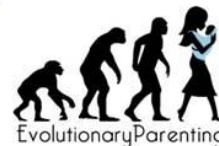


GROWING ORCHIDS

A COURSE ON RAISING THE HIGH-NEEDS OR ORCHID CHILD



Growing Orchids: Week 4 Practical Issues Part II

Welcome to our final week of Growing Orchids! I have saved perhaps the hardest topic for last – handling practical issues where we don't have as much control as we might like. Whereas last week we focused on the practical areas that are linked to the home environment, this week we look at how we can handle those situations and experiences that take part away from us.

I know that this is one of the primary concerns families have because we so want to protect our children, but unfortunately they will spend a large portion of their lives away from us. What do we do in order to help them? When do we need to step in and change the environment and when can we simply be there for them? That's the goal of this week's information and as always, I am here for office hours should anyone need some help trying to figure out the best way forward in any of these situations for *their* orchid.

Section 1: The Outside Environment



Source: bbcweb

What are the types of environments that constitute the “outside” environment? For the purposes of this course, we’re thinking of the things that are beyond our control. This can include the neighbourhood, schools, daycares, activities, and even friendships (romantic relationships count too, but hopefully we set the stage for healthy relationships and as most of you have younger orchids, this could be a topic for a totally different day so we won’t touch it herein).

In the research there are certain things that have been identified as having effects (positive or negative, thanks to that differential susceptibility) that are outside the realm of our immediate control. These include:

- Socio-economic status
- Quality of the neighbourhood environment
- Teacher-child relationship, especially in the first years of school
- Being bullied
- Where a child lands on the social ladder
- Quality of daycare

It is probably no surprise to any of you by now that we see positive effects when a child has higher socio-economic status (with all the benefits and privileges that confers), is in a higher-quality neighbourhood, has positive relationships with teachers in school, has high-quality daycare defined by the type of caregiving provided, is not bullied, and lays higher on the social ladder in social circles (school or otherwise). And of course, there are negative effects with the opposite of these.

Although I refer to this as the “outside” environment because there is often little we can do about changing that particular environment, I want to be clear that not all hope is lost. You do have more control than you probably think and that’s an area I want to drill home; if you know where you have control, you can then exert it for your orchid’s benefit. Of course, I also want to acknowledge that sometimes we *don’t* have control and so we also need to make space to figure out how we can mitigate

the potential negative effects over the situations that can feel helpless. In short, I don't want you walking away from this section fearful of all the bad things out there, but rather I want to open your eyes to these risks (because they are real) and then help you see the ways you can do your best given the realities of your circumstances.

Last week I spoke about the perils of perfect parenting and a similar caution must be used here. Many times you will want to completely control your child's environment in order to help them thrive and may feel regret, shame, frustration, depression, anxiety, or a host of other emotions when you realize what you cannot control. I know those feelings. We all want to protect our children, but just as we can't be perfect parents, nor can we create perfect environments. It's also questionable if we even would want to do that. Just as we can use our mistakes in parenting to help our orchids develop, we can use the imperfections in the environment to help our orchids find ways of overcoming the many imperfect situations they will likely face growing up.

Of course, there is a caveat here – just like we still want to aim for the best parenting possible, so too do we want to do all we can to mitigate these negative outside environments. Some environments would ideally be changed and we should do all we can to handle that, but some may require more coping techniques over avoidance. Understanding when to expose our child to difficult situations (when we have the choice) and when to avoid is a crucial part of learning how to parent your orchid and one I hope to help with this week.

Section 2: Movin' On Up? or There Goes the Neighbourhood?



It wouldn't be right to talk about environmental effects without thinking of one of the biggest which is the type of stressors kids can face in the areas they live. What neighbourhood you live in can have a profound impact on your orchid's development and well-being. Research has found that socio-economic status is an independent predictor of stressors for children, and for orchids being in the "wrong" neighbourhood can expose them to a number of stressful situations that make negative long-term outcomes more likely.

I should note that socio-economic status is also a predictor of well-being for dandelions, so strong is the effect that it has on children's development. Syndemics theory has been proposed to explain why something like socio-economic status can have such an effect and I'd like to briefly discuss it here. Syndemics theory posits that the co-occurrence and interactions between various adverse conditions within a population results in worse outcomes than if these adverse conditions occurred separately. The idea of "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" is another way to think of this.

What are the issues that can be associated with lower socio-economic status? Some of the examples that have been identified as being linked to lower socio-economic status and as risking negative effects on later life outcomes include:

- Less access to health care and preventative medicine
- Less access to high-quality child care
- Higher stress home environments due to financial concerns
- Higher rates of alcohol or drug abuse/dependency in caregivers
- Overcrowding
- Neighbourhood violence
- Exposure to environmental toxins
- Less social group organization and exposure
- Less sensitive parenting (likely due to the higher stress on parents)

When we think about an orchid child, it should be no surprise that the above list can represent a very stressful environment that can then lead to more negative outcomes later in life.

