

## Susan Hart to social educators: **Everyone should be seen with kind eyes**

Since childhood, psychologist Susan Hart has had a pioneering urge to understand people and what happens between them. Emotional development is hindered when people are not met with kind eyes. Here, social educators play a central role. And Susan Hart has the approach.

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Psychologist Susan Hart was chatting with the chief physician in the kitchen of the child psychiatric ward at Gentofte Hospital, where she worked. She had been reading the latest research from the USA on the structure and development of the brain. She had delved into psychological theories about attachment and relationships.

And she had no doubt that it all—neuroscience and developmental psychology—needed to be tied together. It had to be given a name. And if she didn't do it, decades later, she would find herself a bitter old woman—because someone else would do it.

Susan Hart has traveled across Denmark giving lectures and courses on the understanding framework of Neuroaffective Developmental Psychology, and her books and articles have been translated and published in several countries. Meet her here and read why the work of influencing people's emotional maturation has everything to do with social educators.

"I told the chief physician, 'You know what, this is so exciting. I think it's going to be big—someday,'" says Susan Hart.

Today, 25 years later, she sits in her study room in her summer house near Kalundborg —wearing a coral-red shirt and with bright, sparkling eyes, she tells the story of the journey leading to what many social educators now know as Neuroaffective Developmental Psychology.

She has toured Denmark with lectures and courses on the understanding framework, and her books and articles have been translated and published in several countries. And in May 2025, she will be one of the keynote speakers when AIEJI – International Association of Social Educators invites social educators from all over the world to the 21st AIEJI World Congress in Copenhagen under the theme 'Social Educators Change Lives.'

– When I look back, I feel both humble and grateful that so many people have embraced it. Now I hope that others will take up the baton because I don't believe we'll see this change in my time, she says.

What it is that needs to change requires further explanation. But first, let's turn back time to where it all began.

### A Sensitive Child

Susan Hart grew up in a diverse home in Copenhagen – with a father from a better working-class neighborhood in London and a mother from the rural community of central Jutland. The parents were starting a business, so little Susan was among the first children to attend kindergarten.

– As an only child, it was good for me to be among other children. And I loved my kindergarten, which really gave me social contacts. But as an only child with the rest of the family in London and central Jutland, it didn't take much to trigger a feeling of loneliness, she recalls.

Susan Hart was also a sensitive child who took it to heart when other children were bullied at school or reprimanded by teachers.

– I had a very close relationship with my mother, and she was good at accommodating my distress over it. My mother and I, however, had significant problems when I hit puberty, as she struggled with my detachment. I don't think she ever really accepted it, she says.

And even though it's just a rationalization that Susan Hart makes from the armchair – with a view over Kalundborg Fjord and a perspective on a lived life – she is still convinced that this is where it all started.

## Susan Hart

- Born in 1956 in London and raised in Copenhagen.
- Educated as a psychologist and psychotherapist with many years of experience from municipalities, family centers, 24-hour institutions, residential homes, substance abuse centers, and psychiatry.
- Independent psychologist, supervisor, educator, and author.
- Ph.D. from Aalborg University in 2018.
- Has developed neuroaffective developmental psychology, which is a framework for understanding human emotional, personality, and social development.

– I've always pondered over human relationships. And the emotional break with my mother made me think about what happens between people and how much emotions really matter, even though back then, and even now, we don't talk much about how we develop emotionally. Or about how we create presence, empathy, and a sense of flow between us – and how painful it is when it doesn't happen, she says.

### Understanding the Brain

When it became clear to the young Susan Hart that she wanted to do 'something with people,' and that she loved to read and understand, it was natural to study psychology at the university, followed by a four-year postgraduate education in body and gestalt therapy.

Her first job was in Slagelse Municipality, where she was responsible for the day care sector and the social assistance department. She supervised educators, health visitors, and social workers – and spoke with social assistance clients who were struggling in life.

But Susan Hart dreamed of becoming a clinical psychologist and therefore spent one day a week at the psychiatric department in Nykøbing Sjælland. Here, the chief psychologist opened doors to entirely new insights by inviting her into a network of 15 psychologists who met annually at his summer house – with therapists and researchers from the broader world who brought the latest research into the circle.

– It was a whole universe that opened to me. For three years in a row, the American psychologist Peter Levine came, who was focused on the brain and the autonomic nervous system (the autonomic nervous system regulates the functions of the body that we are not consciously aware of performing, ed.). And it became incredibly exciting to understand the brain's structure and emotional organization, and how the brain needs to be stimulated to achieve emotional development. This happened while infant researcher Daniel Stern became a well-known name in Denmark, says Susan Hart.

### Driven by a Pioneer Spirit

Simultaneously, Susan Hart was tasked with establishing a family treatment center in Slagelse Municipality with a group of social educators under her leadership.



Just as popular as Susan Hart is in the practice world, she is a tender spot in academic circles. But she has been very conscious that she wanted her framework to de-academicize—for it to be practical among practitioners.

– We had to, among other things, challenge the idea that you can just send social educators into a home, and then they can intuitively 'do something' for the family. No, we had to work according to theories and methods, and we needed to work much more structured and targeted, she says.

As the head of the family treatment center, Susan Hart also witnessed many types of disturbances in the relationship between children and parents. Subsequently, in her work within child psychiatry, she gained insight into how psychological vulnerability can be influenced both by upbringing and by inherent sensitivity.

Meanwhile, thoughts on integrating theories of brain structure and development, evolutionary psychology, developmental psychology, attachment theory, and trauma understanding continued to swirl in Susan Hart's mind.

