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Chicago, IL

**PRE CONFERENCE:**  
March 22–23, 2018  
**CONFERENCE:**  
March 24–26, 2018

“ There is a little voice inside  
my head”

Invisible attachment trauma and  
suicide in children and healing  
strategies. A case study





<https://www.traumacentrum.be/en/education/workshops>





# voice

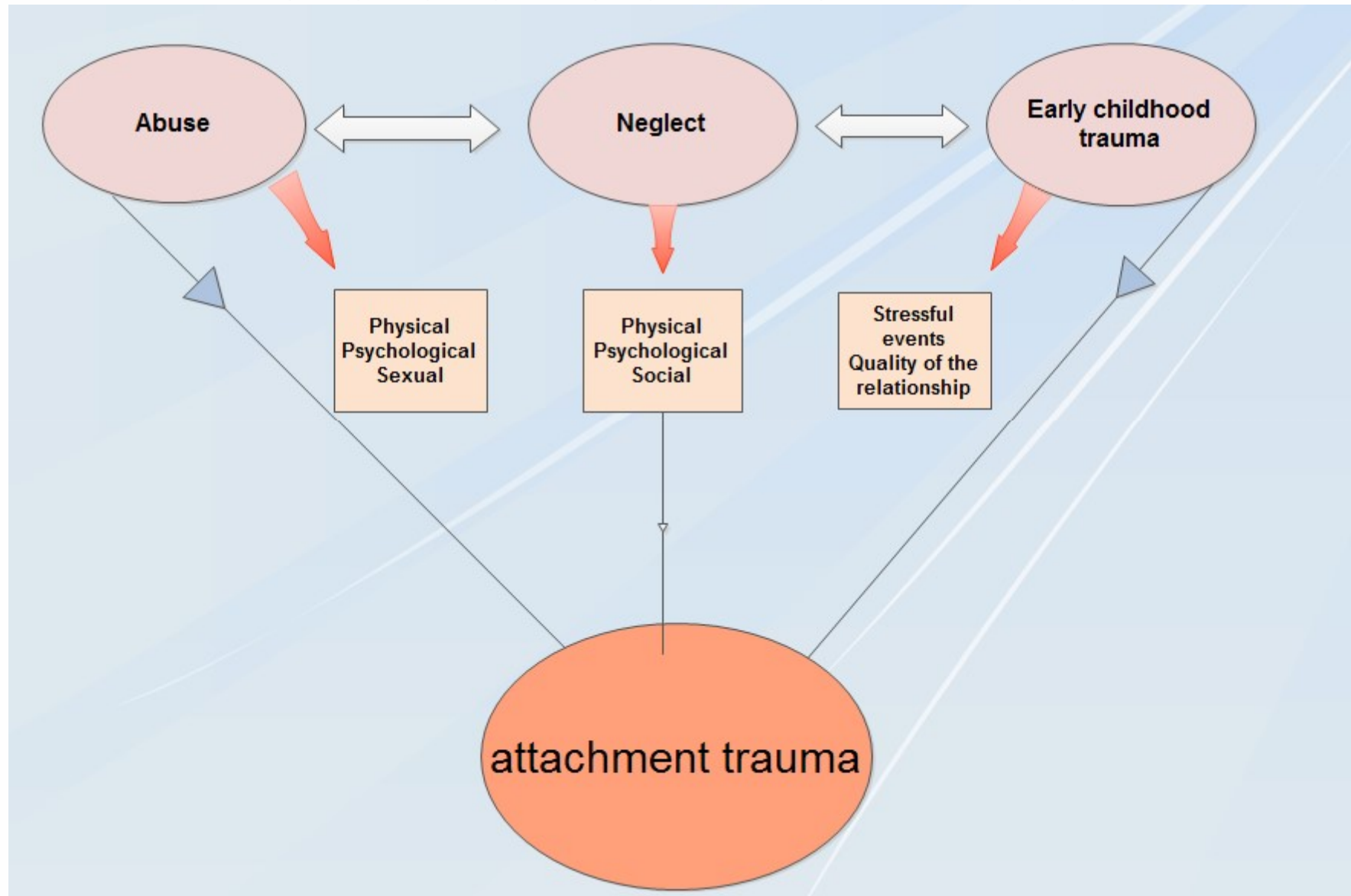
“ Invisible attachment trauma”

Suicide

Case

Treatment

# Invisible attachment trauma



# “Invisible Attachment trauma”

The form of traumatization



Child's experience of threat



Totally dependable on his caregiver



include the threat of



separation  
from the caregiver



having little  
response to  
the signals of distress.

