

Disrupted Attachments: What Can Happen and What Can be Done?

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A few words about attachment

- I assume you have all studied attachment and know about Mary Main and Mary Ainsworth.
- I assume you know about the different styles of attachment
 - Secure, Anxious/Avoidant, Anxious/Preoccupied, and Chaotic/Disorganized
- We are going to use this knowledge today to help 3 families solve their disrupted attachment

We know that Attachment Styles...

- Come out when the relationship is at risk
- We know that the baby has a biologic and psychological need to connect with her/his caregiver
- We know the baby will adjust and try to adapt based on her/his experience

- We know that there can be “misses”
- We know that these misses can be rescued

What do we seek in a relationship?

- **Safe haven**- comfort, nurturance, soothing, protection, regulation assistance
- **Secure base**- encouragement, scaffolding, opportunities, exploration, confidence
- Helps support our development of Internal Working Models (IWM)

The Skipping Girl



The Skipping Girl

- A 4-year-old girl and her father are on a walk
- Father warns girl to be careful, girl shows she has heard him
- Girl starts singing and skipping
- A short time later, she trips and falls, skinning her knee
 - Cries
 - Holds knee, unwilling to get up and continue the walk
- Father curtly tells her to get up
- Father tells her to stop crying
- Father scolds her for not listening
- Father turns away and mutters under his breath “quit being such a baby”
- Girl stops crying, quietly sniffles, gets up and holds Father’s hand as they finish the walk

What has the child learned in this example?

- What does her Dad offer? Safe Haven? Secure Base?
- Is he offering connection? Is he offering support and nurturance?
 - Do we know why he acts this way?
- How would we describe his style?
- If this continues, what style will the child develop?
- What if she doesn't adopt that style?

Misses

Child

Doesn't signal well

Doesn't respond well

Doesn't understand what
the parent needs to
understand them

Parent

Can't adjust

Only know 1 style

Only learned one style from their experiences

Loss of attachment as a child

Traumatized and confused in their relationships
with parents or later with romances

Maybe they experienced rigid responses and
they couldn't adjust

Helping this Father

- What would you do first?
 - Education about attachment relationships and IWMs?
 - Teach him about co-regulation?
- What have we learned about him? His attachment styles?
 - What is the risk to the relationship in this situation (tricky question, proceed carefully)?
 - Why might he have responded in the way he did? What were his goals?

Helping the Dad

- We need to help him with ABCDEs of co-regulation
- But first he has to feel we are attuned to him
- We "read" his level of emotional arousal- we comment on it, we give it words, we attempt to help him get to Zone 1
 - Example- "you look ____ when your daughter is upset", "she looks ____ when hurt"
 - Then we help calm and coregulate their relationship
- Then we try to promote reflection, expand his reflective capacity
 - "When your daughter gets hurt, or is in trouble, what do you think goes on in her mind"? What do you think she needs?
 - "If you were to provide what she needed, what do you think would happen"?

We could go into a lot more, but maybe this is enough

- Attachment patterns
- Internal Working Models
- Attunement and repair
- Co-regulation methods
- Caregiving qualities that help attachment processes
- Reflective capacity

- Let's save these for the other cases...

The Hungry Baby



The Hungry Baby

- A 9-month-old child is in his infant seat
- His parents are in the next room getting high with their friends
- The child starts to fuss, then cry
- The parents don't hear it because the music is too loud and they are preoccupied with feeling euphoric
- Eventually, one of the parents comes in to check on the child, notices he has a smelly diaper, tells the other parent to "get in here and check on your kid"
- The other parent reluctantly comes in, sees the child needs changing
- The second parent changes the child without much interaction, notices the time and feeds the child without much interaction (she is high)

What has this child learned?

- What are the parents offering this child?
 - Are they sensitively responsive?
 - Are they mutually confirming in their interactions?
 - If this continues, are they trying to better understand the child's needs?
 - Is the child learning how to better signal his needs so they “get it” quicker, better?
- What style are these parents using?
 - Are they offering a Safe Haven? A Secure Base? A clear way to connect with them?
 - What IWM is the child going to learn if he has many experiences like this?
- What are his options for trying to get connection?

Parents come to your office

- They want to be better parents-they feel ineffective, blame themselves
- Start to over do it- intrusive attempts to get the child to respond, anxious, perseverative in their attempts- it is too much for the child
- What style might the child switch to- it was Anxious/Preoccupied and then gave up- what is likely next?

