It’s All About Attitude

Jenny Foster and Jenny Thomas appreciate the value of NLP principles in caring for children. By Caitlin Collins

A s American spiritual guru Ram Dass wryly remarked sometime in the sixties, ‘If you think you’re so enlightened, go and spend a week with your parents.’ That home truth could equally well apply the other way round: If you think you’re so enlightened, have children — they’ll soon flush out the ego lurking in the undergrowth! The family crucible offers one of life’s most intense arenas for growth. It’s a potent emotional maelstrom, embracing the extremes of intense love, joy and intimacy along with misunderstanding, frustration, disappointment, grief and conflict; so much conflict. Our society seems to be particularly heavily conditioned to follow a philosophy of conflict: we are repeatedly exhorted to ‘fight’ our problems, as political leaders talk about engaging in ‘wars’ against drugs, cancer, terrorism, crime, whatever, apparently oblivious to the irony of trying to resolve violence with more violence.

What can NLP offer parents and others who want to ‘do something different’ in bringing up the children in their care? I consulted two experts, Jenny Thomas and Jenny Foster. I found that not only do the two Jennies have a name in common, they also share a conviction that NLP has much to offer, especially in promoting constructive attitudes — in fact, a profound alternative to the prevalence of conflict.

A starting point

With a background in teaching, Trainer Jenny Foster teaches NLP to professionals working in Education and Early Years, including West Sussex Early Childhood Service. She remembers the goose bumps she experienced when she first came across NLP and realised that she’d found the tools that would help her understand, communicate with, and relate to others, both ‘big people and little people’. ‘I want to make NLP available to parents and educators, and anyone working with children,’ she says. Whether I’m working with educational professionals, Early Years Practitioners, or parents, my first question is always: what about the adult? Difficulties that adults experience with the children in their care often appear to be related to the adults’ lack of resourcefulness, yet resourcing the adults has not always been a priority.

Jenny identifies the NLP presuppositions as the starting point. ‘The thing that produces the most profound change is always attitude,’ she maintains, ‘beginning with helping people to explore their own assumptions. Assumptions can have been bubbling, or even festering, below conscious awareness, and demonstrating how readily we assume things about people and situations can be enlightening. Introducing the presuppositions and exploring their usefulness as a set of guiding principles can set people on the road to learning.’

Jenny illustrates her point with the example of one of her ‘learners’, a volunteer at a community play scheme for 5 – 10 year olds, many from disadvantaged backgrounds. Jenny’s student tells the story:

In a school hall that had been transformed into the undersea world of Captain Nemo, I was given responsibility for forty boys and girls aged 8 – 10 for three mornings. I knew many of the children already and was aware of some of the complex difficulties that they faced at home. Some of the children were less than thrilled to be there, their absence of enthusiasm evident in their posture, facial expressions, and reluctance to join in with the others.

I decided to implement two NLP presuppositions for the duration of the play scheme: “Every behaviour has a positive intention behind it” and, “Every behaviour is useful in some context”.

I soon had a chance to test my resolve when a ten year old boy, well-known for his challenging behaviour, decided it would be a good idea to write obscenities on a piece of paper and circulate it to the other children. Presented with his “written work” by another child, my immediate reaction was annoyance; however, instead of acting on this, I decided to approach the situation in a more open-minded and calm way.

Remembering my chosen NLP principles, I considered what might be the positive intention behind his action, and how might the action be serving a purpose for him. Perhaps he wanted attention, and to be acknowledged. I think the boy, who was initially looking very pleased with himself, found it a bit strange and confusing not to be shouted at! I sat down with him on his level and maintained eye contact as we talked through why he had thought his actions were OK and how his behaviour was affecting other people, and we were able to reach an agreement about how he would approach the rest of his time at the play scheme more constructively.

‘My student was delighted when by the final day the boy was fully engaged in all the activities,’ adds Jenny. ‘The cherry on the cake came when a team helper gave her a hug and said, “I’ve learnt so much from you!” She told me that she couldn’t wait for the next play scheme and opportunity to practise her newly found calmness!’