# Attachment relationship



centrality

# Importance of the relationship

- The dynamic interaction between caregiver and child is necessary for:
  - Survival
  - Affect/ stressregulation
  - Development of the internal world
  - Experiencing a wide range of affective themes
  - Organization of self
  - Organization of relationship



# Quality of the attachment relationship





# Quality of the attachment relationship

- Attachment style of the parent
- How do parents mentally process attachment-related information
- Quality of parenting

# The quality of parenting:

## THE ABC OF ATTACHMENT (Siegel & Hartzell, 2004)

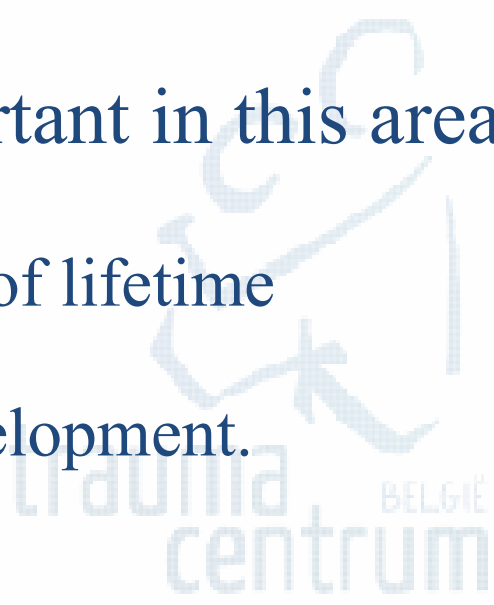
- Attunement
  - Sensitive responsiveness
  - Mentalization
  - Reflective functioning
  - Containment
  - Shared pleasure/ play
- Balance
  - Mother as external regulator
- Coherence

# Suicide in children



# Development and Suicide

- The way individuals develop
- how they come to see themselves as individuals
- the roles they adopt throughout the maturation process
- may have a greater effect on lifetime suicidality than any other factor.
- A number of theories are important in this area including:
  - Bowlby's work on development of lifetime attachments
  - Freud's work on personality development.



# Suicide and attachment

- Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980)
  - Theory of attachment is critical to the study of suicide
  - Attachment system → proximity to the caregiver
  - Unavailable caregiver due to
    - a lack of quality of parenting
    - Parent threatening their child with the idea that
      - if the child does not behave they will leave /not love the child any more
      - Parent with Suicide threat/ ideation



- Fear of abandonment / disruption of the attachment bond



- a "genesis of anxiety" in the child.



- Fear of abandonment leads to greatly increased suicidality later in life.



# Suicide and fear of abandonment

- Newson and Newson (1968) in which no less than 27% of parents interviewed indicated that they used threats of abandonment to discipline their child.
- The message sent to the child is that he or she is expendable; if the child does not behave, he or she will no longer be tolerated (Sabbath, 1969).



# Freud's theory of suicide (1917, 1920)

Suicide and Attachment: Fear of Abandonment and Isolation from a Developmental Perspective


- kill himself =
- he is at the same time killing an object with whom he has identified himself
- is turning against himself a death-wish which had been directed against someone else
- The relationship between the suicidal person and the object is characterized
  - by enmeshment
  - the suicidal person feels a great deal of ambivalence
  - he or she both loves and hates the person (Leenaars, 1988)

# Love and hate

- Two processes are happening → both lead to suicide:
  - the suicidal person seeks to be rid of the attachment figure
  - the suicidal person feels an intense guilt or self-blame over their hatred toward someone they care for very much.

