

Viewing the Children's Contact Services through an attachment and trauma informed lens

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Acknowledgement



I wish to acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional Country of the Noogar people and pay respect to Elders past ... present and future.



Aims of presentation

To describe the importance of applying an attachment lens for working with children and their families who are engaged in the Children's Contact Service (CCS)

To describe how therapeutic supports can assist the building of more positive parent and child attachments



The CCS program objectives

- Ensuring the wellbeing, safety and best interests of children
- Assisting the development of stronger attachment relationships between parents and their children
- Offering parents/caregivers the opportunity to spend time with their children in a safe environment
- Assisting parents/caregivers to have a greater understanding of the needs of their children
- Assisting families in moving to self managed care arrangements (where possible)



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In supporting families attending the CCS, there is a focus on:

- Building positive relationships
- Walking along side people
- Listening and responding to families' needs
- Offering place based programs and warm referrals to support services



How do the Children's Contact Services work?

- Priority for child-focused services
- Safety of children as paramount
- Preparation for CCS for children: introduction to program
- Preparation for CCS for parents: Intake, screening and assessment, introduction to program, expectations, contact arrangements
- Regular reviews for both parents and children



Promoting children's security

- A focus on child's safety and child's voice in service delivery
- Consistency in processes and procedures in CCS
- Staff with skills, knowledge and expertise in working with children in CCS
- Ongoing review with children and families



Children/families using the CCS

- Require Family Court Orders or a Parenting Plan/ Agreement
- May have experienced challenges/risk factors/trauma necessitating the court to seek close monitoring of the child and parent/Care giver
- May require support with reconciliation/reconnection
- Are assessed for suitability for the service
- May be declined an ongoing service if assessed that the child may be adversely affected by contact arrangements



The families' complex issues

Families who use the CCS may have experienced or continue to experience the following:

- Family and Domestic Violence
- Drug and Alcohol issues
- Mental Health issues
- Trauma experiences
- Poor or non-existent attachment relationships
- Grief & confusion; Loss of relationships following separation
- Insecurity and change
- Resistant-refusal dynamics



Children's exposure to adverse situations

Can result in:

- Less ability to articulate and manage emotions
- Inability to rely on or trust parents for physical, psychological or emotional safety
- Child feeling responsible for supporting parent
- Child being less able to cope with situations or understand own perceptions
- Poorer developmental outcomes (such as education, friendships, mental health), adjustment issues
- Ongoing trauma responses

(Greenberg, Fick & Schneider, 2012)



Children's experiences in CCS

Whilst many children have positive experiences in the CCS a number of children may struggle with the following:

- Conflicted loyalties
- Exposure to different perceptions of reality
- Presented with extreme views of relationships
- Presented with accounts of events that do not fit with their own experiences of a parent
- Fears



These dynamics make it difficult for child to deal with complex emotions and to form on-going healthy attachment relationships



Children's experiences in CCS

- Having a level of control over the environment
- Opportunity for a relationship with a parent they long to see
- Time spent with a parent can be healing and assist recovery from traumatic experiences
- A timely opportunity to maintain an attachment that may otherwise be lost



How we view children

- Important to have a philosophical stance on how you view children in the world.
- We recognise children as credible beings who have agency, skills and emotional wisdom
- That with meaningful efforts to talk to children, we discover levels of maturity and insight in the views they reflect
- Their voice can direct us to advocate for the change they need in their family
- Transforming children from invisible objects into subjects with legitimate voices of their own (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011)



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What is attachment

- Innate and primary motivating force, seeking and maintaining contact with significant others is essential across the life span.
- Offers a safe haven
- Presence of a positive attachment figure provides comfort and security
- The perceived inaccessibility of such figures creates distress
- Therefore the proximity to a loved one is the natural antidote to anxiety and vulnerability
- Attachment offers a secure base from which to explore and adapt to the world.
- Accessibility and responsiveness builds secure healthy bonds.
(Johnson, 2005)



