

# Compromised Attachments: Understanding Reactive Attachment Disorder

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- § Working with children with compromised attachments is about working to build relationships. This needs to be the focus. Even more than behavior, we must focus on the relationship and the process of what is happening in the relationship.
- § Our job as therapists and caseworkers is to facilitate this process

# Attachment Focused parenting is more than Discipline

- § Attachment is central to development and is the **Connection**.
- § **Connections** repeated guide a child in a positive manner without sacrificing individuality and autonomy
- § **Connections are more important than Correcting**

# Attachment: Bowlby and Ainsworth

- § Persistent and on-going, not temporary
- § Is Directed toward a specific person
- § Is emotionally significant
- § Is Directed toward maintaining contact with another
- § Show distress during involuntary separations
- § Is characterized by seeking security and comfort

- § About 2/3 of all children have attachment security and benefit from its positive influence as they develop. Securely attached children do not become dependent on others as adults.
- § About 1/3 of all attachments have insecurity, but most still have organized patterns of attachment, even if these attachments have limited usefulness and leave them vulnerable to some developmental challenges

# Why is attachment important?

Attachment is the key to:

- The development of a healthy personality
- § The attainment of full intellectual potential
- § The development of logical thinking
- § The development of conscience
- § The development of relationships with family members and friends

# Importance of attachment (cont)

- § Management of affect regulation such as fear and worry
- § Ability to develop coping strategies that are healthy
- § Ability to deal with perceived threats to safety

# First Year Attachment Cycle

- § Needs expressed lead to a response from caretakers
- § Response leads to a need fulfillment, calming and soothing for the child.
- § Repetition of the pattern leads to a development of trust



# The Unhealthy First Year Attachment Cycle

- § Child learns that they need to meet their own needs.
- § Learn self soothing techniques when hungry, cold, lonely and in pain.
- § Learn to trust themselves to meet their own needs
- § The brain begins to believe that adults are nonresponsive at best and dangerous and unpredictable at the worst.

# Signs of Poor Attachment in Infancy

- § Child who is resistant to cuddling and seems to pull away
- § Poor eye contact, gaze avoidant
- § Poor sucking response
- § Tactile defensiveness
- § Lack of reciprocal smile, although may smile for strangers or casual visitors
- § Weak crying or rageful crying

# Second Year Attachment Cycle

- § This is the year that children begin to learn permanence
- § When there are interruptions to this cycle the child develops shame and doubt rather than developing a sense of autonomy.
- § Mother's voice does not develop in his head as a guide.

# Second Year Attachment Cycle

- § Need or want is expressed by Child
- § Parents set appropriate limits
- § Child May Protest Limits but generally accepts parental limits
- § Parents give approval and child feels a sense of accomplishment

# The Unhealthy 2 Year Old Attachment Cycle

- § When appropriate boundaries are not set, children do not feel that sense of safety.
- § If the limits are too lax the child may fail to learn responsibilities and control
- § If the limits are given too harshly the child feels great shame which is immobilizing, and they have no belief they can do anything on their own.

# Bonding Cycles of Trust

- § World is a safe place
- § Child's needs will be met
- § Child can influence the world
- § Parent is reliable and good
- § Child can believe they are good

# Memory states

§ Cognitive

§ Emotional

§ Motor

§ State

# Stress

- § Causes confused and distorted thinking
- § Impairs short term memory
- § Impairs ability to communicate
- § Trauma triggers heighten stress receptors



# Mission of the Primary Attachment Figure

- § Provider
- § Protector
- § Guide

# Impact of Failure of the Parent to Provide, Protect and Guide

- § Attachments don't happen
- § The trust cycle does not develop, the cycle of mistrust does
- § Without attachments, one does not get solid cause and effect thinking
- § Empathy does not develop
- § A distortion of what it means to survive develops

# Interruptions to the Attachment Process

- § Trauma or major upset to mother during pregnancy.
- § Alcohol or drug exposure in utero.
- § Any form of physical, mental, or sexual abuse.
- § Neglect of infants and toddlers.
- § Separation from the primary caregiver.
- § Multiple moves or placements.
- § Pain that cannot be relieved.
- § Placements that are not permanent