# Autonomy and relatedness

- **Blatt's Two-Configurations Model and Suicidality**
- According to Blatt's two-configurations model ([26](#), [27](#)), personality proceeds through a dialectical and continuing interaction between the issues of identity, autonomy, and achievement on the one hand, and interpersonal issues of relatedness, attachment, and intimacy, on the other



A little voice inside my head goes  
on and on

# Case: the child

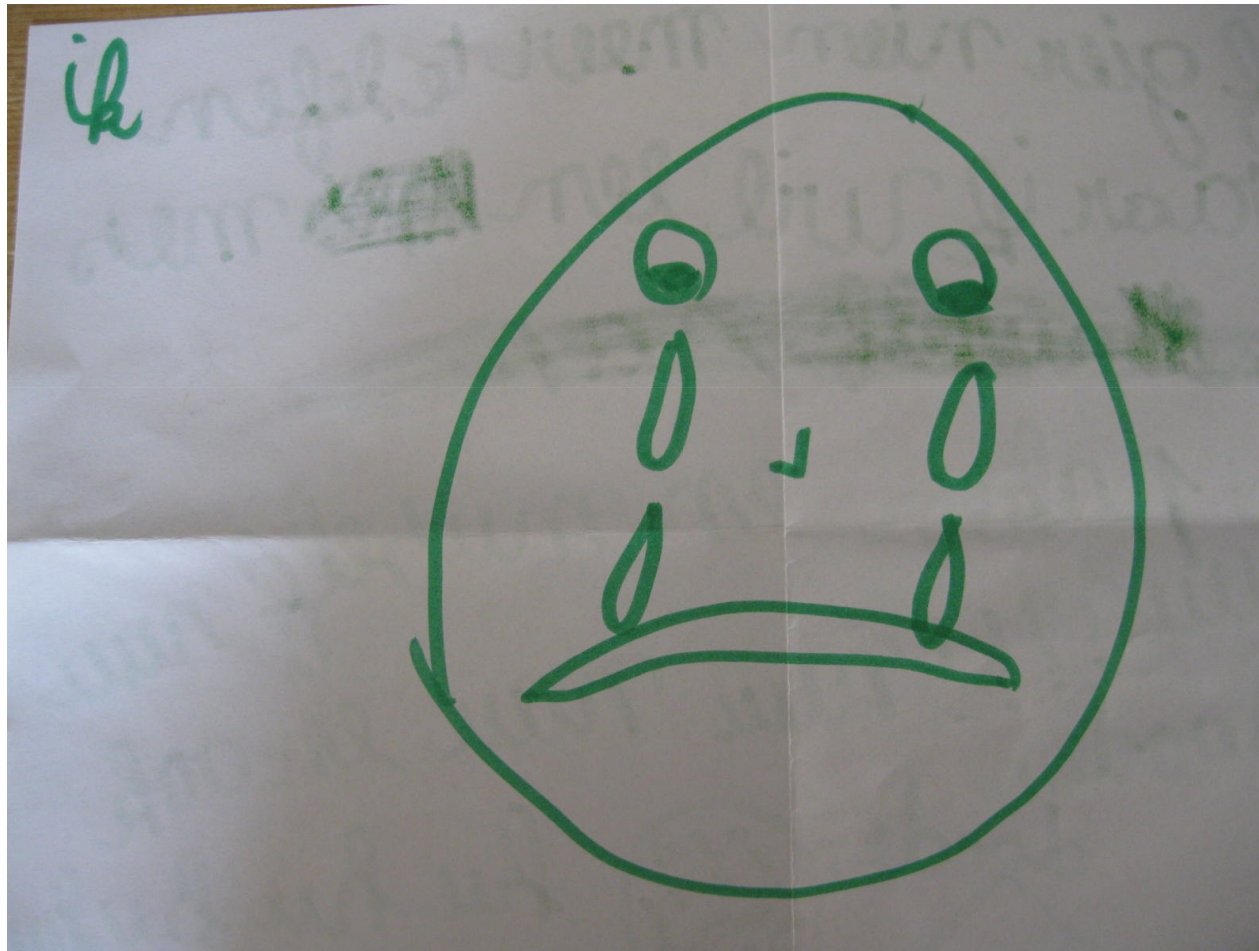
- This case concerns a 6-year old girl with suicidal ideation
- She feels abandoned, lonely and sad
- She describes a little voice inside her head telling her to commit suicide

# Letter of the child





# Self- image



# Case: the parents

- Traumatic childbirth
  - a prolonged and painful labour
  - The intense feelings of fear, panic and helplessness
  - Situations related to the medical specialists
    - neither supportive nor friendly
    - providing insufficient or no information etc.
- Ghosts in the nursery ( both parents)
- Missing features in the quality of parenting (both parents)

