Attachment Disorder:
How to help your hurting child

Melissa Nichols, M.A., L.M.F.T.
Family Attachment and Counseling Center of Minnesota
Model and Meaning

Attachment Relationships

Meaning
Model and Meaning

- Attachment
- Relationships
- Life Events
- Trauma
- Meaning
Possible Impact of Attachment on Development

• Physical
• Emotional
• Cognitive
• Social
• Spiritual
Patterns of Attachment

I. **Organized**
   - **Secure**
   - **Insecure**
     - Avoidant Attachment
     - Ambivalent Attachment

II. **Disorganized**
   - **Insecure**
Behavioral Clues

- Indiscriminate in affection? Superficially charming?
- Able to ask for help? Able to accept help?
- Inappropriately demanding of attention?
- Excessively controlling?
- Passive-aggressive?
- Prolonged temper tantrums or rages?
- Receives a compliment well?
- Wants to please his caregiver?
- Responds appropriately to the good fortune of others?
- Physically and/or verbally aggressive when doesn’t get his way?
- Zone out or dissociate?
Two Important Factors for Attachment Repair

• Attunement

• Regulation
Attunement

The ability of a parent to accurately read the emotional state and motivations of his or her child, reflect what he or she is feeling with words, and appropriately meet his or her need.
Healthy Effects

• Regulate emotional state
• Helps form healthy concept of self and others
• Supports language development
• Assists a child in learning about a relationship-cooperative partnership
• Supports development of a coherent narrative
Unhealthy Effects

- Dysregulated emotional state
- Negative concept of others and self
- Impaired language development
- Insecure relationship with caregiver
- Incoherent narrative
Factors which can affect attunement

• Parents' model of attachment
• Mental state of a parent
• Amount of time spent with a child
• How supported a parent feels
• The child’s perspective
Regulation

A person’s ability to calm—to regulate body, emotions, and states of mind. Parents help children to regulate.
Children with Poor Regulation

- Moody
- Frequent Temper Tantrums
- Aggressive
- Compulsive Behaviors
- Retreat/Withdraw
Techniques to Promote Attunement and Regulation

- Mind-Body Connection
- Family Attachment Narrative Therapy
Mind-Body Connection

- Sensory Integration / Developmental Movement to Regulate
- Nutrition & Exercise
- Digital Audio Visual Entrainment
- EMDR
- Medication
- Animal Assisted Therapy (Equine Assisted)
Shifting Inner Working Model with Narratives
Why Do Stories Work?

• Stories are culturally universal and timeless
• Organizes memories and gives meaning to life (coherent narrative)
• Stories promote neural integration of thinking and feeling
• Stories channel a different perspective of life events--Change the story, change self understanding
Constructing Stories

- Setting
- Props
- Perspective
- Hero
- Message
Types of Narratives

• Claiming
• Developmental
• Trauma
• Successful Child
Claiming Narratives

- Strengthens emotional bond
- Facilitates trust
- Establishes birth order
- Extended family
- Passes on traditions, history, rituals
Developmental Narratives

• Facilitates cognitive development
• Enhances emotional regulation
• Builds relationships
• Remedial skill building
From the first, you were a child that deserved to be loved and cared for by parents you could trust.
Trauma Narratives

- Heals pain of trauma
- Creates empathy
- Fosters understanding
Even though you experienced abuse, abandonment, neglect, you deserved to be loved and cared for by responsible parents.
Successful Child Narratives

- Teaches values
- Reinforces cause and effect thinking
- Presents alternative behaviors
- Explains basics of “How To Do” life
Your problem behavior does not define your value and we will be there to love and support you as you make changes.
Additional Resources

• **Parenting with Stories:** Creating a foundation of attachment for parenting your child (Nichols, Lacher & May, 2002)

• **Connecting with Kids** (Lacher, Nichols, Nichols & May, 2012)

• **First Steps for Strengthening Adoptive Families** (DVD & Study Guide)

• Website: www.familyattachment.com
DSM-V Definition of 313.89 (F94.1) 
Reactive Attachment Disorder

Diagnostic criteria for 313.89 Reactive Attachment Disorder of Infancy or Early childhood

- A. A consistent pattern of inhibited, emotionally withdrawn behavior toward adult caregivers, manifested by both of the following:
  - The child rarely or minimally seeks comfort when distressed.
  - The child rarely or minimally responds to comfort when distressed.

- B. A persistent social or emotional disturbance characterized by at least two of the following:
  - Minimal social and emotional responsiveness to others
  - Limited positive affect
  - Episodes of unexplained irritability, sadness, or fearfulness that are evident even during nonthreatening interactions with adult caregivers.

- C. The child has experienced a pattern of extremes of insufficient care as evidenced by at least one of the following:
  - Social neglect or deprivation in the form of persistent lack of having basic emotional needs for comfort, stimulation, and affection met by caring adults
  - Repeated changes of primary caregivers that limit opportunities to form stable attachments (e.g., frequent changes in foster care)
  - Rearing in unusual settings that severely limit opportunities to form selective attachments (e.g., institutions with high child to caregiver ratios)

- D. The care in Criterion C is presumed to be responsible for the disturbed behavior in Criterion A (e.g., the disturbances in Criterion A began following the lack of adequate care in Criterion C).

- E. The criteria are not met for autism spectrum disorder.

- F. The disturbance is evident before age 5 years.

- G. The child has a developmental age of at least nine months.

- Specify if Persistent: The disorder has been present for more than 12 months.

- Specify current severity: Reactive Attachment Disorder is specified as severe when a child exhibits all symptoms of the disorder, with each symptom manifesting at relatively high levels.

In order to make sense of a narrative or story, there must be an identification with a protagonist which allows a here and now perspective to be adopted. In doing so, the narrative has the capacity to travel back and forward in time and space, thus allowing the message to become immediately relevant.


The process of verbally interacting with self and others is essential in the development of the ability to evaluate present behavior and plan for change in the future.


The inability to form a coherent strategy to ensure protection from the caregiver has been identified in the narratives of maltreated children. Children exposed to disruption and family violence typically construct an incoherent, chaotic life narrative.


When faced with a frightening situation, the inability to contemplate a solution seems to retard developmental accomplishments and interfere with successful processing of subsequent traumatic events.
Supporting Research


Parent-child reflective dialogue that identifies the mental state that fuels behavior, perceptions, intentions, goals, beliefs and desires seem to promote both secure attachment and the integrative process of co-construction of narratives.


Securely attached children typically tell stories in which the child protagonist struggles, finds a solution and ultimately lives happily ever after.


The experience of narrative is the same as being in or observing the real situation.

*The Innate Quality of Attunement*


In order to ensure survival, the parent is biologically driven to provide care and protection in the same way the child seeks proximity in order to be cared for and protected by the caregiver. Just as the infant is physiologically comforted when the parent is available, the mother experiences strong emotions of pleasure and satisfaction when she is able to provide protection and heightened anger, sadness or despair when her ability to be available to her child is threatened.
Supporting Research

Stories & FANT


Family Attachment Center
18322C Minnetonka Blvd
Deephaven, MN 55391
952-475-2818
www.familyattachment.com