



**Cultivating Secure Attachment, Resilience, and
Positive Mental Health in Children**
A Workshop with Susan Stiffelman, MFT, and Dr. Gabor Maté

For those who do not know, let me introduce Dr. Gabor Maté, using information from his website, drgabormate.com. Dr. Maté is a retired Canadian physician with a strong “expertise on a range of topics including addiction, stress and childhood development.” He is an author of many books, including *When the Body Says No; The Cost of Hidden Stress; Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More than Peers;* and his latest book, coming in 2025, *Hello Again: A Fresh Start for Parents and Their Adult Children*.

I attended a webinar between Dr. Maté and Susan Stiffelman, to learn more about cultivating secure attachment and resilience in children. Below are some excerpts from the discussion.

Susan Stiffelman: We {parents} come preloaded with instincts that are often covered over, and I wanted to start {with} the instinct that is so powerful, which is connection and attachment, which I think you and Dr. Neufeld, blazed a trail where you weren’t focusing on scripts or controlling a child’s behaviour, but rather looking at the undercurrent of connection....You’ve written something so beautiful... “it’s not about techniques, parenting is about relationships. It’s that simple.”

So, can you begin talking about attachment?

Gabor Maté: In terms of attachment, it’s just the most important dynamic, not just in life, but in the universe. Attachment is the gravitational force that pulls two bodies together, for the purpose of being taken care of, or for the purpose of taking care of the other. The infant cannot survive unless their parent has an attachment drive to look after and care for that infant. And, at the same time, the infant is drawn to connect to the parent. And so, our brains are wired for attachment....That instinct is absolutely essential for the survival; and not just survival, but also the healthy

development of the mammalian child. So, that's an instinct; however, instincts need to be triggered and supported by the environment.

...There's the fact, that from an early age on, most kids spend most of their time, or much of their time, away from their parents during the day. So, that bond is not maintained.... And then, there's the fact that parents are stressed, extremely stressed, and ... studies have shown that when parents are stressed, or depressed, they can't emotionally connect with the child as much as they would want to. Not because they don't love the child, not 'cause they're not doing their best, just 'cause they can't.

There {are} so many ways that our society undermines the parenting template.

SS: If you didn't grow up with that {sense of attachment}, which many, many parents did not, they didn't have the gift of an attuned, safe, secure childhood. Then, naturally what they bring to the process of parenting is their own sort of splintered, cobbled together version.... I've seen how we can retroactively heal wounds in ourselves as we're offering our children something healthier.

GM: ...traumas that we haven't worked out in ourselves, we tend to pass on to our kids, just as you say, unwittingly, not deliberately. And, it's really important to emphasize that no parents are being blamed here....most of us become parents long before we even realize that we have issues to work out, you know? And, so, sometimes our parenting difficulties can act as a wonderful wake up call to that which we haven't worked on in ourselves. And then, rather than trying to fix the kid, ... we work on ourselves.

SS: ...all my work now is with parents, not to teach techniques necessarily, {but} to just help heal....you've written beautifully about authenticity and it's something that really speaks to me. So, there's attachment, which is the drive in the child. And then there's the drive for authenticity, which is how we perhaps mitigate or bypass some of the stressors and traumas and illnesses that we acquire because we're not being authentic. Can you talk about authenticity and attachment and the dilemma that the child might face early on?

GM: Sure, so first of all, let's understand something about development, human development. It's basically, it's a pyramidal process. The basis is what we've been talking about is attachment. So secure attachment, that's the basis for everything. Then comes what we call individuation, where we become our own persons with our own preferences, our own understanding of the world, our connection to ourselves. Then,...comes socialization, where we connect with others, where we can respect their individuality...while we hold onto our own.

Now, in this society, we tend to put socialization out of individuation. So, we have play dates, and we want to our kids to have friends at age one and a half and two years. Now, there's a difference in playmates and friends. It's okay for a kid to {have} playmates, but the most important relationships need to be with the adults on the basis of attachment....before [the child] can have genuine friends, they need to have a sense of themselves and respect themselves.

The attachment relationship is essential for [the child's] survival. They will instinctively suppress their emotions in order to please you. Now, they're no longer being authentic. They're choosing attachment over authenticity. Now, why is authenticity important? Art in nature, where we evolved for millions of years, how long does any creature survive if they're not connected to their gut feelings? Not very long. So, authenticity is actually a survival need. And, when children are put into, or in a family where the parents are stressed...the child actually learns to start taking care emotionally of the parent, suppressing their own needs. Suppressing their authenticity....[T]hat suppression of authenticity of our own genuine emotions actually undermines physical health....[T]he immune system and the emotional system are one system....[T]hat suppression of authenticity, which is a survival technique when a family where the authenticity is not accepted, is later on a source of pathology.

The rest of the workshop centered around questions from the audience. For more information on Susan Stiffelman's workshops, please visit www.susanstiffelman.com.