



ALISTAIR COOPER AND SHEILA REDFERN

ROUTLEDGE

# REFLECTIVE PARENTING

A Guide to Understanding What's  
Going on in Your Child's Mind

## REFLECTIVE PARENTING

Have you ever wondered what's going on in your child's mind? This engaging book shows how Reflective Parenting can help you understand your children, manage their behaviour and build your relationship and connection with them. It is filled with practical advice showing how recent developments in mentalization, attachment and neuroscience have transformed our understanding of the parent-child relationship and can bring meaningful change to your own family relationships.

Alistair Cooper and Sheila Redfern show you how to make a positive impact on your relationship with your child, starting from the development of the baby's first relationship with you as parents, to how you can be more reflective in relationships with toddlers, children and young people. Using everyday examples, the authors provide you with practical strategies to develop a more reflective style of parenting and demonstrate how to use this approach in everyday interactions to help your children achieve their full potential in their development – cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally.

*Reflective Parenting* is an informative and enriching read for parents, written to help parents form a better relationship with their children. It is also an essential resource for clinicians working with children, young people and families to support them in managing the dynamics of the child-parent relationship. This is a book that every parent needs to read.

**Alistair Cooper** is a clinical psychologist and site consultant within the National Implementation Service, Michael Rutter Centre, implementing and researching evidence-based parenting programmes for children in care.

**Sheila Redfern** is a consultant clinical psychologist at the Anna Freud Centre, helping develop interventions for children and young people, and before this she worked in NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) teams.

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*Alistair Cooper and Sheila Redfern*

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As a new parent, I found this thoughtful and beautifully written book not just immensely interesting but bursting with practical support. *Reflective Parenting* stresses how we can benefit our children's development by focusing on what we love doing best: feeling the enjoyment of relating to and being with our children! This guide is not just the perfect gift for all new parents, but a useful tool for those with older children who want to think about how to make lasting changes in their connection with their children and tackle difficult behaviour without having to resort to shouting and/or punishments.

– Rosie Nixon, Editor, *HELLO!*

Reflective Parenting is turning out to be a key to mental health. This book really helps us understand what it involves in practice.

– Sue Gerhardt, author of *Why Love Matters* and *The Selfish Society*

If you want your kids to mentally flourish and be able to have a great life in a world that's gone insane, then this book will tell you everything you need to know. It's the ultimate guide on how to be the parents you wished you had.

– Ruby Wax

While this book is aimed at parents, it is just as important for professionals working with parents to read. The authors offer sound advice throughout, and do so in an entertaining and perhaps even gripping style. There is a 'page-turner' quality to the book, which comes from the application of a key principle of reflective parenting: they arouse curiosity in the reader. You read and you want to find out what happens next. The curiosity is hopefully infectious – in the sense that curiosity about what is going on in a child's mind is what reflective parenting is all about.

– Peter Fonagy, from the Foreword

This exciting book is a welcome addition to other approaches to parenting, and it takes a new methodology to the task of bringing up children successfully. It proposes that a major aspect of the parenting task is explicitly to connect with what the child is thinking and feeling. The authors argue that this will not only make children feel understood, but crucially, will also help them understand their own feelings and therefore

manage them better. The joy of such an approach is that it can easily be combined with other proven approaches to parenting such as sensitive responding to the child's needs, spending positive times together, and calmly setting limits when necessary.

– **Stephen Scott CBE, Professor of Child Health and Behaviour at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, Kings College London; Director of the National Academy for Parenting Research.**

In short, the authors have not given a cookbook for behavioral management for parents to use with their children. Rather, they have provided parents with a guide for developing their own self-awareness as well as their awareness of their children's thoughts, feelings, and motives. They have shown us the central importance of reflection in becoming the sensitive, responsive, and authoritative parents that our children need us to be.

