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# Creating a Therapeutic Relationship With the Child in Educational Therapy, Part I

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*This is the first of a two-part paper based upon the keynote address given at Chicago's annual 2003 AET workshop. Dr. Sussman's paper was so well received that we asked her to adapt it for publication, to reach a wider audience. —Ed.*

Last year, John, the fourth tutor to work with an unmotivated teenager, asked, “How long do I have to play basketball before I can set this kid down to work?” Immediately I referred him to the educational therapist who had played basketball—as well as checkers and Connect-4—with a resistant patient of mine. They had reviewed spelling words on the blacktop while shooting hoops, and this child eked out additional sentences in therapy in order to get the promised game of basketball when he finished.

When the attachment relationship at home has been satisfying, and learning has been smoothly accomplished—even with assistance—it may be easier for the educational therapist (ET) to engage the child in purposeful, goal-directed academic activity. When, however, this core relationship has been conflicted, or when the child's motivation has been disrupted by classroom failure, as well as feelings of shame and helplessness, then the teacher/therapist/tutor/coach has to work harder to create an alliance and a relationship that will sustain this endeavor.

As a psychologist and diagnostician, I have heard many stories from ETs about individual kids who can't just have a snack, talk about their day, and then get down to work. Instead, there was the child who would do nothing but play with her ET, and the boy who made strange monster noises, hunching in a fetal position, whenever demands became too difficult. One girl was so oppositional that the ET had a hard time feeling useful, especially as she would complain at home, “we didn't do anything today.” There also were two defiant boys who resisted parental demands at home, insisted that they didn't need tutors, and proclaimed their smartness, but gradually allowed their very engaging and personable tutor to help with writing after multiple rounds of tai chi and chess.

These circumstances pose dilemmas for the ET, since most people—including ETs—assume that their main job is to help a child acquire strategies and academic skills. ETs feel uncomfortable when they have to move instruction to the back burner because a child withdraws, breaks into tears, or has to spend the first 15 minutes of the hour talking about his fight with his parents the night before. It may be, however, that the ET has a dual function: before she can engage in the back-and-forth of school-related learning, she must ensure that the

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child experiences himself as being in an optimal, supportive, safe environment. It is the thesis of this paper that children need to have an attachment relationship that satisfies basic needs for contact and closeness before they can be ready for learning. For clarity, I will use male gender pronouns when I refer to a single child, and female gender pronouns when I refer to teachers or therapists. Certain comments will refer to a parent or mother, but they could refer to anyone in a special emotional care-taking role with a child.

Many children working with an ET are highly motivated to succeed academically: they already have a well-developed sense of self, are socially quite competent, and can reflect on their experience and engage in symbolic, higher-level thinking and problem-solving. Others make demands on ETs that have not traditionally been included in the job description. For these children, teaching strategies for academic success and skill-building are successful only if they can adaptively cope with disruptions to their self-esteem, and function in school without getting derailed by anger and frustration that invades the session with outbursts like "I'm dumb; I can't do it; it's so frustrating I wish I were dead."

By using the attachment relationship as a model, and reviewing current research and thinking about the attachment process (Part II), I hope to demonstrate how the process of educational therapy extends and sometimes modifies essential functions of the parent-child relationship. By showing how utilizing inborn processes, like attachment and exploration, can clear the path for learning, we can relieve the doubts of many ETs who worry that they take too much time in relationship-building, listening, and empathizing, devoting insufficient time to academic skill-building. Two sets of principles underlie this effort: One concerns the dilemma and the dialectic; the other focuses on the attachment relationship of early childhood and how it models the essential components of a relationship essential for learning.

## FIRST PRINCIPLE

### The Dilemma and the Dialectic

Irwin Hoffman (1998), a psychologist and psychoanalyst, relies upon the notion of dialectical thinking to illustrate how psychotherapists are constrained by their training and technique to practice in certain prescribed ways, yet must also be fully human and attuned to the patient's individual experience for the patient to feel engaged and committed to the analytic process. He refers to the built-in tension within the parent-child relationship between the parent's concern for making sure the child's needs for love, caring, food, and attention are addressed, and, simultaneously, the parent's concern for his or her own well-being, interests, and satisfactions.

