

Musings from ATTACH/2008 in Charlotte: A Clinician's Viewpoint

Just when I thought it was OK to go outside again, both my connecting flights from Colorado Springs to Charlotte were delayed. “Broken airplanes” I was told. Well, at least I only had to pay \$555.00 in American money for a Wednesday of delays. Anyway, I’m confident all of you feel my pain.

“Go Greyhound” becomes increasingly salient to me with each passing year of airline travel.

Anyway, upon dragging myself out of bed in Charlotte the first morning, I stumbled—jet lagged and mentally mangled—into Dr. Michele Borba’s keynote. If I’m honest, it took my muddled brain a good 60 minutes to wrap my arms around the speaker’s energy as she waxed eloquently on the importance of building moral intelligence among children with attachment challenges.

Once the dense fog within my even denser brain regained a hint of its pre-existing limited intellect (resulting from a glass of full-octane cola along with a tasty box lunch), I and some long-time colleagues opined around the table as to the content of Michele’s keynote. The consensus was that enhancing moral intelligence in all children is a worthwhile goal and too often overlooked by us as clinicians. On the other hand, would the mere “visual modeling” of healthy behavior on the part of healthy others, be effective in instilling moral intelligence into youth with attachment issues?

After all, compromised brains as a result of early trauma would, we surmised, likely road-block the effectiveness of mere visual modeling. At least, that’s what I think our small group concluded. (I could tell my own brain was still at least moderately compromised during this discussion, upon realizing that, minutes earlier, I’d addressed ATTACH Board member, Mary Jo Land—AKA *The Whip*—as “Lark”.)

Anyway, once Mary Jo slapped me back to reality (literally), as a result of the “Lark” addressment, I felt a lot better, proceeding on to a Thursday afternoon seminar. I chose Dr. Katherine Leslie’s *Interdependence Theory: A Vital Context for Attachment-Focused Disorders*.

Frankly, I was hoping for a little more energy...

Seriously, Katherine’s presentations are a hybrid—part Vegas stand-up act and part Energizer Bunny. Plus, she delivers excellent content. Having obviously skipped the chapter in grad school related to Interdependence Theory, I found the seminar extremely helpful. In essence, this approach offered a bit of mini-paradigm shift for me, beginning with the notion that each family member’s feelings and outcomes are affected by the actions of the other. Seems straightforward enough. One of the most helpful tidbits for me

was a better appreciation for the importance of attachment therapy paying attention to the needs of parents, not solely the needs of the child. Each family member has needs. There's an interdependence. So I as therapist "attend to and nurture what the child needs from the parent, as well as what the parent needs from the child". The mindset is to, in equal fashion, work toward kiddoes' "start" behaviors, as well as their "stop" behaviors.

What are "start behaviors"? Glad you asked. Such things from the child as hugs, verbal compliments, snuggle time, asking for help, etc. So, it's not only "What can I as a parent do to light up my child's life, but what behaviors can my child do to light up my life?" More of a win-win outcome. As Katherine astutely observes, "We as parents can deal much better with negatives from our child if there are some positives too..."

You know, I think all this Interdependence Theory was helping me shed the rest of my mental malaise from the previous day of "Planes, Trains, and Automobiles". Anyway, a valuable take-home from Katherine's seminar for me is better sensitivity as a clinician via homing in on what the parents' needs are, vis-à-vis their relationship with Johnny. It's not only about how we help the parents fix Johnny.

Katherine also does an excellent job of articulating how a therapist can coach a parent, in order to help the child learn and internalize new "start" behaviors. Here, I'm eager to learn more about how to coach parents coach their child.

Friday morning at ATTACH was all about getting the MIT-ilk complexities of my audio-visuals (a power-point projector) set up for the afternoon. (Actually, John Fisher—husband of Sebern Fisher, co-presenter with Vicky Kelly, on another outstanding ATTACH seminar: *The Fear-Driven Brain: An Evolving Model for Attachment Disorders*—helped me greatly. I was however able to supply outstanding moral support in John's direction, in the form of: "Way to go, John!", "That looks great, John!", etc. I'm sure he'd agree that my assistance to him that morning was invaluable.)

The yearly ATTACH Friday luncheon focused on the organization's 20 year anniversary. A great slide-show of pictures was included, along with well-deserved recognition of ATTACH's past founding *mothers* and *fathers*. The only disappointment for me during the luncheon was arriving slightly late, prohibiting me from the yearly ritual of loudly greeting Board member, Antoine Lassiter—upon his formal introduction to the gathering—with my customary "You da MAN!!!"

But I digress.

Anyway, as a result of having to supervise John in setting up for my Friday afternoon dog-and-pony show centered around attempting to instruct up-and-coming neurofeedback technicians on... well... how to become neurofeedback technicians, I missed the entirety of

Dr. Diana Fosha's keynote—*Wired for Healing: The Birth of Transformance*. Sorry, Diana. My bad.

On Saturday morning, there was the inimitable Robert Spottswood's *Can I Blow Up My Brother? The Therapeutic 'No' in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy*. Robert, for those of you unfamiliar with him, is a breath of fresh New England air. Sporting a marvelously dry wit, this able clinician hailing from beautiful Vermont (my wife's favorite state), does an exceptional job of laying down specificity in what he teaches. From helpful bits of parental verbiage, to his articulation of how to be playful with a child, Robert's presentation is the real deal. Nothing phony. No psychobabble. All of his suggestions for beleaguered parents are clearly spelled out in real English. Thank you, Robert.

And thank you, dear reader, for patiently listening to my ATTACH 2008 musings, from a clinician's perspective. With any luck at all, I'll be back home in time for Christmas... Wait. I think the pilot just came over the intercom with something about our cruising altitude as we circle Baltimore...