– **Daniel Hughes, author of *Attachment-Focused Family Therapy Workbook* (2011), *Attachment-Focused Parenting* (2009) and many other books and articles. His office is in Annville, PA, USA and he presents and travels internationally regarding his model of treatment and care.**

# CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Peter Fonagy</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Prologue</i>	xv
Introduction	1
1. The origins of Reflective Parenting	13
2. The Parent Map	30
3. Managing your feelings	51
4. The ‘Parent APP’	67
5. Helping children with their feelings	84
6. Discipline: Understanding misunderstandings	98
7. Helping sensitive children work through misunderstandings	115
8. Family, siblings and friends	146



CONTENTS

9. Mentalizing during good times	171
10. Reflecting on the book	196
<i>References</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	213



Summary pages at the end of the chapters are available for download at <https://www.routledge.com/products/9781138020443>

# FOREWORD

It doesn't happen to me often that I feel worthwhile. Most days I do what I feel I have to do, and if I have done 50 per cent of what I needed to, I feel good. The outcome I aim for is just to have coped. In reading Sheila Redfern and Ali Cooper's book, I briefly stepped into a different world. Here was the application of ideas and research findings from two decades of work suddenly being turned into something worthwhile. For this I am immensely grateful.

The conceptual framework and empirical findings concerning reflective function or mentalizing have been influential in research and have found their way into some aspects of social work practice. What I did not realise could happen is for these findings to have the power to influence the way parents bring up their children. Of course, this was exactly what we had in mind originally when thinking about the transmission of secure attachment patterns across the generations and how this could be mediated by the extent to which parents are able to think about the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, wishes and desires in their child's mind as they responded to the child's actions. But few of us dared to hope that the translation from theory to practice could *actually* be achieved. In the real world, ideas are easy: we can all have them. The tougher task is to make something real out of abstract concepts. The authors are generous in their attribution to those whose research initiated the work they have undertaken; yet truly it is in their application of these ideas to working with parents where the real creativity lies.

This book is one of the best I have read in terms of providing a coherent and eminently practical framework within which the quality of the social environment that the family creates for the child can be genuinely improved. The book is not just practical in the sense of being easy to implement while providing firm direction as to what needs to be implemented; as the time-honoured quip goes, 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory'. In using ideas on reflective function to create a guide to Reflective

Parenting, Sheila and Ali also implicitly develop the theory they work with. They integrate parenting with the notion of emotion regulation; they bring in a number of behavioural and cognitive-behavioural principles in line with the mentalizing model; and most intriguingly, they extend the model to cover systemic theorising. What is extraordinary is that they achieve all this high-level integration while remaining 100 per cent in touch with the people they are working with – children and their parents.

While this book is aimed at parents, it is just as important for professionals working with parents to read. The authors offer sound advice throughout, and do so in an entertaining and perhaps even gripping style. There is a ‘page-turner’ quality to the book, which comes from the application of a key principle of Reflective Parenting: they arouse curiosity in the reader. You read and you want to find out what happens next. The curiosity is hopefully infectious – in the sense that curiosity about what is going on in a child’s mind is what Reflective Parenting is all about. It is this natural wish to find out that is so often lost among the competing priorities of modern living, where it is so much easier to take a shortcut, even if this entails making massive assumptions about another person’s thoughts and feelings. Yet, at least as far as our children are concerned, we so rarely bother to find out if we were right or wrong. The curiosity also works in another way: the parent’s curiosity about what is on the child’s mind should – and in my experience, does – create curiosity in the child’s psyche about his or her parents. There is nothing like feeling that someone is interested in you to make you curious about what might be going on in that person’s mind. This is perhaps the single most important reason why reflectiveness generates a secure bond and a good child–parent relationship.

Quality of parenting remains an important predictor of most outcomes we value in our children. One particular finding I am fond of sharing concerns the likelihood of persistent aggression and violence across childhood. We know that children are at their most violent at around 2 years of age. They do not have sufficient verbal skills to be persuasive, so physical aggression has an adaptive, if slightly asocial, role. Not all children are like this, of course; temperament plays an important part. But most children, thankfully, desist from this violent behaviour during the ensuing few years. Sadly, 5–10 per cent do not, and these can develop serious conduct problems. It will not surprise anyone to find out that those children who desist are twice as likely to have positive interactions with their parents, to receive consistent parenting and to have parents who appear less hostile and more effective. These findings come from a Canadian study which looked at over 10,000 children (Cote et al., 2006). The reason I am mentioning this is because of the striking power of these observations. The likelihood that these observations were due to chance is less than one in a billion billion!

