

## **Core Strength: Attunement**

Few things capture the depth of a wide range of human feelings like the power of music. Music touches the heart and sparks poignant memories with a force words lack. As a person with limited musical talent, I stand in awe of talented musicians who are able not only to create harmony, but to detect subtle changes in the pitch of their instrument and make needed adjustments when they detect even slightly discordant sounds. Musicians are “attuned” to their instruments – they focus intense attention to the tone emanating from their instrument to detect changes that will result in a disharmonious result.

In human relationships, attunement is the ability to correctly read and effectively respond to the needs and wants of others, and it is one of the Core Strengths identified by neuroscientist Dr. Bruce Perry as essential to optimal child development. Although it is possible to live an emotionally healthy life if one is musically tone-deaf, to be “tone deaf” when it comes to reading others can result in significant challenges for our children. If a human is unable to recognize the emotional cues that are part of every-day communication, they will be unable to successfully participate in social relationships.

Children develop the capacity to recognize the needs, interests, strengths and values of other people through experience. They are not born as attuned humans. Infants are fully self-absorbed, and it is up to attuned care-givers to learn to read and respond to the infant’s signals. This attuned interaction from a loving caregiver becomes the basis for the child’s development of social attunement. When a child interacts with people, one area of the brain processes and attends to the words, while other areas are focused on the nonverbal actions that accompany the words. Through this process, a child begins to make a mental catalog of connections between facial expressions, voice tone, body posture, and behaviors.

Attunement depends upon our capacity for *non-verbal* communication. Some children have difficulty accurately interpreting other people’s emotions, putting them at a disadvantage in all types of human interactions. There are things parents can do to assist their children in developing this skill. Parents can model awareness by being aware themselves talking to children about how other people might feel in various situations. This is particularly important as children become aware of people who may appear different from them. The more attuned a person is to others with whom they interact, the less likely they are to categorize people with negative stereotypes. One definition of attunement is “to bring into a harmonious or responsive relationship.” Musicians do this because they are “tuned in” to their instruments and to the surrounding music. As you hear the beautiful music of this season, remember that you can help your children “tune in” to others in their world.