



**Brainwave**<sup>TM</sup>  
early years last forever  
whakamana i te tamaiti

# supporting children's social and emotional development

Written by Keryn O'Neill, MA, PGCertEdPsych, Knowledge Manager



When children grow up to be flourishing adults it is no accident. When they are able to take on responsibility, contribute to their whānau and community and when they are a good friend, partner or parent, it is almost always due to early support.

Parents, whānau and other adults who have understood and guided them in their early years, childhood and adolescence, have been an important part of reaching that positive adult state.

In the early years, physical development is obvious and significant. As our tamariki grow they roll, sit, crawl and walk. That's an awful lot of growth and learning, and it is amazing to observe. These skills will continue to be built on throughout childhood and beyond.

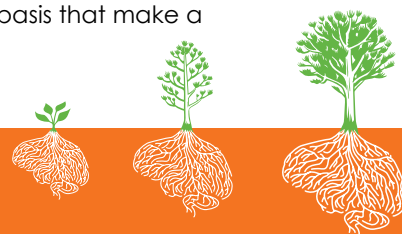
But that's not all that's developing rapidly over this time. From the very beginning, babies are gathering information and learning about themselves, and about other people. Their emerging social and emotional skills will form the foundations for their later development and will impact many areas of their life. This will also profoundly affect the lives of those around them.

Early social, emotional and behavioural understanding is important in many ways as children develop, such as being ready to learn at school<sup>1</sup> and forming relationships with friends and whānau. These early skills are also linked to success in adolescence and throughout life.<sup>2</sup>

## Executive Function Skills

Some of the most important skills needed throughout life include (1) controlling impulses, (2) staying focused and (3) making plans. Collectively these skills are sometimes called "executive function skills" and they are the basis for both cognitive and social learning.<sup>3</sup> Babies are not born with these skills, but they are born with the potential to develop them. Providing children with the necessary support to develop this potential is an important part of parenting. How well they develop depends a lot on their experiences, beginning from birth.<sup>4</sup>

These skills don't just 'happen', although it can feel as though they do when parents know what to do without thinking about it. There are lots of things parents and whānau do on a daily basis that make a difference.





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Here are some of the things that help.

### Scaffolding

From birth, understanding and meeting baby's needs, physically, socially, and emotionally, pretty consistently will help to form the beginning of a secure attachment relationship. As babies become toddlers, parents have an important role in providing guidance and scaffolding so children learn how to behave.<sup>5</sup> Scaffolding involves the parent providing support for their child's learning. Ideally this involves providing just enough help for the child to do something themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Children learn these skills best when parents help them practice their growing skills, and have reasonable expectations for their age. Providing them with challenges that 'stretch' them, but are not too overwhelming seems to be key. Like a lot of parenting, this is easier said than done! However, like all parenting it needs only to be 'good enough', not perfect.

Parents gently guide tamariki, over time, from being completely dependent to being able to make some decisions for themselves. The early versions of these skills are the foundations for their more developed skills in adulthood.<sup>7</sup> They also increase a child's resilience and ability to cope with difficulty.<sup>8</sup>

### Back and forth interactions: Serve and Return

Long before they can talk, babies reach out to their parents and whānau. Through their facial expressions, babbling and bodily movements, babies communicate what is going on for them and what they need. Just because pēpi is not talking yet, doesn't mean that they are not communicating!

When parents join the 'conversation' by talking and gesturing back to their pēpi, something amazing happens. These back-and-forth ('serve and return') interactions help to build and strengthen the structures in baby's brain.<sup>9</sup> Talking 'with' children is much better than just talking 'to' them.<sup>10</sup> This involves the parent in both talking and listening to their child. In the same way, the child gets to talk and listen as well.

It's important that parents learn to read their baby's signals and respond to them.<sup>11</sup> Having parents and other whānau respond in this way helps pēpi to feel understood and important, and, through many repetitions, they also develop new skills.<sup>12</sup>

Repeated chats have a number of benefits for a baby's development. The more of these conversations that tamariki have, the better their language development is likely to be. Having their needs and interests responded to is one of the ingredients for a healthy attachment with their parents. And healthy attachment is very positive for many aspects of health and wellbeing.