## FOREWORD

The parents have an important role to play, and that role has become increasingly important as family size decreased from ancient times, when it was genuinely a village who raised a child, to modern times, when the task falls on just one or two adults. The pressure sometimes can be almost unbearable. Humans did not evolve to be sole carers of their children; our genes dictate that there should be grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins – an extended family network. The increased mobility linked originally to the industrial revolution has made parenting harder, and the time that reflection requires more precious than ever. What we know about child development suggests that children require quality rather than quantity: that is to say, the occasional experience of the true presence of a parent is more important than his or her constant physical, but unreflective, presence. By ‘true presence’ I mean being there for the child, having the child’s mind in mind, thinking about the child’s thoughts, feeling the child’s feelings. It is this capacity that engenders the capacity to think and feel in the young human. It is this capacity that is the foundation for our humanity. It is this capacity that this book attempts and succeeds in making just that little bit more accessible to all of us. I wish I had had this book when I was bringing up my children!

*by Peter Fonagy FMedSci FBA OBE  
Professor and Head, Research Department of Clinical,  
Educational and Health Psychology, University College London;  
Chief Executive, Anna Freud Centre, London.*

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Alistair would like to thank the people who have inspired the inception of this book: Deborah Page, for starting this journey through her wisdom and kindness, and Daniel Hughes, with his commitment to his work, generosity and compassion for others. A special mention to the children and young people with whom Alistair has been incredibly fortunate to work with and learn so much from, especially about resilience and courage in the face of adversity. Finally, a very large mention to Emily, Sam and Izzie, for their understanding and continued interest, without whom I would have been unable to do this.

Sheila would like to thank Peter Fonagy and Judy Dunn for providing the inspiration for this work, and for their original work in so many fields, and for making it make sense. The real inspiration for continuing to develop this research in clinical practice comes from the parents, children and young people who have shown such determination to improve their relationships. The biggest thanks go to my family: Richard, Gabriel, Joseph and William – the people who have taught me the most about what it means to hold another person's mind in mind.

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# PROLOGUE

The following fictitious families are described throughout the book. Some of their everyday struggles and family scenarios we hope will be familiar to you.

## Family One

Jon (38) and Lisa (36) have two children, Charlie (6) and Ella (4). Jon works in local government and gets very stressed by his work. He has a group of friends outside of work that he likes to meet up with regularly to take his mind off work, and to have time out from his family. Lisa also works part time for a travel company. She likes to be organised and get things done on time, but finds the commitment of a job and two young children makes it hard to always be as organised as she would like. Lisa does the majority of the childcare and at times this can cause tension. Jon sometimes takes over the care of the children when Lisa has work commitments, and enjoys this, but finds it also conflicts with the demands of his stressful job. Jon has both his parents who can help with childcare from time to time. Lisa's parents are no longer alive. Charlie is a boisterous 6-year-old and likes to be active and physical as much as possible. He and his younger sister Ella can play well together, but often get into battles, vying for their mum and dad's attention. Charlie likes the fact that he is the eldest child.

## Family Two

Karen (41) and Tom (44) have three children, Maddy (12), Sam (10) and Molly (2). Tom works for a finance company and has a critical boss. He would like to change jobs to something he enjoys more, but the family depends on his income to support them, and so he feels stuck. He is a keen cyclist and will sometimes go away for long cycling trips on his own or with



## PROLOGUE

a group of friends. Karen supports his interest but wishes she had something similar so that she could have more of a break from the children. Karen also works part time as a receptionist in a health clinic. Her job is poorly paid for the hours she works, but is very busy. Karen's parents are divorced and she had a difficult childhood with her parents arguing much of the time. Her mother is involved with the children and offered childcare when the children were little, but as her mother gets older, Karen is finding she needs to care for both her mother and her three children, which puts a strain on her and the family. Her relationship with her mother is quite tense. Tom's parents are both still alive, but live overseas and so are much less involved with the children.

### Family Three

Rachel (32) and Matt (31) have three children, twins Grace and Lilly (7) and 9-month-old baby Jack. When Jack was 3 months old, Rachel and Matt, who were not married, separated and are now living apart. Matt sees the children on alternate weekends, but because Jack is still a baby, he does not have them to stay overnight at his house yet. He finds it hard being separated from the children and enjoys taking them out when it is his weekend to spend time with them. Matt works as a furniture maker and has his own small business, which means he does not always have work. Rachel is unable to work because it is too expensive for childcare for the baby and after-school care for the twins. She has mixed feelings about being a stay-at-home mum. She enjoys the one-to-one time with Jack, but finds the responsibility of three children on her own much of the time very difficult. Rachel has a wide circle of friends on whom she depends. Her parents are both alive and help out whenever she asks, although Rachel finds it hard to ask for help sometimes and would like to show that she can manage on her own. Matt's parents live locally to him and are involved with the children. They would like Matt to try to resolve his relationship with Rachel.

