

THE DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE OF NATURAL LEARNING RHYTHMS

Josette Luvmour, PhD

Natural Learning Rhythms (NLR) describes in detail the psychological, emotional, and physical components of optimal well-being and how these emerge within each stage of childhood in relationship to context. It is founded on both fieldwork and the literature in child development, family systems, and contiguous psychological disciplines.

This approach is both a synthesis and extension of the works of developmental psychologists such as Mahler and Gessel, cognitive psychologists including Piaget and Kohlberg, humanistic psychologists such as Maslow and Rogers, transpersonal psychologists such as Wilber, anthropologists such as Bateson and Mead, and holistic educators including Dewey, Steiner, Gardner and Montessori. NLR addresses two main questions: How does perception (of themselves and the world) change throughout childhood? What is optimal well-being for the child in each stage of childhood?

The developmental contextual view that Natural Learning Rhythms adheres to is that humans are dynamic systems with a biological unfolding in a constant feedback loop with the environment (Luvmour, 2006; Luvmour & Luvmour, 1993). One premise of NLR is that that development occurs in relationship and that a primary location of learning and growth for children is in the family context. In this view adults and children interact with one another in the family system and influence one another's development in multidirectional transactional processes (Lerner, 1989, 2006; Wapner & Demick, 1998, 2000). A second premise is that there are stage changes throughout life and development that are a movement toward greater

complexity involving both nature (innate capacities) and nurture (environment).

In order to encourage full capacity and potential in children, it is necessary for adult caregivers to value and understand the developmental stages of childhood. Knowledge of child development helps the adult provide environments that support development in the child and prevent environments that hinder well-being. In the NLR developmental approach, there is an organizing principle expressing itself through the child during each stage of childhood. The organizing principle guides the child toward well-being and actualization of his or her innate developmental capacities. There are psychological and emotional nourishments which nurture the optimal well-being of the child. Every family and learning environment can and must find a way to supply the developmental imperatives and nourishments for that particular child in the particular context.

NLR specifies when and how changes occur throughout the formative years of childhood. Moreover, it describes the optimal over-arching context for the organization of well-being. Throughout development in childhood, there are changes in physical growth, brain development (changing neuronal connections), emotional sophistication, cognitive complexity, etc. Each of these changes yields shifts in perception (e.g., of self, other, family, community, and the world).

In this developmental view, the inherent capacities developing in each stage of childhood come to consciousness in the child when the capacity is carefully nurtured in the child's environment. Stages of development have had various names in each different developmental model. Using the NLR developmental model and nomenclature, a

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brief overview of the four primary life stages of childhood follows:

- The first stage comprises approximately the first 7 years of life. For this stage, the term *BodyBeing* is used. It reflects the idea that learning occurs primarily through the body. Primary development during this stage is to organize a sense of *rightful place* in the body, in the family, and in the environment; secondarily, to develop the capacity for relationship with healthy boundaries. The psychological and emotional sensory-rich nourishments that support the child to develop these capacities are; loving touch, security, flexibility, warmth and the nourishment of sensory exploration. Access to the appropriate developmental combination to meet the child's needs, will yield a sense of *rightful place* in body and in family. When a child knows her *rightful place*, she senses that she belongs. When a child senses that she belongs, she is strong and can sense boundaries.
- Building on that foundation, the next organization in development is primarily the ability *to trust in relationship* to self, family, and community; secondarily, to organize the capacity for reciprocal cooperation. The second stage ranges in age from 8 thru 12 and is called *FeelingBeing* as learning is primarily through feeling relationships. The nourishments that support these developing capacities are; feeling mentors, honesty, fairness, adventure, adaptability, and justice (a newly forming ability to discern whether people are emotionally engaging with others appropriately and whether situations are appropriately just to people). Access to the appropriate developmental combination yields trusting connection with self, family, community and the natural world. This is fundamental to future relationships. When a child trusts, he or she has an ability to

perceive the feeling world of others in any situation. With trust, the child will cooperate in the name of relationship.

- The third stage ranges in age from 13 thru approximately 18. This stage is called *IdealBeing* as learning takes place primarily through the exploration of ideals in a variety of social environments. The teen is moving from the family context to taking a place in society. The primary organization in this stage is healthy autonomy, which involves self-governance, social ability, and skill in relationships; secondarily, to organize identity construction with a relationship to freedom and responsibility. The nourishments that support these developing capacities are; sensitive respect, the opportunity to express and act upon ideals, peer contact, respect of personal space, and challenges within the realm of success. Sensitive respect means that we support the teen's search for environments that support his or her core nature. Sensitive respect calls for engagement that serves the exploration of identities so the teen can develop an identity that is an expression of his core nature. Access to the appropriate developmental combination yields a solid sense of self, which provides the power and freedom to forge ahead in an uncertain world.
- The last stage of childhood starts at around 18 and ends at approximately 23. The name for this stage is *ReasonableBeing*, reflecting the new ability to step into another's perspective and re-organize meaning in relationship to context and self. During this stage, the primary organization involves interconnectedness, humor, and humility, through dialogue, activation of substantive values, and the ability to comprehend systems. The nourishment that supports the developing capacities during this stage is *mature recognition*. The capacity for mature

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recognition has four aspects: 1) recognition of commitment—the capacity to commit over time to substantive values; 2) recognition of equality—the capacity to see any reasonable inquiry as valid; 3) recognition of achievement—the capacity to uncover the values behind ideals with greater complexity; 4) recognition of recognition—the capacity to self-observe and to accept responsibility for meaning creation. The ability to self-observe is the basis for comprehensive self-knowledge. Access to the appropriate developmental combination yields self-knowledge that is interconnected, self-confident, and humble.

ONTOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

A key theoretical approach underlying Natural Learning Rhythms is the dynamic systems view that combines stage theory and contextual views of dynamic systems constructivism. A basic premise of this view is that development occurs in relationship. Natural Learning Rhythms views development as an ontological epistemology. The way the child knows (epistemology) is through his or her whole being (ontological). It is how we come to know who we are as a being-knowledge. One underlying assumption of this approach is that knowledge is emergent, needing context and relationship to come into being. In this view, a developmental stage is defined by the way the child organizes the world in each stage of life in relationship to context using all faculties (and their interrelationship): cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and self-perception. Knowledge is emergent, not constructed.

Another underlying assumption of the NLR approach to relationships with children is that nature and nurture work together as one whole system. All humans have a stage-specific way of organizing the world and create meaning

accordingly. Psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being emerges in relationship to context (Wapner & Demick, 1998). The biological nature aspect plus the contextual nurture relationships combine to contribute to this contextual emergent view of development. Moreover, personal purpose in life is aligned with meaning creation. This has implications for uncovering self-knowledge of our essential nature. It is an emergent developmental contextual view as described by Learner (2002). In the developmental contextual view, the learner shapes the context as much as the context influences the learner. Thus, the child affects the adult as much as the adult affects the child.

In today's world, theories translated into practice are most useful if they address issues and problems of the day (Green & Piel, 2002). The developmental theory of Natural Learning Rhythms is intended to be practical and to enhance the life of all those who are in relationship with children (parent or professional). It has pedagogical usefulness and practical applications because development is seen as multidirectional and emergent for all persons involved—adult and child develop together.

ADULT AND CHILD DEVELOP TOGETHER

Erikson (as noted by Hoare, 2002) claimed that wisdom is a likely stage during adult development but it is not inevitable. Moreover, his writings showed that wisdom involves more concern about the whole instead of the self and held adults responsible for the next generation (Hoare, 2002). Erikson's statements opened the door to studies on wisdom in adult development resulting in a variety of definitions. Moreover, research has shown that adult and child develop together (De Mol & Buysse, 2008; Luvmour, 2009; Palkovitz, 1996).

One context of adult development is when adults take the time to learn child development and then

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take action with their child. By providing the stage-specific needs of the child and properly responding to the expressions of the organizing principle in young people simultaneous development is precipitated in the adult. The process begins with the initial action of learning a new way of being with the child. The new learning of child development principles leads the adult to engage in critical self-inquiry. The self-inquiry stimulates cognitive and emotional changes. These changes promote differentiation from old self and old ways of being and doing. Out of the context of differentiation from the old emerges increased self-knowledge, making new-meaning of the world, and new-identity formation. From the platform of self-knowledge and new meaning-making springs sustained intentional effort to nurture the child's development. In this way, nurturing the child leads to potential transformation and greater adult development.

Wisdom may emerge as an outcome when adults engage the necessary intention and work. Deep involvement with the children in our lives can break open our hearts to greater awareness. Some adults not only make new meaning of old childhood

experiences and experience well-being, but they also access increased wisdom with experiences of compassion, service, greater presence, insight, and gratitude. Even though there is a rich natural history of wisdom in adult development literature, more research is needed as to its dynamics in the adult's relationship to the child.

There are potential benefits of parent education for adult development when practical applications of child development information are used in the family context and in other relationships with children. Biological-parents, foster-parents, grandparents-as-parents, adoptive-parents, gay- and lesbian-parents, and educators of children could benefit from such education on nurturing the child's development.

The relationship of nurturing the developmental needs in the child serves the deepest development of both children and adults. It can be viewed as mutual development toward greater self-knowledge, well-being, and wisdom. It is a vital example of opportunities naturally built into human development.

About The Author

Josette Luvmour, PhD, has a private Personal and Family Consulting practice. She also serves in the non-profit sector at EnCompass Institute as Director of Family and Professional Development; and is Adjunct Faculty at the National College of Natural Medicine. Her expertise is in adult development, child development, mutual development between child and adult, human systems, and transformational learning in adults.

Together with her husband, Ba, Josette created and developed Natural Learning Rhythms . They have been using NLR with children, families, educators, and counselors for over twenty-five years.

Josette specializes in human development, sustainable family relationships, adult development in a family context, and supporting optimal well-being in each family member. Josette is the co-author of four books: *Natural Learning Rhythms™ - How Children Grow and Learn, Towards Peace* and *Win-Win Games for All Ages*, as well as many articles and essays.

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