# Consequences of this Traumatic childbirth

- Mother starts wondering if the child is hers/ She become convinced that the girl is exchanged in the nursery.
- She rejects the child
- She does not attach herself to the child
- Disruption of the attachment relationship
- Threat of abandonment
- Psychological unavailability
- Increased anxiety/ guilt in the mother → enmeshment and over- protection

# Consequences of “ Ghosts in the nursery”

- On the quality of the attachment relationship



- Disruption in the attachment bond



- Affectregulation
- Attachment style ( IWM)
- Body
- Neurobiology
- Sense of self
- Cognition
- Dissociation



# Consequences for the child: ambivalence

- Rejection from the mother



- The child: No right to exist



- no relatedness



- Loneliness

- Mother 's guilt



- enmeshment with the child



- No autonomy



- Fear of abandonment

# Consequences for the child

- Ambivalent attachment style
- Fear of abandonment due to disruption in the attachment bond:
  - Traumatic childbirth
  - Quality of parenting
- Intrapsychic conflict between autonomy and relatedness
  - Foreclosure of the self
  - Identification with the “ nice daughter”
- Suppression of the anger caused by:
  - anxiety for the hate to the caregiver ( rejection)
  - Enmeshment without possibility to individuate
- No affectregulation



# Treatment



# Treatment

- Internal support
- External support
- Working with the parents
- Prevention

# Treatment plan: Internal support

- Dis-identification the child from “the voice”
- Building resources
  - Connect with the internal world
    - Give the child a body
    - Affectregulation
      - Anxiety reduction
      - Free the anger
    - Integrating the needs of the child
    - Containment of thoughts
  - Autonomy and relatedness

# Dis- identification the child from the inner part

- Imagination exercise: The dream walk
- The little voice is a “ little mouse”
- It is sad and lonely
- The mouse thinks the mother doesn’t love him anymore
- The mouse feels “ forgotten” by the mother
- Then the mouse appears telling: “ you don’t have to live any further”.
- When the child is curious it is punished and then again the little mouse appears

