

Early Systemic Intervention with Resistance-Refusal Dynamics

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Copies of Handouts and Additional Resources

<http://lyngreenbergphd.com/>

What Goes Wrong in these Cases?

- Focus on blame
- Focus on adults' allegations
- Ignoring developmental issues
- Therapy is too late
- Therapy is poorly structured
- Poor follow up

Risky Practices

- One-sided treatment
- Interpretive play therapy
- Failure to consider multiple hypotheses
- Neglecting developmental issues
- Orienting treatment around adult allegations

Resistance-Refusal Dynamics

- Multiple possibilities/components
 - Developmental issues
 - Legitimate parenting concerns
 - Child characteristics
 - Traumatic History
 - Conflict behavior, external influence
- Components are *not* mutually exclusive

Impact of Resistance-Refusal Dynamics

- Distort or delay emotional development
- Long term emotional adjustment
- Regressive symptoms
- Poor coping skills
- Relationship disturbances
- Some children more resilient than others

Degrees of Research Support

- Evidence Based vs.
- Evidence Informed vs.
- Failing to consider available evidence vs.
- Inappropriate extrapolation
- Disregarding available evidence vs.
- “Flying by the seat of our pants”

Adapted from Sexton, T., Gordon, K. C., Gurman, A., Lebow, J., Holtzworth-Munroe, A., & Johnson, S. (2011). Guidelines for classifying evidence based treatments in couple and family therapy. *Family Process, 50*, 377–392.

Key Findings to Know..

- Detailed in Greenberg and Lebow (2016)
- Compelling consistency on key findings
- Evidence for intervention with behaviors we see
- How much adaptation is needed
- Resources from child's daily lives

Children's Outcome is Related To

- Coping *Effectiveness* (healthy coping skills)
- Coping *Efficacy* (belief that what one says or does will work)
- Access to healthy relationships
- Stability
- Authoritative parenting
- Access to normative activities
- Management of developmental risks

Pedro-Carroll, J. L. (2005). Fostering resilience in the aftermath of divorce: The role of evidence-based programs for children. *Family Court Review, 43*, 52–64.

Pedro-Carroll, J. L., Sandler, I. N., & Wolchik, S. A. (2005). Special issue on prevention: Research, policy, and evidence-based practice: Forging interdisciplinary partnerships in the courts to promote prevention initiative for children and families. *Family Court Review, 43*(1), 18–21.

Factors We Can Impact, That Are Related to Outcome (Adapted from Pedro-Carroll, 2005)

Individual Factors

- Active coping style
- Accurate Attributions
- Hope for the Future
- Realistic appraisal of control
- Effective coping skills

Factors We Can Impact, That Are Related to Outcome (Adapted from Pedro-Carroll, 2005)

Family Factors:

- Protection from Interparental Conflict
- Psychological well-being of Children,
- Solid, supportive parent-child relationships,
- Economic Stability,
- Authoritative Parenting
- Household Stability and Structure

Factors We Can Impact, That Are Related to Outcome (Adapted from Pedro-Carroll, 2005)

Extrafamilial Factors:

- Supportive relationships with positive adult role models
- Support network (family, school, community)
- Preventative Interventions providing support and skills training
- Effective Therapy

How are these children coping?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Edb9plpHO7k>

<https://youtu.be/Edb9plpHO7k>

Resistance-Refusal Dynamics (Young Children)

- Typically don't repeat hostile narratives independently
- Greater patchwork of strengths and weaknesses
- Regressive symptoms
- Preschool/kindergarten may be critical
- Abilities that support parenting transitions are also *globally* adaptive

Critical Issues

- Developmental regression (often to the nonverbal)
- Impacted by Adults' emotional reactions
- Vulnerable to adult interpretations
- Promoting language critical

Early Signs of Trouble

- Developmental regression
- Marked differences depending on who is present
- Conflict at transitions
- Resistance to practical solutions
- Inability to support developmental progress