## Children who have lost predictability through compromised attachments

- § Lose their ability to make sense of the world
- § Have difficulty with logic and reasoning
- § Don't believe that pleasing adults will have any positive outcome for them
- § Want to control anything in their life that they can
- § Have major difficulties with trust

# Impact of Trauma

- § The child who did not attach during infancy or had the attachment compromised by trauma plays out all the pain they repressed
- § Parents need to relate to the pain, showing empathy and nurture, while setting the structure

# Characteristics of the Older Child with Attachment Disorder

- § Poor eye contact
- § Lies
- § Has a great need to control
- § Steals and Hoards
- § Superficially charming with strangers
- § Problems with soiling, and sometimes wetting

- § Incessant chatter
- § Can be passive or very explosive
- § Preoccupation with fire, gore, and violence
- § Don't avoid mistakes, keep repeating them
- § Demanding and clingy
- § Does not know how to play
- § Not able to be reciprocal with relationships

- § Asks repeated or nonsense questions
- § Deliberately breaks things
- § Tells stories with a piece of truth but sequence or some details may be missing
- § Sometimes learning lags or disabilities
- § Poor peer relationships
- § Parenting or treatment focused on change through reinforcement or punishment is generally ineffective
- § Poor sense of time- a day is a lifetime, a week is an hour



# What do the Parents Look Like ?

- § Feel tired and angry and don't know why they feel so angry
- § May appear hostile to providers
- § All of this is because they don't feel understood and believed for what they are experiencing
- § Parents take on the anger that their child is feeling but when they express it it doesn't make sense

§ Parents must deal with the loss of the dream of a child with reciprocity, in order to help their child develop reciprocity

# Types of Attachment Problems

- § Organized but avoidant
- § Organized but ambivalent
- § Disorganized

# Organized but Avoidant

- § Child minimizes the importance of parents and overemphasizes self reliance .
- § The emphasis is on independence vs. relationships

# Organized but Anxious

- § Child emphasizes reliance on his parents and avoids the development of self reliance skills
- § Emphasizes dependence and fear of loss of the parent

# Disorganized Attachment

- § Child does not demonstrate an organized pattern of attachment related behaviors when stressed
- § Can't rely upon themselves or others
- § Unpredictable in their response to stress
- § Try to rigidly control events to create safety because they don't have the self reliance skills or relationships to mediate these events.

# Effective Treatment

- § Only minimal research on effective strategies for treatment of Reactive Attachment Disorder
- § Play therapy and individual therapy have generally been ineffective
- § Treatment methods such as rebirthing and other coercive therapies have been highly controversial. Rebirthing is not considered to be a safe treatment method, nor are therapies that focus on restraint.

# Effective Treatments

§ Other methods such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy have been demonstrated to be effective in evidenced based research and are considered to be safe.

Becker-Weidman, *Treatment for Children with Trauma Attachment Disorders: Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy*, Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal. 23(2), April 2006



# Effective Treatment

- § Treatment must include the parent and the primary caregiver
- § May be considered individual therapy provided within a family context.
- § Treatment is relationship focused while paying close attention to the process evolving in the relationship

# When the child has had multiple placements

§ If the child is now being raised by someone other than the birth parents, or has had multiple separations, they may be bringing in transplanted trauma of which the current caretakers/parents may have little knowledge. Parenting and treatment must address this. Traditional therapy which sees the problems as all related to the parents may miss how much of the current behavior is connected to trauma that the parents were not a part of in any way.

# Parenting and Treatment need to target the relationship

§ This allows for:

- | Feeling loved
- | Experiencing peace and joy
- | Experiencing comfort and encouragement
- | Validation as a person

§ When parenting and treatment target performance and behaviors with a child before there is a solid relationship between the parent and the child, a relationship will not develop.

§ Need to look carefully at what is the goal. Is it all about changing behaviors, or is it to develop a relationship?

§ If you focus on relationship building

- | Fears and worries can decrease
- | Trust can increase
- | Children will allow you to teach them about regulating their emotions.

