A Review of Literature Supporting the Parenting by Connection Approach

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Introduction

Since its founding in 1989 by Patricia Wipfler, The Parents Leadership Institute (PLI), has offered parenting education through workshops, literature, parent support groups, and parent-child play groups that allow parents and caregivers to learn how to nurture the bonds of connection with children. Patricia and the groups of parent educators that she has worked with over the years have consistently received positive feedback from the parents they teach and support. Typical comments from prior evaluations include;

> *"The group helped me heal many deep-rooted problems with myself that I didn't realize cause my children harm. I see this through my home changing. I feel enthusiastic at home. I know that if I feel well, my children will feel well." Tantrum Training 2004*

> *"I used to be negative about many things because I was embarrassed to ask for help, I have learned to be able to ask for help for me and for my children." Tantrum Training 2004*

> *"This class has helped me learn compassion towards my child and myself. I'm more patient and open to my daughter. I definitely feel more confident in my parenting." Tantrum Training 2004*

> *"I found the classes to be great. They have really helped me a lot, especially with my two-year-old daughter. My husband did not attend the classes, but I have shared the material with him. It is helping both of us to make changes, and we see changes in our daughter. Thank you." Tantrum training 2006*

While observing parents' renewed energy and confidence emerge after having tried PLI's tools has been rewarding for staff, PLI also sought to investigate the extent to which their approach aligns with the latest scientific research on child development. An understanding of the field would allow PLI to further strengthen their approach, and make a strong case to foundations and other stakeholders for the importance of supporting PLI and its programs.

Through an examination of the literature of child development, including sub-categories such as parent child connectedness, brain development, resiliency, and early childhood literacy, we found again and again that PLI's approach is congruent with scientific findings on how best to help children thrive.

The format of this literature review includes:

I. Overview of the Need for Parent Education
II. Overview of Research on Parent Child Connection
III. A description of each of the tools PLI uses and examples of scientific findings that support the use of these tools for positive outcomes in children.
IV. Conclusion

I. What is the Need for Parent Education?

The Parents Leadership Institute was created to support parents through the struggles they face. Unfortunately, the concept of supporting parents is not widely accepted in United States policy, economic structure, or culture. In addition, studies show that the work of parenting is becoming more difficult today than it was 30 years ago.

In order to support a family, earning a reasonable income is essential. However, real wages, adjusted for inflation, have been declining for American workers since the recent economic recovery began in 2001. *"For weekly earnings, the relevant values are $530.17 in November 2001 and $525.84 last month [June 2004]…in other words, after adjusting for inflation, both hourly and weekly earnings are below where they were when the current recovery got underway [2001]"* (Economic Policy Institute, July 2004). Often the media portrays our economy as progressing, when in fact it is not, for the average worker.

The decline in wages contributes to many kinds of stress and hardship in families' lives. For example, *"42 percent of U.S. workers feel "used up" at the end of the work day, and 40 percent feel so tired in the morning that it is hard to get up and face another day at work"* (Kagan and Weissbourd; 1994, p. 113). In her study, "Work hours as a predictor of stress outcomes," Rosalind Chait Barnett, Ph.D. found that *"For [the mother]: as total family work hours increased, her marital-role quality showed a decrease. For [the father]: as total family work hours increased, his ratings of work-family conflict showed a trend to increase"* (Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center, 2004).

Unfortunately, these statistics are even more severe when examining communities of color. *"About 25 percent of families with children under three years of age fall below the poverty line. The rates are still higher for African American families, Latino families, and single-parent families with young children"* (Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children; 1994, p. 17). Clearly North American culture's lack of support for families overlaps with institutionalized racism.

While more and more families drop below the poverty line, inner city neighborhoods are becoming less and less resourced to care for those who need support the most. *"Nearly 4 million children are growing up in "severely distressed neighborhoods"* (Annie E. Casey Foundation; 1994, p.11). The terms "severely distressed neighborhood" refers to indicators of distress such as schools in which the majority of children perform below grade level, drug activity in public, and lack of safe public places for children to play.

Poverty and distressed neighborhoods lead to violence. Parents living in these types of conditions are more apt to lose their temper, be unable to control their anger, or be exhausted. Children lash out at one another as well. *"Homicide is the third leading cause of death for elementary and middle school children"* (Children's Defense Fund; 1995, p. 61).

In San Mateo County, the cost of living is higher than almost anywhere in the nation. *"In San Mateo county, in 2004, the yearly income necessary for a family of three to maintain self-sufficiency was $62,568 (or $28.97 an hour) almost 4 times the federal poverty level"* (San Mateo County Children's Report, 2005). So what can parents do to support a wholesome family in this county? What does it take to raise a resilient child? What can parents do to overcome their own stress and give their children the attention that they really need?

