

Fit your own oxygen mask first before helping a child

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WHY PARENTS NEED TO MEET THEIR OWN PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS FIRST

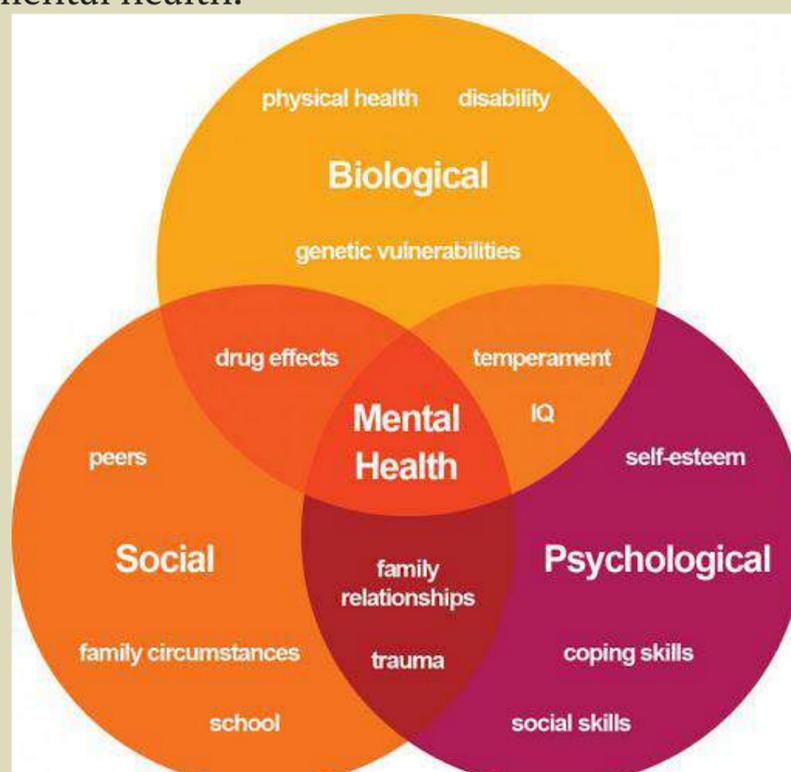
Parents seeking therapy for a child are typically under incredible stress and struggling psychologically themselves. Sometimes this is because they are at their wits end with all they have been coping with. Other times, it is because they are also struggling with their own issues that have been building or are coming to the surface. Parenting has a habit of doing that!

At Pocket Family Psychologist, we often see parents disregarding their own needs. They are desperate to get help for their child before even beginning to think about themselves. Sound familiar?

It is crucial that parents can begin to think about and meet their own needs before trying to help their child. We are big advocates of parents learning to become a little more 'self-centred'. Here are two reasons why:

Children are highly dependent and connected to their family

Parent's and child's struggles are likely to be inter-connected. When understanding a child's difficulties it is useful to explore how they developed, function and are maintained within the family system. This is always part of the picture that must be considered when understanding concerns about a child's mental health.



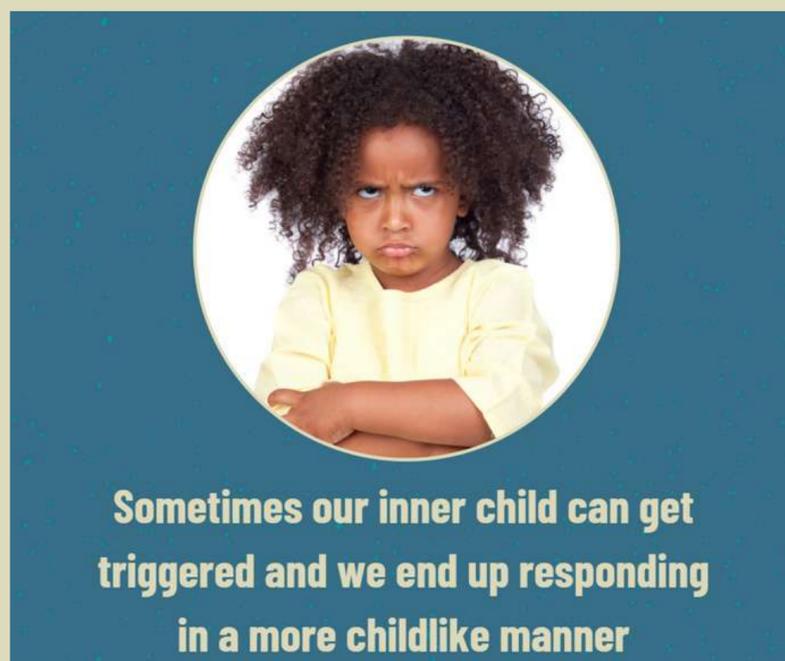
Only a calm and emotionally regulated parent can co-regulate and help a child

Children rely on their parents to help them manage their emotions, assess danger and problem-solve throughout most of childhood. We see this most obviously with babies and toddlers but it also applies to older children and even teenagers – think of the teenager distraught following a relationship difficulty or failure of some sort.

A parent can only connect with their child's needs, soothe and help them problem solve if in a calm state themselves. This allows the parent to hold the beat steady and stay connected with their child whilst the child spins or pulls shapes. Can you see why we encourage parental 'self-centredness'?



A parent's thinking brain needs to be online and in a mature/parenting position. But sometimes children can trigger their parents' inner child causing the parent to act upon feelings of hurt, anger, jealousy or resentment. Other times, the parent shuts down and cuts off from their child emotionally in a bid to protect the child.



A parent's inner child is more likely to be triggered when under stress or feeling unsupported and vulnerable. This can be harder still for parents who have experienced trauma, neglect or other difficulties in their early caregiving relationships; their inner child has strong needs and feelings that can easily come to the surface during parenting.

So how does a parent keep calm, self-centred, connected and in a parenting position for their child? It sounds simple but we know from therapeutic experience and from our own parenting just how tricky this can be. Here is what to do about it:

At Pocket Family Psychologist, we often advise parents to “fit your own oxygen mask first before helping a child”. This can mean different things for a parent depending on their situation.

- 1 Have strategies at hand to quickly calm down.** Get the brain in a state in which they can think rationally and connect socially and emotionally with their child. Be able to hold a steady rhythm for the child. Read our other blog posts on this topic <https://pocketfamilypsychologist.com/dropping-an-anchor-holding-steady-in-a-storm-and-keeping-your-thinking-brain-online/> and <https://pocketfamilypsychologist.com/more-on-managing-your-threat-brain-get-ready-for-some-science/>. Simple techniques such as taking 5 minutes outside, a breath or a mantra such as: “my child is just learning and developing, they need my support right now”.
- 2 Ensure a parent pays attention to their own needs** for support and nurture. That might mean taking time out to recharge or time in adult nurturing relationships.
- 3 Seek psychological help** to deal with old hurts, triggers or early unmet needs that are coming to the surface. This can be helpful when a parent is being triggered (aka losing it) a lot and struggling to hold steady as an adult and parent.

At Pocket Family Psychologist, Dr Sharon Brooks provides online adult consultations to help parents explore and address any issues that may be coming up for them. We also offer family consultations to explore how an issue may be understood and managed within the family context. Go to our online booking page to book your adult or family consultation

Please go to our website www.pocketfamilypsychologist.com for additional family resources.