Parenting Assessments: Adult-oriented issues and the parent-child relationship

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The Centre for Child Protection

Aim: To get to the heart of child protection training using innovative ideas and the latest technology

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Toxic Trio

- Domestic Abuse
- Substance Misuse
- Parental/Carer Mental Ill Health

Toxic Trio: Domestic Abuse

- “any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threating behaviour, violence or abuse between those ages 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional” (Home Office 2013, p. 2).
- 750,000 children in the UK bear witness to domestic abuse – but this is the tip of the iceberg (Middleton and Hardy 2014)
- Possible impact for children
  - Physical harm
  - Psychological/emotional harm
  - Social/behavioural harm
  - Cognitive harm
  - Educational harm

(Murphy and Rogers 2019)

Toxic Trio: Substance Misuse

- "Substance use disorders occur when the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs causes clinically and functionally significant impairment such as health problems, disability and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school or home" (Murphy and Rogers 2019, p. 252).
- Estimates range from 60,000 to 1.3 million children who are living with an adult who misuses substances throughout the UK – across both drug and alcohol misuse (Murphy and Rogers 2019; Middleton and Rogers 2014).
- Possible impact for children:
  - Neglect (lack of parental responsiveness)
  - Emotional abuse (lack of parental predictability)
  - Physical abuse
  - Impairment to brain development
  - Repetitive patterns of family/community/industry violence (NSPCC 2022; Murphy and Rogers 2019)
- Substance misuse AND/OR alcohol misuse?

Toxic Trio: Parental/Carer Mental Ill Health

- “Behavioural or psychological syndrome or pattern that reflects an underlying psychobiological dysfunction the consequence of which are clinically significant distress or disability” (Murphy and Rogers 2019, p. 256).
- 1 in 6 people (age 16-64) have a common mental disorder (~14 million) and 68% of women and 57% of men with mental health problems are parents (Public Health England 2021).
- Possible impact on children
  - Psychiatric problems
  - Disrupted attachment
  - Reduced adaptive functioning
  - Poorer cognitive ability
  - Learning difficulties
  - Socioeconomic disadvantage
  - Social exclusion (McCormack, White and Cuenca 2017)
- Learning Difficulties/Mental Ill health?

(Murphy and Rogers 2019; Middleton and Hardy 2014)

Toxic Trio

Cumulative risk of harm

None: 36 (21%)
One: 47 (27%)
Two: 53 (30%)
Three: 39 (22%)

(Sidebotham 2019)

Toxic Trio: Should there be Caution?

- Conflation of Factors

(Sidebotham 2019)

- Limitations to Research Clear and consistent definitions of the variables
  - Clear and comprehensive data about the population affected
  - Clear and relevant outcome measures
  - Clear theoretical framework
  - Appropriate and standardized statistics
  - Control for contextual or confounding factors
  - Intersectionality
  - Policy Context

(Skinner et al 2020)

- Toxic Terminology

(Murphy and Rogers 2019)

- Limited Scope
  - Socioeconomic Status
  - Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
  - Parental Age
  - Social Isolation
  - Educational Status
  - History of Crime (especially violent crime)
  - Child Experience/Impact
  - Parent-Child Relationship
  - Many others…

(Sidebotham 2019)

Are we looking in the wrong place at the wrong things?

"Something about the task of caregiving appeared to be rekindling past traumas or losses which then 'switched off' the carer's sensitivity and responsiveness"

(Shemmings 2016, p. 22).

Mentalisation

"a person's ability to attribute mental states to observed behaviour for the purpose of interpreting, explaining or predicting the behaviour of others and oneself"

(Low, Lewis and Sefarty 2023, p. 517).

"The **majority of parents** who maltreat their children have problems mentalising their children's psychological condition. Their own histories tend to be ones of rejection, abuse, neglect, trauma and loss. Never having been recognised as an independent, complex psychological being themselves, **they have problems relating to their children as complex, separate psychological beings"**

(Howe, 2010; 336).

Meaning of the Child

- “Some children had a special significance to their parent(s) and, as a result, were at greater risk of harm than other children in the household.”

  (Reder and Duncan 1995, p. 39).

- “The MotC [meaning of the child] takes this relationship-specific understanding into its assessment of how the parent *thinks* about the child.”

  (Grey and Farnfield 2017, p. 17).

Moving Forward

- Consider adult-oriented issues
- Challenge your understanding of the “trio”
- Move beyond the “trio”
- Recognise the cause of challenges – not just the symptoms
- Get an understanding of the parent-child dynamics and relationship

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