

# An Integral Approach to Parenting in the First Three Years of a Child's Life<sup>1</sup>

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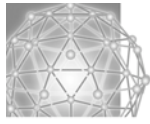
This article provides an introduction to the possible span and depth considered when applying an Integral approach to parenting during early childhood. The relationship between Integral Theory and the practice of parenting is addressed, and key principles and concepts that underlie Integral Parenting are discussed. The task of parenting is placed within an evolutionary context and presented as a possible Integral practice. Ken Wilber's Integral Theory serves as an inspiration and organizing matrix.

## Introduction

Adonia, who are you, my child? I hold your body, hear your breath, touch the unbelievable softness of your skin. I look into your eyes for clues. I watch. I wonder. There you are. And here I am. And joining us is the space between us, the relationship—intimate, and apart. Attentive attunement to all aspects of your being and becoming is my aspiration. As I proceed to put that intention into practice, I find myself learning about, awakening, and being stretched into new and ever-unfolding experiences. I try out, I stumble, get up again, discuss, analyze, contemplate, read, and write. Now, at close to three-and-a-half years old, you are a bright, inquisitive, and *alive* little girl. I give thanks to you for all the moments we have shared thus far. In addition to the profound experience of getting to know and accompany you, you greatly inform my exploration of Integral Parenting. As I sit here and write, I hear your chirpy high voice: “You fix that, OK?” I think you are crafting a star out of modeling clay with your papa.

Two main questions I have held in heart and mind over many years around the subject of parenting and early childhood have been: can we raise children so that they do not have to get over their childhood? And is it possible to welcome children into this world, to guide and accompany them, in ways that fully support the unfolding and flourishing of their unique gifts and potential, while at the same time enabling them to become a part of and to contribute meaningfully to the greater whole: their family environment, society, the planet, and Kosmos?

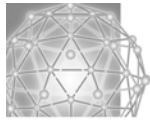
The Integral framework has greatly helped me organize and articulate more clearly many of the pieces gathered over the last two decades that I feel contribute to answering these questions in the positive. Sometimes I get carried away with rather complicated and lengthy explanations to back this response. But I like to remember the underlying simplicity of it all: if you plant a healthy seed in healthy soil and facilitate its growth under healthy conditions, the seed grows into the potential it held from day one. Engaging in the task of parenting in the early years of a child's life in as integral a way as possible supports this.



So, let us remember this underlying simplicity as we venture forth to look at what central themes Integral Parenting involves. This is very important because, as you will see, the topic is vast. For example, in applying an Integral perspective to the first few years of life we look at the myriad aspects of becoming and being a human being, alive in this adventure of Life-on-Earth and enfolded in an evolving universe. This means that we as parents meet, regard, and respect the *whole* child—a being made of body, mind, soul, and spirit. Integral Parenting also strives to understand what needs to happen, what content will meet the child’s intent, so that each developmental stage is fully reached, lived, and moved through, thereby encouraging a healthy foundation. And right away, all these questions and aspirations bring us to ourselves, the parents. What does it mean, both practically and spiritually, to be integrally informed, authentic and present, and to allow the notion of *evolution* into the parent-child relationship? Yes, the topic is vast indeed, *and* we must remind each other that Integral Parenting does not seek the perfect way of parenting—there is not a place (inner or outer) to “arrive at” that is “perfect” (in the sense of absolute). Rather, it seeks a *perfecting* way of parenting, one that is in the mode and movement of continuously finding out what a more evolved form of parenting might be and that is willing to put this into action. I will discuss this more later on.

This introductory article is not about giving answers to specifics, such as what to do when your baby does not sleep through the night, or when to introduce solid food, or how to respond to a whining child. Instead, imagine you are entering a house called “Integral Parenting.” This article aims to welcome you into the foyer, asks you to take your coat and boots off, then invites you in for that initial cup of tea. After that you may choose to venture on to discover and move around in any of the many rooms that are present in this house, but for now we are just laying the basic groundwork and requirements, the general parameters of an Integral approach to early childhood. Thus, in addition to briefly outlining what the Integral framework asks us to consider when applied to any area of life, and in this case making the bridge to parenting and early childhood, I discuss what I perceive as central underlying patterns, principles, and possibilities that emerge when we bring Integral consciousness to bear upon the parenting journey. This article is divided into the following six sections:

1. *The Why and What of Integral Parenting.* This section provides a brief outline of what an Integral approach to parenting encompasses and how this approach enables us to use a fuller range of resources in any situation.
2. *Theory and Practice: The Map and the Journey.* Whilst having a comprehensive map to navigate the parenting journey can be extremely helpful, this short section reminds us that even a great map cannot “do the journey” for us, and that it is important to differentiate between the map and the actual territory and trek. In other words, talking the talk is a useful, even illuminating step, but walking the talk is what will actually make a real difference.
3. *Parenting as an Integral Practice.* Here we touch on the fact that Integral Parenting holds all the ingredients and requirements of a serious Integral practice, which includes spiritual and psychodynamic work, and how seeing it in this way



will make a huge difference in how we approach the task. Who we are is ultimately what we bring to parenting, and thus our own evolution is intimately connected with how we parent.

4. *Support and Challenge.* This section discusses and reflects on one of the distinguishing marks of an Integral approach to any field: the growing capacity to hold and live with paradoxes, to dance with seeming opposites rather than resorting to an either/or stance. In the context of raising a child, this ability is tested at times to an extreme degree in the simultaneous need for offering one's child unconditional love and support *and* providing direction, guidance, and at times very clear boundaries and correction that a growing toddler may well resist, sometimes quite literally (with hands, feet, voice, and all!).

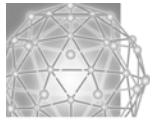
5. *Integral Discipline.* In many ways, this section continues the discussion of the theme above (support and challenge). The topic of discipline is a hot one that generally comes up sooner rather than later whenever one speaks of parenting or education in general. So, here a taste of what some of the considerations of an Integral approach to this important aspect of parenting involves.

6. *Parenting within an Evolutionary Context.* Parents often feel that they are not doing a good enough job. Becoming a parent can make us very vulnerable. We may easily feel overwhelmed and doubt our ability to navigate the complex task of helping another person grow. So, how can we both lift the bar of what parenting can be and not create more self-doubt and stress? This last section explores what it means to place our parenting efforts in an evolutionary context and simultaneously work with what is.

Before we get going, just a quick general clarification: by its very nature, and expressed in the word itself, *parenting* is about parent and child, and especially in the early years of a child's life the two are usually very interwoven. Thus, parenting is understood as an active relationship, encompassing at least two individual holons: parents as holons and a child as holon.<sup>2</sup> The act and endeavor of parenting hinges on the interaction between these two holons. We cannot just talk about the child holon, the parent holon must also be reflected upon and considered, as well as the co-arising space between the two—the second-person sphere or culture that is co-created by parents and children. So, while the focus here is clearly on the infant and young child, it is also very much about the parents. In applying the Integral framework to parenting we cannot but involve reflections on and from the parents.

## The Why and What of Integral Parenting

We are born into this world with big heads and helpless bodies, completely at the mercy of others, utterly dependent on the nurture, love, care, and protection of those who have gone a ways on the path we begin to tread. From a warm, gurgling, jiggling, familiar womb we make the huge transition to being “out here.” From one moment to the next, air touches our skin, sound



and light reach us without the filter of mama's belly, and from then on, one sensation after the next, one impression follows another. We slowly integrate them (if we are lucky). Some of us get blasted with stimuli suddenly and overwhelmingly and do our best to accommodate and adjust. Then, as we grow more and more into this world, our pace and eagerness to explore outwards and to incorporate what we are surrounded by increases daily. We begin to taste, touch, smell, look at, pull, push, and shake any object within our reach. We begin to orient ourselves in this world. In the first three years of life, tracks get laid for the rest of the journey. These are, in the truest sense of the word, *foundational* years.

