

# How We Make Sense of Our Lives: Adult Attachment

## INTRODUCTION

Children's lives are in part a chapter in their parent's life story. Each generation is influenced by the preceding generations and influences future generations. Even though our own parents did the best they could, given the circumstances of their own lives, we may not have had the early experiences that we would wish to pass on to our own children.

The positive connections we have had with others in or outside of our families serve as a core of resilience that may have helped us to weather the storm of difficult times in the past. Fortunately, even those of us who had quite difficult childhoods often have had some positive relationships during those years that can offer a seed of strength to help us overcome early adversity.

We are not destined to repeat the patterns of our parents or of our past. Making sense of our lives enables us to build on positive experiences as we move beyond the limitations of our past and create a new way of living for ourselves and for our children. Making sense of our own lives can help us to provide our children with relationships that promote their sense of well-being, give them tools for building an internal sense of security and resilience, and offer them interpersonal

skills that enable them to make meaningful, compassionate connections in the future.

How we have come to make sense of our lives, how we tell a coherent story of our early life experiences, is the best predictor of how our children will become attached to us. Adults who have made sense of their lives have an adult security of attachment and are likely to have children who are securely attached to them. Enabling our children to build a secure attachment lays a foundation for their future healthy development.

## PARENTS MAKING SENSE OF THEIR LIVES

Reflecting on your childhood experiences can help you make sense of your life. Since the events of your childhood can't be altered, why is such reflection helpful? A deeper self-understanding changes who you are. Making sense of your life enables you to understand others more fully and gives you the possibility of choosing your behaviors and opening your mind to a fuller range of experiences. The changes that come with self-understanding enable you to have a way of being, a way of communicating with your children, that promotes their security of attachment.

Our life stories can evolve as we grow throughout the life span. The capacity to integrate the past, present, and future allows us to move into more coherent levels of self-knowledge. This increased coherence of our life story is associated with movement toward an adult security of attachment. Changing attachment status as we develop is quite possible. Studies have shown that individuals can move from what was an insecure childhood attachment to a secure adult attachment status. These studies examine the finding of an "earned-security" status, one that is important for our understanding of coherent functioning and the possibilities for change. Individuals with earned security may have had troubled relationships with their parents during their own childhoods, but they have come to make sense of their childhood experiences and their impact on

*their development* as adults. Relationships, both personal and therapeutic, appear to be able to help an individual develop from an incoherent (insecure) to a more coherent (secure) functioning of the mind. Such growth is carried out through relationships that help an individual to heal old wounds and transform defensive approaches to intimacy.

Here is how one parent with a secure attachment and a securely attached four-year-old son tells a coherent story about her childhood.

"My mother and father were very caring, but my father had a problem with manic-depressive illness. It really made growing up at my house unpredictable for my sisters and me. It helped that my mother knew how scared I was of my father's moods. She was very tuned in to me and did her best to help me feel safe. It was very frightening, although at the time I thought being scared was normal. But in thinking about it now I realize how much my father's unpredictability shaped so much of my life as a child, and even into my twenties.

"It wasn't until he was treated effectively after my son was born that I could get any perspective on what had happened. Initially it was really hard for me to deal with my son when he got upset. I got scared all over again at somebody out of control. I had to try to figure out why I had such a short fuse. I really had to work on myself so I could be a better parent. I'm not so reactive and my son and I get along great. My relationship with my dad is even getting better now. Our relationship had been very stormy, but now I think it's pretty good. He is not as sensitive or open as my mother is, but he's doing the best he can. He's gone through a lot and you've got to respect him for that."

This woman had a difficult time growing up but has made sense of her painful experiences. She recognizes the impact of her childhood relationships, both good and bad, on her development and her role as a parent. Her reflections have an open quality to them as she continues the lifelong process of making sense of her life. It is fortunate for her child that she has earned her security as an adult and is free to nurture him in ways that can promote his own sense of vitality and connection in the world.

