

## ENHANCING PARENTAL AND CAREGIVER EMPATHY THROUGH SOMATIC RESONANCE

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### Basic Principles of Doing Experiential Exercises to Teach Empathy for Infants

- Instructors must do the exercises themselves at least several times before teaching them, in order to empathize with the students and to understand the effects
- Students should be as comfortable as possible, nothing should be physically painful
- Students should dress comfortably and may want to remove belts, shoes, or jewelry
- The room should have carpet and variable lighting if possible
- Distractions should be reduced as much as possible to encourage relaxation and engagement
- Accommodations need to be made for pregnant women and other physical limitations
- Students should be told to “take care of yourself” and not follow any instruction that may be difficult or painful
- Each instruction must be spoken clearly and slowly and students must be given plenty of time to feel, sense, and move
- The focus is on somatic and emotional awareness and not on conceptual awareness, thinking, evaluating or judging, i.e., the focus is on cultivating “babymind”
- Instructors should also cultivate their own non-conceptual babymind awareness in themselves and in empathy with the students, both in their own embodied practice and while teaching
- Encourage students to focus on their whole body and any feelings, leaving full pauses between each step for them to do this
- Do not talk constantly when leading the exercises: allow for silences
- In the discussion that follows the exercise, avoid judging or evaluating what students say; simply comment about infant experience in general or acknowledge their own experience or just say “thank you”
- There is no wrong way to do these exercises, or to experience them
- Create an atmosphere of relaxation, comfort, and acceptance of each person’s point of view
- Students are taking a “risk” to act like a baby and to allow themselves to be vulnerable and the sense of that must be implicit in the instructor’s behavior

### **Somatic Awareness (babymind) and the Hands**

Alan Fogel, PhD; Based on observations of infants

1. Find a comfortable way to sit in your chair. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing that.
2. Feel your body touching the chair – where does(n’t) it touch?

3. Become aware of your breathing, that in fact you are breathing. Now observe the movement of your breath flowing gently in and out, connecting your inner space with the surrounding space – breath is the connection between inside and outside
4. Notice where in your body you can feel the breath going – where can you feel the rising and falling patterns of the breath moving through you?
5. Are there any places where you cannot feel the breath? Any places of tension? Just notice
6. Notice the parts of your skin that are clothed vs. exposed to the air. Notice the differences in sensation. Which feels more comfortable? Adjust your posture if you need to do that.
7. Notice the sounds in the room and how they are affecting you.
8. Now pay attention to your feet. What position are they in? What part of your feet are contacting a surface? Are your feet relaxed? Can you move your feet so they feel more comfortable.
9. Now, notice your hands. Without moving them, notice the position they are in. Does it feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Does this position feel familiar or unfamiliar?
10. Slowly move your hands to a different position. Does it feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Does this position feel familiar or unfamiliar?
11. Separate your hands if you had them together. Slowly begin to curl and uncurl your right hand. Notice how that feels. Notice if you can feel anything in your arms or shoulders as you do this. Gradually reduce the effort. Compare your right side with your left side.
12. Do the same on your left side.
13. Experiment with using your hands to explore your body, clothing, or the chair. Pay attention to the different sensations. Rest.
14. Bring your hands up in front of your face with your eyes closed and let them explore each other through touch.
15. Open your eyes and look at your hands as if you've never seen them before. Relax your hands and close your eyes again.
16. Slowly come back to your breathing, the room, the sounds, the other people in the room, and open your eyes.

**Hands on Shoulders**  
Rosen Method Bodywork Exercise

This exercise is about dyadic somatic resonance through touch. Choose a partner and find one chair. Introduce yourselves and talk for a few minutes. One person sits and the other stands behind.

1. Everyone please close your eyes and come into your baby mind. Notice your breathing, notice your contact with the chair and/or the floor. Notice comfort levels and emotions. Notice sounds in the room.
2. Those of you who are sitting, please keep your eyes closed and monitor your ongoing experience. Those of you who are standing, please open your eyes and look at the person sitting in front of you. Ask yourself: who is this person? Let your gaze be soft and curious but uncritical.
3. From the previous exercise, you are not aware of your hands in a new way, so bring that awareness into the present. Place your hands gently on your partner's shoulders, not too softly and not too firmly, but in a way that lets that person know you are there and present. Notice your feelings as you are doing this. Without doing anything, and without moving your hands, use your hands and your eyes to notice the person. Do they feel relaxed or tense? Can you feel the movement of their breath? Can you feel a change as a result of your touching? (at least 2 minutes).
4. Get a sense of a part of your partner's shoulders, upper back, or neck that calls to you to be touched and gently move your hands there. Once you find the spot, settle in with a contact that meets the person and let your hands be soft and receptive. Notice changes in your self and your partner: breathing, temperature, color. (2 minutes).
5. In that same place, or a different one, let your grip go very loose, so you are making only superficial contact. What do you notice? Now make your grip more intense, like you really want to take hold of the person (but without inflicting pain). What do you notice? Now return to the middle ground, the place where you feel you can meet and notice the other person (they know you are there but you are just being present and not demanding).
6. Use your hands in a way that says "goodbye" to your partner and then place your hands at your sides and close your eyes. Again, baby mind, noticing.
7. Change roles silently and repeat.
8. Discuss in pairs.