Attachment

Three "S's" that equal security -
Seen, Soothed, Safe



Attachment styles

Avoidant	Ambivalent	Disorganised	Secure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Superficial indifference - Fail to express need to be soothed - No desire for proximity and appeared deaf to affectionate overtures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Amplified expressions of attachment; disturbing pre-occupation with mother's availability. - Distress from separations was severe and relief upon reunion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attachment figure is experienced as a safe haven and source of danger - Frightened without solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience distress @ departure and be sufficiently reassured by return to make continued play exploration

(Wallin, 2007)

Attachment experiences of children in CCS

Secure: confidence in connections with loved ones and an ability to regulate distress of separation

Insecure Avoidant: Physiological distress, suppressed delay of emotions

Insecure (Ambivalent/Resistant): Extreme distress on separation with observed clingy, angry protests to loved ones on reunion and difficulties in soothing.



How attachment styles contribute to dynamics of relationship

→ Felt Security

Intergenerational patterns of attachment

Attachment Pre-separation

Attachment During separation

Attachment Post-separation

Attachment influences

Positives:

Quality time
Felt safety
Sensitive parenting

Negatives:

FDV / Child abuse
Absent parenting (psychological/physical)/
Insensitive parenting

Negative Separation processes influences attachment security

Pre positive attachments less need for repair



How CCS supports positive attachments?

- Guiding parents in being child focused and listening deeply to needs of children
- Assisting parents/children to understand change can occur
- Assisting parents to address their issues with support services
- Providing opportunities for both parents and children to express feelings and thoughts.
- Role model positive interaction and communication for parents and children.
- Working with the tension between acknowledging child's voice (for example no contact) and the importance of a safe parental relationship

- Case Example



Referrals to support services

- For children with attachment challenges, therapeutic support is often indicated.
- Therefore, referrals to support services such as Supporting Children After Separation Program (SCASP) or child counselling programs are made to assist children in CCS



A therapeutic model offered by Anglicare

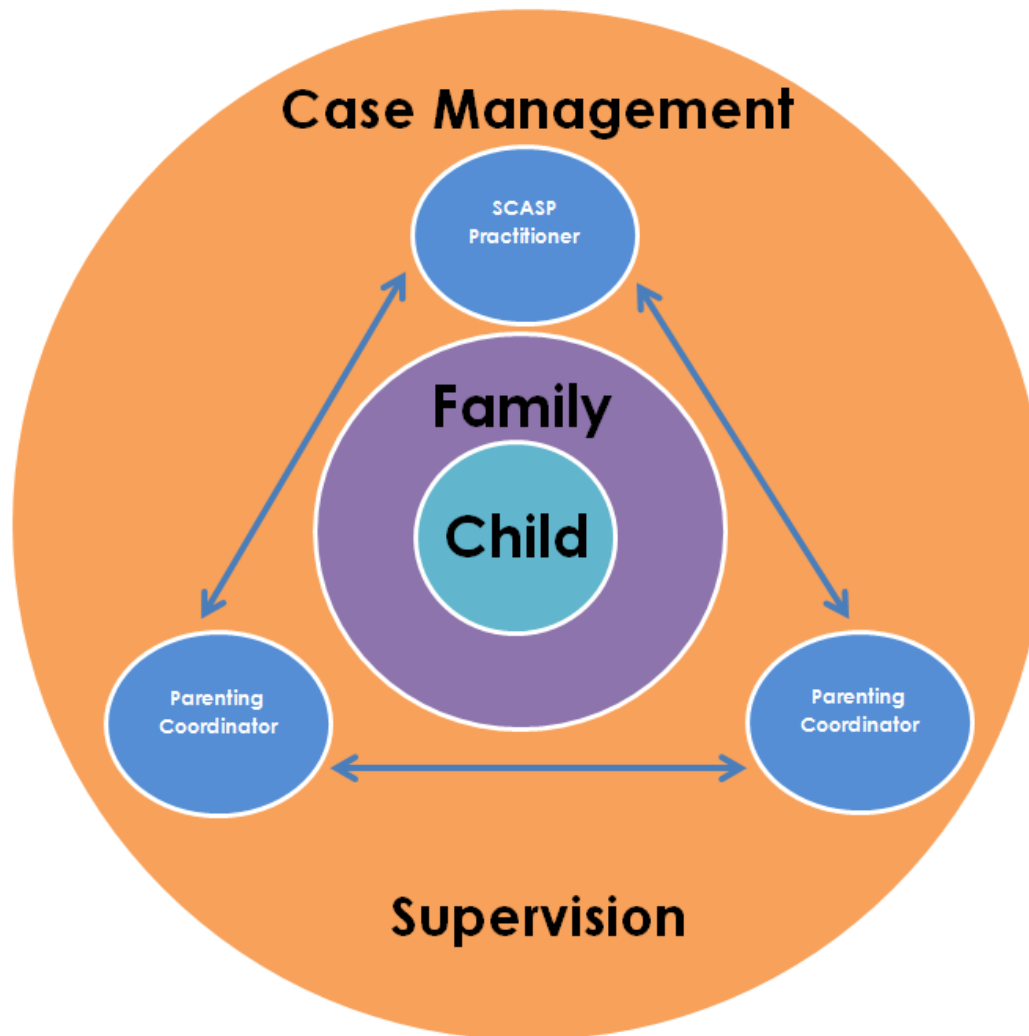
What is it?