Throughout the book, when referring to a child, we have used the masculine 'him' for consistency. The principles of Reflective Parenting, however, apply to children of both genders and of all ages and developmental stages.

# INTRODUCTION

*It is early on a Monday morning after a stressful family breakfast. A family is busy preparing for the start of the week. Lisa, the mum, is getting the children ready for school, but Charlie, her 6-year-old son, is being oppositional, saying 'No' to just about everything and running around the front room refusing to put on his uniform. Both parents are running late for work, and consequently tempers are running high. Threats of sanctions seem to be inflaming the situation and bribing with treats offers no resolution. Both parents subsequently try ignoring Charlie's difficult behaviour, then Lisa changes tack and tries to find a way to praise Charlie, but, with little success, after having tried all week during half term to get Charlie to follow her routines, gives up and pretends that she has to get something important from upstairs for work.*

*Suddenly Jon, the dad, takes a moment to step back and reflect on Charlie's behaviour. He takes Charlie to one side and asks in a kind voice 'What's going on today? Why do things seem so difficult this morning? Are you anxious about going back to school after such a long time off?' Charlie's body instantly relaxes; his head turns to the floor as he confirms with a nod that he is worried. After a brief discussion about his worries about being away from home again and what might help (in this instance taking a toy in his book bag to remind him of home) they trot off to school, leaving Lisa in a curious state wondering what had just happened and how a simple question could have such a powerful effect.*

Being a parent offers some of the most joyous and fulfilling experiences of your life – but it can also lead to conflict, confusion and some of the most stressful, even life-changing encounters. Almost every day parents can become overwhelmed with intense emotions that are related to their children, many of these emotions positive and fulfilling, but others more

## INTRODUCTION

negative. Within these often contradicting and confusing experiences, parents frequently wonder whether what they are doing with their children is the right thing – whether the ways in which they interact with, discipline and motivate their children are really working. For example, Lisa, as she drives to work, wonders just what was making her son so worried about going to school and why and how this had affected his behaviour.

Have you ever wondered what's going on inside your child's mind?



Have you ever wondered what's going on inside your child's mind?

Have you wondered what the inside story behind his behaviour might be? What kind of parent would you like to be and how would you like your child to behave? We are guessing that you picked up this book because you have asked yourself these kinds of questions and are motivated to think about

your parenting and what will help your child develop. You may also have turned to this book because you have tried other approaches, but find that you are still trying to get on top of difficult behaviours and situations that leave you feeling less than satisfied with your relationship with your child. In this book, unlike a more traditional parenting book, we do not promise to offer you solutions to specific behaviours or give you a set strategy that we claim will work in a specific situation with any child. What we do promise is to offer you a different way of thinking about you (as a parent) and your child, which will benefit both of you enormously. In our work, we often draw on specific theories we find helpful, such as mentalization-based treatments, the concept of mind-mindedness and attachment theory. If you want to understand a bit more about these theories, we have given you a summary at the end of this chapter.

When we started writing this book, we thought about how we could get the ideas that we use in our professional interventions with children, young people and their parents and carers across to parents reading this book, so that they could use these theories to help them in their everyday parenting. First, though, let's look back at the scenario, which is likely to strike a chord with many parents:

*Looking back on the situation a day or two later, it became obvious to Lisa that Charlie was anxious, but at the time she had no space in her mind to think about anything other than that her son was being difficult and making her late for work. A build up of stress over half term, with its relentless chores and Charlie's non-compliant behaviour, meant that she found it hard to reflect on what might be going on inside his mind in that moment. She had no clear sense of Charlie's thoughts or feelings in that moment. Instead she was simply absorbed in her own experience, overwhelmed by feeling helpless, irritated and distracted by her own thoughts about work and what she had on that day, and was exasperated with getting nowhere in her attempts to manage his behaviour.*

