
Creating a Therapeutic Relationship With the Child in Educational Therapy

Part II: The Attachment Relationship

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Part I proposed the importance of an attachment relationship that satisfies children's basic needs for contact and closeness, before they can be ready for learning. ETs experience a dynamic tension between preparing a child for academic achievement and acknowledging his need for a personal, spontaneous, emotional relationship. The ET's commitment to both poles of this attachment/learning relationship creates for the child an image of himself as a successful learner. By understanding the importance of attachment to the learning process, ETs can allow a self-creating process to unfold because they accept that it is an essential component of their job description. [I use male gender pronouns when referring to the single child, and female gender pronouns when referring to teachers or therapists.]

Educational work with an ET takes place within a relationship that has its own history, continuity, and sense of “being with” somebody else (Stern, 1982). When this relationship is positive, the child has the sense of being “in sync” with the ET and their mutual goals for learning. Positive relationships may be complementary in that the ET teaches and the child learns; they also can be transformative, so that failure and shame can be repaired, and self-confidence be built up. Alternatively, relationships can be negative; for example, a child may comply, rather than engage actively in learning. Or a child may retreat from the humiliation and mind-freeze of “the chasm” (Orenstein, 2000), claiming that he is “bored” or “doesn't care.” Thus, an attachment or therapeutic relationship involves a set of internal and external experiences that are created when two or more people, over time, feel affiliated and have the potential to transform the quality of each other's experience.

John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, proposed that a genetically programmed attachment “control system” functions to ensure that infants and young children will engage in behaviors to promote proximity to an attachment figure who provides a “safe haven” (i.e., soothing and comfort from distress), and who has the primary responsibility for “regulating infant safety and survival” (Bowlby, 1969; Main, 2000). Researchers, like his collaborator Mary Ainsworth, observed that although infants could be classified as being “securely” or “insecurely” attached based upon differing patterns of behavior in separating and reuniting with parents, attachment itself was an internalized “something” that had “aspects of

feelings, memories, wishes, expectancies and intentions . . . that serve as . . . a filter . . . for the reception and interpretation of interpersonal experience.” It functions as a template that shapes the nature of outward observable responses (Ainsworth, quoted by Main, 2000) and facilitates the development of a learning relationship that is both emotional and social.

THE ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIP

Distinctions between *internal* factors underlying attachment relationship and *external* behaviors expressing differing forms of attachment highlight the ways in which an attachment relationship between the ET and the child promotes educational therapy. Were the ET primarily to provide strategies and remediation, she would be working to transmit appropriate behaviors and build cognitive structures that would help a child comply externally with educational goals in the classroom. It would be up to the child, his family, and his teacher, however, to create the *internal* motivation and incentive for learning. Alternatively, if the ET develops a *relationship* that is complementary and transformative, learning becomes an internal psychic experience, positively impacting both the child's desire to learn and what the child can expect from a relationship with a caring, potentially helpful adult.

When Louis' math teacher reported that he had lied about turning in his math assignments, his mother said, “Well, he does no work at home—he just sits and reads *Time* magazine. Aren't you going to fail him if he keeps this up?”

For Louis, a learning relationship would probably include internal “replays” of the argumentative, accusatory nature of the attachment relationship with his mother. In situations of noncompliance, he would assume people would yell at him, blame him, and call him “irresponsible.” He would also anticipate that fledgling efforts to accommodate would be unrecognized. The potential for experiencing shame and even guilt might extend to other interpersonal moments, shaping his outward responses to accord with internalized feelings, especially with adults in authority positions

