Attachment Based Principles for Helping Youth With Trust & Attachment Difficulties

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What Causes Damaged Attachment?

- Abuse in early childhood
- Painful, prolonged illnesses (Colic)
- Neglect
- Loss of Parent Figure
- Unemotional Parenting
- Domestic Violence

What are the Psychological Effects?

- Negative Internal Working Model
- Low Trust
- Low Sense of Safety
- Phobia for Intimacy

Trust

- How many losses does it take before you no longer trust that people will be there for you?
- How much harm does it take to be convinced that most people are dangerous?
- If adults are dangerous, then who should be in control of your life?

Inner Working Model

- A mental construction or representation
- Implicit view of self and others (based on procedural memory- not something taught explicitly)
- Formed through interactions
- Laid down as neural pathways
- Stable but can be changed by new experiences

Inner Working Model

- Positive interactions Negative interactions

- **Self** as lovable, special, competent
- **Others** as loving, responsive
- **World** as a safe, exciting place

- **Self** as unlovable, incompetent
- **Others** as uncaring, untrustworthy
- **World** as unsafe, full of threats

Avoid Intimacy–But Get Needs Met In Superficial Ways

- We need the support of others
- We need touch
- We need the services of the world

- How will you obtain these? Maintain these? Yet keep yourself safe?

Critical Symptoms to Be Alert For…

- Superficially engaging & charming
- Manipulative & splitting parents
- Obvious, absurd lying
- Hoarding food
- Stealing
- Cruel to animals or people
- Lack of remorse
- Poor eye contact
- Affectionate only on their own terms
- Affectionate or attention seeking from strangers
- Extensive Tantrums
- Encopresis/Enuresis
- Destructive of property
- Haggard Parents

Isolated-Avoidant

- Sadness is predominant emotion
- Avoid nurturing touch because of aversion to intimacy
- Intimacy/nurture is seen as dangerous due to being hurt by caretakers in the past
- Prefer a passive-aggressive approach to relating to adults, but avoid open defiance
- Tend to be hyper-independent and may have cared for younger siblings at a very early age

Evasive-Anxious

- Fear is predominant emotion (especially fear of abandonment)
- Seek to be close to adults, but do so in intrusive ways (nonstop chatter, invading personal space, interrupting)
- Relationships lack intimacy: They drain emotional resources by clingy/attention seeking behavior and give little back (lack reciprocity)
- Prefer a passive-aggressive approach to relating to adults, and alter their presentation to what they perceive will be most accepted (thus “real” feelings are avoided in therapy).

Defiant-Ambivalent

- Anger/rage is predominant emotion
- Rage is used to avoid feeling other emotions of fear, sadness, loneliness
- They are directly defiant and aggressive
- The directness of their emotion/behavior makes them disruptive and prone to rejection by foster parents
- Easier to work with therapeutically because their emotions and motivations are more clear
- Primary thinking error: “There’s not enough for everyone so I need to get mine first”

Bizarre-Disorganized

- Free-floating anxiety is predominant emotion
- At risk for poor reality testing or even psychosis
- Tend to be more impaired neurologically (IQ, LD, sensory problems)
- Tend to throw prolonged tantrums
- Tend to be hyper-independent and may have cared for younger siblings at a very early age

Engagement Principles

- Nonverbal message over verbal message
- Small repetitions over large cramming sessions
- Give it time
- Under the Radar Principle
- Be There and Be Consistent
- Cooperation over Competition

Theraplay Principles for Connection

- Structure
- Engagement
- Nurture
- Challenge

Structure

- Have clear boundaries
- Have clear values
  - Be Safe
  - Stick Together
  - Have Fun
- Do safe, non-competitive, clearly defined activities
  - Special handshake
  - Mirror game

Engagement

- Fun and Laughter create engagement & connection
- Games that promote this:
  - Silly faces
  - Pterodactyl

Nurture

- Affirming eye contact
- Food
- Caring touch when socially appropriate
- Games
  - How fast can you slurp up a licorice string
  - How many bites before the donut falls off the straw
  - Check up—Just noticing the other person

Challenge

- Our relationships help us grow and develop
- Our role is to help a youth learn in the proximal zone of development
- Youth need to develop confidence, but this can be through fun activities
  - Cotton ball soccer
  - Feather or bubble keep up

Termination

- Use Structure
  - Be clear about your role
  - Be clear about boundaries
  - Be clear about long term expectations
- The primary secure base should be the parent, so facilitate this as much as possible
- Facilitate other secondary supports
- Fade back
- Have a termination/commencement party
- The child can handle it

Helping Parents Understand

- Get their perspective
- Listen with empathy first

Critical Symptoms Parents Complain Of…

- Superficially engaging & charming
- Manipulative & splitting parents
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- Hoarding food
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Trauma Education

- Looking through the lens of trauma is sometimes easier for parents
- Provide education on trauma effects
  - Hypervigilance
  - Poor sleep and nightmares
  - Insecurity
  - Heightened sense of shame

Provide Neurological Explanation

- Trauma conditions the brain
- Trauma conditions the whole nervous system
- When trauma is related to early childhood experiences it creates relationship insecurity at nervous system conditioned level.
- Sometimes this helps put things in perspective, making more understandable—not a moral problem

When All Explanations Fail…

- Don’t worry about it…
- Continue on with the program
- Meet the family and child where they are at
- Meet the needs you can
- Give it time
- Experience and behavior is more important than insight or knowledge