

## **Transcript: Our Families, Ourselves: How Our History Influences How We Raise Our Children Featuring Dan Siegel, Ph.D.**

Q: Hello and welcome to ZERO TO THREE 's exciting new podcast series for parents: Little Kids, Big Questions, made possible with the generous support of MetLife Foundation. ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization devoted to the health and development of babies, toddlers and their families.

I'm Annie Pleshette Murphy, a ZERO TO THREE board member, and the host of this series, which will showcase interviews with leading child development experts on the issues most pressing to parents today, based on findings from a recent parent survey ZERO TO THREE conducted also with support from MetLife Foundation.

I am really thrilled to introduce Dan Siegel to talk about how the way we are brought up influences the way we bring up our kids—the power of the past on our parenting. Dan is a child, adolescent, and family psychiatrist and author of *The Developing Mind: Parenting from the Inside Out*, and *Mindsight*. So Dan, I thank you so much for joining us.

A: Thank you, Annie. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Q: When I think about the power of the past on parenting, I think of that moment that we all experience as parents when, having sworn that you would never say certain things that your mother or father said to you; but there is that great moment where your kid does something that suddenly, you know, your mother's voice comes flying out of your mouth. I think that most parents have had that experience. Why is that? I mean, why is it that it's very hard for us to avoid repeating in our own parenting what, you know, we experienced as kids?

A: These layers of what we experience actually can go on automatic pilot so you can kind of be aware that you're saying something and you actually didn't really choose to say it. You can be aware you're behaving in a certain way, but you didn't choose to behave that way; you're just doing it. And that's how early experience shapes us, and why research shows it's so important for parents to make sense of their lives, because if they don't, they end up just repeating what happened to them. And if what happened to them wasn't so good, which is true for about a third of the population, then it just gets passed down through generations. So, becoming aware and understanding the impact of the past at least gives you a window into making a difference. We still continue to do things and say things that are never exactly what we want them to be, but at least your intentions, and then your direction, is to go in a more positive way for you and your child.

Q: Right. I remember someone made the joke, why did your parents push your buttons? And, you know, the answer is because they installed them, which I always thought was very apt.

A: Exactly. That's right.

Q: And there's no question that my mother could certainly push my buttons in ways that some people couldn't. We did do this wonderful piece of research, and the podcasts are based on this research, with over 1,600 parents. And eight in ten parents said that the way their parents raised them had a major impact. They may have been talking about something at a slightly different level, which is choosing to adopt the values or the approach to how they raised their kids. But let's start with some of this I think very, very interesting, almost unconscious ways that we can repeat the past, and the importance of bringing that to the surface of really tuning into your own childhood experiences. What are some of the ways that you think parents do experience that other than, you know, opening their mouths and saying things they may not have planned to?

A: That's a good place to start actually. You know, the research that I'm trained to do is called attachment research. What it is, is some really wonderful people, who are trained as often psychologists, went and studied the way parents interact with their children, across all different cultures and different settings, and they found that the way parents communicate with their children actually directly influences how that child's mind develops. We're now starting to look at how those patterns of communication also affect the brain. But just let's stick with the mind for now. So, what we know is that about 20% of kids have an experience of emotional distance from their parents. Emotionally there's just not much closeness, and things are dealt with on a surface kind of level—just behaviors are what the parent focuses on, not on, feelings, or thoughts. About 20% of parents don't tune in to that aspect of the child.

Now, if a child is raised like that, what the research shows is they themselves will not be given a rich set of tools to know their own inner life. Then as that child grows up, the research shows, first of all, their peers will see them as somewhat distant and controlling and not really that likeable. And then, as they get older, there's a probability—it's not a certainty, but a probability-- that they themselves will raise their own children in a way that's cold and distant. So, you can see it's experientially created—the buttons, if you will, are installed. In this case it's almost like the absence of a button

Q: Very interesting. So, you're not talking about a parent who's severely depressed. This is really more about a parent who is just not helping

children label emotions or get a sense, of their own feelings—their world of feeling and emotions is somehow cut off. Especially for a lot of boys, they're told, you know, "You're okay. You're fine." You know, that in fact the feelings, particularly if there are feelings of vulnerability or sadness, that they're quickly told that you're not having those feelings, or you need to man up, and not show those feelings. I guess that also gets back to, you know, a lot of family situations where children's emotions are not only not labeled, but they're discounted or belittled or they're told what they should be feeling as opposed to having them experience the help of learning to label their feelings and work them through maybe.

