

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER: Healing Through Lifebook Work

HELPING MALTREATED CHILDREN
RECOVER FROM TRAUMA AND LOSS



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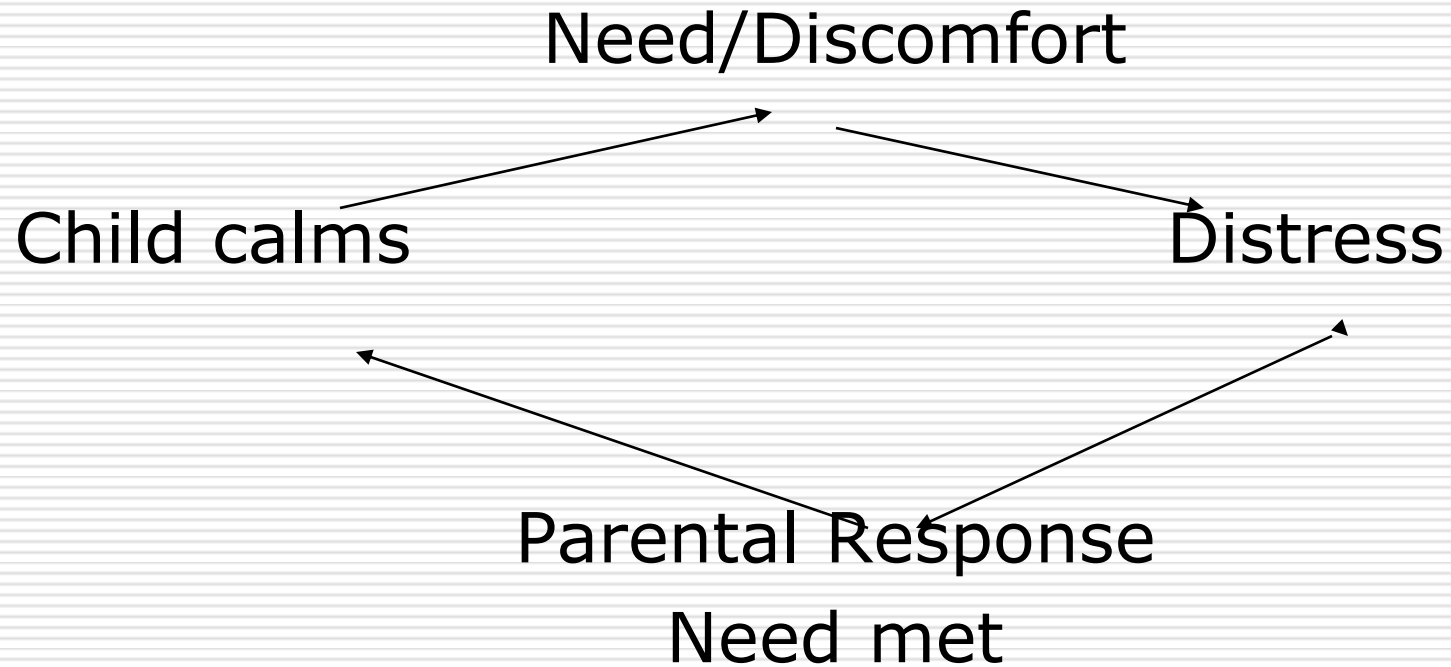
A child's sense of what happened and what will happen and what should happen is often completely different from the sense of those directing the child's fate.