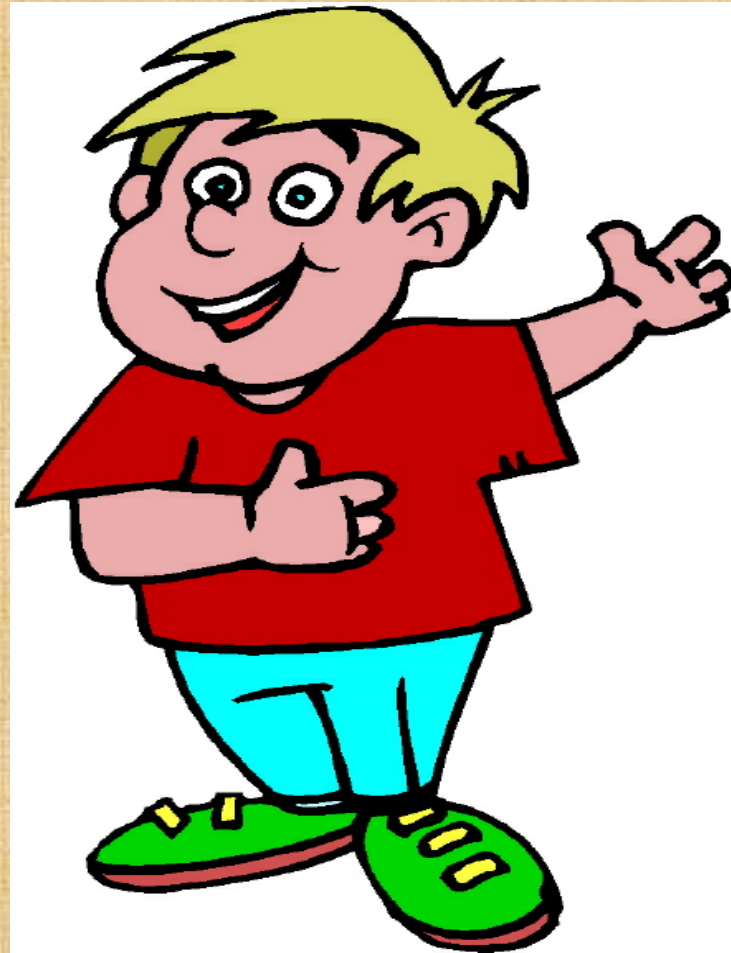
Resistance-Refusal Dynamics (Cont.)

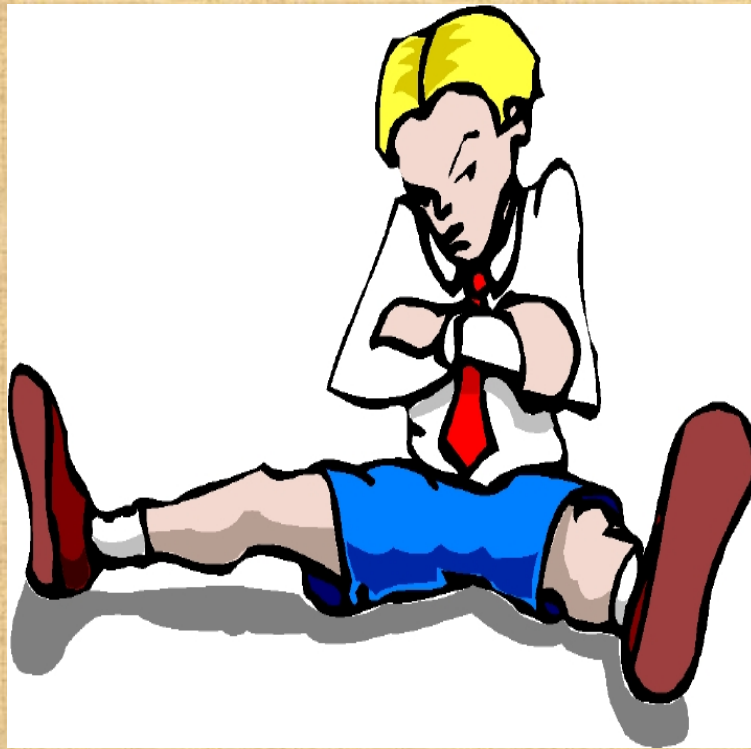
- School age children:
 - Accustomed to complying with external rules/demands
 - Can respond to clear limits
 - Often involved in external activities
 - Closer to peers in social behavior if problem not entrenched

