



COMPASSIONATE CHILD-REARING

CLASS 1

PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAM

Instructor's Guide

Class Meeting I **Compassionate Child-Rearing and Parental Ambivalence**

Schedule of Activities

1. Introduce yourself and ask participants to introduce themselves and tell something about their families, children, partner, family of origin, career, etc.
(For a group of 15, this can take 30 minutes)
2. Introduce the goals and purposes of the course. Mention available referral services for those parents who desire counseling or family therapy. **
3. Have an open discussion about questions most frequently asked by parents or prospective parents. What problems have come up for the participants as new parents? What expectations do they have about any changes the new baby might bring to their family? How do they feel the new baby will affect them as a couple?
4. Introduce and explain the “compassionate” parenting perspective as a primary focus of the course. This approach is based on parents:
 - (A) developing sensitivity to themselves in relation to their own childhood experiences as well as the present-day challenges they face as parents.
 - (B) understanding the feelings they experience, both positive and negative, in relation to their children. Understanding what goes on in their brain during the wide range of interactions they have each day with their baby (and/or their older children).



Both approaches help dispel feelings of guilt that many parents experience in relation to trying to be the “perfect” parent.

**For at risk populations in particular, this is the point at which you can sensitively describe the mandate to report child abuse. Specify what the laws are in your state [or province] and what your responsibilities are as a mandated reporter. Be sure you explain to parents the limits of confidentiality.

Break: 15 minutes for socializing and refreshments

5. Explain the background of the videotaped parent discussion group (see Guidelines) and introduce *Parental Ambivalence*.
6. Show excerpts from *Parental Ambivalence*, (14 minutes) for CLASS 1 of the DVD Compassionate Child-Rearing Parent Education Program.
7. Encourage open discussion about participants’ responses to watching *Parental Ambivalence*; Could they identify with someone on the DVD whose story resonated with them?

(This discussion can take 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the size of the class and the degree or self-disclosure and emotion responses of the participants)

8. Discuss incidents that can trigger negative feelings and anger in parents. Talk about one or both examples in [*Parenting from the Inside Out*](#), pp. 14-21, where the authors, Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell, disclose such incidents and describe how they traced back the sources of their disturbing feelings to events in their past.
9. Locate and stream the following PsychAlive **YouTube** excerpts about what neuroscience has recently discovered about a child’s developing mind. They also show how, as parents, we often react to children when we are under stress in ways that can disrupt attuned interactions with them.

A. Dr. Dan Siegel on [“The Low Road”](#)

B. Dr. Dan Siegel on [How You Can Change Your Brain](#)

These PsychAlive YouTube programs show what happens in our brain when the prefrontal cortex goes “off line” and we engage in “low-road” behavior with our children.



Also how we can begin to change these patterns through “Mindsight” or self-reflection and exploring past relationships.

- 10.** Keeping a journal: Suggest to participants that they could begin keeping a journal of their experiences in the class as well as their experiences at home in interactions with their baby. The New Parent Questionnaire could be used as the first page in their journal if they like. (see [HANDOUT](#))

- 11.** Introduce the idea of a cooperative parents’ group; discuss ways to share babysitting functions and to set up networking activities on a long-term basis. Help parents begin to work out logistics to put these plans into effect.

Handout for Class Meeting 1: [New Parent Questionnaire](#)



Guidelines for Group Process and Topics for Discussion

In the first class meeting, it is important that instructors try to determine how receptive parents will be to the videotaped material. Instructors may be able to informally assess a parent's level of openness during this first discussion:

Adjusting to Being a New Parent

In this class, we will talk about the feelings that new parents often have when they bring their new baby home. In adjusting to their new role, many parents become confused because they can't separate what they know about themselves from the myths of what they think a good parent should be. What are some of these societal myths about parenthood? How do they differ from reality?

One myth is that parents should always be patient, tolerant, easygoing, and firm. Another myth is that fathers know less about handling young babies than mothers and have to be coaxed into being close to their own baby.

Things do get better: The first new months of parenthood are the most difficult for parents. New mothers and fathers often shut off their own needs for fulfillment; they should evaluate their needs to see if they have neglected their relationships and their lives. Parents should also arrange for a weekly sitter as soon as possible. Most new parents feel emotions that trouble or puzzle them. The most common are guilt, resentment, and anger; for example, trying to find out why the baby is crying and being unable to comfort him can arouse feelings of guilt, frustration, and anger.



Common Problems

- Lack of confidence, e.g., uncertainties about schedules.
- A sense of responsibility and a feeling of isolation that can turn into a feeling of being burdened by the baby; the lack of mobility or transportation; the lack of day-care facilities for the child; or the trials of trying to find a reliable sitter.
- Lack of organization or sense of accomplishment.
- Fatigue. Many parents don't realize that emotional exhaustion is worse than physical fatigue and fail to recognize or understand why they are experiencing it.
- Loss of warmth or closeness with spouse. If the couple feels that they have drifted apart, they should be encouraged to spend some time alone together each week to talk, relax, and have fun together the way they did before the baby arrived. A decrease in sexual relating and communication between new parents may also be a sign of more deep-seated problems, which may require professional counseling.

Introduction to the Concept of Parental Ambivalence

(Reference Chapters 1 and 3 from [*Compassionate Child-Rearing*](#))

1. The Core Conflict: All of us are in conflict between actively pursuing our lives, our goals, and happiness in our relationships, and equally strong tendencies to sabotage our achievements and happiness, to limit ourselves, to dislike ourselves, and to sometimes turn against ourselves. The more we were hurt in our early experiences, the more we try to protect ourselves from situations where we might be hurt once again. So we distance ourselves from people who might make us feel pained or sad in our current lives; we protect ourselves from both negative and positive events. It seems paradoxical to turn away from something positive or someone who treats us with affection and love, but this is what most people do, often without even recognizing that they are pulling away.



