“There is a little voice inside my head”

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

“ Invisible attachment trauma”

Suicide

Case

Treatment
“Invisible Attachment trauma”

Attachment trauma

↔

Abuse

Neglect

“ Invisible Attachment Trauma”

↓

Quality of the attachment relationship
“Invisible Attachment trauma”

The form of traumatization (not about an obvious event)

↓

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.
Importance of the Attachment Relationship
Importance of the Attachment 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 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
• 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.

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Suicide and attachment

  - 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
Suicide and attachment

• This results in:

- 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)

- 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**

• 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


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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
- Enmesment 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 affect regulation
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.
Building 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
HAPPY
ANGRY
SAD
LOVE
GUILTY
JEALOUS
FRIGHTENED
Affectregulation
Containment of thoughts
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:
  – He does not want the house to collapse =
    • 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
Anxiety reduction
Anxiety reduction

• Recognizing the anxiety symptoms

![Early Warning Signs](image)
Anxiety reduction

- **FAFA: First aid for anxiety**
  - Grounding
  - Breathing
  - Here and now
  - Dual awareness
  - Safe place

- **Calming the physiology: Long term**
  - Meditation
  - Relaxation
  - Yoga
  - Sports/ movement
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.
Q&A