Sharing the burden of parenting under multicultural stress: Primary prevention of child abuse and neglect

7th NFBO Conference, Bergen, Norway
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MOTHERS NEED OTHERS TO SHARE THE BURDEN AND THE STRESS OF BRINGING UP A CHILD
Mothers and others

- A mother is the biological center of a family
- Mothers have always needed others to be able to cope with basic child care
  - fathers
  - older siblings and cousins
  - grandmothers and aunts
  - sisters and sisters-in-law
- In western cultures there has been a change
  - a strengthening in the role of fathers
  - child minders and day-care personnel
  - teachers and coaches
  - social service and health-care personnel

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Stress

• Stress is the body’s reaction to an event threatening with harm or loss
  – loss of an important other
  – loss of control or continuance of being

• Individual window of tolerance
  – individual capacity for regulation
  – temperament and experience of co-regulation
    • attachment relationships

• Mild stress increases individual potential
  – bravery and innovation
  – tend and befriend -behaviors
Major stress

• Constriction of individual potential
  – functioning with less flexibility
• Integrative brain areas disconnected
  – fight, flight or freeze reactions
• Experience of traumatization and dissociation
• Difficulty in using co-regulation to reconnect
  – earlier experiences of attachment crucial
• Social support is central for handling extreme stress
  – we adults also need attachment relationships for co-regulation
Causes of multicultural stress

- **Trauma and loss** behind and in seeking refuge or in immigrating
- **Uncertainty** of future
  - means of livelihood
  - future for self and children
- **Unfamiliarity** of surroundings
- **Minority** culture
  - differences in family and parental roles
- **Continuous stress most harmful**
  - **MEES**: mundane extreme environmental stress
  - stress of **visibility** or stigma
Coping mechanisms bring resilience

• Stress is strain on one’s coping mechanisms

• Internal
  – practical: how to handle stressful situations
    • alternatives for action are culture specific
  – emotional
    • how to regulate and express one’s feelings

• External
  – how to use help of other people
    • silent wisdom is particular to every culture
    • whom to approach
    • how to present own case
    • how to interpret answers and actions of others
Parenting and culture

• Parenting is learned intrinsically
  – reactions to child and to challenges of parenting are primarily not conscious

• Different goals of upbringing
  – communal or individualistic
  – different goals and expectations bring conflict
  – there is no one good way of parenting – however:

• **Punitive, authoritarian parenting is harmful**
  – clearly associated with behavior problems
  – associated with less experience of social support
    • from own family
    • from own community
    • from professionals
The paradox

• Many parents neglect, abuse and abandon their children in all known cultures now and in history
  – mothers often responsible for abuse of small children
  – what underlies this contradictory parental behavior?
• Our nearest relatives, the great apes do not
  – each infant is kept and protected without question
• Human child needs an immense investment
  – longest time of dependence – and development
  – no parent can manage on their own
  – child is at risk if parent does not find help
  – the danger of our individualistic success societies
Parenting in evolution

• One of the basic motivations of life

• Parent child conflict of interests
  – there is no perfect match

• In most species children grow relatively quickly into independence
  – mother is alone in care

• Some species have longer childhoods
  – all characterized by high intelligence and high levels of co-operation
  – AND co-operative parenting: sharing the burden
  – children are selectively neglected and abused if mothers are left without support
Human parenthood

• Biological, social and psychological parenthood affect each other
  – parenthood causes changes in all areas, in both child and parent

• Shared or co-operative parenting is intrinsic
  – mothers are willing to give their baby into other hands
    • most women readily accepted by mother
  – men capacity to care for children is phenomenal
    • big variations: contact with babies is of help
    • father leave changes culture
  – children monitor all adults with interest
    • big temperamental differences
    • fathers chosen selectively as playmates
Co-operative parenting: child perspective

• More adults to provide
  – brain growth is immensely expensive

• Different adults resonate with different potentialities
  – interpersonal experiences mould the brain and mind
  – resonance creates energy and brain growth
    • the most potent formative and reparative element

• Developmental possibilities of child expand
  – intelligence, creativity and morality
  – inborn capacities that require shared experience
The underpinnings of social development

• Theory of mind
  – infants monitor how others are inclined towards them

• Language is based on babbling
  – communication over distance
  – responsivity of adult easily gauged
  – only in species with co-operative parenting

• Altruism
  – natural preference for pro-social behavior
    • aversion to hindering other’s in their intentions
  – expectation of support natural
    • child, mother and father all are entitled to the support they need
Attachment

• Attachment is the external mechanism of stress regulation
  – with more support in stress regulation, more of ones potential is realized
• From an exclusive relationship perspective to the desirability of multiple attachments
  – preference for one is natural
• Capacity for security of attachment develops with experiences of attuned support
  – abusive parenting leaves one handicapped in using support in adulthood
Social support

- Experience of support increases positive and diminishes punitive parenting
  - advice does not have a positive effect
  - **practical** help does
    - improves parenting by lowering burden of other areas
  - help with **children** does
    - lowers burden of parenting
    - gives children other adults to relate to
  - help with **private feelings** does
    - increases self-worth as parent
  - **proto-prevention** of abuse and neglect
What is experienced as support

- Concrete support in whatever are of life
  - tending to physical needs of child and parent
  - the logic of food in parent groups

- Experience of interpersonal resonance:
  - Being seen as one is
    - interested curiosity
  - Being understood and accepted
    - respect
  - Being answered to
    - active interaction
Lack of support

• Those who could do not answer to ones needs
  – those in position of “stronger and wiser and kind”
  – asking for help and not receiving it
• Being expected to do something one cannot manage
  – working through crises in a foreign environment
  – conflict of roles and parental values
    • fantasy of returning home
• Risk of fight, flight or freeze reactions towards the one responsible for the increase in stress
  – the child is a major burden: child abuse and neglect
  – the spouse may not be supportive: partner violence
Refusal to share the burden of parenting is dangerous to children

- Historically infanticide has been common
  - letting die of malnourishment
  - giving away
- Child abuse and neglect share the same dynamic
  - sharing is the **responsibility of our society**
  - helping to access informal support can be difficult
  - one has to ask parent how to be of help
    - being interested in the **experience of the other** is supportive in itself
    - **speaking the language** of the parent is immensely valuable
How to offer support in our multicultural societies

- **Being active**: knowing that parents need support
  - **smiling and greeting** children and their parents

- **Respecting** the cultural underpinnings of parenting and child development
  - interest in the nuances of parents’ mother culture
  - respect for the hardship of minority parents cope in two cultures

- **Positively discriminating** minorities in social work, teaching, health and youth work training
  - multiplicity of language and cultural knowledge

- **Voting** for minority representatives
  - knowing that complexity brings resilience
Thank you for your interest

• Further reading on shared parenting:
  – Mothers and Others
    • Sarah Blaffer Hrdy : Harvard University Press 2009
  – Attachment and Bonding, a New Synthesis

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