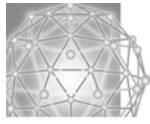
As adults, we know, if only intuitively, that the beginning of a human life and how it is experienced makes a big difference. It is a subject that matters deeply. Research by developmental psychologists, depth psychologists, and more recently by neuroscientists clearly confirm this.<sup>3</sup> We care about approaching it "right" and we want to know what exactly is "right." Our "wanting to know," combined with the fact that it is not easy to know when the subject of concern is a little infant, also provides fertile ground for beliefs and convinced opinions to run rampant. It is easy to project what may be assumed or understood through a particular lens of adult inquiry and cultural norm onto this rather foreign and nebulous stretch of life.

Much research, meticulous observation, sincere curiosity, care, and concern have gone into understanding what happens in these first years of life. In addition, rigorous scientific study has brought forth incredibly exciting and insightful discoveries. There are also thousands of books for parents and caregivers on the market that touch on and include a number of developmental lines and come from a variety of perspectives, spanning and reflecting largely traditional to more progressive worldviews.

So what do we do with all the information and misinformation on the topic? A meta-perspective on the many perspectives could sure come in handy! And this is really what an Integral approach to parenting can provide: orientation and guidance in our quest to grow into and be the best parents we can be. How so? Simply put, it asks of us to stretch sideways, upwards, and downwards in order to *perceive and embrace more*. It also provides us with a map that can help us discern and understand better, so that we become that much more present to a little person who stands at the beginning of his or her life journey. We begin to ask questions such as: What might we discover if we consider and integrate the myriad insights on the topic of parenting, thereby opening up the horizontal dimension and looking for the greatest possible span (the widest embrace)? Simultaneously, what might we uncover when we apply an evolutionary, transpersonal framework that seeks to "separate the wheat from the chaff," thus bringing in the vertical dimension and exploring the greatest possible depth (increase in consciousness)?

These questions reflect a basic and underlying understanding of Integral Parenting: that bringing greater span and depth to the parenting endeavor can encourage and support the healthy unfolding of a young child. What this involves is explained more fully in the following.

Inspired by and applying the AQAL (all-quadrants, all-levels, all-lines, all-states, and all-types) framework, Integral Parenting sees each mode of inquiry and each method of understanding as



holding some part of truth, while acknowledging that the whole truth is still evolving and can never be completely captured. It honors life to its fullest, realizing that it is we who limit what this existence is all about, but that it is also our privilege and responsibility to recognize and appreciate ever greater degrees of fullness, depth, breadth, and mystery. Integral Parenting attempts to take the many facets of life into consideration and to discover how they inform, interweave, and complement each other. This includes approaches to early childhood from biological, neurological, societal, cultural, psychological, and spiritual fields of study. It involves considering the individual and collective aspects of the parent-child journey, as well as the interior and exterior modes of experience and reality, termed the *four quadrants*.

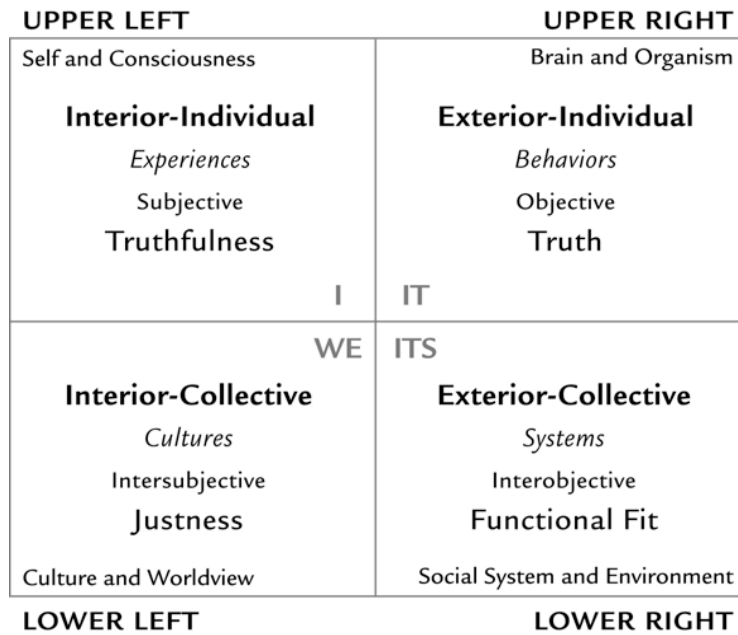
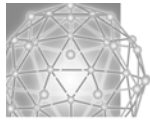


Figure 1. The Four Quadrants

An Integral approach to parenting also considers the many developmental *lines* in a young child—cognitive, emotional, social, psychosexual, musical, moral, spiritual, and others. Simply by increasing our awareness for the wide variety of lines that are present in our child, we are more likely to be attentive to how we might facilitate our child’s overall development. In addition the Integral framework understands that consciousness evolves in stages, or *levels*, that each human being passes through these levels, and that these levels cannot be skipped. As developmental psychologist Robert Kegan says, “If you want to understand another person in some fundamental way you must know where that person is in his or her evolution.”<sup>4</sup> It also acknowledges the importance of *states* of consciousness (e.g., waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and access to higher states through peak experiences) for a person’s development, motivation, and insight. And lastly, Integral Parenting considers *types*—a child’s gender, as well as his or her particular enduring tendencies and inclinations, such as whether a child is generally introverted or extraverted.



That sounds like a lot, I know. But if you think about it carefully, you are probably aware of and including some or many of these five AQAL elements already. For example, when your child becomes sick, your mind may well go over a variety of possible causes in your efforts to better understand her condition and to help her.<sup>5</sup> Did she not wear enough clothes (UR quadrant) the other day when it was cold and windy (LR quadrant)? Has she been more stressed than usual (UL quadrant/states) due to your recent move (LR and LL quadrants)? Is there a flu going around (LR quadrant)? Could it in part be that rich chocolate cake she ate yesterday (UR quadrant)? Did the move affect her more than her brother due to her more sensitive nature (types)? Or maybe she is more susceptible because she is just pushing her back molars through (levels of development/UR quadrant)? Or could it perhaps have something to do with the fact that her recent entry to daycare is stimulating her cognitively but challenging her emotionally (lines of development)? Or all of the above, or some combination thereof? Your mind (and heart) scans and sifts through the many influences in your child's life. You may be more aware of certain aspects of his personhood, development, and situation than other ones. Utilizing the Integral framework can help you see where there might be gaps in your attention to and understanding of any situation. Through expanding your awareness, a greater range of resources and insights can be implemented. This will help both you and your child.

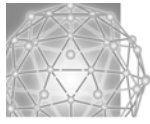
So really, the “what” of Integral Parenting—what this approach considers and encompasses—explains the “why” of Integral Parenting: as we widen and deepen our awareness and thus the range and depth of our ensuing actions, we become more effective in and present to one of the most challenging, wonderful, and important tasks on earth, that of raising a child.

### **Theory and Practice: The Map and The Journey**

“The secret of parenting is not in what a parent *does*, but rather who the parent *is* to the child.”

—Gordon Neufeld<sup>6</sup>

Integral Parenting does not primarily hinge on the parenting methods or techniques one might use, the philosophies and theories one might apply, or the equipment and educational material one might utilize. Ultimately it depends on the parent becoming “integral”—which involves thinking, feeling, perceiving, and acting integrally. For this, a cognitive understanding of the AQAL framework can be very useful and enlightening, but it is not necessary or sufficient. Or as Wilber notes in *Kosmic Consciousness*, one does not have to know Integral Theory to be integral, or in this case, to parent integrally.<sup>7</sup> However, as we consider how best to go about parenting, having the AQAL map can be a great help in guiding us as we navigate the parental journey. For parenting a child during the first years of his life can surely be compared to a journey into unknown territory. Who is this child before me? Who am I in relation to him? How does my family and greater environment respond to us? What life situation am I embedded in as I offer my hand to this wee lad and do my best to help him along the way? Many questions and many possible answers.



