reader does not need a lot of explanation in translating these garden metaphors into their implications for the quality of adult intimate relationship. Just wake up to your personal responsibility and care of your 'relationship-garden'.
- 2) Personal change is required in order to renew adult relationship. If you leave adult relationships to the passage of time, they die, slowly or fast. In the same way that plants and animals have to do something in order to overcome gravity, to stand upright or move, our soul life is in a kind of 'soul-gravity' and tends to deteriorate unless we do something consciously to keep uplifting it. *A problem cannot be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.* Conscious upgrade is constantly needed.
- 3) Children are being severely damaged by the conflicts of their parents. In Psychophonetics¹ we call it *environmental abuse*. The conflict does not have to be directed at the child, for the child to be damaged by it. Whatever you do to your co-parent, you are doing to the child, intentionally or not, and, potentially, you can control it. It takes two to tango but it takes only one to stop the dance. The same applies to fighting: it takes two to create a conflict, but it takes one person to stop the fight. *Any conflict in relationship can end with any individual in it stopping to fight.* At any point in time, in the middle of any argument, each one involved can

¹ Psychophonetics is a method of self-awareness, personal development, coaching, counselling, psychotherapy and organisational consultancy based on Yehuda Tagar's development of Rudolf Steiner's Psychosophy. It is being practiced in Slovakia, Czech Republic, UK, South Africa, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, Spain and Australia. It is being taught professionally by Psychophonetics Institute International (www.psychophonetics.com.au) and in Slovakia by Skola Empathie, the Slovak branch of PACE (Psychosophy Academy of Central Europe) (www.pace.sk).

stop their own participation in it, observe oneself, and re-start from another place in oneself. You don't have to wait for the other to stop what he/she is doing.

- 4) We have to accept the human complexity for what it is. You did not marry an angel but a man or a woman, a complex human being like yourself: a combination of light, darkness and everything in between. It is naïve and unintelligent to expect perfection from anyone. By joining the life of another person intimately and for a long-term, you took on board *everything* that lives in that human being, not only what you like about them. You took on board also what you hate about them, their weaknesses, their wounds, their shadows, their untransformed human habits, their whole biography and their darkness. You cannot pick and choose the parts of your partner that you like, as if they were products on the shelves of a supermarket, and you cannot return what you don't like in them to Amazon by mail. They took on all of you as well. Now you have to work with whatever is in that package, like it or not. No use fighting it. That is your lot now. Stop complaining. Work with it.

The core principle of sustainable, healthy relationship is that the only person you can really change is yourself, and even that takes a lot of work. *You cannot change anyone else!* Whenever you try to change someone else, you just start another war. Most domestic arguments are based on the destructive assumption that you can force a change on the other. Attempting that only fuel the conflict. Peace can only come when you accept the other as they are, changing your reaction to them.

- 5) The next principle for peaceful relationship is very hard to accept: there is not only one truth and only one reality on the human level. Everyone has their individual point of view forming an individual reality. On the basis of accepting that principle, a greater truth can be discovered and a greater reality can be formed, but not before. Domestic arguments poison the air that children breathe. Developing respect for different points of view stop the argument and start a conversation.
- 6) The next principal is an ancient one: 'Know the truth and the truth shall set you free': if you want to change a personal pattern of behaviour, you have to understand that pattern very well. You can only start a change from where you are. Self-knowledge is a pre-condition for personal change, and personal change is the only foundation for a change in relationship. We owe it to our children to develop our capacity for self-observation.

Defensive reactions dominate the life of all animals, including the human animal, but to be fully human, one has to be on an ongoing process of overcoming one's reactions. Uncontrolled, compulsive, repetitive defensive reactions destroy human relationship, intimacy, love, softness, warmth, tenderness, listening, care—everything children need in order to grow well. By reacting defensively to each other in domestic situation: reacting to our partners, our children, our life situation, we destroy them. It is a difficult task to overcome one's automatic reactions, but a possible one. Not trying to overcome one's defensive reactions is harder.

Domestic arguments must stop. No one ever wins them. Everyone is a loser. During arguments no one is actually listening to the other, and what is the point in speaking when no one is listening? It is a waste of time and it destroy any loving atmosphere. We can disagree, we may have different realities, but domestic arguments are intrinsically stupid, an insult to the intellect. Just stop them as soon as you remember to. Nothing will be missed.

- 7) The last principle in this list for now is the conscious cultivation of gratitude: there are so many things in everyone's life to want to change, but there are also so many supports to being alive at all to be grateful to. It only takes a choice to stop and to appreciate what we have, inwardly and outwardly, to be filled with gratitude. The experience of gratitude nurtures the soul and cultivates love. Our children chose to be born to us, that is an incredible privilege and an act of incredible trust. They bring so much into our life. For children to be appreciated is oxygen. That is the air they *need* to breathe to be well.

This is the gift I wish to give to all of us as parents, for the new year: the reminder that the children grow in the human space between us and they breathe the quality of 'emotional air' that we as adults create. We can take conscious responsibility to our individual contribution to the quality of the air that our children breathe. Of course, real change requires more than just good intention. It requires self-awareness and practical process, such as being offered by Psychophonetics². But good, informed intention is the starting point for real change and the minimum that we can do for our children. They have nowhere else to go, and they trust us. Let us live up to this sacred trust.

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² For information about sessions and training > www.pace.sk <> www.psychophonetics.com.au

(Psychosophy Academy of Central Europe), offering professional training in Psychophonetics and Methodical Empathy in Slovakia and internationally.