

**Relationship & Beyond:
Supporting Children with
High Emotional & Behavioural Challenges.**

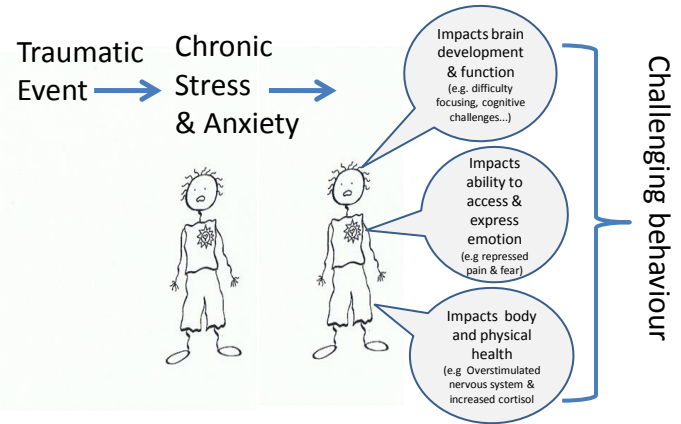
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The 9th Annual Assessment Workshop - Keys to Children's Mental Health:
Assessing Children's Social & Emotional Well-Being
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What is behind the behaviour?



Meeting challenging behaviours with curiosity and compassion aids us in seeing what is underneath the behaviour.



**Potential factors
that impact the child/family
and that can be the
root of challenging behaviours:**

1. Systems

Understanding that the child is within a family system, and the family within a broader system and community

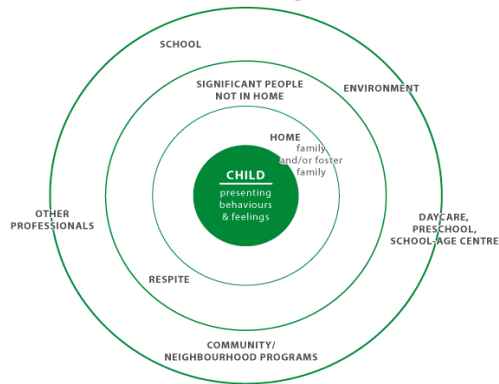


For example:

- Family living in the home with the child
- Family living outside of the home
- Extended family, close friends
- Daycare, preschool, school
- Support programs, individuals such as Doctor, Dentist, Speech and Language Pathologist, Community Health Nurse, etc
- Community Members
- Municipal, regional and provincial programs

Working in partnership with others brings the wisdom of many.

A systemic model for understanding the child



Emotional Systems



Each person bring an “emotional field” which interacts with others, creating a complex system of intertwined emotions which trigger and reinforce each other.

2. Attachment Relationships

These are the relationships that develop between an infant/child and a parent or primary caregiver. Attuned attachment is a biological need of all healthy developing humans.

Attunement:

Being connected, being on the same wave length as someone else, giving full attention, having an open heart and mind to what is happening

When the child feels safe, heard, understood and cared for in this relationship they learn to trust, to develop an integrated sense of self and to be open to learning and social interaction.



The Parent-Child Connection

The parents’ emotional health and past attachment history can affect their ability to form relationships and to cope with stress and can impact their level of reactivity.



At times of stress, people move back to familiar patterns.

The parents’ ability to cope and find a sense of stability depends on a strong sense of self. Their sense of self is affected by their own early relationships and experiences and having had their own needs met.

Relationship building is the task of parents and significant adults in the life of the child.



We bring to the work with young children and their families who we are and how we have made sense of how we were brought up and educated.

3. Traumatic Experiences

Present behaviour often has its roots in the past.

Experiences that have left the child feeling overwhelmed or unsafe and trying to make sense of events in their own way, will greatly impact their ability to manage in the world.

These experiences may include witnessing violence and experiencing chaotic and unpredictable living arrangements.



What are some of the signs when attachment is interrupted or broken

- High state of anxiety
- Reluctance to trust
- Impulsivity
- Inability to self regulate
- Hyperactivity
- Rigidity
- Poor play skills
- Reactivity
- Explosive behaviour
- Withdrawal
- Depression



4. Milestones & their timing in a family's life

- Prenatal, birth and postpartum issues
- Anniversary dates of significant events (changes, deaths, births for example)
- Moves-immigration, transient families
- For example: entering new stages of life such as 2's, adolescence, transitions of members in or out of the home, new job, loss of job



Thinking about the factors that impact children's behaviour gives us insight and direction when thinking about building strategies to support them.