Attachment

- ❑ The deep and enduring emotional connections between individuals
 - ❑ Foundation laid in infancy (and before)
 - ❑ Attachment is essential to physical and emotional growth, empathy, conscience, and “social citizenship”
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Attachment Cycle



Through this constant, predictable, attuned interaction the children develop trust, a mental blueprint of the world as safe and responsive, and confidence in themselves as loveable, worthy and able to get their needs met.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

(Fahlberg)

Children with secure attachment have a positive working model of the world:

- sense of safety
 - capacity for empathy
 - foundation for conscience
 - sense of worth
 - sense of efficacy
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IMPAIRED ATTACHMENT

Insecure/avoidant, insecure/anxious or disorganized-disoriented attachment results in:

- a negative working model of the world
 - limited capacity for empathy
 - limited emotional range
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ASPECTS OF ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIPS

- Endure over time, never replaceable
 - Foster security
 - Persist despite negative aspects of relationship (e.g. poor parenting)
 - Enhance capacity for future attachments
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LOSS

A profound sense of insecurity and sorrow, characterized by yearning for what is lost and constant attention to the environment to aid in recovery of the lost other.

LOSS OF ATTACHMENT

Separation distress – the inability to achieve reassuring contact leads to

- Vigilant attentiveness
 - Apprehension and fearfulness
 - Compulsion to search
 - Inability to give attention to other matters
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IMPEDIMENTS TO RECOVERY

- ❑ The loss makes no sense
 - ❑ Ambivalence toward the attachment figure
 - ❑ Low self-esteem, especially when coupled with feelings of dependency on attachment figure
 - ❑ Feelings of responsibility for attachment figure (Weiss, 1988)
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I remember living with Grannie. I love Grannie. She took good care of me. I feel bad. I miss her. I wish she was here to take care of me.

RECOVERY FROM LOSS

Aspects of our helping system often impede recovery:

- Traumatic separation
 - Prolonged inaccessibility
 - Separation of siblings
 - Failure to understand grief in children and failure to help them process loss
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Lessons Learned

- ❑ Familiarity is more important than safety in a child's mind
 - ❑ Children attach to inadequate parents (and few parents are inadequate all the time)
 - ❑ Children often feel responsible for their family members and need to protect them
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TRAUMA

An emotionally painful event or series of events that challenge sense of security, predictability and mastery, typically for a prolonged period. Often involves fear, terror and helplessness.

Trauma can be experienced directly or vicariously.

Research suggests that emotion operates as a central organizing process within the brain... An individual's abilities to organize emotions...directly shapes the ability of the mind to integrate experience and to adapt to future stressors. Siegal (1999)

NEUROBIOLOGICAL IMPACT

- alterations in brain development and brain function, especially when trauma occurs early in life
 - corresponding inability to regulate behavior (primitive brain responds with flight/freeze or fight)
 - inability to engage higher brain function when in stress (learning, non-verbal cues, reason, cause and effect thinking)
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POTENTIAL

Organization and functional capacity
determined by

Genetic inheritance/prenatal
environment/maltreatment

Experience

THE POWER OF EXPERIENCE

Our brains are “programmed” by experience

Experience creates a template for processing information that filters new input

The more a pattern of neural activation is activated the more indelible memory becomes

Experience...

Sensory information from both internal and external environment enters the CNS at the brainstem and midbrain

Matched against existing patterns

If unknown or associated with previous threat, activates survival responses

Experience...

What is safe and comfortable as well as what is threatening or frightening becomes so from the brain's processing and storing of experience

Experience matters most in young children due to brain plasticity and limited experiential templates

Experience...

Trauma alters children's development:
physically

emotionally

cognitively

socially

DEPRIVATION

A particular kind of trauma – resulting in both stress effects and impaired brain development.

Romanian orphan research finds structural and functional deficits and high stress hormone levels with abnormal cycles

