Unaccompanied Children and Families Seeking Asylum

Traumatic Effects on Children’s Attachment and Reunification

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Content Warning

This presentation contains graphic photos and videos that some of you may find distressing and disturbing. Please use your discretion.
Focal topics

- Asylum seeking
- Unaccompanied children
- Families units
- Apprehension and detention
- Traumatic effects on children’s
  - Attachment and reunification
  - Mental health and development
Attachment and Bonding

- Cornerstone of human development. Influences social relations and helps predict, control and manipulate interactions
- Disruption of attachment in childhood can result in long term cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties
On reuniting with parent or caregiver

- Securely attached children show
- Confident, joyful reunion & interaction with parent after period of separation
- Have good emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social outcomes
Childhood Trauma

- A scary, dangerous, violent, or life threatening event that happens to a child (0-18 years of age).
- May also happen to someone else and traumatizes child seeing or hearing about the other person being hurt or injured.
- Child may become very overwhelmed, upset, and/or feel helpless.
Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)

- Accumulation of trauma in childhood
- Affects physical and mental health throughout life (e.g. heart and lung disease, alcoholism, risk for IPV, drug use, academic or work performance, depression, suicide).

ACE include traumatic experiences, but is broader

- Abuse: physical, sexual, psychological/emotional
- Neglect: physical, psychological/emotional
- Household violence, substance abuse, mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member
Accumulation of trauma in migrant children

1. Pre-migration trauma (gangs & violence)
2. In-transit trauma (*coyotes*, assaults, deprivation)
3. Post-migration trauma (*hieleras* & detention)
Pre-migration trauma
Witnessing death, dead body, or serious injury

- Largest part of PTSD burden; long symptom-duration
- Affects memory & helplessness in PTSD etiology
- Adds to memory formation intrusive & vivid recall
- More distressing when multiple traumas experienced

(Atwoli et al., 2013; Ferry et al., 2014; Hackett, 2009)
Danny’s pre-migration trauma
Danny’s pre-migration violence hits home

For details, visit TED.com/talks/Zayas

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In-transit: Migrating through Mexico

- Who can you trust?
- *Coyotes*, criminals, and organized gangs
- Witnessing violence and death
- Victimization: Imprisonment, deprivation, intimidation, physical abuse, sexual assault
- Constant danger and depravity
Post-migration trauma: *hieleras* (ICE-boxes) and *UC detention* (2021)
Consequences of Separation, I

**INSECURE-AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT**
- Child expects rejection from parent on reunion
- Displays avoidance rather than seeking proximity
- Avoids to reduce anticipated conflict or rejection
Case 1: Insecure-Avoidant

Boy reuniting with mother, separated for 3 months

- Expects rejection
- Avoids caregiver

Source: ACLU August 24, 2018
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsBaFHnMu8k
Consequence of Separation II

- **INSECURE-AMBIVALENT ATTACHMENT**
  - Child is uncertain of parent’s response on reunion
  - Displays passive or angry resistant behavior that serves to establish proximity to parent
  - When parent responds, child is ambivalent and not comforted by parent
Case 2: Insecure-Ambivalent

- Boy in shelter with mother, after separation
- Uncertain of caregiver’s affection
- Angry, resistant behavior

Source: The Atlantic  September 7, 2018
https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/569572/family-separation/
Reactive Attachment Disorder (313.89)

- Inhibited, emotionally withdrawn behavior toward parent
  - Limited positive affect
  - Episodes of unexplained irritability, sadness, or fearfulness (in non-threatening situations)

- Experienced: neglect, deprivation, sudden/repeated changes of caregivers, or time in unusual setting
Trauma: Imperiled developmental trajectories

- Dysregulation of child’s stress response
  - Symptoms, behaviors and, biologic measurements
- Internalized negative attributions
- Diminished hope, expectations for future
- Difficulty with self-esteem regulation
- Functional impairments in key areas psychological, social, and academic
Long-term effects of detention on children

- Fear of being returned to home country
- Sudden, upsetting memories; nightmares & images of threats, humiliation in detention
- Numbness, dissociative episodes since detention
- Child feels criminalized, helpless; may function as if detained or will be detained again
- Shattered sense of safety and well-being
Urgently needed services

- At apprehension: Nutritious food, warm/comfortable shelter
- Medical care
- Psychosocial assessments and therapeutic interventions
- Psychoeducational services for parents
- Parent-child interaction therapy
- Educational assessment and intervention
- Social integration in community
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