

Forming My Presence as a Mother

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Abstract

In this article, the author applies the principles and methodology of Formative Psychology to her personal parenting situation as the mother of an autistic child. She describes in detail how her daily practice of Formative methods positively impacts her quality of life as well as her effectiveness in working with her son in his developmental therapeutic program. The author demonstrates how she applies Formative theory and methods to her own structure and particular parenting challenges. She relates finding meaning and satisfaction in shaping her life in this way.

Keywords

Formative Psychology – Parenting – Asperger’s Syndrome – Porosity – Rigidity

I work every day with how I organize myself as a mother. I depend on my ability to influence my shape and therefore my state and my behavior, in responding to the challenges of parenting. My wonderful son Jake, now 10, has Asperger’s Syndrome (a condition involving brain damage or differences from what is neurotypical, on the Autistic Spectrum[□]). He uses a great deal of ritualistic, repetitive behavior to organize himself; he loves talking with me about the same things, over and over. I have learned that the quality of my life hinges a great deal on how I help myself in large and small ways to manage my responses to him, and to my situation as his mother. At the same time, while the degree of challenge in parenting Jake is particular to the condition he has, much of what I do for myself using this work is relevant to other parenting situations.

There are many times in any given day when I need to make more or less form so that I am able to respond to my son with more of myself. Often when I’m very porous I will make a firmer shape, which enables me to take action, to keep his mealtimes or bedtime on schedule while he vigorously persists with his ritualistic interests. Or a very firm shape helps me respond in a definite way to his new “bigger boy” testing of the limits.

I tend to make a lot of form, rigidifying myself to get things done on a typical busy day. But when I am overformed, rigid-brittle, I recognize that I cannot receive and enjoy my son’s affection or enjoy his almost-constant enthusiasm. Sometimes I choose to work with my rigidity, doing it less especially in the neck and head, resulting in softening somewhat in those areas, and containing elsewhere enough to contact and support my tenderness, to be able to receive a sweet gesture he makes toward me. This forms a different shape, one in which I still have some rigidity—just enough to support my receiving and responsiveness, to really be *with* him.

Often, the demand to influence my state is from inside myself. I might experience a painful stiffness in the head and neck, and a strong pressure in the chest while hurrying during a typical day. This is an experience of feeling oppressed, and I want to help myself change my state. As I experience my discomfort, I realize that I am the only one doing this to myself. So I respond to myself by intensifying and de-intensifying the shape a few times until I have enough intimacy with myself to know which version of the shape I want to support for now. Once I have made a different version of the original shape, and worked to support/contain it, I am at home in myself in a far more satisfying way. And I can be present with my son, be playful or patient or firm with him as the situation requires. I can enjoy myself and him, and appreciate how he is present rather than keep him at a distance.

Doing this work gives me the satisfaction of living and forming my own life, rather than being lived by my son’s condition and the tasks I perform as his mother. It’s vital to me to form, to support my presence, to show up in my life.

Organizing a Strongly Rigid Shape

I am a porous person in a situation as a mother that puts many demands on me. This means that I often need to help myself by making a firmer shape to respond to those demands. Sometimes I need a strongly rigid shape for a brief period of time. When Jake gets sick and needs my help in the middle of the night, when he is acting-up/ignoring the rules and I am very tired, in a very porous state, I am grateful to be able to help myself.

Helping myself in these kinds of situations involves making vigorous form (without having to feel vigorous beforehand); and then later, being able to do the strong shape less, without collapsing, after the need for it has passed.

To make the strong shape, I basically rigidify my neck and head, and pull in and up in the belly and chest/ in my upper half, squeeze my gluteus muscles, straighten/stiffen my legs. I do this to a medium-high or higher intensity. This is a power move and sometimes I enjoy the experience of being this very firm person, this “Mother with a capitol M.” Sometimes, if the situation allows and I can take the time to fine-tune, I will do my rigid shape a bit less, choosing to support just a medium intensity. My son recognizes when I make one of these shapes: He will usually follow my directions right away when I form-up this way.