Early Signs of Trouble

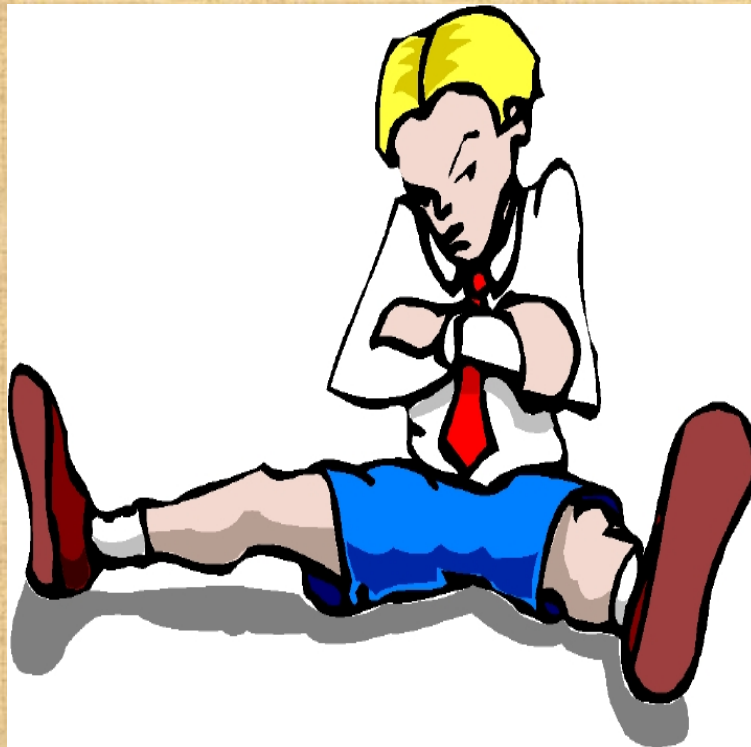
- Developmental regression
- Rejection of previously enjoyed activities
- Guarded communication, changing stories
- Inappropriate behavior when both parents present
- Marked behavioral changes depending on who is present
- Rejection of skills assistance, practical solutions
- Stress-related medical complaints

**“I really think
my
psychological
best interests
would be best
served by 50-
50 custody.”**

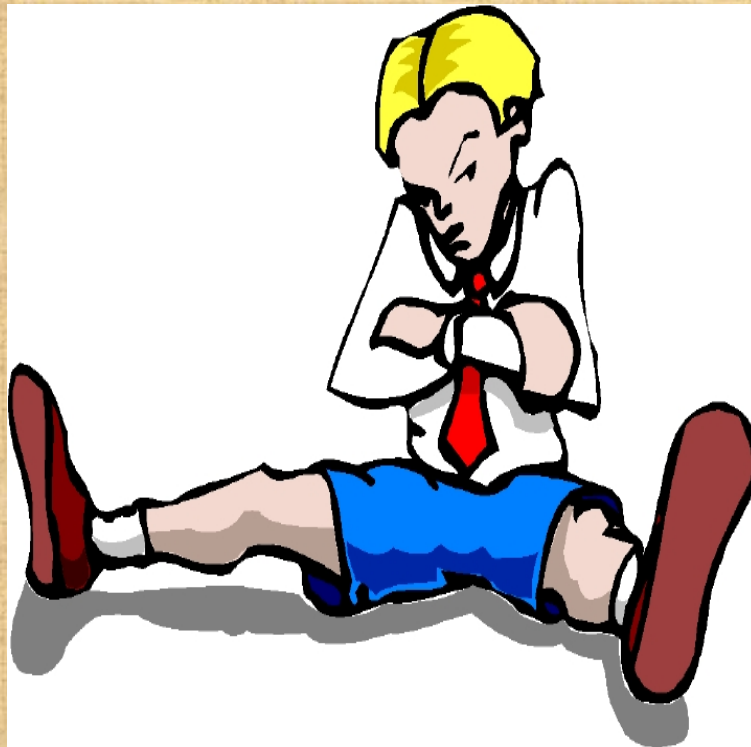




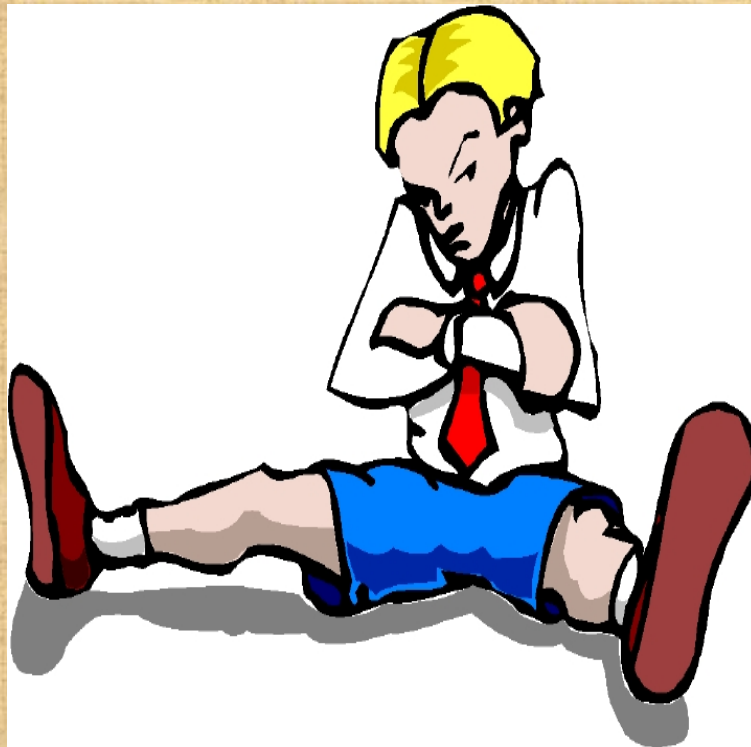
“I hate my Mom. I
want to live with
my Dad.”



