

Reconstructing the Parent's Infant Narrative: An Approach to Child Abuse Treatment

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ABSTRACT: *This paper proposes that direct inquiry into the parent's own internal working models—about parenting, about relatedness, about how attachment works and what causes disruptions of attachment, and about what children require for optimal development—opens up avenues for healing and change in aberrant parenting practices. Particularly in intransigent child abuse or neglect cases—where the problem has been seen across several generations in one family—didactic and cognitive-behavioral approaches that fail to uncover the origins of parenting beliefs and practices may produce minimal change in parenting behavior. A case example is used to explicate the process of such inquiry, and to make clear how, and why, behavior change may then follow.*

The days of visualizing the human infant as a lifeless, largely unconscious creature—to whom the world happens without her taking much notice—are largely over. While there is debate about precisely how babies go about perceiving and remembering experience, and formulating narratives (later to become working models) about experience, we no longer doubt that they are quite busy at it. Clearly, they record, respond, and adapt to the world in which they find themselves. ^(1, 4, 10, 13, 14, 15)

Do the early experiences of babies in being parented, in creating connections, and in experiencing disconnections form the basis for how those babies grow up to parent their own children? If so, precisely how? Do babies simply grow to do exactly what was done to them? Or do babies and young children develop *narratives*: internally-processed story lines—the precursors to working models—that help the infant explain to himself why things worked out as they did, that help her adapt to present circumstances, that cue him about how to act in similar circumstances, in the future? ^(2, 7) If so, two things would appear likely: (1) such narratives would have great inertia, proving difficult to unseat—particularly using educational means, and rational discourse; and (2) such narratives would likely find expression in the child's own parenting behavior, later in life, and would be defended with great vigor. ^(5, 6, 8, 12, 17)

Profound clinical and methodological questions arise, then, about the efficacy of any intervention that fails to take into account precisely *why* a parent behaves as he or she does. It would appear that the likelihood of provoking change in aberrant parenting, including abusive and neglectful parenting, might be significantly increased if we could find pathways to accessing the parent's own infant narratives. ^(3, 9, 11)

We once imagined it would constitute a sufficient intervention to simply conduct a fine social history, then set about to correct the inadequate parenting, or the abusive parenting, or the dyssynchronous parenting, or the unempathic parenting, with some combination of information, support, and good will. As diagnosticians or intervenors, we could often see the problems in parenting behavior rather clearly, and it seemed to us, we should be able to eliminate them by educating parents—essentially pointing out to parents the errors of their ways.

Then reality hit. Parents appeared intransigent; or simply ignored us; or they complied with our tidy suggestions, at the moment, only to “return to normal” as soon as we were out of the picture; or they argued

indignantly about the correctness of the parenting methods they had been using. Barriers to change were everywhere, and we found ourselves sometimes blaming parents for being defensive or uncooperative. At other times, parents appeared eager to change, but also appeared helpless in the face of some unidentified barrier.

Now we understand that identification of these barriers often leads us into exploration of just exactly where, in fact, the parent learned to parent this way, where the firmly-held parenting beliefs came from, when the life-patterns began. What we sometimes find, in these dark recesses of poorly-articulated memory, is a story about being a baby. It may be an unlikely-sounding story, and may seem illogically connected to the present circumstance. The parent may, herself, doubt the truth of the story. Indeed, any truth arising from the story may seem elusive, because it is not, actually, a well-formed story at all; it is a primitive interpretation of events, a child-like morality play. Nevertheless, the point of the story seems firmly-held by the parent whose own early story it is.

The Parent's Infant Narrative

What we may have stumbled across is the *infant narrative of the parent*—or, perhaps, one of many such narratives that, it turns out, were developed when the parent was very small. It helped, back then, to give the child some way to understand her world, and to predict what was going to happen next. It was a survival strategy, a way of gaining some imaginary control over a life that may have offered the child little actual power. The child used the intellectual and observational resources available to him at the time (meager though they may have been) to construct a story about his world. As he grew older, he may have continued to behave and to develop expectations and to relate to others as if the narrative were still true, even though it may no longer have been correctly descriptive of actual experience. Discomfort over any mismatches between her early narrative and her present life may have caused a growing child or adult to try to squeeze actual experience into interpreted narrative since, curiously, it is there that she found comfort; it was there that she once found survival.

