The Meaning of the Child

Interview:
Classifying the Parent’s Connection to their child in the Parenting Interviews

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The Meaning of the Child to the Parent

‘Some children ... had been at greater risk of harm than others because they carried a particular psychological significance to their caretaker(s). It was as though the children had acquired an undeclared script or blueprint for their life that submersed their personal identity or personal characteristics, and this meaning came to dominate the parent-child relationship... The children became “actors in someone else’s play.”’

[Reder and Duncan 1999, ‘Lost Innocents’ Study]

The Meaning of the Child

— System of classifying parenting interviews to understand the strengths and risks in the parent-child relationship (Grey and Farnfield 2017a&b)
— Developed within practice
— Focus on ‘at risk’ and ‘struggling’ relationships
— Demonstrated validity in respect of correlation with
  • CARE-Index patterns (Grey and Farnfield 2017b) and
  • Parental RF (Grey 2014)

The Theory of Meaning making in parenting

— Attachment theory – in particular defensive information processing (Bowlby, Crittenden)
— Problematic Reflective Functioning – ‘Psychic Equivalence vs. Pretend Mentalising’ (Fonagy et al.)
— ‘Semiotics’ (study of signs in biological systems) and ‘Semiotic Freedom’ (flexible interpretation)
— Caregiving as a separate system (Solomon and George) – is the child an AF or extension of self?
— Dyadic understanding of relationships – attachment is ‘co-constructed’

Patterns of Caregiving

Sensitivity:
The degree to which the relationship is mutually satisfying and works for the development of the child

Threatened parents respond defensively &:
1. Intrude on the child to ‘re-make’ the child what s/he ‘needs’ to be (Controlling)
2. Withdraw from child psychologically (Unresponsive)
3. A combination is possible!

Based on Crittenden’s CARE-Index (Crittenden 2007)

The MotC ‘lite’

Note the Expression of affect (expressive or distancing language, images).
— These indicate how the parent actually feels about the child.
Pay close attention to Reflective Functioning: any mental states ascribed to parent/child/other.
— This indicates what the parents believe they are thinking and feeling about the relationship.

A gap between the two is Risk: reasonable coherence is Adequate; pleasurable acceptance is Sensitivity.
Sensitive Caregiving

- Parent and child please each other; each finds the relationship rewarding.
- The child is alive in the mind of the parent and the parent is able to give appropriate meaning to the child’s signals.
- The parent can then respond appropriately to comfort the child / resolve the problem.

Sensitive Parenting

- Sensitive parents respond sensitively to their children, because they have the flexibility to see where they and their child are and adapt (like dance partner).
- Beliefs have context, and are congruent with them.
- Expression of feelings and content match each other.
- Absolutes are usually avoided; (‘never’, ‘always’) or qualified.
- All information is integrated with context and reflection, or at least accessible to reflection.

Sensitive

- What do you like most about Ellie?
- Um...that’s quite a difficult question to answer (soft laugh)
- It is a difficult question, have a go, have a shot.
- (7-8 seconds silence- thinking)
- Well it’s difficult to put my finger on one thing, there’s a couple of things that I really love about Ellie...um (pause) one of them is um (pause) I really love her smile, she’s got, she smiles at everybody but she’s got a particular smile that she turns around and grins for you, for somebody special in her life umm (pause) she’s got a very infectious laugh, she loves to laugh umm (pause) really like that about her umm (pause)

Sensitive

- Sorry it’s very strange, the way she smells cos she’s my child and it’s a funny parent thing I know, maybe only I’ve got but there’s the smell of Ellie and I can still go into her room and even though she’s not been there for a very, very long time, it smells like Ellie in that room (pause) it’s a very strange thing... And even though she’s been with her foster mother she still smells like Ellie (pause) um so that’s quite important to me um (pause) and um (pause) but when she calls mummy even if she’s upset or she’s (pause) um happy or you know when she calls for me that really melts my heart even if it’s, even if she’s annoyed with me (laughs) you know but it’s when she interacts with me and that’s possibly because I don’t get to spend the time with her but that’s really important to me.