### Talking about feelings

The content of what parents and tamariki talk about is important too. Using words to describe emotions is an important part of developing the ability to handle all their feelings, which is often called 'emotional regulation'. As children get older, if their parents talk often about people's feelings and about the morals of their behaviour, they are more likely to take on their parents' moral rules and recognise when they've done something wrong.<sup>13</sup>

A child's ability to recognise, understand and handle a range of feelings is important. It's a central part of managing their behaviour and getting on with others.<sup>14</sup> Knowing and understanding their own feelings, and those of others, is linked to a number of positive outcomes, including fewer behaviour problems.<sup>15</sup>

Like other things pēpi and tamariki are learning, emotional understanding takes a while and happens in the context of their most important relationships. While it will take many years to fully develop, it starts at the very beginning. One of the things parents can do to help is to accept their child's full range of emotions and use words to describe how their pēpi or tamaiti is feeling.

<sup>1</sup> Jones et al., 2015, p. 2283

<sup>2</sup> Bettencourt et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2015

<sup>3</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011

<sup>4</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011

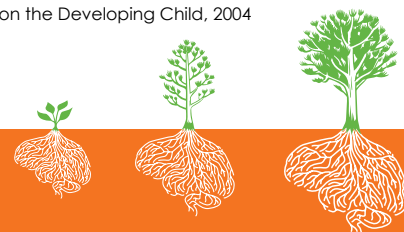
<sup>5</sup> Smith, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Powell et al., 2009

<sup>7</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011

<sup>8</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015

<sup>9</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004



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### Putting Things Right: Rupture and Repair

All babies will experience times when they are not responded to straight away. All parents and whānau will make mistakes, missing a need or responding in ways that aren't helpful. Sometimes parents are caring for another child, cooking dinner, or taking an overdue shower. Maybe they're operating on very little sleep.

While this may be distressing for babies, once parents realise this and do respond, their baby's stress response system is likely to return to normal. This process of a communication breakdown followed by reconnecting is sometimes called 'rupture and repair'.<sup>23</sup> Another way of thinking about this is, the parent is "putting things right".

In fact, as long as baby's needs are met much of the time, some of these unavoidable disruptions can even be helpful. The process of not being responded to, or being responded to in a way that didn't meet baby's needs, can help them to develop coping skills, so long as once the parent realises what's happened they put things right. Through having these ruptures between parent and child that are repaired, tamariki learn to tolerate brief times of difficult feelings, and to be able to move from difficult feelings back to more pleasant feelings.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Zimmerman et al., 2009

<sup>11</sup> Bornstein et al., 2016

<sup>12</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004

<sup>13</sup> Laible & Thompson, 2000, cited by Smith, 2005

<sup>14</sup> Bornstein, 2014, cited by Bornstein et al., 2016

<sup>15</sup> Hughes et al., 1998, cited by Kårstad et al., 2015

<sup>16</sup> Meins et al., 2001

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, 2019

<sup>18</sup> Eisenberg et al., 1998, cited by Kårstad et al., 2015

<sup>19</sup> Kårstad et al., 2015

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, 2019

<sup>21</sup> Fivush, 1998

<sup>22</sup> Siegel & Hartzell, 2003

One study found that mothers who correctly talked about their baby's emotions were more likely to have babies with a secure attachment.<sup>16</sup> Talking about their feelings helps tamariki in several ways. It helps children feel understood, it gives them words they can use about their feelings in the future, and the sense of being understood means they will probably calm more quickly too.

On the other hand, the well-intentioned tendency to tell an upset child, "You're OK", when they clearly aren't, is a missed opportunity.

