

# How Our Past Experiences Impact How We Provide Care to Young Children

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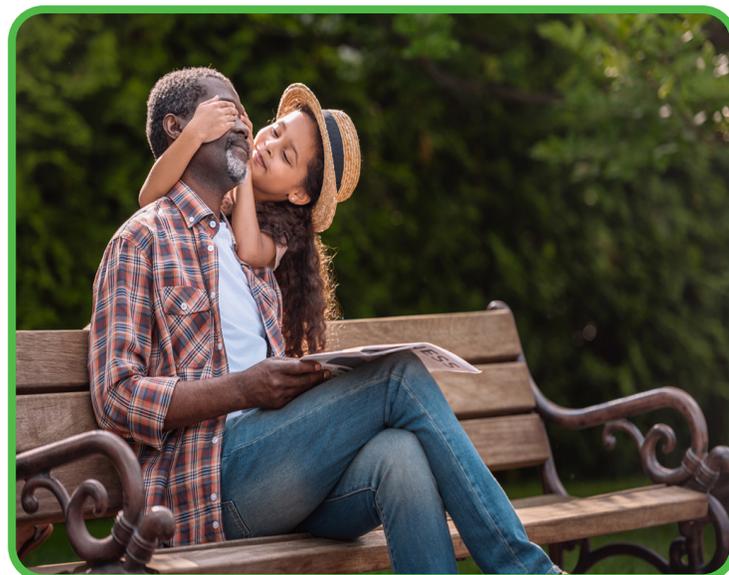
Are you aware of how deeply your own childhood experiences shape how you care for children? Dr. Selma Fraiberg, a pioneer for Infant Mental Health, studied how our own past experiences and memories from childhood impact how we as parents and caregivers provide care. Her research was called *Ghosts in the Nursery* (Fraiberg, 1974).

"Ghosts" are identified as the underlying feelings that are expressed through thoughts, behavior, and through approaches toward the child in the here and now. We strive so hard as caregivers to say, "I promised myself I would not do this \_\_\_\_\_ because of how it made me feel when I was a child."

But how often do we find ourselves still naturally wanting to react in these ways out of habit? This means that we subconsciously are reminded of our past when providing care for our little ones and it impacts how we respond. To bring awareness to this we have to bring the subconscious ghosts to the conscious so that our ghosts don't haunt us.

One way we can do this is through reflection and ask ourselves the following questions:

- How have my own unresolved conflicts impacted how I provide care to children?
- What are some things I intentionally avoid or do differently to prevent the children in my care from experiencing things I experienced in my past?
- What are some practices or ways I provide care that look different from my parents/caregivers? Why?



By taking the time to reflect on these things we are now bringing the subconscious to the conscious and developing a sense of awareness of how our own experiences impact how we provide care. By acknowledging our "ghosts," we now have the capacity to make a conscious effort to avoid repeating patterns and catch ourselves in those moments.

Dr. Alicia Lieberman developed Child-Parent Psychotherapy, an evidence-based treatment for children ages birth to five, which furthered Fraiberg's research on childhood trauma and coined the term "Angels in the Nursery." Angel moments "refer to the moments of affective experience with our caregivers (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers...etc.)." Lieberman found that "angels" are the antidotes to the "ghosts in the nursery" and the more "angel moments" a child has, the better chances that child has in thriving.

So, what are our “angel moments” and how do we create more of these moments for our little ones? Here are some reflective questions to connect you with your own angel moments:

- Looking back to your own childhood, do you remember a time when you felt unconditional love? Who was it with?
- Think back to a smell/scent when you were a child that brings back a positive memory, what was the scent? What memory does it spark for you and who was it with?



Many of you will notice that these amazing angel moments you experienced in your childhood are often memories that are not with your parents but with other caretakers, family members, or teachers who can have a strong impacts at an early age.

In reflection, ask yourself the following question: “How can I create more of these positive moments for children in my care?” Research shows that the more positive moments that we create for our children the more resilient they become. These positive moments not only build stronger bonds and attachment, they are the antidotes to the ghosts in nursery, and they also make a strong impact on the development of a

healthy brain. You have the power to make a huge impact through our connections with our children and shared positive experiences.

To learn more about ways to increase “**angel moments**” through serve and return activities, click on this [video clip](#) from the **Developing Child Harvard** entitled, “5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return.”

**References:**

Lieberman, Alicia F., et al. “Angels in the Nursery: The Intergenerational Transmission of Benevolent Parental Influences.” *Infant Mental Health Journal*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2005, pp. 504–520., <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.20071>.

Fraiberg, Selma, et al. “Ghosts in the Nursery: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Problems of Impaired Infant-Mother Relationships.” 23 May 1974.