

# **The Effects of Trauma on Attachment: A Behavioral Perspective**

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**SWWC Behavioral Health Services**

# Stephanie's Story

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# What went wrong?

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- ▶ **Relied On:**
  - ▶ In-office Behavior
  - ▶ Parent Report
- ▶ **Unable to:**
  - ▶ Handle Child's Behavior
  - ▶ Help Parent with Child
- ▶ **Only Able to:**
  - ▶ Make Diagnosis
  - ▶ Prescribe Medicine



# Diagnosis

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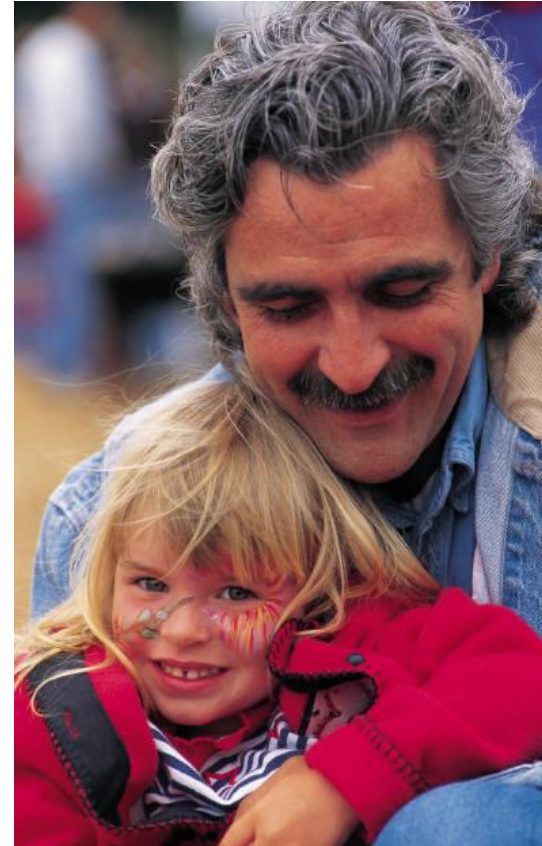
<b>Medical Model</b>	<b>Behavioral Model</b>
<b>Individual disorder/ disease</b>	<b>Environmental factors</b>
<b>Clinical interview</b>	<b>Observe in multiple natural settings</b>
<b>Family history</b>	<b>Reinforcement history</b>



# Use Lots of Powerful Reinforcers

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- Attention from Parents/Peers
- Eye Contact/ Physical Contact/ Close Proximity
- Excitement/Intensity
- Control/ Power
- Movement/Activity
- Access to Preferred People/ Places/ Items
- Escape/ Avoidance



# ABA Helped Us To Get Our Child's Behavior Under Control

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# Child Exhibited Behaviors Indicating Lack of Attachment

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# Devastating Effects of Lack of Attachment





# Devastating Effects of Lack of Attachment: Behaviors Associated with Psychological Difficulties

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- ▶ Heightened processing of threat-related information
- ▶ Emotional dysregulation
- ▶ Depressive symptoms
- ▶ Depression, anxiety and dissociation
- ▶ Adolescent sexual risk behaviors
- ▶ Maladaptive coping strategies
- ▶ Increased risk for substance use



# Immoral/Unemotional Behaviors

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- Lying, stealing, cheating
- Appearance of no guilt/remorse
- Appearance of no performance anxiety/achievement motivation
- Appearance of no joy/pride/sadness



# Conduct Disorder with Callous-Unemotional Traits (APA, 2013)

- Lack of remorse or guilt
- Lack of concern for others' feelings
- Lack of concern over poor performance at school, work or in other important activities
- Shallow or deficient emotions