Of course, the problem is that we should never think anyone chooses to be in the lower socio-economic status group and most people struggle mightily to get out. For parents who see themselves in this list, and are feeling the panic set in, let me be very clear: You are not to blame and you are not helpless. This is one of the cases where we want to think about how we can overcome the effects of socio-economic status for our orchids because chances are, our society is *not* going to help us in this regard (though I'll take this moment to say we should all be pushing and voting for policies that help end this inequity in our society and instead focuses resources towards helping all families).

What can you do?

1. Get any help needed. If there is an issue with dependency or violence in the home, please seek help from local professionals. I would be happy to help you find something in your area, but getting assistance is something we all need from time to time and the positive effect it could have on your child should not be discounted.
2. Create routines at home. As discussed last week when talking about change, routines are the antidote to the effects of not knowing what's coming next. When we talk about some of the issues linked to lower socio-economic status, there is often the idea of the "chaotic" home life for these children (due to many societal issues) and that is difficult for orchids to cope with. Having as much stability at home as possible is one way to help counteract the effects of a neighbourhood that may be more chaotic.

I note here that there is some research suggesting that for families living in dangerous neighbourhoods, child outcomes are better for kids whose parents are more authoritarian over authoritative (which is typically what is associated with positive outcomes). It is quite likely this effect is due to the impact of stability in a more authoritarian environment. Now, I am not advocating authoritarian parenting as it's also not ideal for orchids, but rather acknowledging that stability seems to be a key force for good in the development of children in lower socio-economic settings.

3. Increase the number of people in your child's life. Unfortunately urban settings – especially for those in lower socio-economic areas – were not designed with community in mind. High rises do not facilitate people socially interacting, yet having a support network for our orchids can be highly beneficial. This may not be easy, but the more you can involve neighbours and have others your child can go to and talk to will be helpful in making them feel more secure and overcome some of the negatives of a society that has seemingly been built with seclusion in mind. These individuals – especially when close to home – help make the environment more secure and safe for our orchids.
4. Focus on your own stress and sensitivity. Perhaps I should just say "keep calm" for the thousandth time, but it's true. The more you can focus on reducing your stress – or rather *experience* of stress – and focus on parenting sensitively, the better things will be for your orchid. Now, I feel particularly shitty writing this because I know how not in control of my stress I feel when it's due to factors

outside my control, like financial stress and things of the same ilk. This is not meant to shame you. It's meant to highlight that although our society sucks, we may be able to work a little bit on our stress and sensitivity for our kids. Even just a bit and even though it shouldn't be just on us.

5. Keep the home somewhat organized. Orchids are highly aware of their surroundings and can be overwhelmed by chaos. If you can keep things somewhat organized (it does *not* need to look like a museum) then you may help reduce some stress for your orchid. It may include having fewer things out, more bins to throw things into instead of actively organizing, but having a space that isn't fully cluttered can actually have a positive impact on our mental well-being. (I should be clear that as the parent of a very messy orchid, it's not an effect for all kids, but even I notice the difference in her anxiety when things around are a bit more organized. However, she's still responsible for her spaces and that way she can learn about how she feels herself with things being tidier or messier. You are not responsible for all of these things areas!)

Now, as we'll be talking about daycare and other environments below, I won't include those here. Overall, what I really want you to know is that the sensitive, responsive parenting that orchids need and that we covered last week can go a long way to making the external environment a factor that has less power than it would otherwise. The fact that you're taking a course like this highlights that you're already a long way towards overcoming the elements that may be out of your control.

Section 3: Daycare, School, and Activities



Daycare Memes

Source: Mombabble

This is probably the outside environment many of you worry about for it is often the most salient issue that you face. Perhaps your child has already struggled in daycare or finds the start of school nearly impossible. Perhaps activities pose troubles as your child clearly *wants* to do things, but then finds it almost impossible while there. Or perhaps you haven't faced any of this yet as it hasn't been relevant, but you worry about what is to come in the future when your child becomes school-age. Regardless, this is one of the areas that I have found many families worry about when they are raising orchid children.

Let's start with what we know from the research in these areas. I'll be honest that the bulk of research is on daycare and schooling, with very little looking at activities as their own category; however, I firmly believe we can apply many of the lessons from other environments to the activities environment as well. So what areas are linked to differential susceptibility for our orchids?

1. Daycare quality. This is from a body of work by Jay Belsky and Michael Pluess who examined how child temperament interacted with features of daycare to predict various outcomes, including social and cognitive/academic. They found that high-quality care was linked with the best social and cognitive outcomes for orchids whereas lower-quality care led orchids to have the worst social and cognitive outcomes. The effects persisted to middle childhood, years after the exposure to daycare. Notably, the effects held for quality (based on sensitive care), but not quantity or age of exposure, suggesting that it is the environment these orchids find themselves in, not necessarily the amount of time in it.
2. Quality of early teacher-child relationships. Longitudinal data from W Thomas Boyce and colleagues examining how orchids experienced their first year of school found that the quality of the relationship between orchid and teacher was predictive of mental health in grade seven. That is, those children who had negative interactions with their teacher in that first year were more likely to

have greater mental health problems and those who had positive interactions were more likely to have fewer mental health problems than their dandelion peers. Of course the relationship isn't perfect and other teachers likely had an impact later on, but it's important to realize how this early experience can have lasting effects.