What would happen if, in our interventions on behalf of abused or neglected babies and toddlers, we

turned our attentions directly to the discovery and reconstruction of the parent's own infant narrative? What if we went directly to the source of the parent's parenting beliefs, to the causes for the parent's present choices, to the place wherein hides the power that drives parenting behaviors? What if we skipped past the didactic or educational or cognitive-behavioral work that we find simpler and more straightforward, having become aware that our earnest efforts in these areas will bear no fruit unless the parent's experiences at being parented—and his narratives about that experience—are first revealed, understood, and accepted for the adaptive value they had at the time? Is it possible that a successful intervention—one that might actually stop the abuse—can only begin at this point? In short: is it possible that core shifts in parenting beliefs and practices can only occur when the parent and the intervenor have conspired to expose the origins of those beliefs and practices to the light of day?

One Parent's Story

Kathrynn appeared in the skimpiest of bikinis for her first appointment with her home-based infant-parent therapist. She was regularly beating her two young children, aged one and three at the time, with a fan belt, or so it was reported by the child protection agency who referred the family for assessment and possible intervention. Our infant mental health program believed in the efficacy of home visits for both assessment and treatment, whenever possible. On this particular day, however, I might have wished for the relative safety of my office; perhaps Kathrynn would have donned a few more bits of clothing for the trek into town. Then again, perhaps that would have disallowed my having such an early opportunity to wonder about her own, personal narratives—and whatever about them that was somehow connected to her abuse of her children.

She showed me the fan belt proudly, on a hook next to the refrigerator. She expressed no particular dismay about being visited, or even about being under consideration by child protection. She also showed not the slightest remorse about the beatings, nor the least interest in my showing her a more peaceful way to raise children.

She was, however, more available than I might have predicted to “talk” about her state of undress. Actually, I never asked directly about it. I merely

began inquiring about her life: how she came to have these two children, what she wanted for them, what she wanted for herself. This took us—as it nearly always does—to the story of her own growing up.

Infant Narrative Unfolding

Kathrynn lost her parents when she was a toddler, spent a year or so in some sort of orphanage, then found herself in foster care by age four. That placement was disrupted when it was found that she was having sex with an adolescent foster boy in the home. And that *is* just how she put it: not that she was molested, not that something bad happened to her, but merely that a much older boy took an interest in her, and she responded. Oh, and then the grownups got rid of her.

What sort of internal working model had Kathrynn developed about the loss of her birth parents (the details of which she was unable to remember) that might have made her particularly vulnerable to early sexual abuse? What had she come to believe about herself in those first two years with her parents? What narrative about relatedness, and loss of it, had she put together in the orphanage—based not only on her experiences there, but on the story line she brought there, from her earlier connections and disconnections? By the time this child came to her first foster home, what had she decided about how one gets and retains affection and attention, about how one survives?

In the next foster home, she remembered how nice it had been to have the attentions of the older boy. (No, she did not recall that she was lost and alone at the time, and desperate for loving touch and attention.) She began to squirm on the lap of her new foster father, imagining that he would be pleased with her, and would want to keep her and care for her. It backfired, and she was sent away again by her unnerved and frightened foster parents.

In the third foster home, she received a more welcome response to her loneliness and neediness (as well as her old—and it appeared to her, correct and oft-reinforced—internal working models about relationships, and how her needs could be met in them): she was now sexually abused regularly by a much older foster brother, and his friend. She had learned, she seemed to suggest in the way she framed the story, how to survive her fear of loss and

her yearning for attention. That the pattern of loss was continuing—and was now being compounded by abuse—did not seem to occur to her, either then or later, as she was telling me the story. She thought she was quite clever. She had no sympathy whatsoever for the little girl we were talking about. She could not even identify a down side to all that had happened.

By the time she was sent to her final foster placement, Kathrynn was twelve years old, and had been routinely sexually molested by one trusted, older male or another for eight years. She stayed in the final foster home for several years before the abuse by one more foster father was discovered, at which point Kathrynn simply ran away, rather than to have her placement disrupted again. Her infantile narratives had proven, as far as she was concerned, to be true representations of what to expect from life, from connection—perhaps even from attachment.

