



## The Phases of Becoming a Parent, Ep. 20

[00:00:00]

**Kimberly:** Have you ever had that feeling in your gut that something's wrong, but you can't quite figure out what it is? For young children that happens all the time. They feel the same big emotions as grownups – anger, fear, frustration – but they don't have the tools or experience to manage them. So they tell us how they're feeling through the way they behave.

In other words, children are always communicating. We just need to figure out what they're trying to say.

Welcome to The Hidden Language of Children, a podcast devoted to helping grownups decode the meaning behind children's behavior.

I'm your host, Dr. Kimberly Bell, Chief of Clinical Practice, Training and Innovation at the Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio. At Hanna Perkins, we understand a child's behavior is communication, and we work with adults to understand it too, so they can enjoy parenting more while helping their children grow into resilient, caring, confident people.[00:01:00]

I'm here again with our producer, Bob Rosenbaum.

**Bob:** Hi, Kim. So before we dig into our topic for today I want to tell a quick story. I have this vivid memory more than 30 years ago of leaving the hospital as a first time dad with my wife and newborn twins. I fetched the car. We strapped them in. I made the short drive home during a spring blizzard at probably an average speed of 12 miles an hour. The babies were sound asleep through the whole transition and they stayed that way until we got in the door and gently placed them together in a crib at home for the first time so that when they woke up they would be sharing space just like they had for the previous nine months. And then my wife and I sat down and we just looked at each other wondering what was going to come next. Not even realizing we'd made our first independent decision as parents that our twins would sleep together, at least for now. We eventually acclimated and the babies eventually [00:02:00] graduated to separate cribs but that imposter feeling took forever to go away. In our hearts we were parents. In our minds we were just big kids living with an impossibly big responsibility. That's the launching point for our topic today: the developmental process of becoming a parent.

Kim, people become parents every day. Why is it so important to even have this conversation

**Kimberly:** Because what you didn't know at the time, and maybe it would've helped to know, was that you had already started to become a parent. You had already done it in that, in that



moment of making the decision to put your twins together, there was a sense of wanting to understand what your child needed. You were not caught up in your fear. You felt it, but you put that aside because what you had to figure out was this one thing. [00:03:00] This one thing, are we going to put them down together? Are we going to put them down separately? And you made that parenting decision, which means that you put yourself into the shoes, if you will, of your infant.

What would be best for them? And that is one of the keys to entering into this developmental phase of parenthood – that you have created a self for yourself, right? You have become an adult and you have a personality, and you have a sense of self, and you are now ready to focus on the development and the needs of another human being.

And that's really the beginning of it. It's the thinking about it. It's the imagining it, it's the, the magical thinking of it all. And nobody goes into it fully prepared.

You know, you always, it's always fun for me to, to see those interviews that they do of like people with their first child and people with like their third, second, and third child [00:04:00] where you go into it with so much more confidence, but then your second or your third child doesn't turn out to be anything like your first child, and then you feel like you're back starting at like ground zero in terms of trying to understand what it means to be not just a parent, but a parent to this child. And so all of these twists and turns that come into parenting require you to be in this overall general phase of focusing more on the needs of somebody else than the needs of yourself.

But then the pregnancy itself is a buildup. It's experienced differently for the person who is physically pregnant than for somebody who is a partner or adoptive parents who don't get that nine months of giving up the body to the sake of the child. When you're pregnant with a child, you eat what the child lets you eat. You [00:05:00] stop drinking, you quit smoking. You, you completely alter your physiology to carry this life. So in the most intense ways, that's the entrance into becoming a parent.

Now, the partner of the pregnant person is also experiencing a derivative of that as they support and assist and make adjustments of their own around this changing partner that they have. Right? They have a partner whose body is changing, whose emotions are changing, whose appetite is changing, and, and they're like very focused right on taking care of that person. So it's a different kind of adjustment, but it's all part of becoming a parent because those adjustments and thinking and taking care of someone that is not you is the hallmark of what you're going to spend the rest of your life doing.

