

When the Child Is a Trigger

The Plight of the Parent
With a History of Childhood Abuse

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Preventing the intergenerational transmission of trauma requires interventions that address the special nature of the patient's problems as a parent.



"I'm afraid I'm going to hurt my child somehow."

Unresolved Childhood Trauma

- Unprocessed intrusive memories of distress, helplessness, and fear as children
- Activated in caregiving interactions with their own children
 - Triggered by the child's strong emotions and distress
- Causes parent to feel dysregulated and unsafe and be unable to offer comfort or regulate the child's distress

Evolutionary Action Systems

- Attachment System —seeking connection that offers soothing and protection in moments of fear or distress
- Caregiving System —tendency to provide care and protection in response to attachment-seeking by others
- Defense System —life preserving responses to danger or life threat (fight / flight / freeze)

Trauma Responses

- Fight — anger, hostility, threat of aggression
- Flight — avoidance, neglect of responsibilities
- Freeze — collapse, helplessness, frightened by child

Impact on the Child

- Frightened or frightening caregiving behavior leads to conflicted, disoriented, fearful behavior in the child
- Paradoxical situation of having to seek comfort and safety from the source of danger
- Leads to activation of two systems — attachment and defense — and disorganized attachment
- Consistently linked with psychiatric disturbance in adolescence and early adulthood

Reflective Parenting

- The parental capacity to reflect on their own and their child's thoughts and feelings is an important protective factor
- The goal is to hold the child's mind in mind, reflecting instead of reacting, and making meaning out of the child's behaviors
- When parents gain a better understanding and sense of control over their reactions, they discover new parenting skills and experience increasing joy in parenting

Treatment Objectives

- Increase awareness of the effects of trauma responses on parenting
- Boost capacity for self-regulation
- Increase capacity to reflect on their own and their children's thoughts and feelings
- Increase ability to offer comfort and regulate children's distress

How To Ask

- "Parenting can be very stressful. Have you considered that the challenges of parenting might be contributing to your current difficulties?"
- "Some parents have not had the best experiences growing up and they know they want to do some things differently with their kids, but they might not know how or where to go for ideas. Has that ever been the case for you?"
- "Sometimes traumatic childhood experiences can interfere with parenting the way we would like because our memories get stirred up. Have you noticed if that ever happens to you?"

"Having been helped to recognize and recapture the feelings which she herself had as a child and to find that they are accepted tolerantly and understandingly, a mother will become increasingly sympathetic and tolerant towards the same things in her child."
John Bowlby, 1940



"I trust my child will come to me in moments of distress."

Q&A

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