# Behavioral Explanation: How Did This Happen?

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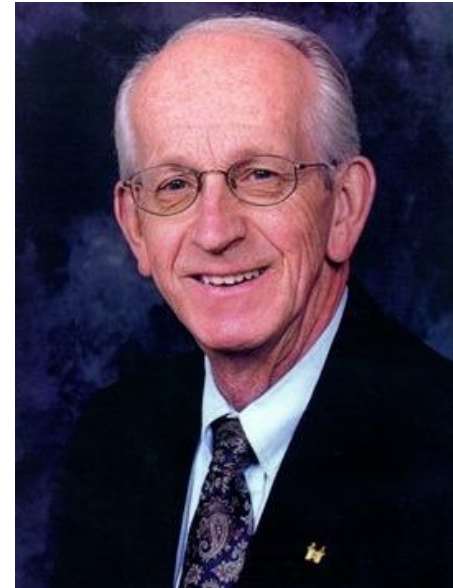
- “It takes a village to raise a child.”

**Hillary Clinton**



- “If the village raises your child, you will raise a psychopath.”

**Glenn Latham, The Power of  
Positive Parenting**



# **Behavioral Explanation:**

## **Why Maltreated Children Fail to Learn Attachment Behaviors**

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- ▶ Familiar adults abuse, neglect, abandon
- ▶ Learn to rely on self (manipulate-coerce or charm)
- ▶ Strangers (naïve adults) give without reciprocity/accountability



# Behavioral Explanation:

## The Impact of Reinforcement History on Moral Behavior

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- ▶ Positive reinforcement for expressing basic needs (caregiver consistently meets needs)
- ▶ Chooses caregiver's reinforcement over all other's (attached to caregiver)
- ▶ Engages in appropriate behavior to gain positive reinforcement (to please caregiver) and avoid punishment (not disappoint caregiver)
- ▶ Engages in appropriate behavior for covert positive reinforcement (internalized caregiver, development of a conscience)



# Michael defined EO as

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- ▶ Environmental events, operations, or stimulus conditions that affect an organism's behavior by altering
- ▶ (a) the reinforcing or punishing effectiveness of other environmental events and
- ▶ (b) the frequency of occurrence of that part of the organism's repertoire relevant to those events as consequences

(Laraway, Snyckerski, Michael & Poling, 2003)

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# These Environmental Events can take the form of

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- ▶ **Deprivation of stimuli** in the environment that have **reinforcing value** ( food, attention, pleasure, structure, excitement) that may make the presentation of those stimuli have more salient or stronger reinforcing value
- ▶ **Presentation of stimuli** in the environment that have **punishing effects** (pain, anxiety, chaos, task, person, place) that may make removal of those stimuli have more salient or stronger reinforcing value





# Feelings as EOs

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- ▶ In the past, abuse/neglect caused feelings of:
- ▶ Pain
- ▶ Guilt
- ▶ Shame
- ▶ Sadness
- ▶ Anxiety



# Feelings as EOs

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- ▶ In the present, stimulus conditions associated with abuse/neglect cause feelings of:
- ▶ Pain
- ▶ Guilt
- ▶ Shame
- ▶ Sadness
- ▶ Anxiety



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## Discriminative Stimuli (SDs), Establishing Operations (EOs) & Negative Reinforcement (SR-)

- ▶ Antecedents
    - ▶ External SD= event triggers feeling
    - ▶ EO = feeling of discomfort
    - ▶ EO = how you feel that makes reinforcer more salient
- SR- = Negative Reinforcement =  
negative feeling goes away



# Abuse / Neglect / Trauma / Loss

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- ▶ Negative reinforcement for numbing/blocking emotions associated with aversive situations
- ▶ Experiential and emotional avoidance of anxiety (Friman)



# Behavioral Explanation: Why Children who have been Maltreated are more likely to Numb/Block Emotions

- ▶ The pain/destitution was more severe
- ▶ Learning history of being punished for feeling/expressing emotions
- ▶ Lack of learning history of getting relief by being soothed/comforted (negative reinforcement)