**Bob:** [00:06:00] So so yeah Kim that makes good sense. It takes us through pregnancy through your Lamaze or your parenting classes and all of that stuff, and then you get to the hospital and kaboom all of a sudden you're not thinking about being a parent, you are one.



**Kimberly:** Well, isn't it kind of a universal cosmic joke that you become a parent when you're at your most exhausted? you go through hours of labor, whether you're the partner or you're the person giving birth. You go through hours of waiting. And you're sleepless. There's been pain, there's been worry, there's been stress, and now you are handed a child and you are now fully responsible for that child.

So let's just take a moment and hold space for that reality and, and that as much as you feel prepared maybe you're more prepared second and third time, but you worry about all the things that could have gone wrong, but that worry is practice. Right. It's practice for the worry that will remain [00:07:00] with you for years.

And so it's your first time really practicing and seeing how very important something that is not you can become to you. You always hear parents say, I didn't know I could love something so much. Well, think of all the buildup that comes to receiving this baby and it triggers that deep, deep, deep love. That this child is an aspect of you, right? It's an aspect of you and your partner, and these things usher in this moment of "I will take care of this for the rest of my life."

**Bob:** Which is awesome. And then they put you out on the street and then you make the drive home and you sit down with your spouse and and you say now what?

**Kimberly:** Now what?

**Bob:** Another memory: Those sleepless nights. Just trying to coax our way through those nights, the first five months of insane disorientation.

**Kimberly:** Let's take an [00:08:00] overview of it, but I want to give it the respect it deserves and let people who are listening know that what's coming is we're going to do an entire podcast just on infancy because of how important and how difficult those moments can be in infancy.

So forgive me for now for sort of skimming over it. Consider this sort of an introduction to the thought of that. This ability to, uh give so much of yourself to an infant is really one of the hallmarks of this thrust now into parenthood, and that is that you will deplete yourself, your resources, we call them ego resources, but essentially imagine that when your child is dysregulated.

So hungry, wet, cold, hot... where the system is not in homeostasis. You are wrapping a bubble around [00:09:00] them of all of your emotional resources to help them calm, to figure out what their cries mean, and you no longer sleep the same because you are constantly attuned to the sound of their cry. Or you, some people when they're not sure and they're scared that they're not going to hear the cry, they have the baby sleeping for a time right next to their bed, right?

So that there's, they can manage it all. These are times where you begin to see the child or continue to see the child as an aspect of self. So if I'm in a room and I'm cold, my first thought is, it's chilly in here. Put a blanket on the baby.



Or what was that sound? Oh, that must be the hunger. You're constantly focused on that child as an extension of you and it keeps you in tune with all of the little micro expressions that [00:10:00] you come to learn. And you and the baby are still very much one. The mutual eye gazing that's so important.

Things like that, that we'll go into create this sense of still being symbiotic. That the infant is outside of your body, but is still very much a part of you. And the challenge if we skip over infancy now into the next three to five years, is releasing that sense of self and beginning to see that child as their own separate human.

**Bob:** In an earlier conversation you used an example of your 3-year-old wants to dress up as a ballerina when you go out shopping. It can be hard to separate yourself that way. It feels like oh my God I'm taking my kid out dressed like a circus clown and that's all...

**Kimberly:** what will people think?

**Bob:** Yeah

**Kimberly:** because it's what will people think? So one of the key [00:11:00] emotional features of being a parent is guilt. We like it to be of what we call usable guilt, because we know we can't get rid of it. Am I doing a good enough job? The, the responsibility is so massive that you're always asking yourself, am I doing a good enough job?

And so these things propel you to make sure you get doctor's appointments done, to have your sleepless nights, to do all of those things that you do with your child. But then your child starts to walk away from you, crawl away from you, eventually says no. Right? And just as we talk in all of our podcasts about child development and what the child is going through, as the child is separating from the parent, the parent is separating from the child. We are very keyed in to this being a give and take process. And so for parenthood, you are, as Anna Freud would say, there to be [00:12:00] left. You are there for the child to have a secure foundation to move away from.