Nurturing relationships support our growth by helping us to make

sense of our lives and to develop the more reflective, integrated functioning that emerges from secure attachments. There is always hope and possibility for change.

## ADULT ATTACHMENT

Each of us has a state of mind or general stance toward attachment that influences our relationships and is often revealed in how we tell our life stories. These states of mind have been studied and found to be associated with specific patterns of communication and interaction between parent and child, which shape the ways in which the child develops a security or insecurity of attachment.

The attachment researcher Mary Main and her colleagues thought that perhaps some elements of the parents' own history of being a child would be important in determining their behavior toward their own children. They came up with a research instrument, called the Adult Attachment Interview, in which parents are asked about their recollections of their own childhoods. As it turned out, the way parents made sense of their own early life experiences, as revealed in the coherence of their life narrative as told to an interviewer, is the most powerful feature that could predict the child's security of attachment. The following chart shows the correlation between child attachment and adult attachment.

TABLE 8. ATTACHMENT CATEGORIES AS CHILDREN AND AS ADULTS

CHILD	ADULT
Securely attached	Secure (free or autonomous)
Avoidantly attached	Dismissing
Ambivalently attached	Preoccupied or entangled
Disorganizedly attached	Unresolved trauma or loss/ disorganized

Adult attachment can be determined by how parents tell the story of their early life history to another adult. Parents' understanding of themselves is revealed through this adult-to-adult communication, not through how parents explain their early histories to their own children. The way the story is told, not merely the content, reveals characteristics of the parent's state of mind regarding attachment. These narrative patterns are associated with the child's attachment status to that parent as demonstrated in the above table. Long-term studies have further shown that adults' narratives generally corresponded to their own childhood attachment categories assessed decades earlier.

When you read about these categories, it is important not to try to classify yourself rigidly in one particular grouping. It's normal to have some elements of several categories. Children often have different patterns of attachment to the different adults in their lives. The ideas explored by means of these categories can be useful in deepening the kind of self-understanding that promotes secure attachment in our children when considered in a flexible and supportive manner.

#### **Secure Adult Attachment**

An autonomous or free state of mind with respect to attachment is usually found in adults with children who are securely attached to them. These adults' narratives are characterized by a valuing of relationships and a flexibility and objectivity when speaking about attachment-related issues. These individuals integrate their past with the present and their anticipated future. These are coherent narratives revealing how the person has made sense of his or her life history. Emerging research that has followed infants into their young adulthood suggests that such narratives develop when the individuals have had secure attachments when they themselves were children.

An earned secure adult attachment is one in which the narrative is coherent, but there were difficult times in childhood attachment. Earned security reflects how an adult has come to make sense of his or her early life history. The story earlier in this chapter about the woman

with a manic-depressive father is an example of how one parent with earned security might describe her experiences.

#### **Dismissing Adult Attachment**

For adults whose early life may have included a predominance of parental emotional unavailability and rejection, a dismissing stance toward attachment may be found. As parents their children's relationships with them are often characterized by avoidant attachments. These parents appear to have little sensitivity to the child's signals. The inner world of such adults seems to function with independence as its hallmark: being disconnected from intimacy and perhaps even from the emotional signals of their own bodies. Their narratives reflect this isolation, and they frequently insist that they do not recall their childhood experiences. Life seems to be lived without a sense that others or the past contribute to the evolving nature of the self. One proposal is that these adults live in a predominantly left mode of processing, especially when interacting with others. In spite of these mechanisms that minimize the importance of relationships, a number of studies suggest that the children and adults in this grouping have bodily reactions that indicate that their nonconscious minds still value the importance of others in their lives. Their behavior and their conscious thoughts appear to have adapted to an emotionally barren home environment by producing an avoidant and dismissing stance toward attachment and intimacy.

