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#NYCI2026

Restoring Connection: Attachment-Based Interventions for Young Children and Parents Impacted by Trauma

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Attachment injuries impact capacity to trust:

- early neglect, rejection, or abuse
- parental substance abuse or mental illness
- domestic violence
- birth trauma, NICU
- painful medical conditions/interventions



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Attachment injuries lead to developmental deficits

- Poor emotional, social, and cognitive maturation.
- Poor feelings vocabulary
- Inability to reason and solve problems
- Inability to delay gratification

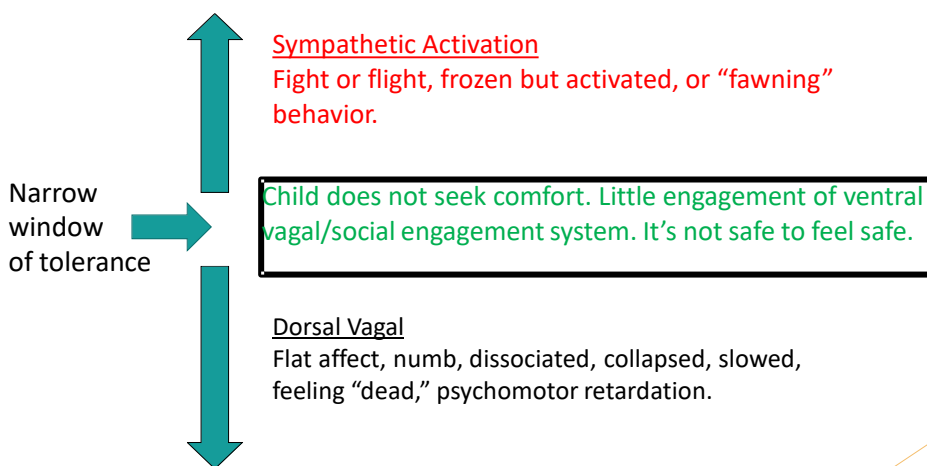
(Developmental Trauma Disorder Diagnosis has been proposed by Bessel van der Kolk and Julian Ford)

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Attachment injuries narrow the window of tolerance for the child



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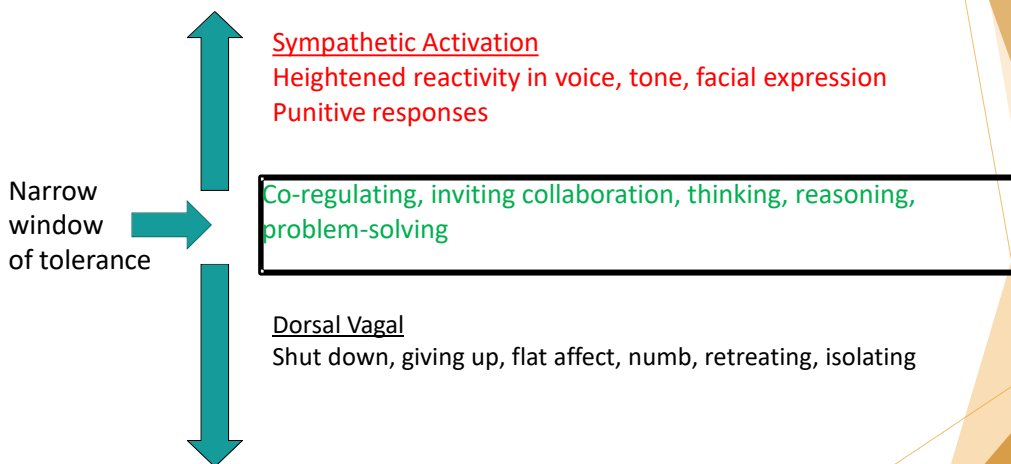
Generational transmission of adversity--

- Parents may have grown up with adversity.
- Parents' nervous system may be wired to self-protect, reducing the parent's capacity to attune to the child's emotions.



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Parents with unhealed trauma may have a narrow window



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Invite 1:1 sessions with the parent for history-taking, case conceptualization, and psychoeducation

1. Identify the problem behaviors
2. Identify the triggers
3. Hypothesize the child's negative beliefs
4. Trace the triggers and beliefs back to adverse events
5. What would the parent like the child to believe instead?
6. How would the change in beliefs impact the child's behaviors?

