

# Copy of #32 And Baby Makes MWE!: Attachment & Attunement (Part 2)

[00:00:00]

Welcome to the podcast today. Today is the second part of a two-parter. Last week, we met with a couple who are weeks away from having their first child. I checked in last night and no baby, but they are still very excited. I invite you to join in the second part of our conversation, which is not only helpful for new and expecting to be parents but for all of us who are in lives of children, professionals, grandparents, and neighbors, how can we be the village that helps our children's mental health grow and develop in a healthy way? We ended our conversation when I asked them if they had given much thought to how they would cultivate mental wellness in their child. So, let's pick up where we left off.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** The last question I want to ask you and I'm going to put you on this spot here, have you thought much about how you cultivate mental wellness for your child?

**Mom:** That's a great question. I don't think I have really [00:01:00] thought about that. The closest I've come to thinking about that was what I said earlier about having a sense that I don't want my worries to become something that burdens them. But that's more, in the realm of what behaviors am I modeling for them. I don't know that I've thought much about their own agency as a person that will have their own mental health journey. Probably because I'm so caught up in the week-old newborn idea of who my child will be. That's a really interesting question. I don't know. Have you thought about that?

**Dad:** I think maybe a little bit. I don't know what I was watching or reading I came across this quote. Your job as a parent is not to control your child's environment, but to teach them how to be the master of their environment. Who knows, I haven't been a parent yet, so maybe I'll live into it and be like, oh, that's a terrible saying. The idea that the removal of all risk or danger or consequence, the complete paving of the path is maybe not [00:02:00] necessarily always the right thing to do, but to rather enable and empower your kids to feel confident in the spaces that they inhabit. I think in just tiny, almost analogous way, I try and practice that just in my current job. I work with students. Help them to produce some student publications like magazines and

books and stuff on campus. I found myself sometimes trying to make sure that I'm not a helicopter advisor so that they can feel like they actually have ownership over the projects that they're working on. Because sometimes if you feel like you have too much of a safety net or at the end of the day, it's really the advisor that makes the last call and makes all the final edits and cleans everything up, then they don't feel as much like it was their product and maybe don't get as much out of it. I'm wondering if that might be transferrable at all to being a parent. Obviously attending to our child's needs, caring for them, make sure they're healthy, but also giving them the space to develop, I guess in a way, like you were talking about with the [00:03:00] middle ground between chaos and rigidity, like finding that balance between all the stimulus in the world, like getting to experience that and not being shielded from it totally. But experience it in a safe way so that there can be like healthy growth. I don't know exactly what that'll look like.

**Mom:** I'm glad you have all those thoughtful thoughts about it.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I'm happy to throw that out there because I think it is an under-discussed part of being a parent and often what people hope is I don't want my child to be anxious. I don't want my child to be depressed. Which is really different. The foundation for mental wellness is trust. In developmental psychology it's agreed, that first year of life is where we create trust. We create trust with attunement. Attunement is basically being attuned to what our child's needs are. There was a lot of newspaper print in the last couple weeks that you can't give enough affection in the first year. I think that was pretty agreed upon [00:04:00] until the last 20 or 30 years because we've moved from allowing children to grow with support and love to seeing children more like a product. How can I develop them? You'll just crack up. I do this all the time. I'm a violator. Someone will see a baby's hands and go, oh, they're going to be a pianist, or they're going to be a football player. Oh, yeah. But they begin, we begin to say what they are. That's not harmful, but we're always putting a noun. I think it's helpful if parents understand that first year you are just coming to know the child. I used to say every morning at breakfast, good morning to my kids, and in my head I'd be, I don't know you. That was very freeing. It allowed me to step back from thinking I knew them.

When I took that step back, I tried to be in tune to who they were, not who I thought they were. The trickiest part of attunement. Is we're trying to be in the moment with our child while simultaneously remembering the long game. The [00:05:00] long game for the two of you in year one is to build trust with your child. Making sure they're fed, sheltered, sleep well loved and have enough stimulation because the child's needs in that first year are just to have a safe and