3. Classroom hierarchies. Not surprisingly, orchid children tend to be differentially susceptible to the effects of where they land on the social hierarchy in their social environments. When they are high they are often leaders (and good ones), but when they fall to the bottom, they can suffer greatly. This can be compounded by the fact that upward mobility in social groups in schools is a nice thought, but is rarely found to happen too regularly. Similarly, orchids also struggle more than dandelions with the effects of bullying.
4. Supportive teachers/coaches/child care workers. This is in line with the issue of relationship quality, but also somewhat distinct. This refers to the ability of the teacher/coach/carer to create an equitable environment that showcases and supports all children. Needless to say, this is associated with positive outcomes for the orchid child whereas the lack thereof is associated with negative outcomes.

Clearly, our orchids are highly influenced by these environments and yet they are environments orchids are bound to find themselves in. Though not all orchids will go to daycare or even school, almost all children end up doing activities, meaning that us parents must put our trust into other adults who are looking out for groups of children, one of whom will be our orchid. Knowing this, let's take a look at what we need to be looking for or advocating for as parents and what are some of the common roadblocks to consider and plan for.

3a. The Right Environments

Whether it's daycare, school, or activities, the type of environment will be central to how well your orchid does. No matter what it is, one of the key pieces will be the type of adult that is leading the group for this is where research (and logic) tells us the effects are greatest. Our orchids need leaders who are kind, sensitive, and make an effort to connect with our orchids, help them feel safe, and create as equitable an environment as possible. No hard task, right?

Specifically, the following are things you can do your best to facilitate:

1. Connection. When you look at any external environment, look for teachers or carers or coaches who seem to connect with the children. In order to feel safe, your orchid will need to form a bond with these people and a bond cannot happen unidirectionally so you will need to ensure the adult in this relationship is open and able to connect too. Trust is essential here and so your orchid will need time, but even in the early stages, a good adult will be able to show them that they are on that path.
 - In daycares, this is particularly salient as our orchids are younger and more vulnerable. You can ask point-blank if they have a system whereby one carer is matched with a small group of children in order to spend the necessary time to build up that relationship.

- In schools you will need to take a look at the classrooms and see how various teachers interact with the kids. Obviously check out the teachers that your child will first have, but it's also important to see how the teachers of older children are. In most school environments, your child will have multiple teachers so you want to see a strong showing of sensitive and responsive teachers.
 - In school, this connection will not only influence our orchid's emotional health, but also how our orchid does academically. Remember week 1 when we talked about memory? Well, when our orchids are with adults that are sensitive to them and provide a safe space, orchids have a fantastic memory and this can translate into them reaching their academic potential (whatever that is). However, they can also have the worst memories if with adults who are not supportive. Thus the relationship with the teacher can result in artificially low scores in school because the orchid is unable to maximize their memory.
 - In activities, get to know the coaches/teachers/leaders/etc. Depending on who the person is that runs the activity, it may or may not be a good fit for your child. For example, my daughter *loves* gymnastics, but has recently had a change in staff to someone who is colder and harsher and she, in turn, is struggling with going each week compared to it being the highlight of her week. Be aware how important the person leading is for our orchids.
2. Mixed-age groups. One of the findings above that fascinated me most was to do with the hierarchies in schools (though these exist in daycares, preschools, and activities as well). Humans naturally form hierarchies and so it's no surprise that kids in these settings form them, but the problem is the lack of upward mobility and the very artificial nature of the hierarchies being formed. That is, in most social circles for kids historically and in other cultures, hierarchies are formed by age. Older kids rule and as the kids grow up they get more and more status which is why we see younger children often drawn to older kids to learn from. In these situations, there is upward mobility because the children age. And because the natural hierarchy is age-related, there is also more empathy and consideration for those on the lowest end because they are also more vulnerable, adorable, and deemed worthy of special assistance; these are things that are lacking in artificial hierarchies. Thus, when schools or daycares or even activities have mixed-age communities (when appropriate in the case of activities), the children at the bottom know it's a matter of time before moving to the top and they are also more likely to receive the assistance needed to not feel like they are "at the bottom".
 3. Smaller groups. Because of the sensory issues that face many orchids, a large gathering is likely to be "too much" and so to the extent possible, picking daycares, schools, or activities with smaller sizes is more likely to facilitate positive feelings about the environment and allow your orchid to thrive. Of course, what constitutes "small" will vary orchid-to-orchid but generally a class of 25 to 30 kids is probably going to be too much. When it's not possible to be in a smaller group, asking if subgroups can be formed in the environment may help your orchid do better in the larger group environment.
 4. Equitable teaching. Teachers (or carers or coaches, etc.) should take time to call out the strengths of every child to allow all kids to feel valued for who they are and to highlight that the artificial

hierarchies created by children are not necessarily shared by adults. Adults who do this minimize bullying in their environments and buffer the negative effects of being low on the hierarchy for orchid children. This should be no surprise as it serves to highlight to our orchids that people have different strengths and weaknesses and we can value everyone if we choose.

