

# **Strengthening the Adoptive Family: An Attachment-Based Family Therapy Approach**

---

Reena Bernards, LCMFT

January 31, 2014

Jonah Green and Associates, LLC



# Initial Thoughts about Adoption

---

- Adoption has both losses and gains for all members of the adoption triangle (birthparents, adoptive parents, and adopted child). Losses need to be grieved.
- Gratifying, close bonds and attachments between adoptive parents and child can be achieved
- Adoption is a lifelong journey into self, affecting all members of the adoptive triangle
- Adopted children are over-represented in mental health clinical settings, given therapists an opportunity to assist families in the journey.



# Agenda

---

- Attachment-Based Family Therapy: Attachment Theory
- Awareness about adoption at each stage of life
- Adoption Timeline -- a hands-on tool for telling the story
- Children with complex attachment trauma
- Healing from trauma: Discussing emotions within the family (video clip)
- How to address “horizontal parenting” – dealing with issues of difference in culture, race, abilities or temperament.
- Reunion with birth parents – when and how to make the connection

# Attachment Theory

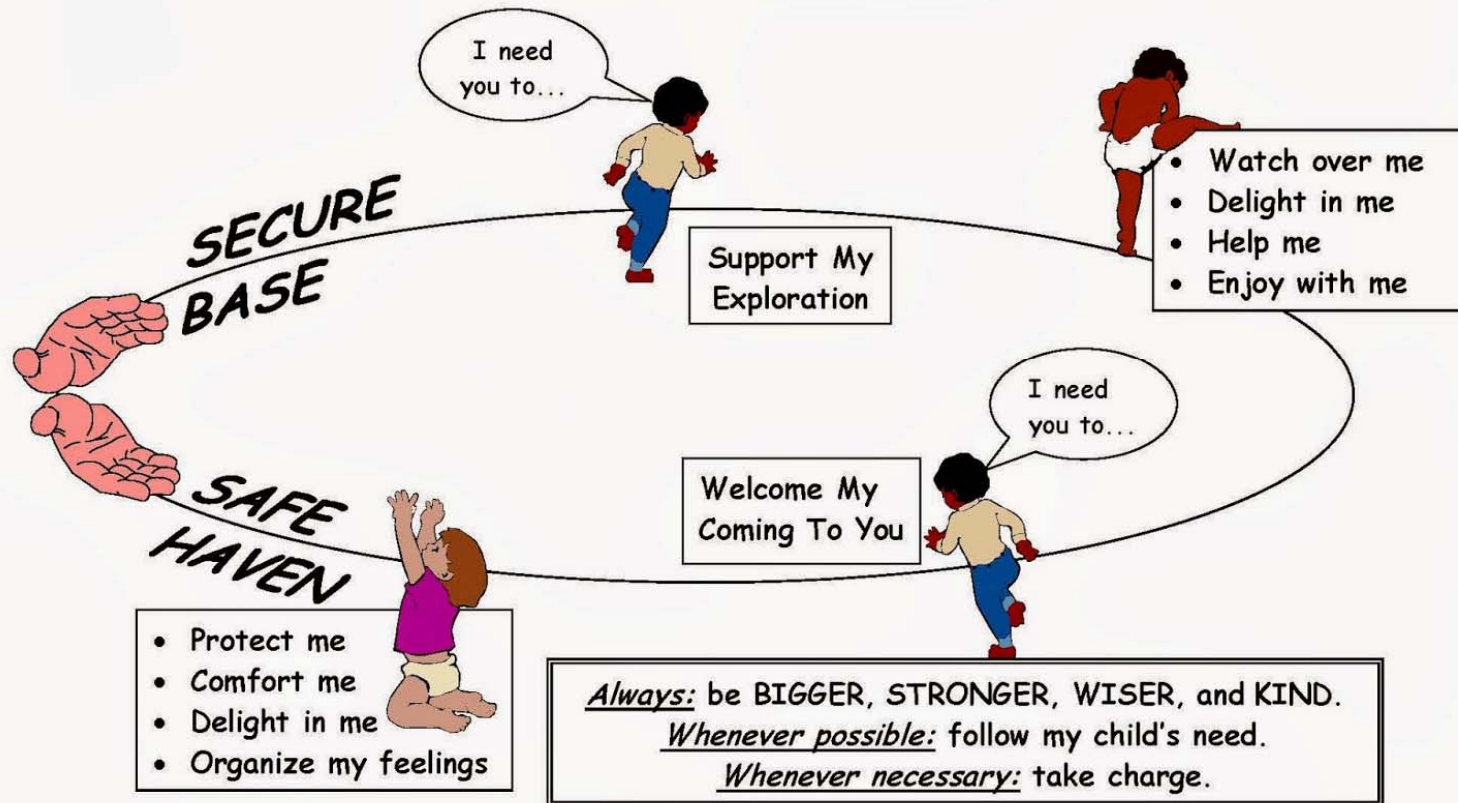


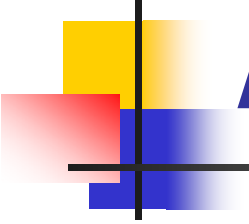
---

- Early Developers: Dr. John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth
- Application to Adoptive and Foster Families: Dr. Daniel Hughes, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (aka Attachment-Focused Family Therapy)
- Application to Families: Dr. Sue Johnson, Gail Palmer, George Faller, Emotionally Focused Family Therapy (EFFT)

# CIRCLE OF SECURITY

PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS





# Four Types of Attachment Styles

---

1. Secure – comfortable with comings and goings, able to rely on self and others
2. Anxious – trouble relying on self
3. Avoidant – trouble relying on others
4. Disorganized (complex attachment trauma) – anxious and avoidant



