

PTSD and Parenting

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I interviewed my good friend W., a survivor of childhood sexual abuse because I admired the way she was getting help as a new parent. Here is what she told me:

Going to my parenting class taught me things I wouldn't have thought of. Four helpful ideas I've learned are:

1. Women have three roles in a family: housewife, mother, and lover/companion to one's partner. I thought my mother was a good parent because we always had clean sheets on our beds. My therapist had to explain to me that the clean sheets meant my mother was a good housewife. Paying attention and interacting with your kid is being a good mother. I really didn't know how to interact with my son. I couldn't do baby talk or sound affectionate. My thinking was, he doesn't talk back so why would I talk to him? I hadn't had it modeled for me, so she [the therapist] would model it for me. "Hel-lo, bay-bee!" she'd say to my son when we walked in, her voice rising and falling. I felt silly talking like that, but I could see how it engaged him, so I am learning it. Playing is difficult for me, too, but I'm learning.

2. Having an expressive face nurtures the baby emotionally. My therapist taught me that if you have an emotionless face and just stare blankly at the kid—I remember my mom doing that when I was little and feeling very upset—it is upsetting to them. I associate my expressionless face with the emotional numbing from PTSD from my sexual abuse, but also from my mother not responding to me. Facial expressions are very important to a baby. Looking him in the eye when he nurses and bonding with him is important. It is emotional as well as physical feeding. I've learned babies need that.

3. Being responsive empowers your child. My therapist also taught me not to leave him crying, which my mother did to us. When he cries and gets picked up, he's empowered. He learns he can get his needs met. If you cry and cry and don't get picked up, yes, you eventually stop crying, but you also can become hopeless about getting what you need. I think that happened to me.

4. A baby is not crying on purpose. When he cries, he's not doing it on purpose. It is the way babies communicate. He's not pulling my hair or biting me on purpose, either. He doesn't speak or understand English yet [at nine months]. It's all a big experiment for him. He can't talk.

After this conversation, it struck me that there is confusion about fatherhood, too. Bringing home the bacon is good providing. It is not good parenting. Paying attention and interacting positively with your kid is good parenting. Criticizing is not.

People may have been provided for and their mothers may have been good housewives, yet they may not have received any good parenting at all!

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