

Handout: Four Areas of Functioning Challenged by the Impact of Loss, Trauma, & Inadequate Nurture

Capacity for Relationships

The ability to develop close emotional relationships with others...to love and be loved.

<p>Attachment is the foundation for all development. Securely attached children have a sense of safety, the capacity for empathy, a sense of worth, and the foundation for a conscience. Additionally, cultural norms influence how “secure attachment” is manifested.</p>	<p>Children with dangerous or deprived beginnings distrust others and learn to protect themselves from closeness. Closeness may be associated with pain and loss. While a child craves closeness, it scares her, and she may alternate between seeking closeness and distancing parents. Unresolved losses and grief also can pose barriers in new relationships.</p>
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Felt Safety & Control

Felt safety and a sense of personal control and mastery;
the belief that one’s own efforts can make things better and that one is not simply a victim.

<p>Well-nurtured children have their needs met and build on achievements to develop a sense of impact on the world – “the master of one’s fate”. They feel secure that parents will protect and care for them and that if they voice their needs, they will be met. For some cultures, such as American Indian tribes, a sense of safety is derived from being part of a group, the sense that you can depend on your family, kin, or cultural group to protect you.</p>	<p>Poorly nurtured and traumatized children learn that their wills are violated and their wishes don’t matter. They feel vulnerable and afraid. Like “a ball in a pinball machine” they have been powerless to control the direction of their lives and protect themselves. To avoid feeling vulnerable and helpless, they may behave in negative, oppositional ways to exercise power and control. For children of some cultures, losing their place in the protection of their group causes them to feel vulnerable and afraid.</p>
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Self-Regulation

The ability to regulate one's own behaviors and emotions is an outcome of maturational processes stemming from a healthy parent-child attachment and brain development.

Well nurtured children receive comfort and many cues about their emotions. They develop trust that enables postponing gratification, thinking of others, and considering consequences. The mastery of cause and effect thinking, the development of a conscience, and the capacity for empathy and motivation to adjust one's behaviors to the desires of others are all founded on parent-child attachment. Other maturational capacities related to self-control are the development of language to express feelings, the development of social skills, and healthy brain functioning and biochemistry.

Poorly nurtured children lack the emotional connection to others that is the foundation for the development of empathy and self-control. They may have effects of maltreatment that impair the parts of the brain that control impulses and allow for reason and consideration of consequences. Deficits in self-regulation are a primary factor underlying emotional and behavioral disturbances.

Identity/ Sense of Self

Our "sense of self" is derived from the messages we receive from the external world and our own inner interpretation of life events.

A positive sense of self generally results in a positive feeling of self-worth. Well nurtured children receive positive external messages that become internal. Additionally, a positive cultural identity results in a positive regard for self as part of a group, which helps children who are part of an oppressed group feel safe and worthwhile.

Children experiencing poor treatment often see themselves as responsible and are often missing essential elements from which to "build self" and make sense of who they are. Some struggle with feelings of rejection related to not being "kept" or protected by birth parents. They also may feel a sense of stigma related to adoption or having been a foster child—that they are a second class citizen or fundamentally different from other children.

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Salient Goals for Intervention

Capacity for Relationships

The ability to develop close relationships with others, to give and receive affection, is the foundation of other developmental capacities, such as cognitive abilities, language, self-regulation, social abilities, and a positive identity. Deprivation and experiencing physical or emotional pain in early relationships leads to a fear of closeness, anger, and the development of defenses for self-protection, such as numbing and withdrawal. Well-nurtured children have the capacity for emotional connectedness, whereas children from adverse beginnings distrust others. They test their parents' commitment in many ways. In order to overcome attachment problems children must learn to identify and express their own feelings and needs and to manage their fears related to closeness without pushing others away. Grief work related to lost attachments influences developing new attachments. Below are some tasks for children and parents in this work.