– I was captivated by that whole pioneer spirit of understanding the human being and why it behaves the way it does. In the psychiatric department, we dealt a lot with the 'Bible,' she says, lifting a small, blue spiral-bound book, 'Psychiatric Disorders and Behavioral Disturbances – Classification and Diagnostic Criteria.'

– But there wasn't much focus on understanding the behavior behind the symptoms. And so, we return to that day in the kitchen and the conversation with the chief physician. Because it was here that Susan Hart, as she puts it, really got fired up.

### Development Must Be Nurtured

Susan Hart contacted a publisher to get all her thoughts down on paper. And after a year, she realized that she had written the first two books on neuroaffective developmental psychology.

A key cornerstone of neuroaffective developmental psychology is the belief that humans are inherently social: that we develop our personality, emotions, and social behavior through interactions with other people.

Another essential cornerstone of neuroaffective developmental psychology is the American neurologist Paul MacLean's model of the "triune brain," where the brain is hierarchically divided into an autonomous, limbic, and prefrontal level. The three levels develop—one after the other—in line with our age. But development doesn't just happen on its own. It must be nurtured in close encounter moments.

– When we talk about motor development, we have the saying that one must crawl before walking. When we talk about cognitive development, it is also completely accepted that a child in 6th grade

## The Triune Brain

In neuroaffective developmental psychology, the brain is divided into three levels: the autonomous, limbic, and prefrontal levels. The three levels develop in line with our age:

**The autonomous/sensory level:** The child is zero to three months. Here, the fundamental ability to synchronize, regulate arousal up and down, and feel pleasure and displeasure is developed.

**The limbic/emotional level:** The child is three months to one year. Here, emotional attunement is exchanged. It is here that we distinguish "Who am I, and who are you?" "What do I feel?" It is also here that the ability to empathize and mirror others' emotions and moods develops.

**The prefrontal/thinking level:** From the child is one to twenty-five years. It is here we develop the ability to inhibit our impulses and our mentalization capacity, which enables us to act socially appropriately.

doesn't understand the curriculum of 10th grade. But when it comes to emotional development, the understanding falters. In reality, it's the same: We have an innate capacity when it comes to arousal, sensitivity, etc., which we get help and support to regulate and develop through our environment. If this doesn't happen, we don't mature as we should. And then it manifests in all the ways you see here, she says, patting the blue "bible."

### **Create Encounter Moments**

But what does all this have to do with social educators? If you ask Susan Hart, the answer is prompt: everything.

– For social educators work with vulnerable people of all ages who precisely have not received what they needed to be able to regulate their emotions. We need to create the encounter moment where we can support and influence emotional maturation," she says.

For this work, Susan Hart has developed the "neuroaffective triangle." One leg of the triangle is the theory of neuroaffective developmental psychology, which is the entire foundation for understanding why the child or adult behaves the way they do. Susan Hart calls this the "map."

– When development doesn't occur at the time it should, one needs to know something theoretical about what normal development and developmental impairment are," she says.

The next leg of the triangle she calls the "GPS." This involves a series of assessment methods that can be used to investigate the citizen's emotional developmental level and a series of intervention methods to decide which activities and games can stimulate emotions and support maturation.

### **Zone of Proximal Emotional Development**

For example, Susan Hart has developed both the neuroaffective compasses and the neuroaffective analysis, which can be used to highlight resources and vulnerabilities on three levels: the autonomous, limbic, and prefrontal. This can be used to map and analyze what the most appropriate intervention might be.

– We need to find the citizen's zone of proximal emotional development. If the citizen, for example, has difficulty regulating their emotions, it may be a limbic issue. If it is hard to get up in the morning, it might be a prefrontal issue, she says and continues:

– It could also be that the citizen looks everywhere else when we talk and isn't really reachable, which might indicate an autonomous issue. If it concerns autonomous and limbic issues, we cannot create changes through language content but must work experientially. For instance, we could take a small ball and toss it to each other or blow a feather back and forth to create an experiential activity that generates synchronized encounter moments, which jump-start maturation.





### You Are the Driver

Finally, there is the third leg of the "neuroaffective triangle," where Susan Hart has placed the aspect of self-agency—the part she also calls the "driver," meaning the social educator themselves and their ability to engage in developmental interactions with the citizen.

– As a social educator, you are in an asymmetrical relationship with the person whose development you wish to support. It is the social educator's responsibility to ensure things go well. And if they don't, it is the social educator's job to use understandings and methods to figure out why and what can be done differently. This responsibility must be taken very seriously. And I want this to be more deeply embedded in social educators' understanding of themselves and their professionalism," she says.

And it is precisely the neuroaffective triangle that Susan Hart encourages social educators to use to change what she believes is so crucially necessary: viewing emotional development in the same way as cognitive and motor development.

– We are concerned with emotions in our society. But we are not concerned with what it takes for us to become emotionally well-developed people. We focus on distress and diagnoses but don't understand that the ability to regulate oneself emotionally and comprehend the complexity of emotions requires development. The consequence is a lot of distress, which becomes hard to resolve," she says, concluding: – There are truly people in this world who have never been met with the loving gaze of another person — and it is among these people that our help is most needed to develop the ability to form emotional relationships.

In neuroaffective developmental psychology, the work is based on the "neuroaffective triangle," which consists of three cornerstones, all of which impact each other: theoretical understanding, assessment and intervention methods, and self-agency.