

## **Summary of 'Nurturing Adoptions: Creating Resilience after Neglect and Trauma' by Deborah Gray**

### **Summary of Chapter 8: 'Common Ground: What Parents, Caseworkers, Teachers, and Therapists Can Do To Help'**

The following concepts will assist parents in helping children respond to their new safer and kinder settings, rather than continue to act out the lessons learned through maltreatment. This is discussed in the context of helping children who have suffered the traumas of abuse and neglect but is also appropriate for children who have problems resulting from prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol.

#### **Restoring Hope/Counteracting Shame**

- Children who have successfully overcome the obstacles posed by early abuse and neglect will say things like *'My parents never gave up on me'*.
- People drift towards depression and hopelessness following early neglect and /or trauma and tend to believe that they are not worth being cared for. Children without hope will not even try to change.
- When parents lose hope, children and teens respond with bitter anger. If your own parents have lost hope then you are in a sorry state!
- What language promotes hope? Comments like those below help children who are convinced that they should hide and be ashamed think about and become curious about themselves in a positive way. Examples include:

*'That was a thoughtful comment! Smart choice!'* (Compliment thinking)

*'You have a strong sense of fairness.'* This is particularly good for someone who likes to talk about what is unfair.)

*'You have a sensitive heart.'*

*'I am so interested in seeing how your gifts will develop as you get older!'* (This shows optimism for the future.)

*'I believe that you have a good heart. I wonder what was going on with person X that they didn't see this?'*

*'I believe in you. I think that you will be a caring teen and adult. I will be here to help you along the way.'*

*'I liked how you did that! Wow! You are growing up!'*

- Hopelessness promotes deception – some children with little hope feel that they cannot compete with other children on a level playing field as they are marred by maltreatment. Identify the problem and set small detailed but realistic goals for achievement so that hope can be instilled.

#### **Giving Up Old Defences - Explicit and Implicit Memory**

2 types of memory

- Explicit – stores facts and events eg autobiographical, verbalized memories like ‘when I was about 4 I rode my pony alone for the first time. I remember the excitement, the pony’s big eyes and the handful of coarse mane that ran through my hands.
- Implicit (nondeclarative memory)
  - Stores information such as perceptions, feelings and motor movements that is used unconsciously.
  - It is the first type of memory stored in the developing brain.
  - It is nonverbal although sometimes early memories or feelings can be accessed through verbal discussions.
  - Store the schemas or internal representations of how life works in regard to close relationships.
  - Lessons from early attachments are stored here.
  - The way in which children approach the world is largely based on the intrinsic, implicit memories formed in the first 18 to 22 months of life.
  - Children may enter loving families with stored implicit memories of early abuse or neglect – may arch off their parents’ laps and squirm out of hugs. They have no idea why they do this.
  - Most children feel shame about reactionary behaviour – they are sure that there is something wrong with them.
  - These reactions are not consciously thought – children need help understanding that their reactions are based on early intrinsic memory systems.
  - Eg Kira p157
  - Often giving children good background information about themselves helps them to identify a ‘why’ for their feelings or behaviours. This helps cope with early intrinsic memories.
  - When specific background information is not available, tell children that something happened, but we don’t know exactly what, that scared them or made them mad. Then ask for them to try acting in a different way eg give a hug.

*Stress impacts executive functioning*

Stress during early childhood shapes the brain. Children who experience early stressors also exhibit high rates of executive functioning problems or dysfunction. Children will be prone to:

- Forgetting or being preoccupied versus using working memory
- Inhibiting inappropriate behaviours in favour of exhibiting appropriate ones
- Making impulsive choices instead of using logical reasoning
- Giving quick random responses to memories and events instead of organizing memories and events
- Scanning of the surroundings instead of devoting attention to the task at hand
- Responding to a situation ‘in the moment’ instead of remembering the reason why they came into the situation.

Some of these behaviours overlap symptoms for ADD. Executive functioning issues caused by early stressors, however, are more extensive than those seen in ADD. Activities that allow adults to provide structure acts as the executive brain for children who need extra work on focusing, logic, understanding context and organization. At the same time these activities offer them templates for refocusing. Finishing tasks, allowing time for thinking, and practicing the routines necessary in daily life so that these processes are eventually done automatically.

Children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder may have permanent brain injuries that will prevent them from developing executive functioning.

### *Memory systems and understanding life as 'then' and 'now'*

Children cannot give up protective reactions or ways to defend themselves until they are given valid reasons for doing so. These reasons should be in the format of clear 'before' and 'after' messages.

