

Growing Minds:

The MindGarden Approach



Using cutting edge developmental understanding and neuroscience to teach and grow our children

By:
Carrie Bourgo
and Ryan Bourgo, Ph.D.

“

Children are born persons.

—Charlotte Mason



About us

Carrie Bourgo

- B.S. in Elementary Education
- Homeschooling mother of three (ages 6, 14, and 16)
- Completed **Making Sense of Kids** comprehensive Intensive in childhood development at the Neufeld Institute
- Neufeld-institute trained in:
 - Attachment
 - Counterwill
 - Anxiety
 - Aggression
 - Preschoolers
 - Adolescence
 - Alpha children
 - Science of emotion
- Co-founder of **MindGarden Learning**, a new non-faith-based enrichment program for homeschoolers

Ryan Bourgo

- Ph.D. in Genetics and lifelong professional science communicator and writer



Wired for connection

What if the most powerful thing we could give a child wasn't instruction, but **connection**?

- For thousands of years, human beings lived in small, close-knit communities
- Survival depended not on individual strength—but on strong, trusted relationships. Infants were never far from caregivers, and children learned through imitation
- Learning, safety, and growth came through proximity to attuned, familiar adults
- Today's children may live in a radically different world—but their genetic make-up and nervous systems haven't changed. **We are still biologically wired to grow in the context of connection**



Children are not empty vessels

Old view: Children are blank slates that are inherently immoral, and we need to re-write them to be good.

Biology and Development Science: Children are biological beings to be nurtured. Like a plant, their growth is emergent, not engineered.

- Children are not blank slates upon which to write our ideas and hopes
- Nor are they lumps of clay to be molded to our desires and expectations
- Children grow when they feel safe and attached
- And they learn mostly through play and modeled behaviors

“We don’t grow children up. We provide the conditions, and then get out of the way.”

—Dr. Gordon Neufeld



Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). *Supportive relationships and active skill-building strengthen the foundations of resilience* (Working Paper No. 13). Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.

Ginsburg, K. R., & the Committee on Communications, and Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. (2007). *The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds*. *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182–191.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Harvard University Press.



Attachment is the foundation

Old view: Development is a matter of instruction and discipline. Children learn by being taught, corrected, and conditioned.

Biology and Development Science: Attachment is not an aspect of development, it is the soil in which all learning and growth occurs.

- Dr. Gordon Neufeld's seminal and ongoing work on attachment have identified **6 roots of secure attachment**:

Proximity → Sameness → Belonging → Significance → Love → Being Known

- Without secure attachment, children resist influence (“counterwill”), struggle with emotional regulation, and cannot find the nervous-system rest that allows growth*

***MGL book recommendations for interested parents:**

Neufeld, G., & Maté, G. (2004). *Hold on to your kids: Why parents need to matter more than peers*.

MacNamara, D. (2016). *Rest, play, grow: Making sense of preschoolers (or anyone who acts like one)*. Page Two Books.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. W. W. Norton & Company.



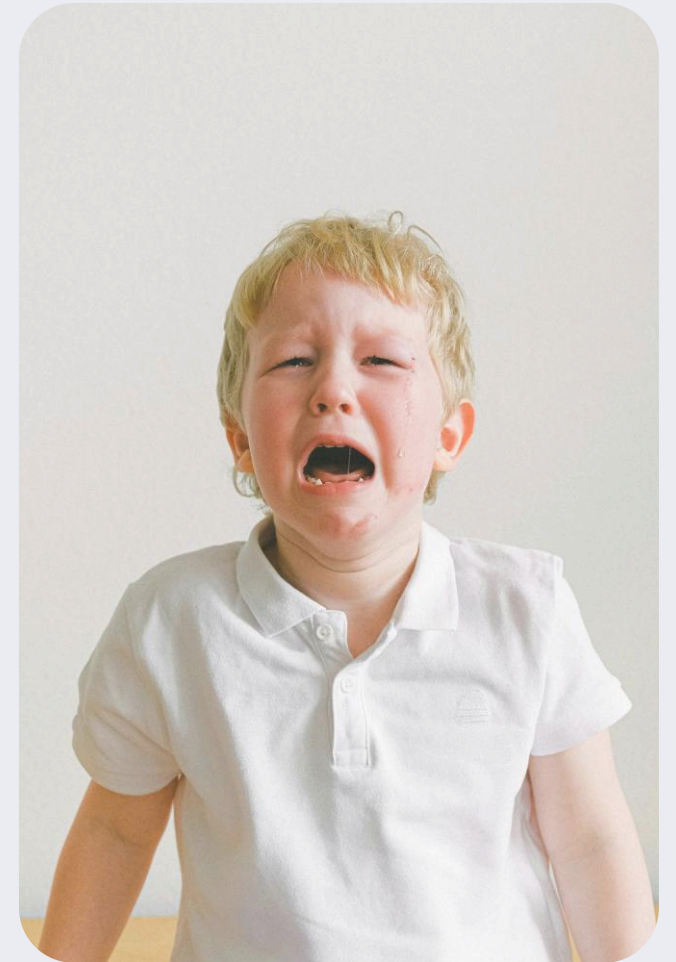
Emotions grow us up

Old view: Anger is unacceptable. Crying is fine as long as I can't hear it. And if you're sad, just think differently so the sadness goes away.