# The little mouse = “ Invisible attachment trauma”



# Building resources: Connect with the internal world

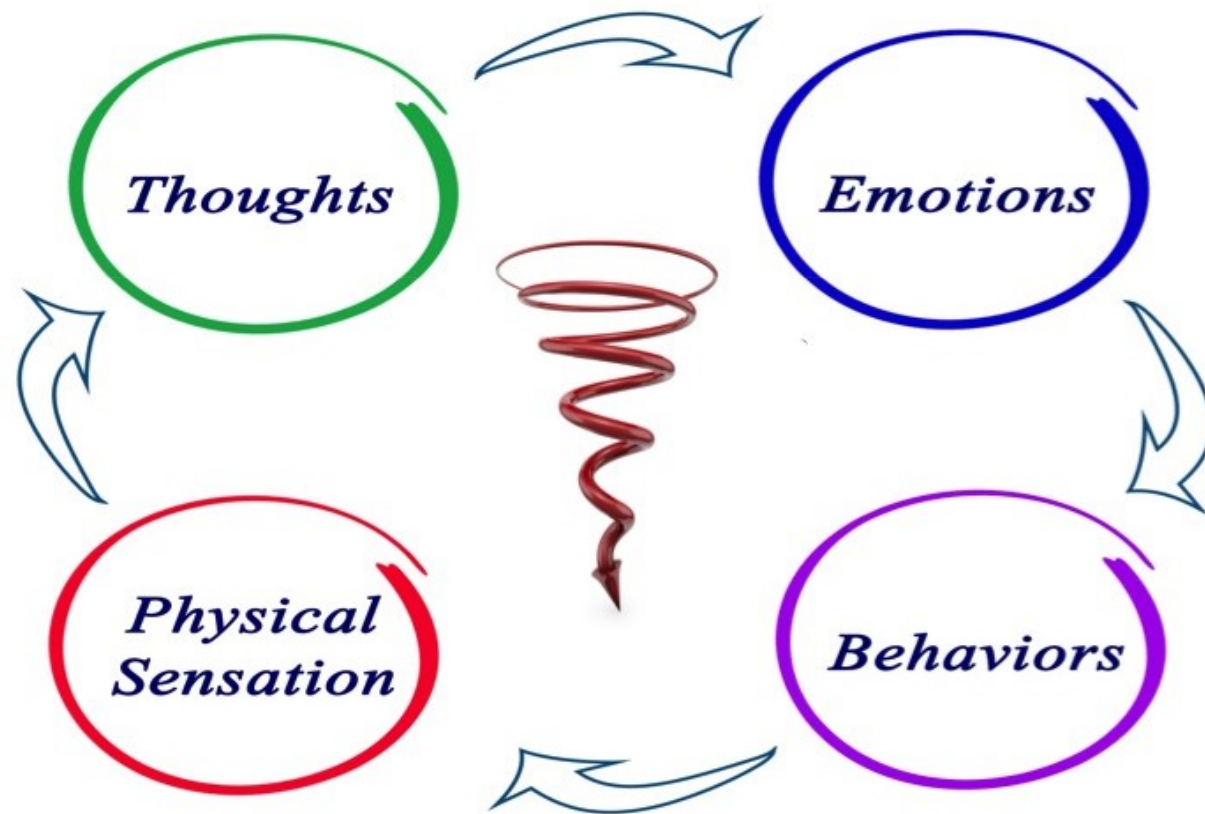




# Building resources: Connect with the internal world



# Differentiating Body sensations from emotions and cognitions.

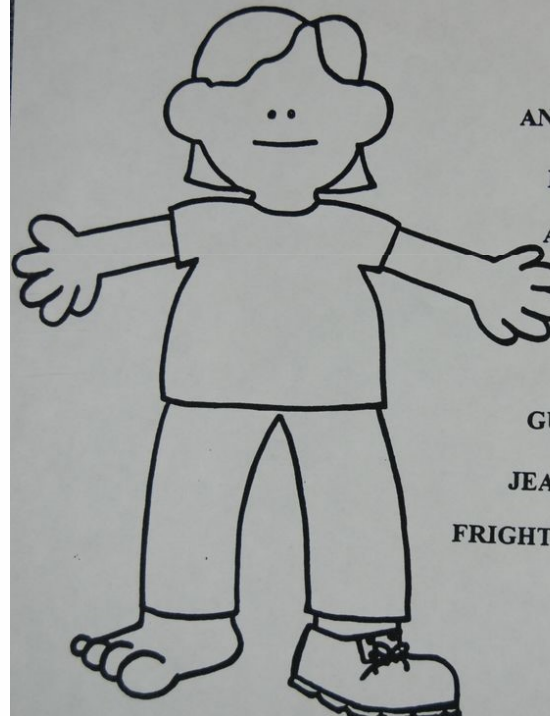


# Buiding Resources: Connecting with the body

- Building somatic resources
  - Identification and verbalizing of bodily sensations.
  - Differentiating Body sensations from emotions and cognitions.
  - Increasing sensation:
    - Safe touch
  - By mindful experiencing the “container” of their physical body