Tasks for Children

Learning to manage fears, accept comfort
Resolution of past losses; grief work
Understand reasons for separation
Building on former attachments
Strengthening attachments in adoptive family
Identifying & expressing feelings
Experiencing safety and security

Identifying and using support persons

Tasks for Parents

Calming, therapeutic parenting
Work through own losses
Help child express grief
Honoring child's previous attachments
Claiming child; positive interactions
Help child to verbalize feelings & empathize
Responding to child's needs at his/her developmental level – reparenting
Increase attunement to child and manage own negative feelings

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Felt Safety & Control

Feeling safe and a sense of control or self-efficacy is best understood in relation to its antithesis – powerlessness. Children who have experienced interrupted attachments and other traumas have feelings of extreme vulnerability, fear, and rage. Powerlessness is a primary impact of trauma, defined as the process in which the child’s will, desires, and sense of efficacy are continually contravened. Children who have been unable to protect themselves may have a constant fear of impending doom, underlying feelings of anger and tension, and a strong need to control. They may seek to control all aspects of their environment and develop maladaptive behaviors to achieve a sense of power and mastery. Self-efficacy then is a sense of personal control and mastery (“I am the captain of my fate”) and the feeling that one can manage events in life. Children whose will is continually violated do not feel safe, even when they are. They believe that their wishes do not matter. They need to learn positive ways to gain control, to achieve mastery in some areas of their lives, and to have an increased sense of personal choice and power.

Tasks for Children

Getting in touch with feelings

Gain sense of felt safety

Healing from trauma

Learning positive ways to gain control

Achieving mastery in some areas

Anger management

Increase sense of power/choice

Tasks for Parents

Encourage expression of feelings while limiting behaviors

Meet child’s needs and support through stressful events

Tolerating children’s pain/healing work

Unhooking from power struggles; therapeutic parenting

Providing opportunities to succeed

Managing own anger & teaching child same

Empower child to make good choices

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Capacity for Self-Regulation

The ability to regulate one's own emotions and behaviors is an outcome of maturational processes stemming from a healthy parent-child attachment and nurture when undergoing periods of high stress. When children have experienced neglect and abuse, they were not soothed by their parents so that they do not learn how to manage stress. Poorly nurtured children may have impairments in the parts of the brain that control impulses and facilitate reasoning and consideration of consequences. They are not able to physically modulate tension and organize reasoned responses. They need help in identifying their feelings, finding ways to modulate and express them, and considering possible responses and their consequences. The goal of therapeutic parenting strategies is to teach self-regulation skills from the ground up.

Tasks for Children

Linking feelings and behaviors
De-escalating building tension/anger
Learning acceptable ways to express feelings
Developing problem solving abilities
Developing internal controls
Accepting control from others

Tasks for Parents

Learning therapeutic parenting skills
Recognizing/coping with triggers; affect control
Helping child to verbalize feelings
Processing incidents and practice re-dos
Helping child accept responsibility for behavior
Consistent therapeutic parenting from both parents

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Identity/ Sense of Self

Children who are well-nurtured develop the ability to incorporate many aspects of themselves into an integrated sense of who they are. Persons with a strong identity have a sense of wholeness, connectedness, and positive self-esteem. Their search for meaning has led to answers that do not devalue themselves. It is common for children who experience maltreatment or are removed from their birth family to see themselves as lacking in fundamental ways and unlovable. They may feel they must have done something bad to deserve maltreatment. Most adopted children ask themselves “Why didn’t they keep me?” and can struggle with feelings of rejection and not really mattering to anyone. They often have a fragmented sense of their lives and struggle to gain a positive sense of who they are and their place in the world. To come to terms with their history, children need to be able to connect their past, present, and future through reconstructing their life history and processing the meaning of these events in their lives. They need to be able to affirm the positives they have gained from others and their ability to survive difficult experiences. Transracial placements add an additional layer to integrating race/ethnicity into their identities. Salient tasks in this work include:

Tasks for Children

Reconstruct & process life history

Affirm the positives they received

Destigmatize adoption

Normalize adoption—know other adoptees

Connect past, present, and future

Recognize positives in self & talents

Tasks for Parents

Share all information and add to complexity as they grow; life book work

Demonstrate respect for birth family

Develop communicative openness about adoption; teach child to handle negative comments from others

Affiliate with other adoptive families

Maximize openness in child’s best interest

Provide opportunities to excel; praise

Smith, S.L., & Howard, J.A. (1999). *Promoting successful adoptions: Practice with troubled families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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