5. Time spent outdoors. Programs that are nature-based are excellent for orchids for a few reasons. First, there is the practical issue that being in nature calms our minds and for a child that is more sensitive to threat, this can help alleviate some of the anxiety they may face. Second, outdoor groups tend to be smaller just for the practical reasons of having to keep track of children outside in the wild. Similarly, there are often smaller teacher-to-child ratios. Finally, there is often a philosophical difference in outdoor-based programs that seems to serve orchids well. Whether it's a greater acceptance of the more anxiety-prone child's needs or the idea that kids need more active time which is facilitated outdoors or something else, orchids tend to do very well with teachers in these environments.
6. Low-pressure environments. Orchids – especially younger orchids – can struggle with higher-pressure situations. If you know you have an orchid, try to pick activities and schools that don't put a ton of pressure on your child while they're young (actually this is good advice for all kids, but especially orchids). The goal should be enjoyment and love of learning and those come when our orchids aren't made to feel like they have to perform to a certain standard in order to gain approval.

One final note: When it comes to activities, you will often find that for the orchid, the leader and the environment will have a much greater impact on what they like doing than the actual activity. If your orchid shows an inclination towards something, go look for that, but be mindful that the environment you find may lead them to either love it more or turn away from it entirely.

3b. When Others Discipline

One of the struggles you will likely face (if you haven't already) is when other people discipline your child. In these other social environments, this is likely to happen. If a person disciplines like you, then no problem, but what about when others do it differently? Less gently? Perhaps even punitively?

Obviously these are situations that are *not* helpful for the orchid child. As discussed in depth in weeks 2 and 3, the orchid can really internalize these experiences in a negative way that lead to feelings of shame, self-loathing, and more. Discipline may be one area that impacts that finding about how teachers in the first year of school impact mental health later or even why daycare workers can have such differential effects.

Given you don't have control over how others will be disciplining your child, the preventative measure is to first inquire about this in each situation your child is in and, if possible, lay the groundwork for sensitive and responsive discipline. However, even that won't be a guarantee. This brings us back to what is, I hope, by now a common theme – using these negative situations to empower rather than weaken our orchids. For us to do this, we have to first start by acknowledging that the way discipline was handled wasn't good. Sometimes we can feel like we have to justify it because it's another adult

and we don't want to step on their toes (or something of the sort), but in reality, we need to call a spade a spade. This serves to validate the feelings our orchids have about it, helps to negate the internalization of shame or loathing, and opens up the discussion for how our orchids can cope *without putting the blame on them*.

Once they know it's not them and that it's the other person, I would assure them that you will talk to the people, but you may not be able to make them change. Our orchids will often feel we can move mountains for them, and part of our job is to help them learn we can't always, but we can always support them. They need to know we have their backs, but that they can't fall back on us as the only person to affect change. What you can offer – and what they need to know they have – is your undivided support after the fact. You will always give them space to cry or vent and be there to help them realize it's not them. Remind them of that so they know that even in those moments, it's temporary.

This brings me to the next bit which is how to help them find ways of coping in the moment. If they are stuck in a situation or face a new person who they aren't prepared for and haven't bonded with, what can they do to help them in that moment? It may be breathing exercises, it may be a mini-pep talk to keep them from feeling shame, it may be a calm down jar, or it may be having a safety toy with them. It can be any number of things that will be dependent upon your orchid and what helps them feel safe. This is the empowering part because they need to know they can do it, even if only for a short time. Make it clear you believe in them and find the things they need to make it through harder times until they can make it back to their very safe space of you.

I will share an anecdote here because it really highlighted how powerful this was for me. When we first moved, my newly 6 year old orchid tried a camp that was not for her. It was wrong on all counts – too many kids, no attempt to include her with others, and staff that were rather cold. I had told the staff she was allowed to call me if she ever felt the need and they had done that one day which gave her the boost to finish the day and enjoy parts of it. The next day she asked one of the staff if she could call because she was feeling sad. His response was to tell her that big girls don't cry and asked her if she wanted to disappoint me by calling because I was busy and she should be brave for me. This is typical language used with kids today; he wasn't excessively mean, but his responses were entrenched in cultural ideas about behaviour.

