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## Divorce and Dance/Movement Therapy: Helping School-Aged Children Find a Sense of Self-Agency

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DIVORCE AND DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY: HELPING SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN  
FIND A SENSE OF SELF-AGENCY

Madeleine Vouros

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## **ABSTRACT**

The divorce rate currently sits at 50% for families in the United States. Divorce can and will look different for all families. Children are directly impacted by this event externally as their familial structure is shifts and internally on a body-level. This can cause children to have feelings of shame, neglect, self-doubt, fear of abandonment, embarrassment as well as behavioral issues. Many times, these feelings can go unaddressed and can cause new “challenging” behaviors.

Dance/movement therapy is a therapeutic approach that presents tools which are beneficial for school-age children going through divorce. More specifically, using body-based grounding techniques can help school-aged children who are struggling to find a sense of agency.

*Keywords:* dance/movement therapy, divorce, school-age children, family systems theory, family structure

The traditional family structure was formed centuries ago when many married couples had no legal way of divorcing (Historical Divorce Rate Statistics, 2009). However, since then, many new familial structures have been recognized. In 1970, the United States witnessed a steady increase in the number of divorces reported (Historical Divorce Rate Statistics, 2009). By the year 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported the divorce rate at 4,539 per 100,000 for men and 6,577 per 100,000 for women (Historical Divorce Rate Statistics, 2009). As a result, only 63% of American children grow up with both biological parents in the household (U.S. Divorce Statistics, 2009). Non-marital births have shown an increase over the years with 36% of U.S. children in 2004 being born to unmarried mothers (Amato & Maynard, 2007). Many economists blame the rise in U.S. child poverty to the decline of married-couple households (Amato & Maynard, 2007). Research shows that couples who have high conflict relations pre and post-divorce often have the highest negative impact on children (Fincham & Stanley, 2002). Amato (2005) found a direct link to interparental conflict and children who later show attachment and emotional insecurity. This can cause emotional insecurity later on in adulthood. Moreover, it has been seen that ethnicity plays a role in the child's response to divorce. In 2009, only 29 percent of African American children lived with their married biologic parents, while 50 percent were living in single-mother homes (Anderson, 2014). Furthermore, 58 percent of Hispanic children lived with married biologic parents, while 25 percent were living in single-mother homes (Anderson, 2014). The divorce rate is currently 40 to 50 percent in the United States. Around half of children born to married parents will end up going through the experience of a divorce before age eighteen (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 106).

Research on the outcome of divorce on children has been consistent over time. This experience can be traumatic for some children. Divorce can lead children to have shifts in

their social, emotional, and cognitive well-being, academic problems, depression, anxiety, feelings of shame and neglect, fear of abandonment, isolation and rebellion (Barron, 2010).

Amato concluded that children of divorce scored lower on measures of well-being than children from married households (Amato, 2005). It must be acknowledged that children will be affected by divorce at varying degrees depending on their age and corresponding development stages (Barron 2010). Lansford (2009) states that some studies find no differences on particular outcomes between children whose parents divorce and those whose parents stay together. However, this does not seem to be the common finding in the research.

Though children experience similar risk factors, their level of success can still differ. Pryor & Rogers (2001) include risk factors to be death of a parent, separation in early childhood, amount of contact with nonresidential parent, maternal or parental loss and outcomes before and after separation. Moreover, when working with a child of divorce it is crucial to consider the age of the child, gender, race, socio-economic status, interparental conflict, and demographic changes (Temke, 2009). The transition from a two-parent household to one-parent household can be very difficult for children. Many children often believe the divorce is their fault. Toddlers can express emotional symptoms such as depression, anger, moodiness and aggression (Temke, 2009). They have little understanding to why one of the parents has moved out. Lansford narrows in on the effects of divorce regarding children's age at the time of adjustment. Younger children tend to be more affected by divorce based on the support and needs that come from the caregiver.

Although school aged children are able to have a better understanding of divorce, it does not mean there are no negative outcomes. School aged children can experience emotional pain and have not developed the appropriate tools to deal with their emotions. Along with emotional

pain, school aged children can still experience divided loyalty issues, false hope that their parents will get back together and somatic symptoms (Temke, 2009).

