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Child and Youth

Chapter 21: Integrative Attachment Trauma Protocol for Children

Presenter:

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1

Attachment trauma is often chronic and cumulative...

- Early neglect, rejection, or abuse
- Parental substance abuse or mental illness
- Domestic violence
- Painful medical conditions/interventions
- Attachment separations/losses



The layers of maladaptively stored memories interfere with trust, safety, self-worth, and belonging, and negatively impact the developing brain.

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2

Chronic attachment trauma interferes with emotional, social, and cognitive development.

- Poor emotional, social, and cognitive maturation.
- Poor recognition of internal state
- Poor feelings vocabulary
- Inaccurate perceptions of others' feelings and intentions
- Poor ability to empathize
- Inability to reason and solve problems
- Inability to delay gratification



van der Kolk, B. A. (2005). Developmental trauma disorder: Toward a rational diagnosis for children with complex trauma histories. *Psychiatric Annals*, 35(5), 401–408.



3

The subsequent symptoms and problems are obstacles to the utilization of therapy



4

The EMDR Integrative Attachment Trauma Protocol for Children and Adolescents (IATP-C) is designed to improve attachment relationships and overall functioning before gently addressing triggers and traumas.



5

Advantages of a 2-therapist team:

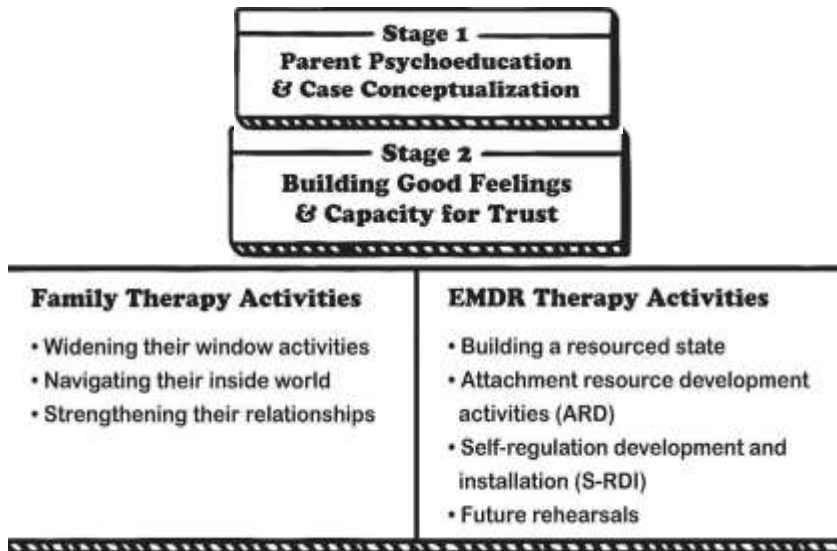
1. Improves morale when working with complicated cases.
2. Therapists keep one another on track. Exchange of ideas each session.
3. Child and parent hear the same information from 2 clinicians.



The protocol was developed for a 2-therapist team, but can be applied by a solo therapist.



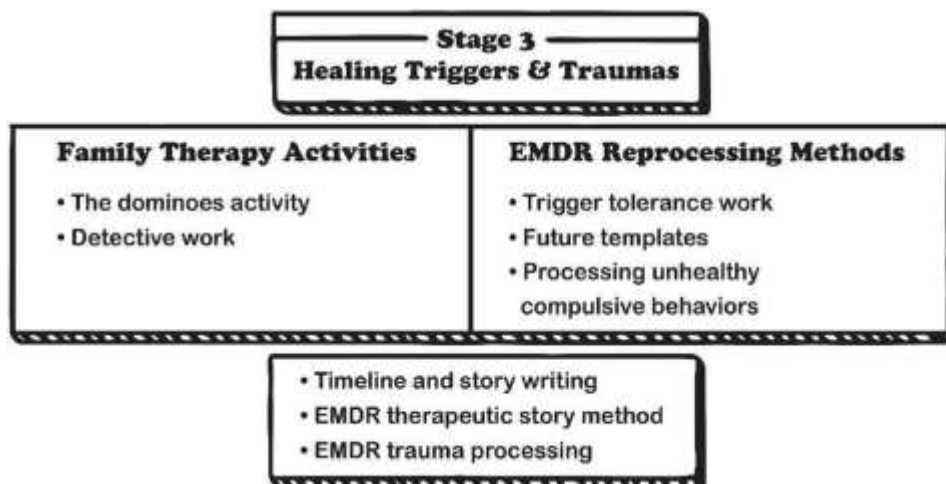
6



Wesselmann, D. (2025). *EMDR and family therapy: Integrative treatment for attachment trauma in children*, 2nd ed. W.W. Norton.



7



Wesselmann, D. (2025). *EMDR and family therapy: Integrative treatment for attachment trauma in children*, 2nd ed. W.W. Norton.



8



During Stage 1--

Parents learn to attune to the child's hidden struggles rather than reacting to the behaviors.

