

What is Gentle Teaching?

A look at the basics

Gentle Teaching is a non-violent approach to interacting with people with challenging behaviours and/or special needs. **Gentle Teaching** focuses on four primary goals of care-giving:

- Teaching the person **to feel safe** with us;
- Teaching the person **to feel unconditionally loved** by us;
- Teaching the person **to feel loving** towards us;
- Teaching the person **to feel engaged** with us.

Gentle Teaching puts aside the traditional behaviour modification approach that centers on reward and punishment. **Our challenge is to move from a behavioural approach to a new psychology based on human interdependence that sees all change as mutual** – both the child with a ‘behavioural problem’ and his/her caregiver must learn strategies that bring about or deepen feelings of companionship and community so that the ‘behaviour’ in question is no longer an issue.

As a natural part of our early development, most of us learn that we are safe and loved by our parents or primary caregivers. Self-determination and decision-making skills arise out of these early experiences. But many children come to us with life stories filled with abuse and neglect. Others have had lives in which they were loved, but were unable to feel or express it due to disability, mental illness or other conditions. Many have been passed between foster homes without opportunity to form lasting relationships. Others have passed decades in institutions where fear has been prevalent, never able to establish a sense of being loved or loving. For those who have experienced or witnessed abuse in its various forms, or struggle with intellectual or emotional disabilities or conditions, violence can be interpreted and felt in the simplest and slightest facial expression, word or gesture of discouragement. For those who are fragile, many modern care giving practices are seen as mean-spirited, neglectful, and even abusive.

Without even realizing it, our tone of voice, posture, facial expression and word choices could be telling the vulnerable person strong messages such as, “You are no good!” “Do what I tell you, or else!” “We must intentionally learn new ways of communicating strong messages of safety and love. Gentle Teaching offers a way to teach meaning to those who feel meaningless, terrified, unloved and unloving.

We must be willing to continuously re-evaluate what our words, actions and body language communicate to others. As educators and caregivers, the question is not whether children are safe in our care. However, we must ask ourselves whether we are teaching each person to **feel** safe with us and unconditionally accepted by us. Our task is to teach each person that we are kind and loving – virtues that must be most evident when someone in our care is at their worst.

We teach a person to feel.....

- **Safe:** This is done through repeated acts of unconditional acceptance in which every instance of contact conveys the message repeatedly: “With me you are safe and unconditionally accepted. Do not be afraid. I will not harm you.”
- **Loved:** Feeling unconditionally accepted is an extension of feeling safe. This nourishment of self-esteem must be given abundantly and unconditionally. We cannot feel timid talking about love and expressing it in the warmest ways possible, especially during the most difficult moments.

- **Loving:** Teaching the expression of love – a warm handshake, an affectionate gaze, an endearing embrace, a kind word. We must establish trust before we can teach others to feel loved and loving.
- **Engaged:** Chipping very gently away at the self-centered nature that comes with a history of abuse or violence by teaching the person that it is good to reach out to us and others, be together, do things together, and even do things for others. This starts with teaching, “It is good to like me! I will help you at every moment. Then, we will learn to do things together.”
- **Stretching:** After learning to feel safe, loved, loving and engaged, a time comes when more is expected. The person moves from passive acceptance of our place in their lives to active participation in relationship. This emotional stretching process occurs after the child learns to trust the caregiver. Now, the caregiver begins to move the child into more interactive participation with the world around him or her. This is a complex task due to our culture’s obsession with independence, self-reliance and productivity. **For independence, skill acquisition and a sense of empowerment to come about, we need to teach a sense of engagement, helping the person to continue to feel safe and loved while being slightly stretched.**

4 Tools of Gentle Teaching:

- Our Presence - to convey a message of peace, protection and caring;
- Our Hands - to convey a message of being safe and loved;
- Our Words - to convey a message of encouragement and nurturing;
- Our Eyes - To warm the persons heart with tenderness and love.

Our primary role is to teach feelings of companionship, love of self, love of others, and engagement in community life - not to get rid of behaviours, teach living skills, or make people productive citizens. We do not diminish the importance of these aforementioned values; however, they require a foundation of feeling safe and loved to see real success.

When dealing with children or adults with challenging behaviours, we often look at the individual as if he/she were simply ‘noncompliant’ or ‘should know better’. Generally, the person with behavioural problems is stuck in a mix of feelings of detachment and/or self-centeredness. **In many ways those with the most severe behaviour problems do not ‘see’ us; they only ‘see’ a chain of caregivers over the years who have come and gone, offering no stability or continuity in their lives and sometimes treating them cruelly or neglectfully. Until we teach a feeling of companionship, we are just ‘Caregiver #182’ – a faceless, anonymous average of all previous caregivers.**

Teaching feelings of companionship requires the convergence of everything that we have discussed thus far. Seeding the understanding of feeling safe, loved, loving and engaged deep into the person’s heart is our primary task. **This understanding then serves as the foundation for companionship and community.** As it emerges, the person’s aggression, ‘negative behaviours’, self-injury, or self-isolation begins to diminish. More importantly, a new way of interacting begins to unfold based on companionship and community.

Our primary focus is not on modifying a behaviour, but teaching a deep sense of feeling safe and accepted. This is the foundation upon which we can build relational expectations.

The best and most enduring change starts with us.