ATTACHMENT AND AROUSAL

A reciprocal relationship exists between attachment and exploration, such that *feeling safe enables the child to feel comfortable enough to reach out and explore the world.* An underlying physiological arousal system, responsive to stimulation from external events or internal emotional states, governs and shapes behavior. Once children feel safe, they experience the need for more stimulation. They become

uncomfortable, restless, bored, and motivated to seek out novelty and to explore. Curiosity is aroused and children manually explore objects and play actively in order to know more, shifting, as they mature, to self-directed, reflective thinking and problem solving. At an *optimal level of stimulation*, children's capabilities are equal to classroom demands and they experience success. However, *learning* actually happens when they *do not* have sufficient skills to meet challenges. Instead, children experience *uncertainty*, leading them to feel anxious. At an *optimal level of anxiety*—when they feel sure that they can learn what they need to know—the desire to reduce uncertainty and lessen anxiety presses them to acquire new information and strategies, increasing knowledge and capability. When, however, challenges seem beyond their capability, anxiety increases, creating panic, freezing, disorganization, or withdrawal. LD kids who are resistant or claim to be “bored” or “disinterested” frequently have been overwhelmed, or have experienced “the chasm,” preferring to short-circuit back to more manageable levels of stimulation and anxiety that are “boring,” but safe.

Attachment relationships provide comfort and reassurance, lessening anxiety and enabling children to keep going without the fear of losing confidence or falling apart. Proximity affords access to the resources and competencies of parents or teachers who function as *ego auxiliaries*, using their superior skills to assist, especially with homework. Through continuous small experiences, the attachment figure develops within the child scripts or templates for modulating arousal and learning how to self-regulate, thus enhancing opportunities for more complex learning. For the ET, developing an attachment relationship increases the chances for optimal learning and exploration (information-gathering), which can only occur when anxiety is at a manageable level.

ATTACHMENT AND LEARNING

In Great Britain, ETs are teachers or educational psychologists whose training includes special attention to children's emotional states and to how unconscious mechanisms influence the interaction between student and therapist. Barrett and Trevitt (1991), British ETs, assume that relationships in the classroom mirror earlier parent-child interactions. They contend that securely attached children are able to wait for attention, and aren't overwhelmed by apparent rejection. Secure children “appear confident and . . . can relate positively to their teachers and their peers,” because they have been listened to and sensitively responded to. They have been effective in getting what they want from parents, so they expect equally positive responses in school, which leads to greater competence.

Conversely, Barrett and Trevitt observe that children judged to be insecurely or anxiously attached are those most frequently “referred to us for educational therapy,” and are “less likely to learn effectively in school.” Feeling rejected by parents, they tend to expect similar reactions from teachers and other children, who may be perceived as inaccessible. Unlike securely attached children, they cannot use others as resources or depend on them for calming when they feel anxious. Children may be “attention-seeking in negative ways,” just as they had to be with parents who were inconsistent in their availability or preoccupied with their own issues.

Securely attached children expect to do well even if they have found learning difficult. They are eager for information and strategies to help them feel competent and successful. For those who felt unheard or were disappointed by their parents' responses, or whose parents have been intrusive and controlling, the need for information takes a secondary role to the child's anticipation of a learning relationship that is conflicted and nonconfirming, one that adheres to someone else's agenda rather than his own.

Renata's ET had to penetrate her veneer of indifference in order to fire up dormant executive functioning skills that were developmentally deficient. Her anxiety and unmotivated approach to high school clashed with her first tutor's demands that she write consistently and get work in on time. Partially, Renata was defending against her mother's worries that she wouldn't be successful or even admitted into college, as well as her father's indifference. Once linked up with a young ET who talked animatedly with her about opera and nail polish, she grudgingly acknowledged her executive function deficits and underlying desires to succeed.

Frequently, childish patterns of relating need to be renegotiated with the ET within a transitional and playful learning space (Winnicott, 1951) before the business of academic skill-building can be addressed.

CAPACITIES FOR SELF-REGULATION AND MENTALIZATION

Today we realize the profound impact that stress and trauma exert upon children's ability to pay attention, to learn, and to maintain relationships. Fonagy and Target (2002), in a speculative but intriguing article, suggest that parents not only provide models for interacting with others in the social environment; they also help children, through the attach-

ment relationship, develop capability for self-regulation and mindful activity.

