

The role of Tri-Energetics in parenting

Judith Safford

What is the goal of parenting? It's to help a child to grow up to be a decent human being: a person with compassion, commitment and caring, a person who finds their role in society and their role in life. Children learn what they experience, and parents set the tone. Well beyond early childhood, when the world speaks to the mind of a child, parents' language is more intimate: parents speak to the heart. Thus, when parents live their role not only with an open mind but also with an open heart, it'll be a good start. Tri-Energetics helps establish this starting-point.

What is Tri-Energetics?

"Learning to live with the unity of the body, mind and spirit" (Moore, 1989)

Tri-Energetics was developed by the American counselling psychologist Rickie Moore, who calls it "a practical tool for managing our lives" (Moore, 1989). It can also be described as a general approach to life's problems that can be applied in practically any situation.

The theory of Tri-Energetics is concisely described at www.tri-energetics.net. Its essence is very simple: Tri-Energetics teaches people to ask themselves what they need, want and intend. Needs, wants and intentions are the fundamental functions through which people interact with their environment. Even in very complicated and difficult situations, if a person learns to

- find out what it is that they really need
- express their wants to other people
- establish what their intention is in a given situation

then it becomes easier to focus on the essential, to understand and overcome problems, to discover how to resolve conflicts, and perhaps ultimately to attain happiness in life, or "inner peace" (Box 1).

A central assumption of Tri-Energetics is that needs, wants and intentions apply equally to all

Box 1 Some definitions

- *Inner peace* is the expression used by the Dalai Lama to describe the ultimate aim in Buddhism (e.g. see Dalai Lama, 2001: p. 5).
- The *spirit* of a person is understood as the transcendental and non-material part of being. It contains the greatest truth in life, which is defined and expressed differently by every individual. It can be a confessional God, the highest reality or powers greater than human consciousness.

three aspects of a person: body, mind and spirit (Box 1). A therapeutic approach that relies solely on the intellectual discussion of difficulties – as nearly all psychotherapeutic methods do – and does not integrate the physical requirements of the body and our needs for emotional release and spiritual nurture will be ineffective, because it ignores integral parts of the person. In Tri-Energetics, the main tools or methods for achieving inner peace are flexibility (for the body), tolerance (for the mind) and curiosity (for the spirit).

In our rich Western world basic physical needs rarely present a problem, but our non-material needs are often not fulfilled. We need love and we need other people: isolation and loneliness are major problems in our society. Needing each other means, in everyday terms, learning to cooperate with each other, sharing feelings, showing respect and support for each other and experiencing physical contact (touching, embraces, massage or sex). We also need meaning, purpose and inner peace in our lives: spiritual deprivation is common. We need to feel empowered to control our lives. Finally, we must recognise and acknowledge these facts.

Wants are the means by which we try to fulfil our needs, for example for good health, sufficient movement, friendship, fun, moments of silence, protection from danger. Wants are desirable, but not

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Box 2 Wants and needs

The distinction between *wants* and *needs* has been widely discussed in sociology and psychology. Such a distinction is not always practically possible, because value judgements are involved, cultural differences may exist and testing human needs for survival raises ethical problems. With this in mind, here I respect as far as possible the broad distinction made by Rickie Moore.

strictly necessary (Box 2). Intentions are the plans we make to satisfy our wants and fulfil our needs. They give purpose to our behaviour.

Tri-Energetics for the body

“Soma needs flexibility” (Moore, 1990: p. 62)

The body must be cared for as a precondition for a healthy mind and soul. An inflexible body becomes brittle and can break. Flexibility keeps us flowing, both physically and emotionally. Methods for becoming flexible include physical exercise, especially yoga and dance, release exercises such as screaming, or hitting punch balls or pillows, and massage. These all require dedicated and regular practice.

Tri-Energetics for the mind

“Psyche wants tolerance” (Moore, 1990: p. 62)

Tolerance allows people to engage in life with an open heart and with the ability to show mercy and compassion. We desire tolerance because it enables us to live and let live. Intolerance fosters impatience, aggression and violence, all of which make happiness or inner peace unattainable. Tolerance, like flexibility, must be learnt and practised. An integral element of Tri-Energetic’s approach to changing the psyche is the power of play, music and role-playing, which enable the ego (the self) to re-learn and change established patterns of thought and behaviour.

Tri-Energetics for the spirit

“Spirit intends curiosity” (Moore, 1990: p. 62)

The understanding of curiosity in Tri-Energetics emphasises a passive openness of mind and not only active inquisitiveness. The key to spirituality is curiosity, because only curiosity can allow truth to dominate second-hand experience and dogma (“beliefs”, in Moore’s terms). Without curiosity and the ability to question personal beliefs, we do not

experience the joy of discovery, but become trapped in preconceptions that limit our ability to experience the world around us as it really is. If the spirit can learn to be open and receptive to what comes, our horizons are greatly extended. “Anything can happen if you let it”, to quote Mary Poppins. To become curious in Moore’s sense, we must learn to stop rational thought and quieten the mind, in order to reach the spirit. (It is interesting to note that inspiration often comes in moments of relaxation. Newton watched an apple fall from a tree. Archimedes was taking a bath. James Watt was watching the kettle boil. Einstein was day-dreaming in a tram.)

