

# Understanding the Disorganized Child

## Development:

- ◆ The disorganized child is *raised in a context of fear* (a frightening and/or frightened parent);
- ◆ This presents a “*Catch-22/ Double-Bind*” for the child: The very person from whom this child needs to seek comfort and protection (in times of difficulty and danger) is the same person the child experiences to be dangerous;
- ◆ The disorganized child is thus *unable to experience* either a “*secure base*” or a “*safe haven*;”
- ◆ Hence, the *parent is experienced as lacking the capacity to provide security or safety* for the child. The child experiences the parent as unable to supply:
  1. Appropriate hierarchy
  2. Appropriate boundaries
  3. Appropriate structure
  4. Predictability and consistency
  5. Empathy for the child’s feelings
  6. Repair after moments of rupture;
- ◆ Because of this lack of safety (structure, hierarchy, predictability, empathy, and repair) in her/his parent, the disorganized child protects him/herself from further experiences of fear and disorganization by becoming either *controlling/punitive or chronically focused upon providing caregiving* for others. In either circumstance, *the child takes control* of an uncontrolled environment, thus offering some form of predictability.
- ◆ In addition, because of this lack of safety (structure, predictability, empathy, and repair) in her/his parent, *the capacity for trust is significantly compromised* in the disorganized child. In its place, the child becomes hypervigilant – chronically focusing upon the “potentially dangerous parent.” This “inner parent” is then projected onto the environment (see: any person in the child’s world who is involved in providing care and protection; any person who might become a source of positive relationship). The “dangerous other” (teacher, fellow student, etc.) must initially be hidden from or battled with. The projection of danger and hostility onto others creates distance, which further isolates the child who then further distorts the environment as dangerous or punitive.
- ◆ This chronic experience of danger and fear thus *undermines* the disorganized child’s *capacity to relax* and consider new points of view. It also *requires the child to “test”* any potential caregiver or friend for lengthy periods of time, prior to a beginning willingness to begin trusting. (The longer a child goes without resolution to this view of the environment as dangerous and punitive, the longer the time required for “testing.”)
- ◆ The severely disorganized child has *no experience of being able to positively impact his/her environment* and thus experiences him/ herself as *helpless, powerless, and hopeless*. Experience has consistently confirmed that there is no way to influence or be understood by significant others. The “only options” remaining are “*acting-in*” (self-hatred, depression, chronic anxiety, self-mutilation, suicidal thinking, etc; i.e. aiming fear and aggression at the

self) or “**acting-out**” (bullying behavior, hyperactivity, conduct disorder, etc; i.e. aiming fear and aggression at others).

### Keys to Successful Intervention:

- ◆ **Empathic Shift: Holding** a clear understanding of and **empathy for** each disorganized child’s emotional double-bind (“*She wants to trust me, but she can’t yet believe anyone can be trustworthy;*” “*The closer he gets, the more he needs to test me by acting disruptive and hostile.*”);
- ◆ **Providing a solid and caring relationship**, based upon safety and structure (caring hierarchy, predictability, consistency, willingness to repair, etc.)
- ◆ **Reflective Attunement & Dialogue:** Helping the child identify and discuss her/his state of mind and the state of mind of another. (“*I’m wondering what you were thinking just before you started to throw that bottle. Can you think back on what thoughts were going through your head?*”; “*I’m guessing that it feels horrible these days with so many kids mad at you, kind of like you are all alone . . . and that you were thinking that being mad is the only way you can feel some power.*” “*Do you know how it feels to be talking to me more and more these days? Can you guess how I feel, knowing that you are willing to tell me these important things about your life?*”)

Specifics:

- ◆ **Become a Secure Attachment Figure** (A Secure Attachment Figure = someone who is bigger, stronger, wiser and kind)
- ◆ **Creating Structure** (Establishing needed safe haven/secure base)
  - A. *Gentle Hierarchy:* Allowing the child to know that you are in charge and that your decisions are fair, caring, and trustworthy;
  - B. *Predictability:* clarity of position/ consistency of approach : consistency in your responsiveness and availability;
  - C. *Establishing and maintaining clear boundaries* (“*This I will do, this I will not do. This you can do, this you can’t do.*”);
  - D. *Focus on positives/ firm limit on negatives-* consistently recognize and honor positives (rule of thumb: offer recognition in a quiet, comfortable tone of voice) and thwart dangerous or damaging behavior (rule of thumb: set limits in a quiet, firm, comfortable tone of voice).
- **Building Relationship**
  - A. *Repair and negotiation* - building relationship in times of difficulty by seeing disruptions on the part of the child as her/his attempt to return to the familiar territory of disorganized relationship (“If it ain’t fixed, keep breaking it.”) This attempt represents the child’s intuitive wisdom, an “inner knowing” that she/he needs to experience repair after inevitable breaks in a relationship. A disorganized child will “return to the scene of the crime” (i.e. ruptures in relationship) again and again: 1) because this is all she/he knows – so it feels almost comfortable, in spite of being painful, and 2) because she/he continues to hope that someone will finally care enough and be able to maintain enough structure to

- provide needed negotiation and a willingness to work problems through to a positive outcome;
- B. *Respecting the child's intention* to “ find another way” within a context of trust;
- C. *Interaction themes* (for teachers and staff):
1. “*Time-ins:*” repair, repair, repair
    - willingness to negotiate when appropriate
    - focus on upsets and disruptions to a positive outcome
  2. *Focus with* the child upon tasks until their completion (Central: offering safe relationship as the means by which tasks can begin to be completed appropriately. “*Here, let me work **with** you on this. I think we can find the answer together.*”)
  3. Interact with calmness and ease, with no abrupt changes in mood or tone of voice
  4. Willingness to help the child explore what is fearful and frightening
  5. Willingness to identify and understand child’s fears (and to recognize fear as central in every interaction)
  6. Willingness to be a “safe haven” (showing protective and safeguarding behavior)
  7. Willingness to take charge when necessary
  8. Face-to-face/eye-to-eye contact (to the limited degree that the child can tolerate)
  9. Sensitive physical contact (when appropriate)
  10. Relaxed and comfortable communication
  11. Frankness, clarity, and directness of speech

**Bottom Line: “It’s the relationship.”** These children aren’t seeking attention (even though they will settle for it). They are looking for a safe and trustworthy relationship. *A secure relationship precedes healthy behavior; authentic motivation follows genuine trust.*

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*Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell*  
*Marycliff Institute, Spokane, WA*