



The Impact of Child Abuse Trauma on Emotional Dysregulation and Academic Performance



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Question and Hypothesis

Question

- Does a perceived absence of relationship conditions (i.e., unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence) and exposure to child maltreatment in early childhood contribute to a disorganized attachment style?
- Does a disorganized attachment style predispose a child to emotional dysregulation and poor academic performance?
- How can schools address child abuse trauma to reduce the risks it has on their students?

Hypothesis

Children who experience limited relationship conditions in early childhood and are identified as suffering from a disorganized attachment style, as a result of child abuse trauma, present with emotional dysregulation and poor academic performance.

Abstract

- Identifies the risk factors for students who have been exposed to child abuse trauma, specifically emotional dysregulation and poor academic performance in school.
- Explores how schools can foster a positive school environment for students who are suffering from child abuse trauma.
- Applies an integrative theoretical model of Carl Rogers' (1951) person-centered theory and Mary Main's (1986) attachment theory.
- Best practices, utilizing a Response to Intervention (RtI) service delivery model, offer recommendations for the school psychology profession regarding assessments, interventions, and consultation services.

Literature Review

Background Information

The effects of child abuse trauma on school performance are twofold. First, exposure to child abuse trauma can impair a child's capacity to emotionally regulate (Lowenthal, 1998). Second, a student's inability to appropriately express or control his or her emotions can seriously complicate the student's academic functioning (Schelble, Frank, & Miller, 2010).

Definition of Terms

Child Abuse Trauma – multiple and/or prolonged exposure to child maltreatment.

Emotional dysregulation – an inability to control one's emotions, displays unsuitable emotional reactions, and/or cannot adequately express emotions (Cole et al., 2004).

Academic Resilience – students achieving success in school despite adversity (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994).

Theoretical Foundations

Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Theory (Rogers, 1951; 1965)

For a child to acquire a healthy development of self, the primary caregiver must provide effective relationship conditions for the child. These relationship conditions also foster a positive parent-child relationship.

The relationship conditions are as follows:

- *Unconditional positive regard* - "basic attitude of liking, respecting, or prizing" directed at the child (Bohart & Watson, 2013, p. 243).
- *Empathic understanding or empathy* - is "based on the ability to intuit oneself inside [the child's] personal reality (Bohart & Watson, 2013, p. 243).
- *Congruence* - the degree to which the parent is in touch with a child's inner experience (Bohart & Watson, 2013).

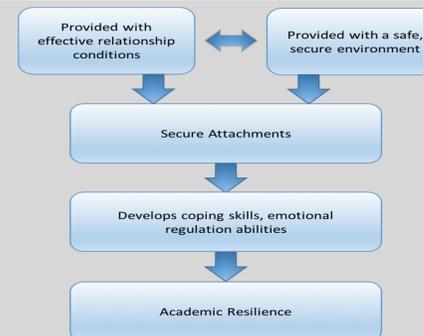
Attachment Theory: Ainsworth (1965; 1970); Main (1986)

Ainsworth (1965) identified *attachment styles* to describe the different attachment behaviors typically displayed in infants: secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant. Further research by Main and Solomon (1986) identified a fourth attachment behavior pattern, disorganized/disoriented attachment.

- A *disorganized attachment style* is established when a child develops an unorganized attachment with his or her primary caregiver.
- Certain behavioral patterns displayed by the parent (i.e., anger and unsympathetic responses to a child's distress) increase the likelihood of a child developing a disorganized attachment.
- This style of attachment often occurs in cases of *child maltreatment*.
- One risk factor associated with a disorganized attachment style is poor emotional regulation (Green & Goldwyn, 2002).

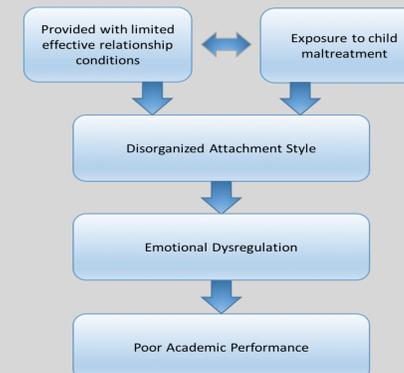
Proposed Integrative Model

The integrative model proposes that school staff should foster relationships of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence with traumatized youths. Further, these relationship conditions nurture secure attachments and ultimately, mitigate the risks associated with child abuse trauma, disorganized attachment styles and the resulting emotional dysregulation and poor academic performance.



Application of Integrative Model

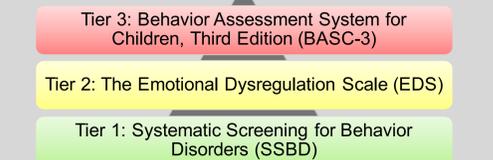
- The integrative model asserts that a disorganized attachment style is a result of exposure to child maltreatment and a perceived lack of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence by a primary caregiver.
- A child who has been traumatized by a disorganized attachment style will present in school with emotional dysregulation.
- A student who is unable to regulate his or her emotions will exhibit externalizing (e.g., anger outbursts, defiance, hyperactivity) and/or internalizing behaviors (e.g., social withdrawal, irritability, difficulty concentrating), which adversely affect his or her academic performance.



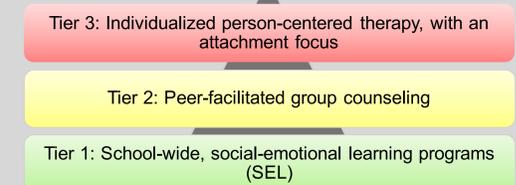
Best Practices

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Assessment



Interventions



Consultation



Conclusion

The model integrating Rogers' person-centered theory (1951) and Main's attachment theory (1986) suggests that child abuse trauma and limited effective relationship conditions in early childhood contribute to the development of a disorganized attachment style and, ultimately, emotional dysregulation. School psychologists can support these traumatized youths by creating a positive, safe, and supportive school environment, one that fosters secure attachments and personal growth. As a result, these students will become more behaviorally and academically successful in school and in life.

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