Breaks in the Flow: 
The Role of Repair in the Attachment Relationship  
David Belford, LISW, IMH-E 
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NMAIMH competencies addressed

  Theoretical Foundations
  • attachment, separation & loss
  • infant & young child development and behavior

  Direct Service Skills
  • observation & listening

  Thinking
  • analyzing information

  Reflection
  • curiosity
  • professional/personal development

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. "Pooh!" he whispered. 
"Yes, Piglet?"

"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you."

(A. A. Milne)

All relationships involve back and forth exchanges. Stanley Greenspan refers to these exchanges as circles of communication. For each circle of communication there is an opening of the circle and a closing, and the exchange may be verbal, nonverbal, or a combination of both. When circles of communication are empathic and flow easily (each person reads, understands the intent of, and empathically responds to the other’s cues), we call this being in sync or attuned.

Lewis (2000) points out that historically, much of the attention around the concept of attachment has emphasized the importance of parents being attuned with their child, and we often talk about mutually pleasurable exchanges or the dance between parent and child. We also know from the work of Tronick and others that typically, parents are attuned or in sync with their child only about 30 percent of the time. What happens when they get out of sync?

When a parent and infant’s exchanges move from being in sync to out of sync, it is the result of a rupture, disruption or mismatch between agendas or intentions. There are many reasons for these disruptions: the parent might become distracted, she might
misinterpret her infant’s cues, or perhaps she gets triggered by something her infant does. These disruptions are normal and occur in all relationships. Instead of being something to avoid, the important part of such disruptions is the process of repair.

Looking at the repair process in more detail, we can see that when a disruption occurs, the infant becomes stressed and we can observe a change in their affect from positive to negative. Initially, the infant will attempt to get his parent’s attention, often signaling her with eye contact, by vocalizing or other similar behaviors. Assuming the parent picks up on the infant’s cues, she will repair the situation by gently matching the infant’s affect and re-engaging. If the infant’s bids for their parent’s attention fail, the infant will attempt to self-regulate by looking away, sucking their thumb and even losing postural control. If the infant experiences repeated failures over the attempts to re-engage his parent, this can lead to an insecure attachment.

We understand from attachment theory that when parents respond to their infants cries in a more or less consistent, predictable and nurturing way, the infant will begin to build a sense a trust and safety in their world (“I know I will be taken care of”). The repetition of these types of experiences of being responded to builds and reinforces “healthy” neural pathways in the infant’s brain. In much the same way, through the repeated process of disruption and repair, the infant adds to his knowledge or blueprint of the nature of relationships, increases his tolerance for stress, and begins to realize a sense of agency in the world.

The disorganization or dysregulation that follows a disruption and the subsequent repair of that disruption is part of the infant’s development and crucial to building secure attachments. It is the chief mechanism by which the infant begins to make meaning of relationships.

Talking points for supervisors

- Take time to reflect on your relationship with those you supervise. Can you identify disruptions in your relationships? Can you identify times when you’ve made an effort to repair those disruptions?
- Keeping in mind the parallel process, it may be helpful to explore disruptions that occur between the home visitor and the parent, whether those disruptions were repaired and the importance of this process to building relationships.
- As home visitors relate their observations of the parent-child relationship (verbal videos), explore with the home visitor what the cycle (attunement → disruption → repair → attunement) looks like for this parent and child. Are their opportunities to notice repairs and point them out to the parent? What does the home visitor notice about the child’s behaviors when there is a disruption? What might make it hard for a parent to notice her child’s attempts at repairs?
References/Additional Resources