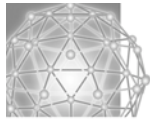
As good maps do, the AQAL map helps us notice landscapes and crucial forks in the road we might otherwise miss. It indicates areas (cliffs, bumps, and windy roads) to be on the look out for and reminds us of facets of the journey that we may expect sooner rather than later (or vice versa). It also provides an overview of the entire adventure and how the landscape is interconnected. In short, it helps us experience and engage in the journey with our entire being, taking into consideration and integrating the many facets of what it means and what is required to do comprehensive justice to the task of raising a child. To do so, it takes apart what is essentially whole, enabling us to see and better understand the myriad aspects that make up our trek. But as we get up to go, let us remember to use this excellent map as it is intended, namely as an excellent map—one to keep in our back pocket for quick and frequent reference, one to look at and learn about so that we begin to “know” it, not just intellectually, but in such a way that the guidance and clarity it offers begins to seep into our very bones, thus becoming a perspective with which we walk through life. We must do the walking ourselves. It is up to us to discover what the actual territory looks like. To fill in the contours, distance markers, and elevations with actual sweat and spirit. And to enjoy the views as we go!

Now that we have briefly touched on what applying the Integral framework to parenting encompasses and how important it is not to confuse the map with the territory, I will spend the rest of this article outlining what I perceive as the three foundational requirements to parenting integrally, namely: approaching parenting as a spiritual practice, offering one’s child both support and challenge, and placing the task of parenting in an evolutionary context. A thread that runs through these is that Integral Parenting requires Integral parents—thus all the following sections have a great deal to do with who we are as parents and what capacities we need to develop in ourselves.

## Parenting as an Integral Practice

It is for the following reasons that I propose approaching parenting as an Integral practice—which includes spirituality—to be a key requirement for Integral Parenting. For one, the very act and experience of being a parent holds great ingredients for Integral practice. Building on this, by perceiving and engaging in parenthood in this way we are challenged and encouraged to grow up, for real. So it is an opportunity not to be missed for parents if we want to develop into integral people. Lastly, when we perceive and take on spirituality as part of our Integral Parenting practice, we say “yes” to showing up as fully as possible in relation to our child on a daily basis, and this facilitates greater presence toward our child and a growing capacity to embody the AQAL map. In other words, Integral Parenting evokes spirituality *and* spirituality is necessary for Integral Parenting. Let us unpack this further.

Bringing children into this world and raising them holds undeniable and bountiful experiences of joy, love, and inspiration, *and* there is no doubt that being a parent also involves a lot that is hard, challenging, and can be downright exhausting. Next to the extreme demands on our time and energy, we are asked to bring levels of patience, compassion, discernment, and presence to situations that on first impulse might just want to make us scream, run away, or perhaps simply



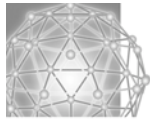
weep in desperation! Depending on who we are—what our particular strengths and weaknesses, preferences and dislikes are as parents, and also what specific life circumstances we are embedded in—different situations will push us to our limits. For some, having to deal with the oftentimes illogical cognition and stubborn will of a toddler can be really exasperating; for others the experience of not sleeping through the night for a few years will prove very taxing; again others will find the lack of personal space and time difficult. In addition, some of us may find ourselves in situations that can bring additional challenges to parenthood, such as facing economic vulnerability, being a single parent, or experiencing a personal crisis.

So, as parents we are faced with great opportunities and great challenges—I do not think any parent would dispute that. At the same time, what we bring to the task of parenting is intimately connected with who we are, and where we are coming from in all our interactions with our child. How then might we welcome and pursue parenting as an Integral practice, and what difference could this make in our efforts to parent integrally? In the remainder of this section I focus especially, albeit briefly, on the spiritual and psychodynamic work that make up part of a parent's Integral practice. With spiritual growth I refer to an increasing capacity to be present, to expand our awareness, to disidentify from our ego, and awaken to our deeper nature—our soul and spirit—so that we can be evermore fully and authentically available to the child before us, and ultimately to life itself. This is greatly supported by development in the emotional/psychodynamic realm through such practices as shadow work.

An example to illustrate this: about a year ago in the middle of the night, my daughter, Adonia, then three-and-a-half-years-old, wakes up and seemingly out of the blue insists that she needs her red socks. I try a variety of approaches: distraction, logic (mine anyways—that it is the middle of the night and time to sleep, and that I do not have a clue where those socks are), other solutions (I could get her another pair of socks, we could look for them in the morning, etc.). Nothing works, she insists more and begins to cry inconsolably, an unusual reaction for her. I am at loss, all I know is that what I am doing and where I am coming from are not helping. I need to reach to a different level of consciousness, and in my foggy middle-of-the-night state, everything seems to be pulling me down, literally, rather than up. Stephan, my husband, hears her cry, and shows up all cheery and friendly. I catch myself thinking, “You don't have a clue what's going on—she is being unreasonable, and nothing seems to be working.” I also register somewhere in the back of my mind that his cheery, awake approach is much more conducive to finding a solution than my outwardly calm and inwardly exasperated one. Well, as he chats with Adonia and she continues to cry and insist, I roll over and take the chance for some time out. As I lie there listening to her, I come to the conclusion that this is not a moment to hold firm a boundary and help her deal with the unchangeable, but rather, if possible, to find those darned socks. I also have some time to search my brain for where those socks could be, and in a moment of illumination remember putting them in the laundry basket. Off I go, and indeed, there they are. God, that was easy. She snuggles up with them and falls asleep.

This minor episode is one of the many daily ones where I as a parent am asked to reach into my vertical growth as opposed to (or in addition to) my horizontal capacities. I had to get out of the





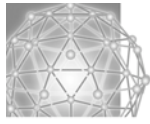
state of “Leave me alone, I just want to sleep and forget about these red socks” to “Wait a minute, by the sound of her voice, tears, and insistence, there is something else going on that is more important to her than simply trying to will through an unreasonable idea.” And I remembered that we had danced around the living room earlier that day, had a grand time pretending to do ballet with all the swoops, swirls, and leaps included—and that all the while she had been wearing her *red* socks and her little red, black, and white slippers. It dawned on me that perhaps she was requesting those particular socks as a way to bring that fun time close and be ready to go at it again in the morning. True enough, first thing the next morning she put her socks and slippers on, and off we went for another round of wild dancing.

Another helpful indication to me that something other than, or at least in addition to “just a stubborn idea stuck in her head,” was going on was the fact that even whilst Stephan arrived on the scene with a fresh breath of presence and compassion, she still insisted on the red socks. This showed me that it was important for her even when someone was engaging her in an awake, non-reactive manner. I have found that when I am reactive it is so much harder to tell whether a situation is staying unresolved due, in part, to my contracted input or because of something else. From a calm, non-reactive stance, experiences (easy and hard ones) are often viewed and interpreted quite differently than from an egoically involved perspective. They are also viewed more accurately, as we get out of the way and can actually perceive *what is*, rather than mixing our own conditioned responses and desires into our discernments.

Commitment to grounded, self-aware, and non-reactive interaction on a parent’s side is one of the most potent and transformative gestures we as parents can make toward building a trusting and healthy relationship with our children. This can be likened to tending to healthy soil in which our children can grow in—an essential component of Integral Parenting, which in the language of the AQAL map refers to a healthy Lower-Left quadrant, or We-space. As I aspire to consistently respond to my child in this way, I am humbled many times over, since there is always more to learn.

We have to be broken open. The walls have to be razed. We have to be ploughed like earth being prepared for sowing. The passion of individualism, which is instinctually in our nature as an ontological necessity of self-preservation, self-promotion, self-fulfillment, has to be superseded by the passion of ecstasy, the movement of exodus that pours us out into the space between us and other people, accomplishing in us the movement that makes us capable of real love, Capax Dei.<sup>8</sup>

Men and women deeply interested in the transcendent realm used to be encouraged and most often chose a life away from the day-to-day affairs of raising children. Monasteries, ashrams, temples, and mosques were their homes. As mentioned earlier, anyone who has ever attempted to raise a child can relate with how overwhelming the whole experience can feel at times—up in the middle of the night, your little one crying with a high fever; the love, the worry, the care, and the confusion all mixed together; life shrunk to the very immediate moment of sweat, tears, concern,



and fatigue. It can at times feel quite surreal. How did you ever get to this experience? To care so deeply and at the same time to feel so helpless? Lofty spiritual heights seem very far away. But a central question is: what is actually happening in you in such moments? Have you ever been that responsible for another human being before? Have you ever felt that “cracked open”? That humbled? Cared about someone else besides yourself that much? Is it possible in those most challenging moments, as well as during the regular and at times long hours of caring for a young child, to actually surrender to the moment and offer your full attention and love, despite fatigue, concern, or boredom (yours, that is)? Much of this goes against the grain of our habitual way of being, and yet, by surrendering to such experiences rather than resisting them, we can participate right then and there in the evolution of our child and ourselves. Each moment can be utilized as an opportunity to grow—for us as parents to grow in our capacity to embody an Integral perspective and for our children then to be met in such a way that actually does them justice by allowing us to discern and enact how best to raise and accompany them.