Two to six sessions help parents become more attuned, sensitive, and supportive of their child or teen.

The sessions with parents provide the therapist with information for EMDR treatment planning.

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Wesselmann, D. (2025). *Attachment trauma in kids: Integrative strategies for parents, 2nd ed.* W.W. Norton.

9



During Stage 2--Parents and kids become a team, learning skills together and developing a common language.

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10

EMDR foundational activities utilize slow, short sets of bilateral stimulation to deepen feelings of trust and connection and a more positive self-view.



Following are two EMDR Attachment Resource Development (ARD) activities:

Messages of Love and Cord of Love



11

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.



Messages of Love--an Attachment Resource Development (ARD) activity



12

- “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?”

Suggest the parent bring in photos to share.

Show the parent *Messages of Love* questions/prompts to choose from. Discuss possible responses.



13

Bring in the child/teen and say,

- “You’re lucky today! You get to sit back and relax, and your parent will do all the work. You can listen or not listen--it’s entirely up to you.”
- You may offer a weighted blanket, lollipop, gum, or a fidget toy.



A paradoxical approach improves cooperation



14

- As parent answers *Messages of Love* questions and describes positive memories and feelings about the child, deepen the good feelings and sense of connection with slow taps or other BLS.
- Say, “Notice how relaxed you feel in your body. Notice how good it feels to be connected.” (While adding another slow, short set of slow BLS)



Deepen the good feelings!



15

The Messages of Love Activity can become a game:

- For example, the child/teen earns a candy heart with each message of love.
- Or a message of love is provided with each successful move during a game of Jenga or Pick-up-Sticks.
- Add the BLS after each message or at the end of the game.



Messages of Love can be playful...



16

Make up words to common tunes,
like Frere Jacques:

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



Messages of Love can be provided
through a song for younger children...



17

The Magical Cord of Love—an ARD activity

Say to the child, “We can’t see love, but we know it’s there. It’s like a magical cord of light that connects us heart-to-heart. There’s a magical cord of love between you and your parent. Can you both close your eyes and picture the cord while I add some taps?” (Add slow BLS)

Ask the parent:

- “Does the love go away when you’re busy?”
- “What about when you’re frustrated?”
- “What about when you go somewhere?”
- “What about when you’re paying attention to someone else?”



18



- Ask the child, “Can you draw a picture showing how the cord is still there when you are apart—or when you and Mom/Dad are struggling?”
- Suggest the child look at the picture -- remind the child of the lasting connection while you add slow BLS to deepen the good feelings.

With teenagers you can say: “There’s an incredible heart-to-heart connection between parents and their kids that does not go away even when they’re struggling. I imagine this connection as a beautiful stream of light. If you could see this connection, what color would it be for you?” (Add slow BLS)



19

During Stage 3—
Improved trust and connection allows parents to provide a secure holding environment throughout processing of triggers and difficult traumas.



Prepare parents to be a silent but supportive presence.



20

- Mom/Dad, do you believe kids are responsible for the actions of adults?
- Mom/Dad, if you could travel back in time to this event, what would you do to help? What would you say to _____?
- Mom/Dad, what else do you want your child to know/feel right now?
- Mom/Dad, how do you feel right now, knowing this happened?
- Mom/Dad, do you believe kids in foster homes are less worthy?
- Mom/Dad, what do you want your child to know about how you keep them safe today?
- Mom, can you move a little closer so your child can feel you there?

Parents can be prepared to help provide interweaves as needed...



21

Case series study

- Case Series: 23 Cases
- Adopted from foster or orphanage care
- EMDR therapist and family therapist team.
- Ages 7-12
- EMDR therapy and family therapy weekly
- Average treatment 12.7 months
(Treatment considered complete when 2 of 3 measures were near or below clinical cut-off)
- Significant improvement at group level on measures of behavior, attachment, and traumatic stress

Wesselmann, D., Armstrong, S., Schweitzer, C., Davidson, M., & Potter, A. (2018). An integrative EMDR and family therapy model for treating attachment trauma in children: A case series. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, 12(4) 196-207



22

Single-case experimental design (SCED) with randomized baseline periods

- Applied the IATP-C with 15 abused and neglected children in permanent out-of-home placements.
- The children received 17 weeks of the preparation phase activities and 16 weeks of applied EMDR desensitization and reprocessing phases.
- Eight cases were suitable for analysis and 7 out of 8 showed positive treatment effects

Van der Hoeven, M. L., Plukaard, S. C., Schlattmann, N. E. F., Lindauer, R. J. L., & Hein, I. M. (2023) An integrative treatment model of EMDR and family therapy for children after child abuse and neglect: A SCED study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 152,1–12.



23

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- Swimm, L. L. (2018). EMDR intervention for a 17-month-old child to treat attachment trauma: Clinical case presentation. *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, 12(4), 269-281. (18-month-old received a simplified IATP-C by one therapist. Trauma and attachment symptoms resolved).
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Single case studies



24

Thank you!

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