The Attachment Dilemma in Child Welfare

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Attachment

- An enduring emotional relationship with a specific person.
- The relationship brings safety, comfort, soothing and pleasure.
- Loss or threat of loss of the person evokes intense distress.
- Satisfaction from coordinated and complementary interactions affect both the infant’s and the caregiver’s sense of physical and mental well-being.

Furthermore

- Attachment is our first and most important social achievement and the key to “evolutionarily prepared paths” (Fonagy, pg 439).
  - The primary mechanism that propels cognitive development and lays the groundwork for future exploratory skills, emotion regulation, communication style, ego resilience, social competency, etc.
Sensitive vs. Critical Developmental Periods

- Windows of opportunity during which developmental tasks can be achieved
  - Sensitive: Broad time range of optimal conditions. If missed can be achieved later.
  - Critical: Small time range of optimal conditions. Can not be recouped later.

Attachment Occurs During a Sensitive Period

- “The systems in the human brain that allow us to form and maintain emotional relationships develop during infancy and the first years of life” (Perry).
- This is the best opportunity for successful and easy achievement of attachment capacity. Attachment skills can be learned later in life. However, it is less likely sought and when sought extremely effortful.

Contributory Factors to the Dilemma

- Child
- Siblings
- Relatives
- Parents
- Cultures
**Child**

- Age
- Temperament
- Emotional/behavioral problems
- Disability/medical conditions
- Quality of relationships (attachments)

**Siblings**

- Ages
- Behavioral issues
- Paternity/maternity
- History
- Relationships

**Relatives**

- Grandparents
- Others
- Commitment Capacity
- Knowledge of / involvement with situation
- Willingness to self-educate
### Parents
- Demands/desires
- Commitment capacity
- Parenting Capacity
- Mental capacity
- Socio-economic capacity

### Culture
- Social mores
- Lawful requirements
- Meaningfulness to child

### Comprehensive Evaluation Criteria child
- Screening for sensory issues, neuropsych issues.
- Child's mental health issues, attachment capacity, behavioral and emotional regulation skills, cognitive status
- Nature and quality of the child's relationship with the foster parents, relatives, other interested parties
- What are the child's needs and the type of home and environment necessary?
Comprehensive Evaluation Criteria
adult

- Adult Attachment Interview (AAI)
- Adult personality
- Parenting Stress Index
- Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI)

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siblings

- Place together or separate?
- Reunite or separate after placement?

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Reason to separate:
The children's combined problems may seem too severe and numerous for one set of parents.

Possible negative impact of separation:
Teaches children that the way to deal with conflict is to walk away from it, rather than work it out.

Hope:
Siblings problem behaviors will dissipate and they will learn how to resolve their differences and develop stronger relationships.

Possible reality:
Could take years, if ever, and the impact of constant exposure to troublesome behavior can have severe long term consequences on all members of the family.
Reason to separate:
One sibling is victimizing the other.

Possible negative impact of separation:
Problem isn’t solved because child may continue to abuse others.

Hope:
Adoptive parents will be able to provide enough supervision to protect victim child. Parents will get offending child therapy.

Possible reality:
Therapy isn’t always effective, or could takes years. Abused sibling is expected to live and interact with abuser.

Reason to separate:
Older child has difficulty giving up his or her role as "care giver" to the other children.

Possible negative impact of separation:
The "care giving" older child gets the message that taking responsibility for a younger sibling is bad. This child is traumatized by losing her siblings (children).

Hope:
The roles can be used constructively by adoptive parents and the care giving child can be helped to become a child again and the younger child(ren) can learn that adults can be trusted.

Possible reality:
Sometimes the care giving child never gives up the role and causes constant conflict in the home. This prevents other children from attaching to their “parents” and prevents care-giving child from being a child because of constant reminders of past responsibilities.

Reason to separate:
Behavior problems
1. Children are so unhappy about being removed from their biological family that they band together to sabotage their adoption.
2. Sibling rivalry
3. One child is affecting the others

Possible negative impact of separation:
Remaining children get the message that they can also be removed for problem behavior, which reduces their sense of trust in adults.

Hope:
All the children learn that adoption is forever, heal from their trauma and learn to trust adults.

Possible reality:
Everyone is living with some form of DV, which is unhealthy for all. Siblings must all move because of one child’s behavior, resulting in further traumatization and the acquisition of similar behavior problems.