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Teach the 5 building blocks for secure attachment...

1. Emotional attunement & empathic responses
2. Affection
3. A safe, predictable environment
4. Shared pleasure, play, and fun
5. Repairs

Source: Wesselmann, D. (2025). *Attachment Trauma in Kids: Strategies for Parents*. W.W. Norton.



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At the same time, the natural defenses of children who've experienced adversity create obstacles to parents' efforts to improve attachment:

- Insecurity leads to self-protective defenses
- Self-protective defenses guard kids from receiving affection.
- Aggression, opposition, avoidance, and defiance protect hurt kids from feeling vulnerable.



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1:1 time with parents...

- Stay attuned and validating with parent, while inviting the parent into reflecting upon the underlying reasons for the child's behaviors
- With clinical judgment, invite reflection upon the parent's childhood experiences
- Invite the parent into collaborative problem-solving regarding the child's behaviors

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Invite parents and caregivers to reflect upon the child's behaviors in terms of their belief system

I have to keep myself safe.

I have to be in control.

I have to find ways to meet my own needs.

It's not safe to love or trust.

I don't belong.

It's not safe to have feelings.

It's not safe to be vulnerable.

I cannot count on others.

I'm unlovable.

I don't deserve good things.

The world is not safe.

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Invite a shift in perspective...

My child is attention-seeking → My child is connection-seeking.

My child needs to learn a lesson → My child needs to feel safe/loved to learn.

My child is angry and incorrigible → My child is hurt & operating in survival mode.

My child is overreactive → My child needs help regulating.

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Who we are with the parent and child becomes as important as what we do.

- We become the regulated nervous system in the room.
- We support the nervous system of the child and the parent simultaneously.
- We bring a reflective, mentalizing approach to what is happening between the parent and the child and between the parent and the child and us.

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Messages of Love Activity



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Messages of Love steps...

1. Prepare parents ahead of time by discussing the questions/prompts together.
2. Provide a relaxed, playful environment for the activity.
3. Deepen positive affect for the child with slow BLS.

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Show the parent message of love questions/prompts to choose from and discuss possible answers:

- "What are characteristics that you enjoy about your child?"
- "What are some of your favorite early memories with your child?"
- "What do you remember about first laying eyes on your child?"
- "Describe times you have felt proud of your child."
- "What are some activities you have enjoyed doing with your child?"
- "What are some things that the two of you have in common?"
- "What are some of your future hopes and dreams for your relationship with child?"



Reference: Wesselmann, D. (2025). *EMDR and Family Therapy: Integrative Strategies for Treating Attachment Trauma in Children*. W.W. Norton.

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Messages of Love through song with very young children:

For example:

(to the tune of The Mulberry Bush)

- Here is Kai with a lovable heart, a lovable heart, a lovable heart. Here is Kai with a lovable heart so early in the morning.
- Here is Mom who loves Kai so, who loves Kai so, who loves Kai so. Here is Mom who loves Kai so, so early in the morning.
- Here is Kai who is smart and strong, smart and strong, smart and strong. Here is Kai who is smart and strong, so early in the morning.

Lyrics by Stefanie Armstrong, 2014

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More examples:

Tune: "Hush Little Baby"

Hush little Bailey, we love you.
Mommy and Daddy keep you safe.
You are always safe with us.
Learning everyday that you can trust.

Words by Stefanie Armstrong, 2014

Tune: "Frere Jacques"

Andre is safe, Andre is safe.
Yes he is, yes he is.
His mommy and daddy, mommy and daddy,
Keep him safe, keep him safe.

Reference: Wesselmann, D. (2025). *EMDR and Family Therapy: Integrative Strategies for Treating Attachment Trauma in Children*. W.W. Norton.

