

## When We Are Very Young

### Episode 10

#### Automatic vs. Manual Transmission

Today we are talking about automatic vs. manual transmission. What does this have to do with parenting children? I am thinking about children who are growing up in the typical family where their parents are present; their parents are loving and caring and considerate. The parents are able to meet their needs in a timely and sensitive fashion. And for those children, who are developing in a typical kind of way, generally speaking, their different domains of functioning, develop at a relatively similar rate. We might think of their emotional functioning or their social functioning or their physical functioning or cognitive functioning. And for typically developing children, generally speaking, two year olds, have two-year-old social skills, two-year-old cognitive skills, two-year-old emotional skills, two-year-old self-regulatory skills. And, the same would be said for a 6-year-old and a fourteen-year-old.

The difficulty for parents who are parenting children who have had early trauma, loss and neglect, and who may have been diagnosed with developmental trauma, those children tend to have variation in their different developmental domains. And so, this is what I am thinking about. When you are parenting children who have typical development, and all of their domains are similar to each other in terms of age or developmental stage, it's like driving a car with an automatic transmission. You get in, start the car, you put the car into drive, you press the gas, and the car automatically goes through the different gears as you accelerate. Parents don't really have to think what gear is my car in, is it the right

gear? Too high? Too low? And so, it makes the task of parenting simpler. There is a gradual transition in the transmission through the years of development of each child.

Now for children who have developmental trauma, their developmental level in different domains, will vary according to the child's age, stage, history of trauma. In fact, the developmental level will vary according to the moment; how regulated is this child in this moment. For parents who parenting children who have developmental trauma or who have self-regulatory problems, parenting can be quite difficult. In this moment, my child is acting according to her age of thirteen for her social, cognitive and emotional development, and in the next moment, she is having a meltdown and acting as if she is developmentally socially and emotionally three or four years old. And so, I am having to shift my parenting, I'm shifting gears, cognitively, with awareness, mindfully shifting gears to parent this child now according to her in-this-moment developmental stage. I call that parenting with the manual transmission; that is, having to be often and fairly constantly aware of the developmental stage of the child in this moment. We have to remember that age is not necessarily equivalent to developmental stage in children with developmental trauma and that the social domain, cognitive domain, emotional domain and physiological domain, may be very different not only from each other but also may vary day to day and moment to moment in this child. Learning to drive that manual transmission is not always easy but it can be done.