The Impact of Trauma on Attachment Relationships

Jody Todd Manly, Ph.D.
Clinical Director, Mt. Hope Family Center
University of Rochester

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Learning about Attachment

How do you understand love?
Attachment Theory

• Theory developed by John Bowlby
• Parenting/Caregiving is not just meeting physical needs
• Patterns of interaction are established in infancy:
  – To ensure survival
  – To control closeness/distance
  – To increase felt security
Attachment is ...

- An evolutionary adaptive emotional tie
- A reciprocal process by which an emotional connection develops
- An intense affectional bond
- An instinctual process...as basic as seeking food

Between the child and his/her primary caregiver
What Attachment is NOT

- Not bonding like glue
- Doesn’t happen in an instant
- Not all or none - quality is important
- Not just for some children
- Not every relationship
- Isn’t just for babies
The Role of Attachment

Children seek safety through relationship with parents.

- **Infant behavioral system**
  - visual checks, sharing interesting sights, approaching, signaling distress, reaching for pick-up, cuddling, clinging

- **Parent behavioral system**
  - watchfulness, protective behaviors, closeness
Secure base for learning

- With confidence in protection, the infant is free to explore and learn
- Infant behavioral system
  - novelty seeking, walking, climbing, inspecting the environment
- Parental behavioral system
  - letting go, encouragement
The Cycle of Attachment

Infant/child feels threatened, needs help, has a need and elicits the help of the caretaker by crying/moving closer and getting his/her attention.

Caretaker correctly reads the needs of the child and tends to the need.

Child is satisfied, returns to activity, confident that help is there if needed.
Children’s patterns of relationships with caregivers can be described as:

Secure
Or
Insecure
Secure

The emotional bond is positive and care is consistent. A sense of trust develops. Child may move away and explore knowing that the caretaker is available for help in case of adversity or fear.
Patterns of Attachment

- Secure Attachment

- Insecure (Anxious) Patterns:
  - Resistant
  - Avoidant
  - Disorganized
Insecure

Insecure-**Resistant**: Child is uncertain. Vacillates between seeking and resisting contact with caregiver.

Insecure-**Avoidant**: Child expects rejection from caregiver. Actively avoids caregiver.
Insecure

Disorganized/Disoriented
– child is confused, dazed, frozen, mixes strategies, may try to run from or hit caregiver....
Attachment is not all or none: The quality and degree of security the child feels is important.

Attachment is a lasting emotional connection that develops between infant and parent (or primary caregiver) over time.

Attachment is a unique type of relationship built on trust: Consider who the child turns to in times of stress.

Attachments form across a wide range of conditions.
Important points in Attachment Theory

- From this first relationship, infants form an understanding of themselves and their relationships with others because they learn what to expect.

- Children try to interact with other people as they expect others to act.

- Attachment behaviors may be useful for gaining protection but may not work well in all situations.

- What worked in early relationships may not work well in new situations.
Attachment and expectations

- Children’s views of their parents/caregivers and their views of themselves are linked.

- A secure child has developed a view of self as lovable and others as caring and trustworthy.

- Without this security the child may develop a view of self as unlovable and of others as not dependable.

- If parents/caregivers are inconsistent, fail to meet the child’s needs, or are hurtful, the child is likely to develop an insecure attachment relationship (e.g., maltreated child).
Attachment over time

As children become more independent, they learn to negotiate (Goal-corrected partnerships)

Relationships early in development carry forward into new relationships with:

- Teachers
- Peers
- Intimate Partners
- Own children
What Is Trauma?

• Trauma is a response to a perceived threat to survival or emotional well-being of an individual or large group such as a community or a culture. Trauma leads to adverse brain, bodily and psychological changes that damage self, relational and spiritual development and impair living, learning and working.
Trauma:

An exceptional experience in which:

- powerful and dangerous stimuli overwhelm the child’s developmental and regulatory capacity (including the capacity to regulate emotions)

- the child has insufficient resources to cope with the event
Types of Trauma

- Domestic Violence
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Neglect
- Traumatic Grief
- Accidents
- Community and School Violence
- Complex Trauma
- Medical Trauma
- Multiple Transitions (e.g. foster care)
- Natural Disasters
- Refugee and War Zone Trauma
- Terrorism
A traumatic experience....