Sensitive

- [Child is 8, adoptive mother’s first language is French]
- Taking the first of those err loving, can you give me a recent example, a time when you felt the relationship was loving – a sort of memory or an occasion?
- Well for example just yesterday mm when she yeah wanted to be a baby and wanted to be cuddled in my arms and erm, said she was born yesterday, “I was born yesterday mummy from your tummy” and erm she just wanted to sit on my lap and just be, be hugged and err her head against my chest and this moment of stillness – erm there was no chatting. We were just there together and that was really loving.

Controlling Parenting

- The parent fears intrusion or rejection; what will happen if the child is allowed to influence the relationship (contribute to the conversation)
- Parental beliefs are imposed on the ‘conversation’:
  - Positive beliefs - the reality that the parents need to believe in
  - Negative beliefs express disappointment at the child’s failure to live up to it
- Can include ‘needy’ enmeshed relationships as well as hostile ones
- Both fail to accept the child or the relationship as they actually are
Controlling the Interview

- The parent is engaged in the interview because they need the interviewer to accept their version of reality.
- They fear that the NTV might see things differently, and the expression of affect in order to 'bully' the NTV into accepting their meanings.
- One-sided and self-serving information offers no context to base an independent opinion.
- Other perspectives are brought in bolster own perspective, or as 'straw men' to be dismissed.
- A sense of struggle pervades even seemingly 'positive' interviews; things have to be how the speaker sees them, and others must or should recognise it too.

Unresponsive Parenting

- Unresponsive parents fear the child will elicit difficult, even unbearable feelings.
- There is a desire to escape from unpleasant or threatening aspects of reality.
- This is done by idealising the child (and relationship) and making things impersonal.
- The former avoids attention to negative feelings; when this fails, the latter distances the self from them.
- The affect of both is to create an island where they cannot be touched; but then cannot 'touch' their child.
- Their idealisation lacks context and genuine affect because the child is not seen; it is not based upon or contingent to the child.

The love, the uniqueness of my son and our relationship, cos it’s one of a kind, you won’t get one like me and my son has got, I don’t care who you got, whatever they think. I know there is no one better than the one I got with my son. I know that much - just by looking at him - and the way he looks at me... yeah...

I think he understands, in my own heart. I do. I think he knows, where he is and he shouldn’t be there but - it’s one of them things, its happened now, I’m going through the system. I don’t want to beat the system; I want to work with the system. So...

... so, taking first the love, can you tell me about just a particular moment, describe a time with him where, where, that has showed the love there is between you..
Yeah, ok. And what would you say you like most about your son?
Being able to talk to him and play with his toys with him.
Hmmm. Yeah, so you like playing with him? Yeah.
And what about him would you say you like least?
Nothing, nothing at all.
No, there’s nothing about him that’s difficult to manage or? No. No.
Even when he’s upset I can cope with him, I just know how to look after him and calm him down and tell him everything’s ok, and when you tell him everything’s ok he calms down. Hmmm. But he’s having a bit of a problem at the moment cos he’s teething. Right. But we’ve got under control I have cos when he starts crying, I give him his dummy and that soothes him.
Right, he likes that, ok. Ok, we’ve got a bit of a picture of Tim and of you. Yeah. I want to look a little bit about your relationship with Tim. Yeah. Ok, ummm and think about how that is, ok. So can you think of three words or phrases that would describe your relationship?
It’s a good relationship with me and Tim. We’re bonded, he’s happy with me and there’s the occasional time when he’s upset when he’s in pain.
Yes, ok, you say you are bonded, can you give me a for example?
He knows who I am.
So when did you last have that feeling that he knew who you were?
Well I’ve never had that feeling that he’s not known who I am.

Further Information

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