



Connect and shape: A parenting meta-strategy

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ABSTRACT

The existing parenting literature is dominated by two worldviews: the behavioral worldview and the relational/emotional worldview. Points of tension between these worldviews are apparent within the scientific literature; however, both approaches can be fully incorporated into an evolutionary science paradigm including contextual behavioral science. Connect and shape is a parenting meta-strategy that combines behavioral and the relational/emotional strategies into a single parent–child interaction. The elements of connect and shape are not new. What is new is the combination of parental responsiveness/emotion coaching and behavioral parenting strategies into a single, clearly elucidated meta-strategy that can be easily incorporated into parenting intervention.

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1. Connect and shape

The scientific literature on parenting is dominated by two worldviews: the behavioral worldview and the relational/emotional worldview (including attachment theory, meta-emotion theory and emotional responsiveness). There are evidence-based parenting interventions grounded in the behavioral worldview (Patterson, 1982, 2005; Sanders, 1999, 2008; Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014) and evidence-based parenting interventions grounded in the relational/emotional worldview (Cohen et al., 1999; Havighurst, Harleym, & Prior, 2004; Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, & Prior, 2009; Hawes & Dadds, 2004), as well as parenting interventions that draw from both frameworks (Allen, Timmer, & Urquiza, 2014; Eisenstadt, Eyberg, McNeil, & Newcomb and Funderburk, 1993; Salmon, Dittman, Sanders, Burson, & Hammington, 2014).

There are points of tension between these two dominant worldviews (Coyné, 2013; Eisenberger & Shanock, 2003; Suchman, Pajulo, DeCoste, & Mayes, 2006) and this tension is apparent in many current controversies within the literature, for example, the debate on parent–infant sleep practices (Douglas & Hill, 2013; Whittingham & Douglas, 2014). The tension between these two frameworks may even be seen in interventions that attempt to combine them, in the sense that the two basic worldviews are usually understood as *applicable to different situations*, rather than *applicable simultaneously* in a single parent–child interaction. For example, in a randomized controlled trial of emotion-enhanced Triple P (Positive Parenting Program), Triple P

combined with parental emotion coaching strategies, the tension between the two worldviews was managed by arguing that parental responsiveness and emotion coaching are applicable when children are distressed and engaging in attachment behaviors, whereas parenting strategies based in operant theory, including planned ignoring, logical consequences and time out, are applicable when the child is engaging in misbehavior such as non-compliance (Salmon et al., 2014). The obvious question, of course, is: what if my child is both distressed and non-compliant? What if my child's attachment behavior, which includes any behavior aimed at gaining proximity to and nurturance from caregivers (Bowlby, 1988), is also, in a particular interaction, coercive or dysfunctional? Parents too, detect the tension between these two dominant worldviews. Parents have put variations of the above questions to me repeatedly, often with considerable anxiety about their ability to recognize the difference between misbehavior and attachment behavior, and understandably so. In fact, misbehavior co-occurring with significant child distress and/or anger is common, particularly in preschool age children (i.e. temper tantrums) (Giesbrecht, Miller, & Muller, 2010; Wakschlag et al. 2012).

The points of tension between the behavioral and the relational/emotional worldviews can be fully resolved, to be point where both understandings may be drawn upon *simultaneously* within a single parent–child interaction. Philosophically, tensions may be fully resolved by grounding both within the larger worldview of evolutionary science, incorporating a contextual behavioral perspective (Coyné, McHugh, & Martinez, 2011; Coyné & Murrell, 2009; Coyné & Wilson, 2004; Murrell, Wilson, Drake, & Rogers, 2009; Shea & Coyné, 2011; Whittingham, 2013; Whittingham, Sanders, McKinlay, & Boyd, 2014).

Within this larger paradigm, attachment behavior can be understood as a behavioral class shaped by the operant function of obtaining proximity to and nurturance from caregivers (Mansfield

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& Cordova, 2007), and parental responsiveness can be understood as parental caregiving behaviour under the appropriate and appetitive contextual control of the child's signals (Whittingham, 2014). Further, the ongoing dance between child attachment and parental caregiving behavioral systems can be understood as a crucial evolutionary solution (Bowlby, 1988); enabling our species to reach adulthood as self-aware and verbal humans after a lengthy and vulnerable childhood with extensive neurodevelopment occurring after birth (Ball, 2009).

Within this larger worldview, focus is brought to the cognitive processes that may interfere with parental flexibility and responsiveness, including cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance. Parents may attempt to control their child's behavior, thoughts or feelings, in order to control their own experiences, at the expense of responsive parenting (Coyne et al., 2011; Coyne & Murrell, 2009; Shea & Coyne, 2011; Tiwari et al., 2008). Parents may also become fused with verbal rules, particularly rules functioning as pliance or incorrect, unworkable or untestable tracks, undermining the contextual control of parental caregiving behavior (Whittingham, 2014).