# Behavioral Explanation of CU Traits

- ▶ Negative feelings (sadness, shame, guilt, remorse, anxiety, fear) are EOs for numbing
- ▶ Numbing is negatively reinforced (avoid or escape the pain of these negative feelings triggered by thoughts of early childhood experiences of abuse/neglect/loss)
- ▶ Acting out behavior is reinforced and on-task behavior is extinguished



# Anti-Social Youth High on CU Traits

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- ▶ More severe, aggressive, and persistent pattern of antisocial behavior
- ▶ Greater risk to develop adult psychopathology
- ▶ Less reactive to threatening and emotionally distressing stimuli



# Good Old-Fashioned Discipline?

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(McFarland & Bonavita)

- ▶ • A traditional mindset with a blanket approach to discipline is not supported by Behavior Analysts or by those working with children with trauma



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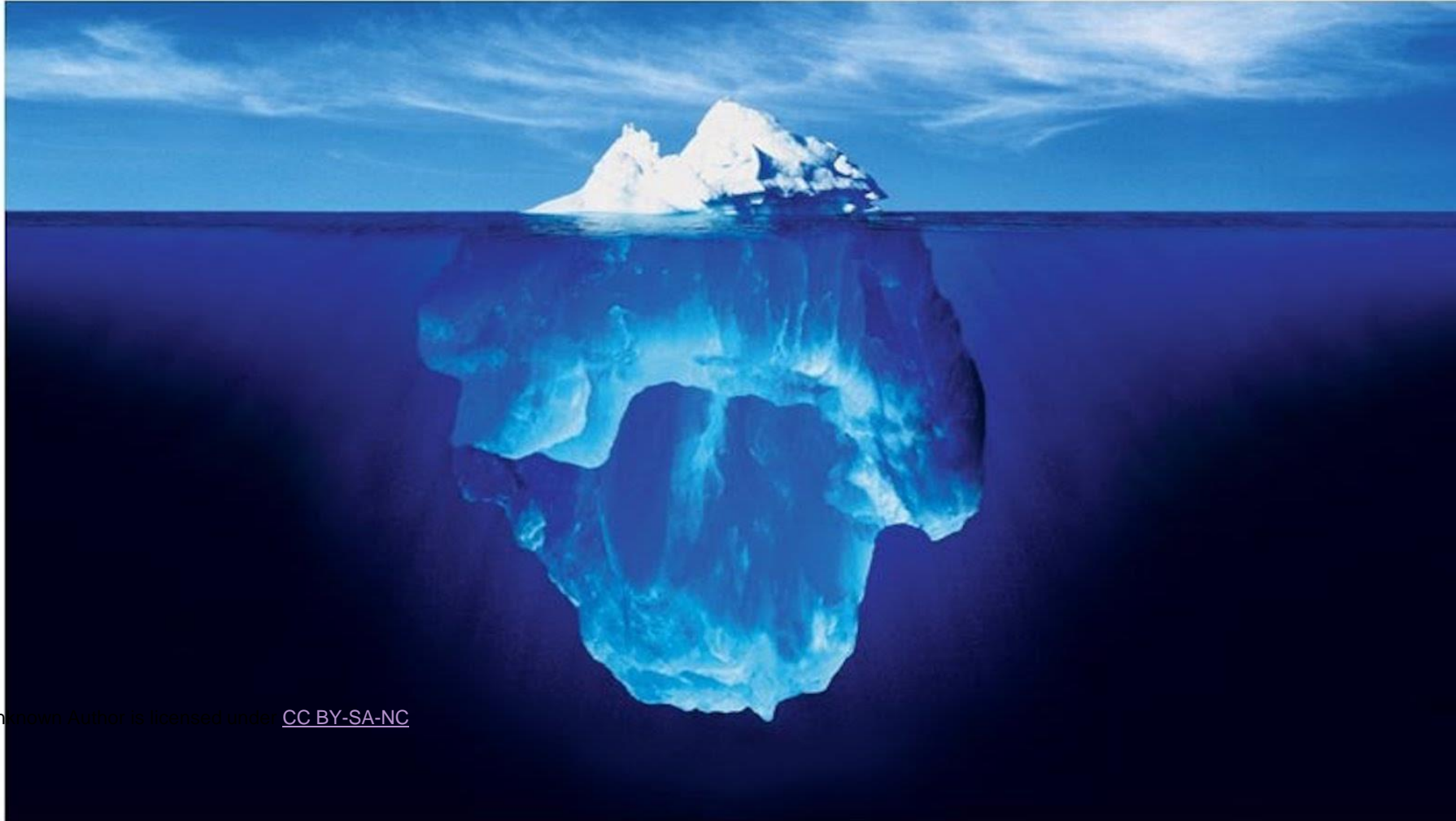
- ▶ • Why?
-