Dialogue With A Therapist

What was missing in the story? What did any of this have to do with how Kathrynn was dressed today, or the fact that she was physically abusing her own tiny children? Was this what we were supposed to be talking about? Kathrynn had set up the agenda for the session (unconsciously, of course), by presenting herself, physically, the way she did. But was it right to be “distracted” from the referral problem of overt physical abuse of her two young children?

That which was missing *from* the story, of course, stood out as stunningly as did any of the facts *of* the story: this was a child without regard for herself, a child who had never seen empathy reflected back in the eyes of another, a child who had survived *with* sexual abuse, not merely *from* it. I upset everything by looking into her lively, chipper, uncomplaining face and communicating my sorrow for her many losses. But *what* losses, she wondered? I had to supply the names: the loss of her parents when she was less than two; the loss of hope at the orphanage; the loss of someone along the way who would grab her up and communicate to her that she was the most precious child on earth; the loss of someone who would kill to protect her; the loss of trust when one male after another saw an opportunity in this needy child with few boundaries and that yearning look; the loss of any continuing awareness

of the losses, so that she could grieve them and fight back in some other way.

She accused me of feeling sorry for her, when she did not for herself. I said that was, maybe, the point: no one had, and someone should have. She was furious that she did not feel so chipper any more, and accused me of sabotaging the peace of her family home.

As the weeks progressed, she became sad, and then angry. And she started putting on clothes. She asked me if I were attracted to her. She said I wasn't much of a man. She told me about a new body movement her toddler-daughter had begun making that she thought seductive, and she seemed distressed about it. Then more sadness and, finally, ambivalent, halting, then cascading anger. "How could they have done that to me? Could they really not see how little I was? Why did no one step up to protect me? Where were my parents when I needed them? Where was God when I needed God?"

Empathy-for-self was bursting through. Perhaps, more correctly, it was having to be formed out of nothing. There was little evidence that Kathryn had ever stumbled across compassion aimed in her direction, except for one reference that seemed to pop out of nowhere one day: Kathryn suddenly recalled an older woman, dressed in some sort of red bandana dress, sitting in a rocking chair. She thought it might be an orphanage memory, but she was certain that she was once in the arms of that woman, and that she was—however fleetingly—being loved. This was the breakthrough we needed. Her narrative had been shaken. She began to hang great hope on the notion that there was once a time that someone cared deeply for her, and it seemed to release waves of caring-for-self, indignation at those who hurt her, indignation at anyone who would hurt a child.

And there it was. She had said it. People should not hurt little children. Little ones would feel it deeply, she reported, and they would not forget.

The fan belt disappeared. It had never once been mentioned in this brief intervention on behalf of two abused children (or was it three?), and now it was gone. No discussion of child-rearing techniques was necessary. Something about a carefully-boundaried therapeutic relationship with an older male seemed to allow her to recall her own vulnerability. She could

remember that she hurt, and she could rethink the culpabilities. She could allow a different sort of narrative, and she could still survive. She could find empathy for Self and, with it, empathy for her two children. She stopped beating because she remembered that it hurt. She could no longer remain aloof from the look in her children's eyes when she harmed them: the same look that neither she nor others had ever noticed in her own. That is about enough, for most of us, to stop us from abusing.

It is, often, that which we once "wrote" on our hearts about our early lives that guides our later choices and our later behavior. These are not rational, conscious narratives. They are, in all likelihood, stored in the right brain, and are heavily laden with affective components.^(13, 14) They may even be full of factual errors. But little progress will be made by those who wish to "help" parents to change their behavior, or to make better choices, by those who try to talk parents out of that story line about the world to which they may cling so irrationally, but tenaciously—the same kind of story that we all unconsciously employed to help us understand our world, and to survive, when we were very small. Instead, that story line, that narrative, that internal working model, must be unwound, understood, marveled at for its adaptive cleverness, and—ever so tenderly—exposed to the light of the present, adult day.

As those who are committed to children getting a better shake on this planet, we are at some risk of forgetting—since our empathy flows so easily in the direction of the abused or neglected child—that the child's parent was also once a baby, and has a story. The likelihood of change actually occurring, on behalf of the young ones in the family, increases significantly when we bother to learn about that story. Therein will often lie the reason the child is being harmed in the first place. And therein will lie the route to healing for mom or dad, and to their being aroused to protective action on behalf of their own child.

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