

# valuing our needs

**Helen Oakwater, an adoptive parent, NLP Coach and Trainer, adopted a pre-school sibling group in the early 1990s and has first-hand knowledge of living with 'the child who hurts'. Her knowledge and perspectives are borne from her own personal journey, membership of adoption panels, books, numerous training courses and other adopters. Here she looks at the needs of both parents and our children and why knowing our values can help us to a better understanding of ourselves.**

## WHAT do you need right now ...

A cuppa, a hug, acknowledgement, dignity, a toilet, self-respect, grounding, fulfilment, warm socks, protection, importance or ...?

We all have needs which we strive to meet, sometimes consciously; popping to the bathroom is a conscious act. Sometimes the need is satisfied outside of our conscious awareness. Maybe you prefer to sit with your back to the wall in a restaurant, because, at an unconscious level, it feels safer.

We adopted our children to fulfil our own personal needs. Even though our individual motivations may have varied, we all felt something was missing from our lives. A need was not met and we strove to attain it.

## what do all humans need?

You, me, our children – everyone is driven to fulfil unmet human need. It's what motivates us and drives our behaviour; every second of the day, every day of the week.

By understanding our own needs and those of our children we gain another perspective on the extraordinary task of parenting traumatised children. This article includes two theoretical models to help make sense of our feelings and the often apparently nonsensical behaviour of our children. Remember – children's behaviour is their vocabulary – as adults we must learn to understand and interpret it. (See Caroline Archer's article *The Language of Trauma in Adoption Now*).

Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy focuses on needs-based motivation. He proposed humans operate as if they had a hierarchy of needs. Maslow classifies everything except Self

Actualisation to be 'deficit needs' ie if you don't have it – you feel the need, but once you've got it, you feel nothing at all. You don't notice the roof over your head until it flies off or there is the threat of its loss. An absence of friends generates loneliness. When the lower ones are satisfied we focus higher up the search pyramid. Under stressful conditions we 'regress' to a lower level need.

By contrast Self Actualization is a 'being need', the need to be all you can be; to grow and become the fullest 'you'.

## what did our children get?

A baby fed intermittently; a toddler slapped for being curious; a newborn shivering in a damp room; an infant rarely cuddled; a child who can't sleep because of the shouting. These experiences are all too common for children subsequently adopted. Their basic physiological, safety and belonging needs were regularly unfulfilled or violated.

This legacy stays with them. Maybe they hoard food; maybe they are hypervigilant; maybe they can only sleep with the light on; maybe moist air makes them grumpy.



## what motivates children traumatised in infancy?

Children whose early basic needs were not met will endeavour to satisfy them



whenever possible. They will have a greater need to feel safe and know there is, and always will be, food. So, they may need to sit at the back of the class, or turn round frequently because danger often comes from behind. At school, they may grab food and on a day trip incessantly ask loudly,

'When is lunch? What are we having?' Their motivation is survival – a teacher might see it as naughtiness or disobedience or attention-seeking behaviour.

### why did you become a parent?

For us as adults, our desire to parent comes mainly from the upper part of Maslow's hierarchy. Quite rightly, social services would not want to place a child with us if we could not satisfy the lower need levels. You probably wanted love and connection with your child, a sense you mattered in the world, self respect and the respect of others. Your qualities of truth, honesty, playfulness, self-sufficiency (all driving 'being' needs of self actualizers) would be criteria used in your assessment as adopters.

### why is parenting sometimes so unfulfilling?

You didn't plan to lose your dignity, confidence, safety, sense of belonging and peer group, yet adopters often do. Parenting traumatised children is hugely challenging and their demanding behaviour often puts us into survival mode. Often our esteem, needs and sense of belonging is directly or indirectly trampled by our children's behaviour. Being called an ugly, f\*\*\* ing, smelly, b\*\*\*\*\* as you endeavour to put shoes on a six-year-old, whilst avoiding flailing limbs, is not ego boosting. Being berated by a parent in the playground (because your little darling took several large bites out of their little darling) squashes your ego too. You're not invited to tea because your child hits everyone – so you're excluded from yet another group. Your basic 'belonging need' is seriously unfulfilled. Believe me, at this point you do not feel a sense of connection, contribution or self actualization. Knowing you are being of selfless service is, in my experience, not enough at the moment when you are fighting for survival. And, when in this state you rarely have the time or space to reflect on your own needs.

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## the Personal Consciousness Model

Richard Barrett has proposed that Maslow's categories represent states of consciousness and has expanded 'Self Actualisation' into four stages which together explain the motivating forces of all human interactions.