loving environment. And that builds trust. As our children age, the building blocks of their development will naturally unfold. We can learn about our child's psychosocial stages by Googling ages and stages. I was laughed at people know more about their cars or their computer than their child stages. I don't think I should laugh about that, but I do. This helps us to better understand our child's capacity at each age. And also, what their developmental tasks are for that particular age. It really begins to help us not think about what our mind is thinking, but to try to put our mind in our child's mind so we can really understand who they are. This is the basis of attunement, which is really the foundation for healthy attachment. [00:06:00] Which is a whole other episode. We don't have to do it perfectly, actually, we don't want to do it perfectly because then they don't leave home . If you've ever been 17 or 18, it's not pretty to live with forever. So, the stress is off. But I think the real beauty of parenting is learning to attune yourself so you're really coming from a place of mutuality. That going to build trust with you because you're going to lead me. There's a lot of, we're going to get this kid on a schedule. We're going to, impose control. And some of that is very important, we just don't say to kids walk across the street. Yeah. But it's an art. Parenting is much more art than science and there's a lot of science out there, which is helpful. But if it comes from a place of fear and not a place of love. The number one thing I say to parents in my office is that coming from a place of love? Or is that coming from a place of fear? Wow. And fear can look a lot like, I'll let the kid do whatever they want. I have, four kids and I do four different dinners because I am meeting all their needs. But fear can also [00:07:00] come from a place of rigidity. Yeah. Where it's, you need to do it this way and mental wellness is really being able to attune ourself. Like a tuning fork with music. To who this other person is and really putting ourself in what their mind is. Trying to understand the mind of our child is how we develop mental wellness for the child. Wow. At every age.

**Dad:** It must be so hard to do because when you're first a parent your baby needs so much from you. You have to take the first step of knowing when to feed and put down and start that sleep schedule and all that stuff. So yeah, I'm sure it can be really challenging and take a lot of conscious effort to do that. Stepping back and let your child reveal themselves to you and to just pay attention to what they're showing you rather than imposing your own kind of agenda on them.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I think I'd want to soften one thing. I think it is genius that when children are born, all they need to do [00:08:00] is be fed, sleep, and be played with. We don't need to teach them math. we don't need to get their skillset going on soccer. All we need to do is feed, keep them warm, help them sleep. It's quite simple. But because it's so new, it's quite overwhelming. I've got these, mindfulness exercises where you ground your

feet, you take a breath to reregulate, your central nervous system, as it gets amped up. It's all it takes is you just keep breathing. I find great comfort because I've worked a lot with 16- and 17-year olds who found themselves unexpectedly pregnant, who actually did a pretty good job. I'm like, wait, I'm twice as old as them, I can do this. From the beginning of time people have raised children. Yeah. And we don't need to do it perfectly. We need to connect and attune to our child. And they often will tell us. My very close friend has a new grandchild and she was talking to me and then the child got fussy. She was babysitting and she said, I don't know why this children fussy. This child's had [00:09:00] this and this. I'm like, yeah that's the journey. You don't have to know. . Wow. You have to get off the phone and you have to step back and figure it out. And it's not endless. It's not oh, cause I didn't have the dictionary out and they wanted to read this word. It's usually. Maybe they have gas, maybe they need food. Maybe they're just bored. Maybe they're just listening to their voice and they're going to be fussy and this too will pass. I do think it's having this curiosity, which it's lovely that this father here is full of curiosity. Without the expectation that you have to do it right? Mm-hmm. that's beautiful. It's a lot more fun than I think the apps make it out to be.

**Mom:** That's good news.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** It's not a project, it's a process. We make a million mistakes with kids and they turn out fine. The list is long and my parents' made mistakes with me. I made tons of mistakes with my kids. But you just go back and say, oh, I'm so sorry. Repair. Children are incredibly forgiving. Wow. The bond is so strong. The one last thing I want you to think about is, if we're [00:10:00] talking about the first year's building trust, we build trust by meeting just basic biological needs. When you cry, I'm here for you. I don't have to be here for you like, SWAT team, I can gently pick you up and I can be here for you with a spirit of peaceful and calm, and if I get anxious, I can reregulate myself while I'm picking you up. But it's really that first year that we do it so many times, those basic needs that child then goes in the second year of, huh, I'm connected to these people. I trust them. My needs are going to be met. This is all good. I want to end by, have you thought about the role your phone and devices will have as you try to attune yourself with this child?

**Dad:** I don't think I have, have you?

**Mom:** We've thought a lot about how we don't want to have our phone out when we're with the baby and we've thought a lot about like you would want to do for mindfulness in your daily life without a baby. Wanting to really engage [00:11:00] face-to-face with the baby instead of always having a phone in

between taking photos or taking videos. We're not on our phones a whole lot. I feel like we do a pretty good job in our house together. Yeah. But I know that will surely be a huge temptation to want to always be taking pictures of our cute baby.