What just happened in this situation and what helped? Jon's effectiveness was not solely down to the fact that he took charge of the situation, or because Charlie realised his dad had the authority; it had very much to do with *how* Jon approached the situation, and how Charlie experienced him. First, he did not approach the situation as a problem, but simply as a normal, everyday interaction. Second, and importantly, he did not focus on the behaviour itself, but was more interested in why the behaviour was there: he focused on the meaning of Charlie's behaviour and *his* experience. And finally, he did not become overly frustrated and managed to keep his

## INTRODUCTION

emotions in check throughout the interaction. Here lie the effective ingredients in managing these everyday challenging interactions, and they relate to a style of parenting we refer to as Reflective Parenting. The final two ingredients, which relate to theories we will be drawing on throughout the book, are especially important: how sensitive a parent is to the mind of their child, and how sensitive the parent is to their own mind, both of which we will discuss in detail in the following chapters.

So, how were we drawn to Reflective Parenting, and what makes us so convinced that this is the way forward if you really want to improve your relationship with your child? Both as clinical psychologists working with struggling families and as busy parents ourselves, often peddling hard to keep everything running smoothly, we know something of how hard it is to manage family dynamics plus our own emotional and work lives. After training in clinical psychology, we were both immediately drawn to working with children and young people (Ali with children who were in care and leaving care, and Sheila with children and young people who were referred into Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS)). In our separate services, we became increasingly interested in the impact and influence of early attachment relationships – the relationship children have with their parents in the first weeks and months of life – on how children develop socially and cope with emotional challenges later on in their childhood and into adolescence. So it never felt sufficient to look simply at the problematic behaviour that children were referred to us with. Instead, helping parents to improve their relationship with their child, and to think about what is going on inside his mind, often led to the most positive changes in his behaviour and a more harmonious relationship. The theories underpinning this book are also concerned with helping parents promote a feeling of security and build resilience in their children. Resilience and security are essential for children's overall development and how they make their way in the world. Children who have been parented in a reflective way are better able to navigate their way through the joys and difficulties encountered in life and relationships. How you interact with your child will determine, to a great degree, how he will grow up and interact with other people. With this in mind, there are two central questions:

1. What exactly is Reflective Parenting?
2. How can parents become more reflective in their parenting?

The core purpose of this book is to answer these two questions. We will make the ideas behind the psychological research on this area accessible to parents who want to understand what is at the heart of this style of parenting, and how it helps children develop emotionally and reach their potential.

The term ‘reflective parent’ links closely to an established concept within the field of research on parent–child relationships, known as reflective functioning (see section on theory at the end of the chapter). The construct of reflective functioning was introduced by Peter Fonagy, Miriam Steele, Howard Steele and Mary Target just under 15 years ago (1–3). Through his research, clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst Peter Fonagy found that parents who have high ‘reflective functioning’, that is who are able to consider what is going on in their child’s mind as well as being aware of their own thoughts and feelings, bring clear benefits to their children, including promoting secure attachment, good social skills and the ability to ‘read’ others, and an ability to manage, or regulate, their own emotions, sometimes in difficult and challenging situations or interactions. So when we use the term ‘Reflective Parenting’, we mean a style of relating and responding to your child that has characteristics that are associated with parents who have high reflective functioning. We believe it is important that all parents are able to benefit from the research on Reflective Parenting, and it is this belief that motivated us to write this book.

Reflective parents do not focus solely on the external behaviour of their child, but also keep a focus on their child as an individual with his own mind. The expression ‘he has a mind of his own’ is often used in a slightly derogatory way to describe a wilful and oppositional child. However, reflective parents more often than not would see that their child does indeed have their own mind that is a rich tapestry of interwoven thoughts, ideas and motivations, and they wish to understand the workings of this mind. At the same time, they realise their child’s experience can be very different from their own – that is that their interpretation of an event could be quite different from their child’s experience of it. Reflective parents can frequently see that their child often does things for reasons that are linked to how he is thinking or feeling – that there is an inside story. Parents can then respond to that inside story of thoughts and feelings, rather than just reacting to the behaviour. Reflective parents are also more likely to be in touch with their own thoughts and feelings when interacting with their child, and to have some understanding of how their own emotions might affect interactions and the actual outcome of situations.