- Child inclusive counselling for children and parents who are in the CCS
- Collaborative and systemic approach
- Provided in "non-admissable" programs

Importantly has RISK ASSESSMENT as an on-going feature of the work of all practitioners



Practice Model



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Theoretical underpinnings

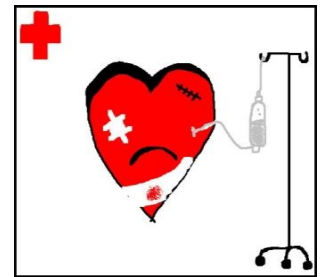
The support for the children and family is underpinned by the following:

- Attachment theory
- Trauma-informed practice
- Systems theory
- Person- centred practice
- Child- focussed and child-inclusive practice
- Child directive and non-directive play therapy
- Psycho-education



The goals of the therapeutic process for the child

- Maintaining a focus on the needs of the child, at his/her pace
- Assisting the child in expressing his/her own complex and independent feelings
- Assisting the child to have healthy participation in decisions that affect them
- Enhancing the child's chance of maintaining or rebuilding attachment relationships with the parent



The goals of the therapeutic process for the child (Continued)

- Equip children with healthy coping skills; not avoidance
- Improve children's skills and self-esteem
 - Increases capacity to cope with adversities
 - Promote child safety

An important process for the child and separate and apart from whether a "reunification" with the parent takes place



The goals of the therapeutic process with parents

- To assist parents to focus on the needs of the child
- To build stronger attachment relationships with child
- To assist parents to identify, acknowledge and take responsibility for factors that have adversely impacted the child and his responses.
- To support parents to manage own emotions and behaviours
- To maintain objectivity, a balanced perspective and empathy
- To refer parents to other appropriate support



Working with children

- Child drives the session.
- Listen to child's story through therapeutic means (e.g. art & play, sand tray) at his/her place.
- Assist child in exploring and expressing needs , wishes and hopes
- Explore what relationships mean and identify possible ways for safe ways of interacting
- Provide sense of hope for change whilst listening and acknowledging fears
- Explore ways of connection with child/parent in spite of absence (Letter writing, exchange photos) & positive coping strategies



Working with the parents

- Listen to the parent's story through therapeutic engagement
- Identify issues and explore different ways of interacting and engaging with children
- Assist parent to work at the child's pace and focus on the child's needs, wishes and hopes.
- Support parents to hear challenging information/feedback



Challenges for children & parents

- May be resistance & fear from parents and children
- Relationship building takes time
- Pressure from parents for outcomes
- Pressure from courts, legal personnel for quicker outcomes



