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A Family-based Intervention Design: Reversing the Negative Coping of Attachment Disorder

According to one emotional development theory, attachment theory, the subject, a child aged 8, fulfills the diagnostic criteria of attachment disorder. A family based intervention, which consists of two parts - drawing course and family meeting, was designed to help this child nourish a secure attachment through transactions with her interpersonal environment. The effectiveness of the intervention is evaluated at post-treatment and at 1½-month follow-up. The results indicate the child apparently benefits from co-operative activities. The added family training (tutoring) also produces significant change. However, the child's unstable emotion, aggressive behavior and the parents' occasionally inappropriate attitude continue to occur and interfere with the intervention maintenance effect.

A Case Study: Lina

Lina is an eight-year-old Chinese girl. When she was 5 months old, her father left China for Canada and her mother joined him in Canada 2 years later. Until she was 5 years old, Lina lived with her grandmother in China. In 1995 she brought Lina to Canada. Since, Lina became "so unexpected" (Lina's mother's words). During her grandmother's 6-month residence in Canada, Lina refused to sit beside her father and when her parents tried to hug her, she became stiff. She appeared "shy" and avoided looking her parents in the eye; she seemed unable find the right channel to communicate with them. When she felt upset, she usually hid herself in a dark corner and refused to do anything or talk to anyone. Unable to extend her visa, Lina's grandmother had to return to China. Three months later, Lina's mother gave birth to a baby sister. In the subsequent year, her father switched to a more demanding job and at the same time Lina began school. Lina's mother said: "She changed dramatically, I really do not know how to handle this, she drives me nuts". "Who cares" became Lina's favorite saying, spit from her mouth continuously. When she wants something, she always tries to get her way by acting charming or by aggression, to manipulate others. If she is caught doing something wrong, she often says, "I do not know". At an interview with Lina's teacher, she was described to her parents as "somehow a little bit bossy". Lina's mother's greatest worry is that Lina often makes her baby sister cry by playing roughly. For example, although her mother warned her not to hurt the baby, Lina still "punished her" by hitting her hand when the 2-year old messed up Lina's cards.

An Analysis of Attachment Disorder: Behavior Symptoms and Negative Emotion Responses

According to attachment theory, attachment is defined by Bowlby (1988), as the behavior and feelings that are expressed by two people when they engage in mutual care seeking and care giving. Attachment serves as a secure base for a child to develop an autonomous and flexible sense of self. Children develop secure or insecure attachments to their caregiver based on the quality of care. Securely attached children experience care that is constant and sensitive to their emotional needs, and insecurely attached children experience early separation from parents, the absence of long-term attachment, primary caregivers' change and an unfavorable situation in terms of insensitive, inconsistent care (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982). These different experiences cause children to develop different attachment patterns and construct an internal working model used later to generalize the relationship with others (Bowlby, 1973). Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation,

maintenance, disruption and renewal of the attachment relationship along with different coping behavior. For example, the threat of losing attachment arouses anxiety, fear and withdrawal or defensive behavior. Actual loss gives rise to distress or anger accompanying aggressive behavior, etc. (Bowlby, 1980). The abnormal attachment is classified into two patterns, avoidant attachment style and ambivalent attachment style. As Magai and Hunziker describe the 1988 work of Malatesta and Wilson:

Avoidant attachment style revolves around a fear/anger axis. Anxiety about overly intrusive stimulation from insensitive care giving, as well as about the overt expression of anger, ensures that a distance is kept from the caregiver and that anger is kept harnessed and hidden so as not to imperil the connection with the caregiver. Under these conditions emotion communication is low, and anger in particular is muted, though there are occasional sudden eruptions of anger that appear unprovoked. Two types of ambivalent organization can be also be discriminated (Cassidy & Berlin, in preparation) - one characterized by overt anger; the other by a more passive, helpless, and withdrawn style, ... (Magai & Hunziker, 1991:253).

Bowlby (1973) also points out: "That separations and instabilities of maternal care should lead to responses of two opposed types, anxious attachment and aggressive detachment, and sometimes a mixture of the two, is a little confusing"(p. 226).