A code for living

Jenny Thomas is a life coach and Master Practitioner based in Taunton. Her two children were 18 and 22 when their mum began training in NLP, which makes them well placed to comment on their own experience of noticing changes in the family.

‘Since I began applying NLP in my own life, tremendous changes have occurred in me and in my relationship with the children,’ says Jenny. ‘Both my son and daughter picked up on what was going on very quickly, and our family life became more harmonious and intimate than it had ever been. We’re now able to accept each other’s idiosyncrasies and are...
better at resolving disputes – which are fewer and farther between.’

Like many people, Jenny had encountered some of the principles NLP embraces before she’d ever heard of NLP. ‘I came across “The map is not the territory” long ago,’ she recalls, ‘and it immediately made sense to me. Since then I’ve found the presuppositions a reliable source of optimism; they’ve transformed my attitude and approach to life. I love what Robert MacDonald says about how if you memorise the presuppositions you’ll have all the data you need to create everything there is in NLP. I’d like this “data” to become the code for living in the twenty first century, especially as it would appear to be innate – if often, sadly, dormant.’

Jenny describes how she used to regret aspects of her past, including perceived inadequacies at parenting. ‘I used to regret a lot about the past, including the fact that I hadn’t encountered NLP in the early days, thirty years ago,’ she says. ‘But, given the presupposition “If one person can do something, anyone can learn to do it,” I reckon that if I can learn to feel richer for all my weird and wonderful experiences, so can my children learn to feel the same way about theirs! And now they’re learning alongside me! My son is applying NLP ideas in his personal relationships and in his business; he says he’s more diplomatic now as he’s better able to appreciate different maps of the territory, see other people’s points of view and apply the perceptual positions in disputes. My daughter has remarked that we’re all calmer, easier to get along with, and better equipped to deal with life’s challenges. We often use NLP exercises together to help each other.’

Jenny celebrates her children’s individuality. ‘They’re very different from me, with their own unique learning styles – which I’m now better able to appreciate and respect. I truly believe that they “already have all the resources they need,” and I’ve realised that my role is to help them draw out the resources already within them. Their application of NLP seems natural, intuitive and effortless. My experience with NLP and my own children is now informing my current work mentoring students with disabilities, and the speed with which many of the young people I meet learn to play with NLP is fascinating and delightful.’

So, if Jenny were to choose a favourite presupposition, what would it be?

‘Well, I’d want to choose two,’ she answers. “Underlying every behaviour is a positive intention” and “People make the best choices available to them at the time” are the ones which enable us to develop a compassionate and forgiving attitude towards ourselves and family members and everyone else as well. And it’s good to remember that everyone has the potential for “redemption” whatever their past.’

At a recent NLP conference, Jenny heard something she found so inspiring that she has asked the speaker’s permission to share it with Rapport readers in this article. ‘It was Jo Clarkson,’ she recalls, ‘talking about his mother, Di Kamp. Jo said, “Mum’s gift to me was to show me that anything was possible and to see things from a myriad of different perspectives. She allowed me the space to “do that / be that”, which enabled me to create the story of my life.” What more could a parent wish to do for his or her child?’

What starts at home…

Contemporary guru Eckhart Tolle, whose advice to ‘[give your children] help, guidance and protection to the best of your ability, but, even more important, give them space – space to be,’ resonates with Jo Clarkson’s words, sounds a hopeful note in his book A New Earth. He maintains that the process of awakening of human consciousness from the darkness of ‘dysfunction’ and conflict is gathering pace. I echo both the Jennies in appreciating the deep compassion and wisdom underlying the NLP principles of, ‘Every behaviour has a positive intention behind it’ and, ‘People make the best choices available to them at the time’. There’s cause for rejoicing in all who are lighting candles in the dark and expanding the radiance of compassion and wisdom – a radiance that starts here and now at home.

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