And it starts in, it starts in toddlerhood when they can walk away from you, when they can say no. When they just are not as passive as they used to be when they were not as mobile and verbal. And it separates them and you have to let go of that. And I often hear parents sort of wistfully thinking about infancy days and sometimes this is when parents start to feel like they want to have another child.

But what I have found in working with parents is when you can clue into the miraculous nature of each developmental phase, then yes, there's a sadness and a saying goodbye to a particular phase with your child, but there is so much cool stuff coming in the next phase that at the same time it's a celebration of newness.

And so inside the parent there is a slow releasing of the [00:13:00] child because you just can't wait to see what this person is going to become. In an ideal world, that's where you are in this



particular phase of parenthood, so that when your child is dancing around like a ballerina in the middle of Target, you can see that as, "I wonder if my child's going to be a dancer someday," or they're going to be a performer, or maybe they're going to be this.

And when your child is negotiating with you and arguing with you, you think to yourself, man, they'd make a good lawyer someday. And you're projecting these things as strengths rather than as a tax on yourself. And that is a transition that sometimes parents need help with. It's hard.

**Bob:** You're bringing up all sorts of memories that aren't even necessarily the good part of it...

**Kimberly:** Mm-hmm.

**Bob:** When the babies were still in cribs one of them started developing night terrors and waking up in the middle of the night crying the worst tears. And I remember thinking "what have we done? These [00:14:00] babies are like three months old. What have we done in three months that one of them is already so traumatized she's waking up with nightmares. I couldn't even imagine where that was coming from and you're right the guilt was palpable. The doctor told us to calm the heck down, said it'll pass. To this day that baby has grown up to be the most sensitive of my children and the one who feels things most deeply. So she was feeling it or she was born that way. There's no question in my mind now, but at the time it was all my fault.

**Kimberly:** Yeah, well, exactly, because you're still seeing them as an extension of yourself, right? At first you can kind of see them as a passive recipient of your parenting.

And as you stay in a state of fascination and learning about this new creature that you've brought into the world, you can begin to see them as their own human being with feelings and thoughts and temperaments that are their own.

And then there's [00:15:00] this trick though, Bob, that what if their temperament is not mine? So how do I as an extroverted parent, relate to a developing introverted child? And maybe the way that I was parented isn't going to work. It may have been great for me. I needed this kind of structure or that kind of structure, but I have to learn what works for my child.

And that requires parents also in this phase of parenthood to be very vulnerable, to always be questioning themselves and to be invested enough to seek help when they need it. If they have a child that they're having a hard time understanding because the child is so different from them or doesn't seem to respond to the things they know what to do as a parent.

**Bob:** This whole line of conversation started with your mentioning of the importance of the guilt [00:16:00] which I clearly remember. I know that every parent who walks through the doors at Hanna Perkins Center walks through the doors with a truckload of guilt whether it's deserved and earned or not – and especially moms.



**Kimberly:** OK, so here we call it usable guilt. What we mean by that is that it is a connection to the child and an investment in the child and in the investment of being the best parent you can be. To sit in the mess that is toddlerhood with aggression and everything else that comes up and say, "OK, I have to, I have to keep doing this. I have to do this the best way I can." That is all usable guilt. If you beat yourself up too much, then you've crested the wave of unusable guilt. And unusable guilt often leads us to be defensive and not be able to hear that we have to do something differently [00:17:00] or it can lead us to doing nothing and setting no boundaries with our child because we feel like maybe we were too strict, so now we're going to go the complete opposite way. Guilt is a part of the human experience and so it's just about keeping it in this manageable range rather than, going overboard to the point where you are not able to make a decision or function because you don't trust yourself.