Teaching the parents

- Sensitive responsiveness and mutually confirming interaction
 - Rebuild attunement
- Practice “serve and return” to reteach the child to signal
- Label the parents’ “style” when they are high (Avoidant/Dismissive)
- Help them understand the child’s need for Safe Haven and Secure Base

The Parallel Process

- The parents might not have received these “gifts” as a child
 - Sensitive responsiveness, mutually confirming interaction, Safe Haven, Secure Base, attunement, “Serve and Return”
 - They will need it from you (adults are big kids)
- It is never too late to learn a new style- but they have to feel it to really get it
 - In your relationship with them, you need to Attune to them, provide the “gifts”, see what is good, have confidence and encourage them (all things you want them to do with the child)
 - Don’t over do it...

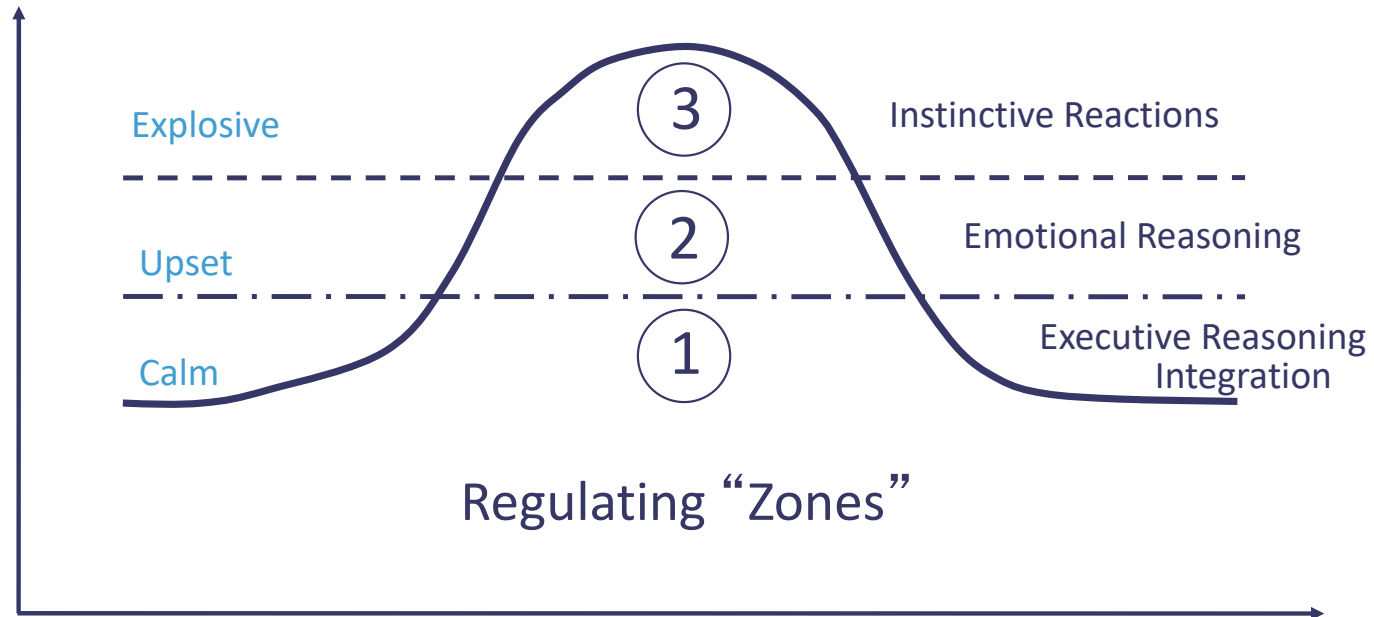
We really want to work on Attunement and Repair

- We want the caregiver to be able to provide Sensitive Responsiveness and Mutually Confirming Interactions
- We want the child to give signals that can be read by the caregiver and then develop some trust that Safe Haven and Secure Base will be offered/provided in a predictable and responsive manner
- There are therapies that do this in a purposeful manner
 - We don't have to be a therapist to be therapeutic- we can offer some of this to families

Another way to say this is...