While findings regarding whether and how parental divorce is related to children's adjustment are not always clear in the literature, there is agreement among most researchers that children experiencing parental divorce are at risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes (Lansford, 2009). Recognizing that each child and family hold different strengths, weaknesses, personalities, and temperaments, as well as various degrees of social, emotion and economic resources, divorce still has an overwhelmingly universal effect on children's wellbeing (Anderson, 2014). Factors that need to be considered when evaluating the wellbeing of the child, post-divorce, are the loss of time with each parent, loss of economic security, emotional security, lack of trust as well as mature behaviors, beyond current age (Anderson, 2014).

When working with children of divorce, recognizing the factors mentioned above will help give therapists more information and insight into the child and problems that are arising. The parent and child relationship that was developed since birth, may now shift due to the new family structure. This can play a role into the change in a child's behavior, as they might be losing time with the caregiver and support might look different. Attachment must be understood when reviewing the development of the child and parent relationship. Attachment theory is an influential concept by which to understand parent/child interactions (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Lieberman & Zeanah, 1999). John Bowlby, a pioneer in attachment theory research, highlights that development occurs based on experiences and interactions children have with their primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1988). The core of this theory is rooted in a biologically based predisposition for proximity and attachment between mother and child (Bowlby, 1988), which can later affect the development of functioning. Ainsworth, a developmental psychologist,

collaborated with Bowlby to gain a clearer understanding of attachment relationships. Their work emphasized that variations in attachment security are rooted in patterns of early caregiving (Ainsworth, 1979). A child experiences its attachment figure (usually a parent) as a secure foundation from which to venture out and explore, and a safe haven to return to in times of danger (Bowlby, 1988). It is important to understand the dynamic of the early relationships of the parent and child as this can shift throughout the child's development. Security of attachment can shift in children as the traditional family structure is disrupted and there is a change in the family unit. What once seemed like a safe haven for the child may no longer be secure. Thus, when working with a child who has gone from a traditional family structure to a new structure, such as a single parent household, divorced parent household, or foster care, it is still important to consider the whole family as a whole unit to ultimately comprehend what is not so clear on the surface. Looking past the immediate household can also be beneficial when considering how other relationships outside of the household factor into their well-being. Family systems theory brings a focus to individuals with established relationships, which are maintained through communication (Bevelas & Segal, 1982). "When the 'objects' happen to be people in relationships with other people, one of their most important tributes is their communicative behavior" (Bavelas & Segal, 1982, p. 2). Family systems theory is a lens that takes into account the changes in members or relationships and the lasting effect it will have on the whole family. In addition, families, as systems, influence their environments and, in turn, are influenced by the circumstances and contexts around them. Family systems theory advocates that the family as a whole is taken into consideration because it can be misleading to only focus on a particular individual or dyad within the family (Fine et al., 1994).

A child's developmental level plays a factor into how they experience the process of divorce. Each child develops at different times and in different ways, and each development stage has different cognitive and social competencies as well as coping skills (Adler, n.d.). Younger children tend to have less well-developed cognitive abilities and are usually more vulnerable to the parental shift of divorce, as they are more dependent on parents. School age children have a greater cognitive development and can use cognitive resources like play to further comprehend what is going on in their life. However, their cognitive ability is still limited, and they are not able to grasp concepts such as cause and effect (Adler, n.d.). School age children also may believe they were the cause of their parents' divorce or they may wish the divorce away (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). It is clear that divorce is not just a singular event but, rather, the effect of divorce can stay with the child throughout his or her development (Adler, n.d.).

As a result of divorce, the child's inner senses become anaesthetized, the body is restricted, and emotions are blocked, and the intellect is not as developed as it should be (Oaklander, 2007). From the minute humans are born, there is a sensory overload as everything they are experiencing is happening for the first time. Similarly, the first time a child experiences a divorce, it can be traumatic since the only thing they have known is changing and shifting (Oaklander, 2007). When a traumatic event occurs for a child, the body is restricted, and emotions are blocked, the child can jeopardize their healthful growth. This is seen as a tactic to protect oneself but ultimately creates more problems internally, leading to external consequences (Oaklander, 2007). A factor that can lead to these inner sensations derives from the child being egocentric: they do not understand that their experience can be different from others. It is quite a learning process to understand separate experience, and children do experiment with this at early

ages (Oaklander, 2007). Being an egocentric organism, the child takes everything personally, and believes that external events are under their control. Children often blame themselves for negative things because of their egocentricity and their inability to separate their own experience from others. This is very common during the period of divorce (Oaklander, 2007).