After the need for that degree of firmness has passed, I may experience the beginnings of an aching head and will want to re-organize again. To rigidify less without losing all form, I’ll do the rigid form I’m in just a bit more intensely to know it deeper, and

[□] Asperger’s Syndrome involves disorganized, disregulated brain functioning. People with Aspersers compensate rigidly: with stiff, ritualized and repetitive movements, thoughts and talk. They are recognized by a combination of very limited ability in self and social contact, and often high verbal, intellectual (sometimes savant) abilities, usually centering around one narrow interest.

then do it less two, three or even four times, pausing after each time to contain the less rigid form. Sometimes I overdo the disorganizing, and become too porous, unfocused. To help myself with this, I organize that porous shape more, then less, and make a couple of degrees more of firmness, settling with and sustaining one of them for a while. I'm grateful to be able to use voluntary effort to respond to Jake's needs, and also to my own.

In the Playroom: Forming a New Shape

I work and play with my son in the developmental program we have for him in our home. My times with him in the playroom are often times of delight, of closeness and of adventure with him. I enjoy myself. Working with myself formatively in this situation enables me to form the shapes of myself that I need at different moments in being with him.

On a daily basis, I make, adjust and re-make a shape with more form than comes naturally to me. I begin by experiencing how I am present in myself, in the room with him. I use my porous organization to receive both how Jake is present, and my own excitement about being and working with him today. I'll exaggerate my porous slump just a bit to know more deeply how I'm doing it, and then do it less, filling myself out. I support this changed shape by pressing into my sitz bones/pelvis, legs and feet. I always feel more able to carry out my plans in working with him as soon as I have done this; I have an experience of more support inside myself.

I practice organizing different versions of this shape, working to form it more reliably. In this new shape, I am based in the experienced firmness of the triangle of support between my feet on the floor, legs and pelvis planted on the child's size chair (just the right height to make this shape). Curving my lower back a bit, more or less supports this experience of being planted. The curve also supports my contact with my sweetness, experienced as quiet, deep pulsation in my belly/digestive tube. I keep my belly and chest motile enough to support receiving and responding to Jake (and myself) by periodically softening in the belly, diaphragm-chest and throat, then framing or containing myself with arms pulled downwards, hands resting on my thighs. I need some rigidity in my upper spine and head to stay focused, but not too much.

When I've made too much rigidity there I become impatient, instantly judging Jake or myself negatively. If I don't apply the voluntary effort to work with myself, but instead "relax" the spinal curve, I slump (collapse), and soon can feel that this work is too much for me, or Jake begins to run the play session. So as soon as I begin to judge (too much rigidity), or feel burdened or discouraged (loss of a supportive form), I know I can work with myself and make changes in my organization. I do so; even 10 seconds of deliberate effort can completely change how I am present.

The implications for working with Jake of my helping myself formatively in these ways are great, and simple. If I stay very rigid in the playroom, I soon find myself in a power struggle with Jake and no fun or learning will take place. If I am collapsed, I will begin to resent him and want him to behave in certain ways to please or help me; this also prevents the deepening of our contact that I am working for. But as I apply effort to organize the shape of my discomfort, do it more, less, more, less, then pick a version to contain and support, I come home into myself. This enables me to be present in ways responsive to myself and also to Jake in the situation. It is in this way that I help my son body a little less rigidity, and he learns to change his shape a bit and come closer to himself and to me. "Oh, I *really* love you," he says to me while hugging me in a tender way. He has learned to make degrees of firmness, to hug me this way; when we began working with him he had only fiercely strong hugging or flaccidity as options for hugging. Now I get to receive his hug, as well as my own experience of being present in myself.

Working with the Shape of Rigid-Porous Anger

Sometimes work with myself on an ordinary day begins like this: Jake asks, "So what do you think is REALLY the difference between a dianthus and a carnation?" This is the fifth time he's asked me this in the past half-hour, and he knows the answer; he is testing me. This is a way for him to organize himself. It's also fun for him to quiz people. I want to snap at him angrily. I want him to leave me alone. I experience that I am holding my neck and head, really all of my upper half, very stiffly as I make dinner. I am tired, and the holding is fairly extreme; I am numb to myself. In this shape and state any demand from the outside is too much. I intensify my stiffening for a moment, holding this long enough to experience a painful "bone-on-bone" sensation where cervical spine and head meet. My belly and chest wall are pulled-in, and I'm slumped forward in the shoulders and chest. Then I do it less. I experience the movement of my breathing filling me out. Now I know how much of myself I had recruited to make this rigid form, to stay on time with dinner preparations while conversing with Jake: A lot. I'm less of an automaton now, and I want more of myself back.