An adult may assist this process by saying something like 'I can see that you elbow is up. You had to protect yourself from people a long time ago. Can you feel that you are in a friendly place now with a parent who wants a hug? Let's try that again while you remember that I am a friendly dad who is giving his son a hug.'

Eg 'I know that you want friends' I said. 'But when you were little you learned that you needed this big shot way to protect yourselves. Now that you are safe, you are still keeping people away.' 'And you are lonely. I'd like to work on friendship with you.'

Children will continue to use the old defences if the children have not integrated important facts about their parents.

### *Hot Memory Systems*

- Intrinsic memory systems that store early and /or stressful memories are 'hot' memory systems – meaning that it is difficult to access the memory and make changes unless the feelings and reactions are activated by experiences.
- Eg – girls knew that the caregivers had changed but they still held onto their early beliefs about caregivers that taught them not to trust their parents.
- Might not have seen the issues if I hadn't asked the girls to engage in experiences that would bring out the memories and beliefs.
- There can continue to be a lack of integration.
- Work in the present with actual experiences as this ensures activation of these memory systems.

### **Auditory Processing Issues**

- Auditory limitation, that is, cannot remember what has been said to them accurately, in context for a normal length of time or with the proper complexities implied in the content.
- Includes difficulties remembering and understanding detailed instructions given in both home and school.

- Most people relate to these processing and memory lapses as they often occur during stressful time.
- For neglected or abused children these lapses constitute a habitual state.
- Neurodevelopment has been shaped by stress to the extent that their memory systems may never be robust, even after they move out of the stressed state.
- Need to use simple techniques:
  - Use words sparingly
  - Pretend that you are paying by the word
  - Be concise
  - Go slowly
  - Say your main point at the beginning of the conversation (Often people provide supporting evidence and build up to their case before stating the main point placing the main point at the end. A child's brain is flooded with too much information.)
  - Use phrases like, 'the main point is' or 'the most important thing is.'
  - Make sure that they understand how your point relates to the 'big picture' or overarching idea.

Example:

Jean's mother was used to giving long lectures. The first part of her discourse included all of her thoughts, feelings, and explanations. Jean was overloaded by the time her mother began the second half of the discussion on what she wanted to have happen. Jean and her mother's mismatch in style were summarized by their complaints after the discussion.

"Too many works," Jean said. "It hurt my brain. All I could think about was how to get Mom to stop making that noise."

"She doesn't care about anyone but herself.' Her mother said bitterly.

'I never understand her. She's always complaining," Jean said. "Why doesn't she just say what she wants instead of telling me all this other stuff?'

## Organising Memories

Early neglect/trauma can impact the ability to organise memories. Sometimes memory recall is also more difficult

- It may take more time for the brain to find information, especially for children with prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol.
- Children may need more clues in order to bring back memories.
- Children may not recall information in a way that relates it in sequence and priority.

Leaning templates help these children develop patterns for organising the information that they are retrieving from memory eg

- 'Tell me what happened first? Then, what happened second? How did it end?'

- “Who was there?”
- “Where were you?”
- “Where did this event happen?”
- “Was it in the morning or after lunch?”
- “Were you indoors or outside?”
- “Who said what?”
- “What was the important point in what they said?”
- “What part of the story is most important to you?”
- “What is the part of your story that you think that I’ll like the most?” This can be followed with, “You are right! That is my favourite aprt!”

Mental pictures can be helpful.

Children with FASD are not able to retrieve information unless they keywords or images precisely match the words or images in the brain’s storage system.

Example:

The parent will say “You said that you would go to bed after the programme was over.”

No. I did not,” says the child/

“Yes. You did,” says the parents.

Actually it turns out that the parent said. “Get your teeth brushed and change into your pajamas so that you are ready to get to bed after the programme is over.”

The child did those things. He did not generalise that he had to go to ed after the programme was over. Huge arguments can break out over this type of mismatch.

The child will say, in an injured tone, “She never old me to go to bed.”

Children with difficulties organising their memories will need some special help organising the space, the plan for therapy and in understanding how the information about the events in their lived. Indirect methods used in play therapy and talking therapies give most children a medium but not for children who have difficulties organising their memories.

Children with pre-natal substance exposure have difficulty moving information from one part of the brain to another. Chidlren who work on issues during play therapy will not necessarily substitute the new information fro the old by moving it to different parts of the brain. Much more intentional, co9ncret methods must be used when working with these children.

### **Rebuilding the Mind-Body Connection**

Children cannot continue to feel what they are feeling when they are in physically or emotionally overwhelming situations. They have to stop the feelings. In doing so, they stop ‘knowing’ the sensations in their bodies. This provides a temporary respite for them. Long-term however, it is problematic: It is impossible to get far in life if you do no know where you body is or what it is feeling.