So, too, the ET experiences a tension between the twin polarities of exercising discipline in the learning situation in order to adhere to academic objectives, and acknowledging

the child's need for the ET's personal, authentic, spontaneous interest in himself as a person. I agree with Hoffman that the tension between these two poles is inevitable; I also believe that the ET can adopt a commitment to each one of these principles without abandoning the other. Like the familiar gestalt picture that can be seen either as a goblet or as two people in profile facing each other, one feature may emerge or dominate at any one time, but both are part of the overall picture and they are dynamic in their interaction. In addition, as Hoffman suggests, the ability to negotiate these dual positions successfully has a great deal to do with maintaining a playful attitude and keeping humor available in the relationship.

The child also experiences these tensions between the wish to succeed academically and the fears that he cannot achieve. Since the ET's personal and ongoing relationship with the child is maintained in the interest of learning and success in school, her commitment to the child's academic success and intellectual achievement creates the frame. It gives meaning to their interaction and determines a goal that both therapist and child create through their learning relationship. We are not talking about psychotherapy, but educational therapy. Hence the child expects that he will be challenged, and knows that behind every moment of shooting hoops and every computer game, regardless of how much he delays and resists or distracts, he can do so without guilt or manipulation because the ET carries in her mind their mutual representation of the child as an achieving, successful learner.

Shortly after Janet underwent a neuropsychological evaluation, I spoke to her ET who had been working with her over the summer and into the fall. "She's a great kid to work with," she said, "and smart. But her behavior and anxiety were in the way. I always had to fight her attempts to distract. The more serious I wanted her to be about working, the more she would use her charm to do something different; she wanted to play games on the computer. It wasn't clear whether she was covering up some real learning problems, or just masking her weaknesses by trying to distract. She had real self-esteem issues.

Half her functioning is just the associations and inventive ideas she spins that drives her teacher crazy! She's always trying to keep you at bay. If you ask her, 'How much is 2+2?' she'll say, 'Let me think it over ... 2+2, it's either 5 or 22' when she knows it's four! So you don't know what she knows and what she doesn't know. She has a strategy for keeping you confused.

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Despite all this, Janet's ET felt she'd made progress in spelling and writing. Clearly, with a kid like that, there was no way to approach academic work directly: "When the stakes got higher," her ET said, "she became more goofy."

In a sense there is no dilemma—there is, instead, the experience of dynamic tension. The ET says, "Our mission together will not be destroyed by you and I won't abandon you when other concerns are more pressing. Our work together will continue." However, there are never times when "anything goes." Nonetheless, the ET also says, to paraphrase Hoffman, "I can yield, so you can have the freedom to explore for yourself and gradually to own the work that you do."

## SECOND PRINCIPLE The Educational Attachment Relationship

The second of my guiding principles is that understanding the attachment relationship that exists between parent and child can give us a better understanding of the many ways that ETs function to promote learning.

Early attachment theory demonstrated how essential it was for the child to experience security within the attachment relationship. It was assumed that when children felt secure, they could feel connected with others and could develop a coherent sense of themselves as agents of their own learning. It was believed that as the child-parent relationship developed, over time, increasingly the child would have the freedom to be curious and to explore the physical and social world around him. We take it as axiomatic now that the more secure a child feels, the more he can deal with new information, without feeling anxious or disorganized. Additionally, if a child feels secure, then he also expects that his interactions with other people will be safe, and he has less need to feel guarded, defensive, and shameful if he makes mistakes.

Daniel Siegel in *The Developing Mind* (1999) proposed that parent-child relationships within the attachment process organize the child's mind neurobiologically for learning and for processing social and emotional experiences. He also postulated that through numerous interactions, organized patterns of learning and regulation develop structures in the mind that determine how a child will respond in the future.