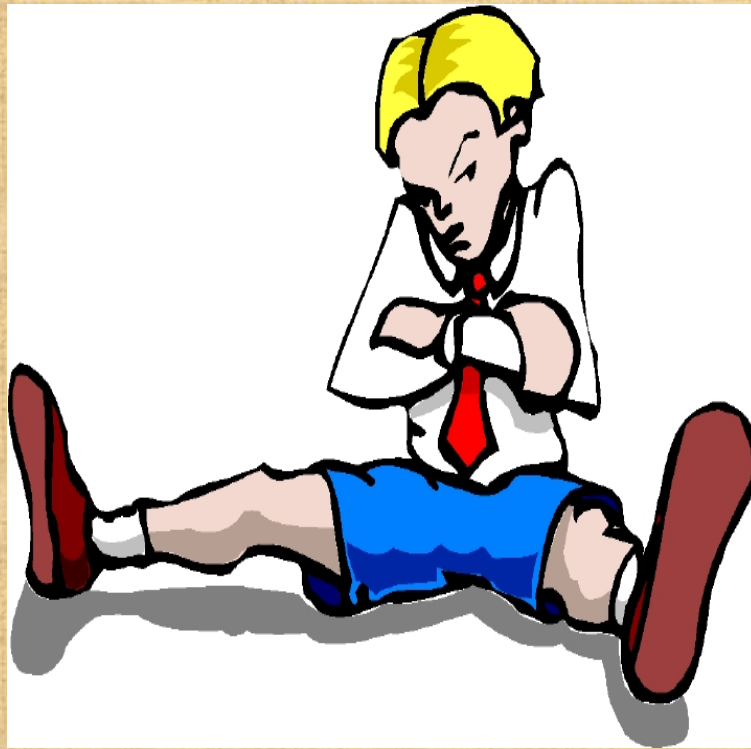
“She’s mean.”



“She never lets me
do anything.”



“Like last night, she made me turn off my computer game right in the middle, and she yelled at me too.”



“I was supposed to be doing my math. I hate math.”

Resistance-Refusal Dynamics (Cont.)

- Adolescents (not entrenched):
 - Irreconcilable tension between family conflict and normal development
 - Can respond to clear limits and *appropriate* family therapy
 - External activities are a resource
 - Prefer avoidance
 - Prompt intervention critical

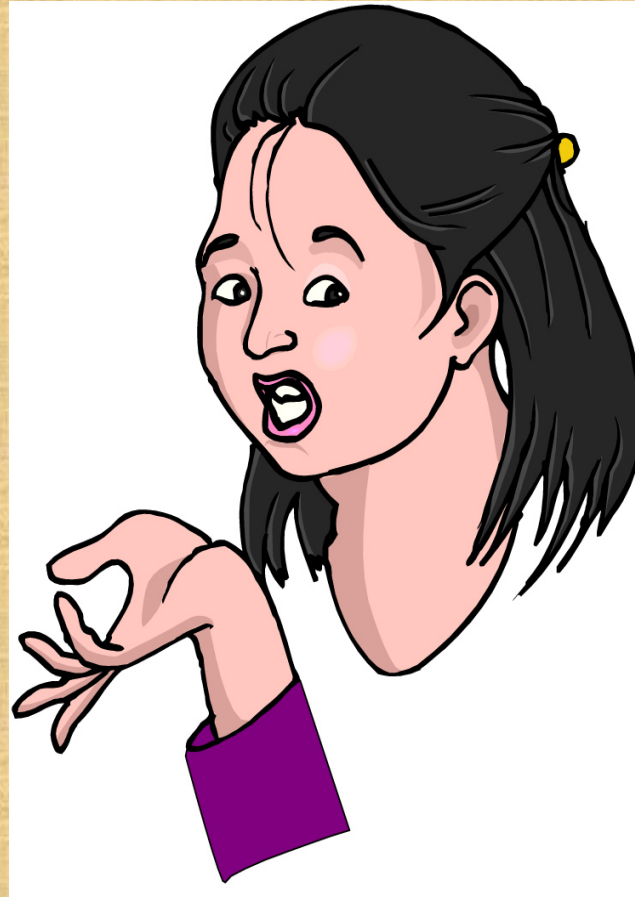
Confusing issues with Adolescents

- They may have their own concerns
- May appear more mature than they are
- Vested with decision-making that they aren't ready for
- Need to resolve independent issues with parents
- Uneven mood, temperament may be normal
- Adults abandon normal expectations

