PARENTING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Child psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Siegel tells Hannah Hiles about one of Gwyneth Paltrow's favourite parenting books.

FOR 10 YEARS, PARENTING from the Inside Out has been regarded as a classic in the United States. With glowing recommendations from the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow (a must-have for any parent) and Michelle Pfeiffer (applicable to all of our interpersonal relationships), the book has now been updated with the latest research and launched in the UK for the first time.

Authors, Dr. Daniel J. Siegel and Mary Hartzell, take the reader through a journey of self-discovery – underpinned with neurobiology and attachment research – to help us "raise compassionate and resilient children" through a better understanding of our own lives.

DAN, WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO WRITE THIS BOOK?
I had written a book called The Developing Mind, which explores the science of attachment relationships, and how the relationships we have with our kids shape their development. I found that there was some incredible research that most people did not know about – that the best predictor of a child's attachment is how well the parent has made sense of his or her own life – and I wanted to tell people about this. My daughter was in preschool at the time and I put on a number of workshops for parents. They were so popular that I decided to turn them into a book, which I wrote with Mary Hartzell, who was the director of the pre-school. The research rang a lot of bells with me as >
MEET THE AUTHOR

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I am a father and I know how challenging parenting can be. I wanted to lay out the science but also wanted to show how important it is to realise that there is no such thing as perfect parenting. You can be a devoted parent and still make mistakes. In my parenting books I always put in examples of how I have messed up. We need to be kind and compassionate to ourselves as well as to our children.

WHY DO WE TURN INTO OUR PARENTS OR REPEAT THEIR MISTAKES WHEN WE RAISE OUR OWN CHILDREN?
There are two types of memory: implicit and explicit. Much of what we do is driven by our unconscious mind. If you have difficult things happen to you in your own childhood but don’t make sense of them, you are likely to repeat them. Making sense of your life is the best gift you can give your child.

WHAT WOULD BE A GOOD FIRST STEP TO TAKE TO IMPROVE OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR CHILDREN?
Parents are often interested in changing their children but the research shows that a better first step is to look inside and see what your own childhood did to you and the impact it has had. The book lays out a step-by-step procedure to do this. People sometimes ask where they can get a workbook for Parenting from the Inside Out but the book IS a workbook with exercises in its own right. Some people even work through it during pregnancy. People can be scared and think there is nothing they can do, but if you start making sense of your own life, things will get better. You can make sense of things that made no sense at the time. It’s scientifically informed. The way we reflect on our own history affects the structure of our brain, as the brain always changes in response to what we do. Neuroplasticity – how we can change the physical structure of our brain – is a very exciting field.

LIVING FROM THE INSIDE OUT AS IT OFFERS SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE.
Attachment is a model for how we have relationships with anyone. There is always time, no matter how old a person is or what their situation is, to make sense of how the past influences the present.

I F THE READER ONLY TAKES AWAY ONE MESSAGE FROM YOUR BOOK, WHAT SHOULD IT BE?
The field of attachment tells us that relationships are important but doesn’t tell us what to do about it. People have called this book a classic but it met a need. People think ‘what happened to me was terrible! I’m really in trouble!’ but this book brings great news. You can make sense of your life and not be a prisoner of what you may previously have felt. It’s so empowering. I hope people will hear the message in an open way and learn to be kinder to themselves as best they can. It would have a ripple effect.

MORE INSPIRATION
VISIT Dan’s website at drdansiegel.com for more information about his books, videos and audio clips and other resources.
READ The Whole-Brain Child, Dan’s book on how a child’s brain is wired, which gives practical strategies for dealing with day-to-day challenges.
FIND Hannah is a freelance journalist and mum-of-one who lives in Staffordshire. Her website is hannahliles.co.uk.

GET STARTED NOW
The passing of unresolved issues from generation to generation produces and perpetuates unnecessary emotional suffering. It is important to recognize that each of us may have leftover issues that create vulnerabilities that don’t become apparent until we raise or work with children. Being a parent gives us the opportunity to reparent ourselves by making sense of our own early experiences. Our children are not the only ones who will benefit from this making-sense process: we ourselves will come to live a more vital and enriched life.