In response to questions about her childhood experiences a mother of an avoidantly attached child made the following self-reflective comments:

"My own mother and father lived at home and created the kind of house that is a good one for a child to grow in. We went to many activities and I was given all of the experiences any child would expect from a good home. For discipline we were taught right from wrong and given the right direction for how to succeed in life. I don't remember exactly how they did this, but I do know it was a good childhood overall, a regular childhood in the sense that it was good. That's about it. Yes, it was a good life."

Notice that though this adult is able to have a cohesive, logically

consistent story of her life with a general theme that it was a “good life,” little detail is offered from personally experienced memories to illustrate that view in an enriched and coherent way. Coherence, making sense, involves a more holistic, visceral process of reflection. For example, the statement “For discipline we were taught right from wrong and given the right direction for how to succeed in life” does not involve an autobiographical sense of the self in time as personally lived. A coherent narrative might have reflections such as, “My mom really tried to teach me right from wrong, though I didn’t always listen and she would get mad at me at times. I remember one day I picked all the neighbor’s flowers to make a bouquet for her and she told me that she loved the thought, but that it was wrong to take something without permission. I felt so bad when we had to give the flowers back and take them a potted plant as an apology.” This mother’s actual reflections reveal a stance that minimizes emotional vulnerability and dependence on others. Her shared story has many words that logically state her thoughts in a linear fashion, but little sense that there is an integration of memory, emotion, relatedness, and a process connecting the past to the present and how these might influence the future.

#### **Preoccupied Adult Attachment**

Adults who have experienced inconsistently available, perceptive, and receptive caregiving often have a preoccupied stance toward attachment, one filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and ambivalence. These preoccupied parental states may impair the ability of the parents to reliably perceive their children’s signals or interpret their needs effectively. Their children are often ambivalently attached to them. The parents may be overwhelmed by doubts and fears about relying upon others. Their stories are often filled with anecdotes revealing how leftover issues from the past continue to enter the present and steer the narrative flow away from addressing the topic at hand. This intrusive pattern of leftover issues is a direct impairment to mindfulness and may block the capacity for flexibility. The incoherence of these intrusions may be un-

derstood as a flooding of the right mode of processing into the left mode’s attempt to make logical sense of the past.

One father of an ambivalently attached child made these comments in response to questions about his childhood experiences:

“My childhood growing up? It was something else! We were very close, not too close, but close enough. We used to have lots of fun together, me and my two older brothers. Sometimes they’d get pretty rough, me, too, but it wasn’t a problem, though my mother thought it was. Sometimes. Even this weekend, I guess it was Mother’s Day, and she thought we were too hard on our kids. I mean, she said I was too rough on my son. But she never said that about my two brothers when we were kids. I mean, she let them tackle me for God’s sakes and didn’t say a word to them. No. It’s always me. But I don’t care, it doesn’t bother me anymore. Or it could. But I wouldn’t let it happen. Should I?”

These responses reveal how themes from the past intruded on this parent’s ability to reflect coherently on his life. His focus on the past merges into discussions of a recent weekend, then back to his childhood, and again into his present preoccupations. He is still enmeshed in the issues of his childhood. This leftover baggage will likely interfere with his ability to connect with his own children. For example, if he feels slighted by his son’s seeking attention from his wife, he may become flooded with a sense of being treated unfairly, similar to how he experienced his mother’s favoritism of his brothers. If he doesn’t make sense of and resolve these leftover issues, he will be prone to create emotionally clouded interactions with his own children.

#### **Unresolved Adult Attachment**

Parental unresolved trauma or loss is often associated with the most concerning child attachment category, disorganized attachment. Parents with unresolved trauma appear to enter abrupt shifts in their states of mind that are alarming and disorienting to their children. Examples of such behavior include spacing out when a child is distressed, becoming suddenly enraged and threatening to a child who is excitedly skip-

ping down the hallway singing “too loudly,” or hitting a child who asks for another bedtime story.