During and after a parental divorce, it is difficult for children to get their needs met because they are often unsure what they might need themselves. The connection between the beginning of the experience and how children are helped to adapt within their bodies is more absent. This can lead to children feeling a sense of hopelessness, powerlessness and helplessness in addition to their numbness with regards to the situation, which can cause the trauma of parental separation to 'overwhelm their capacity to cope' (Mckenzie, 2019). This is relevant because actions expressed externally are usually a consequence of what is being held internally. Instead, the inner sensations end up coming out dramatically through external actions. "Inner impulses are expressed in outer form. Involvement in the outer world in turn influences inner experiences" (Hackney, 2000, p.40). External behavioral responses exemplified by children are labeled as negative and detrimental to the child as well as their environment. In many cases, the external response is considered "bad," which leads the child to believe that expressing their emotions is not okay, especially if it is anger. So instead, the child holds emotions which manifest within. "Distortions in body shape and functions [are] maladaptive responses to conflict and pain" (Chaiklin & Schmais, 1993, p.77). When there is no longer an outlet for external response, the feelings get pushed so far down internally that the child might not be aware of it anymore. These feelings will take on a new form of stomach-aches or being withdrawn. On the other hand, a child could act out by kicking and screaming. All of these are the child's natural response to release these feelings.

Children go through developmental stages at different times and in different ways. As children continue to go through various developmental stages, their grasp on the world around them will continue to expand and can further their understanding about their own processing of divorce. Collins argues that children do not develop in stages in the traditional sense of the word but rather there is a gradual shift in behavior, at different rates and in different domains (Collins, 1984). Based in Collins's model, the term "stages" is used here as a loose term rather than specific milestones, respecting that each child develops in their own time as a result of their environments. As children develop, there will be major qualitative changes in behavior, and changes in behavioral organization (Collins, 1984). Collins poses the question of how the child and the environment collaborate in development. According to Collins, children develop at various rates which coincide with the way children respond to their environment. Much of the literature discusses how school can be a place of stability for children of divorce but it is not always sufficient, as there are many children in the classrooms and these children can slip through the cracks. With a heavy emphasis on learning material, there is little time in a school setting for children to have time and focus solely on their selves.

When children act out in a school setting, it is common that they are put in time-out to address their behavior. Their behavior is being address externally but, ultimately, the internal issue of why the child acted a certain way is not addressed and majority of the time there is no deeper investigation beyond the surface. Time out can be overused by educators for a quick fix, while failing "to understand and apply the behavioral principles that make the procedures effective in reducing problem behaviors" (Ryan et al., 2015, 60). There is significant focus on the external response's children have while there is less focus on the internal. What must be remembered is that the external behavioral response to environment starts with the emotions that

the child is experiencing. Therefore, this needs to be the main focus of their well-being. Unfortunately, not much research supports a child-center response and instead, presents checklists for the children to do, hoping it will solve the deeper problem.

Ideas about what is wrong, what is right, what we are allowed to do and what we are not, are cultivated from our environment and those around us. Challenging behaviors are not always apparent to the child. Many times, these behaviors are subconscious, involuntary, and occur when a child inaccurately perceives threat (Fagell, 2019). Fagell emphasizes the importance of adults to view these children as individuals with vulnerable systems, not “problem children.” This is important to note because in a world where children are taught binaries, there is an expectation for them to turn on their “appropriate” behavior rather than letting these children feel all these emotions and letting them question what is going on. Dance/movement therapy can help children through this uncertainty, without scolding them for their “challenging” behavior (Loman, 2016). Loman (2016) makes the case that dance/movement therapy can help children shift their behavior from what society deems as “inappropriate” to “appropriate” by applying tools through dance/movement therapy. Through this methodology, children can work through their behavior with body based coping mechanisms to help find alternative ways to channel and express their emotions that is more socially acceptable in school settings. In a safe space created by the dance/movement therapist, the child can comfortably express these “challenging” behaviors in order to find alternative ways to express their behaviors. However, as a society, we must be aware of the wording we use as we help shape children in their prime developmental stages.

