

Ways of Being

Becoming an "out of the box" parent has deepened Senthil's relationship with his six-year-old daughter. He describes the ways



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LOOKING AT OUR NEWBORN CHILD FOR THE FIRST TIME WAS AN unforgettable moment. The innocence and calm Soniya exuded was simply magical. Life has not been the same since Soniya came into our lives.

I cannot say that all has been perfect for me as a parent. I have begun to realise how easy it is to correct Soniya or even motivate her, but for all the wrong reasons. I have always been aware (like all of us can) of times when I correct Soniya for all the wrong reasons but not as acutely as I am able to these days.

Things really changed when I was introduced to a book written by The Arbinger Institute, entitled *Leadership and Self-Deception – Getting Out of the Box*.

While the title of the book seems to suggest more of a corporate angle – it was for this reason that I actually started reading the book – its contents are more real, more "whole" in its approach. It also, in a big way, invited me to reconsider who I was and how I was with both my wife, Malar, and daughter Soniya.

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I would like to share three key ideas that have become extremely important for me as a parent, as a result of what I learnt and continue to learn at The Arbinger Institute. Three factors that are critical to nurturing Soniya to the best of our ability.

The first thing the book and Arbinger did was to help me start looking beneath the "rightness" of my behaviour to the intent of the behaviour or what is known as the way of being. Let me give you an example: Soniya loves for me to lie down with her when she goes to bed and talk about what we did through the day. Sometimes, these conversations clash with my watching the news. When this happens, I have very often become impatient and told her she should try to sleep as she had to go to school early the next day and therefore needed a good night's rest! While the behaviour seems fine

(yes, she needs to sleep early, needs a good night's rest, it is past her bedtime after all and so on), the intent or my way of being was totally resistant. Why? Because the only reason I got impatient and said those things was so that Soniya would get off my back and allow me to watch the news.

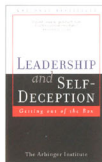
Arbinger's work has helped me realise that however correct my behaviour can be I can never hide my way of being, the true reason behind my behaviour. It always comes through, meaning Soniya always senses my way of being (that is, whether I am being responsive or resistant). She always knows when I am doing something for her because I care for her (the responsive way of being) as opposed to when I am doing something

for her because I have my own agenda (the resistant way of being). As a result of this, she responds to my way of being rather than my behaviour or actions.

Interestingly, learning about my ways of being has enabled me as a parent to be strict with Soniya when I need to be without any of the guilt that can quite often be associated with such behaviour. As long as I am in the responsive way of being, the fact that she can sense it (that it is done out of the best of intentions for her), invites her to be more amenable to the strict behaviour and consequently, respond more positively to it.

Having become more acutely aware of this, these days if Soniya does not respond to me as I would like her to, I simply need to check whether, whatever I am saying or doing is for her or for my own convenience or liking. The best part is I am now empowered to change when I recognise or notice that I am in the resistant way of being which is also called being "in-the-box".

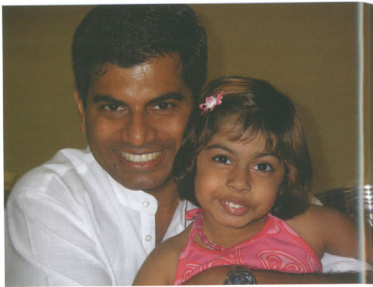
The second point I learnt from Arbinger was to recognise the importance of my relationships with Malar and



Senthil, Malar and Soniya



Soniya to bringing up Soniyya. Here, the realisation that my having a positive and meaningful relationship with Soniyya was contingent on having a positive, loving and meaningful relationship with Malar was an important breakthrough for me. The following passage from an article written by Arbinger entitled "The Parenting Pyramid" gave me a perspective that continues to remind me of my responsibilities: "If parents have difficulties with each other, one way or another, children will get sucked into them. Some parents may punish their children harshly, taking out their marital frustrations on them. Others may indulge their children, seeking to prove they are loved by somebody or at the very least prove that they are someone's favourite." The article goes on to say,



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This fact that my relationship with Malar has a huge impact on my ability to build a relationship with Soniyya has made me assume more responsibility when Soniyya's behaviour, whatever it may be, needs correction. I need to make sure I have indeed created an environment that supports the conversation I need to have with Soniyya.