Parents Leadership Institute helps parents answer these questions through simple, easy to use strategies that are relevant to the real life circumstances of parents. Although the strategies may seem counter-intuitive to parents at first, practice leads parents to feel that the strategies are both logical and effective. The strategies offered are consistent with the leading expert research in child development, so parents' positive experiences are not surprising.

Parents Leadership Institute refers to their overall approach as "Parenting by Connection." Parents are taught six main strategies, called "Listening Tools;" Special Time, Playlistening, Setting Limits, Staylistening, Listening Partnerships and Parent Support Groups. Each of these strategies includes a rationale and suggested guidelines for action. However, all six of these approaches stem from an overarching philosophy that the primary way for children to meet the challenges of this world as confident and empathetic people is through experiencing a loving connection with their primary care givers.

II. What does the research say about connection?

In much of the child development research, the concept of connection is referred to as "attachment theory." For example, according to Dr. Daniel Siegel of the UCLA School of Medicine, in a recent article published in the 2001 volumne of Infant Mental Health Journal; Toward an Interpersonal Neurobiology of the Developing Mind: Attachment Relationships, Mindsight, and Neural Integration, *"the infant is born into the world genetically programmed to connect with caregivers who will become 'attachment figures' in the child's life"* (Siegel; 'Cassidy & Shaver, 1999' 2001; p. 69).

> *"These attachments provide a relationship in which the infant will: 1) seek proximity to the attachment figure; 2) have a sense of a safe haven – in which when he is upset the attachment figure will soothe his distress and 3) develop an internal working model of a secure base – an internal schema of the self with other, self with attachment figure that will provide him with a security enabling him to explore the world, have a sense of wellbeing, and to soothe himself in times of distress in the future"* (Siegel, 'Bowlby, 1969' 2001; p. 69).

Lawrence J. Cohen, PH.D. and child psychologist argues that**,** *"child psychologists talk about attachment theory all the time, but it isn't well understood by parents"* (2001; p. 43). He uses the simple metaphor of a cup. A child who feels empty because of having

a frustrating day, goes to their attachment figure to fill up. The attachment figure is *"a place to start from and return to"* (2001; p. 43).

According to Siegel's research, children who experience a strong attachment early in life show the most likelihood to experience positive outcomes later in life. *"Longitudinal studies have found that securely attached children appear to have a number of positive outcomes in their development. These include enhanced emotional flexibility, social functioning and cognitive abilities"* (Siegel, 'Cassidy & Shaver 1999' 2001; p. 77).

Dorothy Corkille Briggs, in Your Child's Self-Esteem, explains attachment in that *"every child needs periodic genuine encounters with his parents. A genuine encounter is simply focused attention. It is attention with a special intensity born of direct, personal involvement. Vital contact means being intimately open to the particular, unique qualities of your child"* (1975, p. 64). If policy makers took children's needs for relaxed, focused attention from their parents to heart, parents would most likely be supported with more time off from work, longer maternity leaves, and more child friendly public spaces. Rather than blaming working mothers for rises in juvenile delinquency, policy makers would be better to enable parents to provide the best prevention possible, which according to the research is spending time connecting with their young children.

Attachment isn't just the emotional bond between children and their caregivers but is an essential factor in the physical development of children's brains. The physical development of the brain is dependent on experiencing a relationship with another. *"Children need such joining experiences because they provide the emotional nourishment that developing minds require. Relationships that are 'connecting' and allow for collaboration appear to offer children a wealth of interpersonal closeness that supports the development of many domains, including social, emotional, and cognitive functioning*" (Siegel, 2001; p. 78). So experiencing a close caregiver connection does not just encourage the development of skills but actually programs the brain to have the ability to execute these skills. Siegel, in further research, states that, *"In fact, experience shapes brain structure. Experience is biology. How we treat our children changes who they are and how they develop. Their brains need parental involvement. Nature needs nurture*" (Siegel, 2004; p. 34). The knowledge that parents have this much of an impact on their children could be both daunting and empowering. PLI plans to integrate these new scientific findings with their curriculum in simple non-threatening ways in order to empower rather than intimidate.

The Education Training Research Associates, (ETR) with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, conducted a literature review on the effects of parents developing a secure connection with their children early in life. Their product, Parent-Child Connectedness: Implications for Research, Interventions, and Positive Impacts on Adolescent Health, 2004 provides an excellent guide for understanding the true impact a strong parent child connection can have on children.

