

Domestic Abuse, Attachment and Cedar

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Attachment

- What is attachment?
- How can domestic abuse impact upon mothering?
- How can domestic abuse impact upon attachment?
- How can Cedar repair the damage to attachment caused by domestic abuse?

What is attachment?

Attachment is an evolutionary adaptation with an inherent motivation: children develop attachment to their caregivers to stay safe and protected by them. Attachment behaviours vary however they have a functional equivalence in that they are all intended to secure proximity to the primary caregiver¹. Most infants form more than one attachment however they have a strong tendency to prefer a principle attachment figure for comfort and security; this is usually the mother due to the gendered nature of parenting². Repeated attachment-related experiences form the foundation for the child's internal working model which determines how the child perceives and relates to the world around them. If their caregiver has consistently responded to their attachment behaviours – by attending to them when they cry, for example – the child is more likely to see the world as good and responsive, and the self as worthy of this consideration³.

Secure attachment relationships allow children to explore their world with an inner certainty, knowing they have a secure base and safe haven to return to in the form of their caregiver. They are also likely to recover from trauma more quickly and completely as they have greater resilience.⁴

How can domestic abuse impact upon mothering?

Perpetrators of coercive control have been shown to deliberately target a woman's mothering role as part of their abusive strategy. The mother-child relationship has been known to be attacked in a variety of ways: children can be incited against their mother to participate in the abuse, and her mothering skills may be undermined or limited by the imposition of regulations and prohibitions which make maternal functioning fraught with difficulty.⁵ Domestic abuse is linked to depression and anxiety, which can impact upon a woman's ability to engage with and be emotionally available to

¹ Cassidy, Jude, 'The Nature of the Child's Ties' (2008) *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Critical Applications*, Cassidy, Jude & Shaver, Phillip R. (eds), Guildford Press, New York p. 4-5.

² Cassidy, Jude, (2008) p. 14.

³ Weinfeld, Nancy S. et al (2008) 'Individual Differences in Infant-Caregiver Attachment' *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Critical Applications*, Cassidy, Jude & Shaver, Phillip R. (eds), Guildford Press, New York p. 85.

⁴ Weinfeld, Nancy S. et al, (2008) p.90

⁵ Stark, Evan (2007) *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* Oxford University Press p.21

her child.⁶ Protection may be the primary basis of relationships between women and their children in the context of domestic abuse.

However, it should be noted that - despite the adverse circumstances that women experiencing domestic abuse face - many are extremely resourceful when it comes to caring for their child. The experience of mothering in the context of domestic abuse is not universal or unitary, and in fact studies have also shown that women living with domestic abuse often work to compensate for this by providing especially attentive and consistent parenting.⁷

How can domestic abuse impact upon attachment?

Key to developing secure attachment is whether a mother has permitted her child's attachment behaviours⁸, however in the context of coercive control this may be determined by the strategies of the perpetrator. Frightened mothers are experienced as frightening by their children, which can lead to disorganised attachment as the infant struggles to reconcile the fact that his or her intended source of comfort is simultaneously the source of his or her fear⁹. A recent study found that only 37.5% of babies affected by domestic abuse have secure attachment compared to an average of 65% in the wider population¹⁰.

Van Ijzendoorn stated that "among biologically intact mother and infant dyads, the strongest predictor of secure or insecure infant attachment found thus far is the caregiver's state of mind."¹¹ From this, when a caregiver is being subjected to domestic abuse it is likely to have an impact upon their attachment relationship with their child.

How can Cedar repair the damage to attachment caused by domestic abuse?

Cedar specifically addresses children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse, looking at the issue "through the eyes of a bairn."¹² However, Cedar also recognises that the recovery of the child is strongly linked to the recovery of their mother. As a result, Cedar works with both mother and child, aiming to address the impact of abuse on the attachment relationship between them. It does this through building upon pre-existing strengths; increasing confidence by highlighting parenting strategies already in place. This empowering approach mirrors that of a previous World Health Organisation intervention which had a shared objective of improving mother-child interaction:

"By reinforcing the positive skills of caregivers, a double benefit is achieved. First the caregiver starts to feel more confident about her own capacity to care. Secondly she becomes more aware of her own

⁶ Buchanan, Fiona (2011) *The Effects of Domestic Violence on the Relationship Between Women and their Babies: Beyond Attachment Theory*, Flinders University, Adelaide p.28

⁷ Buchanan, Fiona (2011) p.31

⁸ Cassidy, Jude (2008) p. 7

⁹ Furnivall, Judy et al (2012) *Attachment Matters For All – An Attachment Mapping Exercise for Children's Services in Scotland*, Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland, p10

¹⁰ Buchanan, Fiona (2011) p.40

¹¹ Van Ijzendoorn (1995) 'Adult attachment representation, parental responsiveness and infant attachment: a meta-analysis on the predictive validity of the AAI', *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 117, pp. 387-403, p.390