Practically, parents do not need to choose, in a particular parent-child interaction, between parental responsiveness/emotion coaching and behavioral parenting strategies. The two can be implemented *simultaneously* in a single interaction, a flexible parenting meta-strategy I am calling connect and shape. The components of connect and shape are not new, what is new is the combining of parental responsiveness/emotion coaching and behavioral parenting strategies into a single, clearly elucidated meta-strategy that can be easily incorporated into parenting intervention.

2. Key features of connect and shape

Connect and shape includes emotion coaching (Gottman, Katz, & Hoover, 1996, 1997). It involves an empathetic and accepting response to child emotions, in which emotions are understood as opportunities for the child to learn and for the parent and child to achieve greater connection within their relationship. It has been argued that empathetic acceptance on behalf of a therapist indirectly increases naturally reinforcing contingencies within the therapeutic relationship (Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1991) and it is likely that this also occurs within parent-child relationships. In fact, parent acceptance of their child's negative emotions predicts better child emotional regulation (Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002). In addition, the verbal labelling of child emotions by the parent increases the child's emotional language skills (Gottman et al., 1996, 1997;).

Connect and shape is consistent with responsive parenting and emotional availability (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Biringen, Derscheid, Vliegen, Closson, & Easterbrooks, 2014; Eshel, Daelmans, Cabral de Mello, & Martines, 2006). The parent remains within sensory distance and clearly communicates his or her emotional availability in response to their child's cues. Parental empathic understanding is crucial to parental responsiveness and a necessary component of connect and shape (Coyne, Low, Miller, Seifer, & Dickstein, 2007). Through connect and shape the parent aims to meet their child's emotional needs.

Connect and shape includes parental scaffolding, that is, the parent provides guidance, support and encouragement in order to enable their child to perform behaviors that their child is currently incapable of performing alone, in a manner that is sensitive to the ongoing development of their child (Biringen et al., 2014; Clark, Menna, & Mansel, 2012). Scaffolding may involve simplifying the task so that the child is capable of performing it, or it may serve as a discriminative stimulus indicating the availability of reinforcement for specific behaviors. Parental scaffolding predicts social skills in preschool children (Clark et al., 2012) as well as emotional regulation

and mutual enjoyment in preschool children born preterm (Erickson et al., 2013). Cognitive, emotional and autonomy support are embedded throughout connect and shape. The specific scaffolding step of connect and shape may include: prompting specific alternative behaviors, reminding the child about opportunities for reinforcement within alternative activities, modelling an alternative behavior, placing alternative activities within sensory distance or reminding the child of parental availability. Within connect and shape the child's emotional capabilities are understood as developing through interaction with the parent.

Connect and shape is grounded within operant models of parent-child interaction. In common with planned ignoring, logical consequences or timeout parental reinforcement of the child's misbehavior is avoided and alternative behaviors are reinforced (Patterson, 1982). Connect and shape avoids the escalation trap, a pattern of coercive interaction in which the behavior of parent or child, or both, becomes increasingly coercive, with reinforcement for escalation (Kazdin, 1997; Patterson, 1982). Parental focus on responsive, empathetic, and accepting parenting increases naturally reinforcing contingencies for adaptive child behaviors. For example, a child who reaches for a hug is immediately hugged, a child who expresses their feelings verbally is understood with compassion, and a child who moves on to the next activity receives parental attention and joint play.

Connect and shape is focused on the development of a broad and flexible behavioral repertoire in the child. The therapist should work with the parent to identify developmentally relevant behaviors (DRB) in a similar manner to a therapist identifying clinically relevant behaviors in a functional analytic psychotherapy (FAP) framework (Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1991). Parents should be encouraged to identify, not just the problematic behaviors (DRB1), but also a variety of behaviors which may represent improvements for their particular child (DRB2). Using an acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) framework (Hayes, Strosal, & Wilson, 2003) parents can consider the kinds of child behaviors that may represent committed action: "will this behavior, performed flexibly in different situations and relationships, help my child to live a rich, meaningful life?" If a child's behavior is particularly rigid and inflexible, the parent may choose to reinforce all novel behaviors (Eisenberger & Shanock, 2003). Hence the behaviors that a parent may choose to reinforce are dependent upon the parental functional understanding of their particular child's behavior. Common specific examples include: expressing emotions verbally, asking for help and problem solving.

Connect and shape requires parental psychological flexibility, empathic understanding of their child (Coyne et al., 2007), acceptance of their child's emotions (Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002) and defusion from verbal parenting rules (Whittingham, 2014). ACT should be drawn upon as needed to promote flexible parenting in conjunction with connect and shape.

3. Using connect and shape

The process of connect and shape is illustrated in Fig. 1. Parents can be taught the process of connect and shape step by step, with the flowchart as an aid if desired. The components of connect and shape are not new, hence, the existing intervention literature should be drawn upon as relevant to teach each of the individual skills used as well as to support the cultivation of parental psychological flexibility and empathic understanding.

4. Example of connect and shape in action

For illustrative purposes, this is an example of a parent-child interaction using connect and shape. This example is not based on specific real people; it is a realistic amalgamation. Connect and

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