Well, I came to pick up my daughter about an hour after this happened and she saw me and burst into tears. Bigger than I'd seen in a long time. Between sobs she told me what had happened. I was horrified (because I thought I'd already made clear calling was 100% okay and even encouraged for her to feel safe), but I focused on her before losing my mind at someone else. I made it clear he was totally wrong and she had every right to feel as she did. As we talked in the lobby, she accepted this and then asked if she could speak to him. So we did. This little girl went up to the person that drove her to tears and told him point blank that he was wrong to say what he did. When he tried to defend himself to me, I simply told him she was speaking to him and he should talk to her. He ended up apologizing to her, though I don't believe he really internalized it, but for her, it was an empowering moment.

The final element is your decision about what to do going forward. If this is a person that has a regular place in your child's life, it might be time to look for a different arrangement, but this is something you will have to decide on a case-by-case basis. In our case, that was the end of that camp, but we had the luxury of that choice.

3c. Overcoming Negative Environments

This is very similar to the above section on discipline except it may involve less overt moves from an individual and thus be a bit harder to help our orchids understand. For example, having an orchid who falls on the bottom of the hierarchy in a class setting and who lacks a teacher who does anything about it isn't an *overt* act that harms the child, but rather a passive one. Your orchid won't see what's wrong because there's no direct action, but will still face the potential negative consequences from it.

Obviously, the best thing, if you can, is to change the environment if it's really that negative. Although our job is to empower our children, when they are still developing, we need not expose them to so much stress that they simply won't have the tools to overcome. Save those experiences for ones you *don't* have control over.

If this is a situation you don't have control over, then the process is still quite similar. First, you have to acknowledge your child doesn't like the situation and they have every right not to like it. Highlight for them the areas that may be problematic (e.g., too many kids, being treated poorly, not feeling comfortable) and validate each and every feeling they have about this environment. Letting them know you get it will go a long way to them not internalizing.

Second, explain that you can't necessarily change it now, but hopefully you can be honest in explaining that you will look out for ways to try and effect change. Make it clear they aren't being punished for having to stay in this environment and that they don't need to "suck it up" or any such nonsense. Explain your predicament in developmentally-appropriate ways and reassure them you love them and have their back as best you can.

Third, talk to them about what you all can set up in place to make it through until change can be made. Similar to handling the discipline situation above, remind them their need to survive is temporary and may be aided by some tool that helps them feel connected to you. I also urge you to take time each day after they have been in this environment to help them decompress and get any and all negative emotions out. There may be a lot of tears, but these will help them know they are safe with you and also remind you to keep on working for change when possible.

Finally, do what you can to try to create change within the environment. It is always possible that another adult can do things to help your child, especially if they become aware of the situation and have concrete steps to take. It's much harder when we approach professionals with a complaint but no solution. We don't need to dictate what they do, but providing options can be very helpful and may make a total change of environment unnecessary.

3d. When Is It Too Much or Just Enough?

When do we push our orchids into situations they may look to avoid knowing it's best for them versus when do we let them walk away? In our culture, the idea of quitting is so abhorred that we often push our kids to continue things regardless of the potential impact on them. For our orchids this can be particularly problematic as they get pushed into some situations that truly are too much. However, there can be an equal problem of not pushing them enough and always letting them walk away in that it builds up the idea that they can't do these things. Our job is not to let them internalize that, but learn how to balance the fine line of too much versus just enough.

Remember back in week 1 when I shared the story of my daughter and her gymnastics meet? She went out, saw all the people, and then just broke down, begging me to let her leave? Well, here comes how we solved that situation. As I mentioned, she *did* continue and she was so proud of herself for it. I figured this would be the case, but I also knew if I forced her into this, it would never work.

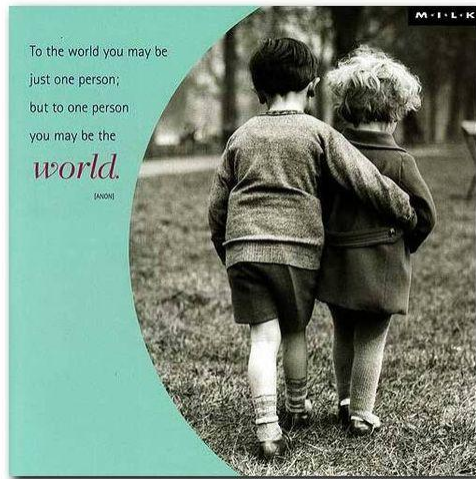
My approach to these types of situations (they happen often enough) is to focus on the following:

1. Never make decisions when emotional. This has become a mantra in our house. If you are highly upset at a situation, it's *not* the time to make a decision about it. Instead, we focus on comfort and letting those big emotions out so we can make a more rational decision. You can start this younger than you think by always being there to allow your younger orchids to express their emotions first and telling them we'll make a decision when we're all calm. It can take time to get this out, but it's so important to do so in order to logically approach how your child feels about the situation. Now one key element is that if your child *cannot* calm in a reasonable time, that *is* your cue that it's too much. And that's okay. For my daughter, I reminded her of this and just held her and assured her I loved her until she had gotten it all out and had calmed down.
2. Break things into smaller pieces. Whatever it is, you can break it down somehow. Sometimes it's just trying 10 minutes or one hour or one day or one event, but however you break it down, it can help your child put it into a reasonable chunk. When we are overwhelmed, we tend to see everything all at once and it can be too much, but if we can break things down enough, those small pieces can be manageable and not trigger the orchid's anxiety. For my daughter, as there were four events to complete, we asked if she wanted to start with just one and see how it went. That was enough to get her going and inevitably, once she started, she wanted to continue.
3. Walk through what will happen. The fear of what might happen can be diminished when we talk through what will happen. I often call this the "What happens next?" discussion where you start out with the very basic step of, for example, walking through the door. Then ask, "What happens next?" and have your child explain, step-by-tiny-step, what this big, scary event will look like as this can help you get to the root of the issue and help calm them right where they need it. For example, in gymnastics, if we had needed to get here, I would have asked my daughter to tell me what was going to happen first and she would tell me they would be sitting down to wait their turn for the vault. Then what? Then it would be her turn. Then what? She'd do it. And here is where her fear likely would have come in – *what if I make a mistake?* This is often at the root of our orchids' fears –

mistakes, rejection, and so on. Instead of negating it myself, I would work to help *her* negate it. I would ask something like, “Okay, what if you make a mistake. What would happen?” Make them be clear – do they think everyone would laugh at them? Once they get out of their anxious mindset, they can often see some reason and if they can’t, this is where you can guide them away from these catastrophic ideas towards more realistic ones. If you need to, make modifications to allow them to see what’s happening, like going last so they can see others make mistakes around the room or walk through more of what would happen even if they all laughed by going further along the path of coming home and being loved and life going on as they know it back in their safe environment.

Just please remember that this is a learning process and you will be learning as much about your orchid as they will be learning about themselves. If you ever push too hard, apologize. If you don’t push enough, learn. This is the best we can do for our orchids.

Section 4: “Will You Be My Friend?”



QuotesIdeas.com

Friendships are a wonderful thing and orchids can make some of the best friends around, going back to that whole emotional intelligence thing they’ve got going on. When friendships are good, they can be great for the orchid. They will be loyal and kind and empathic. If they happen to be leaders in their group of friends, they are often more equitable and considerate than others might be and this can lead to harmonious and longer-lasting friendships.

But like all social relationships, friendships comprise of ups and downs and it’s these downs that can be a real struggle for our orchids. Starting when kids are quite young and they face the random times when others might say, “You’re not my friend” to the older ages of relational bullying or exclusion and the very normal fights that happen in between, these moments are *hard* for orchids. As parents, it can devastate us when we see our kids suffer, and it’s that time in your life when you realize you can harbour some very negative thoughts about other children. But as always, the goal is to support our kids and help them through these moments, not to take down another person’s child, no matter how tempting that may feel.

So what can we do? And perhaps equally importantly, what shouldn’t we do?

1. Don’t justify or normalize shitty behaviour. Sometimes in an effort to appease our child (or perhaps ourselves?) we dismiss the negative behaviours of others. This is just like dismissing the emotions we display that our orchids pick up on, and as discussed in week 2, it does not have positive outcomes. Our orchids are so sensitive to these cues that if we normalize bad behaviour, they can believe that they deserved it somehow. They don’t. If a child is mean to them, it’s okay to call it out, even if we think our orchids may be being a tad sensitive (because chances are they are, because they’re orchids, and that’s in their nature). It doesn’t matter how normal another child’s behaviour may be, if it hurts our orchid, we need to accept and validate that.

This is far more common in the younger years when kids do kid-like things. For example, when a child says, “You’re not my friend” and we know they don’t really mean it, our instinct is to just

dismiss it and tell our orchids not to worry. But telling them not to worry is like asking a fire to just put itself out – it's not going to happen. Instead we need to acknowledge that that comment was hurtful and that it would make our orchids sad. As always, when they are validated, they can move forward.