*Karen was at the local supermarket with her 12-year-old daughter, Maddy. As she walked round the aisles she asked Maddy to look for certain items, but Maddy’s face looked troubled and she stared at her mobile phone, ignoring her mum. Karen snapped at her daughter, ‘Can’t you take your eyes off that phone for a minute and help me here?’ Maddy stormed off to the area near the tills, refusing to help her mum.*

## INTRODUCTION

*Let's have a think about what's going on. Maddy might be failing to help her mum out with the shopping for a variety of reasons that are particular to her at that specific time. Perhaps Maddy is refusing to help her mum because she simply finds supermarket shopping boring. Or maybe she feels it's unfair that she's had to come and do the shopping with her mum whilst her younger brothers get to stay at home. If Karen is able to respond to Maddy in a way that helps her feeling dissipate this is likely to change the way that Maddy acts. For example, if she notices that she has seen a message on her phone, she might stop, ask her about it and reflect that something has happened that has really upset Maddy. In fact, Maddy just received a text from a friend to say a group are all going ice skating but that she hasn't been included. Karen might ask about the message and tell Maddy that she must feel really upset to be left out. This is likely to help Maddy to feel closer to her mum and more willing to help her out with the shopping. However, if Karen is tired and frustrated, she might react to the situation differently and, for example perceive that Maddy is behaving unreasonably. Karen may then respond, unknowingly, in a way that increases the negative feelings Maddy is experiencing, which in turn makes the difficult behaviour increase. For example, Karen might say 'I don't get this kind of problem with your brothers when they come with me. Why can't you be more helpful and stop being so moody?'*

Throughout the book, we promote the idea that children's behaviour has meaning and intention – it is rarely random. We will look at how Reflective Parenting helps you to think about your child's inside story and also your own. Recognising this and taking an interested stance towards why your child does what he does is at the heart of Reflective Parenting. Some parents, a lot of the time, seem to guess intuitively why their child is behaving in a particular way. Often, though, parents can find it hard to focus on the *why* – the feelings and thoughts underlying behaviour. And we are all capable of making snap judgements about why our children are behaving in a certain way, which often are based more on what's going on in our own minds than what's going on in our child's.

In reality, all parents fluctuate on a scale in their ability to relate to their child in a reflective way, depending on internal and external influences.

We will show you how to develop skills that will enhance your relationship with your child and increase his confidence and self-esteem, as well as help you to feel more successful in your parenting. Essentially, we will invite you to observe yourself more from the outside, to imagine how you might come across to your child, and we will encourage you to see your child more



Being preoccupied can make it hard to even notice your child.

from the inside, to consider what their experiences, thoughts and feelings (their mental states) might be within certain situations – both extremely important concepts. To help you achieve these aims, we start by helping you, as parents, to think first about your own feelings, as the ability to do this is vital before you can start to think about your child.

Of course, it would be virtually impossible to be able to do this all of the time in your relationships, but the chapters will share a common focus: to develop and enhance your awareness of and ability to practice Reflective Parenting. You may or may not want to read about the theory underpinning this book, which we make reference to from time to time throughout, but either way we hope you will use this book principally as a guide to help you through the difficult parenting experiences that we all face, almost daily. We hope that, within your relationship with your child, there will be fewer misunderstandings and greater harmony, and that behavioural problems will be resolved more easily.

### **A theoretical background to Reflective Parenting**

A number of respected theories inform the idea of Reflective Parenting, and provide the backbone for the straightforward, practical parenting strategies



throughout this book. Importantly, these practices aren't exclusive to any one group of parents – families from all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds can benefit from trying out these parenting approaches, helping them to build a better connection with their children along the way. Even if your own childhood wasn't ideal, you can choose to do things differently with your own children. Often, trying out a new parenting approach can provide a real sense of excitement, as you anticipate the opportunity to try something new, to embark on this new adventure; as you do so you can feel reassured that the well-researched, tried-and-tested theories discussed here back you up and are there to lean on when things get really tough.