I do the stiff shape less again. I have a wave of warmth moving up through my belly/digestive tube, while I come down into my pelvis a bit. I contain this wave by carrying more of my weight with my legs and pelvis. Now I feel more present in the room with myself. I experience an achy fatigue, but also a foundation of support of my bones, and my warmth and hunger filling me in a sweet way from belly to mouth. I look back at Jake. Now I see his impish little look as he plays and waits for me to answer. I can respond to him now out of choice, and from the playfulness I feel as I look at him. I respond mischievously, and also challenge him to expand his behavior. With a twinkle in my eye I say, "Now that's the fifth time you've asked me that! Draw both flowers for me and show me what the difference is." He laughs and runs to draw them. We are both present together now.

Soon I realize I'm stiffening-up again; I haven't continued to support the shape I just made. This is OK, but I don't want to pay that high a price (the pain from stiffness, the numbness), and I don't need that much form right now. So I do the stiffening more, then less, then wait. I do it more, then less. I do this a few times. I'm in my belly life again, my sweetness. I've come home into myself. Now, to support this shape, to sustain myself, I press into my feet and straighten my legs a bit. I make a small outer shell by squeezing

my thighs/gluteus and drawing-in my arms towards my trunk just a little. Now I have a container for my pulsation. Now I'm here for myself, and not only dinner and Jake. It takes continued efforts to sustain this in this tired state; I will do what I can.

So I make an effort every now and then to enter into how I'm present in myself. This means that once to several times in an hour, I deliberately experience how I'm organized, and do whatever I'm doing more, less, more, less, leaving myself with an edge of extra support as I finish. Sometimes I press a bit into my sitz bones, feet and legs, without thinking about it. This enables me to do less gripping or stiffening above, in jaw, head, neck, and support enough form to enjoy myself.

Forming Responsive, Loving Action from Worry and Fear

I'm glad to be able to work with myself when I worry or experience fear about my son's future. I worry about how far he will progress developmentally, about what kind of adult life he will have. My worry can be triggered by a strongly autistic behavior, such as hitting himself on the head, as he was doing for some months about two years ago. Or I can be in the middle of a lovely day, doing anything with anyone, and find myself in an unwelcome shape and state, worrying.

The shape of my worrying is a compressed-collapsed immobility. I am bent over forward, my head is forward. My belly is sucked-in. My chest is slightly raised but also compressed. I am gripping myself: Upper palate is jammed down, with head likewise jammed-down, pressing into my cervical spine. If I hold this shape for any length of time my breathing is very restricted and I can develop a headache. I am immobilized as I have to recruit more and more of myself, deeper and deeper to sustain this. When I do this shape of worry less in steps, I begin to fill out and extend myself into a more upright shape. I receive waves of round, pulsating wanting, belly-to-throat hunger. I have a hunger for the life in me as I feed myself the basic movements of myself. This is a wonderful and rewarding experience. It then takes more work to fill the chest. I do this by following the at-first faint trickle of hunger moving up from belly to throat. Some practice back and forth and I can sustain pulsation in the chest too. I am always filled with gratitude for what I *have* after disorganizing worry. And when I turn my attention back to Jake, I am struck with how hard he is working to organize himself. I am filled with appreciation for his efforts. I experience how spirited and present he *is*; I am no longer concentrating only on his limitations. Now I move quickly to focus on what I now choose to do to help him with his development, or just to love him.

Sometimes I am afraid for Jake. This is a different experience, with a different organization from that of worrying (although there are similarities). I make this shape when he does something dangerous, such as running close to the cars passing on the street. I've also had this kind of response to reading articles in The New York Times on autism, or after answering a friend's question about my son's condition. I am engaged in an ongoing way in working with each of these shapes, so as not to be ruled by them.