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Encourage parents to continue messages of love through songs at home

Say,
You can make up fun, silly,
and loving songs together

- while driving in the car
- at bedtime
- anytime



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The Gentle Therapeutic Story Method

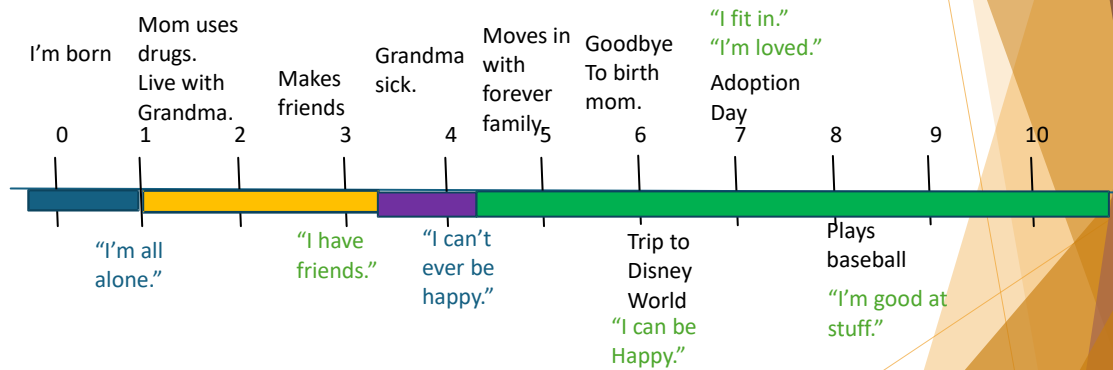
- Work with the parent to create a story for the child that makes sense of the child's past.
- Provides corrective information.
- Helps the child see themselves and their story through the eyes of another.

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Timeline example



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Outline developed with the help of Joan Lovett (Small Wonders, 1997)

(Story in 3rd person—about a child or an animal character)

- **Once upon a time there was** a little boy who lived with his forever family. He liked to play baseball and had many good friends.
- **Like most kids, the boy had some wonderful/positive things and some confusing (or difficult/painful) things happen in his life.**
- **A wonderful thing was that** the boy was born with a good heart and a smart brain.
- **A difficult thing was that** his first Mom started using drugs again, and the drugs made her forget how to take good care of the little boy.

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Outline (continued)

- **If the baby could have put feelings into thoughts with words, he might have said,** “I’m alone in the world. I’m not good enough. I’m not safe.”
- **His forever parents want him to know that today** he’s no longer alone. They will do their best to keep him safe. And he’s a good person.
- **A wonderful thing that happened was** a social worker found out the boy’s mom was having troubles and suggested the little boy stay with grandma for now.

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Outline (continued)

- **Another confusing thing that happened was that** grandma wanted to help, but she got sick and couldn’t do a good job caring for the little boy anymore.
- **(May identify one or two more things that were wonderful/confusing.)**
- **Today, the boy still struggles with believing** he is safe, loved and lovable, and that he belongs. But his forever parents love him and keep him safe. They remind him that he’s good and they know how to give him good care.

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Story examples...see handout

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Animal Story told with the help of stuffed animals— Adopted child—his birth mother kept custody of the siblings

There was a little boy wolf who lived with his bear mom and bear dad in a cave in the forest. The little wolf enjoyed life with his family except for one thing. Sometimes he had visits with a wolf mom they called his birth mom. She was his mom when he was first born. The wolf mom had some other little wolves, too. The other little wolves still lived with the mother wolf in the wolf cave. The little boy wolf asked his bear mom why he didn't live in the cave with the wolf mom and the brothers and sisters.

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His bear mom said: “Before you were growing inside your wolf mom’s womb, she and her husband wolf got mad at each other. She moved away and started to be with a different man wolf. You started to grow in your mom’s womb, and when you were born, the new wolf man was your dad. Then your wolf mom decided to go back and live with her wolf husband. She was afraid her husband would not be nice to you because he was not your dad. She loved you and wanted you to have a mom and a dad who would both love you and give you good care.”

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The mommy bear continued, “God wanted you to be born. You were meant to be. You’re meant to be here with us. We may not be wolves, but Daddy and I knew you were meant to be ours. You are in our hearts forever. This is where you are supposed to be. We love you so much.”

Reference: Wesselmann, D. (2025). *EMDR and Family Therapy: Integrative Strategies for Treating Attachment Trauma in Children*. W.W. Norton.

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Thank you!

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