# There is time for performance

However meaningful performance results  
from intimate (close) relationships formed  
at the right time for the right reason

# Therapeutic Work

§ PACE- Therapist sets a healing pace by being Playful, Accepting, Curious and Empathetic

§ PLACE- Parents create the healing environment by being Playful, Loving, Accepting Curious and Empathetic

Dan Hughes

# Understanding Behaviors

§ Must Know the meaning of behavior before you respond

§ Meaning includes:

- | Thoughts
- | Feelings
- | Wishes
- | Intentions
- | Perceptions
- | Values
- | Memories

All these connect to the behavior



# Misbehavior or Survival Behavior?

§ Often kids with trauma use survival behavior. It kept them safe in the past, but does not work in the current setting

# Understanding the role of Shame in repairing attachments

- § Discipline of child triggers shame.
- § Shame becomes more than they can tolerate.
- § Avoid by denying responsibility.
- § See themselves as life's victim, therefore have no responsibility for their behavior
- § Parents need to be sensitive to when they have pricked the children's deep well of shame.

# Basic Principles of Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy

§ Safety

§ Self Regulation

§ Self Reflective Information Processing

§ Traumatic Experience Integration

§ Relational Engagement

§ Positive Affect Enhancement

# Parent Issues- Preparing for Parenting the Traumatized Child

- § Even in the best of situations, parents get triggered. Every parent needs to know their triggers and plan for their addressing of their own triggers.
- § Parents need to be well aware of their own attachment patterns
- § Parents need to have developed some skills to be able to deal with the emotional content the child brings.

§ Our emotional reactions to the child's history need to be balanced so as not to overwhelm our ability to think through how to manage the child's experience and memories in the moment.

§ Workers can help parents to understand their own attachment history, triggers and trauma as they prepare to parent their children.

§ They also need to deal with their own emotions about their child's history, so that they can allow their child to have their own feelings.

**§ Parents have the best influence on their children when their children can also have an influence on them**

§ As we grow older, words tend to dominate the sharing of information

§ But the non verbal foundation of the relationship remains pivotal in the communication leading to a deeper and more meaningful relationship between those who are connected.



# What is the Child's Inner Working Model

- § Treatment helps the child to define their own inner working model, reflect on it, and use their current experience to shift it.
- § Connecting with the underlying meaning of the behavior to the child allows the parents to respond with empathy and support.

# Emotional safety

- § All feelings are honored and heard with respect, including angry feelings
- § Feelings, even intense feelings, can be tolerated while the therapist and/or the parent maintains the connection with the child
- § **Parent focuses more on listening than teaching**

- § Parent learns to stay carefully attuned to their child so the child can remain regulated and feel supported
- § Parent is helped to provide feedback to the child's inner experience without giving judgment
- § Solutions are explored even in the face of stress .

# How do we listen to the child?

- § Most parents and therapists want their child to feel good. In order to do this, they give positive messages to enhance self esteem.
- § But what happens when the child disagrees with your view, or simply does not believe the positive message? Essentially they think the therapist and parent is useless, stupid, missing the mark, doesn't care etc.

# Strategies for Connecting to the Pain

§ Parents need to have languaging ideas

§ “You don’t know how I feel”

“I am guessing I wasn’t getting it at all. I am sorry, will you tell me?”

“No but I really want to, and even if it is hard for me to hear, I am going to work on listening, not defending myself”

“I really want to listen to you, and if you can tone it down just a bit, I think I can”

§ Therapist must facilitate this experience for the child with their parent, it is not enough for the therapist to do it in front of the parent and child.

- § Parents or caregivers need to apologize even if they were not involved in the child's life at that time, they can apologize for not being there.
- § Parents or caregivers should not be cutting their children slack and not addressing issues because of what they did not do in the past. Their job is to understand the pain and validate it. That is how they “make up” for it.
- § Validating the pain does not require you to agree that this is what happened, only that you hear and get how they are feeling.

# Interactive Repair

- § Reduces or resolves the sense of shame
- § Occurs through multiple repetitions of the attachment cycle between parent and child
  - | Shared affective (emotional) experience
  - | Breach in the relationship
  - | Reattachment



# Reflective Dialogue

- § Helps the child reflect what they are saying and hear that you are understanding them, or at least trying to “get” what their experience was.
- § Cognitive Revelations

## To consequence or not:

- § Discipline given with annoyance or anger becomes the attachment compromised child's proof adults wish to hurt them. So life is seen as perilous
- § The child defends with rage and anger
- § More is gained by hearing the child's perception and letting them explore it.

