

Book Review

Maria Szalavitz and Bruce D Perry, *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential - and Endangered*. New York, William Morrow, 2010. 384 pp. ISBN 006165678X £13.99

‘Put yourself in their shoes!’ This is something we often encourage children we work with to do. With children who are involved in offending behaviour, we especially try to encourage victim empathy. *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered*, a book by Maia Szalavitz and Bruce D Perry, discusses how recent changes in our society deprive children of the essential relationships required to teach empathy and caring.

In this book both authors use case examples of children they have worked with. They describe the children’s experiences and how these experiences have affected their ability to form, sustain and maintain meaningful caring and empathetic relationships. The way the examples are written allows the reader to visualise and relate to them. Throughout the book, I had thoughts like, ‘I worked with a child like this one’ or ‘We could try that with our young people’. This made the book very readable and real.

Szalavitz and Perry discuss relevant theory related to each case, for example brain development and attachment theory. Neuroscience can be difficult to grasp and a few terms may scare some from reading on, such as oxytocin (a chemical in the brain, if you are wondering). However, the authors appear to have worked hard to make this information interesting and accessible, and they have shown how it is crucial to understanding young people’s behaviour. Their explanations of brain development are clear and practical.

This is a book that can be easily understood by all who work with children in residential child care and it is extremely relevant to our line of work. It offers practical recommendations to promote positive relationships while instilling empathy. We have taken up one such recommendation in my workplace, namely storytelling. ‘Reading fiction...requires perspective-taking, placing the reader in the position of the characters and eliciting pleasure from their triumphs and pain in their suffering. Reading such books is essentially practicing empathy’ (p.312).

So far our storytelling group has been successful. The children spend time during and after the session discussing the characters, how they might have felt and how it feels to hear the stories. We have also used films such as *Freedom Writers* and *Goodwill Hunting*. These sessions evoked strong emotional responses from the children which normalised open displays of emotion and related discussion.

This is a hopeful book. While some of the cases are sad, the recommendations and the examples of successful growth in young people are encouraging, urging us to explore and possibly change some of our practices.

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