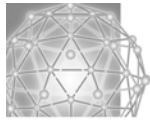
When we consciously take on and welcome spiritual and psychodynamic work as part of our Integral Parenting practice, we are blessed and challenged with many ingredients that can make the experience one of the most *radically transformative ones available to a human being*. Indeed, parenting in this way can be as challenging, fulfilling, and meaningful a practice as any other, offering many opportunities to evolve, to embrace wider and deeper, to become more integral as individuals. How so?

As a parent we are faced with the *great responsibility for a vulnerable, dependent other*, which calls for utmost integrity in our intentions, communications, and actions. Responding to the pretty much *full-time demands and needs* that infants and young children bring with them requires that we stretch and tap into resources we did not know we had, such as extreme patience, flexibility, physical resilience, and discriminating wisdom.

Given the absorbent nature of a young child’s mind and the deep emotional imprinting that happens at this early age, we are called to face ourselves and to become more *conscious of our own shadows for the sake of the child*. Young children are developmentally still very self-centered. We can easily get triggered by this in ways we may have thought we were immune to, thereby discovering our own shadow, as well as having to take on the challenging task of discerning how best to respond in any given moment so that they can gradually grow beyond this stage of development.

By paying close attention and witnessing the miraculous growth of a young human being, we begin to understand that perfection is not a state to achieve but rather a dynamic unfolding to ever higher, wider, and deeper realms of existence. We are humbled many times over—making many mistakes, having no choice but to carry on and do better, and being engaged in an endeavor that is generally neither egoically gratifying nor professionally enhancing.<sup>9</sup>

To facilitate and encourage our child’s well-being and integral development, we are asked to *bring love, presence, and discernment to all situations*. Because the healthy development of a child requires that she be met with both nurturing support and stimulating challenge, we



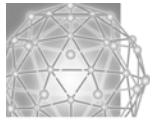
ourselves need to *balance what we offer*. If, for example, we tend toward being too lenient, we need to balance this with firmness and boundaries; if we tend toward being too strict, we need to include a more embracing perspective and posture. This asks of us to go to places within ourselves that may be foreign and uncomfortable.

The incredible *delight* in witnessing a young child be and grow provides access to higher levels of commitment, stamina, and motivation than we usually think are possible. Thus, we also get to *experience our higher selves* and can get inspired and informed by this. The central role that the parent plays means that we as parents need to go beyond technique, method, or belief, and *become that which we wish to see our children model and be exposed to: an integral person and perspective*.<sup>10</sup>

To be present to and strengthen our child's deeper nature—her soul and spirit—we need to awaken the deeper layers of our self, gradually disidentifying from our own ego and discerning who we are and where we are coming from in each moment. In caring so deeply for another, we discover a *motivation beyond our self-centered relationship to life*. Especially with infants and very young children, we are challenged to place our own personal desires and agendas aside in order to be present to what is beneficial to the child and the whole.

As is easy to imagine, the spiritual and psychological work we do before becoming a parent will greatly benefit our parenting efforts. Also, after our child is born there is much less time to meditate, engage in contemplative prayer, or go to therapy. However, whether one has made substantial progress in this realm before becoming a parent or not, the actual act of parenting, of coming face to face with a newborn, can, as one mother recently told me, “turn the love switch on.” This mother had been a very successful oil broker, working all the way through pregnancy, right up to the day she went into labor. She had marked in her calendar when she could go into labor to accommodate the last meeting she had to attend. Then, once her newborn was in her arms, her life completely changed, leading her to grow and transform in ways she had never conceived of. Her experience, as she told me one day, was that up until the moment she looked into her daughter's eyes she actually had no idea what true love was. Thus, grace and spiritual work intermingle.

Indeed, I have not come across any other endeavor that asks me to grow up as much, as persistently, as convincingly as being a parent and aspiring to do this as integrally as possible. In addition, the consequences of not rising to the occasion are not saved up for the future; they are apparent and in our faces immediately—kids provide fast and relentless feedback through their doing and being. It helps me to remember that I as the parent am the one who is in a position of greater understanding, perspective, maturity, and thus ability to respond (response-ability). By developing our capacity to witness ourselves in action we stop resorting to all forms of projection (negative and positive). We free ourselves from being held hostage to our own unseen shadows and from acting upon the myriad knee-jerk reactions and whims of conditioning. In this way we can actually *see* our children more fully and can respond to them more adequately, more integrally.



As we grow into the fullness of who we are and become increasingly present to the fullness of the child in front of us, the context within which parenting takes place opens up. In honoring and strengthening soul and spirit as much as body and mind—and this both in ourselves as parent as well as in the child—the early years of life are placed within the full trajectory of the human journey, which eventually reaches into the transpersonal realms of existence.<sup>11</sup> We seek to co-facilitate a foundation during the initial years of life that is most conducive toward a child growing into an integrated adult who is poised at the cutting edge of consciousness evolution, ready and willing to take next steps on the trajectory of the human adventure. We invoke and evoke parenting for transcendence, beginning at the very beginning...a step at a time.

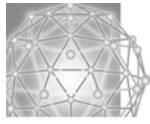
### Riding Paradoxes

One of the distinctions of an integral person—in this case, an integral parent—is the capacity to hold multiple perspectives, which in turn facilitates our ability to hold and work with paradoxes. We are not wedded to one particular way of seeing life. We can feel into and see through a variety and reap and validate the insights of each.

I discuss this capacity here as a central requirement for Integral Parenting because so much hinges on it. In particular, our effectiveness and presence as parents is greatly augmented when we relate to a child as both a “whole” and a “part” (rather than as one or the other). In other words, instead of viewing a young child either solely as a “full human being” or inversely, as a “person-in-the-making,” we meet and regard the child *as a whole person*, while understanding that this young being stands at the very beginning of a long journey toward ever-greater maturity.

The child as a “whole” is understood and met as a full human being, however little he or she may be. This perspective encourages us to meet and engage with a child under all circumstances, at all times, with respect, integrity, and dignity. How might I speak to, handle, respond to, or play with an infant and young child if I view her at all times as a person, as a subject, not as an object? Look at a newborn. A miracle, indeed: it is all already there—body, mind, and the deeper dimensions of soul and spirit. These dimensions do not need to be constructed; just further developed and realized. Thus, a long journey lies ahead, and yet the beginnings of all these dimensions of self are already present and can be nurtured and strengthened from the get-go.

The child as a “part” is understood and met as a being-in-becoming, just starting his life journey, with still a lot to learn and integrate. Here the knowledge of developmental stages—one of the five elements of the AQAL map—is key. When we know what a child is actually capable of at each age, along various lines of development—cognitively, emotionally, interpersonally, physically, etc.—we do not expect too much nor too little. We introduce concepts and experiences when he is ready, not earlier or later. We provide guidance, direction, and education. We help our child develop a pleasant and functional ego, which involves adaptation to givens and to reasonable expectations. And we do not elevate our child to what he is not yet by committing a pre/trans fallacy, which happens when we confuse what is still prerational with a transrational level of development.<sup>12</sup>

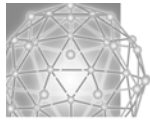


Whenever we leave out one of these two perspectives, we only meet our child halfway. Aspects of either position hold some truth. When taken as the whole truth, they end up largely inaccurate and in disservice to the child. For example, when we overemphasize a young child's "partness," we run the risk of devaluing her interior, subjective dimensions (e.g., "She's just a kid, she won't notice"). We may dismiss a young child with the "just a kid" approach and feel justified in not taking her seriously, we may laugh at a child's expense or expect certain behaviors of which she is not yet capable of, such as being able to share consistently with another toddler or sit still at the supper table for a long period of time. We may break a child's will or oversee important aspects of nurturing her growth by putting our personal agenda ahead of our child's.