Stress-reduction techniques are an important step for quietening the mind and reaching spirituality. Other methods are determined by what for you is a spiritual activity: meditative activities (anything from marathon-running or listening to music to Buddhist sitting), rituals and ceremonies, chanting a mantra, being in silence, sex with a loved and trusted partner, a walk in the country are all examples. An important way to experience spirituality that is common to the major religions is through regular acts of kindness: by giving and caring for others. Tri-Energetics teaches that when quietened, a mind will open to curiosity and allow the insight into a personal situation necessary for discovering needs, wants and intentions.

The theory of Tri-Energetics

The theory of Tri-Energetics is based on numerous approaches to the human psyche (such as transactional analysis, bioenergetics, Jungian psychology, the cognitive-behavioural approach, Janov’s primal therapy and Perls’ gestalt) and it strongly adopts the person-centred counselling approach of Carl Rogers. Moore also integrates mystical powers from other cultures into her work (in particular, Indian yoga and shamanism from South America), which reinforce her belief in the possibility of extra-ordinary transformations in clients.

In common with conventional psychology, Tri-Energetics recognises that both inborn factors and past experiences influence perception and behaviour. Both biomedical conditions and traumas can create the dependencies, neurosis, feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness that bring people to psychotherapy.

An important criticism of Western psychotherapeutic methods made by Moore is that they create dependency and perpetrate a feeling of powerlessness. Tri-Energetics emphasises personal responsibility as a need and instils in people the self-respect and confidence (“power”) to determine their own future. We must develop the skills ourselves to be able to meet the challenges of life.

Universal needs are central to Tri-Energetics. Everyone needs love, security, praise, acknowledgement, new experiences and responsibility – even adults. These needs must be recognised, felt and lived in the body, mind and spirit, if they are to be satisfied. Simple intellectual affirmation is insufficient.

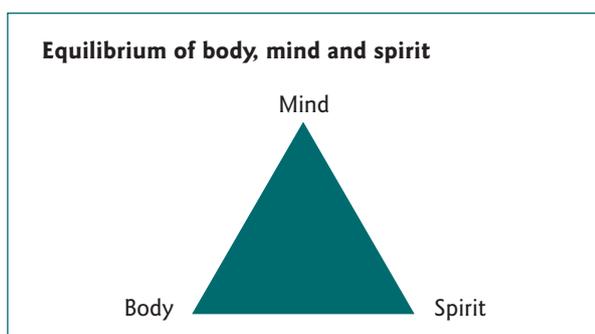
Despite this belief in the universality of the human condition, Tri-Energetics emphasises that personal needs, wants and intentions differ for every individual. This means that there is no universal recipe for integral health or inner peace as taught, for instance, by major religions or psychological theories such as Freudianism. Within a framework of ethical values such as acceptance, respect and honesty Tri-Energetics has no difficulty integrating the needs, wants and intentions of very different lifestyles and cultures. This is an attractive expression of flexibility within the Tri-Energetics approach that is not explicitly discussed in Moore's writings.

The importance of the integration of body, mind and spirit for the health of the whole being is (with the possible exception of Jung) rarely found in an integrative Western framework. Tri-Energetics adopts approaches from Asian and South American cultures such as yoga and the chakra energy system to demonstrate the harmony of the three energies: body, mind and spirit. The sum of the three is more than its individual components. The unity of soma, psyche and spirit releases a power higher than us. Rickie Moore refers to this variously as an experience of God, love, enlightenment or, in the words of the Dalai Lama, inner peace.

Using Tri-Energetics as a supportive tool in parenting

The balance of body, mind and spirit

The fundamental principle of Tri-Energetics is that body, mind and spirit all require equal attention for integral health. The equilibrium can be pictured as a triangle, of which all three sides must be of the same length.



Applied to the upbringing of children the image orders the child's needs into three broad categories, which need equal attention.

The body

Physical health in practical terms means ensuring that the child gets enough exercise, sufficient sleep and a healthy diet (Box 3). Tri-Energetics encourages people specifically to increase their physical flexibility. Although there are books on yoga for children (e.g. Weller, 1996), most children would probably prefer to take dance or judo classes. Outdoor play in the woods or playground is good for flexibility too.

Box 3 Food matters

There is currently widespread concern over the physical health of children in the Western world, because modern children eat more carbohydrates and take less exercise than earlier generations. As a result an increasing number of children are overweight. This causes direct physical health problems and also psychological difficulties such as loss of self-esteem. Modern food production and processing methods (for example chemical food additives and genetically engineered organisms) are also controversial, because they may have negative health effects.