### **Mutual Gazing and Interpersonal Distance**

Alan Fogel, PhD; Based on research in parent-infant communication

This exercise is about the parental role and the infant experience during face-to-face interaction, and during movements of the infant toward and away from the parent using either gaze or locomotion. It should be prefaced on the same day or on previous days by videos showing how this occurs in parents and infants. The class is divided up into pairs who do not know each other very well.

1. Partners sit on the floor facing each other. Spend a few minutes getting to know your partner. Do an eyes-closed relaxation and self-awareness meditation for a few minutes. Then tell the students that they will be asked to look directly into each other's eyes for the count of 5 (seconds). They are then asked to close their eyes and notice their experience. Notice emotions which might be enjoyment, fear, anxiety, shame, etc. Also notice level of arousal such as breathing and heart rate. Mutual gaze is almost always arousing regardless of the type of emotion. Notice other body sensations. Repeat the 5-second mutual gaze, close eyes and notice emotions, arousal, and sensations.
2. Explain that now they will play the role of either the parent or the child, after which the roles will be changed. Speaking to the parents: your responsibility is to witness the child with a steady gaze. They should continue to feel their own emotions and arousal but it is important to keep those feelings inside and just observe them. Their job is to be there for the child. As adults, they should be able to control their emotions. Speaking to the children: you can do anything you want while sitting there. You can feel free to look at your parent or look away as much as you need or want to. Allow about 2 minutes.
3. Repeat the same process with the same roles, only this time the adult, instead of being attentive, acts distracted.
4. Then change roles, repeating the instructions to the parents and then to the children.
5. Now they will stand up and face each other, about 10-15 feet apart. Again, they play parent and child roles. The instructions to the parent are the same and should be repeated each time. The instructions for the child are similar, expect that they child can move anywhere in the room, approach the parent whenever they want to or move away. They are free to be themselves. After switching roles, the instructions are again repeated to parents and then to children. Allow 2-3 minutes for each episode.
6. Sit in pairs and discuss the experience with each other.

### **Non-verbal communication and kinesthetic empathy**

Alan Fogel, PhD; (See also Tortora, S. (2004, May). Our moving bodies tell stories which speak to our experiences. *Zero-to-Three*, 24, 4-12)

#### Part I:

This exercise focuses on the movement of walking. In this part, the leader talks about how psychological states may be communicated in posture and movement. Begin with a few stretches of upper arms with deep breaths. The leader then demonstrates each of the Laban movement analysis categories and students are asked to stand and do their own versions.

- body inter-relationships: (1) move only one part of body, keeping other parts still, such as upper or lower, arms only, one leg, etc. (2) Coordinate different parts with each other such as right arm and left leg shake, (3) Have the left leg shake and the right arm rotate, etc..
- use of space: Taking up a lot of space with arms and legs extended vs. contracted and small
- sequencing: Try different walking sequences such as extending arm and leg on same side of body vs. opposite side.
- shape: Rounded, straight, snake-like

These patterns are combined when making any ordinary movement and can communicate to others about one's psychological state. The concepts of witnessing, kinesthetic empathy, and matching should be clarified and discussed. The leader demonstrates some common states with his or her body by walking in front of the class and the students try their own versions. Attempts should be made to focus on body movement and not on facial expression. For example,

- Proud: Chest out, shoulders back and down, head high, regular steps
- Dejected: Chest caved in, shoulders hunched, head down, slow and small steps
- Determination: Straight arms and legs, head forward of body, forceful steps
- I'm cool: Shoulders and hips relaxed and swaying, head loose
- Vigilant: Closed posture, small rapid steps, rapid shifts of head direction
- Toddler: Hip rotations, heavy legs, little knee bend, no leg swing (A video of a toddler walking can be used to illustrate this and students can then try it out). It helps to switch between adult and toddler walking to compare the differences.

Talk about what each of these felt like, especially trying to walk like a toddler. What is the difference between adult and toddler walking, especially in the balancing and leg swing?

#### Part II:

In this part, the class divides itself up into triads. There are three roles: witness, walker, and follower. The walker walks around in their more or less normal way and the follower tries to match the walk while the witness observes. Everyone is asked to notice their own experience. The roles change until everyone has played each role. The whole sequence is repeated again, this time silently and really focusing on kinesthetic empathy. Then they discuss the experience among themselves in the triad, sharing with each other about what it was like to "be" the other person and using the concept from Part I. Field note writing follows this.