# Behavior is just the tip of the Iceberg!

(McFarland & Bonavita)

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# Implications for Treatment: Attachment Behaviors can be Learned with Great Difficulty

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- ▶ Critical period for learning attachment (requires more repetition)
- ▶ Tons of high intensity positive reinforcement
- ▶ “Making up for lost time”



# ATTACHMENT / TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH (McFarland & Bonavita)

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## FOCUS IS ON

- ▶ • Regulation
- ▶ • Safety
- ▶ • Healthy Relationship – Positive Interactions (positive affect)
  - ▶ Need fulfillment
  - ▶ Warm facial expressions
  - ▶ Eye Contact
  - ▶ Touch

- ▶ A relationship trauma can only be healed relationally. -Karyn Purvis



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# CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR: Behavior is communication! (McFarland & Bonavita)

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## BEHAVIOR ANALYST APPROACH

- ▶ Why is the challenging behavior occurring?
- ▶ What's the Need?
  - ▶ Attention/Access
  - ▶ Escape/Avoidance
  - ▶ Self-Stimulation

## TRAUMA- INFORMED APPROACH

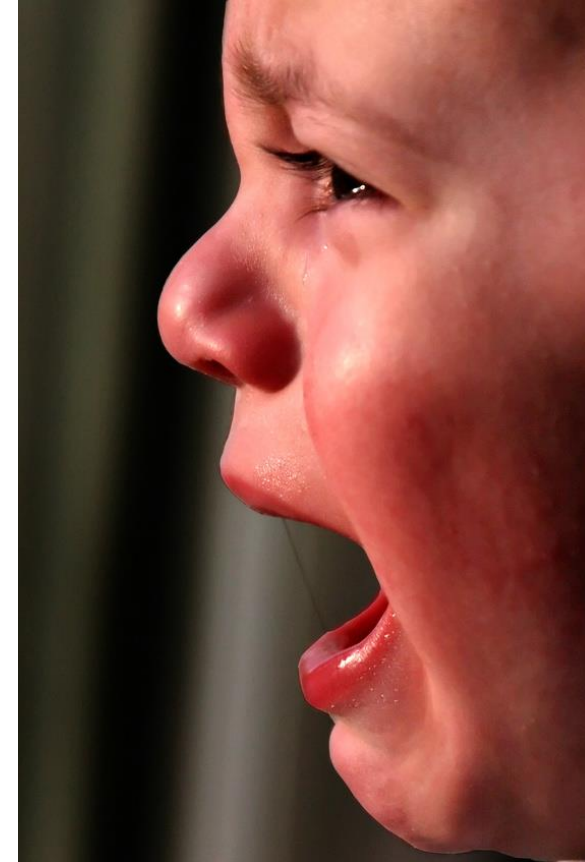
- ▶ • Why is the challenging behavior occurring?
- ▶ • What's the Need?
  - ▶ Basic needs – Safety and...
  - ▶ Felt Safety



# Traditional Behavior Management Interventions

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- ▶ Neutrality in applying consequences
- ▶ Focus on compliance
- ▶ Emphasize what child will gain or lose
- ▶ Avoid bargaining, negotiating, explaining and reasoning
- ▶ Disregard feelings of child who is whining, crying or complaining