2. Help them identify *real* motivations. Our orchids tend to shoulder the blame for a lot, especially in friendships, and can become overly concerned with their own behaviour in response to other people's negative behaviours. Instead we need to help our orchids identify the real motivators so they can use that information to avoid internalizing these negative projections. It's worth it to remind ourselves that children act out towards others – especially others they see as “weaker” (which is often just a way of saying “more sensitive”) – when they are feeling bad about themselves or lacking in their own connections with others. Sometimes behaviour can be retaliatory and it's our job to identify that as well, so taking time to ask and discuss the whys behind behaviours can be a crucial step in helping our orchids navigate their friendships. One odd thing I've noticed (though have found no research on this), is that although orchids internalize the negative so readily, they seem almost aghast at the idea that others could be cold-hearted. They seem to forever see the best in others (at least when raised in the positive environment). Now, this may actually explain *why* they internalize so much (i.e., if you always see others as good then when things go wrong, it must be because of you, right?), but it can make it harder for us to help them identify motivations. Finding the mixed-bag motivations that are kind to the perpetrator can help them be more accepting of it not being their fault.
3. Help them with boundaries. We often have to help our orchids define boundaries as they are prone to want to please others and this can mean not standing up for themselves. Taking time to identify times when our orchids can say “no” is important and it will be equally important to help them practice this. I have found that there are times my daughter struggles here and for me, it's crucial that I provide her an easier answer to start which may be something like, “I need to check with my mom” or “I'll have to tell you tomorrow”, in order to buy time to build up the strength to define a boundary. I have also told her she can always use, “My mom wouldn't let me” if she's at all nervous to set that boundary.
4. Help them separate the fight from making amends. Fights naturally happen between people that are close, but most of us aren't taught how to handle fights and so we aren't very good at helping our orchids navigate these complex social situations. Fights bring up lots of emotions and lots of defensiveness. No one likes apologizing (unless you're Canadian and it's a situation that clearly doesn't require an apology), but yet this skill is crucial to moving beyond the negativity; unfortunately for orchids, issuing the apology may just reinforce that idea that they are to blame. Teaching our orchids that there are two components to a fight – the fight itself and then making amends – can help them differentiate the types of behaviours that go into each. Whoever supposedly caused the fight doesn't have to be the one to make amends because anyone can do that; that allows our orchids to issue the first apology or whatever is needed *without taking to heart that they are to blame.*

5. Steer them away from blunt honesty. Our orchids can get tied up in things being *just so*. Many of you will know what I'm talking about if your orchids are verbal enough. As my daughter would remind me, "That's not just a shoe, that's a slipper". Pedantic much? Yep. It's not meant in a bad way, but rather it's a way for them to organize the environment around them, the environment that has such a profound impact on them. However, this can be a problem in friendships where others get sick of being corrected or facing the blunt honesty that comes with a child who calls it as it is and can lead to social problems for our orchids. Teaching our orchids that not everyone has to see the world in the detail they do can be hard because it doesn't make sense to them why others wouldn't want to. Instead of trying to drag that horse to water, I find it more helpful to focus on teaching our orchids to think about the following questions regarding the words they speak:

- Is it true? This is the first thing a child should ask themselves before correcting another or making any statement. If it's not true, don't say it (unless it's a joke or something like that).
- Is it necessary? This is where it can be hard for our orchids to accept things, but run through the scenario where the shoe is not corrected to slipper – did it change anything? No? Then it's probably not necessary to correct.
- Is it kind? Even if it's true and necessary, the *way* in which we present information matters and this is something our orchids can really understand well. Explaining how they like to hear things in a nice way means they can work off that to think how they want to come across to others.
- Note that this will not change all of a sudden, but it provides a logical framework for orchids to better understand their interactions with others and over time they will get better and better at it.

Section 5: Media Use



Source: HealthyChildren.org

Although it's not a social environment, I did want to add a short section on media use with orchids. There are lots of discussions and guidelines about media use and kids, but I admit I've found many of them to be lacking when it comes to orchids because in some ways our orchids are better off with media use and in others they aren't.

Because our orchids are so aware of their environments they are more likely to watch media in a more engaged manner and get more from it when it's positive. They can immerse themselves in that medium and take in all sorts of amazing facts, provided what they are watching is beneficial for them. For example, I have always been amazed at how from a young age my daughter can watch a show like *The Magic School Bus* and retain most of the information for years. It just seems to come in and stick like glue. However, in line with this differential susceptibility, if your orchid is watching shows that are above their developmental level, or otherwise inappropriate for them, they will still retain those things and internalize them. As parents we have to be mindful that the *content* of the media can be highly influential in what our children learn from it.

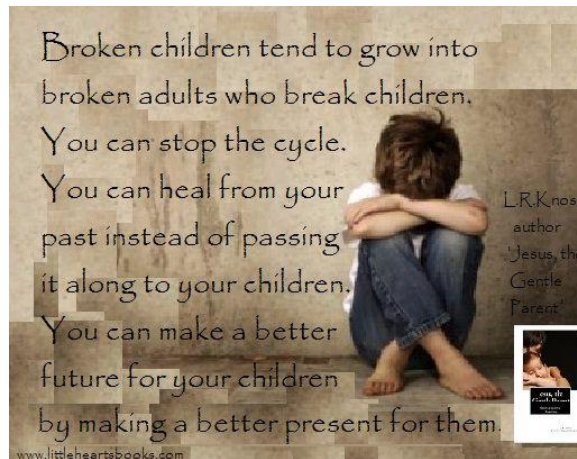
In addition, our orchids are not just influenced by the explicit content, but they are highly susceptible to the subtle influences of the media they consume. Being hyperaware of their surroundings, they will be more likely to pick up on the messages from our culture that permeate media. For example, an orchid will likely pick up on the idea that women should look a certain way based on how they are portrayed in the media they consume. This isn't ever explicitly stated, but it is a part of so much of what they see, and they are so good at putting 2 and 2 together, that they make that connection for themselves.