It is as though there were a connecting cable between the parent's mental organization and the child's, so the child continually downloads the parent's programming, which helps to form the child's mental structures. Thus early experiences with nurturing parents are essential for generating a mind within the baby. As sensitive parents soothe and minimize emotional pain, the child gradually internalizes those ways of responding to stress and becomes capable of self-regulating emotional distress and negative feeling. As parents emphasize features of the environment "See the flower over there, that's a daisy" they help create selective attentional mechanisms. They enable children to sustain attention—for example, "No, it's

not time to play; let's read a bit more"—in ways that heighten competence and the successful completion of tasks.

Siegel and others argue that a caregiver's mental state has a major influence on the child's sense of security and how he feels about himself. The parent's ability to think about a child's feelings and intentions creates within the child a capacity to make inferences about other people's minds, their thoughts, ideas, intentions and feeling states: "I saw her smiling at me—she thinks I'm smart," or "They were laughing when I started reading—they're laughing at me because I'm so dumb." Over time, a child begins incorporating his own version of the parent's mode of representing the child to himself, enabling him to reflect upon his experience, and to use words and images to represent his experience to himself.

Roberto, a child I've worked with for more than five years, can say, "I'm so mad [that you're not letting me take my checker out of the Connect 4 and start again] I could throw the stuff off the table! OK, OK, Dr. Sussman, I'll just calm down."

For Roberto, these mutual processes of action and modulating responses that we have engaged in over the course of a long therapy allow him to build up stable representations or images of himself—not as the bad child he once thought he was, but as a child who has control over his actions and wants to continue participating in a play sequence with me.

Thus children construct images of themselves as students, game-players, sons and daughters, friends, and tutees, and representations of themselves functioning within these roles, often in "goal-corrected partnerships" with others

Ricky said to his educational therapist, "I thought of what we did the other day, and this time when the teacher told us to write, I did three sentences."

These representations enable children to exchange ideas and attitudes with other people, to change their ways of interacting according to other people's requirements, and to interpret their social world in meaningful ways. Not only can they function more effectively, but, because this contributes to their sense of belonging, they experience a vitality and a robust quality of engagement with the world that fuels their ability to learn and engage in cooperative and satisfying relationships with others.

Fonagy and Target (2002) believe that as these processes get underway, they build for the child an interpersonal interpretive mechanism (IIM) that helps evaluate the social environment and respond appropriately. Having a fully functioning IIM helps children make sense of each other by sharing psychological experiences, information, feelings, and emotions. This special interpretive mechanism is also thought to create a sensitivity to the social world, so what parents and teachers say about us becomes exceptionally important and meaningful: what it is important to learn; how to act; what to pay attention to; how to understand what they think of us so that we can modify or continue our actions and reactions.

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This is especially important once children mature. School, as we know, is a social experience. Kids have to share labs, become friends, and deal with teachers and other students. Teachers want children to make inferences about why a story character did what he did or to figure out what led the colonialists to oppose England in the Revolutionary War.

Louis discovered the importance of evaluating social situations when his teacher and the class responded negatively to his raising his hand and quoting Marx and Lenin, or correcting others, including the teacher. She spoke to him about these incidents and her concern over his inability to follow her directions. She also lowered his grade. Discussions with his psychotherapist and school counselor helped him realize how much his teacher's opinion of him mattered, and that he needed to be less self-promoting and more responsive to the moment-to-moment events in class.

Louis, a boy with a Nonverbal Learning Disability also revealed how much effort it took for him to "read" and respond appropriately to his classmates' social cues and behaviors towards him. He maintained a lexicon in his mind of what certain speech mannerisms and social behaviors meant, and he systematically underwent a process of "translation" in order to understand kids' meanings when they did or said certain things related to him.