# **Moral Behavior Deficits:**

## **Conscience = Generalization**

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- ▶ Overt Sd for reinforcement/punishment is necessary (reinforcer/punisher must be present)
- ▶ Covert Sd for reinforcement/punishment is insufficient (thoughts about who I care about)



# Attachment in the Classroom

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Christi  
Bergin &  
David Bergin

Educ Psychol  
Rev (2009)  
21:141–170



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# Increase sensitivity and warm, positive interactions with students

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- ▶ Teacher sensitivity refers to accurate detection and interpretation of children's cues, provision of comfort, and responsiveness to distress
- ▶ (Pianta et al. 2008)



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# Be well prepared for class and hold high expectations for students

- ▶ Wentzel (1997) found that middle-school students felt their teachers cared for them if they helped each student academically
  - ▶ asking if they needed help
  - ▶ calling on them
  - ▶ making sure they understood content
  - ▶ teaching in a special way
  - ▶ making class interesting.
- ▶ Non-caring teachers
  - ▶ got off task
  - ▶ taught while students were not paying attention
  - ▶ did not answer questions or explain things



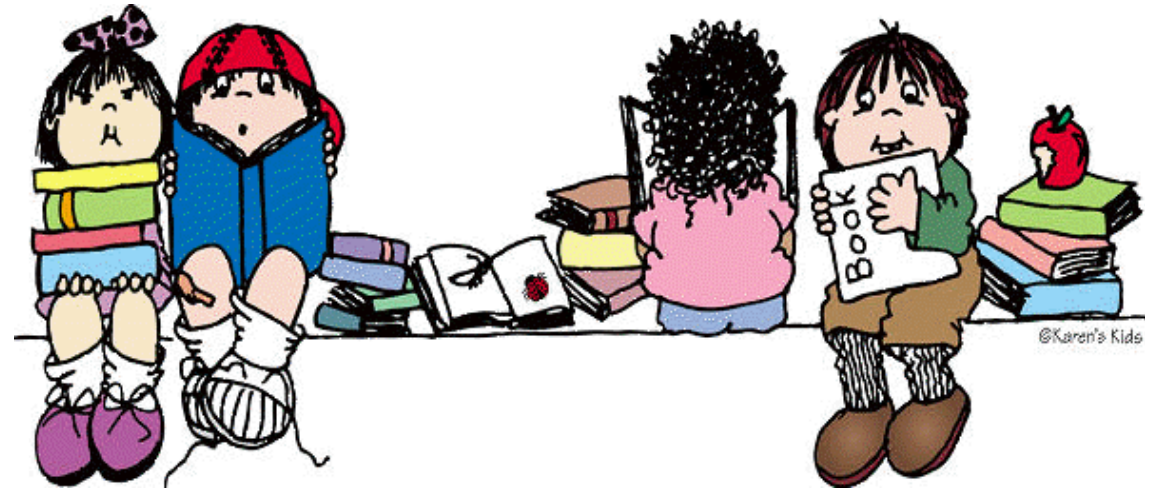
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# Be responsive to students' agendas

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- ▶ Provide choice whenever possible



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# Use induction rather than coercive discipline: Coercion interferes with caring relationships (Noddings, 1992)

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## Induction involves:

- ▶ Explaining the reason for rules
- ▶ Explaining how the child's behavior affects others

## Coercive discipline involves:

- ▶ Using threats
- ▶ Imposing the teacher's superior power
- ▶ Taking advantage of the teacher's ability to control resources like recess time, grades, or detentions



# Help students be kind, helpful, and accepting of one another

## Peer culture is a key component of school bonding (Juvonen 2007)

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### Teachers can increase prosocial behavior

- ▶ by providing children with opportunities to care for and help each other (Mussen and Eisenberg 2001; Noddings 1992)
- ▶ through modeling, such as complimenting students, respecting students, and avoiding hurting their feelings (Wentzel 1997)
- ▶ by praising and expressing gratitude for kindnesses, such as “you are a nice person” or “I really appreciate that you took the trouble to do that” (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; McCullough et al. 2008; Mills and Grusec 1989; Mussen and Eisenberg 2001)



