

Caring for Those Who Care: Reflections on Child Safeguarding and Early Childhood Education

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What I Learned from Children

My journey in child protection began with a question that continues to guide my work: how can we help children who have experienced violence, abandonment, or other adversities recognize and strengthen their own resources?

Working with children in residential care, I came to understand that their experiences could not always be expressed in words. Distress, needs, and opportunities for development could emerge through the body, movement, play, drawings, and relationships with others.

It was therefore necessary to create spaces that did not rely exclusively on verbal expression, where children could explore different ways of communicating, recognize feelings, and build trusting relationships.

In 2003, my master's research at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo explored ways to strengthen resilience through structured experiences with children in residential care. This work formed the foundation of what would later become the Espiral Method.

The approach developed through the integration of body-based experiences, expressive activities, play, and group interaction. Rather than offering isolated exercises, we sought to create processes in which children could engage with their experiences, find opportunities for expression, and strengthen personal and relational resources.

This work also deepened my understanding of the importance of relationships. What children experience does not occur in isolation: it is influenced by the quality of the relationships and the conditions of care that surround them. This insight led us to focus also on the adults in their lives.

From Children to the Adults Who Care for Them

As the Espiral Method developed, our work expanded to include educators, teachers, health and social care professionals, families, and other caregivers. This was not a departure from our original purpose, but a way of deepening it.

In early childhood, children depend especially on adults who can recognize their needs and provide safety, care, and guidance. As children are still developing the language to communicate complex emotions, fear, insecurity, or distress may be expressed through behavior, movement, play, or other forms of communication.

How adults respond matters. Yet educators and caregivers also face stress, frustration, and emotional challenges that may affect their relationships with children. We therefore came to see supporting these professionals as one way to contribute to more protective environments.

Through Núcleo Espiral's training activities, we seek to give participants opportunities to experience aspects of care themselves: bodily awareness, emotional expression, recognition of boundaries, listening, and the development of relationships. The goal is not simply to teach adults what to do with a child, but to encourage reflection on how they perceive, feel, and respond in caring relationships.

The Espiral Method in Practice

The Espiral Method recognizes that emotional and relational learning involves experiences that go beyond the transmission of information. It integrates five interconnected pillars: Body, Experience, Symbol, Group, and Resilience.

Body

The body is a fundamental dimension of human experience. Through attention to bodily sensations and movement, participants are invited to notice tension, emotions, and different responses to everyday situations. Such awareness may help caregivers recognize their own discomfort and respond more thoughtfully to challenges involving children.

Experience

Experiential learning brings together sensations, emotions, thoughts, and relationships. Activities create opportunities to explore different ways of perceiving and expressing oneself and then reflect on what was experienced. The emphasis is on the participant's experience rather than a predetermined outcome.

Symbol

A symbolic perspective recognizes that bodily expressions, images, play, and creative productions can carry meaning within each participant's unique experience.

Symbolization does not mean assigning fixed interpretations to the expressions of children or adults. Rather, it means creating conditions in which experiences can be lived, expressed, and worked through in a relational context. From this perspective, the body is not merely an instrument for activities but a field of experience and symbolic expression.

This distinction is especially important when working with children: their creative expressions should not be interpreted automatically or used in isolation to determine what they are feeling or experiencing.

Group

The group provides a setting for connection, shared experiences, and relational learning. Participants can practice listening, recognize differences and boundaries, and build trust and mutual support. For educators and caregivers, group experiences also offer opportunities to reflect on shared challenges in everyday care.

Resilience

Resilience is understood as a capacity that can be strengthened through experience, personal resources, and supportive relationships. It is not a demand that children or adults endure adversity alone, but an effort to foster conditions that expand their capacity to cope and develop.

In the Espiral Method, Resilience is the fifth pillar, emerging from the integration of Body, Experience, Symbol, and Group. The pillars are not independent stages; they work together while respecting each participant's pace and individuality.

Care as Part of Child Safeguarding

Our experience, which began with children in residential care, has taught us that safeguarding must consider both children's needs and the relationships and environments in which they grow.

In early childhood education, this means paying attention to ordinary interactions: how a teacher comforts a frightened child, sets boundaries, recognizes signs of distress, or makes room for play and expression. These moments call for professional knowledge, but also sensitivity, self-awareness, and emotional availability.

The Espiral Method seeks to contribute to this relational aspect of education by helping professionals reflect on themselves and their interactions with children. It does not replace formal safeguarding measures. Institutional policies, training to recognize risks, reporting and referral procedures, and access to specialist services remain essential. Experiential work can complement these measures by strengthening the human and relational dimensions of care.

One conviction has become central to me: protecting children means more than preventing violence. It also means creating the conditions for safe relationships, opportunities for expression, and support for

development. The Espiral Method began with the search for these possibilities among children and expanded as we recognized that adults also need opportunities for care, reflection, and growth.

Caring for those who care is one way to strengthen the relationships that protect children. Together with responsible institutional safeguarding practices, these relationships can contribute to preventing violence and building safer environments.

About the Author

Neusa Maria Lopes Sauaia is a psychologist and the founder and president of Núcleo Espiral – Assistance, Research and Prevention of Violence Against Children and Adolescents, in Brazil. She holds a degree in Psychology and a master's degree in Clinical Psychology from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, and a specialization in Jungian Psychotherapy combined with body-based techniques from Instituto Sedes Sapientiae.

Her additional training includes Somatic Experiencing, Self-Healing, and therapeutic approaches addressing trauma and body–mind integration. She is a member of the Brazilian Institute of Sandplay Therapy. Her work focuses on violence prevention, care for vulnerable children and adolescents, and strengthening resilience. She developed the Espiral Method, an approach integrating bodily, experiential, symbolic, and group processes in work with children, families, educators, and care professionals.