On the other hand, a sole focus on the child as a whole person can lead us to overestimate his capacities. Here we run the risk of placing too much freedom, insight, and decision-making power onto very young shoulders. Brought to an extreme, this one-sided position can lead parents to leave out the important dimension of challenging and directing their child. One set of parents, for example, decided to never say "no" to their daughter and asked other adult friends to do the same. By the time the girl was seven, she was at times extremely unpleasant to be around and it was only other kids who would challenge her behavior, frequently choosing not to play with her—surely not the outcome her parents had intended, but the sad result of a one-sided, overly lenient approach.

Combining the two—child as a *sentient holon*, and child as a *human-in-the-becoming*—puts us in a place of consistent respect for and acknowledgement of the full person (thereby not discounting the child in any way), while simultaneously considering the young child's limited capacities and early level of development. This has immediate practical implications. With newborns, for example, who are extensively dependent on our care, there are so many times in a day when we pick them up and handle them. If we keep in mind that they are not just babies but also persons, we will let them know beforehand what we are about to do. We will not, for example, just lift them up from behind as if they are an object or pull a sweater over their heads without prewarning. Instead, we will do as we would with another person: check in, let them know what we are about to do, see if they are up for it, and communicate when we are done. At the same time, we understand that whilst they deserve the full respect we would offer another adult, they are not capable of leading and guiding us through the day. We need to provide them with structure and routine that is in tune with their cues. They need help in so many ways: help to fall asleep, help to eat, help to shift from a distressed emotional state to a calm one.

So *how* we do things is with utmost respect and coming from a place of deep listening. *When and what* we do is up to us as parents to decide after we attentively consider the true needs of our child. Generally, until we are firmly established in integral consciousness, each of us will lean toward one or the other side of the spectrum—the more permissive approach that places a lot of trust in the young child's ability to know and choose; or the more directive approach that places emphasis on the parent's role as authority and guide.



An Integral approach involves both—again here, we as parents are challenged to grow up ourselves, to become more integrated and conscious, to reach into areas we are perhaps uncomfortable or unfamiliar with. For someone who tends to give their child ample freedom and little direction, the act of inserting boundaries, “no’s,” and correction can be a huge internal challenge, bringing up shadow work, questions, doubts, and deeply-held assumptions and habits. Even simply paying enough attention to one’s child’s behavior in order to intervene when necessary can be a stretch for some parents.

The same applies for those who are more comfortable and embedded in a stricter, more authoritarian parenting style: to see one’s child as a full person, to not resort to too many restrictive directions, to include space for free exploration, and to honor the relationship above any instructions may well involve a profound change in oneself. It requires that we learn to listen deeply to another, to not impose our agenda and direction onto a young child without being attentive to the whole child, including his developmental level across various developmental lines, personality type, and the particular circumstances of the moment. Whichever way we need to balance and compensate within ourselves and in our relationship with our child, a great opportunity for growth, shadow work, and transformation presents itself here to us as parents.

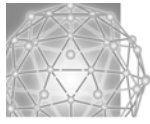
Thus, the simultaneous holding of “child as part” and “child as whole” calls for an ingenious balance of providing both support and challenge. And because a young child goes through so much development over a short period of time, this balance is to some degree a moving target—what the ideal balance of support/challenge actually looks like when taking care of a newborn, for example, is quite different than when dealing with a three-year-old. Embodying and enacting the principles of enfoldment and unfoldment is the doorway to a new relationship with our children, one that holds keys to helping our children grow into adults capable of navigating healthily in an ever-changing and increasingly complex world.

So what becomes possible when we ride this particular paradox? And how might this look when we are, for example, faced with the task of responding to behavior that requires discipline?

### **Integral Discipline—Some General Reflections**

Through all our lives we are faced with the task of reconciling opposites which, in logical thought, cannot be reconciled.... How can one reconcile the demands of freedom and discipline in education? Countless mothers and teachers, in fact, do it, but no one can write down a solution. They do it by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended—the power of love.... Divergent problems, as it were, forces man to strain himself to a level above himself; they demand, and thus provoke the supply of, forces from a higher level, thus bringing love, beauty, goodness and truth into our lives. It is only with the help of these higher forces that the opposites can be reconciled in the living situation.

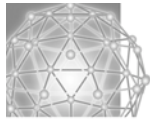
—Ernst Friedrich Schumacher<sup>13</sup>



Love to our child expresses itself both through our providing of safety, support, and acceptance as well as through stimulation, direction, and challenge. A parent's Integral toolkit supports the emergent good, true, and beautiful in a young child, and also considers how to best address and redirect the emergent opposites present in each developmental stage. In addition, and as mentioned above, each developmental stage requires a different balance between support and challenge. For example, the first 18 months are very much about welcoming a child into a full Agapic embrace, facilitating her entry into this physical existence, and supporting the formation and empowerment of her will. Emphasis is placed on support, on enfolding the newborn and growing infant with love, care, and security. The stretching that happens takes place simply by easing a young child into this reality through establishing daily rhythms, structure, and consistent guidance. This may well include certain "no's," such as not eating the jade plant in the living room or not touching the hot stove, but generally baby/toddler-proofing one's home is a more effective way of handling boundaries at this age, and the practice of "no's" can be reserved for a few specific situations. As we support our child in discovering himself and his surroundings, experiences of the known and the unknown need to be skillfully balanced; support and challenge are intimately connected. From 18-24 months, as a young child's exploration of will, choice, and independence kicks in more fully, limits and boundaries, and the correction and redirection of certain behaviors become more pertinent and necessary. From two to three years old (and beyond), as the child engages ever more fully in developing her frontal self and is able to cognitively appreciate logical and natural consequences, challenging her behavior in certain moments is essential to helping her shape and develop herself healthily. At this age, when her will is healthily developed, we are concerned with helping her shape it so that she can also learn to adapt to the world.

It is a delicate and important endeavor: in order to encourage a healthy integration of the emerging impulses, we as parents must guide, correct, and direct our children's behavior and simultaneously enable their greatest flourishing so that they are not pushed into disowning and repressing parts of themselves that will then remain truncated in their development on the other side of the self boundary in the shadow realm.<sup>14</sup>

Rather than advocating the use of either an authoritarian conventional approach or a permissive pluralistic approach toward unpleasant or unhealthy behavior, we encourage our child to adapt *and* we accommodate our child, as stage-appropriately possible. It is a dance. We ride many paradoxes: the paradox between accompanying a little one into her growing sense of individuality (autonomy) and guiding her toward considering others (communion); the paradox between a compassionate embrace and encouraging/challenging the child toward further growth; the paradox between honoring a young child's developing will and holding necessary boundaries, to name just a few. Walking this fine line and feeling into these paradoxes requires a grounded attentiveness in the parent that allows for deep listening and responds to the child in a way that considers what is for the highest good, reads the child's cues, decides what is in the child's best interests, and acts upon this from a place of attunement and alignment *with* the child, rather than a place of wanting to control or coerce the child.



Thus, the parent is in charge but not in control.<sup>15</sup> The parent teaches and guides but does not resort to punishment. Instead of punishment, which can lead to the repression of certain behavior and backfire in a mistrustful or resentful attitude toward the parent, a child is presented with logical/natural (not artificial) consequences that are combined with a grounded and explicit explanation in age/stage and type appropriate ways. Punishment is, therefore, not included, it is actually excluded, but aspects of more authoritarian value systems, such as consistency, reliability, and natural/logical consequence are integrated. Love and discipline do not stand in contradiction; a firm boundary or consequence is delivered with calm, loving understanding and loving firmness.

