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Targeted Parenting

# "Sometimes, I Don't Like My Kids." Burnout Blocks Attunement

New research shows that parental burnout can block parent/child attunement.

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Parental burnout is defined as an emotional state where demands outstrip the parent's perceived capacity to handle them. A recent study revealed that parents experiencing burnout report more emotional distance from their children, leading to harsh punishment and even violence towards children. A groundbreaking new neuroscience study from Nanyang Technological University may demonstrate why this happens. 31 maternal/child dyads were studied using functional near-infrared spectroscopy to measure brain-to-brain synchrony. The study found that mothers experiencing high levels of stress were not able to attune to their child's emotional state. This may be the neurological mechanism for how parental burnout interferes with attachment.

## **The Relationship Between Attunement and Attachment:**

Attunement is a critical component of attachment. Attunement means being aware of, and responsive to, another person's reality. When we are attuned to our children, we can predict their needs and their reactions, without the use of language. A mother can differentiate a hungry cry from a cranky cry, and both of those from a scared or pained cry. When a child comes home from school and says his day was "fine," an attuned parent knows when that "fine" is sincere, and when to probe a bit.

The experience of parental attunement leads to attachment, which psychologists define as a strong and durable emotional connection between parent and child. Attachment has been demonstrated to be critically important in helping children learn self-regulation skills. Self-regulation describes how children manage their emotions, how they self-soothe, how they understand other children, and how they develop self-control. Children with secure attachment to their parents have greater levels of self-regulation than children who have 'insecure attachment' to caregivers.

## **Measuring Attunement:**

In a study that looks like something from a sci-fi thriller, researchers attached a cap of electrodes on both parent and toddler heads. Using a combination of functional near-infrared spectroscopy with tandem hyper-scanning, the researchers were able to non-invasively measure brain function by measuring blood concentration levels in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. The prefrontal cortex is involved in our ability to understand another's point of view.

Research has already demonstrated that parents undergoing severe stress, or parents experiencing burnout, report greater levels of harsh punishment and a sense of emotional distance from their children. This, in turn, interferes with attachment.

Before the study, mothers were asked about their parenting stress levels. Both mother and toddler were then fitted with the fNIRS caps, and while the toddler was sitting on the mother's lap, both watched animation clips from Brave, Peppa Pig, and The Incredibles.

Parents who reported lower levels of stress had greater prefrontal cortex synchrony with their children. Parents who reported high levels of stress had little prefrontal cortex synchrony with their children. Researchers were surprised at the level of relationship found between stress and synchrony but point to the strong implications of their findings.

### **Self-Care *IS* Child-Care:**

In my own Targeted Parenting classes for parents of challenging children, the conundrum of self-care comes up frequently. It's why I repeat my maxim over and over again – **Self-care *IS* childcare**. If you don't care for yourself, your brain won't be able to attune to your child. It's that simple. What tends to happen is that a lack of attunement becomes a relationship breach before you know it. (To read more about the Targeted Parenting approach, click [here](#) and [here](#). [To read more about helping neurodiverse children achieve their goals, click here.](#))

*Jonathan was in a **mood**. He came home from school, and I could do no right. The supper was "gross," I hadn't fixed his gaming system yet, I was the only "crazy" mother who was insisting that he complete the entire homework, his little sister is a "annoying" so he felt justified in hitting her.... the evening was a disaster. Problem is, I was in a **mood** myself. I tried to get the gaming system fixed, the company was supposed to send a tech, who never showed. Waiting for him meant I got stuck in a traffic jam, I was late to work, so I sped, which meant I got pulled over. My hands were shaking so bad, I got coffee all over my suit.... My boss yelled at me, the whole day was a disaster.*

*So when Jonathan hit his sister, I lost it completely. I yelled at him, and I'm ashamed of what I said. I told him that sometimes, I don't even like him. I love him. But I don't like him right now. Hours later, I got a call from his principal, wanting to know if Jonathan was OK. You know he's mainstreamed for part of the day. It seems that when the kids in his class walked from the special-needs wing to the regular ed wing of the school, a group of kids were harassing and taunting them, calling them "weirdo" and "retard." On the day he was socially excluded, his own mom told him she doesn't like him! It never occurred to me to ask Jonathan why he was so moody! Now I feel terribly guilty and ashamed.*

Rosalie is emblematic of a mother who is trying so hard to care for her children, she forgets herself in the equation. As we all validated her struggles, one of the mothers in the class asked Rosalie if she gets enough sleep at night, and if she had eaten at all that day. Rosalie admitted that she's been trying to power through

allergies, her sleep hasn't been good, the allergy medication takes away her appetite, and that she had not engaged in any self-care activities at all that week. Sometimes, a mom needs a "mom," someone to ask if she's OK, and to remind her that humans are like cars – we can't function without fuel. And we can't be present and attuned if we're under extreme stress.

Of course, it never occurred to Rosalie to ask Jonathan why he is in such an upset mood. As the study above shows, it's hard to attune to children when we're under stress.

#### **Maternal Guilt Contributes To Burnout:**

I'm glad Rosalie was able to discuss this incident with the class. Holding on to feelings of guilt is only going to increase her burnout, which will, of course, make it even harder to connect with her children. Thankfully, we can address feelings of guilt by apologizing and making a concrete plan to act differently in the future. A recent study about parental burnout was revolutionary in that it was the first study where parents openly admitted to just how severe parental burnout can get. ([To read more about that study, click here.](#))



When we are under stress, we're not able to attune to our children. Self-care IS childcare!  
Source: yanlev/123RF

Occupational burnout has three ingredients:

- Chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job
- Overwhelming exhaustion
- Inefficacy – a sense of ineffectiveness.

This can lead to a sense of detachment from the job at hand. Doesn't that describe parenting? There are often emotional and interpersonal stressors (This supper is **GROSS!** My sister is **annoying**, I'm going to hit her!), overwhelming exhaustion (this one needs no explanation) and parents often feel ineffective, especially when trying to manage the competing needs and demands of several children, or when parenting neurodiverse children. Of course, this can lead to a sense of emotional numbness and detachment, and of course, that blocks attunement. ([To read more about scientific approaches towards parenting a neurodiverse child, click here.](#))

## References

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## About the Author

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