Case study

Smith Family

4 children: 12yo female, 10yo male, 8yo female, 5 yo female

Lives with mother

No contact with father for 2 years

Family & domestic violence observed by children

Referred for CCS



Children's stories

"He needs to apologise for what he has done"

- 12yo - felt betrayed, angry at father for leaving the family and for hurting mum
- 10yo - felt scared and angry at his father for hurting mum
- 8yo - missed her father and felt worried that her father will hurt mum again.
- 5yo - felt that her father was a "bad" person



Children's issues

- All children strongly aligned to the mother
- Children were very loyal to each other
- Three of the children missed their father although ruptured
- Loss and grief issues for all children
- Children experienced lack of trust in father
- All children expressed the need for their father to apologise (for leaving the family, for hurting mum)



Dad's story

- Referred to parenting coordinator
- Was provided opportunity to share his story
- Assisted father to explore his abusive behaviour and the impact on the children and former partner
- Discussed his relationship with his children pre-separation and his role in their lives
- Assisted him to consider his parenting role post-separation and ways he can reestablish stronger relationships with his children
- Provided psycho education regarding child development needs and assisted him to focus on hurts impacting his children



Mum's story

- Referred to the parenting coordinator
- Was provided opportunity to share her story
- Acknowledged her focus on children
- Encouraged her to explore her fears/anxieties for the children
- Assisted her to focus on her children's needs in having a safe relationship with their father
- Referrals to domestic violence services



Intervention

- Work at child's pace, and in exploring relationships in the family and their wishes and hopes for their dad and mum
- Identify their hurts and named the grief
- Assist and explore each child's independent needs and emotions and his/her wish for reconnection
- Each child decided to describe his/her thoughts and feelings surrounding the hurt experienced to their dad
- Planned for a group reunification



Apology letter from Dad



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Response from child



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Responses from other children



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Responses from other children (continue)



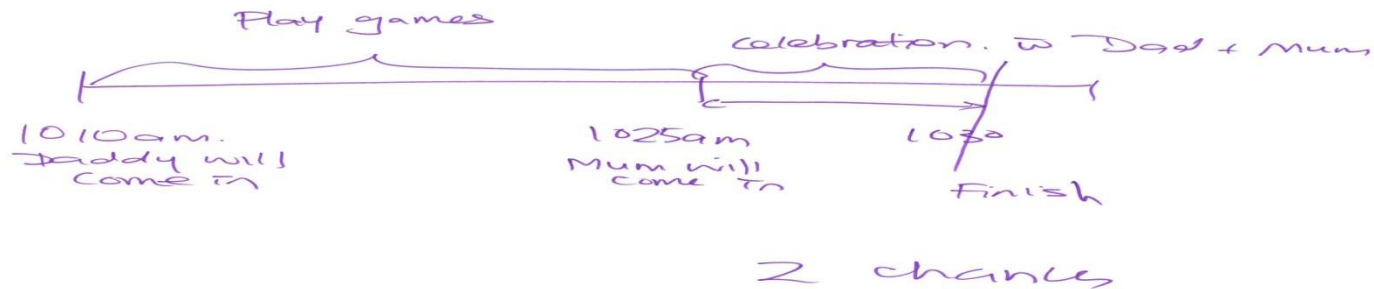
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The reunification

- At the children's pace
- Children came up with rules and activities they would like to engage with their father
- Safety signals explored
- Both mum & dad to come into the session supported by their parenting coordinators
- Therapist act as time keeper



Achievements

- Hearing the child & attending to the children's needs
- Parents' preparedness allowed the voice of the children to be heard
- Acknowledgement to the loyalty, but also hearing their independent views
- Increasing a parent's sensitivities towards the child and building a relationship
- Building of a stronger attachment relationship



Father's feedback

It helped me very much in building good rapport with my children, improve my relationship with my children



Children thrive best in safe healthy environments where parents are responsive and sensitive to their needs.

The Children's Contact Services aims to promote positive attachment relationships that provide children and their families with the 3"S's"



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The opportunity to be
SEEN

The opportunity to be
SOOTHED

The opportunity to feel
SAFE