Unlike Louis, who deliberately constructed his own unwieldy interpretive mechanism, most children develop their capacity for engaging in intellectual and social activity from repetitive early attachment experiences. Memories of these experiences enable them to create effortlessly their own lexicons of meaning, and to attune adaptively to social situations and to others' emotional states, permanently encoding these in memory for future use. Focusing on a mechanism like the IIM highlights the continuity of interpersonal experience from infancy to old age and makes us aware that what we learn about, what we think, how we feel, and how we behave, depend upon what we learn from others, how we learn it, the emotional climate in which we learn it, and the feelings that get stirred up.

For children with learning disabilities, social experiences in school can have devastating effects. We all know, for instance, what it feels like to be criticized and shamed by others, and how those feelings jam the pathways to thinking. Myrna Orenstein and Fred Levin (2003) make a powerful case for the trauma that follows failures in learning. They suggest, "as learning failures multiply, so do cycles of shame" (p. 11). Serious ruptures in self-esteem, withdrawal from activities conducive to further learning, increased blaming of

others that complicate relationships, perceived criticism from parents and teachers, and intense experiences of grieving or depression are some consequences of learning failure. In many instances, a student's ability to cope will depend upon early experiences with caretakers and teachers who may either help to repair the rupture, creating within the child mechanisms for soothing hurt feelings and lowering arousal, or, alternatively, heighten disorganizing affect through ridicule, irritation, or dismissive neglect.

It makes sense that as the child and the ET enter into a learning relationship, elements of the attachment process function as they did in early childhood. Because the ET carries in her mind a representation of the child as a successful learner, she can transmit this, enabling the child to transform his image of himself. As she fosters a positive self-concept of himself as a learner, as Hoffman proposed, the child's early idealization of parents as authoritative and wise gets transferred to the therapist. If she, similarly authoritative and apparently knowledgeable, sees the child as a learner, then maybe, indeed, he is! Possibly, too, lurking deep down in the childish unconscious is a sense of the magical power of the ET and the process—a carryover from nursery stories and fairy tales of the magical transformations made possible by fairy godmothers and powerful wizards and by courageous persons who undertake arduous journeys and defy evil forces. Therefore, the internal logic goes, if I work with this person and am close to her, she will magically fix it and make it better; she will protect; and finally, she will enable.

As we understand more about the attachment relationship, we see that the ET uses built-in genetic dispositions toward self-regulation and the development of a mind, and the human ability to represent the world and our place within it to ourselves as a way of fostering new modes of self-regulation and the ability to attend, in order to promote the child's subjective experience of himself as a learner. Since learning for our children is already so emotionally heightened—most often in a negative way—encouraging the development of an attachment relationship means that the ET can have greater impact, because emotion fixes and amplifies experience. It might be possible, therefore, to help a child revisit old hurts and put-downs within the context of a more flexible, more accepting relationship, thereby modifying the angst of shameful not-knowing experiences, and replacing them with modest, small experiences of success.

It may be necessary, therefore, to allow children to lean on the ET and, once again, have the experience of "being carried," much as they were when they were young. Although we try to encourage independence, sometimes the way to autonomy is through dependency and regression. By functioning as ego auxiliaries for children, we make it possible for them to perform up to a certain standard of behavior. Through the regression, we also make it possible to go backward in time, in effect repairing the damage of chronic trauma and conflicted experience. Most important, the resulting depen-

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dence encourages a certain amount of identification that makes it satisfying for children to adopt our ways of thinking and doing, such as being consistent and reliable, working hard, and getting up on time.

Within a relationship that develops emotionally, socially, and intellectually, the ET has the possibility for helping the child experience once again the pulls and tugs of old unsatisfied longings and wishes, reactivating needs for positive regard within a social milieu that can be optimally responsive. A major benefit of such an approach is that it creates a mandate for ETs to do the work they have consistently been doing, now without guilt or doubt that they are taking too much time in relationship-building, listening, and empathizing, and not devoting sufficient time to academic skill-building. Now, within an academically oriented setting, the child can be responded to in ways that can elevate feelings of self-esteem, confidence, and positive expectation. Consequently, the ET has the possibility of influencing not just strategies for math or reading, but the child's whole approach to learning and education.

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