As a working couple it is easy to get caught up in day-to-day routine and forget how important it is to have that one on one time, quality time, with Malar. In fact I have begun to notice a clear, direct correlation again in the way I respond and am around Soniyya when Malar and I have these quality moments/eatings as opposed to when we are just trying to catch up and live according to our routines. The difference is simply too great to ignore. The love and affection that is communicated to Soniyya when Malar and I have our own time together (when we go for a movie together, dinner or something else that we enjoy)

is vastly and qualitatively superior to the times when we don't make time for each other.

The other part of the relationship is actually with Soniyya. Spending one on one time with her without any agenda, being present, enjoying and willingly participating in things she wants to do is vital to building my relationship with her. Again, I have noticed that when I don't do this, I have great difficulty communicating to/with her or for that matter getting her attention on things I want her to hear!

The third factor is really my ability to listen to her – what she says and what she is trying to say. If Soniyya doesn't feel listened to, the chances of my having a meaningful conversation with her is almost zero. Again, this, my ability to effectively listen, is contingent on my effectiveness in the two factors I have already shared, my responsive way of being and my relationships.

One way I help myself listen better is by becoming more curious about what she is saying and intending to say. Becoming curious about what Soniyya is trying to say by asking more questions about her ideas and points rather than quickly pushing forward my ideas or conclusions or judgements seems to work wonders on how she feels at the end of our conversations. On the other hand, the experience is so different when I simply go through the motions of listening or when I demonstrate either a certain level of fake interest or indifference.

Being an Arbinger facilitator is the best thing that has happened to me. As

an Arbinger facilitator, I facilitate workshops for organisations, leaders, teams, individuals and families about "ways of being" and help participants learn how to stay in the responsive way of being or out-of-the-box. We teach applications on what it means to create an organisational climate that is conducive for optimal focus on results, and in families, a family environment that invites our children to be the best they can be and for couples to be as happy as they can be.

As I teach these ideas and use some of my own stories in the process, I have numerous opportunities to constantly look at how I am doing and practising these three key ideas. I am able to constantly look out for areas in need of improvement. There are many instances where I fail as a parent and at work and in other areas and relationships. But the knowledge I have acquired helps me pick myself up and improve. The realisation that as a parent and leader you are on a journey of growth and wisdom, just as are your children and team members, is a humbling idea that keeps me in a helpful place for my family and colleagues.

Knowing what I know now, as a father, I am more aware of the need to recognise and respect that Soniyya has her own life. Yes, she lives with me and



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is a big part of my life but at the same time, she also has her own likes and dislikes, preferences and choices.

As such, as a parent, three things I try to deliberately do are firstly, help Soniyya consider what she really wants. And when Malar and I make plans, we always consult with her about her ideas. We also make it a point to

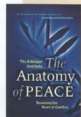
appreciate what she does well and focus on being happy and grateful for everything we have and do. Thirdly, Malar and I constantly demonstrate the need to be respectful of others in everything we do as we go after what we want in life.

Finally, my family life, the relationships I have, my ability to reach out, nurture and nourish my day-to-day relations and interactions with my child are dependent on the first factor, that is, being in the responsive way of being or simply "being out-of-the-box" ☺

Senthi/S. heads the Southeast Asia office of The Arbinger Institute, an international training and consulting organisation. It partners organisations in their change management and transformation efforts by addressing a little-known problem called self-deception, termed the costliest problem in organisations. To discover more, visit www.arbinger.com

POINTERS FOR PARENTS:

- As parents, we need to notice our way of being:
1. Before we say or do anything, notice why you are doing it. Is it out of concern for your child or out of frustration, helplessness or even to get things done your way?
 2. Notice the impact your actions are having.
 3. Notice who you are feeling.
 4. Notice whether you are inviting what you say you want through your actions.



If parents want to understand more about the Ways of Being, they may be interested to read one of the following books: *Anatomy of Peace — Resolving the Heart of Conflict, Leadership and Self Deception — Getting Out of the Box* or Arbinger's article, "The Parenting Pyramid."