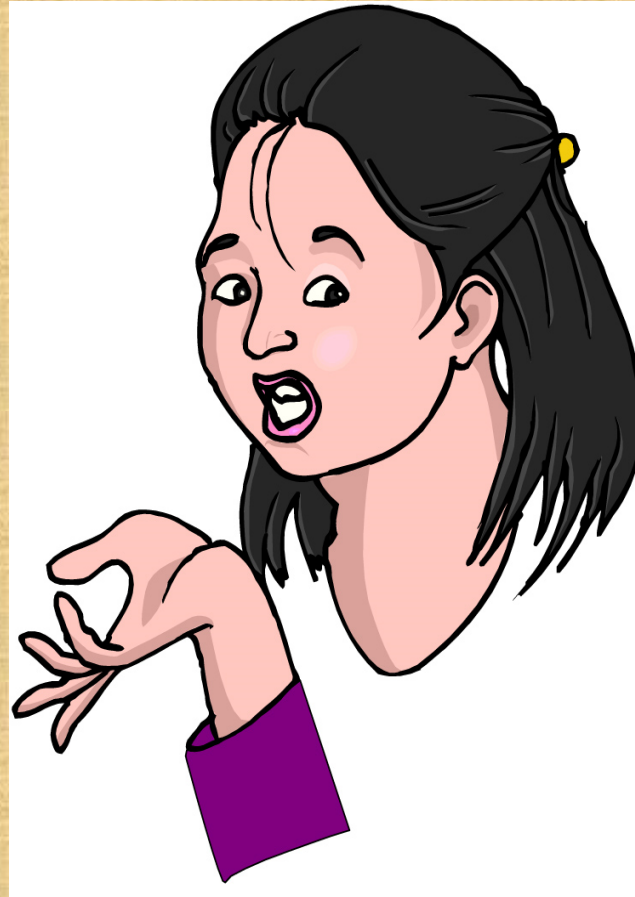
Early Signs of Trouble

- Developmental regression
- Inability to articulate own complaints
- Rejection of problem solving, coping skills
- Abnormal social behavior
- Parent won't set limits
- Physical complaints
- Risk of entrenched behavior

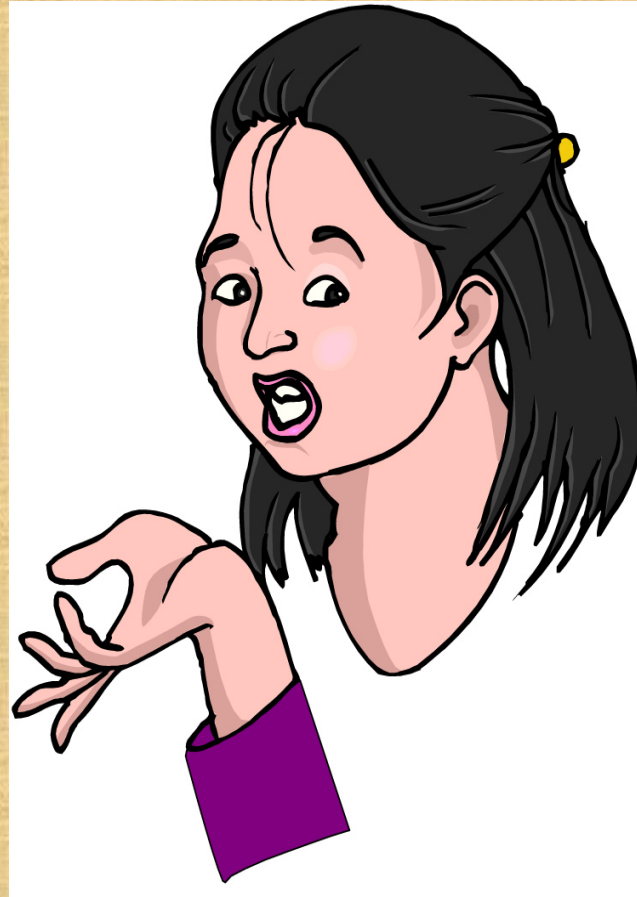
**I have lots of
friends.
I'm in a club
every day after
school and
next year I'm
running for
class
President.**