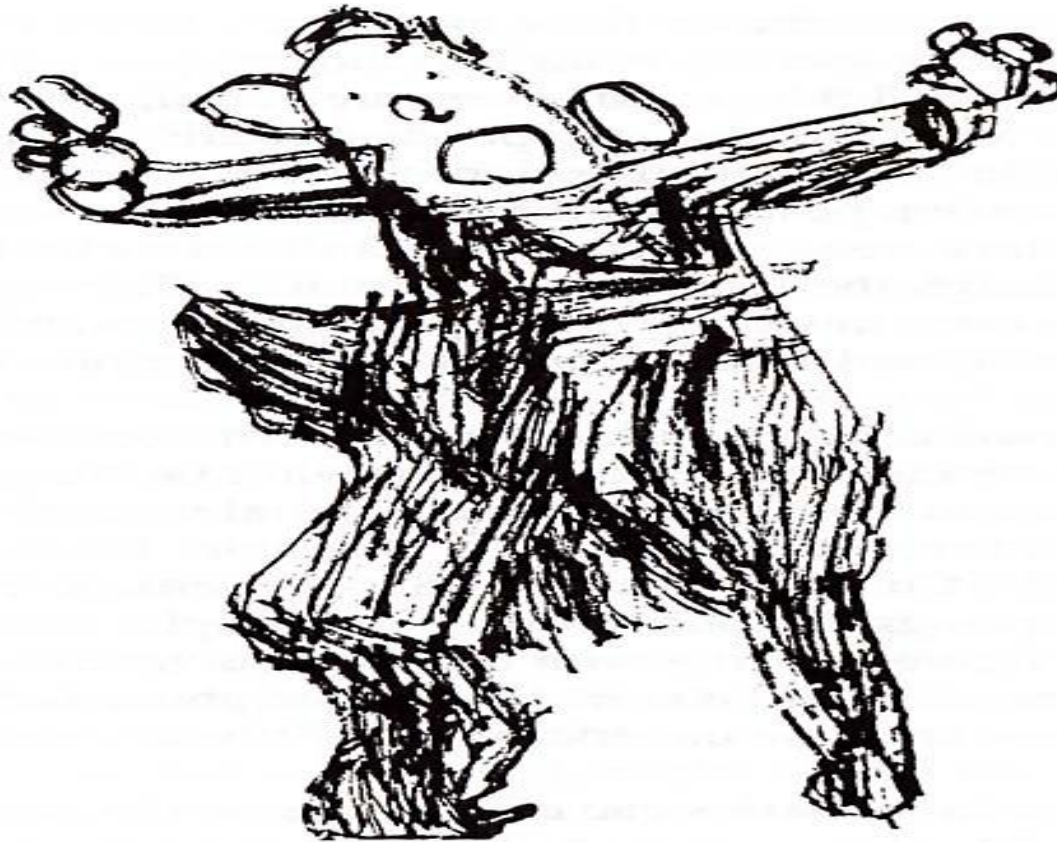
PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

- Damaged world view – life is dangerous, adults are untrustworthy,
 - Pervasive fearfulness, intrusive thoughts
 - Need to control environment and others to feel safe
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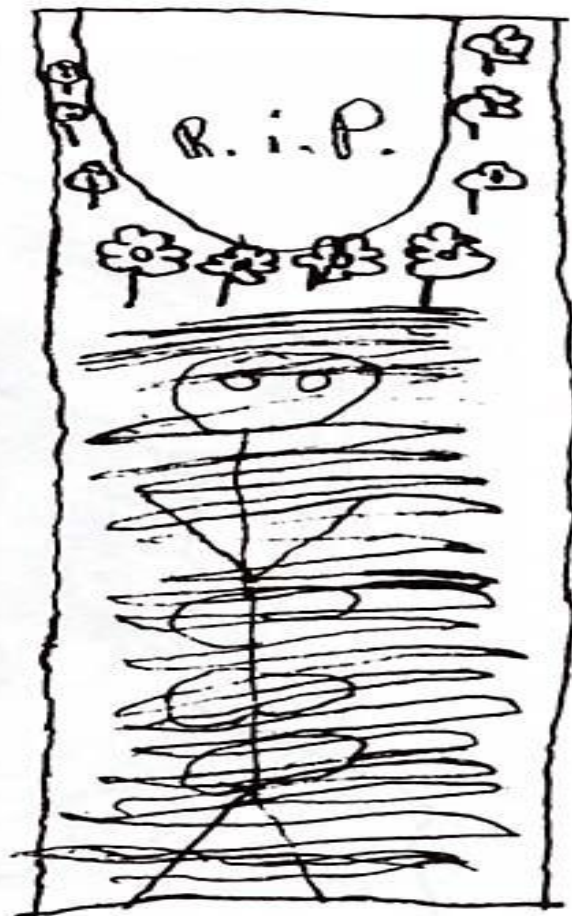
Drawing by an 8-year-old boy who was repeatedly physically abused by alcoholic parents.