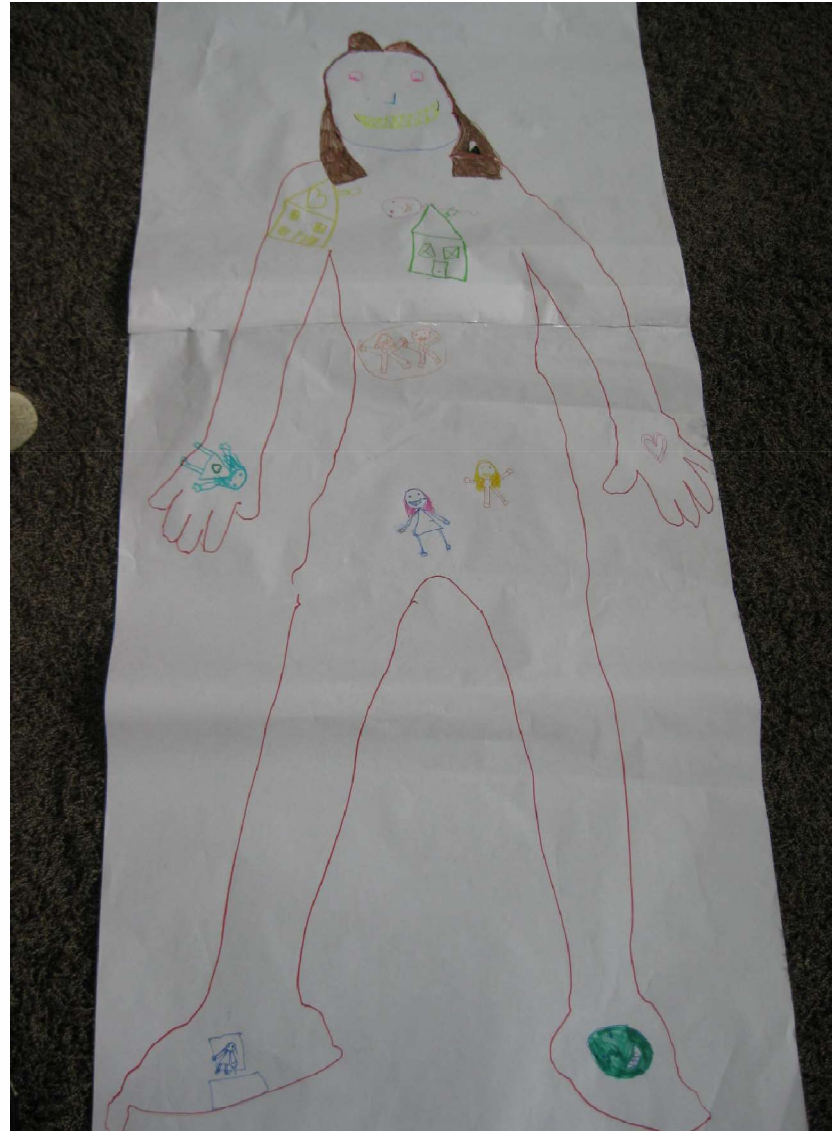
# Emotions and the body

**"THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION"  
WORKSHEET**



ANXIOUS	<input type="checkbox"/>
HAPPY	<input type="checkbox"/>
ANGRY	<input type="checkbox"/>
SAD	<input type="checkbox"/>
LOVE	<input type="checkbox"/>
GUILTY	<input type="checkbox"/>
JEALOUS	<input type="checkbox"/>
FRIGHTENED	<input type="checkbox"/>

# Give the child a body



# Affectregulation



# Containment of thoughts



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# Dis- identification and integrate the needs of the inner part

- What the mouse needs:
  - To play
  - To have fun and feel joy
  - Playing with mummy
  - To learn new things
  - To explore
  - To relate



# Dis- identification and integrate the needs of the inner part

- What the mouse doesn't want:
  - it does not want the house to fall over =
    - need for a stable, coherent self
  - That the others don't like him =
    - need for acceptance
  - That they become friends and the friendship will stop=
    - Need for friendship
    - Need for connectedness
    - Need for continuity in relationships
  - He does not want the mother to forget him=
    - Availability
    - Presence