### **Attachment theory**

Attachment theory was first discussed by John Bowlby (4) and his work has had an incredibly powerful impact on how we understand parent–infant relationships. Bowlby proposed that all infants have an innate motivational and behavioural system that drives them to seek proximity with their primary caregiver – usually the mother. In an evolutionary context, this desire to stay close to the mother would have ensured protection when a child was in danger or threatened by danger. The most important aspect of attachment theory in relation to understanding parent–child relationships is that every infant needs to develop a relationship with one important primary caregiver for their social and emotional development, and more specifically for learning how to regulate, or control, their feelings. In other words, when an infant enjoys a good attachment early in life, this relationship gives them the security to explore their world, and works as a template for future successful relationships. Mary Ainsworth (5), who joined Bowlby at the Tavistock Clinic in London researching the effects of maternal separation on child development and worked extensively in the area of parent–child development, devised a famous experiment where she established four classifications of attachment. She found that most people had experienced 'secure' attachment as a baby, having enjoyed a responsive and close attachment to a parent. The experiment found that when children in this group are separated from their primary caregivers, they experience distress, but are quickly comforted upon reunion. The classification of attachment is made on the basis of the relationship between an infant and his main, primary caregiver. In most cases this is the mother, but obviously not in all, and not across all cultures. The 'secure' infant uses their primary caregiver as a safe base from which to explore the world. Parents who consistently (or at least most of the time) respond sensitively to their infant's needs will have children who are securely attached. These children will learn that when they are distressed, their parents will comfort and soothe them, and so they grow up with the

expectation that other people are also available to help and support them. Importantly, these children develop a complementary model of themselves as worthy and deserving of that love and comfort. Secure attachment underpins the development of good ‘mentalization’ (see following subsection).

You can think of attachment theory as the fertile soil that the following theories all grow out of – that are, in essence, all part of the same family. While there are subtle, and important, differences between the following constructs, at the same time they are extremely closely related to one another.

### *Mentalization*

The term mentalization, first used by Peter Fonagy in 1989 (6), describes the ability to reflect on the mental states, that is the thoughts and feelings, of others. The ability to understand another person’s mental state is strongly linked to whether an individual was securely attached to their primary caregiver as an infant. One important study (in the theory of attachment) looked at how a pregnant woman’s own attachment as an infant could predict whether her own baby would be securely attached and found that the most significant predictive factor was whether the mother was able to mentalize her relationship with her own parents, that is whether she was able to think about and reflect on her parents’ behaviour, emotions and states of mind. The parents who could do this were said to be high in reflective functioning (see following subsection).

When we ‘mentalize’ this means that not only do we recognise that others have emotions, but we also understand and respond to these emotions. The ability to mentalize is thought to be rooted in our early relationships and whether our primary caregivers were able to reflect accurately on our own thoughts and feelings, and, crucially, was able to show by their corresponding actions and words that they understood and could interpret our mental states. When parents are able to reflect on the mental states (internal thoughts and feelings) of their child, the child in turn becomes better able to control their own emotions. This process occurs because when parents ‘mirror’ back to the child (through the way they speak to, look at and behave with the child) how the child is feeling, the child begins to understand, and eventually to control, their own emotions. Without a parent who can reflect back, infants don’t know how to make sense of what they are feeling. The parent becomes a trainer to the infant in learning to understand himself and his feelings.

### *Reflective functioning (RF)*

Reflective functioning, a term also coined by Peter Fonagy and his colleagues, is what this concept actually looks like in action. RF is the capacity

to understand or describe both one's own and another person's behaviour in terms of underlying mental states and intentions. As described earlier, a mental state describes how someone is thinking or feeling. So a person's reflective functioning would be evident in how they talk about their own and others' underlying mental states and feelings. For example, a child might say, 'My Mum was really cross when she saw I hadn't done my homework, because she was worried I was going to get in trouble with my teacher, and thought I was being a bit lazy.' Or a parent might say, 'He used to cry all the time as a baby, and it used to make me feel so inadequate when I couldn't comfort him, but I think he was just very frustrated.' When parents show that they are able to think about their child's mind in this way and respond sensitively, they are showing a good level of reflective functioning. (This has also been called *maternal mind-mindedness*, see following subsection.) RF is also linked to secure attachment.

### *Mind-Minded*

Elizabeth Meins (7) researched the importance of the *way* that mothers and carers speak to children, and the use of language generally in the family. She found that this way of talking to and about children was more important than secure attachment itself in predicting a child's eventual ability to understand another person's perspective. The concept of *mind-mindedness* can be seen in action in families when parents (particularly mothers were studied) talk to their children about what they think might be going on in their children's minds. Meins showed that when mothers talked naturally to their children about the children's thoughts and feelings – their mental states – this was a good predictor of the children's later understanding of other people's thoughts, feelings, wishes and desires. Importantly, it was the *accuracy* of this description of what they thought was going on in their children's minds that predicted how able the children were at understanding themselves and others.

