



Parenting From Your Whole Heart

*Next class starts
February 4th, 2025*

Hi everyone,

Just a reminder, Parenting From Your Whole Heart is starting February 4, and registration is open! You can learn more at <https://www.attunedfamilytherapy.com/parent-classes>
Or go right to the registration form here: <https://forms.gle/dvhdg8Az52s9SzUs7>

Maybe you're wondering what it's all about. Here's a few questions and answers about Parenting From Your Whole Heart, from an interview I did in 2021. If you have more questions that don't get answered here, please email me at robyn@attunedfamilytherapy.com and ask!

1. Why do you teach these classes?

I teach these classes because I want to change the world! It's cliché to say that being a parent is the most important job in the world, but it's true. The way we are treated when we are small, whether we are loved, nurtured, safe and seen, or NOT--affects the way we approach relationships with other humans for the rest of our lives, and that affects the whole world. I look at some of the ways humans have become inhumane throughout history-- and especially now-- and I am positive that truly healthy parent-child relationships would have made a difference, and will make a difference for the future. When I think about the future and it's scary, I want to respond in the best way I can, and teaching these classes is the best way I feel I can contribute to healing our world.

2. What's your background and what inspired you?

I'm a person who had to overcome a lot of difficulties from earlier in life, through the help of therapy and inner work. I became a public school teacher, because I loved kids and wanted to plant seeds for the future. Later, when my son was born and had unexpected special needs, I needed to pivot fast! I had help from an excellent family therapist, and from many others as

well. I had to learn a lot about parenting a special needs child when I had no tools, and all I knew was that I didn't want to repeat the dysfunction I grew up with. Now it's 21 years later, I'm a family therapist myself, and teaching this class is a way of giving back to the community-- paying forward the help I received. I want to provide the kind of learning and support experience for parents I wish had existed when I first became a parent.

3. What ages do your classes cover?

My classes are not so much a "how-to" of parenting techniques, but instead are based in exploring and healing ourselves as parents. The material is appropriate for parents of kids of any age because we are fundamentally learning about our own nervous system wiring, and our own younger selves (parts)-- this development happens throughout childhood. In addition, since the class draws about half its material from Internal Family Systems, we will be working with our own parts-- and parts can be from any age or stage.

4. How does it work if everyone is mixed up?

I've gotten feedback from parents from younger kids that they appreciate being in a multi-age group because they get a picture of what parenting may look like in the future. And for parents of older children, or even adults, the information they are gaining is still helpful for creating a strong foundation of inner connection and validation we use for our own healing as well as building healthy relationships with our kids. Actually, our emotional needs don't change that much as we go through the stages of development-- at every age, we always need external safety, connection, validation and resonance with others, and we also need internal safety, a strong sense of self-connection and acceptance. The delivery may vary from one stage to the next, but the basics are always the same.

5. What is Polyvagal Theory? How can knowing about it help in our parenting?

Polyvagal theory is a conceptual framework, with some evidence behind it, about how our brain and the rest of our nervous system work together. Polyvagal theory basically says that the state of our autonomic nervous system-- whether we are in a safe and grounded state, or a threat-response state-- determines our thoughts, feelings and often our behaviors, and particularly how we relate to one another on a very subtle level. This is all key information for understanding why our kids do what they do, and feel what they feel, and also for building the foundation of emotional connection and safety that will allow our kids to gain all the great skills we want them to have. Polyvagal theory explains exactly why children don't learn and develop

in an atmosphere of fear and stress nearly as well as they do when raised with safety and respect.

6. What is IFS? How can it help / inform / improve our parenting?

Internal Family Systems is a model of human personality developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz, that basically says that we are not just one mind, but a collection of parts. This system ideally functions with parts having the guidance of a core or essential Self (we capitalize Self in IFS). We all also have parts, which you could call sub-personalities, that do different functions for us in the different roles we play in our lives. When we encounter difficulties as young children, parts can get disconnected from Self and start to behave in ways that are not helpful to us as a whole. IFS helps us in parenting because as we become more aware of the power of our own essential Self, and connect with our parts from there, we heal our own past hurts and relate to our children in a much more positive way. IFS also helps us understand our kids have parts too, and we can work with them respectfully instead of engaging in power struggles and conflict.

7. Why did you choose to study these?

I have both a personal and professional interest in these two approaches to understanding humans. I learned about IFS about 14 years ago, and have used it extensively in my own therapy. IFS really made all the difference for me in my own healing and growth. It did not become clear to me how I could use IFS to help parents until I learned about Polyvagal Theory about 5 years ago. Then it all just clicked together.

8. Have you noticed changes in your own parenting and in your kid's responses or way of being? Can you give an example?

I definitely notice changes in the way I relate to my son now-- he is a young adult now--but I wish I'd had access to these ideas much earlier when my son was little. One example is the practice of pausing before I react. It only takes one breath to just consider whether I'm acting from one of my parts that might not be so helpful. Then I can connect with that part, re-establish it's connection with Self, and make better choices. And, when I do need to make amends with him (because I am NOT perfect), I can use parts language and explain that a part of me took over at that moment, but the whole of me wants a healthy, respectful relationship with him. He gets it.

9. Have your students reported changes in their own parenting and their kids as a result of taking your classes?

Absolutely. A lot of the change is internal-- parents report less guilt and confusion, and feeling more connected to themselves and their values, able to stand behind their parenting decisions

in a relaxed way instead of constantly questioning themselves, and, when they do make a parenting mistake, being able to address it constructively and move on rather than getting paralyzed. Parents also report being more able to stay relaxed in difficult moments with their kids, and not taking their children's' behaviors personally or getting caught up in a fear story about what kind of future their kids will have if they don't... (stop that behavior, learn respect, gain skills, and so on).

10. Why do you think there are so many kids struggling with severe anxiety and depression? Do you believe it's an epidemic?

I think when you scratch the surface we're all struggling with anxiety and depression right now, or else we're just not paying attention (if you're thinking about taking this class, you're probably paying attention). Our children are growing up, learning about the world and deciding what kind of life they want to make for themselves--and it's not a pretty picture at the moment. Our kids are also trying to co-regulate with us and coming up against our burdens of sadness and worry. The fear and despair in adults can come out as addictions (including screen!), reactivity, extreme beliefs, or indifference to human suffering. We're all doing it-- it's normalized for adults, but really hard to look at in our kids.

11. Do you think that besides parents doing this work, kids should also see a therapist?

Parents hold the keys to so much in their child's life, so they have far more power to make change than their children. Every family needs something different, but from my perspective, kids should see a therapist if they want to, or if their therapist is also working closely with the parent's therapist. When a child's therapist and the parent's therapist can work together, everyone gets supported. Sometimes, especially as they get closer to adolescence, kids will speak up and say they want someone who is NOT their parents to talk out their problems with and help them learn new skills-- those kids should definitely have access to a therapist they have trust and rapport with.

12. Do you work with children or teens specifically?

I used to work with children directly, and I still work with teens, but my focus has shifted to working primarily with parents. Parents are the leaders and change-makers in their families. They are the ones with the goals, the vision and the ability to make things happen so much more than their children do. I think it's more direct and productive to just work with parents. Also, parents have so many demands, with so much judgment and so little support in our culture right now, I really want to be there for them in that capacity. Parenting is hard, and we often end up doing it alone, more or less. I want to begin reversing that trend.