The mind

Parents usually assume that public schooling institutions will broadly cover the needs of a child's mind. However, children who differ from the norm and have special needs often find that these are not adequately fulfilled. Furthermore, psychic needs such as tolerance, which are beyond intellectual learning, are not usually specifically on the school curriculum. According to Tri-Energetics tolerance is an important aspect of psychic health. Parents can play an important additional role in their child's education. They can try to ensure that the schooling offered is appropriate to their child's needs and includes the wider values, in particular tolerance, that the child should develop. Even if private schooling or switching schools is not an option, parents can do much to instill such values and to provide stimuli for the child's developing mind.

The spirit

The spiritual needs of children are less apparent and more difficult to define. They include social and

moral needs as they are encompassed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm). Free expression of thought, integration in the environment and self-esteem are also spiritual needs. Tri-Energetics teaches that spirituality can be attained by opening the mind and facing life with curiosity. Children are born with this natural, open curiosity: it is essential for their learning and ultimately for their survival. Natural curiosity can be destroyed by negative experiences in which the child's curiosity is not acknowledged and condoned. The task for parents is actively to protect, cultivate and support curiosity by participating in it and providing an environment where it can express itself freely.

Tri-Energetics recommends meditative activities to quieten the mind and thus foster curiosity. However, not all of these activities are appropriate for children, or even necessary to kindle their curiosity. None the less, children can benefit from activities that quieten the mind. Like adults, they too suffer from stress. Any activity that reduces stress helps the child to focus calmly and rediscover their curiosity. Many children enjoy the release exercises recommended by Tri-Energetics (such as hitting a pillow or a punch ball and screaming). These can be used to relieve stress and tension to good effect.

To an extent children are also able to have spiritual experiences (Maschwitz & Maschwitz, 1995). They are able to experience the beauty of nature, appropriately presented and scaled to their cognitive abilities, in a spiritual way. By the same token, rituals, ceremonies and other meditative activities can have a very positive effect. Two books in German that demonstrate exercises in creative relaxation for children are Glaschke & Fitzner (1991) and Preuschoff (1997).

Learning about needs, wants and intentions

Tri-Energetics teaches: "Know what you need, say what you want, and have clear intentions!". I think most parents believe that small children and babies are able to express their needs and wants well. There is evidence that children can express their desires as early as 18 months and certainly by the age of 3 (Cohen, 2002: p. 95). Babies react to and signal their needs and wants as part of an innate survival strategy, unless and until experiences teach them to behave otherwise. The effect of such experiences will depend not only on their intensity and frequency, but also on the psyche of the child.

But no child grows up in a Garden of Eden. Even parents with the best intentions make mistakes. If a parent does not know how to listen to their baby, or

Tri-Energetics teaches:

- Know what you need
- Say what you want
- Have clear intentions!



can't understand what their infant's crying is saying or is unable to fulfil the need, their child will experience separation, fear, disappointment or frustration (Leach, 1989: p. 14). Wants will also sometimes be refused, and if the child cannot accept this, the refusal may be experienced very negatively.

Thus the needs and wants of a child may be neglected. These experiences, together with the child's own way of interpreting and processing them, may compound this disregard into an established experience: the child's needs and wants do not receive the attention that they warrant. Tri-Energetics' message to parents is to focus consciously on the child's needs and wants, and to nurture a culture of attending to them, even if they are not always fulfilled.

The formulation of clear intentions is an important part of Tri-Energetics, but planning the future – understanding and formulating clear intentions – requires introspective cognitive abilities and a high degree of intrapersonal intelligence (understanding oneself). Research suggests that most children only start to develop these abilities between the ages of 6 and 12 (Cohen, 2002: p. 87). Parents should give their children the responsibility and the new experiences that they need. However, they must consider their child's cognitive abilities and tailor their expectations accordingly.

Encouraging curiosity, tolerance and flexibility

Most children have an in-born desire to grow up and become more mature, and they copy the people around them. Parents are particularly important role models. It is very difficult to teach knowledge or skills that you do not possess yourself, but if you are curious, tolerant and flexible, then there is good chance that you can successfully teach these qualities to your children, largely by example and without explicit instruction. Curiosity, tolerance and flexibility are not rules that can be prepared and applied in specific situations; they are principles of behaviour in a value system, which children can learn just as they learn a school subject. The exact behaviours that are nurtured, encouraged or corrected are examples for the child in the process of learning, just like class exercises

and homework. What the child learns will depend on the strength of feeling and priorities that parents set and how plausible rewarding the desired behaviour seems to the child.

An upbringing that fulfils a child's needs will automatically encourage curiosity, tolerance and flexible thinking. Fear, for instance, inhibits curiosity, whereas learning and literacy encourage flexible thinking (Freeman, 2000a,b).

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