



What is Gentle Teaching - A look at the basics

Gentle Teaching is a non-violent approach to building relationships. It focuses on 4 pillars and 4 tools of care giving, often in the midst of challenging behaviours. Our task is to move from a behavioural approach to a psychological one based on human interdependence that sees all change as mutual. Both the vulnerable person and the caregiver must learn strategies that bring about feelings of companionship and community- where building a relationship that is not contingent on behaviour or compliance, becomes the focus.

As a natural part of our early development, most of us learn that we are safe with, and loved by our parents or primary caregivers. Self-determination and decision making skills arise out of these early experiences. However, many people come to us with life stories filled with abuse and neglect. Others have had lives in which they were loved, but were unable to feel or express love toward others. Many have been passed between foster homes without opportunity to form lasting relationships. Others have passed decades in institutions where fear has been prevalent, unable to establish a sense of being loved or loving. For those who have experienced or witnessed abuse in its various forms, or struggle with intellectual or emotional disabilities or conditions, violence can be interpreted and felt in the slightest facial expression, word, or gesture of discouragement. For those who are fragile, many modern care giving practices are seen as mean-spirited, controlling, neglectful, and even abusive.

Without even realizing it, our tone of voice, posture, facial expressions, and word choices can be conveying messages of "You are no good!" "Do what I tell you, or else!" We must intentionally learn new ways of communicating to others that they are safe and valued. Gentle Teaching offers a way to teach meaning to those who feel hopeless, terrified, and unloved.

As caregivers, the question is not whether people are safe in our care; rather, are we teaching each person to feel safe with us and unconditionally accepted by us. Our task is to teach each person that we are kind and loving – virtues that must be most evident when someone in our care is at their worst.

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PILLARS OF GENTLE TEACHING:

Safe: This is done through repeated acts of unconditional acceptance in which every instance of contact conveys the message repeatedly: “With me you are safe and unconditionally accepted. Do not be afraid. I will not harm you.”

Loved: The nourishment of self-esteem must be given abundantly and unconditionally. We cannot feel timid talking about love or value and expressing it in the warmest ways possible, especially during the most difficult moments.

Loving: Teaching the expression of love – a warm handshake, an affectionate gaze, an endearing embrace, or a kind word. We must establish trust before we can teach others to feel loved and loving.

Engaged: Chipping very gently away at the self-centered nature that comes with a history of abuse or violence by teaching the person that it is good to reach out to us and others, be together, do things together, and even do things for others. This starts with teaching, “It is good to like me! I will help you at every moment. Then, we will learn to do things together.”

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TOOLS OF GENTLE TEACHING:

Our Presence – conveys messages of peace, protection, and caring

Our Hands - convey messages of connection, support, and kindness

Our Words - convey messages of encouragement, respect, and nurturing

Our Eyes – convey messages of warmth, reassurance and understanding

Gentle Teaching focuses on teaching feelings of companionship, love of self, love of others, and engagement in community life. It does not focus on getting rid of behaviours or teaching life skills. We do not diminish the importance of these aforementioned goals; however, they require a foundation of feeling safe and loved to see real success.

When supporting people with challenging behaviours, we often look at the individual as if he/she were simply noncompliant or should know better. Generally, the person with behavioural challenge is stuck in a mix of feelings of detachment and/or self-centeredness. In many ways those with the most severe behaviour challenges do not ‘see’ us; they only ‘see’ a chain of caregivers over the years who have come and gone, offering no stability or continuity in their lives and sometimes treating them cruelly or neglectfully. Until we teach a feeling of companionship, we are just ‘Caregiver #182’ or ‘teacher #4’ – a faceless, anonymous average of all previous caregivers.

Seeding the understanding of feeling safe, loved, loving and engaged deep into the person’s heart is our primary task. This understanding then serves as the foundation for companionship and community. As it emerges, the person’s aggression, challenging behaviour, self-injury, or self-isolation begin to diminish. More importantly, a new way of interacting begins to unfold based on companionship and community.

Compassion is a complex thought. It requires an understanding of self-worth, and then other-worth. We start with ourselves and move outward, just as the people we serve do. Our primary focus as a caregiver is not on modifying someone’s behaviour, but building a genuine relationship where both people are working together to create change. This is the foundation upon which we can build relational expectations.

The best and most enduring change starts with us

In Gentle Teaching caregivers become aware of how their interactions decrease the probability of violence by focusing on:

- The need to teach a culture of trust, companionship, and community through the creation of new memories based on feelings of being safe and loved.
- Initially lowering expectations and increasing hope. Although caregivers often have seemingly reasonable expectations, the broken hearted are not ready to do what is expected because they do not feel safe and loved within the caring community. There is little reason to trust a caregiver without these new feelings. Without a strong foundation based on trust, high expectations shatter. The first dimension of caregiving is to establish trust and this arises out of feelings of being safe and loved. If caregivers are too pushy, this could easily spark violence.
- Within this construct, the caring community has to slow down and understand that “The slower we go, the faster we will get there.”
- The avoidance of any compliance attitudes that push broken hearted individuals into a corner and provoke violence.
- The use of our very presence, words, gazes, and touch in a manner that uplifts each person along with a tender and genuine tone turning each syllable, touch, or gaze into the moral equivalent of an embrace.
- The avoidance of attitudes such as so-and-so knows better, just wants attention, or is manipulative. These can be true but are irrelevant in Gentle Teaching; the focus has to be on feelings and teaching each person to acquire a sense of feeling safe and loved. The healing must be found in the heart, not the head.
- The avoidance or prevention of caregiver violence in common practices such as the use of isolation, time out, token economies, verbal reprimands, grabbing and shoving, physical management, mechanical restraint, cattle prods, chemical restraint, the ease of psychiatric hospitalization as a holding tank, and even phone calls to the police to “manage” someone through the use of stun guns and other methods of control.
- Practice, practice, practice. The best way to prevent harm is through a sharp focus on the tools that have been bestowed upon us. First, our intention has to be to bring and share the gifts of creating a sense of security and a feeling of being loved. Then, within these parameters, caregivers have to become intuitively practiced and skilled at teaching these good memories. This approach is in and of itself the most encompassing way to prevent violence.