The first three stages – our basic needs – focus on physical survival, emotional and physical safety; and our emotional need for self esteem. The higher needs (five to seven) focus on our 'spiritual' needs, the last three the unfolding of the human soul, with transformation (fourth stage) lying between.

Before you dismiss this is as 'lah lah' psychobabble territory – Richard Barrett is an internationally recognised authority on Values Based Leadership; he is the former Values Coordinator at the World Bank. Senior business leaders throughout the world listen to him! I had a huge 'aha' when exposed to this model – it made sense of my experience with my children and my reactions to specific events and ongoing circumstances.

Barrett says, "If we grew up without one, some or all of our basic needs being satisfied, we find ourselves trying to fill the emptiness we feel inside by getting what we want from the external world. In this situation we lead a dependency-based existence."

This quote is in a business book, yet it fits with our experience parenting traumatised children. It's why they steal, overeat, demand attention, crave sugar, lie, can't be left alone etc: because the emptiness inside is so painful and it rarely goes away and it surfaces in times of stress.

To increase the difficulty, we can add our knowledge from complex developmental trauma (Van Der Kolk etc) – the emptiness was generated unconsciously using all the senses, and stored in the implicit (not explicit) memory and the body – generally before the child could talk. (Remember trauma is fundamentally stored in the right brain, which is not accessed with language.)

Hence getting inside a child to heal this wound is very tricky. That's why therapeutic reparenting is essential for traumatised children. It's not optional. 'Filling the emptiness inside' is an ongoing, often lifelong, experience, and facilitating it in our children is a vital ingredient in our role as adopters.

## how does this impact you?

'To be successful in the world we need to learn how to master the satisfaction of all our needs so we can operate from full spectrum consciousness'. A great aspiration, Mr Barrett.

I think many adopters had this before their children arrived. So a few years after placement, its absence is sharply noticed; parents have a void in their lives. Can you operate at full spectrum consciousness when your children reject you, school offers little sustenance and other adults avoid you.

Those of us who stop professional employment, (because our kids need us at home) lose that source of positive reinforcement, achievement and the self-worth disappears along with the pay cheque. NO WONDER YOU FEEL BELEAGUERED. Your basic human needs are being challenged and you've lost sight of the higher motivation. You are stuck in levels one, two and three. That is a pretty thankless place to be.

To increase your personal empowerment, you must first recognise which of your needs are currently not being met and then start working out how you can address your deficit needs. That's Good Self Care.

It's also useful to consider other motivating factors such as your beliefs and values.

## why values matter

By understanding our values and therefore our motivations, we can learn to align ourselves and be congruent. The more congruent we are, the more we can be true to ourselves and comfortable with who we are; an essential element of Good Self Care.

Understanding why you are happy or sad or angry or joyful or depressed is enormously useful. It somehow gives you permission to acknowledge the feelings, be with them and let them progress through you.

Like many adopters, I have experienced enormous challenges with my children. It was only after getting my head round values that I started to realise why I was angry or sad or depressed.

One of my high values is truth and honesty so living with children who lie and steal regularly crashed into that value!

Below: The Seven Stages/Levels of Personal Consciousness from Building a Values-driven Organisation by Richard Barrett. In the table each stage focuses on a particular need inherent in the human condition. The ideal is to have all levels satisfied. See the Barrett Values Centre website for deeper insights: [www.valuescentre.com](http://www.valuescentre.com)

Meeting need of	Level	Motivation	Focus
Soul	7	Service	Leading a life of selfless service
Soul	6	Making a difference	Making a positive difference in the world
Soul	5	Internal cohesion	Finding personal meaning in existence
–	4	Transformation	Finding freedom by letting go of our fears about survival, feeling loved and respected by our peers
Ego	3	Self-esteem	Feeling a sense of personal self-worth
Ego	2	Relationship	Feeling safe, respected and loved
Ego	1	Survival	Satisfying our physical needs

I found that I could learn to live with deceit by connecting to my values of 'family' and 'contribution', and by remembering that the stealing was not personal. The beliefs my children formed in

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their early life were the trigger for the behaviour. However, when an adult deceives me I'm infuriated. Truth is still a very high value for me – but in the context of my children I've learned to restructure it.

For me that's useful. It helps me to keep my sanity, so it's Good Self Care. Good Self Care incorporates having the maximum number of resources available to us at any time. Internal resources develop through understanding yourself better.