Whilst it's important to accept our children's feelings this does not always mean that we accept the ways in which they express their feelings. Children need support to learn that it's ok to feel angry or disappointed, but it's not ok to hit their brother or sister. Parents can accept their child's feelings and point of view, without necessarily agreeing with them.<sup>17</sup>

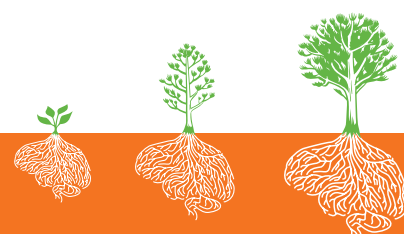
When parents can talk about, and accept, all types of emotions, their tamariki are better able to learn about their own feelings, and also those of others.<sup>18</sup> A parent's ability to accurately 'read their child's mind' is an important aspect of this.<sup>19</sup> It's not just what parents say, but the way in which it is said that makes a difference. Some aspects of this include empathy for how the child is feeling, and having the child's perspective as the focus.<sup>20</sup>

Parents can try and make an educated guess, for example, "You got such a fright when your balloon popped, didn't you?"

Sometimes parents are tempted to avoid talking about difficult things, such as a death in the family, or a child's medical treatment, perhaps because they wish to avoid further upsetting their child. Let's be honest, such conversations can be hard. However, when tamariki have had upsetting or painful experiences, being able to talk about these when they need to, can help them better understand and cope with their experiences.<sup>21</sup> Children may come back to the topic over and over again, and that's to be expected because this is an important part of them trying to understand what's happened. Books can also be helpful in promoting talking about feelings, and in dealing with difficult situations.

Talking about such experiences can help tamariki to connect the events with how they felt about it, increasing their ability to make sense of what's happened to them. These talks also help children develop their ability to be more aware of themselves.<sup>22</sup>

It's through their interactions with parents and whānau that babies and young children learn about themselves, the world and the other people in it.







Parents can help children connect what they have done with the way it has affected others.

Since life doesn't always run smoothly as an adult, these are useful skills to develop.

"Disconnections are a normal part of any relationship".<sup>25</sup> Rather than beating ourselves up for our inevitable mistakes, taking responsibility and finding ways to meet our child's needs, will be much more helpful.<sup>26</sup> For everyone. Sometimes this involves saying that we're sorry. This can be hard for parents, especially those whose own childhood did not include apologies from adults when needed. Like most skills, it becomes easier with practice.

Good parenting doesn't mean there are no ruptures, but it does mean that they're usually repaired soon after. Ruptures, when followed by repair, can actually strengthen the parent-child relationship.<sup>27</sup>

### Thinking of Others

When parents talk about the way others are feeling in everyday situations they are helping their child develop compassion for others.<sup>28</sup> It's also a necessary part of the child learning about socially acceptable behaviour. Parents can help children connect what they have done with the way it has affected others. Noticing and commenting on the helpful, kind things a child does is key. For example, "Maia stopped crying when you picked up the toy she dropped. Look how happy she is now!" Remember, children are learning, but paying attention to their attempts at more socialised behaviour is likely to encourage more of it in the future.<sup>29</sup> Children thrive on encouragement.

When a child's behaviour has affected someone in a negative way, rather than just talking about what they did, help them to see how it has affected the other person. For example, "Liam cried when you hit him. He looks very sad". Talking like this will help children understand how what they did has affected others,<sup>30</sup> and understand the reasons why some behaviour is not acceptable.

Conversations about emotions help tamariki understand the causes and also the consequences of their own feelings and the feelings of others. These conversations can also help children learn to regulate their emotions and can influence their moral learning and teach them values.<sup>31</sup>

### Meeting needs for Exploration and Closeness

Children have two different, but related, sets of needs. Their need for closeness (both physically and emotionally) with their parents, and their need to explore.<sup>32</sup> This can be quite a balancing act, as on a daily basis pēpi and tamariki (of all ages) will move between both these needs many times.

Through following their curiosity and exploring, children are learning about the world and developing important skills. They will gain most from this when whānau support and encourage them, but don't force them to do things before they are ready.

From a young age, tamariki will look to their parents to see whether what they're doing is safe and check that their parents are watching out for them.<sup>33</sup> Parents need to be looking out for their child's safety, but also to be aware of the messages they might be sending their children about their exploration.