ETR begins also by referring to "attachment theory," which they define as a primary caregiver, usually the mother, helping the infant *"learn the important developmental skill*

of self-regulation as distress is soothed, needs are met, and alertness enhanced" (ETR, 'Bridges, 2002' 2004; p. 4). Research has shown that when attachment is derailed, inconsistent or neglected, children show signs of what researchers refer to as avoidant, anxious, or insecure behavior that leads to a variety of adverse outcomes.

ETR uses the term Parent Child Connectedness, or PCC, to expand the idea of attachment to encompass more than the parent unilaterally giving to the child. They define PCC as *"seeing the interaction between parents and children not just as individuals but as part of an on-going, dynamic relationship"* (ETR, 2004; p. 5). The parent-child connection endures beyond the early infant years, and is sustained in different ways throughout the life of the child. This definition of PCC is consistent with the Parents Leadership Institute's approach of "Parenting by Connection."

ETR's review of over 600 research studies concludes that Parent Child Connectedness is what ETR calls the "super-protective factor" against adverse outcomes in adolescence. PCC is the single strongest indicator that an adolescent will reach adulthood without experiencing teen pregnancy or violence, without becoming addicted to drugs or tobacco, and without dropping out of high school.

Surprisingly, ETR also found in their research that *"currently, there are very few interventions specifically focused on strengthening parent child connectedness. In our review of the literature and in our discussions with experts in the field, ETR was able to find only a couple of programs that specifically focus on the strengthening of connectedness between parent and adolescent child"* (ETR, 2004; p. 55). Parents Leadership Institute is one of those few programs around the country.

PLI recognizes that a strong and secure connection between parent and child is the optimal formula for a child to flourish. However, PLI also recognizes that there are many real life circumstances that prevent parents from establishing and maintaining that connection over time. The six simple strategies PLI offers allow parents of all backgrounds to learn to foster a closer connection with their children, and to maintain that connection over time.

III. PLI's Listening Tools

1. Special Time

According to PLI: Children need attention and a connection with their caregiver. Parents love their children, but find it difficult to devote undivided attention to them, given the many demands on their time and energy. Special Time is a framework in which the child can enjoy the parents' focused attention, and communicate with the parent through play. Special Time can be intentionally used to help children during rough times like adjusting to childcare, a new brother or sister, or mom going back to work. It helps a parent enjoy giving the love they so strongly feel for their child/ren. And it gives parents a practical, flexible framework with which to deliver their attention.

PLI Suggests: Set aside a regular, limited period of time for the child to direct the parent in one-on-one play. The parent is receptive to the wishes of the child, and offers eye contact, affection, and warm comments and tone. The parent does not teach, direct, or multi-task during this time.

Research Agrees:

Dr. Stanley Greenspan and Dr. T. Berry Brazelton have spent over 30 years researching what helps children flourish. Their research also points emphatically to the importance of the parent child connection. They also observe that establishing and maintaining that connection is easier said than done. While all parents love their children, parents experience a variety of societal obstructions that impede the parent child connection. The most obvious obstruction is work, but even the stay at home mom is often absorbed with household tasks or other obligations. Although physically close to the child, even the stay at home mother may not always have the opportunity to nurture a close emotional connection.

In The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn and Flourish, T. Berry Brazelton, M.D. and Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D. observed four types of involvement of parents with their children.

1) *being in the house with the child but not being in sight because you are in a different room*
2) *being in the same room – see and hear each other but not necessarily involved in any direct interaction*
3) *being available intermittently, facilitating the baby's interaction with his environment – looking at pictures together, helping the baby to explore a toy or his surroundings*
4) *parent directly interacting with the child – following the child's interests – such as in making sounds or funny faces – handing objects back and forth – 'the parent in essence becomes the play object or the toy or object of interest'* (2000; p. 40).

Number four is the type of interaction parents are encouraged to create in the framework PLI calls "Special Time."

Drs. Greenspan and Brazelton highlight the importance of this fourth type of interaction.

> *"Parents or caregivers who tend to get preoccupied and structured with their tasks may need to set aside more and more* ***special times*** *for the facilitated or direct nurturing interactions. At minimum, there should be four 20-minute or longer opportunities for direct interaction simply because these kinds of interactions help babies learn to have an emotional dialogue and eventually an intellectual dialogue with their caregivers over longer stretches of time"* (2000; p. 41).

Dr. Greenspan also indicates that Special Time doubles as an effective discipline strategy.