**Dad:** It's funny, there's so many things that I think we have thought about in advance of how, what's this going to look like? How are we going to do this? Then I think like you were saying earlier, there's some things that we've almost decided to let's just figure it out when we're there. let's cross that bridge when we get to it. Because there's so much you can try and plan out and then things are always turned out different. Sometimes it might just take some being in the moment and like kind of modulating and making adjustments.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** I think the idea isn't to have it all thought out, but I bring that up. It's my little public service announcement because right before the pandemic I had four couples that I was working with and they were part of a pilot study and they tracked how much they had devices [00:12:00] on when they were with their children who were between the ages of one year and 18 months. The women estimated that they were, had devices on 50% of the time, and the device was phone, iPad, television. And the men estimated 70, they kept track for a week. All four men came back that a hundred percent of the time there was a device on even to the point they were at the changing table and they had old iPads and they'd click the movie. While they were nursing, they were also texting or one was feeding the baby every morning watching Sports Center and they were shocked. Wow. One of the things I like have people to know is that in that first year. Looking into your baby's eyes, gazing, is one of the ways that we turn on parts of the brain, and knowing what I know, I can look at a three-year-old and know that they didn't get enough gazing because they look different than a three-year-old who's wired and who's bright-eyed and bushy tail, my mother would say. It is really, I think, [00:13:00] unfair of us to let parents go home from hospitals without talking to them about attunement. Without talking to them about the process of holding the baby and gazing. So often babies are on bouncy chairs. They're on people's backs. Some of that is fabulous. But in that first year, they need eye to eye contact. They need us talking to them, they need us stimulating and engaging them because that year is when our brain grows the most in any period in our life. Wow. It isn't okay for the baby to be in a bouncy chair and us to bounce it a little bit and then be doing the dishes. We can do that some. But my experience is telling people this, everybody wants to do what's best for their baby. But we have to remember, my generation didn't have devices. The grandparents of your children did not raise children with devices and you've had your devices a lot longer than you've had a baby. Yeah. Both are biologically wired to our brain, but the devices [00:14:00] are more stimulating sometimes than a baby . I think sometimes people are a

little surprised as much as we love them and as interesting as they are there, there's an element of slowing down and lack of stimulation. With a baby unless they're fussy. It's our job to figure out how do we engage in this slow, what I think is a meditative mindfulness process of getting to know an infant on their terms, not on ours.

**Mom:** Yeah. I can see it totally goes back to what you said of mindfulness and being really in the moment.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Yeah. Yeah. I'm glad you said that. Great. Thank you. This has been so enjoyable. Thank you for having us back after you're super experienced.

**Dad:** We realize everything.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** It's not about being wrong or right, it's about being thoughtful without being compulsive. Yeah. You we're not trying to be thinking everything through. We're trying to be flexible, adaptive, and coherent. Does this make sense?

**Mom:** Yeah. Thank you so much for having us.

**Dad:** Thank you. This is a great conversation.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Thank you. I am so grateful to this couple for sharing their experience [00:15:00] of this life and identity transition. Becoming a parent is different for each of us, I think most of us can relate to parts of this couple's story. As our culture becomes more aware of mental wellness, it's not really surprising that this was not an area that this couple had given much thought to. Throughout our child's life we are working on attunement and attachment. Attunement is the process of being in tune with another. Attachment is the process of meeting the needs in early childhood so trust and security are developed between baby and caretakers. When I was in graduate school, learning about attachment and attunement, one of my professors said something that meant little to me in the moment, but a lot once I had a dog, a baby and I worked with teenagers. He said with children under five, be like you are with your dog. Greet them every time with a sense, I'm so glad to see you. [00:16:00] With teens be a little bit more like a cat. Be there and be present when they want to sit with you. This wisdom I use daily. Actually, when my children were living at home, I used it 20 times a day. The trickiest part of attunement for new parents is trying to be in the moment while simultaneously remembering the long game. What is the long game? We want to raise human