¹² Sharp, Cathy and Jones, Jocelyn (2010) *Through the Eyes of a Bairn: Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery in Scotland Interim Evaluation Report*, Scottish Women's Aid p. iii

skills and this in itself will improve the capacity of her care-giving. This is not instruction from without, but rather guidance or facilitation of her existing competence...”¹³

In the context of domestic abuse, this approach has particular merit as the women who access Cedar are liable to have had their parental abilities undermined by perpetrators. In contrast to these messages, Cedar promotes positive representations of self: the project’s ‘I like me’ message of confidence encourages both mothers and children to reflect on their personal qualities and affirm their worthiness of love and respect. Cedar facilitates the recognition of, and validates, the ways that women have acted resourcefully and in the best interests of their child. This approach can be seen in other interventions such as Connect, an evidence based attachment program for parents of at-risk teens:

“The leaders do not tell parents the ‘right’ versus ‘wrong’ way of parenting, instead they strive to stimulate curiosity, reflection and sensitive choices in the use of parenting strategies. Parents and their children are not blamed for problems; rather this is a strengths based approach that focuses on enhancing security...”¹⁴

Cedar can be seen to promote curiosity, reflection and sensitivity through its curriculum, which encourages women to ‘think through the eyes of their children’ and consider how they can support their child through the recovery process.¹⁵ It also includes aspects of ‘mentalisation’, defined by attachment specialists Daniel Hughes and Jonathan Baylin as “a more intentional, cerebral process [than empathy] that involves the ability to understand a child’s verbal and non-verbal communication. Both empathy and mentalisation abilities are important to parenting.”¹⁶ Cedar approaches this through activities with an emotional literacy emphasis: mothers reflect upon their child’s cues from new perspectives so as to better ‘read’ their behaviours. Women who have been through the Cedar curriculum have reported that the group helped them understand the experience of domestic abuse from their children’s perspective, and to understand that children are not always able to put this experience into words.¹⁷

This maternal insightfulness is the mental capacity that underlies maternal sensitivity, and this sensitivity is in turn the prerequisite for secure attachment.¹⁸ When an intervention is successful in enhancing maternal sensitivity, a parallel positive change in attachment security occurs¹⁹.

¹³ World Health Organisation (1997) *Improving Mother/Child Interaction to Promote Better Psychosocial Development in Children*, Program on Mental Health, Geneva p.6

¹⁴ Larstone, R and Moretti, Marlene M. *Connect: An Evidence-Based Attachment Program for Parents of At-Risk Teens* “http://blogs.sfu.ca/research/adolescenthealth/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Connect_Attachment_Based_Parenting_Program_Moretti_2012_Dec_24_FINAL_SUBMITTED1.pdf” [Accessed 28th October 2013] Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University

¹⁵ Morrison, Fiona (2011) *Cedar Toolkit Part One: Cedar Framework*, Cedar Project p. 7

¹⁶ Hughes, Daniel A and Baylin, Jonathan (2012) *Brain Based Parenting: The Neuroscience of Care-giving for Healthy Attachment*, W.W Norton and Company, New York, p. 37

¹⁷ Nolas, Sevasti-Melissa, Neville, Lucy and Sanders-McDonagh, Erin (2012) *Evaluation of the community group programme for children & young people: final report*. Project Report, University of Sussex, p.76

¹⁸ Quitmann, Julia H (2012) ‘The Capacity to See Things from the Child’s Point of View – Assessing Insightfulness in Mothers With and Without a Diagnosis of Depression’, *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy* 19 508-517, p.515

“Caregivers need to be able to reflect on and attempt to understand the child’s emerging internal world. If overwhelming practical demands or emotional distress interfere with this reflective capacity, then providing support to the caregiver that develops or restores this function is an important component in improving the emotional wellbeing of the child.”²⁰

Providing this support is a key objective for the Cedar women’s group, whose curriculum mirrors the children’s group so that mothers are better equipped to be there for their children emotionally throughout the process and sustain any positive changes made.

Mothers who have participated in Cedar confirm that it helped them to understand more about domestic abuse and its effects on their children.²¹ Cedar is an educational programme which offers new experiences aimed at stimulating fuller understanding for participants of their lived experiences. In this way it embodies principles of mindfulness: “a process of turning our attention to the present moment more fully than we ordinarily do.”²² In *Brain-Based Parenting: The Neuroscience of Care-giving for Healthy Attachment*, Hughes and Baylin advocate a “PACE”²³ approach to therapeutic interventions to develop mindful parenting. PACE stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy - and in many ways the attitude and atmosphere of the Cedar approach can be seen to exemplify this model. Both groups participate in art and play alongside group exercises and discussion: playful activities take place in an accepting group atmosphere to stimulate curiosity and empathy. There is a strong connection between a parent’s mindfulness and the quality of the parent-child interactions²⁴, therefore the development of mindfulness through Cedar is likely to improve or reinforce the attachment relationship.