## values are motivators

Values are interlinked with beliefs. However one belief or cluster of beliefs could result in very different actions. Let's take a belief – 'The world is a dangerous place'. This might manifest in safety and security being a high value. The resultant behaviour could be the need for a steady safe job with a pension, or stealing, or

staying indoors, or not risking intimacy, or hitting first, or clinging to any perceived rescuer, accepting domestic violence or ... you get the picture – countless outcomes.

Our values and beliefs answer the question 'why' and help us to make meaning from experiences.

Values relate to what we want and desire. We value something for its worth to us. We might value old photos because they remind us of happy times. We might value money because it gives us security or allows us to buy a car which impresses others.

'Because values are associated with worth, meaning and desire values are a primary source of motivation in people's lives. When people's values are met or matched, they feel a sense of satisfaction, harmony or rapport. When their values are not met, people often feel dissatisfied, incongruent or violated.' Robert Dilts (*Sleight of Mouth* 1999).

In essence, our motivation to do something (our behaviour) comes from our values. It's what gets us out of bed in the morning!

There are lots of 'values'. None are 'right' or 'wrong'. Everyone has a different hierarchy of values which are unique. They might include such things as security, reciprocity, success, recognition, family, love, sensuality, connection, creativity, praise, achievement, humour, challenge, fun, independence, vitality, financial success, adulation, responsibility, contribution, respect, stability, change, flexibility, intellect, simplicity, health, wealth, friendship, safety, team-building, originality, pleasure ... to name but a few.

Even though values matter; we seldom think about them. People don't normally consider, list or prioritise their values. However, having identified them, people find it hugely valuable because it helps them to understand what really matters to

them, what they really want in their lives and why certain things wind them up.

Different departments in an organisation will have different values. The Accounts, Sales, Programming and Human Resources departments would each rate security, challenge, fun, achievement, creativity, flexibility, praise, spiritual connection, curiosity, love, family, reciprocity, health, responsibility and honesty differently. Within each department, individuals would have their own unique list.

In what order would you put this random list? (There's no right or wrong – just interesting to think about).

Why does this matter to adopters?

Because sometimes unpacking our response to an event can throw light onto what really matters to us at a deep level and what value has been stomped on.

If 'connecting to others' is important to you, yet your child's behaviour disconnects you from other parents in the playground, that bumps an important value and might make you feel isolated, sad, solitary, angry or mistreated. (Yet another reason why connecting to other adopters through Adoption UK is important).

**Q.** What does your child do that really winds you up? (Pause ... and think)

**Q.** Why do you hate that behaviour so much? (Pause ... and be honest)

**Q.** What would be the worse thing your child could do? (Pause ... and consider ... now think again ... is that really the worst thing they could do?)

**Q.** Why does it matter? Answer: It matters because that dreadful behaviour or action violates something really important to you, something that you hold dear and is integral to who you are at a deep level. It challenges your values.

So, one action by a child triggers a reaction in us. By identifying the violated value we can choose to think and act differently next time.

## how to identify your values

Think of something that happened recently that made you sad or angry or joyful. Ask yourself:

"Why did that matter?"

"Because ..."

"And why is that important?"

"Because ..."

"And why is that important?"

"Because ..."

Keep asking the questions until you find you're looping back to the same thing. If you do this process (which only takes a few minutes) regularly, and especially after 'an incident', it can be enlightening.



## the only constant in life is change

Values like beliefs can be enhanced, modified and changed. They are not fixed in stone; they can sometimes be modified in different contexts. Health is often a value which shoots to the top of the pile if a serious disease is diagnosed. Previously it may have sat below, say, family, contribution, pleasure, responsibility and challenge.

So it may be worthwhile for you to gently examine your values and check whether they still apply or whether an update is needed. Are they still useful, which are you paying lip serve to and which are you truly living? You might list them.

## whose values are you holding?

There is a joke allegedly told in AA meetings:

**Q.** Why does your Mother know how to press all your buttons?

**A.** Because she installed them.

What if some of your beliefs and values actually belonged to someone else? What if you were operating with some beliefs and values that served you at two, six or twelve but hadn't been updated? You update software on your computer frequently; run virus checks daily or weekly. Do you run virus checks on the software running your mind? When did you last upgrade your mental software?

Decide which software you want to update. Observe that 'thought virus', that gremlin who undermines you. Take them out, expose them to the light, find their message then, if you want, upgrade them.

Do you need to upgrade 'I must look after everyone else's needs before my own' or 'my needs don't matter' into 'Caring for myself allows me to care for others better'? Is it time to address your needs? ■

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