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# Implement interventions for specific, difficult relationships

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## Banking Time (Pianta, 1999)

- ▶ Teacher “saves up” positive experiences in relationship “capital” that can later be “drawn upon”
- ▶ For 5 to 15 min each day, the teacher gives the child undivided attention and follows the child’s lead in whatever activity the child chooses
- ▶ During these few minutes, the teacher does not do any teaching, directing, or reinforcing, but rather acts as a sportscaster, simply giving a play-by-play narrative of the child’s actions
- ▶ The teacher conveys acceptance, interest, and safety to the child
- ▶ Similar to Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (Eyberg, 1999)
- ▶ This approach helps repair relationships where there are high levels of conflict and the adult has been controlling and dominating with the child
- ▶ Relationship repair takes time, because children with insecure attachment have expectations that adults are negative, unsafe, and untrustworthy



# **Moral Behavior Goal:**

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## **Conscience = Generalization**

- ▶ Overt Sd for reinforcement/punishment is not necessary (reinforcer/punisher does not need to be present)
- ▶ Covert Sd for reinforcement/punishment is sufficient to modify behavior (thoughts about who I care about)



# Implications for Treatment:

## Learning to Emotionally Connect

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- ▶ Requires learning emotional behaviors (tolerating, coping with, getting comfort for negative emotions)
- ▶ Emotional connection is part of attachment



# **Key Components of Trauma- Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)**

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**National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2004**

- ▶ **PRACTICE**

- ▶ P- Psychoeducation and Parenting Skills

- ▶ R- Relaxation Techniques

- ▶ A- Affective Expression and Regulation

- ▶ C- Cognitive Coping and Processing

- ▶ T- Trauma Narrative and Processing

- ▶ I- In Vivo Exposure

- ▶ C- Conjoint Parent/Child Sessions

- ▶ E- Enhancing Personal Safety and Future Growth

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# A- Affective Expression and Regulation

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- ▶ Learn to manage emotional reactions (EOs) to reminders (SDs)
- ▶ Learn to identify and express emotions (EOs)
- ▶ Learn self-soothing activities (SR+, SR-)



# C- Cognitive Coping and Processing

- ▶ Understand connections between events (EOs), thoughts (EOs), feelings (EOs), discriminative stimuli (SDs), behaviors, and reinforcers (SR+, SR-)



# T- Trauma Narrative and Processing

- ▶ Gradual exposure exercises (verbal, written, symbolic) (EOs)
- ▶ Inaccurate or unhelpful thinking about the abuse (EOs)



# Discriminative Stimuli & Behavior

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- ▶ SD- whether choose to cope or numb related to SD
- ▶ In therapy or remember (internal SD)  
—> use strategy
- ▶ Chart on wall or index card (external SD) —> use strategy



# Teen Years: Problems

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- Snuck out of window at 18 years old
- Brother took to West Virginia
- Tried to bring her home but she refused
- Came home angrier than ever



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# Teen Years: Strategies

- Teen: I can do what I want. I'm eighteen.
- Parent: I can do what I want. You're eighteen.
- Tough Love: Contingencies with Empathy (Noncontingent praise and acknowledgement)
- Tough Love: Letting Go



# Outcomes: 4 Years Ago

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- Love from boyfriend/baby Sd for feeling positive emotions
- Began to feel negative emotions associated with inappropriate behavior
- These feelings served as reinforcement/punishment
- Also, they served to modify behavior without external contingencies



# Recent Updates: Outcomes

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- Reunited during pregnancy
  - Friendly, active toddler
  - Supportive with boundaries
  - Exhibiting genuine emotions
  - Loving to mom, grandma and toddler
  - Attended college and got 3 As & 1 B
  - Has the goal of becoming an elementary school teacher
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# Recent Updates: Outcomes

## Happy Toddler

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**Questions?**  
**Contact me at:**  
**goldenj@ecu.edu**