Children who become nub have felt overwhelming feelings before without having any reliable person to calm them or to intercede at the time. They were forced to come up with a device to stop the frightening feelings before they became unendurable. Children

continue to use these defences even when they have a safe place because they cannot risk being alone with unmodulated feelings.

Example:

At the first sensation of loneliness, fear, shame or grief they may use diversions such as:

- Eye-rubbing
- Skin picking
- Finger stretching
- Knuckle cracking
- Changing subjects
- Kicking items
- Unravelling loose thread in upholstery etc

These physical sensations stop your brain from processing anything else, finding some way to deflect the unendurable when left without needed attention etc.

Bring children's attention (not shaming) to the connection between the behaviour and the difficulty they are feeling – point out that they may have needed it in the past but they no longer need it and it is holding them back.

Example:

Mia told me that when her dog died everyone in her family felt bad and cried. She felt weird because she did not feel anything. She knew in her head that it was sad, but it really did not feel bad. She thought, "Oh well. I guess the dog won't be there after school very day." Every time she started to feel sad, and I could feel some of her sad feeling within her, beginning in her chest she would pull her fingers back. No wonder she did not feel anything. She was stopping her feelings.

We worked together so that she stopped pulling her fingers back and let her body, in her chest and throat, that it was OK to let those feelings come up within her.

When she came back a couple of years later she told me she was sad for a friend who had been left out of something. She helped her friend. I asked her how she knew the friend was sad. "I just knew," she said. "I could look at her face and I felt bad for her."

Where in your body did you feel this? I asked.

"In my chest and heart and a little in my head." She said.

As children are able to identify their feelings, they are able to begin to put their thoughts together with the feelings. They are restoring the loop between mind and body, the relationship between thoughts and feelings.

Parents and professionals need to mirror children's feelings, describing them and the other person's corresponding feelings. Use every opportunity to align with them. This is helpful in building emotional attunement.

The following list of steps summarizes the route for helping children rebuild mind-body connections.

- Interrupt children who are stopping their feelings
- Give them support with finding the feelings in their bodies. Help them to see the value of feeling. Share the feeling you have when mirroring them.
- As they share their feelings, explore what might cause any normal person to feel such feelings. Help them to get comfortable with having normal feelings. Promise to help them with feelings if they become uncomfortably intense. Make a plan to handle the contingency of intense feelings (deep breathing, getting a drink, getting a hug, taking a walk etc)
- Connect and support their conclusions as they put thoughts and feelings together. Share examples of situations where knowing feelings helped people act on their own behalf.
- Don't rush in offering a child interpretations and conclusions. While it may be necessary to give hints, clues, guesses and examples, it is best to limit involvement to supporting a child as she puts her own meanings together. The child is the one who needs to develop mindfulness. Her initial steps are more important than an adult's most elegant reflections.

#### *Make plans for the day and for important events*

Children with executive functioning difficulties will often respond to daily events impulsively. Writing out a plan for their day allows them to rely on that plan and stay on task. Plans can be made in picture format for younger children. These plans also supplement short-term memory abilities. It calms children by helping them to feel a sense of predictability.

#### *Regulation patterns in oversensitised brains*

Long-term stress oversensitises the brain, making it prone to blow-ups, tantrums, irritable behaviour and negative responses.

Children can develop more positive regulated mood patterns when parents help them maintain calm, happy states. Techniques used with these children should promote positive and regulated moods. Sometimes writing out the answers to written questions eg "Why is this day hard for you? What are you feeling inside? What are you thinking that gives you this feeling?" (It was his brother's birthday.) Can take about an hour. Took an hour.

Example – Isaac p 170

#### **Reflect on the positive**

- The efficient and stressed brain deletes the positive content in favour of high-stress, negative information, which is required for survival.

- Their brain filters out the positive experiences unless we spend a considerable amount of time talking to them about positive experiences so that they will be remembered.
- Time needs to be spent working on positive events, breakthroughs and memories so that they are stored in the memory system.
- Spending time with children describing gains helps consolidate these memories to bring change to their life view.
- Keep a calendar of positive events – mark one or two positive events on a calendar every night. Review the calendar frequently recalling some of the positive events with the child.