- Threatens the life or physical integrity of a child or of someone important to that child (parent, grandparent, sibling)
- May result in overwhelming terror, helplessness, and horror
- Can overwhelm a child’s capacity to cope and produce intense physical reactions, such as pounding heart, rapid breathing, trembling, dizziness, or loss of bladder or bowel control
Relationships

- Young children rely on caregivers to understand their environments.
Impact of Child’s Exposure to Violence: Attachment

- Loss of sense of mother/father as reliable protectors
- Disturbed perceptions of who is safe and who is dangerous
- Loss of capacity to sustain representations of mother/father as base of security

(Lieberman & Van Horn, 1998)
Developmental Issues for Children Birth to 7
(in brief)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approximate Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-12 mos</td>
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<tr>
<td>12--30 mos.</td>
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<tr>
<td>30 mos.-7 yrs.</td>
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- **Attachment Arousal**
  - Attachment
  - Emotions

- **Autonomy**
  - Self
  - Language
  - Exploration

- **Establishing Social roles**
  - Peer relationships
  - Ego control
  - Empathy/Prosocial
Development of Young Child:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Developmental Tasks</th>
<th>Trauma’s Impact</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Processing what they see and hear</td>
<td>• Sensitivity to noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognition of and response to emotional cues</td>
<td>• Avoidance of contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attachment to primary Caregiver</td>
<td>• Heightened startle response</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Confusion about what’s dangerous and who to go to for protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Fear of being separated from familiar people/places</td>
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</tbody>
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How Children Respond to Trauma

A child’s reactions to trauma will vary depending on:

- Age and developmental stage
- The nature of the event
- The child’s perception of danger
- Adversities faced after the trauma
- Availability of adults who can offer help, reassurance, and protection
- The child’s relationship to the victim or perpetrator

Something that is traumatic for one child may not be traumatic for another.
The Influence of Development

- Child traumatic stress reactions vary by developmental stage.
- Children who have been exposed to trauma expend a great deal of energy responding to, coping with, and coming to terms with the event.
- This may reduce children’s capacity to explore the environment and to master age-appropriate developmental tasks.
- The longer traumatic stress goes untreated, the farther children tend to stray from appropriate developmental pathways.
Reactions to Child Traumatic Stress

• A child’s response to a traumatic event may have a profound effect on his or her perception of self, the world, and the future.
Reactions to Child Traumatic Stress

Traumatic events may affect a child’s:

- Ability to trust others
- Sense of personal safety
- Ability to manage emotions
- Effectiveness in navigating life changes
- Physical and emotional responses to stress
How children respond to trauma

• Hyperarousal
  - Nervousness
  - Jumpiness
  - Quickness to startle
  - Hypervigilance
How children respond to trauma

Avoidance and withdrawal

- Feeling numb, shutdown, or separated from normal life
- Pulling away from activities and relationships
- Avoiding things that prompt memories of the trauma
How children respond to trauma

Re-experiencing

- Intrusive images, sensations, dreams
- Intrusive memories of the traumatic event
What You Might See:
Reactions to Trauma Reminders

Trauma reminders:
- Things, events, situations, places, sensations, and even people that a child connects with a traumatic event
**Traumatic Reminders**

- Internal and external cues
- For young children, affective states can be powerful reminders
- Persistent reminders can create broadening associational networks of new reminders: place child at increased risk for persistent hyperarousal
- Parents and children can serve as traumatic reminders for each other
- Home and other familiar places can serve as traumatic reminders
Reactions to Trauma Reminders

Trauma reminders may lead to:

- Re-experiencing
- Withdrawal
- Dissociation
- Anxiety
- Loss of behavioral control
The Meaning of Children’s Behavior

• Young children’s behavior has a meaning
• Often the parent’s developmental agenda conflicts with the child’s
• This conflict is worsened when the parent doesn’t understand the meaning behind the child’s behavior
There may be more to the behavior than you can see

What are the feelings behind the actions?
What can we do to prevent and address the effects of trauma?
Essential Elements of Trauma-Informed Care