What is it about unresolved trauma and grief that produces such alarming and disorienting parental behaviors? Unresolved conditions involve a disruption in the flow of information in the mind and in the self’s ability to attain emotional balance and maintain connections to others. This impairment is called “dysregulation.” Abrupt shifts in the flow of information and energy can occur within a person or between people. Moods may become sullen, emotions abruptly change without warning, and perceptions become colored by sudden shifts in attitude. Responding to change may be difficult and result in inflexibility.

These internal processes directly influence interpersonal interactions: unresolved states produce these abrupt shifts that can create a state of alarm in a child. These are the likely origins of the “fright without solution” experience, as the parent not only disengages from contingent communication but engages in terrifying behaviors. The child experiences the sudden absence of something positive with the emergence of something quite negative.

How are such dysregulated internal processes revealed in an adult’s self-reflections? There may be moments when an individual may become disoriented while discussing issues of trauma or loss. This momentary lapse in what may otherwise be a coherent story is thought to reveal some fundamental way in which those topics remain unresolved for that person. A child with a disorganized attachment can become immersed in the chaos that is her parent’s internal legacy of a chaotic past.

Here are one mother’s reflections on questions as to whether she had felt threatened in her childhood:

“I don’t think I ever really felt threatened when I was a kid. I mean, not that it wasn’t scary. But it was. My father would come home drunk sometimes, but my mother was the real kicker. She had this way of trying to get you to trust her, but it was his drinking that she’d blame, blame for her being so mean. I mean, she was trying to be nice, but it’s as if she became possessed by a demon. Her face would change suddenly and you never knew who to trust. I mean, she looks so strange, kind of

furious and frightened in one package, all contorted and her eyes so piercing. She would sometimes cry for days. I can see her crying face now. Not that it was that upsetting, but it was.”

When this woman was a child and was exposed to the sudden abrupt shifts in her mother’s face when her mother was exceedingly angry or sad, her own mind might have been readying itself to create such intense emotions in the future. Such a process may be due to the mirror neuron system that creates in us an emotional state similar to that which we perceive in others. A parent’s disorienting behaviors will create a state of disorganization, and disorganized attachment, in the child. The child, empathically through mirror neurons and directly through her own fright without solution, enters her own state of internal chaos.

Unresolved states can flood the normally smooth flow of internal processing and contingent interpersonal communication. Lack of resolution may be revealed during the telling of an individual’s life story, and it also may predispose that person to lose the capacity to be flexible under certain conditions related to the trauma or loss. Their capacity to integrate left and right modes of processing may be quite impaired, which leads to disorganization when reflecting on their lives and discussing unresolved topics. When autobiographical recollections are being reactivated, the left hemisphere may become flooded by the unprocessed images and sensations of terror and betrayal. Rather than having a coherent sense of how the past has impacted on the present, these abrupt, dysregulated processes flood the individual and immerse him or her in the chaos of the past. Trauma-related emotional reactivity, a reactivating set of mirror neurons, and impaired integration across the hemispheres may possibly all contribute to these internal processes that create the incoherence and interpersonal chaos of unresolved trauma and loss.

#### REFLECTIONS ON ATTACHMENT

The questions on pages 133–34 can help you reflect on your own childhood experiences. These “Questions for Parental Self-reflection” are not

a research tool such as the Adult Attachment Interview, but have been helpful to many individuals for deepening their self-understanding. Use these questions in a flexible way and consider other issues that may serve as cues to your memory. Feelings and images may come to you in the course of answering these questions. Sometimes we may feel uncertain or ashamed of parts of our memories and begin to edit what we say in order to present a more pristine image of ourselves to others, or to ourselves. Each of us may have ghosts in our closets! There may be patterns of defensive adaptations that have kept us distant from our own emotions and prevented us from being open to the feelings of others.

