

THE NURTURE-STRUCTURE HIGHWAY

It will help if you download:

- *the Highway Diagram*
- *the Nurture Chart*
- *the Structure Chart*

Bringing up children can, on a simple level, be described as being about providing good nurture and structure for them. In other words, providing appropriate care and giving them good boundaries. The Nurture Structure Highway is a helpful way to guide parents/carers with this.

If you look at the Highway diagram, down the centre you have the 2 healthiest forms of nurture (Assertive Care and Supportive Care) and structure (Negotiable Rules and Non-Negotiable rules). This is the road we want to be on as much as possible.

You will find a fuller description of the different types of Nurture and Structure on the Nurture and Structure Charts. Here's a brief summary of what the different styles look like:

Nurture - Assertive Care and Supportive Care

The difference between these two types of care is to do with how much we take over the caring of a child. For example, if a 3yr old falls over and cuts their knee, we will most probably pick them up, perhaps carry them to the sofa and clean up the wound and provide lots of reassurance. This is what **Assertive Care** looks like – we directly meet the child's needs because the child is unable to care for themselves.

The same thing happening to a 12yr old would probably lead to a different response – perhaps telling them to go and get some cotton wool and clean it up themselves. This could be described as **Supportive Care**. The parent has offered help and comfort but at the same time is encouraging the child to take some care of themselves.

To think about

Given how old your child is/children are and taking into account their development:

- How much does your child need doing for them by you? (Generally, the younger they are, the more likely they will need this style of nurturing.) What do you do when you give them Assertive Care?
- When is Supportive Care a more appropriate response? How do you provide this?
- Are you happy with the balance between Assertive and Supportive Care? Is there anything you would tweak?

Structure – Negotiable and Non-Negotiable Rules

All children need rules. Rules make clear to them what is expected of them and give them a sense of security. Some rules will be **Non-negotiable** - they must be followed. "Don't touch the cooker" would be an obvious example of a non-negotiable rule for a 3yr old. Non-negotiable rules need to be related to the child's welfare and well-being. At the same time, they mustn't be rigid – as the child grows older they can be rewritten. So, when the same child reaches, say 9yrs old, it might be that they can use the cooker but under supervision.

Negotiable rules, on the other hand, are those rules that teach children to think clearly and solve problems. For example, usually a child might be expected to come from playing with their friends at 5pm, but on this day something special is going on that doesn't finish until 5.30pm. Depending on their age, it might be appropriate to negotiate this with their parent. Negotiating with parents is an important skill children need to learn. Having some rules that are negotiable is also important for the child's self-esteem. If virtually all rules are non-negotiable, the youngster might start to feel that they have no voice, that their opinion isn't important and that their needs aren't being appropriately taken care of.

To think about

Given how old your child is/children are and taking into account their development:

- What are the non-negotiable rules within your home?
- Is your child clear about these? Depending on their age and development, do they understand the reasons for them being non-negotiable?
- And what are the negotiable rules? How is your child helped to negotiate?
- Are you happy with the balance between negotiable and non-negotiables? Is there anything you would tweak?

Veering off the Highway

Having looked at what it looks like when we are travelling down the centre of the Highway, we're probably also aware of times when it's not quite like that – when either our care and/or how we provide structure/rules is a bit skew-wiff.

One of the great things about the model of the Highway is that it recognises that all parents and carers will at times veer off of the highway and find themselves on the bumpy verge. This might be due to stress, tiredness and/or significant things happening in their lives that are impacting on their ability to provide 'good enough' parenting.

It might also be related to how we were parented ourselves. It's often said that parenting is the hardest job in the world and doesn't come with a set of instructions. Instead what we *do* have are our own experiences of being brought up – and we will automatically draw upon these as we bring up our own children. If our experience as a child was, for example, one of the rules being held too rigidly by our own parents, we might do the same with our own children and find ourselves using the **Critical** style of structuring (eg 'You *never* tidy your bedroom' or 'You *always* do your own thing, without any thought for the rest of the family.'). Alternatively, we might try to avoid this ('I'll never be like my mum/dad') – and slip into the **Marshmallow** style of giving structure, where we slacken our expectations of our children and give them the message that they don't have to follow the rules.

The same applies with our nurturing or caring for our children – we can drift off the Highway and slip into offering either **Conditional Care** ('I will care for you but only if you meet certain conditions) or **Overindulgence** ('There there – don't worry, I will do it for you' – even when they can do it themselves.)

The point is not to beat ourselves up when we notice that we have drifted off onto the verge. Instead, we need to take a step back, consider whether this is a bit of a blip and whether we can get back onto the highway ourselves? Perhaps it's more than just a blip and we need either to take more care of ourselves and/or getting some help from if we could do with some help.

Further thoughts:

In terms of nurturing your child/dren:

Under times of stress, which of the less-helpful nurturing styles do you find yourself slipping into – Overindulgence or Conditional Care?

How could you steer yourself back onto the highway by providing either Assertive or Supportive care?

What are the stresses and pressures? What could you do to take better care of yourself?

In terms of providing structure:

Under times of stress, which of the less-helpful structuring styles do you find yourself slipping into – the Critical or the Marshmallow?

How could you steer yourself back onto the highway by holding to either the Negotiable and/or Non-Negotiable rules?

What are the stresses and pressures? What could you do to take better care of yourself?

Parenting as Partnership – Consistency

Because how we parent is strongly influenced by our own experiences of being parented, it's not uncommon for parents to find that they have quite different ways of providing nurture and structure. The Highway provides a helpful way of discussing these differences and working out how to support one another.

Acknowledgements

If you want to read more about this, the book 'Growing Up Again – Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children' by Jean Isley-Clarke and Connie Dawson ' Hazelden Publishing 1998 contains a full description of the Highway together with lots of other extremely useful ideas to help parents.