
PARENT COURSE HANDOUTS

Lecture 13-Insights into Children's Mental Health Disorders

Knowing how to respond to a child with sensory processing difficulties is challenging for all caregivers. This is especially true since children with specific individual differences can have related mental health problems. The best response is not always intuitive, but the right response is important. Clinical data identify experiences early in life that can lead to different mental health symptoms. The child's developmental stage (especially Stage 4, which involves pattern recognition), the child's particular individual differences (often over-reactivity), and the reaction of the caregiver (whether counter-regulating or not) all play a part.

Anxiety:

- Individual differences-This child is over-reactive to the environment. If coupled with motor planning problems, a child has trouble getting a sense of his body in space. If he has visual-spatial problems, he cannot see the big picture and size things up so well. With these reactions, a child can be easily frightened.
- Scenario A- Caregiver A becomes alarmed when the toddler gets scared, and the toddler then gets more panicky. For a child at the stage of pattern recognition, if this reaction is repeated many times, it could lead to a child becoming very anxious.
Scenario B: Caregiver B counter-regulates the child's reaction with assurances and a soothing tone. The child learns to use gestures to express feelings. 'B' shows child how to master and control the environment.

Depression:

- Individual differences: This child is over- reactive to various sensations and shows strong affect (either positive or negative).
- Scenario A- Caregiver A freezes in the face of the child's intensity— a momentary stone-face. The toddler, who is learning to recognize patterns, looks for a flow of interaction. Getting no reaction, the toddler feels empty. If this pattern persists, the child will return to the empty feeling when dealing with intense emotions.

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Scenario B: Caregiver B tries to regulate the child, counterbalancing if needed. Toddler gets filled up with a warm, emotional tone of voice. Again at the stage of pattern recognition, repeated occurrences let her carry these feelings inside. Later, when intense feelings press in, the child can draw on the security blanket of earlier warm reactions.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder:

- Individual differences: This toddler is over-reactive, hypersensitive, and anxious, but he has better visual-spatial processing and big picture thinking. He wants to control his world so that he is not at its mercy and not overwhelmed by it.
- Scenario A: Caregiver A reacts negatively to the child wanting more control. Power struggles ensue. This child will try hard to control his stubbornness and negativity and is more likely to become OCD.

Scenario B: Caregiver A negotiates, gives options, and introduces flexibility. This reaction helps a child be in charge of his own body and world.

ADD/ADHD:

- Individual differences: This child craves sensation. He is a daredevil and wants louder noises and more things to bang into. He's always on the move. Many children who are sensory craving also have motor planning and sequencing challenges. They can't logically organize multi-step actions. Visual-spatial problems can also make the distractibility more intense.
- Scenario A: Caregiver A either gets frazzled by the constant motion or ignores the child. With either reaction, the child's sensory seeking behavior increases.

Scenario B: Caregiver B engages in the activity and gradually slows it down, helping the child to practice modulating. 'B' plays regulating games, by first engaging and then modulating as part of the activity, not by giving orders. The child learns he can regulate and continues to practice at each later stage of development. For instance, at Stage 5, with pretend play, he can create a fast paced Cowboys and Indians game but use a time for strategizing to slow it down and bring in thinking. At Stage 6 with logical thinking, when he and his parents are combining ideas and interacting, it's longer chains of interaction through conversations on the child's favorite topics.

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Bi-polar:

- Individual differences: A child who is over-reactive to sensation gets overwhelmed. When overwhelmed, some children can switch into a sensory craving pattern. They combine an over-reactive pattern with a sensory craving one. They strike out, hit, and move around. (Children with bi-polar patterns are sometimes victims of the indiscriminate use of medication.)
- Scenario A: Caregiver A doesn't soothe and assure the anxious, overwhelmed child. Overwhelmed, the child then seeks sensation. These two together create mood swings. These children become very active, rather than grandiosity. This reaction vacillates with depression.

Scenario B: Caregiver B soothes, provides empathy, and counter-regulates. If the becomes sensory-craving, he needs structure, limits, firmness and constructive ways to use his energy. He needs lots of long chains of back and forth interaction. When in Stage 5 (creating ideas), he needs lots of empathy for both sides of the problem.

Aggressive and impulsive:

- Individual differences: This child is usually sensory-craving. However, a child who is overly reactive to sensation and fearful will sometimes be aggressive to defend himself. Children with bi-polar also often become aggressive because when they switch from being overwhelmed to craving sensation, they get aggressive. That is particularly dangerous because they get depressed once limits are set.
- Scenario A: Caregiver A uses the law-and-order approach, coupled with isolation, when the child gets aggressive. A child can develop a lack of connectedness, empathy, and compassion.

Scenario B: Caregiver B redirects this child into constructive play and games and uses firm but gentle limit setting. When a child becomes verbal, he can use fantasy to play out his need to seek sensation. At stages 5 and up, 'B' helps the child put the aggression into words in long chains of interaction rather than action. This child can become a leader. Biology is not destiny.