- A: Absolutely. If you yourself were raised to say you can't be vulnerable, often then you'll be raising your child with that exact same stance even though you may not even be aware of it. But let me just say that other studies show that when parents don't talk about feelings, children don't learn how to deal with their own feelings. So, I use the phrase name it to tame it.
- Q: That's great.
- A: So, if you aren't given the opportunity to have a conversation with people really close to you or your folks about your internal world, your internal world kind of becomes a dark forest where you just don't go there. You know, you stay in the light. In this case the light is just the surface behaviors, not the feelings behind the behavior. So, if that kid now becomes an adolescent, then becomes an adult, and not much has changed in the kind of relationships he or she has, then as a parent, that person will come to the experience of parenting just focusing on a child's behavior--looking for performance, not passion; looking for how that child will achieve things and not be attuned to their inner world. So, you know, if you're married to someone like that, or if you're listening to this and you find you yourself are like that, the great news is these individuals, as all the people we're gonna talk about, can change.
- Q Let's say you were, you know, you felt raised in such a way that you consciously did not want to repeat, in terms of kind of getting in touch with the impact of that on your own life--where do you start? I mean, do you need to see a therapist to get this to work out?
- A: No. I don't. I think therapy sometimes is necessary, and of course as a therapist, I know that when people need therapy it can be extremely helpful. But, no, I do not think the majority of people need therapy. The reason, Mary Hartzell and I wrote this book, *Parenting from the Inside Out*, is we felt that people who would be given the information and the tools to actually take the steps to change can do that; and the feedback we've gotten from that book, which is basically a workbook—to take people

through the steps of change—‘cause not many people can have access to or can afford, you know, therapy, nor do they need it.

Q: Right, right

A: So what I then do is say to a person, “Look, there are two sides of the brain. There’s a right side and a left side, and if you just spend most of your time in one side or the other, it’s kind of an unbalanced life.” So, the right side of the brain is kind of more tuned in to the body, and to nonverbal signals, and to the raw emotions of life. The left is a little more distant from the body, so it’s more logical, and, clear, reasoning. So, they’re both important. But if you’ve been raised in a family which didn’t use much right hemisphere kind of bodily affection and emotional communication, you would have leaned over to your left just to survive, because that’s what everybody else is doing in their family.

Now, if you’re an adult raising kids, and you’re mostly leaning to the left looking at performance and outcome and logical things and stuff like that, the fact is you’re missing half a brain. So, what I say to people in a really, you know, loving and supportive way—I say, “You did the best you could; but there’s a whole richness of feelings and bodily experience and connectedness to other people that, although you may not have had in your childhood, you can have it now adult to adult, and certainly you can have it now adult to your own child, and you can have it now as a gift you give to your children.

Q: How do you see this playing out with parents?

A: If they say, “Hey, my childhood wasn’t so good, you know, why should I even think about it?”, you can say, “It isn’t what happened to you that matters now in your parenting; it’s how you make sense of what happened to you.”

Q: Yes. So let’s pause on that for a second, because I think this is so critical. I think a lot of parents will either say, “Oh, my gosh, oh, I had such a terrible childhood,” or, “It’s all my—it’s my parents’ fault,” or, you know, there’s, “What can I possibly do about it now?” But part of what you’re saying is that I think that there’s a sense I’m hearing of really taking responsibility for at least becoming aware of it, as you say, of thinking about what the impact has been. But then being able to say to yourself, “I can change this,” that it’s not too late.

A: Absolutely.

Q: That this is something that I owe my kids.

A: If you make sense of what happened to you, you can liberate yourself from the patterns that generally get passed on when people haven't made sense—they just repeat those same things, because it's the way the brain is structured. If you make sense, you change the passing on generation after generation of these non-ideal ways of being with your kids and you break the generational passage.

A: But when you've made sense of your life, you're giving them an attachment experience that will allow them to thrive and become the best girl or boy that they can be. They'll feel at home in their own skin. You'll be able to accept them for who they are. They're going to feel motivated; they're going to reach their academic potential; they'll have emotional and social intelligence.