- Provide co-regulation for the upset dyad
- Provide information to help each other understand the other person's pattern
- Demonstrate it with the parent
 - Have the parent practice it with the child

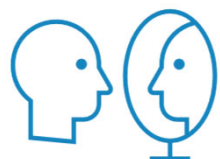
Emotional Mapping



The “ABCDE”s of Co-Regulation



Attune



**Be
Reflective**



**Calm,
Coregulate**

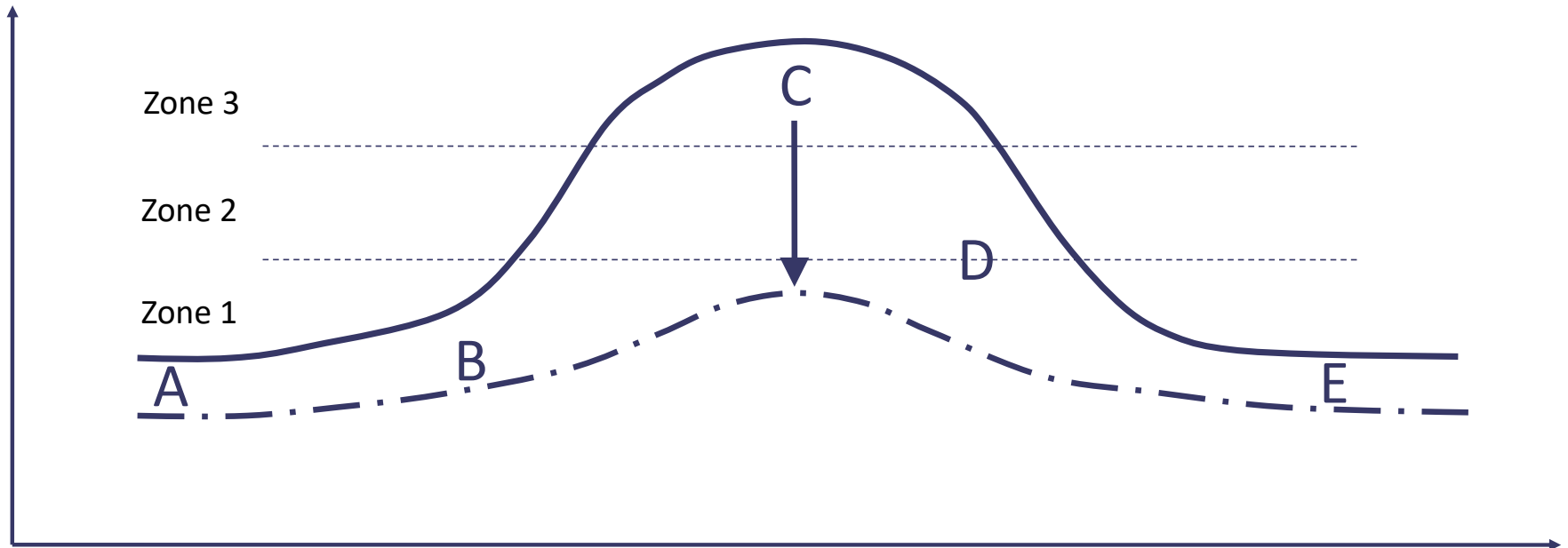


**Describe
and Repair**



**Explore
Options**

The task is this...



Helping the Parents

- We are going to do the ABCDEs with them
- We need to help them feel attended and attuned to first
 - Example (tell me what your worries are about your child)
- We then help the parents improve their physical proximity to the child and be reflective about what is going on in their mind- we can help with this if they don't know
- We then help them calm the child, because they will become a bit fussy or avoidant during this
 - We practice being sensitive and mutually confirming with the child (we might have to model this)

The Angry and Frustrated Boy



The Angry and Frustrated Boy

- A 4yo Boy comes home from school with a note from his teacher about his failure to sit still at circle time and for playing too roughly with his peers
- His mother starts worrying, talking loudly, expressing concern that he will be “thrown out of school” if he doesn’t behave better
- The boy becomes upset with the mother’s tone and words and starts crying, running around the house, and throwing toys on the floor.
- Mother yells at him and starts crying, feeling helpless to control his behavior and fearing she will be seen as a bad mother
- Mother and child end up in bed together, hugging. Boy is sucking his thumb.

What is the parent offering the child?

- Safe Haven? Secure Base?
 - Why not?
 - What is her style?
- What has he learned in terms of how to get connection and nurturance from his mother?
- Is he learning to manage himself with confidence? Does she believe he can control himself?
 - Does she teach him? Compliment him? Admire his success?

How do we help the mother of the angry and frustrated boy?