Drawing of a 6-year-old physically abused boy who drew himself "calling for his mommy to stop his daddy from beating him, but his mother does not come."



Drawing by a 13 year old of a dream she had about being dead and buried, showing her overwhelming depression and helplessness concerning her multiple sexual abuse experiences.



Slides from Maria Beatriz Alvarez
Department of Pediatric Psychiatry
Children's Hospital of New York

*Psychotherapy alters the neurochemistry and physiology of the brain by providing a stimulus that leaves a memory trace.
(Liggan & Kay, 1999)*

Therapeutic intervention can move experience up the brain stem, from primitive brain to neocortex, allowing for processing and relearning.

PERRY CONTACT INFORMATION

Child Trauma Academy –

www.ChildTrauma.org

www.scholastic.com/bruceperry/

Teicher, M. (2002). Scars that won't heal: The neurobiology of child abuse.

Scientific American – March 1 edition

The "System's" Harm

- ❑ Traumatic removal
 - ❑ Separation from attachment figures
 - ❑ Traumatic transitions
 - ❑ Lack of continuity among adults
"designated to care"
 - ❑ Even additional maltreatment
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When I was five I had to go to the Davidson's foster home. I didn't know any of the kids there and I wanted to go home. Mr. Davidson took this picture the day I moved in.

I WAS 'TOKEN'

Folman's (1998) study of 90 children's experience of removal found children typically felt:

1. A sense of being apprehended
 2. Fear and bewilderment
 3. Loss and abandonment
 4. Profound helplessness
-

BEING APPREHENDED

They don't say nothin', just 'come in the car. The police just pushin' us, pushin' us and they push us in the car. And we be cryin', we be kickin', talking about 'leave us alone, what you takin' us for? We ain't done nothin' to y'all, we ain't done nothin'!

Chantel, 10

FEAR AND BEWILDERMENT

*I was thinkin' they was just gonna take my momma somewhere and just do whatever they gonna do with her and just leave me on the streets.
Leonard, 8*

What if we go to a bad foster home where they beat you and stuff? I saw that on the news. Mark, 13

FEAR...

They was gonna take us away and we ain't never gonna see our parents again, and they gonna do something to us. Damian, 10.

They was like "it's for the best" and all this. I was like – they don't know what they are talkin' about.

Bobby, 11

LOSS AND ABANDONMENT

I thought they was gonna take me to juvenile hall and I was never gonna see my momma again and they were going to feed me bread and water.

Joey, 10

[When separated in care] I was thinking that they crazy. Is you crazy or something taking me away from my brothers? Chantel, 10

PROFOUND HELPLESSNESS

They took us to an office...The lady who brought us, she took off. I'm sayin' "where are you going? Don't leave me here!...What happened to my mother? Is she kidnapped? Tell me something!" Cindy, 13.

I was so scared I was afraid I wasn't gonna make it. I was gonna be helpless. (James, 6)

REVISED ASSUMPTIONS

- ❑ Trauma remains with the child, influencing relationships long after the trauma has ended
 - ❑ Trauma that occurs before a child has language can be particularly damaging
 - ❑ Nurture does not erase trauma's effects
 - ❑ Our "protection" may traumatize
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Putting the Pieces Together



A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Capacity for Relationships

Intimacy **Isolation**

Identity

Self-inegration **Identity Confusion**

Self-Efficacy

Mastery **Powerlessness**

Self-Regulation

Self-control **Impulsivity**

Children tell us what they have lived through by their behaviors. Never doubt that a maltreated child's challenging behaviors mean something, even if it is impossible for the child to articulate that meaning.