Reflecting on Lina's case in the light of attachment theory, one observes the following. In her early childhood (from birth to 5 years old), she experienced three separations from her primary caregivers. The first separation from her father influenced her indirectly but strongly through her mother's frustration (worrying about her father). When her mother was about to leave China, Lina asked her: "If I miss you, will you come back?" When her grandmother left Canada, Lina appeared unusually "calm". The repeated experience of separation reinforced her fear and anger at the latest separation, and along with the unfamiliar cultural environment and language barrier in kindergarten contributed to her attachment disorder. In her case, the symptoms indicate two types of attachment disorder. During the first 6 months in Canada, the negative emotions (fear, anxiety) and distancing from parents, are symptomatic of avoidant attachment disorder. After her grandmother's departure, the new baby's birth, her father's apparent distress caused by his new job, the variable schedule of her mother's part time job, all created unfavorable conditions for Lina. She manifested a false independence with flat affect by appearing not to need anybody ("Who cares!"). When exposed to unknown people and situations her emotions changed from anxiety based fear to anxiety expressed in anger. Her behavior changed from withdrawal to aggressive protest through tantrums and false charm. Her attachment disorder was exacerbated by the unfavorable

conditions (Field, 1996). Her symptoms became more complicated and serious, with aspects of avoidant attachment mixed with those of ambivalent attachment.

A Family Based Intervention Design: Focusing on Lina's Aggressive Behavior and Anger

During the first period of Lina's attachment disorder, her parents had no difficulty in interpreting the symptoms as a response to the fear of separation from her grandmother, feelings of alienation towards them resulting from their long term absence, plus unfamiliarity with the new environment (Bowlby, 1980). Lina's parents were prompt to reassure her by explaining that if grandmother left, the separation would not be permanent. They also accompanied her to community activities to make some Mandarin speaking friends. The situation was comparatively favorable in assisting Lina in setting up new attachments. However, the fear of separation from her most constant caregiver – her grandmother dominated her emotions and attention, and her typical attachment disorder symptoms appeared before the renewal of the attachment relationship with her parents. In contrast, during the second period of time, Lina's emotional insensitivity and bossy behavior are much more difficult for her parents to recognize as also being a response to loss of attachment and a reflection of her desire for attention and care (Bowlby, 1980). This is well illustrated by the upset and complaints of Lina's mother. For this reason, before I designed and implemented the intervention for Lina, I undertook 2 hours of tutoring with Lina's parents explaining children's needs in non-technical terms as a prerequisite. I also followed up weekly with them, sharing academic reference readings and ensuring their continued sensitivity to Lina's needs.

According to the “internal working model” concept from Bowlby (1969), children's primary attachment experiences are employed as a model in guiding the formation and development of relationships with others. When the children's internal working model for interacting with these caring people changes, children feel hurt. The picture children have in their minds of themselves as loved, changes to one of doubt: this doubt includes a momentary change in the internal working model children have of these very same people with whom they interact. Enormous effort is required for re-adjusting or updating the view of self. For anxiously attached children, their capacity for updating the internal working model exists basically in negative form - “backdating”; they usually feel that their behavior towards others

determines to a greater or lesser degree, how they, in turn, will be treated. This structure likely prevents any change in their updating capacity. However, if this self-perpetuating interactive cycle is punctuated by a series of more positive interactions – positive external experiences, the negative structure of the internal working model can be changed by overcoming the serious doubts of the inner picture. Through a great number of different, positive **messages** from those who are important to children it is possible to countermand the perception of the internal working model. Thus, the abnormal attachment pattern can be reversed (Barrett & Trevitt 1991). As the findings of Sroufe (1983), in his research with pre-schoolers, that children with “disturbed pattern of behavior” testified, this is “not beyond intervention” (cited in Barrett & Trevitt, 1991).

Based on the above theoretical rationale, a co-operative intervention was designed to help Lina establish secure attachment and to change her negative coping. I suggested that Lina’s father go to a 2-hour drawing course with her and that Lina’s mother, who is good at painting, discuss Lina’s drawing with her after she returns home. This intervention focuses on reinforcing positive attention from parents. Although Lina’s father’s slight distress from work pressure cast a shadow over the family, fortunately, as he noticed Lina’s abnormal behavior, he showed a strong willingness to improve the situation. In comparison, Lina’s mother seemed to have less patience and tolerance toward Lina because of her worry about the baby’s safety and more frequent exposure to Lina’s negative behavior. Lina’s defensive behavior is more obvious toward her mother. The father’s influence dominates the whole family for reasons of cultural tradition, financial provision, higher educational background and a strong, determined personality. This is an additional reason why I designated Lina’s father for a leading role in this intervention. The **message** signal will have strong symbolic meaning. Hopefully, it is strong and positive enough to counter the old perception in Lina’s internal working model.

