

The 10th Annual Assessment Workshop First Do No Harm: Ethical Assessment of Vulnerable Children

Dr. Barbara Fitzgerald
Developmental Pediatrician
Clinical Associate Professor UBC
President, Mom to Mom Child Poverty Initiative
Society

Objectives

- To introduce the idea of thinking about assessment in the context of vulnerability, respect and healing
- To present a model of assessment that honours the child and the caregiver
- To talk about compassion in assessment
- To discuss how assessment can be therapeutic for the child and family

Vulnerability



April and her son Thomas enjoy some quality time during a one-day visit. April couldn't find accommodation in Vancouver on the welfare allowance of \$570 a month and had to give up Nicholas to foster care.

What people may bring to the assessment

- Shame
- Worry
- Issues around poverty
- Family stress
- Lack of choice
- Their own memories of school settings
- Fear of foster care

Conflicting Perspectives

Our Goals	Their Goals
Get the assessment done accurately Reach a diagnosis Be efficient	To get help for their child and be safe in the process.

Meeting families where they are at:

- Finding out what their developmental concern is for their child (if any)
- Listening with respect to what parents tell you

Who Are The Families?

More likely to:

- be single parents
- have low education levels
- Have housing and food security issues
- Be socially isolated
- Be stressed when they come to the assessment
- Be afraid of labeling
- Have issues related to trauma

Who Are These Families?

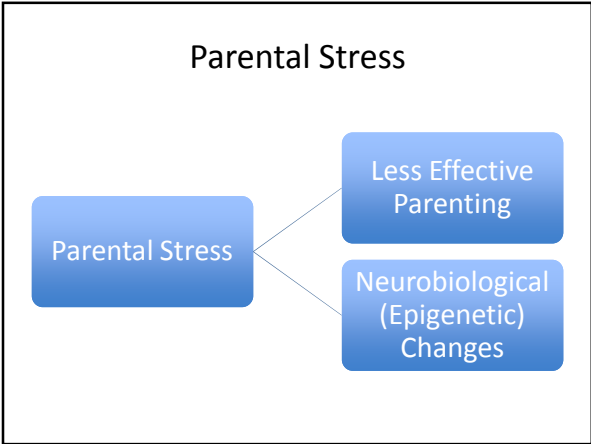
They are more likely to:

- Be resilient and resourceful
- Have had to fight to keep their children

The Role of Poverty

Increased incidence of delays in poor children:

- Wealth buys OPPORTUNITY: books, recreation, extra supports where needed
- More human capital
- More social capital
- Poverty causes family stress
- Poverty changes the way children's brains develop



It's not about us: Family-friendly assessments.

Removing Barriers

- Referral process: who refers, access to care providers, forms
- Booking process
- Location: transportation, food

Removing Barriers

- See people in a timely fashion
- See them in their community
- Invite them to bring support people
- Don't have rigid ideas about how it might go
- Be patient
- Listen to the caregiver: hear their story
- Ask them how you can help and what they need from you
- Reassure them about your role

Practical Points to Consider

Referral Process: how accessible is it? Are your forms only in English? What reading level is required? Is there help for people who don't complete the forms or is the file closed?

Booking Process: What about families who lose wages to come in? Can you be flexible?

What the professional brings to the assessment

Assumptions!

Caregiver's Stories

- We need to know *who* we are assessing
- It is impossible to do a meaningful assessment of a child unless the family context is considered

The Role of Culture and Past Trauma in Assessment

- Beliefs and values
- Parents' experiences with systems: education, health, social services
- Traumatic experiences in parents' childhoods
- Intergenerational experiences

Making an Assessment Therapeutic

- Use the assessment as an opportunity to highlight for the child/parent the strengths and weaknesses of the child
- E.g. show how repetition or visual cues make a difference
- Demonstrate the skills and age level that the child is solid at
- Promote understanding of the child for caregivers and teachers
- It's not enough to *assess*: you have to tell people what it *means* for the child

Promoting Healing

- Many parents, especially mothers blame themselves for the child's disability/challenges
- Even when something the parent did (e.g. FASD) was caused directly by the mother, show that you understand the context of how it happened and emphasize what can be done to support the child
- Show that the assessment/care team are not judgmental

Conclusion

- Assessment can have a profound effect on a family
- It can be therapeutic when it is done in a thoughtful, intentional way
- Challenge your assumptions!