2. Parents' Difficulty in Sustaining Close, Loving Relationships with Their Children

Sometimes we pull away from our children when they are the most loving toward us because it causes us pain or sadness to feel the child's vulnerability and preciousness. It is also painful to recognize that we might not have experienced much love in our childhood. This is one of the reasons why many parents find it difficult to relate closely over a long period of time with their children. Something usually comes up to interfere with this closeness, whether it is a situation that is negative-- where the child is misbehaving -- or a situation where the child is especially lovable and appealing.

3. Parents' Ambivalence toward Themselves and toward Their Children

Everyone has two sets of feelings about themselves. These feelings are connected to the two sides of the conflict we discussed earlier. When we are actively involved in pursuing our goals in life, both personally and vocationally, we tend to have positive attitudes toward ourselves and feel self-respect and have high self-esteem. However, when we are engaged in behaviors that we don't approve of, we feel very self-critical and may have strong feelings of self-hatred and self-depreciation. All people are divided within themselves in the sense that they have feelings of warm self-regard as well as feelings of dislike and self-hatred.

Parents' attitudes toward their children are a by-product of their fundamental conflict and ambivalence toward themselves. Only by developing compassion toward themselves and insight into the core conflict can parents provide the necessary requirements for their children's emotional development.

In other words, just as we have positive and negative feelings toward ourselves, we also have both tender, nurturing impulses and aggressive or hostile feelings toward our children. The fact that we love our children does not mean that we don't have angry feelings toward them at times; and the fact that we have negative feelings toward our children does not invalidate our love and concern for them.



15-MINUTE BREAK

Background of Videotaped Discussion Group

(Reference Chapter 14 from *Compassionate Child-Rearing*)

The participants in the videotaped discussion groups and seminars are not patients; they are friends and associates who are interested in discussing psychological concepts and how these concepts apply to their own personal development. They are committed to forthright and direct communication and to improved couple and family relationships.

The material in the Parent-Child Relations Series, for example, was taken directly from specialized parents' discussion groups where the participants talked openly about concerns and problems in their relationships with their children. The programs on child-rearing represent an important contribution to the field of preventive mental health and parent education. Two of these programs, *The Inner Voice in Child Abuse* and *Invisible Child Abuse*, have been shown on PBS television and at national and international conferences on child abuse prevention.

Participants in the videotaped discussions signed the appropriate releases as each documentary was completed. Video Purchase Agreements also limit the screening of many tapes to professional audiences.

Introduction to Excerpts from *Parental Ambivalence* and *Invisible Child Abuse*

The extension of parents' attitudes toward themselves has an enormous impact on a child's development, as we will see in these films. The parents who are participating in the filmed discussions have been meeting together for several years on a consistent basis. They have grown to trust each other and Dr. Robert Firestone, who facilitates the discussion. As a result, they talk openly about topics that may be considered difficult or



even ‘unacceptable’ to some people. They talk about their anger, disharmony in the couple relationship, negative interactions, family illnesses, death, sex, and other subjects considered taboo in many families.

Dealing with these very personal issues has had a freeing effect on the men and women who participated in the series of group discussions. They have gradually improved their relationships with their children and are more able to guide them toward becoming the kind of people they (and other people) like and enjoy being with.

Application of Concepts from Parental Ambivalence

The results of parents talking together about common problems with child-rearing and attitudes toward themselves and their children included; reduction of guilt feelings about having so-called unacceptable attitudes toward children; a more constructive attitude toward themselves and their children; development of an intuitive sense of what to do in stressful situations with a child; and more involvement with the children of other parents participating in the discussion group, with benefits for both parents and children.

View [Excerpts from Parental Ambivalence](#) (14 minutes)

Have a 15-20 minute discussion of parents’ reactions to the videotaped excerpts

Parental Ambivalence and the Development of the Infant’s Mind

Reference: [Parenting from the Inside Out](#) (Reference Mary Hartzell’s story SHOPPING FOR SHOES and Dr. Dan Siegel’s personal story “STOP THAT CRYING!” pp. 17-21)

Why do we have unresolved and leftover issues? Why do events from the past influence the present? How does experience actually have an impact on our minds? Why do past events continue to influence our present perceptions and shape how we construct the



future? Describe Mary Hartzell’s and/or Dr. Siegel’s experience or a similar example from your own practice.

Explain briefly how experience shapes memory and the structure and functions of the brain and link this explanation to parental ambivalence. (Reference pp 22-29 in [*Parenting from the Inside Out*](#) to expand the discussion including Forms of Memory, Finding Resolution, Moving On.)

View videos related to these topics from PsychAlive YouTube clips.

A. Dr. Dan Siegel on [“The Low Road”](#)

B. Dr. Dan Siegel on [How You Can Change your Brain](#)

By understanding what happens in the brain during times where we “flip our lid,” we learn more about how certain actions on our part interfere with the loving relationship we want to have with our children. With resolution of our own issues comes greater choice and flexibility in how we respond to our children. We can begin to integrate implicit memories into our life stories to make sense of our experiences and support healthy development for our children and for ourselves.

If time allows, discuss this topic in more detail after viewing the PsychAlive YouTube videos.

Parents’ Support Group

Discuss the possibility of parents helping each other in caring for their new babs and toddlers, and eventually forming a parents’ support group that could be ongoing. Many parents spontaneously bring up these possibilities after viewing parents in the DVD



excerpts. At this point, you may decide to begin a discussion of tentative plans and logistics for the parents to continue meeting after this series of classes is completed.

Leave a few minutes at the conclusion of class for parents to socialize with each other and to engage in activities with their infants if they have been in childcare in an adjacent room.