

## THE THERAPEUTIC IMPORTANCE OF HOLDING CHILDREN

Children who have experienced early deprivation in life often develop what is referred to as Attachment Disorders – where the ability to form healthy attachments to others is greatly impaired. A child whose basic needs were not met at a time when they would be unable to meet those needs themselves would learn that the world is a very dangerous place filled with people who cannot be trusted. This lack of trust could also be a prime factor in their extreme need to control others in a possible effort to get their needs met by using others. Other effects of this early deprivation could include a pervasive sense of worthlessness, shame and rage. Their need to control often manifests itself in oppositional behaviors which also have the additional “benefit” of pushing caregivers away, as they associate closeness with pain and abandonment, and therefore must be avoided at all costs.

These children most often operate from the primitive part of the brain (the Amygdala) the part of the brain used for survival, which is associated with “fight, flight, or freeze”. They often develop learning problems, as when children operate out of the Amygdala, the part of the brain used for learning (the Frontal Cortex) is inhibited. This is why these children often have problems with “cause and effect” thinking. These children are extremely stressed, as without this early nurturance, that part of the brain associated with self-calming (the Hippocampus) is often underdeveloped, leaving them in a constant state of hyperarousal. This is also the reason that lecturing, showing anger, or punishing these children is ineffective. Lecturing usually increases the anxiety of the already stressed child, putting that child in “survivor mode”, which then quickly cuts off his/her capacities to think or learn from the lecture. Punishment is also ineffective, as after a child has survived extreme abuse and/or neglect, punishment most often means very little. In addition, punishment and/or caretaker anger increases the self-loathing, shame, and rage, thus creating further behavior problems.

Increasingly, research has shown the importance of holding children in the development of the brain. The act of holding a child can involve multiple stimulations of the sensory pathways – touch, smell, sight, taste – as when feeding the child when holding, and hearing -- as when singing or speaking to the child when holding. In studies of children with Attachment Disorders, it has been found that these children can benefit greatly from this sensory stimulation -- that much of the actual brain damage caused by early deprivation can be improved by holding the child, even an older child. In addition, the psychological effects of holding are extremely beneficial in the development of trust (which allows them to give up much of the extreme control), in reducing rage and shame, and, most of all, in helping the child to feel “cared for” and “loveable”. This does much towards increasing cooperative behaviors that makes living with these children much more enjoyable.

For some of us, holding our children comes as naturally as breathing. For others, especially those of us who have been neglected or abused as children, holding our children is not such an effortless endeavor and might even feel extremely uncomfortable, but from all indications, the act of holding is well worth the effort, and may have beneficial effects for the caregiver as well as the child.

*Shirley Crenshaw (7/14/03)*