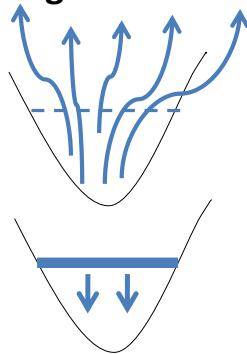
5. Social/Environmental Factors

- Socio-economic factors such as employment, poverty, hunger
- Environment – such as housing, neighbours, access to play areas
- Traumatic events (e.g.. natural disasters, war, loss of home country and exposure to violence)
- Impact of TV and media



Understanding the impact of the emotional world propelling behaviours

- Many past experiences are pushed into the unconscious, but the emotions surrounding them can continue to bubble.
- Acknowledging underlying feelings allows the child to understand their own process and/or feel understood. This understanding is calming and enables shifts in behaviour.



6. General Overall Development



- Physical health
- Developmental delays
- Impact of drugs & alcohol
- Brain Development
- Temperament

Understanding the impact of trauma on the body

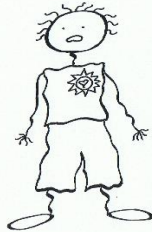
"Trauma is a fact of life but it does not have to be a life sentence."
- Dr. Peter Levine



- Traumatic events impact the equilibrium of the nervous system
- With danger or perceived danger, the autonomic nervous system kicks in for survival but takes energy from all other activities.
- Child may need professional support to re-balance the nervous system; this needs to be done in relationship and at the child's pace.
- Stress leads to increased cortisol levels. Cortisol can pass from mother to fetus during pregnancy.

Breaks in attachment and traumatic events which are not addressed or healed can lead to:

- Chronic anxiety
- Stress
- An inability to access and express emotions appropriately
- Impact on the body
- Significant behavioural challenges, ranging from withdrawal and depression to extreme aggression.



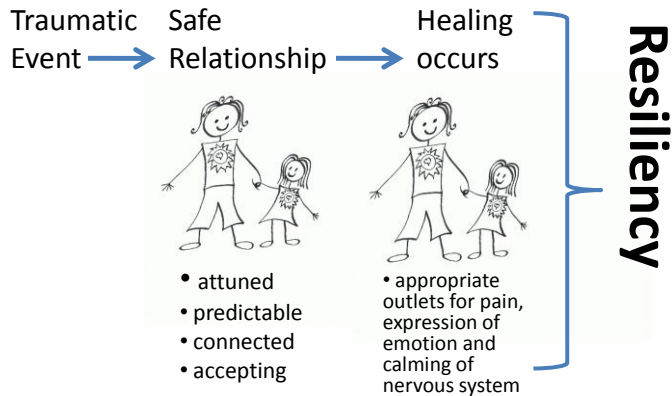
Our role in the healing process: *Connecting and forming a relationship*

- The recognition that creating a relationship takes time: being attuned, matching self to child, reading body language
- Finding the points of joining
- Finding ways to connect with the parent(s)
- Being present, available, predictable
- Listening / responding
- Building on child's sense of self - accept them as individuals, feed their belief in self, celebrate them

The attachment relationship becomes the container for all feelings and is essential for any and all strategies.



Changing the course of the event



A Resilient Child is:

A problem solver
Hopeful

Autonomous
Resourceful

A self starter
Imaginative

A Leader
Flexible

A friend
Aware of my space

Aware of my body
sensations & feelings

Optimistic
Confident

Creative
Adventurous

Imaginative
Empathetic

Boundaried
Trusting

Excited about
learning

Expressive of my
feelings, struggles,
delights & ideas



How do we support resilience in our children:

Our relationship with the child helps the child to experience him/herself as valued and important. Children need to experience that they matter.

- By being attuned and “in the moment” with the children
- By trying to see the world from the child’s “point of view”
- By thinking about how we may sound or be perceived by the child
- By remembering that all children are unique just as they are
- By thinking carefully about what we expect of our children – remembering the bigger picture
- By slowing down when life speeds up
- By remembering that we are the greatest gift we can give our children

Adapted from Everyday Blessings The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting by Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn

What can help

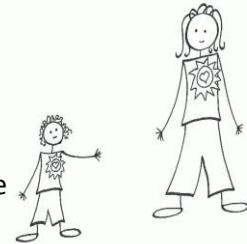


- Being present
- Being aware of our own triggers
- Recognizing our own internal state and finding ways to calm
- Building our own resilience
- Finding support in our team, supervision and outside resources

“The way we communicate with our children has a profound impact on how they develop. Our ability to have sensitive, reciprocal communication nurtures a child’s sense of security, and these trusting secure relationships help children do well in many areas of their lives.” - Daniel Siegel M.D. - Parenting from the Inside Out

What gets in the way of forming an attachment relationship?