**Bob:** And I imagine that all people being different that has something to do with the way your parents brought you up .

**Kimberly:** So in the words of Selma Fryberg, we call that ghosts in the nursery. And I think what you're getting to is this idea that when we come into our parenting developmental phase, like every other phase of our life, we bring with it what we had before.

And so you can come into parenting wanting to parent exactly the way you were parented, wanting to [00:18:00] parent the opposite of the way that you were parented, wanting to, um, uh be modern, wanting to be traditional. You have all these ideas of parenting that come from your childhood, whether you're reacting to it in a, in a positive way or in a negative way.

I'm never going to punish my child. I'm never going to ground my child. I'm, oh, I'm going to give way more structure. I'm going to be there all the time. I'm not going to be quite so hovery. We, we have all these ideas , but what happens is that how you parent quickly has to become driven by the child you are now presented with and who they are and your ability to be flexible inside of those things as you learn who your child is.

It is incredibly important and guilt plays a role in that too. And I don't know how important it is that we talk about it as guilt. It's just that feeling you have of wanting to do and be your best for this child. The [00:19:00] parenting model that we propose is one where we focus on understanding the needs of your child. There may be a child who is just craving boundaries and needing structure, and that's how they feel safe to grow and to become independent.

And you may have another child who needs to be able to negotiate and who needs to be involved in deciding the consequences when they break some social rule. So we don't say "If you do this A...B...C...magic, you're going to have perfect children" – because only you know your child. And then you help us to know your child, and then we help you make adjustments to your parenting style that works for you as a family.



**Bob:** I had, for instance, a baby 30 some years ago who came into the world wired to have night terrors at a very early age for no knowable reason and we had [00:20:00] choices about what to do with it.

**Kimberly:** That's right. Yeah, that's it. That's it. That's it in a nutshell. I don't know if we can write a one page book on parenting, but if we, if we did, that would be the, that would be it. That would be like page one.

Be gentle. Be kind. Learn the, learn the cues. And if you pick up a parenting book and it doesn't work, put it down and go try something else. There you go. That's, that's my advice for today.

**Bob:** When parents are struggling, when they don't feel like they're capable in the role of a parent or they have questions about how they're doing, obviously that's a time where they might want to seek help, what is it that can be done for them?

**Kimberly:** That's a really good question. If you want to get parent guidance work done, if you want that like a, almost like a parent consultant there are lots of professionals out there that are doing that. Some will have, [00:21:00] uh, much more structured ways of helping you parent than maybe somebody like Hanna Perkins will.

But in an ideal situation, you have somebody who understands lots of different ways of parenting and lots of different things about child development, who can sit down, talk to you, get a sense of you, your history, who you are as a parent, what your family values are, who your child is, and where the sticking points are that don't feel like they're working.

And either validate and reassure you that you're doing just fine, which happens a lot; or give you some new ideas that maybe you haven't been exposed to that might work for your child in particular, right? Let's say, especially if you're dealing with a child who has something that they're bringing with them that you weren't expecting, right?

Maybe it's a developmental delay, maybe it's a learning disability. Maybe it's a ADHD. Maybe it's um, autism spectrum. Maybe it's a medical situation. Those things can put a chink in your confidence with regard to being a parent. And so having somebody help you understand [00:22:00] how those things impact the natural course of development can often be really helpful to just course correct.

**Bob:** So how does a parent know when it's time to look for help?

**Kimberly:** Whenever they want to. I, I, I really, I mean that. I would like to remove the stigma on asking for help. We're going to be starting an infancy, uh, parent-child classroom and sometimes it's hard to get people to want to come to that because at that point in time you're so vulnerable to feeling like somebody's going to judge you for the infant that you brought into the world. So it's harder.



As children get older. And they manifest different difficulties it seems to get a little bit easier for parents, but I wish they just didn't wait. If I could, if I could wave a magic wand, it would be the minute you feel like you need to ask somebody a question.