1. Recognize the impact that trauma has had on the child
2. Help the child to feel safe
3. Help the child to understand and manage overwhelming emotions
4. Help the child to understand and modify problem behaviors
5. Respect and support positive, stable, and enduring relationships
6. Help the child develop a strength-based understanding of his or her life story
7. Be an advocate for the child
8. Promote and support trauma-focused assessment and treatment
9. Take care of yourself
Myths to Avoid

- My love should be enough to erase the effects of everything bad that happened before
- My child shouldn’t love or feel loyal to an abusive parent
- It’s better to just move on, forget, and not talk about past painful experiences
- Young children don’t remember bad things that happened to them
What Trauma-Informed Care Can Do

When we protect children from harm
......children learn that the world is safe
When we support, nurture, and respond to them
......children learn that they are capable
When we give them affection and love
......children learn that they are lovable
Safety first:

- A sense of safety is critical for functioning as well as physical and emotional growth.
  - Physical safety
  - Psychological safety
- Emotion regulation
- Issues of limits and discipline
Promoting Safety:

- Help children become familiar with their surroundings
- Give them control over some aspects of their lives
- Set limits and provide structure
- Let them know what will happen next
- See and appreciate who they are
- Help them maintain a sense of connection and continuity with the past
Sensitivity to Cultural Issues

- Understanding cultural contexts
- Cultural values and beliefs play a role in perceptions and attitudes
- Promote healing through respecting cultural support networks
- Focus on learning rather than judging
Assist children in reducing overwhelming emotion.

- Trauma can elicit such intense fear, anger, shame, and helplessness that the child feels overwhelmed.
- Overwhelming emotion may delay the development of age-appropriate self-regulation.
- Trauma may be “stored” in the body in the form of physical tension or health complaints.
The Invisible Suitcase

No one loves me
It's all my fault
You're going to hurt me
I am bad
I am stupid
Grownups lie!
Provide support and guidance to the child’s family and caregivers.

• Parents and guardians must be nurtured and supported so they, in turn, can foster safety and well-being.
• Parents and relatives serving as resource families may themselves be dealing with trauma related to the crisis.
• Assist parents and caregivers who have traumatic experiences of their own.
• Identify and build on parent and caregiver protective factors.
Support Important Adults in Children’s Lives

• Separation from an attachment figure, particularly under traumatic and uncertain circumstances, is highly stressful for children.

• Educate current caregivers about the impact of trauma on child behaviors and behavior management.

• Minimize disruptions in relationships and establish permanency to help children form and maintain positive attachments.
What Can Caring Adults Do?

- Make a special effort to integrate cultural practices and culturally responsive services.
- Understand the cumulative effect of trauma.
- Recognize that children’s “bad” behavior is sometimes an adaptation to trauma.
Trauma-Informed Systems

- Develop *trust* with children through listening, frequent contacts, and honesty
- Avoid making professional promises that, if unfulfilled, are likely to increase traumatization.
Recovering from Trauma: The Role of Resilience

Resilience is the ability to recover from traumatic events.

Children who are resilient see themselves as:

• Safe
• Capable
• Lovable
Recognizing Resilience

• Remember that not all children who have experienced trauma have negative outcomes.
• Some children are remarkably resilient in the face of adversity.
• Utilizing support systems and strengths builds protective factors and reduces risk.
Children’s Resilience Factors

• Sense of Security “I am safe”

• Sense of Self-Esteem “I am lovable”

• Sense of Self-Efficacy “I am capable”

• Sense of Coherence “I can understand”, manage, and find meaning in....”
Building Resilience:

Factors that can increase resilience:

- A strong relationship with a competent, caring adult
- Feeling connected to a positive role model/mentor
- Having talents and abilities nurtured and appreciated
- Feeling some control over one’s own life
- Having a sense of belonging
Repacking the Suitcase

How can we “repack” the suitcase with positive experiences and beliefs?

How can we promote resilience by helping children feel

- Safe?
- Capable?
- Lovable?
Useful Websites

National Child Traumatic Stress Network:
• http://www.nctsn.org

Child Welfare Information Gateway
• http://www.childwelfare.gov

Prevent Child Abuse New York
• http://www.preventchildabuse.ny.org

Zero to Three
• http://www.zerotothree.org
Just as despair can come to one only from other human beings, hope, too can be given to one only by other human beings

Elie Wiesel
Author, activist, and Holocaust survivor
We can make a difference in improving the lives of children and families!!