Dance/movement therapy is a branch of expressive therapies that focuses on using movement to express unconscious thoughts surrounding an individual's emotional, social,

cognitive, and physical self with the hopes to improve one's health and well-being (Acolin, 2016). Furthermore, dance/movement therapy is a behavioral health modality that combines physical activity, social support as well as creativity. Through non-verbal communication, dance/movement therapists can create a safe space for clients where the main focus is the body. This holistic approach to healing is based on the idea that the mind and body are interconnected. Thus, changes that occur in the body are echoed in the mind, and vice versa, which can allow children to make decisions both mentally and physically, acting to what they might see fit.

Humans rely on movement to communicate, non-verbally, beginning in utero. Movement is therefore considered our first (universal) language. The patterns that babies demonstrate, before they are able to verbally communicate to caregivers, such as pointing, continue to be embedded within us as we continue to develop and grow. Movement is a language that children continuously move through life in and is a concept they are able to comprehend; children must be met where they are. Dance/movement therapy is a method to help proactively bring a child into their own positive sense of self where they do not need to rely solely on caregivers throughout the time of divorce. Furthermore, many school-aged children are still developing the necessary tools to build their self-awareness, regulate emotions and empathize with others; this time is crucial, as divorce can be damaging to this growth. Dance/movement therapy utilizes tools that are beneficial for children of divorce and is able to address the effects of having a decreased social and psychological maturation and emotional security which can be a consequence of divorce.

Mirroring and grounding are tools used in dance/movement therapy to help further the client's capacity for self-regulation and stability. Mirroring is valuable in the child's development as it is used as a reflective non-verbal tool, helping the child follow movement

directives through matching and gaining a better understanding of emotional needs. Through mirroring, clients are able to create movements in relation to the emotions and expressions of their experiences. The therapists, or others in the group, do the same movement to strengthen the client's original movement. Witnessing this process can give greater self- and body-awareness (McGarry & Russo, 2011). The impact of this technique is to build relationships between individuals and therapists. Gro and Weibull (2005) state "mirroring improves social understanding, trust, and therapeutic relationships between individuals and others despite using nonverbal communication" (cited in Azizah & Mintarsih, 2019, p. 134).

Grounding interventions provide feelings of stability and connection on physical, environmental, relational, emotional, and sensory levels (De Tord & Bräuninger, 2015). Grounding can be described as one's ability to perceive and live in the 'here and now', and as one's contact with the ground (Meekums, 2002). The 'here and now' refers to giving attention to our in-the-moment bodily senses and our breathing patterns, helping create a foundation of awareness. Helping a child of divorce find this foundation can build a sense of agency and security for oneself. Through grounding techniques and a mindfulness approach (which refers to a greater awareness), the body and mind begin to rebuild their connection, helping children to focus away from negative outcomes and future worries that might arise. Having a greater mind-body connection can contribute to feeling a sense of organization. Grounding can naturally alleviate anxiety by calming the child's body and mind (Manly, 2020). Therefore, solid connection to the ground can provide security that enables people to feel safe when freely moving and exploring (Ho, 2015). This can be achieved by just walking, self-massaging or contacting another person through the palms of the hands or feet.

Another way to implement grounding in the child's practice is through the use of rhythm. Rhythm helps build orientation within our bodies (De Tord & Bräuninger, 2015). In the earliest days of a child's development, there is a natural rhythm that is used to self-soothe, which has naturally also been matched to the caregiver. Kestenberg (1967) identified patterns of children's movement that show up in different ages of development. Kestenberg identified these early rhythms as rhythms of tension-flow and rhythms of shape-flow. Tension-flow refers to the "sequences of fluency and restraint in the state of various parts of the body," whereas shape-flow "organize(s) the relationship of body parts in such a way that drives can be satisfied in transactions with objects" (Kestenberg, 1967, p. 86). Kestenberg observed that patterns transcended through a repetitive nature when the infant or child was trying to communicate non-verbally to serve a biological need such as eating (Kestenberg Amighi et al., 1999; Kestenberg, 1975). Further into a child's development, these patterns will be adapted for specific needs, creating internal movement rhythms within the body.