beings that know right from wrong. Can create and sustain healthy relationships and can use their abilities to make their corner of the world a better place. So, in my continued quest to help all of us increase our mental wellness quotient, let me share with you three Inner Challenge insights to help you understand attunement to men in a more practical way. And how, what we do in infancy can be helpful with older children when times get rocky. As well as a perspective, of attunement and family scheduling. [00:17:00] Sit back. Each of these is a real-life story. I think you will learn so much from listening, that could be applied the minute you turn this podcast off.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Inner Challenge Insight: Number One:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** This attunement story comes from my own experience of parenting 32 years ago. My mother-in-law often came monthly when my first child was born. She was a baby whisper, which I needed because I had an infant that cried from five to seven every night.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Like many parents. I tried to fix the source of his distress: diaper, good. Food, full. Just got up from nap, can't be tired. I tried the bouncy chair, the floor mobile. They just made him cry even harder. Even gazing did not work. I was distressed. My mother-in-law picked up on my distress and said to me, in her thick French accent. This is crying that cannot be fixed. I thought to myself, what does she mean, it can't be fixed? [00:18:00] I said, well, he must be crying for a reason. She said you checked all the reasons and he is still cries. So just walk with him. He will eventually fall asleep. See it as training for the hard times. Ooh, that was sobering. She had lost a son to cancer. So, she spoke with a unique authority about hard times. That began my practice of Notice on the Inside. A skill I talk about in episode two. Of course, I did not call it that in those days, but my sons nightly crying jags helped me to slowly understand that I had to learn to notice what was going on in me so I could learn how to emotionally regulate myself first. This is one of the most important parenting skills. Yes. We have to learn our own management of our emotions. Emotions can be contagious. You might be feeling calm until your baby begins to cry. And then voila', you are distressed it's automatic. And in the early weeks of life, [00:19:00] this serves as a function that calls us into service. As we try to figure out what our infant needs. Yet as we grow more competent, it becomes helpful to learn, to calm our distress for the sake of attunement. Attunement , two minutes is not, and I gently repeat, mirroring distress. Meaning, your child is stressed, then you become stressed. Your child gets more stressed. You become even more stressed. Anyone who has parented a teen understands what it means to have two people escalating emotions with each other. That is not attunement. So, I began to figure out how to call my distress. I

also began to figure out why I did not learn this in therapy school. In order to do this, I just somehow naturally fell into the idea of breathing. I noticed that when I did a little bit of breath work, which nobody talked about in those days, I didn't feel so agitated inside. Then I [00:20:00] noticed if I did 40 seconds of breath work it calmed my emotions and my irritation towards my distressed baby significantly decreased. And I could feel his distress. Not mine. I felt empathy and gentleness towards this child who was so uncomfortable. I was like, oh my gosh. Whatever it is. It's really hard for you. I moved from me to MWE. Dr. Siegel's weird word. Babies cannot manage their emotions. Adults can. In managing mine, I was able to attune to him. So, he had the comfort of being held until this crying, Jake stopped and he fell asleep. Just like my mother-in-law, predicted. Attuning to him on his terms, felt a bit like learning a foreign language. I had to calm my emotions first in order to attune to him in a [00:21:00] healthy way. I had to change my self-centered attitude of, Hey kid, stop crying so I can do what I want to. Whoa, you feel awful and I will stay with you until this passes. The dishes can wait. I had to let him have his process and not be irritated that it did not fit into mine. This may be more natural for you, but for me to give over to his process and needs was something I had to consciously choose to do. Kind of like learning a foreign language. So Inner Challenge insight number one, is just as today's dad to be said earlier in the podcast. Our job as a parent is not to control our child's environment. But to help them learn to master their environment. The skill of attunement starts in infancy. If done well enough, does not need to be perfect, it is the basis of helping us to not only master ourself but to master [00:22:00] our environment.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Inner Challenge Insight, number two:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** This attunement story comes from my clinical practice and shows how powerful early attunement can be when things get rough in the teen years. Many years ago, I had a 17-year-old client who unexpectedly found herself pregnant. She was a teen full of promise and possibility that would be drastically altered due to this unexpected pregnancy.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Her parents were heartbroken and her Dad would not talk to her. After six months of this standoff, the girl's mother talked the Dad into coming to my office for one session. The Dad was one tough cookie. A very principled and moral man. He spoke with conviction, that he had not raised his daughter to make such a mistake. After her father spoke, the daughter instinctively got up from her chair, knelt in front of her Dad, softly held his hands, looked into his eyes and said the [00:23:00] following words that I will never forget. Dad, I am so sorry. This is my mistake. Not yours. And I will rise above it. How do I know this because I am your daughter and you have taught