**Bob:** So we've talked about becoming a parent for the first time. We've talked about young children. What about older children?

**Kimberly:** [00:23:00] Well, if we are doing this in a perfect world, you are gradually separating yourself from your child. And your child is gradually separating themselves from you so that they become their own person. And when you get to middle school, teenagers and kids start to want to take more advice from their friends.

They want to disagree with you, right? If you eat meat, they become vegetarian or some such thing like that. We have to see that those are all ways that a child is communicating that they are trying to separate from you and really become themselves and figure out who they're going to be. And that can be a very difficult time for parents.

And you can find yourself doing things like micromanaging homework. Trying to ensure their academic success, forcing friendships getting too involved in conflict. You have to remember that your job is to be there to be left. The challenge in that phase of parenting is [00:24:00] really redefining who you are as a parent when your child does not need you 24/7 in the exact same way. It's much more distance parenting and being ready with a catcher's mitt to catch whatever might come at you after a period of separation and maybe shutting you out emotionally and finding that balance that's right for you and your child and being able to take pride in whatever it is that they become, even if who they become is very different from who you are.

**Bob:** It reminds me of something that you say all the time that maybe we should restate right here. It goes along with that phrase of a parent's job is to be there to be left...

**Kimberly:** The doing for, doing with, standing by to admire?

**Bob:** Yeah

**Kimberly:** Yeah. OK. It is exactly that. It is exactly that because there is a time with every aspect of their life, with friendships, let's say. So you start having play [00:25:00] dates when your child is very young, you call 'em play dates.

Usually it's because the parent needs some adult conversation, right? And they bring two babies together. And then they go into preschool and they start making their own friends. But you are now doing with them, they're making friends, you're connecting with the parents, and now you're having play dates and you're doing the organizational piece of it.



And then in elementary school, they start to get invited over for, you know, sleepovers. Or they join a team and they develop those friendships and they're whispering and, but without you. They share less and less with you, and that is the point at which you are doing a lot of standing by to admire.

You're still there, you're still standing by, you're still watching, but you're waiting for a cue that somebody needs you as opposed to being in it with them. And that standing by to admire is like two feet, six feet, 12 feet. You know, next door, off to college; you're always standing by to admire. Uh, and [00:26:00] then hopefully they launch and they're sort of there out there on their own.

**Bob:** I never tire of of talking about that process. And it's visible in everything. I mean whether you're teaching your child to ride a bike or to put on their winter coat or to make friends, it's always there. We do it hundreds and hundreds of times over their childhood. So maybe it's time for a little commercial here?

**Kimberly:** Sure

**Bob:** Yeah OK. So if you have questions or concerns about your role as a parent our mental health clinic is here to help. The Hadden Clinic for Children and Families At Hanna Perkins Center has therapists who specialize in working with parents to be more confident and comfortable raising children. The clinic can provide treatment for postpartum depression, parent coaching and consultation, and psychotherapy to help you, your children or your entire family through the ordinary and extraordinary circumstances that are sure to come up. [00:27:00] Our therapists are licensed in Ohio and many other states, and can help to make a referral if you happen to live in an area that we aren't able to serve. So if you want help, call the Hadden Clinic at 216 991-4472 or just visit the Hanna Perkins website at [hannaperkins.org](http://hannaperkins.org) for contact information and help getting started.

**Kimberly:** Just a reminder, if you have questions about parenting or child development, we are happy to answer them. You can send any questions to our podcast at [HiddenLanguageOfChildren@gmail.com](mailto:HiddenLanguageOfChildren@gmail.com). Thank you so much for joining us. We hope you enjoyed this conversation as much as we did and found something to take away from it.

The Hidden Language of Children Podcast is a production of the nonprofit Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in beautiful Shaker Heights, Ohio. Our producer is Bob Rosenbaum. And Dan Ratner is our consulting producer. If you like this podcast, please subscribe to hear future [00:28:00] episodes and share it with family and friends.

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