The shape of my fear is more intense, more rigid and more localized (at first) than that of worry. I pull up, turn my head and twist to the right as well as pull myself in. I suck my belly in; my chest is raised up and also compressed so that I become short-of-breath. I am picture #3 on Stanley Keleman's startle chart*.¹ This has the potential to become a panic state if I don't work with myself.

When I work with this organization of fear and disorganize it enough, I experience deep waves of sweet pulsation, moving from belly through chest and up through neck and head. I am no longer afraid. I am moved, filled with love and compassion, sometimes with a sad quality, but fuller and sweeter than just sadness. At other times I am not sad, but my experience of deep, pulsatory fullness has a sobered, war-weary quality. This has become a familiar state. In this state, the echoes of the fear shape are present in muscle and bone: I have an experiential knowledge that I have been through something difficult but vitally meaningful, and of challenges ahead, as well. There is a strong sense of meaning, even of mission, to meet the challenges.

But this is also when the hardest work for me begins, of sustaining my formed shape. I now work to gather-in the edges around this sweetness, to make a container for myself, to sustain and grow this new shape. I experiment with different ways of doing this at different times, using my arms and hands to make a holding gesture out in front of my torso, or with rounded arms and cupped hands held in my lap, or with arms and hands pressing slightly down on my thighs (while sitting). This gesture/form joins with a now-familiar (I have grown this into a habit) pressing-into my pelvis and legs/feet, and curving my lower back (lordosis). This is the cutting edge of my work now: Practicing the forming, containing and supporting of my pulses of contained love and effort.

Conclusion

I wake up every day to challenges, and to the excitement of applying Formative practice to effect and deepen how I am present, whatever happens around or inside me. I wake to the promise of using myself this way, and practice formatively, embodying some of my possibilities. The promise and tangible results are always there, whether I apply effort wearily or eagerly. My son and I each have our rituals; mine involves influencing and growing my shape in the service of love. I enjoy the same promise and practice and reliable results in how I shape myself in my Formative work with clients, and in my marriage.

I begin with my shape of the moment, whether it is startle or worry or another variation of me, work with the shape, and then practice containing the pulse I harvest for myself. I take that reorganized shape into the room with my son, supporting what I have formed. Jake can feel the differences in my presence. When I am brittle, reactive, he tends to become more agitated, more intensely repetitive, while when I am contained and compassionate, lovingly and firmly containing him, he tends to more readily calm himself,

¹ Stanley Keleman, "The Continuum of Startle and Stress: From Assertion to Defeat." Center Press, 1985 (chart).
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becoming more present. When he is more with himself and with me, he is notably more able to take my direction, and can make significant progress in his development. These are the times when he can learn more of the gestures of contact I show him, the actions and words of interaction. There is a dramatic difference in the degree of success I have in working with him in his developmental and school program, depending on how I am organized.

And most importantly for me, there is a tremendous satisfaction in man-aging myself and Jake using this method. By applying voluntary effort to enter into HOW I am present, I receive clear and instant experiential feedback, repeatedly, daily, that I use in working with myself to adjust my shape, and to practice the new shape I am growing. This is a shape of firmly supported, contained sweetness and responsiveness, with a lower center of gravity, more endomorphically organized than what comes naturally to me. This shape gives me the ability to be responsive to my son and to my own needs as well. Formative practice gives me a way, every day, to use my own efforts to form a meaningful, pro-active life of my own, with far more personal satisfaction than doing what comes naturally would bring. The results are very different from disappearing or suffering on a daily basis because of my son's illness. People ask me, "How do you handle having an autistic child? You must be a saint!" The answer is that I apply voluntary effort daily, as I am able, and this enables me to live my life as a mother as an adventure.

Biography

Martha Weinstein Knobler, MA, MFT is a graduate of Sonoma State University (1976) and licensed marriage and family therapist (1982, California). She has worked with individuals, couples, families and groups for more than 30 years. A longtime associate of Stanley Keleman's work, having begun studying with Keleman in 1974, she is in private practice at the Center for Energetic Studies in Berkeley, California, since 1983. Email: mwk@lmi.net