> *"along with setting limits, I recommend that every day there is some relaxed time one-on-one with the parent and child. I call it* ***"floor time."*** *Often, by following the child's lead for a time you can have problem solving discussions where you work on the limits together. You can also anticipate situations tomorrow*"(2000; p. 153).

2. *"If you have to set lots of limits, you increase the warmth, nurturing,* ***"hangout" time*** *proportionately" "So if you are increasing your limits, increase nurturance and warmth. By giving more, you can expect more"* (2000; p. 153).

While the exact words may be slightly different, (floor time, hang-out time) the concepts are much the same as PLI's Special Time. As reported in the research, Special Time helps foster all of the same benefits as Parent Child Connectedness, and it lays a foundation for preventing children's irrational behavior.

2. Playlistening

According to PLI: A playful role reversal that puts the child in charge of the relationship for a limited time will allow the child to resolve difficult issues through laughter (i.e. fear of strangers, fear of confinement in car seat, the tendency to be aggressive toward other children).

PLI Suggests: Parents should create distinct play periods during which the child has the upper hand in the play he has chosen. The parent should look for ways to play that let the child laugh for extended periods of time while exploring the more powerful role.

Research Agrees: The importance of play in child development has been extensively researched and is a field in which there is a growing movement to change policies to heighten the importance of play for young children within both family and school environments.

According to Aletha J. Solter, Ph.D. and author of Helping Young Children Flourish, which includes research on the value of play for children, play *"is the primary means of learning during early childhood"*(1989; p. 91).

According to her research, there are different types of play when examining young children's behavior and interactions with adults and others; fantasy play, socio-dramatic play, role reversals. The Parents Leadership Institute focuses on role reversal type of play, as well as parent-supported fantasy play. Fantasy play is essentially make-believe. An example of fantasy play early in a child's development is to move a block and say, "Meow." When it involves two or more children, fantasy play is referred to as socio-dramatic play, and role reversals occur when the child directs the make-believe with the parent.

All of these types of play have been found to have psychological and cognitive benefits for children, as well as to improve the overall wellbeing of families.

> *"Research has shown that socio-dramatic play enhances language development"* (Solter 1989; p. 93).

> *"Fantasy play requires and fosters symbolic thought, abstraction, and creative imagination*" (Greenspan 2000; p. 125).

> *"It has been found that parents can be very effective play therapists for their children at home. If your child has experienced a traumatic event, you can encourage dramatic play about the even by providing toys or props along with your own participation and loving attention"* (Solter 1989 p. 97 – 98).

The Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, in its March 2005 edition, published an article, "Making the Case for Play Policy – Research-Based Reasons to Support Play-Based Environments" by Dolores A. Stegelin. The article cites numerous sources of research that backup the importance of play in children's lives.

Research Focus #1: Active Play and Health Related Indicators:

> *Research points out the link between physical exercise and the reduced incidence of anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems in young children* (Stegelin, US Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1996; 2005; p. 80).

Research Focus #2: Brain Research – The critical link between play and optimal cognitive and physical development

> *"Brain research now documents observable differences in the quantity and quality of brain cell development between young children with stimulating and non stimulating early learning experiences during the first 36 months of life*"(Stegelin, 'Piaget 1962; Johnson, Christie & Yawkey 1987' 2005; p. 80 – 81).

Research #3: The link between play, early literacy and competence

> *"Current research on early literacy outcomes shows a relationships between active, socially engaging play and early language and literacy development (Newman and Roskos 1993; Owocki 1999; Morrow 2001). Social skills also grow through play experiences as the child moves from simple contact with another person to learning to cooperate, take turns, and play by the rules*" (Steglin, 2005; p. 81).

A final source of research in the area of Playlistening is Playful Parenting, the parenting book that won the NAPPA 2001 Gold Award. The renowned child psychologist and author, Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D., has found that play is not only an effective way to help

children learn and develop social skills, but an effective way for parents to nurture a bond with their children and for parents to discipline children effectively.

Creating a Connection. Play is another simple way for parents to invoke the guiding approach of parenting by connection.

> *"Playful parenting is a way to enter the child's world on the child's terms, in order to foster closeness, confidence and connection"* (2001; p. 2).

> *"The third purpose for play for children, and perhaps the one that is most uniquely human, is to recover from emotional distress. By pretending, or re-telling the story the scene can be re-created. This time the child is in charge. Through playing it out, emotional healing takes place"* (2001; p. 6).

Effective Discipline. Play is a fun way to reinforce positive behavior and explore the possible roots of off-track behavior.

> *"They may be annoying, obnoxious, or downright infuriating as they try desperately to signal us that they need more connection. These situations call for creating more playtime, not doling our punishment or leaving the lonely child alone"* (2001; p. 8).

