

When We Are Very Young

Episode 4

Fear of Flying

I have come to think of airplanes as a metaphor for families: The parents are the co-pilots--- or in the case of single-parent families the parent is the pilot. The child or children are the passengers who remain seated, wearing their seatbelts, while being flown safely to their destination (which is adulthood). The plane is the safe container of the family. The pilots are skilled; they know how to fly the plane safely, avoiding storms and turbulence; they know where to go and they look after the needs of the passengers as they travel on their journey.

In most families, this works quite well: the pilots are competent, the children feel safe and the journey is completed without major incidents. At the end of the journey, the children are ready to learn to fly their own planes.

However, for children who have been abused, neglected or who have witnessed violence within the family, the situation is different. The pilots have not flown the plane safely; they have fought in the cockpit with each other, they have failed to fly safely and the plane has passed through many storms, frightening the passengers. Perhaps the pilots are unable to fly the

plane because of substance abuse. Perhaps the pilots have ignored their passengers, failing to provide food or reassurance. Perhaps the plane has crash landed or the pilots have ejected leaving the passengers to try to fly the plane on their own. How frightening to have to try to land the plane to save your own life and perhaps the lives of your siblings. Imagine how terrified a child would be.

Now imagine that these passengers were transferred to another plane. Maybe these pilots were not much better and so the children try to crash the cockpit and take control. So then --- they were transferred to yet another plane. But now, perhaps the children don't want to get in another plane. Perhaps now the children don't like flying; in fact, they may be terrified of flying. They may tantrum, and fight, yell and scream, trying to get away from the plane. And so they might be rejected as passengers. Years later, they may be put into another plane but still they may feel frightened. They may fight or run or resist. Sadly, some children might succumb, staring blankly out of the window. The new pilots do not expect their passengers to respond this way. In fact, they might have expected that the passengers would enjoy the experience. They didn't know that their new passengers experienced some very frightening times while flying and now have a fear of flying.

Of course, many children are resilient; they so deeply desire to be safe on the journey of life --- to get to their adult destination ---they accept and even welcome the new plane and the different flying experience because this one feels safe. They begin to trust the pilots and enjoy the flight.

This is the task for the parents with whom I work: to help their adopted children gradually begin to feel safe, to develop trust in their new parents and for the parents to recognize the fear in their children. Fear-driven behaviour cannot be eliminated by giving rewards and consequences. Fear-driven behaviour is controlled by the midbrain and not by the thoughts, choices or motivations of the child. The goal of adopted parents is to help children *feel* safe, not just to be safe. Being safe is not enough. Going back to the analogy of flying, anyone who is afraid of flying knows how difficult it is to just rationalize your way to being calm. No matter what you tell yourself or what others tell you, the fear takes over, very much out of cognitive control.

So it is not words that reduce the fear... it is the tone of those words, the pace and volume, the emotion heard in those words. It is these non-linguistic qualities of speech that the midbrain hears. It is facial expression

and body posture that the midbrain sees. And it is the gentle touch, if accepted, that the midbrain understands as safe.

Our task then, when parenting children who may have a fear of flying, is to calm their fear-driven brains and help them to trust their new pilots. Sometimes, I tell children this story about flying. It can give children and parents a language to help identify when the children are trying to fly the plane, or getting upset when there is a bit turbulence in the journey. It can help parents recognise when fear is affecting their child's behaviour and then respond calmly, with "in-charge" kindness, just as you would expect the pilot to do when announcing that passengers must return to their seats due to the turbulence ahead.

Reading List:

1. Hope for Healing: available at attach.org Great book for parents.
2. Trauma and the Body: Ogden, Minton and Pain
3. The Polyvagal Theory: Stephen Porges

The last two are seminal books in understanding how trauma affects the functioning of the brain and body. If you really want to understand the theory, then these books are for you.