Biology and Development Science: Emotional outbursts are signs of dysregulation, not defiance; and they are developmentally appropriate.

- A dysregulated child is a child that cannot learn
- Biologically, emotions actually fuel the maturation of the nervous system
- Suppressing emotions leads to stunted brain growth and immaturity
- Emotions like sadness, frustration, and joy have developmental purposes—*they must be experienced, not fixed*
- Our job, as parents and teachers, is to validate and hold a child's emotions with warmth and attunement

“Emotion is the engine of development.” —Dr. Gordon Neufeld



Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. W. W. Norton & Company.



Learning follows emotion

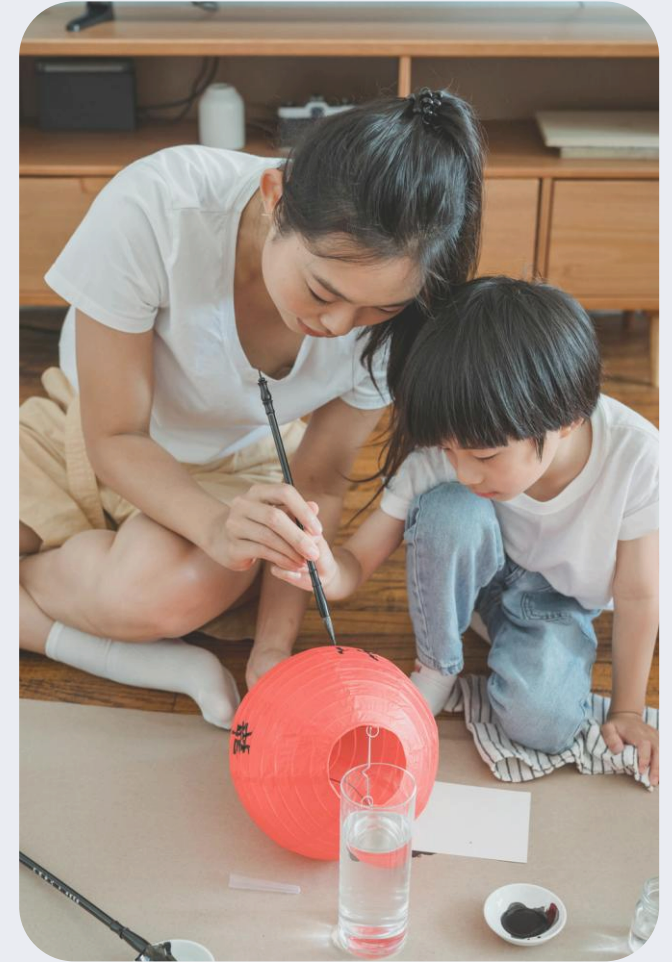
Old view: Emotions should be suppressed and managed so they don't interfere with learning and instruction.

Biology and Development Science: Emotional safety and engagement activate brain systems for attention, memory, and integration.

- Emotionally-driven brain circuits are required for lasting learning—without them, memory and meaning don't stick
- Learning is deeply dependent on emotional activation. A child remembers what they feel, not just what they're told
- This is why emotional safety (especially with the teacher) is critical to learning

“It is literally neurobiologically impossible to think deeply about things that you don't care about.”

—Dr. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang



Behavior is communication, not a problem

Old view: A child who misbehaves is bad, wrong, and/or needs to be taught a lesson or given an “attitude adjustment”

Biology and Development Science: “Misbehavior” is a child, communicating in a child-like way, that they have a dysregulated, overloaded nervous system

- The prefrontal cortex (executive function; thinking center) isn’t fully developed until roughly age 25
- In high-stress, emotional moments, the brain shuts down its ‘thinking’ center and activates survival mode with cortisol and norepinephrine
- Expecting consistent “good behavior” is **biologically unrealistic**
- Young children need **felt safety** to access higher-order brain functions

“Challenging behaviors are the tip of the iceberg. What lies beneath the surface is a dysregulated nervous system, not a disobedient child.”