> *"Playfulness turned a time that used to be full of frustration for both of us, into something fun, enjoyable, and confidence building. Of course, to get to that point, I had to put in some time up front. As every parent knows that time may be hard to find, but it paid off in a very short while"*(2001; p. 11).

Role Reversal. By playing role reversals, children unload the stress of always being the less powerful one and the frustration of having to learn so much for the first time.

> *"Playing doctor this way lets her recover because she gets to see you as helpless and powerless and undignified, while she gets to be the powerful one"* (2001; p. 12). *"Role reversal is especially helpful for restoring children's sense of confidence – escaping from the tower of powerlessness and for overcoming their fears and inhibitions"* (2001; p. 113).

3. Setting Limits

According to PLI: When children are unreasonable, they are asking for our help. They need us to set limits for them. They also need to know that we care about them. It's our caring that puts them back on track. For a child whose behavior is flaring, a parent's gentle but firm limit is a gift. If parents follow up a limit by staying close and listening, the parent's gift will be complete –the child will release her upset feelings and recover a sense of connection with her parent.

PLI Suggests: Listen – Limit - Listen

1. Listen – Gather information: Does your child need assistance? Do your expectations fit your child? Are you running on empty? Is your child unreasonable?

2. Limit – You have listened and determined that your child's behavior is indeed off-track. Act to stop the off-track behavior, if your child needs it, i.e. bring the kicking, hitting child onto your lap, away from her target, or put your hand on a treasure she is grabbing from another child so that it can't be taken away.

3. Listen – Stay close and offer caring as your child releases emotional tension.

Research Agrees:

Because PLI and all Parent-Child Connectedness centers on warmth, love and compassion for children, some may confuse the approach with permissive parenting and/or lack of control. Neither model condones permissive parenting. ETR concludes that a firm but fair disciplinary style is one of the essential components of Parent Child Connectedness. *"When parents are very emotionally warm, available, and affectionate and balance these qualities with consistently high expectations and a firm but fair disciplinary style, they create an emotional context or climate in which children can thrive"* (ETR, 2004; p. 7).

ETR has found that research backs up this approach substantially. *"The parenting style most frequently and solidly associated with healthy, well-adjusted children in the existing literature is authoritative parenting, which has become the benchmark for comparing and assessing different styles. Authoritative parenting combines high levels of warmth with moderate levels of control. It is often contrasted with permissive parenting (high or low warmth with low levels of control), and authoritarian parenting (high levels of control)"* (2004; p. 7).

PLI's guidelines of "Listen, Limit, Listen" direct parents to show warmth and at the same time firmly stop behavior that is not acceptable.

Dr. Lawrence Cohen promotes the idea of, "a meeting on the couch" as an effective discipline strategy that highlights connection as solution to problematic behavior. *"Whenever there is any problem, either parent or child can call a meeting on the coach. It could be anywhere…The goal is to get reconnected. Once you are both on the couch, anything can happen."* (2001; p. 234). Cohen promotes this approach as an alternative discipline method to time-outs.

Sam Goldstein and Robert Brooks, authors of "Raising Resilient Children" and pioneers in resiliency research, which examines how children rise above adverse circumstances, have found that discipline which seeks to build self-esteem rather than control behavior will serve children better in the long run. *"The ways in which parents discipline children*

will either reinforce or weaken self-esteem, self-control, and resilience" (2002; p. 16). In other words, discipline which includes listening to children, fostering children to make their own decisions, examining choices in their behavior, and accepting their feelings of disappointment or frustration in making those choices is more likely to help them choose positive behaviors than fear of getting spanked. *"A goal of this process is to assist children in taking increasing ownership and responsibility for their behavior*" (2002; p. 16).

While it may require more work up front (as many of the strategies do initially) to try and help children make good decisions for themselves, rather than simply abide by rules, research has found that time, effort and emotional wear and tear are saved in the long run. According to Dr. Siegel and Mary Hartzell, in their book, "Parenting from the Inside Out; How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive" *"Children who do not have these important limit setting experiences may have an underdevelopment of the emotional clutch"* (2004; p. 203). In other words, children who are not used to being told no, or having someone listen to their crying in disappointment after the first "no's," are more likely to burst into spontaneous tantrums over the long run.

