

# Child Parent Psychotherapy in the Context of Kinship Care

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# *The role of caregivers*

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- Caregivers are most powerful sources of stress in early childhood
- Caregivers are the most potent defense against harmful stress in early childhood

# *Why stress and trauma are so important in early childhood*

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- Interfere with security of children's attachments
  - Children's developmentally appropriate expectation of parental protection is violated
  - Parents can become sources of fear as well as love
  - Parents can become reminders of trauma for children

# *Why stress and trauma are so important in early childhood*

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- Chronic stress in childhood can
  - Inhibit neurogenesis
  - Disrupt neuronal plasticity
  - Result in neuronal death
  - Disrupt the stress-response system

Gunnar & Guevedo, 2007

# *Child-Parent Psychotherapy: Conceptual Premises*

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- The attachment system is the main organizer of children's responses to danger and safety in the first five years of life
- Emotional and behavioral problems in infancy and early childhood need to be addressed in the context of primary attachment relationships

# *Child-Parent Psychotherapy: Conceptual premises*

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- Promoting growth in the caregiver-child relationship supports healthy development of the child long after the intervention ends

# *Overarching Goal: Putting the Trauma in Perspective*

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- Acknowledge the experience of trauma
- Verbalize feelings and behaviors related to the trauma
- Help child understand s/he is not to blame for trauma
- Create a joint narrative

# *Therapeutic Objectives*

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- Affect Regulation
- Understanding the meaning of behavior
- Normalization of traumatic response
- Reciprocity in relationships
- Continuity of daily living
- Trust in bodily sensations
- Differentiation between remembering and reliving

# *Ports of Entry*

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- Parent's or child's individual behavior
- Interactive exchanges between parent and child
- Attributions: Mental representations of self or other
- Representations of absent parent
- Child's play
- Child's or parent's perceptions of the therapeutic relationship

# *Why kinship care is a policy choice*

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- It helps children maintain some contact with their parents and other relatives
- Children likely know the kin care providers and can avoid the frightening experience of moving into the home of strangers
- Kinship care often allows children to stay in their communities and in cultural traditions that are familiar to them

# *Why kinship care is a policy choice*

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- Kinship care is more stable. Children in kinship care are less likely to move to multiple placements
- Children are better cared for by kin
  - Children report feeling more loved and accepted
  - Children are abused less often than in traditional foster care

# *Potential problems with kinship care*

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- Conflicts between caregivers may run deeper if there are old family dynamics involved as well as current caregiving issues
- Attachment conflicts: Who does the kinship provider protect?
  - Her own child
  - Her child's child

# *Potential problems with kinship care*

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- There may be intergenerational patterns of abuse in the family
- Kinship providers may be older and have health challenges
- The kinship provider may not be psychologically prepared to set the kinds of limits that the child needs to feel safe

# *Kinship care in the current context of child welfare*

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- Kinship care still involves loss of family autonomy
- Even if the child is placed with kin, the child welfare agency maintains legal responsibility and control
- As long as children of color are disproportionately placed in care, kinship care may be the best way to preserve families of color
- Financial supports offered to kin caregivers can give the family the resources it needs to care for the child

# *Child-Parent Psychotherapy in the kinship context*

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- Relationship-focused treatment rather than exclusively focusing on the child
  - There is room for the caregiver, and his or her problems and concerns
  - But caregivers are often reluctant to take part, especially if they have no expectation of being a permanent caregiver
  - This is a larger problem with non-kin foster parents

# *Child-Parent Psychotherapy in the kinship context*

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- The trauma narrative takes on additional complexity
  - There may be specific acts of violence or maltreatment to process
  - The child's narrative may include multiple placement changes in addition to violence and/or maltreatment

# *Child-Parent Psychotherapy in the kinship context*

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- Complexities with multiple meanings
  - The ambiguity about placement is an ongoing stressor that may mean different things to the child and the care provider
  - The kinship care provider may have her own “narrative” about the child’s parent that is different from the child’s and difficult for the child to hear

# *Child-Parent Psychotherapy in the kinship context*

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- Who is the parent?
  - Child and caregiver have different feelings about the child's parent
  - Caregivers' feelings may be so strong that they have difficulty understanding the child's perspective – this may be a subject of ongoing work in the therapy
  - Does the kinship provider still feel driven to protect the child's parent?
  - Can the kinship provider set appropriate boundaries around the parent?

# *Challenges for the therapist*

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- Holding the point of view of multiple caregivers as well as the child
- Tolerating high levels of ambiguity and strong and conflicting affects
- Supporting complex family systems rather than simply a dyad