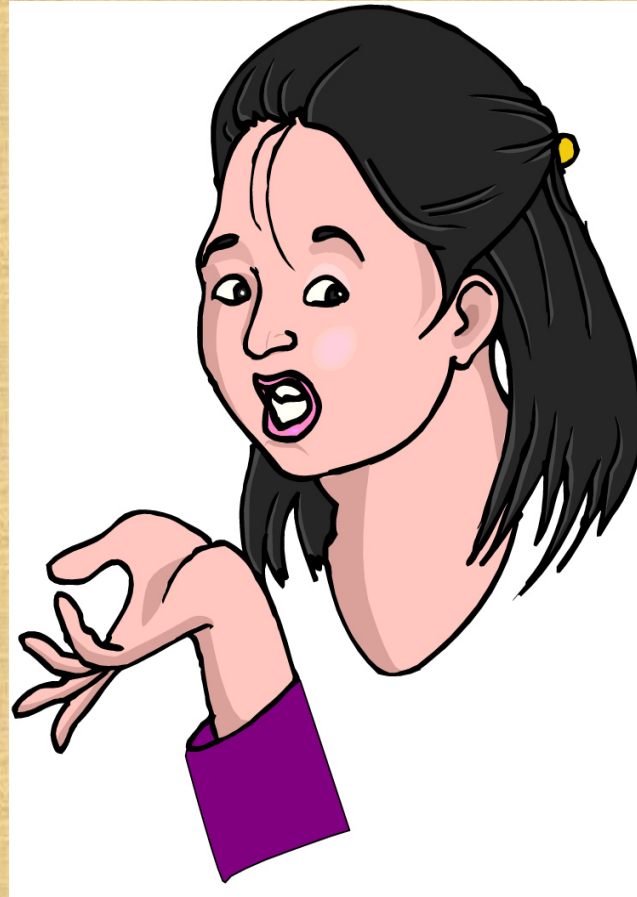
**I really hate
my Dad
because he
won't let me
move to New
York with
Mom...no, I
won't miss my
friends at all.**



**“Why are you
asking me all
these stupid
questions?
Don’t you
believe me?”**



**“Why are you
asking me all
these stupid
questions?
Don’t you
believe me?”**



Trauma-Sensitive, Non-Suggestive Approach

- Children often exhibit behaviors that *may* result from trauma
- While allegations are under investigation, therapist's role is to support healthy coping skills
- Trauma may come from multiple sources
- Active consideration of multiple hypotheses
- Education to parents re: multiple meanings of children's behavior
- Specific instructions for therapeutic tasks

Coping-Focused Approach is Trauma Sensitive

- Strengthen independent abilities
- Develop independent emotional resources
- Language of feelings
- Graduated practice on non-contested issues
- Grounding in daily activities
- Aids accurate understanding