Throughout the research, spanking has been found to have adverse effects on children. According to Elizabeth Gershoff, (2002), "Corporal Punishment by Parents and Associated Child Behaviors and Experiences: A Meta-Analytic and Theoretical Review", a meta-analysis of 88 corporal punishment research studies spanning six decades showed that corporal punishment of children was associated with negative outcomes in children that included increased delinquent and antisocial behavior, increased risk of child aggression, and decreased child mental health. When spanked children become adults they are at increased risk of perpetrating child abuse and spousal abuse, increased risk of adult aggression, and decreased adult mental health. This research is groundbreaking in its scientific basis and the direct link between spanking and negative behavior.

Spanking is not the only type of harsh discipline. Emotional abuse is another strong indicator of adverse outcomes for children. *"A study in the July 2001 issue of the American Journal of Psychiatry found that emotional abuse was the most significant predictor of mental illness, more so than sexual or physical abuse"* (New York Times; 11/9/04).

PLI's suggested guidelines for effective discipline instead of spanking or emotional abuse are also recognized in the literature. While it's easy to say you are against spanking, offering parents alternatives to spanking that work is really the key to ending the intimidation of young children.

4. Staylistening

According to PLI: Closeness is the primary need of the child. Crying is a natural and healthy way for a child to relieve stress and heal his feelings of upset. Being close to your child through the crying period helps him know that crying is OK. He learns that he will feel better afterwards. When the child's sense of connection has been broken, he

feels upset and the resulting feelings create a further barrier to connection. Crying is the child's way of relieving stress and healing feelings of upset. Being close to the child through the crying period helps him to know that the parent cares, reestablish a close connection, and regain his sense of well-being and his ability to thrive.

PLI suggests: When a child is upset, crying, or having a tantrum, allow the child to cry and listen to the child while he cries. Tell your child, "I'm sorry it's hard; I'll stay with you while you're upset."

Research Agrees:

Dr. Stanley I. Greenspan, is the Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at George Washington University Medical School. A practicing child psychiatrist and supervising child psychoanalyst, Dr, Greenspan designed a developmental model that guides the care of infants and children around the world. The author and editor of over 30 books, Dr. Greenspan's influential works include The Growth of the Mind, Building Healthy Minds, The Child With Special Needs, and The Challenging Child.

In one of his books, The Secure Child. Helping Our Children Feel Safe and Confident in an Insecure World, he recommends listening through children's tantrums and increasing empathy towards your child, especially while setting limits. Dr. Greenspan's internationally acclaimed approach aligns well with Parenting by Connection.

> *"The natural tendency is to pull away from empathy and closeness when you're involved in angry exchanges, power struggles, or limit setting. How can you empathize with misbehavior? You can empathize with how hard it is to learn new lessons, for instance, to see a new toy and not grab it. It is only when limit setting is coupled with empathy that your child will eventually wish to please you"* (2000; p. 72).
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> *"Time outs are not necessarily effective. They can suggest to your child that you are not able to withstand his anger. Going eye ball to eye ball with him or even asking him to think quietly in your presence about what he did may communicate greater resolve on your part"* (2000; p. 74).

PLI also promotes "time in, " rather than time out, emphasizing that it is important to offer connection to your child when he is upset or displaying disruptive behavior, rather than isolating him from you.

Crying while in physical or visual contact with a loved one is not only proved psychologically to be beneficial for child, but has positive biological implications as well. Dr. Aletha J. Solter, Ph.D, author of The Aware Baby, offers research that crying has cognitive benefits for babies. Her research corroborates that crying relieves stress and allows the brain to function more effectively, leading to improved social skills, self-esteem, intelligence and even improved physical health.

> *"Another long-term benefit of allowing babies to heal from early trauma through crying is that this helps them be more attentive and alert for learning*"(1989; p. 54).
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> *"In a study of 4000 seven-year old children, researchers found that the children with the highest levels of stress had the lowest IQ's"*(1989; p. 54).
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> *"Allowing your baby to cry freely (in your arms) will help him form a habit of crying when he needs to, instead of suppressing his emotions. This will continue to adulthood. This will help him stay healthier, because pent up stress is a contributing factor to many illnesses, high blood pressure, diabetes, tumors, osteoporosis – are all known to be at least partially caused by stress"* (1989; p. 55).

These findings are corroborated through Dr. Siegel and Mary Hartzell as well. As parents need to release their feelings of stress in order to function as good parents, children likewise need to offload their emotions.

> *"Letting your child have his emotion and letting him know that you understand its hard not to get what he wants is the kindest and most helpful thing you can do for your child at that moment"* (2004;. 190).

Multiple sources confirm that crying should not only be tolerated, but encouraged as a healthy way of expressing feelings and releasing stress. Having someone who cares about the child listen while he cries increases the positive benefits of crying because it promotes the parent-child connection children need in order to return to make sense of their world again.