REGULATION OF THE STRESS RESPONSE

Fonagy and Target suggest that an important function of parents is to help the child adapt to stress and modulate states of arousal in order to organize behavior in meaningful, predictable ways. From early on, a child is sensitive to his parents' reactions to his behavioral expression of tension. He anticipates their expectations and prohibitions, and expects similar reactions from his social world. When children like Renata and Louis override their defenses to engage seriously in learning, they become once again vulnerable to intense feelings of self-consciousness and shame. Under these conditions, the first task of the ET is to cushion the child emotionally. This means permitting the expression of longings, and responding to underlying wishes to be cared for, while accepting times when he retreats into defiant self-sufficiency. Optimal responsiveness is called for through continued positive regard within the context of getting a job done and giving time for repair when the child feels wounded. Thus shame is reduced and a sense of kinship is promoted, while academic work that is just one step ahead of what the child already knows is undertaken as a means of ensuring moments of success.

Most children seen by ETs haven't experienced extreme helplessness and trauma, and their family relationships are adequate and often optimal. Nonetheless, the LD or ADHD child often feels trapped and overwhelmed by a highly stressful classroom situation, followed by anxious, destabilizing hours of homework. Constitutional vulnerabilities also create extreme sensitivity and reactivity to stimulation, intensely emotional or labile moods, and explosive or disorganized behaviors. When activated, these negatively loaded patterns of interaction lead to tension, anxiety about being a "bad" child who should be punished, reduced productivity, lack of consolidation in memory, and difficulty shifting to less aroused states.

Cognitive and memory systems can become so derailed by emotional arousal that attention and executive skill functions may be compromised, making it hard to remember all the information and preparation that took place the night before a quiz. Perched at the edge of the chasm, many children experience intense disruptions in self-esteem, so paralyzed by the inhibiting effects of shame that they retreat into an inflated sense of their own superiority, repress thought, undergo surges of rage and dysregulation, or sink further into flatness and depression.

Parents may become so enmeshed with their child's frustration and so irritated by the child's inability to remember what was reviewed just ten minutes earlier that they react angrily, making it hard to model optimal ways of calm-

ing anxiety. By the time the ET is called to the rescue, the family's tension and despair must be addressed, in addition to rectifying major academic gaps. The ET must help the family recognize how the child defends against anxiety and work with them to develop a realistic sense of what constitutes accomplishment and failure for this child. By interpreting test scores in light of individual progress, grades can be put into perspective and painstaking effort can be rewarded.

REGULATION OF ATTENTION

Fonagy and Target suggest that qualities associated with classroom success, such as *effortful control of attention*, also depend upon attachment relationships for their development. Effortful control is an executive function that involves the ability to suppress competing or conflicting demands for attention in favor of focusing attention on one specific event or set of behaviors.

Real maturation toward effortful control develops as children set their own priorities and regulate attention according to their own plans. Parents and tutors impart adaptive ways of coping with stress and distress, so that emotions don't disrupt a child's focus on maintaining productive efforts.

Janet's slow processing and phonics problems made the fast pace of her classroom overwhelming. Tutoring with a gentle but persistent ET and moving to a school for learning-disabled children helped develop her capacity to sustain effort and remain focused. Her psychotherapist helped her work through underlying feelings of helplessness and abandonment through puppet play, increasing her ability to tolerate emotional and academic pressures. Now Janet's grades are in the top third of her regular junior high class.

Were Janet not in psychotherapy, the ET would need to alert her parents to her distress and suggest obtaining an evaluation from a psychiatrist, psychologist, licensed clinical social worker, or counselor, in order to understand her complex symptoms and deal with internal conflicts and self-damaging behavior, so that she could more freely resolve her academic issues.

DEVELOPMENT OF REFLECTION AND SYMBOLIC ACTIVITY

Fonagy and Target hypothesize that even an insecure attachment relationship fosters responsiveness to the social environment and an intense awareness of the mother's mental state. They highlight research indicating that parents' thinking about their infants' feelings instills a capacity for reflectivity in infants that they call "mentalizing," which helps youngsters

develop a sense of themselves as effective agents who can control their environments and understand what others are thinking and feeling. Through this process, a mind emerges from the activity of the brain, leading to mental operations such as classification, conceptual groupings, and logical operations.