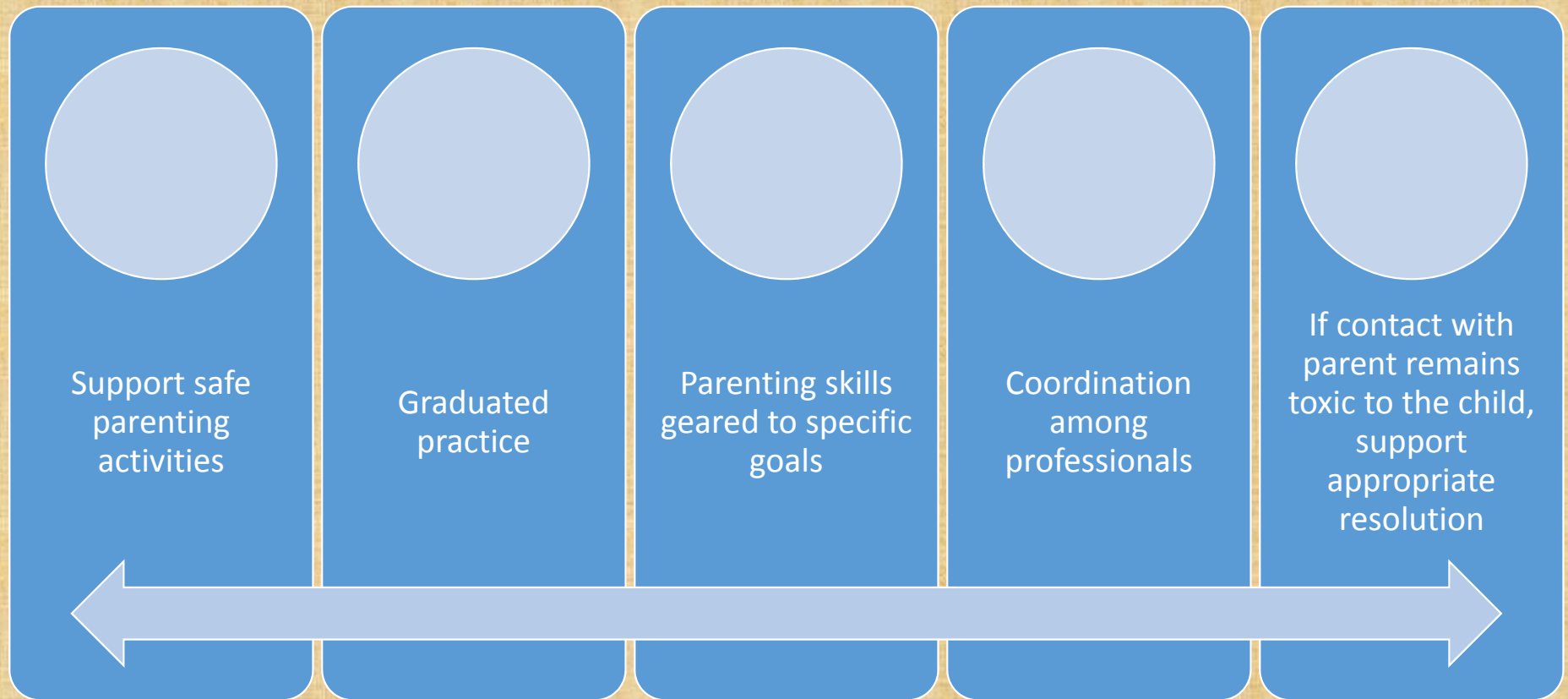
Responding to Children's Statements

- May be unusually direct
- Avoid tainting other investigations
- Explore *current* sources of anxiety and stress
- Equip with skills for current structure
- Explore reasonableness of anxiety/fear
- Structure for therapeutic tasks
- Reinforce age-appropriate behavior

Progression in Treatment..

- Behavioral expectations
- Language of feelings, descriptions
 - Use non-loaded, generalized materials
 - Multiple hypotheses, constantly
 - Protocol for exploring alternate possibilities
 - Remember the child's outside life!
- Initial practice with parents in non-contested interactions
- Parent's knowledge of child's activities helpful

Progression in Parent Interventions



Maximizing Resources

- Single specialist
- Teach front line therapists.
- When intervention is early enough
 - Nonprofessional resources can aid treatment
 - External professionals can address specific issues
- Cheaper than litigation
- Engaging qualified professionals, clear orders
- Judicial officer setting financial priorities

“The judge decided; I’m here to help you make it work...”

Clear Underlying Orders Aid Treatment

- Interim parenting plan
- Details and limits in restraining orders
- Maintain parental roles where possible (i.e. public and school events if safe)
- Travel or removing child from area
- Telephone or web visits
- Detailed order re: exchange conditions, including holidays, and procedures around the child’s activities
- Expectations re: cooperation with treatment, clear treatment orders
- Areas of parental authority

Create Developmentally-Appropriate Therapeutic Tasks

- Within and outside of therapy
- Create tasks that are difficult for the parent (or child) to reasonably object to
- Use opportunities created by school or outside activities
- Work through the details of objections
- Protective structure
- Set limits
- Reality testing

Analyzing and Selecting Activities

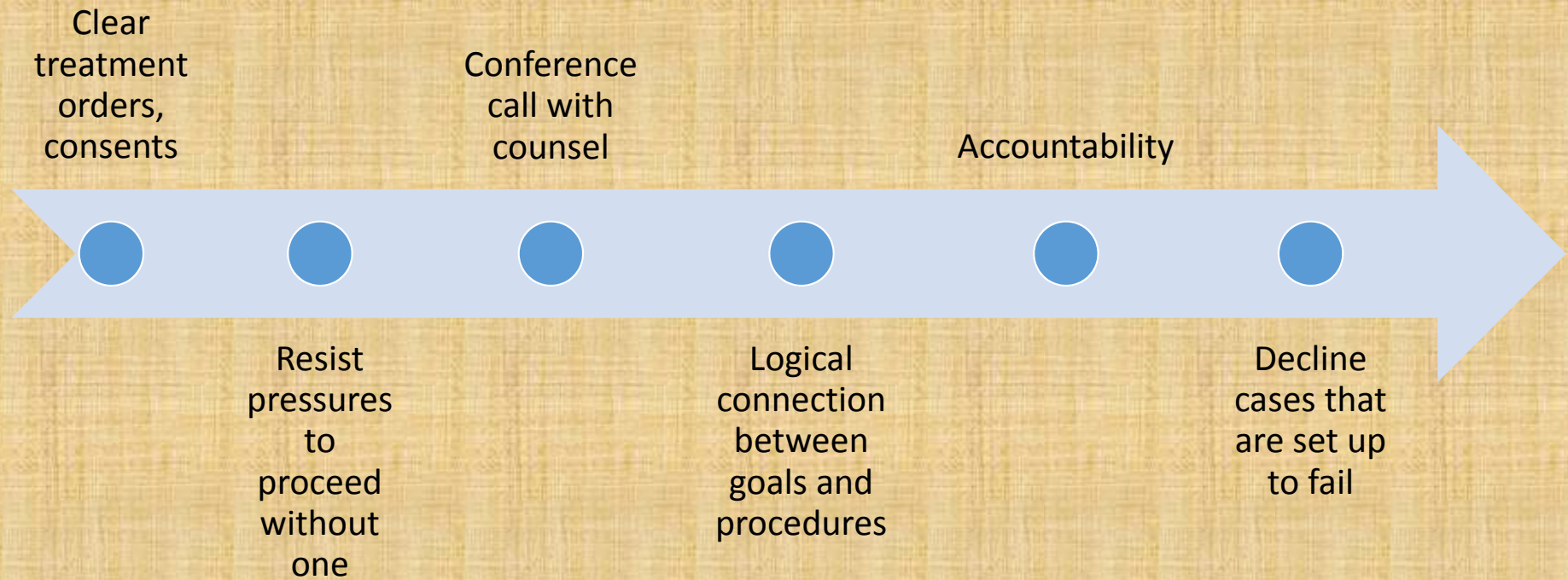
- What developmental tasks will it help the child achieve?
- What level of interaction is required or permitted?
- Match to:
 - Parents' and childrens' abilities
 - Status of relationship
 - Available resources, activity structure
- Is the court willing to help?
- Establishing contingencies