5. **Listening Partnerships**

According to PLI: The work of parenting is very stressful and undervalued in society. Having a chance to unload, talk, laugh, or even cry helps parents relieve stress and feel more confident as parents.

PLI suggests: Two parents come together in a quiet place, away from children, work, or other demands and decide on a set time to exchange listening – anywhere from 5 minutes to a half an hour each. One person talks, the other listens. Then the partners switch roles.

Guidelines: adopt an attitude of respect for each other, assume your listening will make a difference, give your full attention, don't interrupt or offer advice. Respect your partner's ability to experiment and problem solve.

Research Agrees:

Dr. Daniel Siegel has dedicated significant study into the impact of parents' emotionally challenging personal histories on their child rearing. Much of his findings in this area are

presented in his book, co-authored by Mary Hartzell, M.Ed, Parenting from the Inside Out, How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive. Grief from the loss of a loved one to death is ultimately unavoidable for all of us and most parents have some additional unresolved issues that become stimulated when interacting with their children. Siegel discusses at length the concept of "implicit memory" which refers to memories that are not situated in a context of understanding, (2004; p. 38). When we are in a situation and feel angry, frustrated, confused, or ashamed but we aren't exactly sure why, this is probably the result of our implicit memory being stimulated. These unresolved issues can profoundly impair the parent-child relationship (2004; p. 17). While the bad news is that we all have unresolved issues to deal with, the good news is that research shows we can make our implicit memory explicit by reflecting and talking about our feelings and experience. *"The shadows that implicit mental models cast on us can be made explicit through focused self-reflection"* (2004, p. 17). In other words, we can change the way we act in situations by talking about the difficult things we have experienced. PLI would take this concept further and include that it is even more helpful to cry about it (or laugh, rage, tremble, or tantrum).

Two of the most striking scientific findings in Siegel's most recent research are that 1) the most powerful predictor of a child's attachment is the coherence of a parent's life narrative, and b) it is not how stable, healthy or loving one's childhood was, but whether parents can organize their life events into a coherent story, that predicts whether parents will be able to provide a secure attachment for their children. *"Having a history of trauma or loss does not by itself predispose you to having a child with disorganization. It is the lack of [emotional – added by PLI] resolution that is the essential risk factor. It is never too late to move toward making sense of our experiences and healing our past"* (2004, p. 107). How do parents create a story out of their painful memories? By talking with a good listener - something most people can find a way to do with a little help from organizations like PLI. PLI helps people learn and practice this essential skill of using listening exchanges to review their experience, shed feelings of hurt, and assist another parents in return.

Not having had an opportunity to talk about one's life history, trauma, or loss can be the very thing that leads a parent to resort to violence or repeat a family's unhealthy history. For parents, *"When you are feeling stressed or find yourself in situations with your child that trigger past unresolved issues, your mind may shut off and become inflexible"* (Siegel 2004; p. 154). Dr. Siegel suggests, like PLI, that parents find some time at the end of the day to reflect with a friend and talk about those things with emotional content that happened in relation to your child.

Other sources of research emphasize that the first thing to do in order to avoid hitting or yelling at your child is to take a moment to "cool off." *"Effective discipline rarely happens in the heat of the moment. Before you try to deal with a problem, count to ten, take a break, wait a few hours for things to settle down, call a friend* (Cohen, 2001; p.232). PLI encourages parents to call each other often--before things escalate, when things have escalated, and everything in between. Dr. Cohen also says that, *"Talking to other parents is one of the best ways to cool off"* (2001; p.232).

Elizabeth Crary is the author of over a dozen books on child guidance and problem-solving. She has addressed audiences throughout North America on parenting and conflict resolution. As a parent educator, she has taught parenting classes for over 20 years and is currently an instructor at North Seattle Community College.

In her book, Without Spanking or Spoiling, A Practical Approach to Toddler and Preschool Guidance, she also emphasizes parents' individual well-being as fundamental to preventing abuse. *"Parents are more effective when they feel good about themselves. This involves learning how to motivate themselves and taking time to enjoy themselves. When people enjoy themselves it is easier to enjoy someone else."*

Becoming a good parent doesn't just happen overnight or in a vacuum. The research shows that essential factors influencing positive parenting are parents' ability to talk, reflect and be listened to by other parents or friends. People do not have to have had flawless childhoods to be good parents. What makes good parenting more likely is a willingness to look at one's past and attempt to learn something from it.

6. Parent Support Groups

According to PLI: Parents rarely have the chance to examine their thoughts and experiences at their own pace – they spend their days filling the needs of others. The Parent Support Group is set up to give parents dedicated time to think and use their own intelligence to solve problems.