Recent attachment research findings indicate that when caring and patient adults encourage traumatized children to express their emotions, they will gradually open up to new emotional experiences (Eagle, 1994, cited in Hayes, 1997). With effective intervention, there is a significant possibility for children to resolve persistent emotional numbness and defensiveness. Based on the above, I suggested that

Lina’s parents have a family meeting every Friday night. At the meeting, every member in Lina’s family contributes to the conversation around different topics – what is the happiest, saddest thing in the past week, what made me angry, etc. We hope through implementing these two parts of corrective attachment intervention as positive external experiences, Lina will gradually begin to proceed in a healthy manner towards the developmental attachment patterns with the second chance of a secure base (Hughes, 1997).

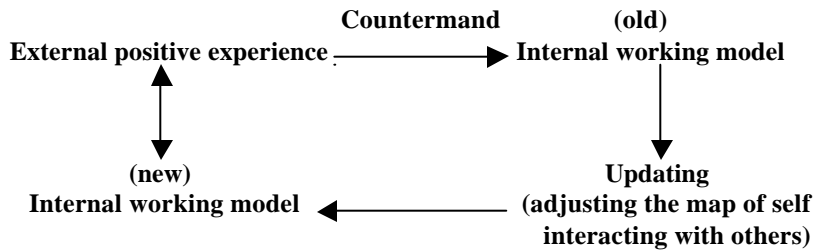


Fig. 1. The Figure of Theoretical Framework for Intervention: Reversing the Negative Coping of Attachment Disorder

A Short Description of the Intervention Process

In the process of intervention treatment, I played a role as a monitor, talking to the parents, constantly checking whether the current interaction was emotionally rich and meaningful. Occasionally, I also participated in the family meetings as a close family friend. Observations of Lina’s verbal and nonverbal interactions with her parents served as a most useful indicator of her attachment status, and emotional well-being (Goldberg, 1991). In order to demonstrate Lina’s interpersonal dynamics, during the intervention, I focus on describing the third drawing class and the first Friday family meeting.

After we agreed upon the intervention design, Lina’s father asked her if she wanted to take a drawing course, and gave her some information about it. He talked for 15 minutes and explained how big the course would be, how long it would last, that it was taught in Mandarin at a much higher level than Lina’s regular school, that he would drive her and stay in the classroom. After this introduction, Lina gave us a brief “OK” as an answer without any obvious enthusiasm (However, drawing is her favorite subject, and she is good at it). In the first two weeks she did a good job on her painting, but also showed her bossy behavior. In the third class, her aggressive behavior caused turmoil in the classroom. A classmate refused to show Lina her painting book, Lina got very angry and during the conflict she unintentionally tore her

classmate's painting; her classmate cried. Facing all the negative reaction in the classroom Lina tried defending herself: "if she let me see it, it wouldn't tear" (taking no personal responsibility). However, her father did not accept her excuse and criticized her in a straightforward and rational manner: "She has the right not to show it to you, and you shouldn't force her". On the way home, Lina sat in the car silently and looked out the window. As she got out of the car, she finally burst out in anger: "I can go by myself next time" (She tried to disengage from the commitment to her father). She got no response from her father. After supper, Lina was supposed to have a painting discussion with her mother, as on the previous two occasions. She seemed reluctant, although she knew her father had not told her mother about the conflict that afternoon (Lina's father had on purpose tried to soften the oppositional situation, give Lina sufficient room for her emotion, and allow Lina's mother the opportunity to play a more supportive role). During the discussion, the mother's positive comments and encouragement of her painting relieved Lina's unease and she began to participate in the discussion, seriously and purposefully. She was fascinated by her mother's explanation of how to present 3 dimensions by using shadow in her sketch. Thus, when her baby sister stumbled against her, and pulled herself up by holding on to Lina's hair, Lina did not yell at her or push her, as was her habit. The appreciation of Lina's ability from the mother, the careful consideration of Lina's self-esteem from her father, combined with her interest in the sketching technique served as the positive message which counteracted her "old brain" (Attachment Center in Evergreen, 1998) and resulted in a modification of her internal working model.