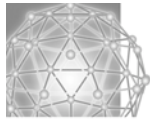
The attentive approach I suggest upholds hierarchy-in-service-to-the-child. In other words, the parent is in an alpha position in order to care for the child and never in order to be dominant. This approach is highly attentive to the child but not child-centered. It is not a parenting style whereby all the child's wishes are tended to and the parent always asks the child for her OK (indeed, at times the exact opposite of what the child wants takes place). This would be disorienting and alarming to the child, and could result in the child behaving like a "brat" or "prima donna." Rather, it is an approach that welcomes and works with the paradox of being in a guiding position *and* listening so deeply that how we guide is fully informed by the child herself and is always done respectfully. A wonderful example of this stems from a restaurant in Southern France, where, upon entering, you will not find a menu. Instead, le chef-de-la-cuisine will come to your table, greet you, and whilst having a friendly conversation, listen not just to how you are doing and whatever else you may speak of, but also to what your meal of the day shall be. He will then go to the kitchen and cook it up to serve you. There still exist a few of these restaurants, where your menu is decided for you, but only after this gesture of careful attunement to who you are and what you may benefit from, has taken place.

What can help us implement Integral discipline, or in other words, navigate the intricately interwoven dance between providing support and challenge to our young children? A few suggestions.

1. First and foremost we must *know our children*. This involves knowing our child's type (her character and emerging personality), her needs and capabilities, what forms of communication work best with her, which areas she is well developed in and where she may need more encouragement and practice, in what state she is most receptive to guidance, stimulation, etc. Again here, knowledge of the AQAL map can help us make sure we are not missing essential aspects of who our child is. Paramount is the right relationship between parent and child. Or as Neufeld puts it, connection is always put before direction.<sup>16</sup> This involves the *child trusting and loving her parents* (the child respects her parents, but is never in fear of them), and the *parents knowing and loving their child*.

2. And we must *know ourselves*. We need to become ever more aware of who we are and where we are coming from in any given moment, so that when situations



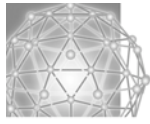


arise in which correction or boundary-setting are called for, we do this from a place within that responds to our child and the situation at hand, without reacting to either one. This enables us to deliver discipline with calm firmness, rather than in a snappy, impatient, or disrespectful manner or in an inappropriate moment.

3. *Understanding the stages of development* a young child grows through is another key element in helping us know how/when to discipline. As mentioned earlier, this knowledge enables us to neither expect too much nor too little at any given stage. A lot of strife and unnecessary frustration (on both the parents' and the child's behalf) are the direct result of overseeing this point. Knowing age-appropriate behavior, for example, helps us discern when to respond to our child with patience and humor, when with firm direction or instruction. In addition, by knowing where we would like our child to grow toward (e.g., an integrated, mature, considerate, empowered adult) we can guide him toward this goal at a pace and in a manner that is possible for him to assimilate and implement. We can also provide opportunities for him to creatively contribute to and participate in daily activities and learning situations, and achieve new milestones in various developmental lines.

4. *By holding multiple perspectives*, we are not limited to our own perspective (or those of our immediate surrounding and its expectations) but can also include in our awareness the needs, impulses, and motivations of our child. As Sears says, "Get behind the eyes of your child."<sup>17</sup> This means not only being able to see multiple perspectives but also deeply feeling into them and genuinely being with the other. By listening to a young child in this way we are more likely to *talk with* rather than talk at her, to provide an "embrace" or a "stretch" while considering as fully as possible the child before us. This enables us to guide our child in the direction we perceive she can and should grow, while ensuring that she feels heard and respected.

May the learning of new skills—from language acquisition to self-control, from utilizing imagination to becoming self-motivated—y ultimately be a joyful endeavor! Friction will no doubt occur. Whether it ends up being a "frictitious" friction or simply the healthy kind of friction that informs parent and child when and where growth is happening, has a lot to do with how well we can hold that balance between support and challenge. In certain moments emphasis will be on support, in others it will be on challenge; generally both principles are simultaneously at play in varying proportions. Our task as parents is to discern what that ingenious balance actually looks like in any given moment. In order to do this, embracing where our child is at and guiding her toward her next evolutionary step will make all the difference, including and transcending all the way and all the while!



### Including and Transcending

The theme of including and transcending—a distinct feature of healthy development—runs through an Integral approach to parenting in a number of ways. As we evolve, both as parents and as a human family, we ideally include what is healthy and true from prior stages of development, while transcending their limiting aspects. Here are two examples:

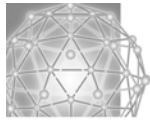
- As parents of young children we are in a unique and responsible position of guiding another human being, of having to make one decision after the next for the well-being and healthy development of another person. In order to do so we must constantly discern what is conducive to our child's healthy development and what is not. As our child grows from one developmental stage to the next it is our task to guide him as to what is included and transcended from the former stage of his development (which also involves discerning what needs to be excluded). For example, it is fine for an 18-month-old child to ask for something with sounds and grunts. However, a two-and-a-half-year-old is encouraged to use words, and a three-year-old increasingly also a pleasant (rather than demanding) tone of voice. Direction is brought in when there is a likelihood it can stick; in other words, when it is developmentally appropriate. Modeling the behavior one hopes to encourage in one's child, however, begins from day one onward.
- In addition, an Integral approach to parenting includes and transcends methods and approaches to parenting that stem from prior stages in consciousness evolution. Skills, insights, values, and responses from prior stages are integrated, transformed, and implemented *through an Integral lens*. For example, the structure and boundaries provided at the mythic level of development through rules and regulations are not simply repeated but are drawn upon and implemented with the added capacity to hold multiple perspectives, to take into consideration the additional layers of insight, knowledge, and perspective that have been gained by moving up the evolutionary spiral.

### Parenting within an Evolutionary Context

“You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.”

—Kahlil Gibran<sup>18</sup>

Why do I include an evolutionary context as one of the three essential requirements for Integral Parenting? An important component of Integral Parenting is the notion that we—including our parenting efforts—can evolve. We need not place a cap on what is possible. Instead, we can seek to bring ever-greater consciousness to our work as parents. In addition, we can include the

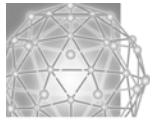


possibility that our child's life journey need not only go as far as the outward arc but could also include the inward arc.<sup>19</sup> How might we parent differently if we keep this potential in mind, while honouring and primarily focusing on the early developmental stages of our child's life?

Take a moment to imagine what bringing more consciousness to the task of parenting could look like. What becomes possible? How high can we lift the bar? How present can we become? Is it possible to engage in each moment with child as a sacred moment, to be aware of every word and deed, and the messages these hold? Even when you are tired, even when your child is stubbornly refusing to listen to your sensible, patient reasoning? This has nothing to do with being a "perfect" parent or figuring out the "perfect" parenting method. It does have everything to do with placing ourselves as parents in an evolutionary context and, as discussed above, seeking to *embody and balance* an ever-deepening and widening embrace of who the child before us is with accompanying, guiding, and drawing our child to further growth and development.<sup>20</sup> Toward ourselves, toward our child, toward the relationship, toward all of life: embrace and release; inclusion and transcendence; compassion and freedom; support and challenge.<sup>21</sup>

So here too, it is by leaning into the seeming paradox of *being* and *becoming*. By bearing, or better still, easing into the tension between "what is" and "what could be," we open up space for an exploration of a more integral way of parenting. We bring understanding and kindness to who we are and what we do, *and* we challenge ourselves to do better, to continuously learn more. We do not beat ourselves up for not getting it right all the time. Neither do we fool ourselves into thinking we have got it all figured out or we just cannot do things differently. And we realize that there is a whole universe out there, enveloping our efforts, offering us comfort and support, as well as challenge and insistence.

If there is one thing that parenting does, it humbles us. As one mother of six children pointed out, "If you think you know what you are doing, if you think it is all easy and clear, then you most likely don't know what you are doing."<sup>22</sup> Here we face a task that we know matters so very deeply, and yet that we rarely feel sufficiently equipped to handle properly. A lot of the time we simply do not know what the right thing to do is. And most of the time we do not have much time to figure this out either. We often parent by the seat of our pants. We are left to our devices without much preparation or guidance. Whatever the parenting books suggest doesn't seem to work with our particular kid. We have high aspirations, yet fall flat on our face frequently enough to make us doubt our very capacity to parent. The gap between our theoretical understanding and our ability to pull it off in practice often stares us bluntly in the face. It can be daunting indeed. And yet, there is a beauty and a promise in all of this—when we dive into all that uncertainty, that humbling effort, when we discover that trying our best, aiming high and at the same time extending forgiveness to ourselves amidst all our failures can go hand in hand, then we need not shy away from the inquiry into what a more mature, authentic, and evolved form of parenting might look like.<sup>23</sup> Then we can approach parenting as an exciting journey of discovery into ever-unfolding territory, both within ourselves and in relation to our child. When we make a mistake we can look at it, feel regret, acknowledge it, learn from it, and then carry on



with renewed vigour and intention. Parenting within an evolutionary context asks of us to offer unto ourselves what we offer to our children: the simultaneous holding of support and challenge. In other words, to hold ourselves lightly and seriously at the same time, to take full responsibility and simultaneously to lean into the Great Mystery for reconciliation, grace, and renewal.