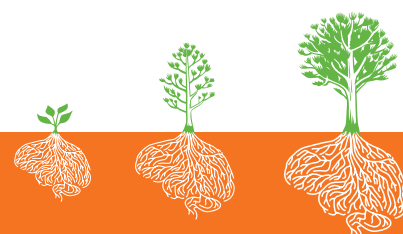
<sup>23</sup> Siegel & Hartzell, 2003

<sup>24</sup> Tronick, 2007

<sup>25</sup> Siegel & Hartzell, 2003, p.187

<sup>26</sup> Siegel & Hartzell, 2003

<sup>27</sup> Siegel & Hartzell, 2003



The social and emotional skills that tamariki develop impact many areas of their life.

Are they showing their support by the words, tone of voice, facial expressions that they use? For example, showing interest in what they've found in the garden is more likely to encourage further curiosity and exploration, while a horrified face at their muddy clothes may have the opposite effect. Once safety has been addressed, supporting as much exploration (and the mess it sometimes creates!) as a child is ready for, will hugely benefit their development.

All great adventures, large and small, come to an end. Perhaps a child has become tired, hungry, or had a fright.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of the reason, children need to feel welcomed back by their parent. When parents provide the comfort or reassurance their child needs, their tamariki feels more able to carry on exploring.<sup>35</sup> Being able to go off and explore under their parents' watchful eye, and come back over and over again, is how tamariki will ultimately grow to become independent. Many parents wrongly believe they make their children independent by forcing them to do things that are really hard for them. In fact, knowing they have support and love is what will lead to independence.

### Conclusions

The social and emotional skills that tamariki develop impact many areas of their life. Whatever parents' hopes and dreams for their children are – doing well at school, being mentally healthy, staying out of trouble, gaining employment – all of these, and more, will be helped by positive emotional and social development, beginning in their early years.

What parents and whānau do really matters. However, perfect parenting is not required. Good enough, and most of the time, will do. Thank goodness, perfection is neither attainable, nor needed by tamariki.

### Glossary of Māori terms:

**Pēpi** – baby, infant

**Tamaiti** – child

**Tamariki** - children

**Whānau** – extended family

### Acknowledgements

This article is based on material written by Brainwave Trust for the Parenting Resource developed by SKIP (Ministry for Children) for use by community based whānau workers.  
<https://www.parentingresource.nz/>

If you enjoyed this article, here are some others you may like to read

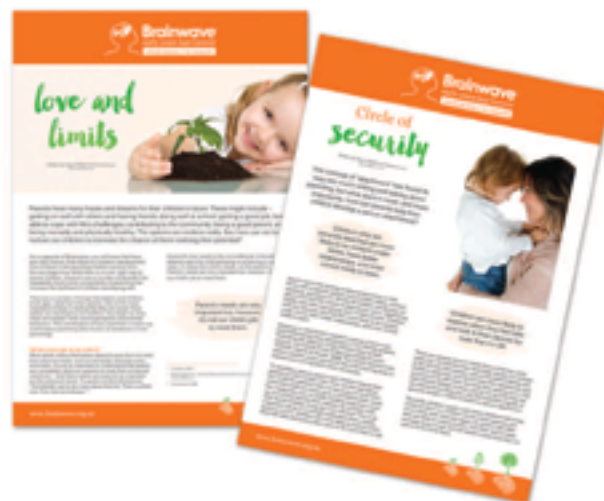
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<sup>28</sup> Honig & Wittmer, 1991

<sup>29</sup> Siegel, 2004

<sup>30</sup> Siegel, 2004

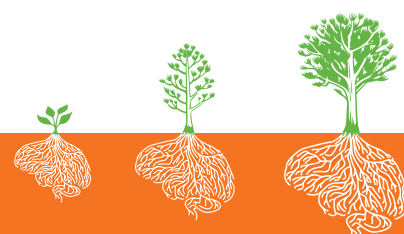
<sup>31</sup> Thompson, 2019

<sup>32</sup> Dolby, 2007

<sup>33</sup> Powell et al., 2009

<sup>34</sup> Powell et al., 2009

<sup>35</sup> Dolby, 2007







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