me to never ever let mistakes, stop me. The whole time she said this. She was looking into his eyes. She was gazing. As you can imagine he broke down in tears and sobbed. Sobbed. I mean, really, really sobbed. He uttered what all of them knew, but had not said a loud. The college sports scholarship would not happen. All the work. All the effort. All the dreams. Gone. True grief just filled the room for quite a bit of time. We sat in silence and stillness. And then the Dad said, [00:24:00] oh, you got me when you looked into my eyes. I used to do this to you when you were a baby, I felt so full of love and hope for you. His mind drifted. And I could just see the memories roll in. And he said. It wasn't like anything else? I have a very demanding and detail-oriented job. I love lists. But there was something about holding her on the couch. At the end of my workday and looking into her eyes, that was very comforting. It wasn't like any other part of my life. I kind of felt like I was getting to know her. There probably sounds weird, but it's true. As a therapist, I was silently flipping out. Because I love these moments where the ordinary guy on the street puts words to what science has taught us about the brain. The infant brain is far from mature. No list-making ,no ability to strategize. It needs all of us to help it [00:25:00] mature for the next 25 years. In those early months, infants need us to attune to them by observing what they are telling us without words. Infants communicate through their bodies. And we are invited to sync up to their very primitive communication. We know the obvious feeding, changing, sleeping. But gazing looking into their eyes can easily be forgotten in our busy and device saturated world. Little did this wise Dad know, gazing actually turns on parts of the brain. Little did this wise Dad know that what he had done 17 years earlier had built a bridge that would be sturdy enough for them to come back to one another in these difficult times. His daughter gazed into his eyes just as he had gazed into hers. And in that moment their connection was restored. And the process of [00:26:00] repair could begin. So, insight number two. To all new parents hold your infant and gaze into their eyes a few times a day. Turn off all devices and just be with one another. Follow your child's lead and mirror their facial reaction. See, if you can smile and your child will mirror you. You don't need to do this for hours a day. A little goes a long way. And as this Dad and daughter taught me lasts forever.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Inner Challenge insight number three:

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** One area of attunement I have never seen, written or discussed is what I call for lack of a clever word, scheduling attunement. It's a simple concept, one that I made up. How much can each person in your family do beyond the normal expectations of each person. Working home for adults. Family life and school for children. Simple concept, not always simple to [00:27:00] figure out because each family member has her own capacity and needs. We all know that we live in a time of unprecedented

opportunities. Great for us, or is it? It is if an only, if we apply the concept of attunement to our family system. And to our family calendar. Can you create a family culture where your children get enough of what their insides need? Enough sleep, enough healthy food, enough time to do their homework well, enough time for nature and enough time for love. Enough downtime and boredom so their next great idea comes. Enough time to read stories that broaden their hearts, minds and imagination. Not to mention give them words, concepts, and values to navigate their life by. Enough time away from striving and competing that they understand the power of being attuned with others in ways that are not competitive. Enough time that they figure out how to replenish their spirit. Of course, this means [00:28:00] parents have the hard task of trying to balance today's landmines of smartphones, gaming, consoles, televisions, and organized activities, so children learn to have space to follow their own lead. Yes, attunement to others cannot happen, if we do not learn to attune to ourselves. This is a very important job in parenting. We create a family culture that helps our children come to know who they are and what they need. So, there's a real connection to self and others.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** Again, we don't have to do this perfectly. But it is helpful for parents to step back and observe their children's energy, their spirit. Do they seem childlike? Do they have sparkle in their eyes? Are they looking at the world with wonder or do they seem burdened a bit numb, bored, or overly focused on devices and competition? Do you know the recommendations from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry when it comes to screen time?[00:29:00] You may be shocked, but we know these devices are harming our children's mental health. So, we must do better. And this must start at infancy. Children under 18 months should have no screen time, except for video chatting with adults. 18 to 24 months only educational programming with a caretaker present. Sorry, Frozen, you are fired from babysitting. And for two to five-year-old, one hour of kid appropriate programming a day. Welcome back part one, of Frozen. This means the phone is no longer a pacifier at the grocery. We need to bring back talking to our children as they sit in the cart. Hey, these are tomatoes. Some people call them tomatoes. Books are brought in the car, not movies or Nintendo switches. All family members need to turn off devices, not only for family dinner, which research has shown for 40 years helps kids mental health. But for family time where families have a good block of time each evening where no one is on devices. [00:30:00] Is this boring? Oh my God, yes it is, for about three days. And then voila'. Families begin to play games, go for walks, help with homework, take bike rides. Family time each day. I have worked with many families who have made these changes. So, I know it's possible. Not easy. To be honest, the people I have the hardest time convincing are the parents. The children are wired for it and they are craving it. Our children do not have the

capacity to know what is healthy. They need us as parents to create a home environment where we attuned to their needs.

**MJ Murray Vachon LCSW:** We must admit the devices and scheduling with no limits are harming our children and the only people that can save them are their parents and caretakers. The last 40 years has taught us we cannot buy our children's mental wellness through opportunities or stuff or [00:31:00] unlimited text time. So, Inner Challenge insight number three. We need to do the hard work of at tuning our family schedule to the needs humans have had from the beginning of time. And that is to be together in ways that are relaxing, fun and connecting. We can do this.

Thanks so much for listening to this. Two-parter. And as you move through your week, Attune to humans like you do to cats and dogs. This, is your Inner Challenge.[00:32:00]