# Free the anger



# Free the anger

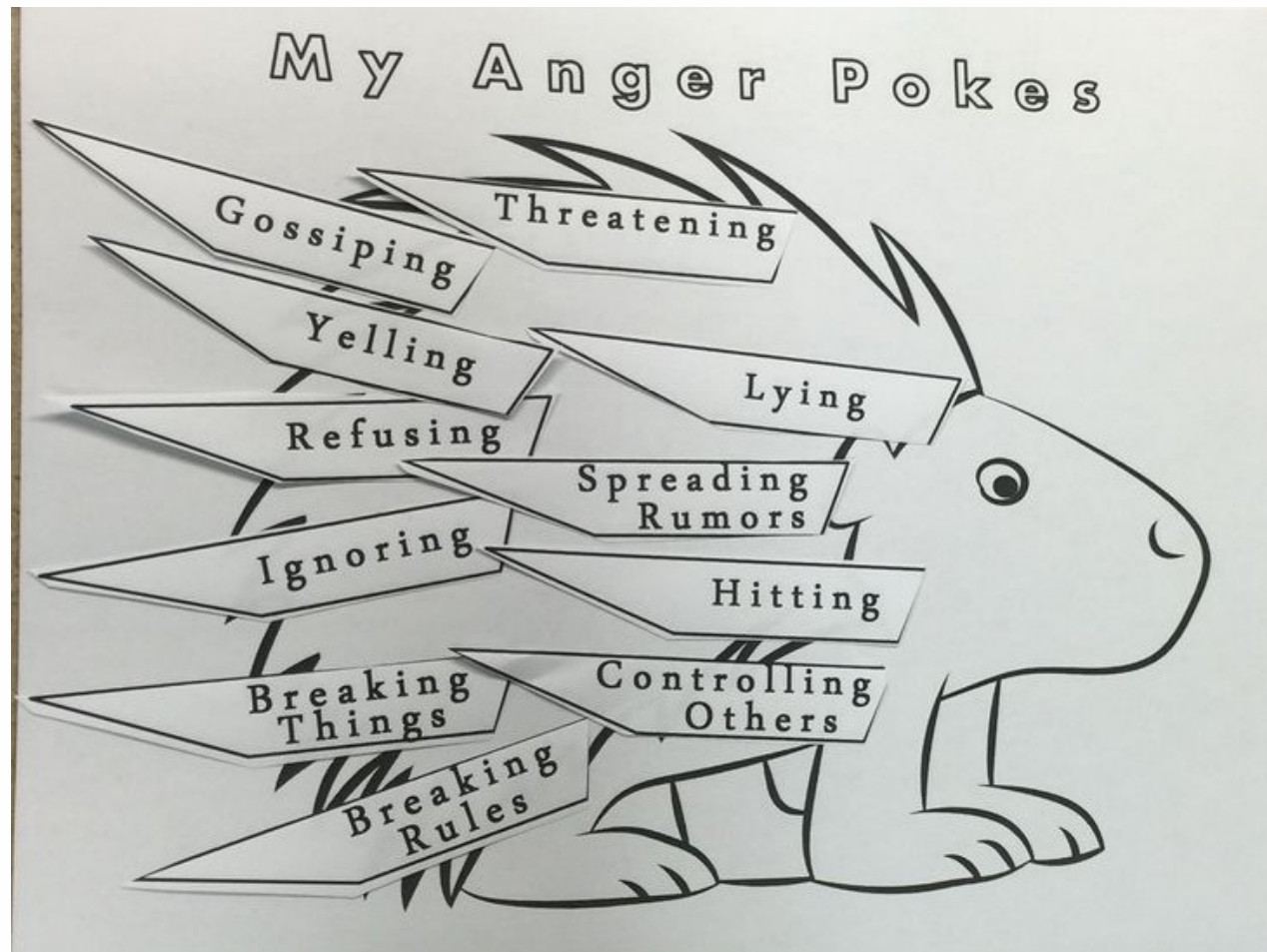
- Symbolisation of the anger (“ the dreamwalk”)
- A laughing head
- When angry, he distances himself from others and want to be alone in the wood
- Desire for individuation and autonomy
- Denied by the ambivalent attachment style

# Free the anger

- Teach the three rules of “how to be angry safely”
  - Don’t hurt anybody
  - Don’t hurt yourself
  - Don’t destroy anything
- Bodywork
- Imagination



# Free the anger



# Anxiety reduction



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# Anxiety reduction

- Recognizing the anxiety symptoms
- FAFA: First aid for anxiety
  - Grounding
  - Breathing
  - Here and now
  - Dual awareness
  - Safe place
- Calming the physiology: Long term
  - Meditation
  - Relaxation
  - Yoga
  - Sports/ movement



# Recognizing the anxiety symptoms





# Autonomy/ Identity



# Autonomy/ Identity

- Development of a secure attachment
- Development of the core self
  - Internal world
    - Feelings
    - Thoughts
    - Intentions
    - Needs
    - Sensations
- Giving independence/ freedom
- Room to explore
- Expression / creativity
- Arts /hobbies



# Free the love: Relatedness



# Free the love: Relatedness

- Mother- child box
  - Creativity
  - Memories ( photo's, objects etc.)
- Magical cord ( Debra Wesselman)
- Enhancing positive feelings



- Attachment based play

# Treatment plan: External support



# Treatment plan: External support

- Parent- child relationship:
  - Acceptance
    - Building the child's self esteem
  - Co- operation
    - Helping the child to feel effective
  - Family- membership
    - Helping the child to belong
- Peer relationship
- School



# Working with the parents

- Psycho education
  - increasing parents' knowledge of child development/secure attachment
- Parent training:
  - Learning safe attachment relationship
  - Improving parenting skills
  - Reducing parental stress
    - Individual
    - Group
- Child- parent therapy
- Free the parent from the Ghosts in the nursery

# Prevention

- Sensibilisation
  - Workshops
  - Articles etc.
- Psycho- education
  - understanding invisible attachment trauma
  - Its psychobiological effects
  - causation from invisible attachment trauma to later suicide.