#### General Discussion:

Should come around to how parents use these skills with their babies, and how this method can be used in treating infants and young children with difficulties. Also, it can lead into a discussion of how babies take on the walk or movement patterns of their parents: this is more than copying but involves feeling a connection and empathy.

### **Rolling Over**

Eileen Rojas, Dance Student; Based on Body Mind Centering and Dance Movement Exercises

1. Place an object right above your head (pick it up with your hand and - lying down - move your arm backward and place your object there).
2. Lay on your back, close your eyes, and concentrate on your breathing
3. Feel any tension you may be holding in your back, neck, or anywhere, get less and less with each exhale. Take a scan of your body and make sure you're in a comfortable position. Feel free to adjust Continue breathing (1 min)

4. Take your internal focus to your abdominal area. Imagine the walls of your abdomen filling up with air like a balloon. You can put a hand on your belly to feel it go up and down with each breath. Feel the air reach all the way to your lower back and pelvis. Feel your back widen into the floor with each breath. Continue.
5. As you do this, think about how babies' movements are initiated from their core (ab, pelvis, stomach). Movements in the arms and legs result sequentially from core movements and a connection between the head and tail.
6. As you continue to breathe deeply, flex your abdominal muscles, and then release them. What does it feel like to flex just your abs. Repeat. Do you feel any reactions in other parts of your body? Do you feel a connection between your head and tail because of your abdominal muscles?
7. Rest. Make sure you're still comfortable. Go ahead and open your eyes (30sec)
8. Now, as you lay on your back, still breathing, turn your head toward your right shoulder. Take your gaze above your shoulder to the object you placed there earlier. Stare at your object for a moment. Babies often stare at the things they want, although they cannot reach them.
9. Rest (30sec)
10. Again, shift your head to the right and look up at your item of desire, still breathing. This time as you stare at your item, engage your abdominal muscles. Flex and release them as you did earlier. See if this affects any other part of your body?
11. Rest. Try to imagine a little baby lying on his back looking at something so hard, that it takes his head further and further reaching towards his toy making his back arch. Arch back.
12. Once again, shift head to right and look up at your object again. Let your focus reach further and further, so far you can't help but arch your back and start turning to your side. You may feel your hands or your feet trying to assist you, try to use just your abdominal/core muscles and your head and tail connection to get you to a balanced position on your side. Remember babies arms and leg muscles are not as strong or developed as their core. Try to refrain as much as possible from using your arms to help you get to your side. What may help you get over?
13. Try and balance on your side as if your body was a seesaw and you want it to remain in the middle without either side touching the ground. Once you figure out how to balance there, release your abdominals and see if you fall forward or backward.
14. Try this a few times, continuing to breathe, reaching for the object, and using the core.
15. This time as you balance on your side, experiment with what may get you to your belly. You might have gotten there already, but this time try and feel the weight of

- the pelvis. Try and feel how gravity and momentum may affect you, and continue being aware of your core.
16. Once on your belly, rest, breathe and take an inventory of your body. Take a look at your object.
  17. You may notice that one of your arms is under the weight of your chest. Don't just move your arm. Remember, babies aren't that strong. Try and engage your abdominals as you lift your head to create a space under your chest to move your arm through. Again imagine that arching image and the stretch between the head and the tail that can help lift your torso just enough to swipe your arm through.
  18. You made it, you rolled over. Now look and see where that object is. Can you reach it! If you can, grab it. If you can't reach it, how does that make you feel?
  19. Try it on the other side!

### **Words & Somatic Resonance**

Alan Fogel, PhD

This exercise is in the context of the amazing developmental transition around 18 months – when infants begin to use symbolic language and thought: hearing words and understanding that they each have their particular meaning – speaking words for the first time & being understood (or not, and being frustrated) – and having thoughts inside their head for the first time. Yet, these words still ring with somatic resonance, and continue to do so throughout childhood.

Relaxation: Lie on the floor – relax – notice breathing, heartbeat, skin, muscle tension notice your thoughts coming & going – words in your head, etc. Leader reads a list of words like the following, with appropriate feeling and intonation. Notice changes in your feelings and emotions as each word is read. Let the words wash over you, let the sounds vibrate and resonate.

Sun  
Dog  
Apple  
Good  
Down  
Snow  
Yes  
Play  
Mother  
Anger (or Grrrr!)  
Cat  
Father  
Fun  
Wind  
Pain (or Ouch!)  
Water  
Friend  
Love  
Want  
Bird  
Fear (or Scared)  
Warm  
Juice  
No  
River  
Baby  
Happy  
Me  
Rain  
Wind  
Water  
Snow  
Moon  
No!  
Cat  
Dog  
Bird  
Apple  
Juice

Drink  
Shame  
Joy  
Fun  
Up  
Down  
No!!!  
Rain  
Mountain  
Good  
Relax