On the following Friday, I attended the first family meeting. The meeting began at teatime following supper (tea, cookies, and soft lamplight, helped create a relaxing atmosphere). At the meeting, Lina's father apologized to the family for being preoccupied with work. He said: "I feel I did not do well enough to be a good husband and dad. When the baby got pneumonia, I blamed mom, that was unfair, and I did not come to Lina's piano performance at the community center" (Lina raised her eyes to look at her father vigilantly). Lina's mother said that she was sorry about her short temper due to being tired, and her unpredictable work schedule. She also said that she appreciated dad's effort to help, and especially, thanked Lina for her help with changing the baby's diaper by unpacking it from the box, and for wiping

the milk off the baby's chin. In turn, Lina, said: "I want to go to the drawing course with dad next time." Her father looked at her and smiled encouragingly. In the following weeks, Lina always went out a few minutes early to wait for her father beside the car. In the class, her painting talent was demonstrated, and her teacher was very pleased by her improvement. However, she still continued to make some trouble, such as borrowing others' crayons without permission, commenting on others' paintings as "ugly", etc.

The most recent good news from Lina's mother was two weeks before Christmas. On the weekend, Lina's family went to a restaurant for dinner and Lina showed her paintings to the owner, who was genuinely impressed and asked her if he could keep one. Lina was very excited and she kissed her baby sister in the high chair beside her. This is quite a change from last year, when Lina screamed about getting her Christmas gift, and threatened that she would be upset forever if she didn't get a real Christmas tree. Her mother felt relieved and more confident about Lina's situation.

The Results and Conclusions

This case study sought to explore the relationships among multiple primary caregivers, unfavorable conditions, unfamiliar situations and the emotional, behavioral coping of an attachment disorder child. An intervention design based on this case was evaluated. Both the drawing course and the family meetings produced significant change in enhancing secure attachment, reversing Lina's negative coping present prior to the intervention. The result indicates that family co-operative activity based intervention can offer rich avenues for positive emotional experience (Laible & Thompson, 1998).

My familiarity with the personal history and experiences of the family provided information that was more detailed and comprehensive than is usually available. Knowing the circumstances of Lina's parents and grandmother during the last three years gave information about a range of parental influences. This made it possible to diagnose her problem, design an effective intervention and implement it over a period of two months, with the active co-operation of the family.

The drawing course aimed to change Lina's currently unfavorable condition (Bowlby, 1969, 1980). Through the project, Lina received attention and appreciation from parents, teachers and peers as a positive input to challenge the perceptions in her internal working model and assist her in building self-esteem,

“good” image as the corrective emotional experience. Consistent, sensitive caring, if maintained, creates many momentary modifications for her “old brain” in a positive way eventually resulting in permanent change (Barrett, Trevitt, 1991). The family meeting was designed to provide consistent and honest parent-child communications, an extension of secure attachment behavior; and, to help Lina gain more understanding of her parent’s emotional status by informing her about family occurrences thoughtfully and respectfully (Hayes, 1997). Through developing a new perspective during family reflection on her past experiences, a new perception was fashioned. For example, patiently explaining to Lina why her grandmother left Canada could change her concept that she was abandoned. This process effectively reduced her anxiety, fear and anger stemming from the unknown, in a situation she could not control (Field & Reite, 1984). It enhanced Lina’s tolerance and empathy toward others, and freed her to be less demanding, allowing more space to develop a new secure base.

Other considerations have to be taken into account, such as individual roles. For example Lina’s father, as family leader, played a crucial role in the process by motivating the family effort, in giving Lina consistent attention, and by providing an example of courageously admitting and correcting his mistakes.

Due to various limitations in the information available, it is not possible to be precise about the change in Lina’s symptoms, at the juncture between her first and second period in Canada. Even after the intervention, Lina’s aggressive behavior and unstable emotion continue to occur. It remains difficult for her mother to keep calm and avoid spontaneous reactions (usually anger, negative criticism) towards Lina’s behavior. Balancing the job pressure and self-emotion, family demands is also a crucial issue for Lina’s father. To evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention, significant follow-up research would be needed and perhaps the intervention could be continued long-term. As for the current research in this field, there is still a major gap between basic research on attachment processes and clinical issues of assessment, classification and treatment of attachment disorders. A critical challenge for the future will be to develop specific interdisciplinary research strategies to work toward broader, interdisciplinary formulations in the understanding of clinical disorders from a developmental perspective (Shaffer et al. 1988; Garman & Huffman, 1996).

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