Initially it may be quite difficult to find words to express our internal images or sensations. This is normal. Recall that words and conscious verbal thoughts emerge from our left hemispheres whereas autobiographical memory, raw emotion, integrated bodily sensation, and imagery are processed nonverbally in our right hemispheres. This situation creates a tension in the translation of the nonverbal into the verbal, especially if the autobiographical, emotional, and visceral memories are overwhelming and unprocessed. Sometimes recollections of painful elements of our emotional memories can make us feel very vulnerable. However, not owning the totality of our histories can actually inhibit the creation of coherency in our lives. Embracing all that we are can be stressful and difficult at first, but it eventually leads to a sense of compassionate self-acceptance and interpersonal connection. Integrating a coherent story involves bringing together the themes from our past with the ongoing story of our lives as we move into the future.

Change happens through a process of trying new ways of relating that can support your journey into deeper levels of self-understanding. In self-reflection, it can be helpful to find an adult whom you trust who can listen to aspects of your evolving journey of discovery. We are all social beings, and our narrative processes are born out of social connections. Self-reflection is deepened when it is shared within our intimate relationships.

#### QUESTIONS FOR PARENTAL SELF-REFLECTION

1. What was it like growing up? Who was in your family?
2. How did you get along with your parents early in your childhood? How did the relationship evolve throughout your youth and up until the present time?
3. How did your relationship with your mother and father differ and how were they similar? Are there ways in which you try to be like, or try not to be like, each of your parents?
4. Did you ever feel rejected or threatened by your parents? Were there other experiences you had that felt overwhelming or traumatizing in your life, during childhood or beyond? Do any of these experiences still feel very much alive? Do they continue to influence your life?
5. How did your parents discipline you as a child? What impact did that have on your childhood, and how do you feel it affects your role as a parent now?
6. Do you recall your earliest separations from your parents? What was it like? Did you ever have prolonged separations from your parents?
7. Did anyone significant in your life die during your childhood, or later in your life? What was that like for you at the time, and how does that loss affect you now?
8. How did your parents communicate with you when you were happy and excited? Did they join with you in your enthusiasm? When you were distressed or unhappy as a child, what would happen? Did your father and mother respond differently to you during these emotional times? How?
9. Was there anyone else besides your parents in your childhood who took care of you? What was that relationship like for you? What happened to those individuals? What is it like for you when you let others take care of your child now?
10. If you had difficult times during your childhood, were there positive relationships in or outside of your home that you could depend on during those times? How do you feel those connections benefited you then, and how might they help you now?

11. How have your childhood experiences influenced your relationships with others as an adult? Do you find yourself trying *not* to behave in certain ways because of what happened to you as a child? Do you have patterns of behavior that you'd like to alter but have difficulty changing?
12. What impact do you think your childhood has had on your adult life in general, including the ways in which you think of yourself and the ways you relate to your children? What would you like to change about the way you understand yourself and relate to others?

### PATHWAYS TOWARD GROWTH

As you reflect on your own attachment history, you may find that some dimensions are particularly relevant for understanding the impact of early family experiences on your development as an adult. We have found that the general framework provided by attachment research is useful for deepening self-understanding and for pointing to some pathways toward change. Research demonstrates that growth toward security of attachment is quite possible. Though the movement toward security is often associated with healthy and healing relationships with friends, lovers, teachers, or therapists, beginning with the process of deepening your self-understanding can serve as an invitation to enhance your connections with others. Moving toward security offers an enriched way of life for both you and your children.

#### **Avoidance and a Dismissing Stance**

For those whose histories included a sense of emotional unavailability and a lack of attuned, nurturing parenting, there may have been an adaptation that minimizes the importance of interpersonal relationships and the communication of emotion. This minimizing stance may have been very adaptive to children raised in an emotional desert. Children do the best they can, and reducing dependence on emotionally unavailable caregivers may have been an appropriate and useful adaptation

for their survival. As this adaptive response continues, children may have a decreased connection not only to their parents but to other people as well. Although studies reveal that individuals with avoidant attachment have mindsight and can take others' perspectives, their defensive state of mind appears to reduce their motivation to be open to the emotional experiences of others. In addition, there may be a decreased access to and awareness of their own emotions. These avoidant adaptations can be seen as a minimization of right-mode processing in favor of a predominance of left-mode thinking in order to reduce their emotional vulnerability.