# Goals of Attachment Based-Family Therapy with Adoptive Families

---

- Help parents access caretaking response appropriate to their child
- Help child create successful bonds with adoptive parents and siblings
- Experience the emotions of adoption story and past trauma and create new meanings
- Integrate adoption story and past trauma into life story, and create new story of safety and success
- Change child's attachment style towards security



# Hurdles Faced by Adopted Children\*

---

- Reason for relinquishment
- Missing or difficult information
- Permanence
- Difference
- Identity
- Loyalty

\*Debbie Riley, The Center for Adoption Support and Education  
(Case)





# Awareness about Adoption Stages and Developmental Tasks

---

- Infancy to Two Years
  - Erik Erikson's Identity Stage: Trust vs. Mistrust
  - Child recovers from separation trauma
  - Bonding and attachment to adoptive parents
  - Parents resolve grief over infertility
  - Extended family adjusts to new baby



# Developmental Stages Continued

---

- Ages 3-5
  - Erikson's Identity Stage: Initiative vs. Guilt
  - Child learns their adoption story from parents
  - Adoption is seen by child as normal and positive
  - Child notices differences in the family (skin tones, hair color, etc.)
  - Family deals with attitudes about adoption in community



# Developmental Stages Continued

---

- Ages 6-12
  - Erikson's Identity Stage: Industry vs. Inferiority
  - Child grieves the losses of adoption (loss of connection to birth family, birth culture, differences with adoptive family)
  - Child understands that they were "given away"
  - If traumatic past – issues of abandonment and difficulties with attachment become salient
  - Family finds ways to connect child with birth culture



# Developmental Stages Continued

---

- 12-18 years
  - Erikson's Identity Stage: Identity Formation vs. Identity Confusion
  - Separation from parents brings up adoption issues (i.e. rejection of adoptive parents, fear of another abandonment)
  - Chooses piece of identity from adoptive family and birth family
  - Search for identity includes ethnic and racial components
  - Reunion with birth family becomes a possibility



# Telling the Adoption Story

---

- Creating a timeline with child and parents (demonstrate tool)
- Using child's imagination about things that are unknown
- Not avoiding painful realities (but being age appropriate)
- Asking about feelings throughout



# Healing Attitude for Therapist and Parents

---

- PACE – The “Attitude” necessary for Healing
  - Playfulness: humor, gently move to positive emotions
  - Acceptance:
    - No Evaluation: criticism or praise
    - Accept all feelings (not the behaviors)
  - Curiosity: “What’s it like to feel that way? When did it start?” “Was this because your first mother hurt you?”
  - Empathy: Empathize with the child’s inner life, Help regulate emotion by feeling it, Help facilitate dialogue



# Children with Complex Attachment Trauma

---

- Repeated abuse and/or neglect
- Traumatic loss of attachment figures
- Disorganized relationship with others
- Can “attach” too easily to strangers, not distinguish who is close and who is not
- Feels scared of losing relationships, and so likes to be in control
- At risk for externalizing behaviors as adult
- 70% of children in foster care system at risk



# Relevant DSM V Diagnoses

---

- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder – 309.81
  - Includes PTSD for Children 6 years and Younger
  - Features: Includes learning that a traumatic event occurred
  - Symptoms: re-enactment in play, dreams, internalizing or externalizing behaviors
  - Could include delayed onset





# Relevant DSM V Diagnoses Continued

---

- Reactive Attachment Disorder – 313.89
  - Pattern of inhibited, emotionally withdrawn behavior toward adult caregivers
  - Experienced insufficient care due to neglect, repeated changes in primary caregivers, or reared in institutional setting
  - Note: Majority of severely neglected children do not develop RAD.



# Working through Trauma

---

- Dialogue between parents and child
- Connect current problems to past trauma
- Allow for emotional expression
- Create new meaning about child's relationship with adoptive parents
- Video Clip of Dr. Dan Hughes  
(17:52-25:21)



# Horizontal Parenting

---

- “Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity” by Andrew Solomon
  - Parenting children who are different than the parents due to differences in appearance, abilities, sexual orientation, temperament, race or culture
  - Parents are profoundly changed by horizontal parenting
- “The Good Enough Child: How to Have a Imperfect Family and be Perfectly Satisfied” by Brad Sachs
  - Grieving the child you imagined, loving the child you have.



# Reunion with Birthparents

---

- Positive value to open adoption (from birth when possible)
- Ability to reunite with birthparents, even when adopted internationally
- Role of the internet – need for adoptive parents to be involved
- What to consider:
  - Secure bond with adoptive parents
  - How well child has integrated their story



# Resources: Websites

---

- The Center for Adoption Support and Education(CASE)  
[www.adoptionsupport.com](http://www.adoptionsupport.com)
- PACT: An Adoption Alliance  
Supporting transracially adoptive families  
[www.pactadopt.org](http://www.pactadopt.org)
- Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy  
Attachment focused treatment for childhood trauma  
[www.danielhuges.org](http://www.danielhuges.org)
- International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)  
[www.iceeft.com](http://www.iceeft.com)



# Bibliography

---

- Daniel Hughes, Attachment-Focused Family Therapy Workbook
- Kim Golding and Daniel Hughes, Creating Loving Attachments: Parenting with PACE to Nurture Confidence and Security in the Troubled Child
- Deborah Gray, Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents
- Joyce Maguire Pavao, The Family of Adoption



# Reena Bernards

---

Jonah Green and Associates, LLC

3940 Knowles Avenue

Suite 200

Kensington MD 20895

301 367-6480

[rbernards2@gmail.com](mailto:rbernards2@gmail.com)