As parents, this subtle impact can be much harder to overcome because we may not be aware that it's even there. Preventatively, you can be strict about what your orchid watches and find shows that represent lots of different types of people in positive lights. Sometimes – heck often – this is hard to find, but it is possible if you dig deep. If it's already too late and you're seeing the effects then you will want to run interference. This means lots of discussions with your orchid about what they see and how cultures differ and this is just one cultural perspective; you should also introduce a broader range of

media that offer a varied representation of whatever it is your orchid has internalized and cut out the worst offenders of whatever it is your orchid has internalized. This may take time, so be patient, but please know it's not all lost and this "mistake" can be the start of your orchid becoming a media-savvy user.

A final concern many parents of orchids have voiced is how obsessed their orchids can get with various shows or media. This may not be surprising if you think about from the perspective of immersing oneself in an environment one feels safe and happy in. Media is an escape for all of us (even if we aren't in need of an escape) and having to tear ourselves away from that wonderful world can be hard. As our orchids age, they get better at it, but it may be helpful to have limits on time for young orchids and to use something like tokens to have them exchange for a show so there's always a little break in between each one. Not letting them fall deep into another world may make it easier to bring them out again.

The Adult Orchid: Handling the World Around You



You went to daycare and school, did activities, and now you're all grown up. You may have great memories of some of these elements and not-so-great memories of others. The question now is how have these influenced your current life and your ability to interact in the world around you? Like last week, I'm going to hazard that if you had wonderful experiences through and through, you aren't too worried here, so the concerns come from those who have had some not-so-great times and now may struggle with work culture, friendships, relationships, and so on.

How do we learn the lessons we should have been given in childhood and apply them to seemingly totally different scenarios? Hopefully the following bits of advice may offer some assistance (along with getting help as needed in your own life and the above recommendations for orchid kids that are also applicable to you).

1. Identify where you are internalizing situations and challenge the thoughts. Chances are part of what has come about for some of you from a childhood in less optimal environments is that you are internalizing the outcomes of various events. Whether it's thinking you're always to blame at work or in friendships, some of you will take any negative situation and believe you alone are at fault. If you can identify these times by writing them down then you can start the work of challenging these thoughts. This doesn't mean you just say you're wrong to think it, but start by just identifying ways others may have contributed. Even just seeing that it's not so black-and-white can help.
2. Find ways to feel safe in anxiety-provoking environments. This is often the crux of therapy for those with anxiety and so, yet again, I strongly suggest finding external support here. However, you can still just take time to think about things that calm you and find ways to incorporate those into the regular environments you find yourself in that cause anxiety, whether it's work or a fight with your partner, or so on. I don't care if it's a lucky charm or breathing exercises, anything that can allow you to survive the experience (knowing it's going to end) is good. (A caveat here that any crutch that has you avoid is not a good thing, but rather you want something that gives you the strength to go through the event.)

3. Recruit your partner for help. Explain to your partner or whoever is close to you how you struggle and what they can do to help. You may not have had the right environment as a child, but you can facilitate the right environment for you as an adult by asking others to engage differently. For example, if you struggle with fights and think everything is your fault, talk to your partner about how to safely bring up concerns without it being done in an aggressive way so you can better take it in and address the concerns. Hopefully your partner is open to working on changing themselves a bit to help you, but also know that it will take time for them to adapt to these changes too.
4. Change your environments. As an adult you have more control over changing your environments, even though I acknowledge it can be scary as hell. You will likely need support from others around you to do this, but if you feel that any environment you are in is unhealthy, make plans to change it. And when that feels utterly overwhelming, start small by just taking the first tiny step that may not involve much beyond a pen and paper. As you take each step, acknowledge the massive step that this is for someone who has not had the upbringing to allow such growth to be commonplace.
5. Really focus on doing what you can for your children. It's amazing how it works, but there is enough research to suggest that those of us who grow up damaged have the best chance of overcoming our history by caring for others in the way we should have been cared for, including how we approach the environments they are in. By overcoming our past through providing a different path for our children, we may be able to heal ourselves, even if just a bit. Perhaps it's the explicit acknowledgement of what was wrong in our lives that allows us to start to come to terms with it, or perhaps it's some type of transference where we feel we are receiving the love we are also giving, but regardless, we have a chance to heal ourselves a bit through our parenting. Given we may be more triggered than others, this can be particularly hard, but it is worth it in the end for your orchid and for you. Just always remember to be gentle with yourself because this is a long road to walk and there will be many stumbles along the way.

This is the end of Growing Orchids: Week 4: Practical Issues Part 2 and of the Entire Series of Growing Orchids. Thank you for taking part.