Having a sense of security is crucial for children of divorce because what they had known thus far in their life is now disappearing before them. In the practice of dance/movement therapy, it is beneficial for a child socially developing to have an outlet where the dominant medium is the body. This kind of therapy can have a positive influence on psychological awareness, body expression of emotions, analyzing unconscious impulses, and improving new strategies of behavior through exploring new patterns and qualities of movement. In that way, therapy through dance and movement indirectly induces relationship with inner sensations, images, feelings and thoughts (Martinec, 2013). By introducing varied movement choices, children can develop the capacity for varied behavioral and relational choices, promoting increased adaptability and coping skills (Loman, 1998).

Helping a child be able to further adapt to the situation and cope with a new family structure is extremely important to their well-being. Many children of divorce feel an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame leading this event to be a traumatic time in their life. This event can create feelings as though the experience is always occurring at that moment rather than as a past event. The effects of this event can be held within the body, affecting the way one carries their head in a lowered position, upper body curled in on itself and limited eye-contact. Dance/movement therapy brings a different approach to unlocking the memories that the child has stored in their body. "Dance/movement therapy is a body-based modality that respects, acknowledges, and utilizes the role of the body in traumatic experiences to maximize the healing experience" (Haase, 2019, p. 49). Unlike other interventions, dance/movement therapy highlights the value of the body and directly engages it within therapeutic experiences (Cristobal, 2018). With the intervention of dance/movement therapy, children are able to gain a sense of agency both physically and mentally.

Dance/movement therapists are able to observe the client through various movement observation paradigms such as Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and more relevantly, Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP), in order to adapt specific skills to further help the client's healing. Laban Movement Analysis is a method for describing human movement. This method uses a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating contributions from anatomy, kinesiology, and psychology. When using LMA language, there are four major components, which include Body, Shape, Effort and Space. Each category allows the observer/witness to see how the body is moving, shifting, changing shape as well as how much effort is being used within the space. LMA is a method that can be used within different populations. Many traumatic events, psychologically or mentally, can consequently build patterns and habits in humans

unconsciously. A dance/movement therapist can analyze these patterns and behavior to work through the event or problem they might be facing.

Many dance/movement therapists focus on the body, emphasizing kinesthetic ability. Kinesthetic ability works to bring awareness to the mind and body. This furthers our understanding of how our movements are related to one another. Through movement, the relationship with one's own body can bring new findings and support deep attunement to others (Federman, 2011). The Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP) defines this as attunement to Tension Flow. KMP offers another lens for dance/movement therapists to gain a deeper understanding of an individual's movement profile through the nonverbal behavior presented. The framework is developmental; it focuses on the way movement patterns develop throughout the life span (Kestenberg, 1999). KMP can help the dance/movement therapist find ways to relate to the client through non-verbal communication. "The KMP's integration of developmental phases is effective when working with children who experience disrupted development, because it offers interventions that can reintegrate the skills and patterns associated with each developmental stage" (Haase, 2019, p. 35). KMP is a beneficial movement profile to utilize when working with children of divorce. Children will be able to gain empathy, understand attunement and begin to have a greater awareness of their self. Observing through the KMP lens offers the dance/movement therapist an understanding of earlier developmental stages from a unique orientation.

## **Discussion**

Much of the literature that has been written about school-age children of divorce suggests psychotherapy modalities as a treatment plan; however, research on dance/movement therapy

and this specific population is limited. Thus, the connection between the beginning of the experience and how children are helped to adapt within their bodies is more absent. This is relevant because actions expressed externally are usually a consequence of what is being held internally. The reason for most of the “challenging” behavior that occurs is because the children are lacking the stability and have not been shown other ways to express their internal feelings. During the development stages of school age children, it is clear the child takes in much of their environment; the good and the bad. Negativity towards the child can hinder their growth, leading to self-deprecation and low self-esteem. Dance/movement therapy can create a safe space as well as stability for the child. The research of dance/movement therapy in relation to children of divorce is minimal and should be examined further.