—Dr. Mona Delahooke



The role of play in development

Old view: A child has to learn work ethic and receive proper instruction in order to develop into a mature, hard-working adult

Biology and Development Science: Play is not folly or a luxury; true play is how children process life, grow, and learn

- Within a framework of **true play**, children:
 - Rehearse emotions
 - Integrate experiences
 - Develop cognitive flexibility and empathy
- Depriving animals of play leads to underdevelopment of the prefrontal cortex, and struggles with impulse control and social nuance
- Adding too much structure, rigidity, or rules on how children are allowed to play inhibits the most important benefits of true play

What is True Play?

- Freely chosen
- Motivated from within
- Open-ended
- Not directed by goals
- Not directed by outcomes
- Imaginative
- Expressive
- Spontaneous

Respectful authority

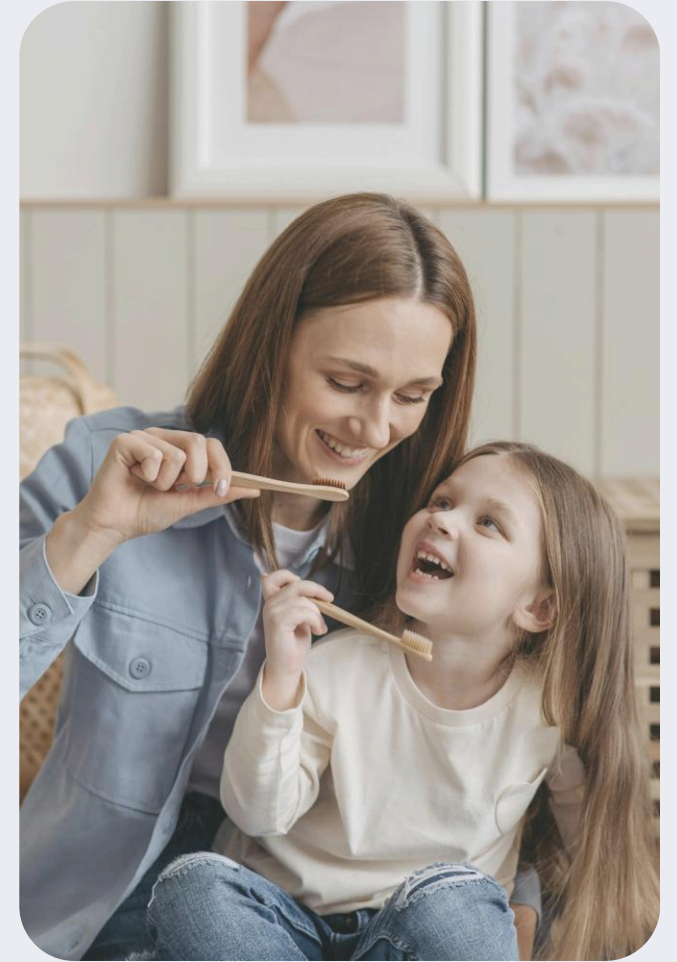
Old view: Authority requires control and compliance. Obedience is the goal, and is achieved through consequences. Respect is demanded, not earned.

Biology and Development Science: Children obey those they're attached to, not because they have to, but because they **want** to. Respect is mutual and modeled, not demanded. Discipline is guidance, not punishment.

- Fear and coercion (to gain obedience) damage relationships, and though they may work in the short-term, they harm in the long-term
- Authority is a moral responsibility of adults, not a personal right; authority must always honor the full person-hood of children
- True leadership can only be done within healthy relationship that is fostered with warmth, clarity, and responsibility. Not force.

“Children do not follow rules—they follow people.”

—Dr. Gordon Neufeld



Practical takeaways

❌ Old beliefs	✅ Scientific understanding
Connection is secondary to compliance or performance	Connection is foundational to development
Behavior is a problem to correct, or reward	Behavior is communication of an internal state
Children grow through instruction, pressure, and correction	Children grow through play, rest, and relationship
Emotions are disruptive, and should be minimized	Emotions are necessary and integrative
Learning must be managed, measured, and imposed	Learning unfolds naturally in safe, attuned environments
Adults lead through control, rules, and punishments/rewards	Adults lead through attachment and relational authority

For parents and educators:

- Focus on connection, before correction
- Make space for big emotions—even the hard ones
- Prioritize play and curiosity
- See “misbehavior” not as wrong, but as an expression of age-appropriate immaturity (to be cared for), or a signal that the child has a need that isn’t being met
- Lead with relationship that respects a child’s whole personhood

At **MindGarden learning**, we root Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy in the soil of Gordon Neufeld's model of child development

- Mason gives us reverence for the child's personhood
- Neufeld gives us the map of how that person grows

This approach honors the sacredness and the slowness of childhood. We don't rush children to maturity; instead, we create the conditions for it to unfold.



MindGarden
Learning

