

Violent Children can be Children in Need reconciliation work and child focus

Second International Conference Nonviolent Resistance

Antwerp, 30th March 2012

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- Whether in foster care, residential homes or living in their birth families, children who have been abused and neglected are among those with the greatest unmet psychological need. Those previously abused children who become violent or self-destructive, are also among the most dismissive, when adults in their lives attempt to care for them.
- Others, who have not suffered child abuse, and are nonetheless violent, are equally dismissive of the adults' attempts to care for them. When the caring dialogue between adult and child diminishes, the young person's unmet need grows.
- The ideas in this presentation have been developed by working with NVR in families with violent children, who have been abused in the past. Their aim is to facilitate the renewal of the caring dialogue, which has been eclipsed



What happens when children dismiss their carers' or parents' care?

- **Constraints to adults' care for their violent child:**
 - Physically and psychologically avoiding the child – reduced parental presence reduces awareness of the child's distress.
 - Parents who have been abused in the past often respond with depression or posttraumatic stress to the child.
 - Negative internal representation of the child (Grace 1993).
 - Vengefulness closes down the neural pathways for empathy
 - Dismissive child behaviour closes down neural pathways for care. Carers, whose foster children dismiss their attempts to act in caring and supportive ways, become less nurturing and more punitive over time (Dozier, 2002).



integrating this internal representation...



...with this one



Constraints in the young person

- Aggressive young people inhabit a threatening world – they experience other people as hostile (Barrett, 1996). (Young people with conduct disorders have hyper-aroused amygdala function, as do anxious young people.) You do not appeal to the person who you feel threatened by for support.
- Survival reactivity – aggression– reduces reflective functioning or mentalization: ‘I’m not upset – I’m angry’. There is little awareness of one’s own distress.
- Power feels safer to children with abusive experiences or early attachment difficulties, than vulnerability.
- Negative internal representation of parents and carers (Grace, as before) leaves young people feeling unwanted and not belonging.
- By taking from the parent, the young person never receives.



Moving to a child focus in NVR

- Wilson (1998): What are the possible meanings in the child's outrage, anger and distress?
- Omer (2004): The aggressive child has positive internal voices, requires love and guidance.
- Newman and Nolas (2008): The 'family values' discourse in NVR opens the possibility for a child focus.



A child focus in NVR: Parents address the child's unmet needs in their reconciliation gestures.

Unmet needs and the unheard voice of distress in the aggressive child

- The need to feel safe and protected
 - Attachment and security
 - Post-traumatic stress and anxiety
- The need for support in one's development
- The need to feel a sense of belonging
- The need for a coherent and benign narrative of self and family



Frightened and Frightening Caregiving & Disorganised Attachment (Janina Fisher)

- **Frightened Parental Behaviour:**
 - Backing away
 - Frightened voice
 - Dazed expression
 - Exaggerated startle
 - Withdrawn
 - Non-responsive
- **Frightening Parental Behaviour:**
 - Looming, attack postures
 - Sudden movements
 - Mocking, teasing
 - Intrusive
 - Emotionally reactive
 - Loud, startling noises



control/anxiety cycle



I will keep reaching out to you, no matter what you do... From reconciliation gesture to relational gesture

- Reconciliation gestures- acts of unconditional love and care, that re-assure the young person: “We care about you”. Instead of *saying* “we love you, we just don’t like what you do”, parents *act*. Acts speak louder than words.
- Reconciliation gestures can communicate a parent’s or carer’s awareness of the child’s unmet need and distress.



Planning reconciliation gestures helps parents and carers focus on the child’s unmet needs and become re-sensitized to their distress.

Child focus toolbox for planning relational reconciliation gestures

- Incorporate parental apology and preferred future in the announcement.
- Use need-focused question sequences.
- Use visualisation to help parents merge the image of the controlling child with the image of the child in need.
- Interview the ‘internalised child’ in the parent
- Hold therapeutic network meetings, at which an advocate for the child can inform parents and NVR therapist about unmet needs.
- See the child in parallel to the parents.
- See the child with the parents after the controlling behaviour has diminished



Need-focused question sequences

- “If he hadn’t got aggressive after school yesterday, what other thoughts and feelings do you believe Jack would have expressed?”
- “How have you known this has been going on at school?”
- “How were you able to sense that that was what he was struggling with?”
- “How did you become alert to his distress, in spite of Jack’s anger?”
- “What small gesture could you make, that would show him you understand his distress? And at the same time save his face? Take your time to think about what the gesture could look like. You know so much about Jack, and what would help him feel understood.”
- “OK, so when you make that gesture - what will help you avoid the trap of expecting a positive response from him? So that you don’t react with disappointment, or anger, or feel discouraged?”



Visualisation

A visualisation-merging technique (Schwarz, 2002) can be helpful to keep parents cognitively and emotionally in touch with their child's unmet need. After a need-focused conversation, the parent is asked to draw or sculpt their internal image of their controlling child. They then draw or sculpt an internal image of their child in distress. The parent is asked to superimpose one image onto the other in their mind, allowing the two images to merge, and then draws or sculpts the merged image. This new, merged image can be brought to mind by the parent, when they plan a practical gesture of reconciliation in the therapy session – or when there is a conflict in everyday life.



Interviewing the internalised other

(Tomm, 1998), supports the development of empathy for the child. Parents or carers are asked to answer the therapist's questions from what they experience as the perspective of their own (aggressive) child's difficult feelings. The therapist asks the 'internalized child' about his or her distress, the preferred relational gesture that would address their need, and what effects such a parental response might have. After this role play, parents plan and later carry out the actual reconciliation gesture based on the 'internalized child's' preferred parent response.



Therapeutic network meetings

are facilitated by the NVR therapist, and involve the parent(s), adult supporters and professionals, and the young person's 'trusted adult', who can be an individual therapist, mentor, adult family friend or relative. After negotiating with the child what should be passed on to the parents, the trusted adult imparts information about the child's distress, thus acting as the child's 'voice' in articulating unmet need. In subsequent sessions, the therapist supports the parents or carers in developing reconciliation gestures, which signal their awareness of the child's distress, and their willingness to provide care. The child's response to the reconciliation gestures is monitored in subsequent therapeutic network meetings.



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