### *Theory of Mind (ToM)*

In 1978, two eminent US psychologists, David Premack and Guy Woodruff (8), developed the concept known as Theory of Mind. Having a 'theory of mind' enables a person to recognise that others have thoughts, desires and intentions that may be different from their own, and that these mental states can predict or explain another person's actions. This ToM ability enables us to understand that mental states can be the cause of how other people behave, so it allows us to understand other people, and their motivations, much better. Normally developing children are thought to develop a ToM

around the age of 3.5–4 years of age. However, there are signs much earlier on, from very early infancy, that babies can recognise that other people have intentional minds separate from their own. Many of the studies on ToM have focused on autistic children and their failure to develop this skill, which seriously impacts on their relationships with others as it means they are not able to understand how things look from another person’s perspective, which is an important part of friendships and relating to others in general. When ToM is studied in children it is found to be related to children’s social competence. Studies show that ToM skills in children relate to their level of social competence, empathy and perspective-taking skills, the last two of which are key components in children’s social relationships. ToM skills are also related to how securely attached a child is (9).

In addition to these theories and research, we have also drawn on a therapeutic intervention, largely built on the foundations of attachment theory, but with a set of principles all of its own, which we have found useful to the thinking behind the book.

### *Video Interaction Guidance (VIG)*

Originally developed by Harrie Biemans (10) (1990) in the Netherlands and then brought to Scotland by Colwyn Trevarthan and developed by Hilary Kennedy, VIG is an evidence-based method that uses recorded interactions to enhance what is known as the ‘attunement’ between parent and child. The practice was developed originally from Video Home Training (VHT) in the Netherlands, and from Trevarthan’s work on what he termed ‘moments of vitality’ between parents and their infants. Trevarthan (11) observed a ‘communicative dance’ happening between a parent and infant; he noticed the way that the parent followed the child, the child the parent, in a sort of rhythmic dance, in which the parent and the child in this partnership both developed ‘space in their mind’ for the other. By this, he meant that the child and the parent start to view themselves in relation to each other. When a child makes what is called an initiative – which may be something as simple as smiling at the parent or holding a toy up for the parent to see – and the parent ‘receives’ it – which may involve smiling back or commenting to the child that they have a fun looking toy in their hand – this sets up what is called a ‘yes cycle’ whereby parent and child connect with each other and which involves sharing positive feelings. This has a very powerful effect on the child and on the relationship with the parent. For example, where the parent notices the child’s pleasure in showing them the toy, and expresses an interest in the child showing it to them, the parent shows their child that they are paying attention to the child, and to the child’s thoughts and feelings. This increases the feeling of being attuned and has a powerful effect of

bringing closer connection between parent and child, and where there might have been tension previously, de-escalates this tension quickly through the attunement. Where the parent misses the child's 'initiative' and the child misses the parent's turn (i.e. where the parent fails to pick up on an invitation from the child to interact) a 'no-cycle' starts, which happens often, and quickly, in families where there is stress. VIG encourages parents to pay attention to interactions and, through watching video clips of positive moments they have shared with their child, teaches them how to interact better. Once parents start to give the child greater attention, they can then build up to more attuned interactions – whereby the parent and child manage to listen well, respond positively and take turns. This can have a profound impact on the relationship as the parents learn to de-escalate difficult interactions. Parents are encouraged to see how a certain set of behaviours can lay the foundations for attunement with their child. This set of behaviours includes when they look interested in their child, for example by turning towards their child; giving their child time and space (e.g. not rushing in to intervene or tell the child what to do); wondering aloud what their child is doing, thinking and feeling; looking for initiatives; naming positively what they see, hear, think and feel about their child and so on. Using the principles of VIG together with mentalization theories can be really helpful in forming an active plan for how you can approach your relationship with your child from the stance of looking at what is going on inside.

Our aim in this book is to draw on all of these theories and bring to you a method of parenting that you can try for yourselves with your children. The test of whether we have done a good job of translating these theories into action will be in any changes that you start to notice and feel in your relationship with your child and in your child's behaviour, and in whether you feel that you are beginning to understand your child's inside story by being more reflective in your parenting.

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