Example Alex p 171

### **What does the home look like?**

- Unhurried homes – children do not do well with family stress and families need large amounts of available time.
- Predictable and structured settings – predictability lowers stress levels and helps kids organise their attention and efforts.
  - Children like knowing what comes next – similar to recognising a chorus in a song.
  - Schedules are important – does not have to be boring – posting the daily schedule on a white board especially in holiday time.
  - A 'theme of the week' – eg a tropical fish week – activities, books, meals and decorations could all involve this theme esp in holiday time – helps keep their mind in the positive present.
    - Teachers who post daily and weekly schedules and run an interesting, but regulated classroom find the children have more energy available for learning – they are not constantly scanning for 'what's next?'
- Train children through role playing and repetition
  - Prepare them in advance when they need to learn an important new activity. Practice activities that you want eg getting into the car properly. Teach them the skill before you want them to use it.
  - Practice will help store it in 'automatic pilot' eg -174 Nick
- Minimise background noise
  - Most children with backgrounds of neglect, traumatic stress and FASD will become easily overstimulated, flooding with too much input.

- When children are getting loud and out-of-control they are often acting out the sensory modality that is overstimulating them.
  - Reducing background noise will have a calming effect. Put all the televisions in a room with a door and keep the door closed. Turn off the TV unless someone is specifically watching a program. Family member must find each other and talk to each other in the same room rather than yelling. Yelling raises the tension level.
  - Children will often do horribly on the school bus especially at the end of the day. Most children do better if they can avoid riding in the bus. 'I'd rather pick him up after school every day than have him scream at us after school,' a parent said.
- Be nurturing and friendly in speech and body language
    - Children do best when they feel safe and cherished.
    - Don't use a dog obedience-type tone.
    - A harsh approach may effectively convince children to behave and get back on track in the short term; every time they will become more defensive and disorganised. They will feel they are back in a hostile setting.
    - Parents do not need to conceal their irritation or frustration at all time, they should certainly reflect a positive and nurturing attitude overall.
    - Sarcasm should not be used – a veiled and hostile manner.
  - Reward and discipline in small increments
    - Behaviours should be back by reinforcements
    - Explain to children that you want their brain to learn that bad habits don't pay that is why there is a consequence.
    - Explain that consequences are to work towards his eventual well-being so his brain will learn a different way of operating.
    - Interventions work in two parts:
 

Change the thought process – discuss the thoughts and feelings that he has when he does these behaviours eg it's not fair, they're mean, poor me, I can't it's too hard, etc. Help him substitute:

I'll try  
 I don't like it, but I'll do it anyway  
 I'm not stupid  
 They aren't mean  
 They need my help  
 I'll feel better once I get started  
 I'd rather have friends than to fight over the rules.

Help them identify how they are feeling it in their body as well

I feel my face get hot  
My stomach gets tight  
My fists go up  
I feel my head pound and I get dizzy  
My chest gets tight  
My chin goes up and my mouth drops open to yell.

Parents say we have already taken away her TV her late bed time etc and it is only ( am. There is nothing left for the day

Don't take away rewards – just postpone them or give another consequence for the misbehaviour but they don't lose their reward because that is the positive reinforcement for the positive behaviour. And the children do not get disheartened.

- **Charting for success**

Use these for reinforcement at school Helps children apply lessons learned in therapy to all areas of their lives. Need to focus on small contained parts of life. Se page 182

- **Backtrack after failures, freeze-ups, or tantrums to practice coping with the triggering problem**

Children lack the abstract skills of adults and therefore benefit from having words and choices modelled that they can practice and memorize.

- **Emphasize functional learning**

Children have to work harder to accomplish daily activities because they have executive functioning difficulties eg washing

- **Rules are memorised and concrete**

Some children with prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol will not go on to develop higher thinking skills, including sound judgement. Some parents describe this problem by saying things like, 'But I told her over and over again why it is necessary that she build trust by not keeping secrets,' or 'be a friend to have friends' or 'be a person of his word'. These types of comments are abstract. The messages need to be broken down into concrete directions placed in the context of specific situations.

Children must be taught to live their lives like a script eg cannot ever keep a secret from your parents unless it is about a present for their birthday or a holiday. Our family rule is No Secrets at camp, at school, at home, or at someone else's home.

- **Be aware of children's processing loads and daily variability**

Some days these children will not do well but this does not mean that parents need be more persistent.

Start deleting activities and expectations on hard days.

- **Parents must anticipate and help children with any changes in routine**

Include predictability and ample preparation time for outings. Continually break things down.

- **Use social cues and role-play social situations**

Role play greeting people etc

- **Teach response flexibility**

Ability to compromise and to learn how to accept disappointment are challenged.

Practiced this 'I like your ideas. We'll do it your way first, then mine second'. To stop acting like he was being abused when parents said 'No'.

- **Limit controlling body language and comments**

Explain to them why they feel the need to control but do not allow this pattern to flourish.