It is important to highlight how these challenges lie in the body. Processing a divorce can and will look different for each child. “The self-blame severely diminishes the self and makes it very difficult for the child to fully express the emotion that need to be expressed to promote healing” (Oakland, 2007, p.34). There is a heavy focus on a child’s external response and less focus on the internal experience and how that is held within the body. Many children may not know how to verbally explain what they are experiencing on a body-level which leads to difficulty when trying to articulate their emotions verbally in talk therapy. This is attributed to a variety of factors such as limited language and processing skills.

Dance/movement therapy creates a physicalized therapeutic experience for children to have self-discovery that cannot be found within verbal therapy. Children are able to explore what is happening on a body level, bringing greater awareness to their various behaviors. Children are able to better process information that is physically engaging through active learning which

supports the therapeutic process (Purvis et al, 2007). This model strives for a person-centered approach, with the stress on the child rather than a binary model approach. Dance/movement therapy fosters a safe space for children of divorce to build a positive self-image, empathy and develop self-agency. Through this expressive modality, individuals can incorporate sensation, awareness, willingness, and perception to enhance self-empowerment that supports self-development and creativity (Awan & Zamir, 2016; Leventhal, 2008). Furthermore, gaining these tools can help an individual increase self-confidence while lessening the focus on their disability (Azizah & Mintarsih, 2019).

After events such as divorce, emotions and sensations can be stored within the body. Developing a greater sense of body-awareness aids reconnection of the mind and body with an understanding of one's emotions and actions (Levine & Land, 2015). Dance/movement therapy is the ideal modality to help children of divorce with body-awareness, as it uses movement which is a tool understood and integrated into children's lives every day. Utilizing mirroring techniques, it allows a person to accept their past as part of their lives in a healthy manner (Levine & Land, 2015). Furthermore, the individual consequently builds emotional expression which is useful for achieving body/self-awareness and self-regulation (Dominguez, 2018; Lucchi, 2018). Along with body-awareness, children of divorce also battle with emotional understanding. Dance/movement therapy facilitates individuals to work towards emotional empathy. McGarry and Russo (2011) state, "emotional empathy refers to affective empathy, the ability to respond to people's mental states appropriately, while cognitive empathy is a consciously controlled drive to recognize and understand another emotional state" (cited in Azizah & Mintarsih, 2019, p. 134). While observing others, an individual must activate mirror nervous system to empathize with the emotions, sensations and movements of other people

(Bastiaansen et al., 2009). When witnessing emotions and sensations of another person, an individual tends to show empathy. The mirroring technique plays an important role in this case, allowing the individual to adapt similar feelings with others. This understanding promotes empathy and encourages a healthy relationship between the individual/group and therapist (McGarry & Russo, 2011).

Dance/movement therapy is a person-centered approach; however, the dance/movement therapist must take environmental factors into account, such as the new shift of family structures and home dynamics in which the child is still adapting to. Divorce can be a lengthy process for some, in which the children get dragged through the changing family structure. Thus, the dance/movement therapy should take these factors into account when working with the children.

Miller (2017) includes a compilation of responses and testimonies from those who have experienced divorce at a young age. Some of the excerpts that Miller shares highlight the effects of divorce. As discussed earlier, not each family and divorce looks exactly the same. Some are more difficult than others but that it not to dismiss that they can all be hard for everyone in the family. There are feelings that are unacknowledged and feelings of abandonment and grief just to name some that are experienced/felt the most. Miller states:

In response after response, the adult children of divorce who I interviewed told me that their own feelings and experiences were either never solicited or systematically sublimated to the adults' desires and feelings. Because of this, they overwhelmingly ended up sticking to 'the narrative' given them by the parents (i.e., 'This will be better for everyone') and spent the ensuing decades managing and being ever mindful of their

parents' feelings (one woman described the pattern as 'pleasing, placating, and pacifying'). (2017).

Miller highlights how much the child's experience can be dictated by caregivers and adults around them. Their feelings can, at times, seem insignificant or be dismissed. Through an approach for young children experiencing divorce, such as dance/movement therapy, children can gain agency for themselves without relying on others or worrying about the shift of external factors. There is much to consider and not every method will work the same with different child. It is an ongoing process.

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