§ All behavior does not require a consequence, in fact in some cases the consequence given too early is counterproductive

Think about the behavior in the paradox. What does it provide for the child. How does it help them?

Ie. Stealing- if you see this as a way to calm the discomfort being generated from within your approach becomes different. What does the stealing provide for them.

Once the child gets they why of the behavior, through discovering it themselves the consequence makes sense.

Children with attachment difficulties cannot differentiate feelings.

All emotions are translated to one or two emotions, often anger or rage to avoid the sense of shame.

Even if sadness is expressed, it is likely expressed as rage.

# Relationships

- § Anger, withdrawal mediates closeness
- § When relationship gets too close child will put distance in.
- § Peer relationships are often brief.
- § Don't think about how current actions will impact future relationship.
- § Can't let self care without feeling vulnerable.

- § When a parent tends to be punitive and want to use punishments, have them look at some of the material from Heather Forbes- Beyond Logic, Consequences and Control
- § When a parent has too few rules and is too lenient, have them look at material from Deborah Hage.
- § Each have valuable perspectives to share although families may need guidance in implementing the strategies to insure they are appropriate.
- § Encourage parents to process new strategies with their therapists first as treatment needs to be individualized.

## Techniques to connect with your child

- § The wounded heart
- § Rice box play- working together is more successful than working alone
- § Post it note therapy
- § The candy game

# Techniques for treatment

§ Life stories or other narratives

§ Books-

- | Llama Llama Red Pajama
- | Llama Llama Mad at Mama
- | The Run Away Bunny
- | I Could Eat You Up
- | The Angry Dragon
- | The Red Thread
- | Mother Bridge of Love
- | Maybe Days



# Parent Strategies

§ Need to teach parents to parent in a different way and let them know it may be counterintuitive

- Keep child in close proximity if child is emotionally young.

- Avoid control battles.

- Be a parent with high nurture, and providing safety. This will include structure

Do's and Don'ts  
of Parenting the Child  
with Compromised Attachments

§ Help the family to connect to other parents experiencing what they are- help them to use support groups or mentors

§ Parents must have a support network. Their friends, family and old support system may not work for them now as they will not likely understand the underlying dynamics of the child's pain and hurt

# Oil and Water: School and the Child with Attachment Difficulties

- § School is often collaborative and working together.
- § The fear base of the attachment compromised child means individual work will likely be less triggering.
- § Group work stimulates the attachment compromised child's anxiety.

§ The many people at school give a number of targets for the attachment compromised child for their projections, splitting or feeling safe by using the vulnerabilities of others .

§ School requires a high level of hyper-vigilance for the attachment compromised child to maintain a perceived emotional safety

- § Parents of attachment compromised children need to help child feel safe with dependence. School promotes independence.
- § School sets a standard for performance, children with attachment difficulties feel threatened by standards of others
- § School becomes an arena for child to get nurturing and avoid it at home.
- § School and home can be easily split.

# School Strategies

§ Drill the concept of choices- use better choices, or look at the better and less good choices

§ Don't ask

did you, why did you, do you remember, and what did you say?

Act as a historian

- § Guess to come up with a child's agenda- "I wonder", "I am guessing", and "Oh, I get it, I think"
- § Observe non verbal cues
- § Don't use the word lying or manipulative or lazy
- § Consider using traditional classroom rules and expectations more than collaborative approaches.



# Thoughts about Homework

- § Homework is designed to reinforce what the child was taught at school
- § If homework becomes a battleground, stop, all that is being reinforced is the lesson done wrong
- § If parents are reteaching at night- stop, the child needs a parent, not for the parent to be their school teacher

# Resources for clinicians

- § Building the Bonds of Attachment- Dan Hughes
- § Attachment Focused Family Therapy- Dan Hughes
- § Attachment Focused Parenting- Dan Hughes
- § Beyond Logic, Consequences and Control- Heather Forbes
- § The Connected Child- Karen Purvis
- § Creating Capacity for Attachment- Art Becker Weidman, et. al