Often mothers and children in recovery live in a ‘culture of silence’ regarding their experience of abuse, where both parties try to protect the other from knowing the true extent of its impact. Mothers have been known to minimise - in their own mind and to others – what the child has experienced out of guilt and a fear of being blamed.²⁵ Cedar helps mothers to accept the impact of abuse on their child while reinforcing that the abuse was not their fault; it provides the opportunity and ‘permission’ to express their feelings and coping strategies in a safe, accepting and non-judgemental environment. The development of emotional literacy will be promoted throughout the programme: mothers and children will ‘check in’ each week with feelings cards, and there will be opportunities to express and explore emotions through play and art. Anger management strategies will also be discussed, using age and stage appropriate memorable metaphors. Previous evaluations of the model have reported that, for some families, participation in group has “enabled them to address the hurt and anger that was previously being played out through everyday interactions.”²⁶ A

¹⁹ Bakermans-Kranenberg et al (2003) Less is More: Meta-Analyses of Sensitivity and Attachment Interventions in Early Childhood *Psychological Bulletin* vol 19 195-29, p. 211

²⁰ Furnivall, Judy et al (2012) p. 33

²¹ Sharp, Cathy and Jones, Jocelyn (2011) We Thought They Didn’t See: Cedar in Scotland, *Children and Mothers Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery Evaluation Report*, p.166

²² Hughes, Daniel A and Baylin, Jonathan (2012) p.202

²³ Hughes, Daniel A and Baylin, Jonathan (2012) p.203

²⁴ Hughes, Daniel A and Baylin, Jonathan (2012) p.202

²⁵ Peled, E., & Gil, I. B. (2011) ‘The Mothering Perceptions of Women Abused by their Partner’ *Violence Against Women*, 17, 457-479. p466

²⁶ Nolas, Sevasti-Melissa, Neville, Lucy and Sanders-McDonagh, Erin (2012) p.82

key message is that everyone has the right to live safe from abuse and nobody is responsible for the abuse but the perpetrator. Mothers and children are able to bond over this shared learning experience.

As stated by Sroufe and Siegel, “early experience influences later development, but it isn’t fate: therapeutic experiences can profoundly alter an individual’s life course.”²⁷ Cedar aims to repair any damage to the bond between mother and child that has occurred as a result of abuse through a strengths-based, relationship-building approach, in accordance with the principle that “attachment stresses connection more than correction.”²⁸ It has been shown that parents can assist their child to revise unhealthy working models through emotionally open dialogue.²⁹ Attachment anxiety is exacerbated when lines of communication are disrupted, and so open lines of communication can increase a child’s confidence in their caregiver’s ability to support them through challenging situations.³⁰ Working with both mother and child, Cedar provides a language for families to discuss their experiences of abuse while supporting and encouraging them to do so. Through reducing self-blame and helping participants to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse, Cedar opens up new ways for mothers and children to talk to and relate to one another.

SUMMARY

- Cedar has a strengths-based approach which seeks to reinforce and validate participants’ pre-existing mothering strategies; increasing self-confidence in their ability to parent effectively and aiming to inspire and empower women in their mothering role.
- Through activities based on principles of mentalisation/maternal insightfulness, mothers are enabled to reflect on their child’s experience of domestic abuse and its emotional impact with a view to increasing empathy/maternal sensitivity.
- Cedar embodies a PACE approach, with a structured curriculum rooted in playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy. PACE interactions in group promote PACE-oriented parent-child interactions, underpinning secure attachment.
- The dynamics of domestic abuse are explored through Cedar and perpetrator responsibility made clear. Techniques for managing and expressing emotions are shared within group. This has been reported to cool family relationships and ease interactions.
- Cedar provides a shared language and specific tools to enable women and children to discuss their feelings and experiences with one another, reflecting the ways in which improved communication can improve attachment security.

²⁷ Sroufe, A and Siegel, D *The Verdict Is In – The Case for Attachment Theory*

“<http://drdansiegel.com/uploads/1271-the-verdict-is-in.pdf>” [Accessed 29/10/13] Mind Your Brain Inc

²⁸ Hughes, Daniel A (2011) *Attachment Focussed Family Therapy Workbook* W.W Norton & Co, New York

²⁹ Bretherton, Inge and Munholland, Kristine A. (2008) ‘Internal Working Models in Attachment Relationships: Elaborating a Central Construct in Attachment Theory’ *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Critical Applications* Cassidy, Jude & Shaver, Phillip R. (eds), Guildford Press, New York p.

³⁰ Kobak, Roger and Madsen, Stephanie (2008) ‘Disruptions in Attachment Bonds: Implications for Theory, Research and Clinical Intervention’ *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Critical Applications*, Cassidy, Jude & Shaver, Phillip R. (eds), Guildford Press, New York p. 34.