PLI Suggests: A structured meeting of parents who listen to each other talk about the things that matter to them as mothers and fathers. As they get to know each other, this group of parents can develop:

- Understanding and appreciation for the tremendous job each parent does
- An education gleaned from each other's struggles and successes
- Reliable information about what their children need most
- Encouragement and skills with which to build more effective support for themselves and their families.

Research Agrees:

The Syracuse University Family Development Research Project conducted a 10-year follow up evaluation of programs designed to support low-income families with mothers without a high school education, including Parent Support Groups and parent education. Some of the outcomes include:

"After three years, parents in a participant group received higher cognitive and social/emotional ratings than those in a control group. After 10 years, 6% of the children of parents in the participant group had records with the juvenile justice system versus 22% of children whose parents were in the control group".

(Lally, J., P. Mangione, A. Honig and D. Wittner (1988) "More pride, less delinquency: Findings from the 10-year follow-up study of the Syracuse University Family Development Research Project." *Zero to Three*, April 13-18.)

This study is unusual in that it followed both a control group and a participant group over ten years. This type of evaluation is costly and therefore not often undertaken. The investment in time and effort has confirmed how tremendous the results are when parents participate in support groups. The large difference in referrals to the juvenile justice system between the participant and control groups underlines the importance of parents experiencing community with one another.

Family Support America, a nationally recognized organization supporting a movement for community-based support to help families raise their children, recommends various activities that can help families raise healthy children. Their credo is to place families in the center, build on families' assets rather than analyze their deficits, and take a long-term, sustainable approach, rather than organize fragmented, one-time programs. One of their recommendations is to set up ongoing parenting classes and support groups. According to their website; www.familysupportamerica.org;

"These [support groups] provide information on and instruction in child development, and opportunities for parents to share their experiences and concerns with peers"

"These [support groups] provide occasions for parents to spend time with their children in activities that are planned by staff with parent input".

This nationally renowned model is one that PLI has been practicing formally since 1989, and experimenting with even before that. PLI has served as an important precursor to this movement for Parent Support Groups.

Conclusion

From the literature that we have reviewed, including new research by nationally and internationally renowned experts in the field, and reviews of research literature conducted by respected organizations, we have found overwhelming evidence that the Parents Leadership Institute approach, Parenting by Connection, and the specific tools taught; Special Time, Playlistening, Setting Limits, Staylistening, Listening Partnerships and Parent Support Groups, are not only important but essential to the healthy development of young children.

This scientific literature also backs up what outside evaluators have observed in PLI's classes. For example; Randi B. Wolfe, Ph.D. shares her findings from observing the outcomes of a series of PLI's most recent curriculum offerings, in "Listening to Children: A New Approach to Parent Support, Education and Empowerment," Family Science Review, 12 (4), November 1999.

Dr. Wolfe field-tested a curriculum based on PLI's Listening to Children pamphlets, which outline the Parenting by Connection approach. 57 parents participated in one of three 8-week courses that included parent support groups in each class. This curriculum shares much of the information and approach as PLI's current offering "Building Emotional Understanding". Twenty-five participants were middle-income married mothers, and the other 32 were low-income African-American and Caribbean-American mothers. The study included control groups.

"*...treatment group mothers consistently reported less stress than non-treatment group mothers and less problematic or worrisome perceptions of their children's self-regulatory capacities. Within individual studies, significant positive effects on the PAS (Parent Attitude Survey) and PPQ (Parenting Practices Questionnaire) suggest that program participation can encourage democratic parenting attitudes and authoritative parenting practices...Taken together, the results of the three studies suggest that LTC (Listening to Children) can be as relevant and effective among middle-class mothers as among low-income mothers of color. LTC seems particularly beneficial for parents experiencing high levels of stress, social isolation, and parental depression, and for parents who veer away from democratic, authoritative child-rearing practices. Target groups of parents might include those whose children are displaying behavior problems related to limit-setting or distractibility and those particularly vulnerable to stress such as parents going through divorce, low-income parents, or others facing stressful life situations*." (Wolfe 1999; p. 86).

The parent-child emotional connection is the central focus of these tools and practices. This focus contributes to the complete development of a child's brain and his ability to be resilient in a complex and challenging world. The tools developed by PLI can be understood and practiced by parents from all backgrounds, regardless of education, culture or personal experience. These tools give parents access to the important work of self-reflection, stress release and engagement with others. In turn, parents are able to better meet their children's core needs for connection by listening to, playing with, and caring for their children.

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