- Our own triggers
- “Goodness of fit.”
- Struggling to keep an open heart when feeling reactive
- Seeing the situation from the adult’s point of view
- Having difficulty putting aside tasks and chores in order to be present and an “anchor”



Creating a supportive environment to minimize challenging behaviours

- Forming a relationship with child and family
- Creating a predictable, safe structure with clear limits and expectations
 - structure is therapeutic-extrinsic structure builds inner control
 - the safety of routines allows the child to relax
 - providing a fence to push against
 - allowing time to experience frustration
 - some level of stress helps children develop strengths
 - manageable stress teaches children to recognize feelings in their body and helps them learn to self regulate



Creating a sense of community

- Create a space where feelings are acknowledged and spoken about
- Provide opportunities for children to help one another, cooperate
- Model and guide empathy
- Create a sense of belonging and connectedness
- Link to child's family and culture



Promoting connection with an absent parent / significant person



1. Language that speaks of reconnection.
(e.g. "See you later" or "I will be thinking about you colouring when I'm at work. Then I will be able to see it when I pick you up.")
1. Calendars or pictures that help children to understand the passage of time.
2. Use of stuffed animals or puppets that give the child a "transition object" to cuddle or hold in their absence.
3. Use of an item of clothing or something that reminds the child of the absent person.
4. Use of technology such as phone calls or Skype to bridge the gap until they are close once again.
5. The sharing of a special story or moment of the absent person
6. Creating a "thoughts about (the absent person) box".

Further strategies to minimize challenging behaviours

- Support play and social interactions
- Get to know each child – build on strengths and support anticipated difficulties e.g. transitions, over-stimulation
- Consider the space – create a "feeling better place"
- Support and allow for problem solving and creative solutions
- Mediate connections and model conflict resolution



Consider the impact of our own behaviour, emotions and body language on the child

Strategies to address challenges

Interweave therapeutic and behavioural strategies; deal concurrently with the social and emotional worlds.

Supporting challenging behaviours is complex and there is no "cookie cutter" approach. Strategies must occur within the context of relationship.

- Counter the heaviness of traumatic events with joy and laughter
- Provide outlets for feelings
- Provide activities to calm the nervous system
- Support children through conflict
- Guiding children in problem solving



Outlets for feelings

- Talking about the feelings
- Use of play
- Drawing
- Materials for physical release
- Pictures and photographs
- Stories/books
- Puppets
- “Feelings box”
- Use of imagery
- Our own memories
- Role of nature



Activities to calm the nervous system

- Providing quiet spaces
- Breathing exercises and visualizations
- Teaching recognition of body sensations
- Pushing on hands and feet to release and refocus energy / giving child power and control
- Repetitive rhythmic activities e.g. drumming
- Movement e.g. tapping - activates brain stem



Any physical connection needs to be appropriate to child's comfort level.

Limit setting

- Minimize limits-be reasonable, realistic and age appropriate
- Be clear about boundaries
- Distract or re-direct
- Focus on behaviour, not the child
- Provide child with the structure and opportunity to change behaviour

Limit setting

- Make directions clear, simple and specific
- Talk to the possible cause
- Follow all consequences with an identification of the processes and feelings which preceded the behaviour and help build their capacity to problem solve
- Always look for possibilities for reparation
- Do not leave a distressed child alone; relationship is healing, and essential to calming the child

Taking Care of Ourselves



- Children operate on an emotional level and will stir our feelings. To be the “container” for these feelings we need to be solid and non-reactive.
- Our own history and experiences impact our attitudes, values and responses-to be able to truly listen to the underlying message, we need to put aside our bias.
- Know our triggers e.g. how we feel about anger, and sadness
- Find ways to calm ourselves
- Find outlets to relax and re-energize



Safe relationships provide the container for healthy emotional systems for the child, the family, caregivers, other significant professionals and the broader community.



Creating community and well being together.

Team Work

- To be a cohesive, supportive team is critical and allows for the sharing of the important issues that impact the work.
- Debriefing and team meetings prevent burnout; help to depersonalize behaviours, de-fuse tense situations, alleviate anxiety, provide new insights and allow for an evaluation of the work.
- Using community resources brings new input and new energy and can prevent us feeling alone and overwhelmed.
- To “nourish” ourselves through new learning.



As a team we can share difficult situations, laugh and enjoy delightful moments together.

Questions, queries, thoughts...



Thank you for your interest and kind attention.
Your survey comments would be much appreciated.

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