With this perspective, one can imagine that the degree of bilateral integration connecting the right and left modes of processing may be quite minimal as well. This may be revealed in how people with this early history do appear to have very underdeveloped life stories. Often they insist that they don't remember the details of their early life experiences. Within relationships, there can be a marked sense of independence that may lead their partners to experience loneliness and emotional distance. The processes that began as "healthy" and necessary adaptations in childhood may become impediments to healthy adult relationships with one's spouse and children.

Approaches toward changing these adaptations are those that promote bilateral integration. Often right-mode processing may be underdeveloped, demonstrated by the possession of minimal mindsight abilities, diminished self-awareness, and at times a decreased ability to perceive the nonverbal signals of others. Self-reflection may be limited because it is primarily the logical and nonautobiographical left mode that becomes engaged. For this reason, efforts to activate the right mode may be helpful and necessary. Research has shown the presence of heightened physiological reactions in these people during discussion of attachment-related issues, in contrast to their comments minimizing the importance of attachments. This indicates the reality that their minds respond as though relationships are significant, even if behavior and overt attitude do not reveal this emotional valuing of connections. In other words, the in-born attachment system that values relationships

is still intact, even though the person's adaptation has required a minimization approach. This view is crucial in considering how to reach out to individuals who may have spent much of their lives automatically minimizing the importance of relationships in order to adapt to past deficits in family life. Those families can be seen as having offered little right-mode stimulation and connection. Finding a way to activate these aspects of mental life can be crucial in liberating the mind's innate drive toward interpersonal connection and internal integration. We have found that activities such as guided imagery which focus on nonverbal signals, increase awareness of sensations in the body, and stimulate the right side of the brain have been quite useful to mobilize underdeveloped right-mode processes.

For someone who is steeped in logic, it is actually helpful to offer the logical explanation described above that an emotionally distant family environment early in their lives might have contributed to their left hemispheres' becoming adaptively dominant. It may also be helpful to point out that recent findings from brain science suggest that new neurons, especially integrative ones, may continue to be able to grow throughout our lives. With this relatively neutral, nonthreatening perspective, the work to open up the gates toward the growth and integration of the other equally important but less well developed mode can begin.

#### **Ambivalence and a Preoccupied Stance**

A different kind of adaptation occurs in response to a family life with inconsistently available parents and can yield a sense of anxiety about whether or not others are dependable. This response to inconsistent or intrusive parenting can yield a feeling of ambivalence and uncertainty. This may be experienced by an adult as a desperate need for others and a simultaneous sinking feeling that one's own needs can never be met. There may be a sense of urgency for connection that may ironically push others away and thus create a self-reinforcing feedback loop that others indeed are not dependable.

The pathway toward growth for aspects of adaptations that include such ambivalence and preoccupation often resides in a combination

of self-soothing techniques, such as self-talk and relaxation exercises, along with open communication within intimate relationships. In some ways one can view this adaptation as involving an excessively active right mode with difficulty in the self-soothing that the right hemisphere specializes in. Memory and models of the self may not reassure the individual that his needs will be met and connections to others will be reliable. The sense of self-doubt at times may come along with a deep and nonconscious sense of shame that something is defective about the self. This sense of shame may be present in various forms in each of the insecure forms of attachment.

Understanding the mechanics of shame and how it may have been a part of our early life histories can help to free us from the ruts that these emotional reactions can create in our relationships with others. We may have developed layers of psychological defense that protect us from being consciously aware of what would otherwise be disabling anxiety, self-doubt, and painful emotions. Unfortunately, such defenses may prevent us from being aware of how these implicit emotional processes may directly influence our approach to our children. We may project onto them unwanted aspects of our own internal experience, such as anger at their helplessness and vulnerability. In this way, defenses that protected us during an earlier time may blind us from understanding our own internal pain and impair our ability to parent well.