- This will take a fair amount of caring for and supporting of the mother (providing her with a Safe Haven with you) and also, when ever possible, complimenting her efforts to support his autonomy (Safe Base)
- We will need to attune to her, watch her mood states, be calm and supportive, so she can be calm
 - Then we start asking about her reflections of what is on his mind
 - Compliment her about her ability to do this
 - See if she can respond mutually to what she thinks is on his mind
- Later, see if she can put it into words with him, for him- model this.

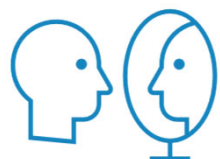
The Parallel Process

- Use of self
- Holding the parent in mind
 - Parent holds the child in mind
- Scaffolding
 - Parents' needs
 - Child's needs
- Intersubjective Space
 - Join the Dyad, make it a Triad

The “ABCDE”s of Co-Regulation



Attune



**Be
Reflective**



**Calm,
Coregulate**

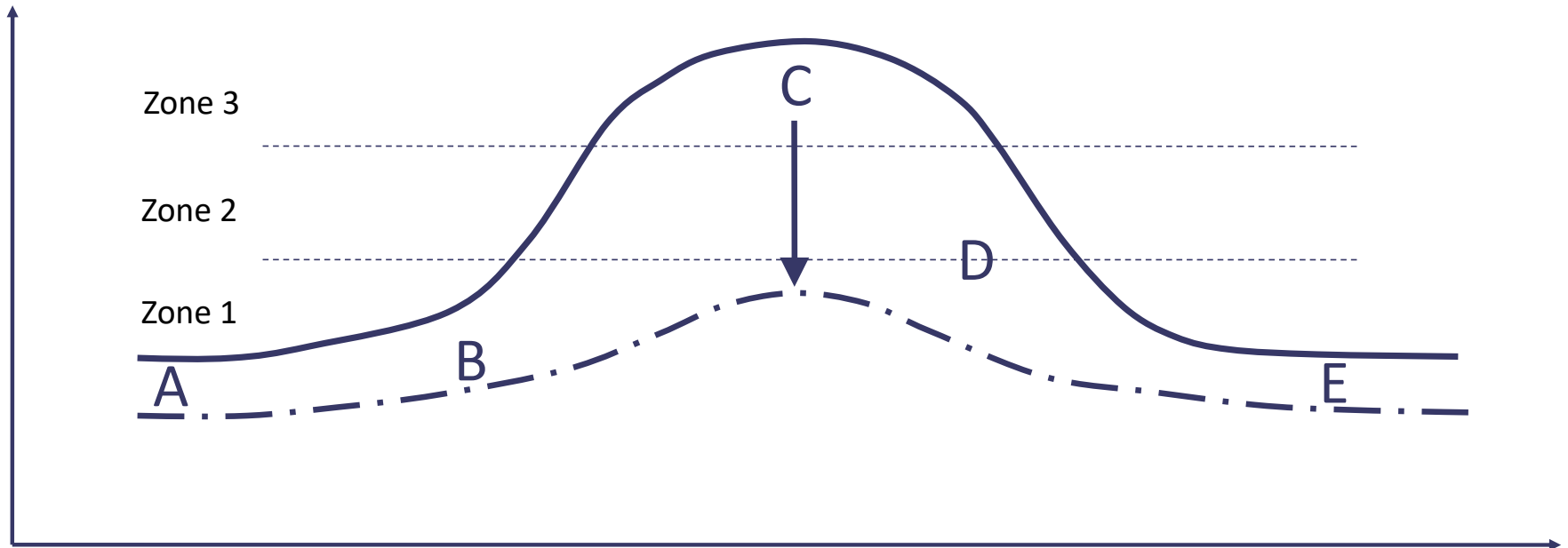


**Describe
and Repair**



**Explore
Options**

The task is this...



The “R”s of the Relationship



Regulation

Self, parent, and parent
co-regulates child



Representation

Parent holding the child
in mind
(external and internal
world of child)



Reflection

Use attachment patterns to correct misattribution

Educate and repair the consequences of being over
aroused and learning negative ideas about themselves

Final words about attachment and repair

- Can we change our attachment styles?
 - Can anyone?
- Do children have different attachment styles (already)?
- Can we be therapeutic with caregivers who use different styles
 - Responding to the Anxious/preoccupied adult with Safe Haven first, then Secure Base
 - Responding to the Avoidant/dismissive adult with Secure Base first, then Safe Haven
 - Responding to the Chaotic/disorganized adult- lots of both