Q: So, Dan, one of the things you've touched on a couple of times that I just want to make sure I understand is this idea of being reactive versus being receptive, and I'm thinking about, you know, a kid has a tantrum and it's really a hard moment for a parent, and we've all been there. What would a reactive parent's reaction look like?

A: Well, that's a great question, Annie. You know, a lot of people hear the term receptive and reactive. They think being receptive means, you know, saying "yes" all the time. But that's not what it means. Umm, and reactive doesn't necessarily mean you're always like yelling or screaming; it's where you're not open to really seeing the inner world of your child.

So, let's say there's a, you know, two-and-a-half-year-old who is insisting that she have ice cream before dinner, and is really getting upset. A reactive way of being is to say, you know, "Shut up. Stop saying that. And you know you're not supposed to have that. You're so spoiled." What I'm doing is I'm reacting to my daughter's behavior, and I'm not being receptive to her inner feelings—her inner experience. Now, someone might hear that and say, "Oh, I see, Dan's gonna give her the ice cream. That's what it means to be receptive." So, watch this—no. So, my daughter says, "I want ice cream! I want ice cream!" Receptive would be like this: I would say, "You know, I can see you really are excited to have some ice cream. Why don't we go into the living room and we'll have some ice cream together after we eat dinner?" And there what's happened is the child—my daughter-- has felt that I have attuned to her inner world, which basically means I'm tuning in. I'm focusing my attention on her feelings, instead of just yelling at her or being reactive to her behavior. I tune in to her inner feelings, and when you do that, children feel that they've been seen, their inner feelings have been felt by us, and it gets them to actually feel at ease because they're not invisible—they're

not alone. And now she's more willing to have dinner, and then maybe we have a little bit of ice cream after dinner, if that's what I've decided is okay to do. It gives her what every child needs, which is absolutely structure, but I've tuned in to her inner world, and she can actually have some of her feelings not only seen, but even turned into a reality, and we have a little ice cream after dinner.

So, reactivity actually usually makes things more explosive and shut down, and children don't really learn from it; they just get their behavior modified. What we want to do is truly know what the word discipline means. It's an opportunity to teach. So, even the roughest opportunity—sometimes especially the roughest moments in parenting—are the deepest opportunities for learning. Children can learn incredibly well, and people, raised in this way actually have deep emotional and social understanding. They're flexible, they're resilient. This is the root of resilience.

Q: You're reminding me of a time when my daughter was about three. My father had died, and I had actually gone back to work too soon, and I was, dealing with a lot. And she did something--really set me off. And I really flipped my lid, and it was not like me to do that. And she was very upset, and, it didn't take long for me to realize where that was coming from. And I said, "Mattie, I'm really sorry. You know, Mama is very sad about Papa, and I should not have yelled at you. I'm very sorry." And I'll never forget it. She went out of the room, and I thought, "Oh, no, she didn't really understand what I was saying." And she came back with a box of tissues.

A: Oh, my gosh.

Q: And it was the sweetest—and I just think that sometimes a big part of your message I'm hearing is that, you know, children—they're a lot sharper and tuned in, as you say. Certainly that right brain part of their brains is working big time when they're young. And, umm, we do them a great disservice when we think that they can't handle that when you say to make things right. A lot of parents think, well, you know, they're not gonna get why I'm apologizing. Well, I think they certainly do.

A: They do. And it's so important what you're saying about making a repair—you know, taking the time and also having the courage to actually be open; not to overwhelm your kids, you know, but just to explain to them so they themselves can make sense. You see, this is the invitation for all of us-- is that when you take the really important steps to make sense of your life, you know, it really invites your child to make sense of their own experience with you and be open to your, you know, making repairs when

there are these inevitable ruptures—you know, disconnections. And it's a great thing, because ultimately what this kind of approach does is it allows us to bring kindness into our interactions not only with our children, but to teach them to be role models, that they can be kind to themselves, and that's really important for a child to then—going through adolescence to enter into young adulthood having these tools for inner understanding, for making sense, and for being kind to oneself and to others. I mean, what more can we want from our children?

Q: Well, that's certainly I think every parent's wish. And, I think it's a wonderful place to end on. Dan, I can't think you enough. This has been unbelievably interesting and so important. And we should all be very mindful in our parenting and in our lives. So, thank you so much for your time.

A: Thank you, Annie. This has been wonderful.