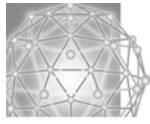
Thus, as mentioned just above, Integral Parenting is not to be equated with becoming a “perfect parent” (as if such a thing even existed). It does, however, understand that we as parents can always learn more, integrate more, and become more present to the task of parenting. We can seek to bring Presence to whatever the circumstance, and each step in this direction is worth the while. In this way, we commit to being on the road, to exploring what a more evolved form of parenting might be, and to implement what we discover. It is the journey, the perspective, the attitude, and the approach that thus become more integral (by stretching both vertically and horizontally) and in this way more receptive to the evolutionary movement at work in all of us. Courage and excellence are encouraged. Integral Parenting says: there *is* a better way, there is a way to parent, to guide, and accompany an infant and young child that does much greater justice to the many facets of what it means to be and become human, that provides a fuller and more complete picture and understanding of how to go about raising a child than what is often perceived and accepted as the norm.

Another area where the notion of evolution comes in lies in the experience that Integral Parenting does not offer a “one-solution-fits-all” approach. Precisely because the Integral approach is committed to look into as many perspectives, insights, and areas of knowledge as possible, and to integrate whatever partial truths can be gleaned, the combination of known and still-to-be-discovered factors pertaining to any specific individual or relationship(s) will result in conclusions that reflect the unique character of that moment and circumstance. As Martin Buber states:

In spite of all similarities, every living situation has, like a newborn child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction that cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you.<sup>24</sup>

What may be the right choice and course of action in one situation may be completely different in another. This reflects a quality and reality that most parents experience anyways: you rarely come to rest. There is no “this is it and now I know exactly what I am supposed to do, from now on hereafter” (wouldn’t that be handy?!). You figure out what seems to work well—be it a daily rhythm of nap and awake times, or what kind of food your toddler likes and will actually eat, or how to provide both a stimulating and safe learning environment for your, say, three-year-old—only to face a new set of unknowns, changes, and questions a few days or weeks later. The one constant is change. This goes for both the challenging and the harmonious periods of the child-parent experience: they pass.

Add to the swift pace of change inherent in a young child’s life, a willingness on the parent’s side to not settle for a belief that claims to be a cemented truth, rather to engage in ongoing



inquiry, and you embark on a journey that literally poises you at the *edge of the unknown*. This may feel unsettling, uncomfortable, at times confusing and complicated. It also opens the door to an experience of life that is dynamic, inquisitive, present, and aligning itself with growth and thus with evolution itself. Integral Parenting involves welcoming change, going with one's best in each moment and continuing to seek what is "best" in every subsequent moment.

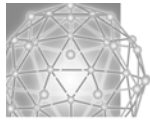
So here again, we find the opportunity to practice a deep spiritual truth as parents. If we can come to realize and accept that change is indeed a constant, our attention can then go toward finding out how we can best navigate and grow with and through change, how we can encourage liberating change, rather than spending a lot of our focus and time on figuring out how to keep things the same, thereby resisting what is the nature of the universe. It is one of the bittersweet experiences of parenting: we watch our child grow, we delight in and sometimes we lament the changes. We might occasionally ache for the wee babe that once was, and yet we would not trade anything for the more complex, challenging, and developed person that is emerging before us.

I remember distinctly what a huge difference it made to me, as someone who used to long for stability and constancy, to realize that if I could realign this deep longing for constancy with what actually was constant, namely change itself, then what I had been resisting all my life could become what I play and work with.<sup>25</sup> In addition, it also dawned on me at one point what ridiculously hard work it was to continuously resist what is. No wonder I was often exhausted. Imagine trying to hold up the evolutionary movement itself. This may sound rather presumptuous, but is it not what most of us are doing, each in our own ways as we hold on tightly to our egoic identity and habitual ways of doing things?

The major institutions of the modern period, including that of agriculture and religion and education and economics, need to be re-imagined within an intelligent, self-organizing, living Universe, so that instead of degrading the Earth's life systems, humanity might learn to join the enveloping community of living beings in a mutually enhancing manner. This great work will surely draw upon the talents and energies of many millions of humans from every culture of our planet and throughout the rest of the 21st century.<sup>26</sup>

Simultaneously, in the midst of ongoing change, there are aspects to the parent-child journey that remain constant, thereby nurturing and providing stability and refuge. The relationship, for example, is rooted in the initial experience of bonding and getting to know one another and that ideally grows and deepens. Whilst it will unfold in myriad ways, making its own twists and turns, going through ups and downs, the shared We-space between parent and child and its depth of love can offer stillness and stability in the midst of all movement.

Other constants that we can come to know deeply and that give orientation and guidance as we walk the road of parenthood include underlying patterns or principles that we can derive from utilizing the Integral framework as our orienting map. For example, there are no shortcuts to raising a child. In other words, we can cut no corners; if essential stages with their inherent needs are short-circuited, a price is ultimately paid. Understanding the stages of development in young



children, and adjusting our parenting in accordance with our children's growth, is thus essential in order to help us neither rush nor hold back their unfolding potential.

Another example is the dynamic between autonomy and communion present at each level of a child's development, and the dynamic between Agape and Eros present between levels of development.<sup>27</sup> Whilst these dynamics will respectively inform each level and the transitions between levels differently, they are always there as drives to take into consideration, to work with, and be informed by. Developmental and clinical psychologist Gordon Neufeld, for example, has written extensively on how healthy attachment is paramount for a young child to venture forth into increasing independence and personhood, showing how intimately and intricately all four drives (communion/agency and Agape/Eros) are interwoven.<sup>28</sup>

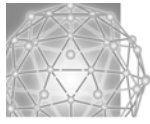
It has also been interesting to ask parents what they have experienced as constants amidst the ever-changing landscape of parenthood. Some speak of humor, others of humility, some of holding space for the fact that a child is driven to learn, and again others of the constant value of self-reflection or being responsible for what their child is learning. And so we see that the parent's attitude and posture can serve well as a constant, too.

As we place our parenting work in an evolutionary context, we again touch into seeming paradoxes: the simultaneous holding of kindness and of greater expectation toward ourselves and our children; the multiple ways and the underlying, coherent, one approach; the potential constant of an authentic, present attitude and posture amidst ever-changing circumstances. The paradoxes dissolve, all the while differentiation of opposites remains. There is stillness present in the eye of the storm. We grow.

Indeed, as we set forth to embody Integral consciousness in all aspects of life, and in this context, in our journeys as parents, the Integral approach holds within itself the requirement and readiness to keep on growing in its understanding. To honor, appreciate, and implement what comes to be known as a greater truth, and to humbly acknowledge and hold awareness for the fact that there will always be more to discover and more to understand. Thank God. We live in a universe that is constantly—each and every second—expanding. In order to be fully alive in this incredible vessel of Life we ourselves must take the plunge. Rather than hold back we too must dive in and swim, willing to constantly evolve and expand ourselves. In this way we become vessels for Life to pour through and enliven those who we touch and meet along the way.

## **Conclusion**

Circling back to the two questions posed in the introduction—"Can we raise children so that they do not have to get over their childhood?" and "Is it possible to welcome children into this world, to guide and accompany them, in ways that fully support the unfolding and flourishing of their unique gifts, while at the same time enabling them to become a part of and to contribute meaningfully to the greater whole: their family environment, society, the planet, and Kosmos?" Each child, each family configuration, each life circumstance is unique. At the same time, we all share in the human condition, and we are all part of a universal developmental process.