LIFEBOOKS...

- ❑ Strengthen caregiver or worker/child connection
 - ❑ Assist workers in assessing child's understanding
 - ❑ Assist child/ youth in developing coherent narrative
 - ❑ Enable child to identify gains as well as difficulties
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LIFEBOOKS

- ❑ Chronological representations of major aspects of the child's story
 - ❑ Contain tangible evidence of child's life story
 - ❑ Incorporate explanations/ best guesses about complicated issues
 - ❑ Are developed from the child's point of view
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Lifebook as a Therapeutic Process

Should not be confused with a scrapbook or picture album

LB is a record of important events but also contains **explanation** from the child's point of view.

Why “should” Lifebooks work?

JIMMY'S STORY

Why is the lifebook important across the lifespan?

What is the importance of having items from the child's original family?

How can workers gather critical information to assist in lifebook development?

Assessing Lifebook's Impact

What would we expect to change over the course of Lifebook intervention?

- Basic knowledge – how many sibs? How many foster homes? Dad's name...
 - Reduction in salience/power of grief
 - Reduction in trauma based symptoms
 - Reduction in self-blame
 - "Reasonably accurate" positive self-explanation of life course
-

How might we measure change?

- Child self-report
 - Caregiver report
 - Standardized measures – self-esteem, trauma symptom checklist for children, children's depression index....
 - Analysis of narrative
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Current study

- Children/ youth asked to tell a story about their lives incorporating:
 - How did I come to live where I live?
 - Where have I lived before?
 - Who is my family?
 - How come I don't live with my mom or my dad?
-

Segment 1

- What I've been told is or I guess my mother was "crazy" or something. She kept having babies and they kept taking them away. She sat in the dark and kept the babies in cribs and gave them bottles but didn't do much else. Anyway my Mom kept having babies and they kept taking them away because she was crazy.*
- [Prompt] and your father? *I didn't have a father.*

Story2 (segment)

When my sister was born and then when I was born my mother was having lots of problems. She was afraid of everything and kept us in the dark and wouldn't let anyone to check on us. She was afraid to take us to the doctor because she thought he might take us away

Story 2

She had this thing schizophrenia that kept her brain from working like it should. So she wasn't being mean and she wasn't stupid (she went to college) but this thing kept her from taking good care of us. I mean my teeth were all rotten from just drinking milk in my crib and I couldn't even walk because I was in my bed so much.

Story 2

Her brain wouldn't let her be a good mother and she was even too afraid to take the pills that might have helped her. She thought the pills were poison.

She never had any babies after me. Now she lives in a place with other people who have brain problems and need someone to help them.

Story 2

(Prompt) and your dad?

Well that's still a mystery because my mom can't say. Marcie (worker) said that in the records it says he was a college student from outside the U.S. I am kind of brown and have black hair and I think maybe he was from Arabia.

[Prompt] Now that you know a little more about what happened what are you thinking about why you didn't stay with your mom?

Well...I'm thinking babies need to not be in the dark and not have rotted teeth. They need hugs and things and books read to them. So I wish I had that but I have it now, even though I'm not a baby!

Examining changes in narrative

- Is the narrative complete? (i.e. does it have a beginning, middle and end?)
 - Is it coherent – temporal, linked?
 - Does it contain change, progress or resolution?
 - Is it complex? (nuanced, offering explanation)?
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Examining Narrative

- Does it use words of emotion appropriate to the child's stage of development?
 - Does it contain some aspect of meaning or value to the child?
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Doing research on Lifebooks as a Therapeutic Tool

Given our understanding of the impact of loss and trauma and the power of narrative, Lifebooks “ought” to work. But how? And how do we know?

Center for Adoption Studies and LSSI hope to shortly begin a study of the impact of lifebooks on youth who have long term foster care experiences using narrative analysis.

What are your recommendations?

- Standardized tools on trauma
 - On loss and grief
 - Others?
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