Uncovering the layers of defense that may have been constructed in response to our own suboptimal parenting experiences is crucial in trying to make sense of our lives. Learning to calm the anxiety and doubt with relaxation exercises can be an important first step to learning other strategies to deal with our sense of discomfort. Having had intrusive and inconsistent parents may have blocked the development of our strategies for self-soothing. Learning "self-talk" techniques can be a very effective approach to taking care of your self. Talking to yourself with clarifying statements such as "I feel this uncertainty now, but I am doing the best I can and things will work out" or "I am feeling nervous about what she said but I can ask her directly and find out what she meant" are examples of how the left-mode language can be useful to



calm the right-mode anxiety. For those with layers of defense that may cover up an internal state of shame, it may be useful to recall that the belief that the self is defective is a child's conclusion, arising from non-contingent connections with parents. Realizing that "I am lovable" is important and can take the place of internal thoughts such as "I am not loved" or "I am unlovable." Finding ways that work to help the right hemisphere learn to self-soothe are the keys to growth for this form of adaptation. You can give to yourself the tools that your parents were not able to offer to you as a child. In many ways, this is parenting yourself from the inside out.

#### **Disorganization and Unresolved Trauma or Loss**

Adults whose experiences with their parents produced states of alarm and terror may have responded with internal disorganization. The sense of disconnection, from others and from one's own mind, may lead to a process of dissociation that might include a sense of being unreal or internally fragmented. More subtle aspects of disorganized adaptation may include becoming frozen under stress or feeling a rapid shift in one's state of mind in response to some interpersonal interaction. Unresolved trauma or loss can make fragmented internal experiences such as dissociation more likely to occur. When they do happen, such states may be more intense, frequent, and disorganizing and may make a repair of the disconnection with your child more difficult and less likely to occur with dependability. Finding a way to resolve these unresolved conditions is healing for both the parent and the child.

Unresolved issues may reflect the inability of the mind to integrate various aspects of memory, emotion, and bodily sensation into a spontaneous set of free-flowing and flexible responses. Such impairment to integration can be seen as states of rigidity or of chaos, which may be experienced by a parent as "stuck" repetitious patterns of behavior or as "flooding" states of overwhelming emotion. Freedom from these extremes of excessive rigidity and disabling chaos emerges as we move toward healing.

Though the events of our childhoods may have made little sense at

the time, it is still possible now to make sense of how they have influenced us. As this integrating making-sense process brings together elements of the past with reflections on the present, you may find that your sense of possibility and your ability to construct a more flexible and enriching future is greatly enhanced. This process can be done in solitude, but it is often helpful to allow others to bear witness to our pain, and our journey toward healing.

Resolution depends upon the ability to be open and face what at times may seem like unbearable feelings. The good news is that healing is possible. Often the hardest step is acknowledging that there is some serious and frightening unresolved business. When we can take the deliberate steps to face the challenge of knowing the truth, we are ready to begin the path toward healing and growth and become more the parent we'd like to be.

#### **INSIDE-OUT EXERCISES**

1. Set aside some time to respond to the questions for parental self-reflection (pages 133-34). After waiting for at least a day, return to your written responses and read them aloud to yourself. What do you notice? How do your responses feel to you? How do you wish your parents might have offered you a different experience of being parented? How have these experiences shaped your own attitudes toward and interactions with your child? What are the most important lessons you have learned from this reflective process? Our life stories are not fixed and sealed in cement. They evolve as we grow and continue the lifelong process of making sense of our lives. Let yourself be open to your own lifelong development.
2. Without taking time to think about your answers in advance, write for several minutes completing the sentences "A