It is my understanding and experience that when we lift the ceiling and open up the context within which our parenting efforts take place, when we begin to parent for eternity by including in our awareness both the inner and the outer arcs of life, and when we make use of the Integral perspective in the immediate fabric of daily life with child, then yes, we do take real steps toward the two questions above being answered in the affirmative.<sup>29</sup>

And so, in conclusion, Integral Parenting weaves together a top-down and a bottom-up approach. We focus on the very beginnings of a human life, while holding the wee lad or lassie in the deepest, widest awareness possible. From that expanded stance we have a careful and practical look at how we can “water,” help, and encourage “the God seed,” as Meister Eckhart puts it, in newborns and young children so that they can eventually grow “into God” as they move through adolescence and on into adulthood.

Indeed, one of the most exciting potentials of Integral Parenting during the early childhood years is its application of Integral consciousness to the *beginning* of another human being’s life. There is an opportunity present to begin right at the start, facilitating an integral foundation in a child, rather than focusing a lot of attention on correcting what may have gone wrong when a child is older. In other words, instead of placing most of our attention on a fix-up, patch-up endeavor (which is a very worthy and extremely important undertaking unto itself), there is the possibility of implementing an integral perspective to parenting from the very beginning.

As mentioned at the beginning, this article can be likened to an “initial cup of tea,” to laying the basic groundwork, the general parameters of an Integral approach to parenting during early childhood. There is much more to explore, understand, and put into action. Onwards and forwards we go.

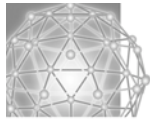
Acknowledgements: I would like to give special thanks to Stephan Martineau, husband, colleague, and partner in exploring and implementing an Integral approach to parenting. I would also like to thank my daughter, Adonia, for the ongoing inspiration and learning experience.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, these years constitute the sensorimotor period to the preoperational phase (2-4 years old) of the preoperational period.

<sup>2</sup> A holon is a whole/part. See Wilber, 2001, *The eye of spirit: An integral vision for a world gone slightly mad*, p. 36.



<sup>3</sup> Barnet & Barnet, *The youngest minds: Parenting and genetic inheritance in the development of intellect and emotion*, 1999; Diamond & Hopson, *The youngest minds: Parenting and genetic inheritance in the development of intellect and emotion*, 1999; Eliot, *What is going on in there? How the brain and mind develop in the first five years of life*, 2000; Kotulak, *Inside the brain: Revolutionary discoveries of how the mind works*, 1997; Shore, *Affect regulation and the origin of self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Kegan, *The evolving self*, 1982, p. 113

<sup>5</sup> When referring to children in singular, I have alternated gender, instead of using he/she, him/her, and so forth.

<sup>6</sup> Neufeld & Mate, *Hold on to your kids: Why parents matter*, 2004, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> Wilber, *Kosmic consciousness*, 2003

<sup>8</sup> Hederman, *Manikon eros: Mad, crazy love*, 2000, p. 63

<sup>9</sup> While parenting within certain levels of development could indeed be a form of narcissism (as many in the psychodynamic tradition would hold true), Integral Parenting lifts the context within which raising a child takes place to include the Inward Arc of the human journey. This means that an integral parent will pursue his or her own journey toward disidentifying with the ego and seek to be present to guide and accompany a child toward becoming a person in his or her own right, not as an extension of the parent's ego or to fulfill a parent's unfulfilled dreams or as a place for the parent to act out their unintegrated aspects. The psychodynamic tradition generally goes as far as the Outward Arc and is still largely focusing on all that arises and needs to be dealt with in First-Tier levels. See Wilber, *The atman project*, 1980, pp. 3-6.

<sup>10</sup> Modeling the qualities we wish to see develop in our child (e.g., considering others, being empathetic, generous, confident, empowered, kind, etc.) is one of the most effective ways of teaching. Young children absorb information like a sponge and imitate; this is how they learn. By treating our child the way we would like him to treat us and others, we are providing guidance in the most direct and immediate manner of all. This requires heightened self-awareness and a deep commitment to growing ourselves. In addition, we can consider all other forms of modeling that may imprint negatively or positively on our child's behavior, on his being and becoming—for example, the behavior of peers (and adults), or stories provided in books—and make conscious choices as to what we expose our children to.

<sup>11</sup> In this section we have briefly discussed the spiritual and psychodynamic/emotional lines in relation to the parenting journey. However, for parenting to become an Integral Life Practice, the cognitive and physical lines are also emphasized. Thus a parent's cognitive and physical development and practice are just as important as his or her spiritual and psychodynamic/emotional growth.

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller description of the pre/trans fallacy, see Wilber, *The eye of spirit: An integral vision for a world gone slightly mad*, 2001, pp. 48-51 & 141-143.

<sup>13</sup> Schumacher, *Small is beautiful: Economics as if people mattered*, 1974, pp. 79-80

<sup>14</sup> In *Integral spirituality: A startling new role for religion in the modern and postmodern world*, 2006, Wilber provides an excellent brief summary of what Freud and the original psychodynamic research have offered to our understanding of the shadow. In addition, he outlines how Integral Institute has updated the “absolutely essential practice of finding, facing, and re-owning the most feared and resisted aspects of our selves.”

<sup>15</sup> In situations in which the child is able to explore safely and responsibly (as in: “able-to-respond”), she can be given the reins and “take charge” for a while, with the parent accompanying her, ensuring the her well-being and that of anyone or anything else involved.

<sup>16</sup> Neufeld & Mate, *Hold on to your kids: Why parents matter*, 2004

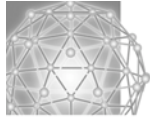
<sup>17</sup> Sears & Sears, *The discipline book: How to have a better-behaved child from birth to age ten*, 1995

<sup>18</sup> Gibran, *The prophet*, 1992, p. 22

<sup>19</sup> See Wilber, *The atman project*, 1980, pp. 3-6.

<sup>20</sup> We enfold our child as he or she presently is. Through extending and embodying a loving embrace and support of the young child before us we can partake in Spirit reaching “down to us with Agape,” (Wilber, *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000, p. 111). In this parental context, Spirit can reach down to our child to the extent that we provide an Agapic embrace. Next to enfolding our child (Agapic embrace), we also participate in reaching “up to Spirit with Eros” (Wilber, *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000, p. 111) by encouraging, challenging, and stretching our child beyond where s/he is at presently. In other words, we can accompany our child up to Spirit to the extent that we embody Eros. Thus we also embody the principle of unfoldment. How the balance between these two principles (support and challenge) plays out in any particular





situation depends on many factors, including the developmental stage of the young child, the child's temperament and disposition, and the specific circumstance and needs of the child in any given moment.

<sup>21</sup> Wilber, , *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000, p. 111

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication

<sup>23</sup> Or in other words, allowing ourselves to receive forgiveness and to be enfolded in the great Agapic embrace.

<sup>24</sup> Buber, *Between man and man*, 1947/2002, p. 123

<sup>25</sup> I was the kind of kid who on the eve of every birthday deplored the fact that I was growing older, wanting to hold onto the age I was, wanting things to stay just as they were....

<sup>26</sup> See <http://brianswimme.org>.

<sup>27</sup> Agape is the drive to include, to embrace, and preserve. Eros is the drive to transcend, to evolve, and to go beyond what is. See Wilber, *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> Neufeld & Mate, *Hold on to your kids: Why parents matter*, 2004

<sup>29</sup> See Wilber, *The atman project*, 1980, pp. 3-6.

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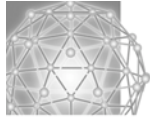
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Miriam works in private practice as an integral therapeutic counselor for adults, couples, youth, and children. She is vice-president of Next Step Integral, an organization that applies an integral perspective to parenting, education, ecology, and community. For the last 15 years she has studied and researched how parenting can be pursued as an integral practice. This has led her to offering courses on the topic, working as a coach for parents, and writing a book entitled *Integral Parenting* (forthcoming). She also leads workshops on authentic voice and movement, and has performed both as a soloist and in a variety of choirs such as the Swiss National Television Choir and the Stiftschor Einsiedeln. She works as a proofreader and translator of university publications. Miriam lives in British Columbia, Canada.