ETs are familiar with the way “mentalization” and reflective capabilities promote investigation, verbalization, writing, and planning for long-range projects and investigative research. However, maintaining interest, sustaining effort and output, and knowing how to communicate with other minds that think differently are often taken for granted. Some children need specific instruction to become mindful of who will be reading their essays, how to meet their teacher’s requirements, or how to coordinate their activities with those of other children in their group. Ricky’s awareness was increased as teachers, ET, and psychotherapist systematically began asking,

“What do you think I’m thinking? What’s in your mind? How would your friends feel about this? Sometimes our thoughts are different and I don’t want to do what you would like to do; I want to do something different.” (See Bleiberg, 2000, pp.150–197, for other ways of building in these reflective functions.)

CREATING A THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHILD

To create a therapeutic relationship, the ET needs to be mindful of the child’s mental states, assessing whether he feels pleasure and energy, or is suffused with depression, shame, or anxiety. She reflects on the child’s thoughts, feelings, actions, intentions, and reactions, and conveys to the child her sense of him as a capable, competent learner, piece by fledgling piece, projecting onto him a sense of hope and emotional acceptance. The therapist and the child work together to represent the child to himself as someone who values his own learning.

Within a framework that recognizes how important self-regulation, social relating, and the capacity to represent ideas is to educational achievement, the therapeutic agenda would target such specific objectives as dealing with stress and excitement and increasing the ability to focus attention, while inhibiting distracting responses and maintaining effortful control. Many procedures, such as helping students and their families deal with the shame and anxiety accompanying low or failing grades, are already part of the ET’s modus operandi. The therapeutic relationship gets strengthened as the ET shows that she is there to help interpret a situation and then help modulate the child’s emotional

distress so that he doesn’t have to do it alone. She realizes that when a child says he’s dumb and can’t learn, it isn’t sufficient to point out how smart he really is and what good grades he’s gotten. Rather than downplay negative feelings, it is important to inquire about them and empathize with the difficulty that he has in pushing onward when so much bad feeling stands in the way. Frequently, when these anxious, terrible feelings are confronted and sorted out, children come to sense they can share this shameful part of themselves with someone who understands how burdened they are.

Only afterward can attention be directed toward positive elements or new goals. By encouraging hopefulness, maintaining esteem through focusing on how much has been learned, and reinterpreting and reframing situations, the ET offers new avenues for regulating stress and tension. By using herself to model how a person maintains *effortful control*, the ET persistently engages the child to stay on task and teaches how to regroup after he’s “lost it” or strayed from the path. She motivates, encourages, and provides strategies for him to restrain impulsivity and stay focused, working to develop other executive control strategies like setting and sticking to priorities. All of this becomes possible because the child cares about the therapist and wants to do good things for her. He believes that if she can work with him, something magical and wonderful can emerge—Cinderella can change into the fairy princess; the ugly duckling can indeed be the beautiful swan.

Significantly, the ET is also an important person for the family. She can modify parental attitudes and interactions around school-related issues. Children’s concerns about being “dumb” and a “failure” often reflect their parents’ worries, especially if parents had anxieties about their own underachievement or their child’s delays. By enlisting parents in the child’s therapy and bringing them into the circle of her concern, the ET potentially creates more functional regulatory mechanisms for parents that amplify and support the work being done in sessions. If parents have a chance to reflect on their reactions, recognize the pain of their child’s experience, think about appropriate responses with the ET, and understand more clearly what is causing the problem, they can feel calmer, less stressed, and more able to be resources for their children.

The ET is *not a psychotherapist*, and many complex emotional issues involve clinical interventions that ETs are not trained to do. Additional training and continuing education courses may give ETs opportunities to explore those areas, play with ideas, create new procedures, and learn useful concepts. Indeed, the ET ought to consult with trusted psychotherapists in order to maintain the separate boundaries between educational therapy and

psychotherapy and to discuss those children who cannot settle into a relationship. Nonetheless these relationship-building processes are the very ones that parents undertake in raising their children! Thus it is clearly within the realm of the ET to help a child

organize the flood of stimulation, feelings, affects,
that interfere with learning;

think about what he or you are doing;

distinguish *thought* from *feeling*; *thought* from
external reality; *thought* from *belief*; and *thought*
from *action* (Carney, 2002).

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