Moran, J., Sullivan, T., & Sullivan, M. (2015). *Overcoming the co-parenting trap: Essential parenting skills when a child resists a parent*. Natnik, MA: Overcoming Barriers.; Greenberg, Doi Fick and Schnider, 2012; also in press; D. Austin 1982, 2012

Therapeutic Interventions Versus Parenting Plan Assessments

- What questions can only be answered with an assessment?
- How extensive does the assessment need to be?
- What behavioral data can be gathered through treatment focused on daily issues?
- Can assessment be concurrent with intervention?
- Financial resources – where should the money be spent?

Structure and Interventions: Children and Families



The Therapist Can (and Should) Assist with Specific Behaviors to Comply with Orders...

Specific dialogue

Structured routines, decision-making

Rules and contracts, email confirmation, detail

Recommendations to parents for better support of child

Feedback regarding what is and isn't working

The Therapist should also be able to:

- Ability to articulate limits of role
- Generate clear, behavioral data
- Maintain objectivity
- Consider multiple possibilities

Preparation of Parents....

- Direction from the Court to cooperate
- Apply to both parents
- Lawyers: Help your client see advantages
- Clear rules
- Assess for “special rules” vs. poor limit setting overall
- Coordinate with parents’ therapists

Why/How Should I Talk My Client Into This?

- Managing issues early
- Refuting allegations
- Exposing the other parent's faults
- Getting help for your own client if necessary

How Does a Parent Accept Responsibility?

- Discussion of contested issues (i.e. abuse allegations) may need to be deferred while investigations/assessments are completed
- Support of healthy child behavior
- Perceptions vs. literal memory
- Contracting for future behavior
- Permission to tell therapist what did and did not work
- Coordination with parent's provider

Practice and Follow-Through on Non-Contested Issues

- Parents gain understanding about the child's daily life and activities
- Tailoring restraining orders and responsibilities of aligned parent
- Regular contact between both parents and therapist
- Spend part of each child's session discussing daily life and issues
- Discussion and therapeutic contracts re issues in each parent-child relationship
- Detailed, careful follow-through

Changing Our Thinking...

- Details of Daily Life Matter
- Attention at every level may produce meaningful information for the Court
- Detail in treatment orders
- Focus on development
- Addressing the issues early
- Getting initial orders in place
- Resources for Rapid Response

Use available tools

- Children involved in many systems
- Daily activities provide resources and sources of data
- Between-session tools (Family Wizard, Coparenter)
- Addressing training gaps

Systemic Intervention Planning

- What does the child need to learn/master?
- What activities or conditions can help the child get there?
- What developmentally regressive influences do we need to address, or protect the child from?
- How do we build resilience in the child?
- What assessment questions
 - MUST be answered beforehand
 - Can be addressed while intervention is ongoing

Additional Handouts & Resources

- Association of Family and Conciliation Courts Guidelines
www.afccnet.org
- Additional articles available at:
 - <http://lyngreenbergphd.com/publications-and-presentations/>
 - <http://lyngreenbergphd.com/resources-for-professionals/>
 - <http://lyngreenbergphd.com/resources-for-parents/>
- Additional Handouts
- Or email admin@lyngreenbergphd.com

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