

Understanding the child (mentalization)

As humans, we are designed to function in groups with others. And in our brains we have various functions that are specially designed to read, interpret, and adapt to other people. We have mirror neurons, for example, nerve cells that simply mirror the expressions of others, and enable us to feel some of other people's emotions in our own body. This helps us to connect emotionally, and enables us to bond with each other.

Mirror neurons often work quite automatically in us and contributes to slightly more advanced functions that we can work on enhancing. Like, when you try to understand how something is experienced by others, or how you experience something. You notice which words they use, and also the tone of their voice, their body language and gaze. You may also wonder what the other person has experienced earlier today, or how what you just said made the other person feel. We all do this all the time when we meet others, both adults and children. In professional terms we call this interpretation process mentalization.

In an ordinary hectic day we don't always interpret people or situations correctly. Children can challenge us in many ways. They can nag, make noise, make rude comments, do other things than what we ask them to, or do things that put others in a bad situation. We can be provoked and think that they are looking for attention. That they are selfish, lack empathy, are manipulative, lazy, rude, or don't want to do what they are supposed to.

When we make interpretations like that our reactions can become strict and harsh. Perhaps we inflict shame and guilt on the child too. This can further lead to negative spirals over a long period of time, which is not good for anyone.

However, if we try to see the situation as the child might experience it, we may notice that the child is in pain, and that their behaviour was an expression of helplessness and defence. This understanding will create more empathy, care, and responsibility in the situation. We can also meet the child with understanding, support, and help to manage to do what is good for the child and others around.

Example:

- "What are you doing?! You're too old for this now, you're not a little baby anymore!"
- "I hate you!"
- Thinking: Ugh, I guess I was being a bit stupid now. I shouldn't have said that, but I felt she did it on purpose. That's probably not right. I know that she is tired, and that she has had a lot of struggles lately. She would probably have done things differently if everything was all right with her. I must try again and try to do it better.

It's not just us adults who mentalize, children do it too. And it is quite natural that children do not always have the prerequisites to interpret situations correctly. This can be particularly relevant for children who challenge us with their behaviour. They may believe that others have hostile intentions with what they say or do, and thus it becomes natural for the child to meet them with hostile reactions in return. If so, it can be useful to help them adjust their interpretations. The best way to learn good mentalization, however, is to experience that others interpret you correctly! To experience that adults see that I am a child who has a difficult time and not someone who is difficult. And thus meets me with support, and not with consequences or punishment.

We don't always manage to get this right. Even if it is good for the child, good for people around us and good for us. Our mentalizing capacity is reduced when we find ourselves outside the window of tolerance, or when we for one reason or other struggle with things that require too much capacity. In these situations we might interpret incorrectly and react in negative ways.

When that happens, we take responsibility and repair the relationship with the child afterwards. After that we charge our batteries and get ready for the next chance to interpret correctly.