

D. The Effects of Maltreatment on School-Age Children

Conceptual Framework

The primary developmental tasks and milestones in each of the four developmental domains for children age six to 12 are as follows:

Physical Development of the School-Age Child

Physical growth in children between the ages of six to 12 is slow and steady. Growth spurts do not normally occur during this period. The child grows an average of three to four inches per year.

School-age children are active, energetic, and in perpetual motion. They rarely stand still or walk when they can run, jump, tumble, skip, hop, or climb.

School-age children can be easily involved in activities that promote the development and coordination of complex gross motor and perceptual-motor skills. Physical activity is directed into both formal and informal games and sports, such as soccer, basketball, softball, gymnastics, dancing, hopscotch, jumping rope, riding bikes, running, or turning cartwheels in the yard.

Fine motor skills are refined and practiced through painting and drawing, crafts, using tools, building models, playing musical instruments, and other activities that require the use of the hands.

Motor and perceptual-motor skills become increasingly well integrated during this period. School-age children can perform complex maneuvers with apparent ease, such as riding a bike without holding on, skate boarding, playing the piano, and balancing on a beam.

The development of motor skills may be influenced by cultural factors. Cultures that value physical strength and skill tend to reinforce activities that involve gross motor abilities. In some cultures, girls are discouraged from engaging in active, "rough and tumble" physical play. Cultures that place greater value on cognitive and social rather than physical skills may tend to discourage active physical play. American culture expects children to sit for long hours at a school desk. Combined with the prevalence of television as a primary recreational activity, many school-age children in this country are considered to be physically "unfit."

School-age children are naturally physical. If given the opportunity, they enjoy using their bodies in the performance of complex activities, and will create opportunities to do so.

Cognitive Development of the School-Age Child

Dramatic changes in cognition occur between the ages of five and seven. The changes are so predictable and prevalent that they have been acknowledged by nearly all developmental investigators, and are referred to as the "five-to-seven shift" [Gardner 1978]. These changes are qualitative, not quantitative; there are distinct differences between the cognitive abilities of preschool and school-age children that cannot be accounted for solely by increased experience. These changes are thought to reflect a "developmental leap," in which new abilities emerge without obvious precursors.

Many theorists suggest that significant changes in the organization of the child's brain permit the appearance of these new skills, specifically, further development of the cerebral cortex, the portion of the brain that controls most higher cognitive functions [Gardner 1978]. Research has demonstrated that these changes occur in cultures that are markedly different from each other in values, norms, and educational practices, further suggesting a strong maturational

component. These changes can be best illustrated by comparing the cognition of school-aged children with that of preschoolers in several cognitive skill areas.

Language

When compared with preschool-aged children, school-age children demonstrate major advances in their use of language. Preschoolers take pleasure simply in using language for its own sake; they enjoy learning, practicing, and perfecting words, and they often talk to themselves. They enter into conversations by posing seemingly irrelevant or "off the subject" verbalizations, and they may ask questions to maintain the conversation, without being particularly interested in the answers. Conversations between preschool children have often been referred to as collective monologues.

School-age children, by comparison, use language primarily as a tool to communicate, to promote mutual understanding, and to enhance interpersonal relationships. Their use of language is, therefore, interactive. They listen to what other people say, and consider these communications carefully. They also ask questions when they don't understand, and they continue asking questions until they are satisfied with the answer. They are also able to differentiate relevant from irrelevant information in a conversation.

School-age children also use language to guide their activities and to direct others. Their enhanced understanding of the relationships between objects and events enables them to describe events logically and sequentially. They can request instructions or directions, and they have the ability to carry them out precisely.

Conversations with school-age children are mutual, and school-age children are invested in the communication. They no longer engage adults in conversation just to provide themselves with an opportunity to talk and practice words. Subsequently, it is possible for an adult to have a discussion with the child, since

the child is interested both in giving and receiving information, and in exchanging thoughts and opinions. The school-age child considers the needs of the listener in the conversation, and will try to provide information the listener will find useful or interesting. For the first time, parents can effectively use explanation and reasoning as a discipline strategy by engaging their children in a discussion of their actions, and the logical consequences of those actions.

The Emergence of Perspective Taking

Preschool children do not recognize that other people have perspectives which might be different from their own. School-age children have begun to develop the ability to understand other people's perspectives. This ability emerges in rudimentary form at the end of the preschool years, and develops in stages throughout childhood and adolescence.

Young school-age children can often understand how other people feel, but they will become confused if their own perspective conflicts with another person's. They cannot grasp that two contradictory perspectives can coexist, and that both may be valid.

By age eight to 10, children can recognize the difference between a person's behavior and intent. For example, if Dad accidentally steps on three-year-old Ted's hand, Ted will be angry at Dad for hurting him. When Ted is eight or nine, he'll understand that his father didn't mean to hurt him, and he won't be angry. He will understand that his father's intentions are different from his actions.

Caseworkers can help some school-aged abused and neglected children to accept, to a degree, that their parents didn't intend to harm them. Some children will be able to acknowledge that "My mom didn't take care of me because she is sick," or, "My dad got angry because he lost his job." The child can be helped to not blame herself. However, the school-age child cannot yet empathize with the parent's feelings, or fully understand the conditions that led to the maltreatment.

The development of true insight occurs with the development of formal operational thinking, which is characteristic of adolescents and adults.

Throughout the school-age years, children become increasingly aware of and able to consider the needs and feelings of others. By the age of 10 or 11, children have the ability to listen to each other's points of view and discuss them, and when their views are in conflict, they can often identify solutions that consider what both children want. For example, when Sally wanted to play soccer, and Toni wanted to play in the tree house, they agreed to play soccer today and play in the tree house tomorrow.

Having the ability to understand others' perspectives does not guarantee that children will act in unselfish ways. It simply means they have developed cognitively to a level where they can accurately recognize, and consider, other peoples' points of view.

Development of Concrete Operations

Concrete operations is the name given by Jean Piaget to the stage of cognitive development that is characteristic of school-age children. The child has a relatively accurate perception of objects, events, and relationships between them, as long as these are concrete; that is, observable or touchable. Through observation the child learns about the nature of objects, and the causes and effects of events. For example, the child might observe that when a glass is dropped, it usually breaks. However, when a plastic cup is dropped, it bounces. The child would conclude, properly, that glass is more likely to break when dropped, than plastic. The child can generalize his knowledge about the fragility of glass to other forms, such as vases, picture frames, and eyeglasses, and can adapt his behavior to prevent breakage.

The school-age child's thinking is generally rational and logical. Magical and imaginative thinking are understood to be "pretend," and they are clearly

differentiated in the child's mind from what is "real." School-age children no longer interweave fantasy and reality in their conversations or play, as do preschoolers. They no longer have imaginary friends.

The school-age child can recognize similarities and differences between objects and people, as long as the attributes are visible and concrete. For example, a younger school-age child might say an apple and an orange are similar because they are both round, or that you eat them. A child of this age might not understand that apples and oranges belong to an abstract class of objects called "fruit." Similarly, a dog and a lion might be considered alike because they have four legs and fur. The child might have difficulty recognizing the similarity between a tree and a fly, and might insist that they aren't alike, or suggest that they are both found outside. The concept of "living things" is too abstract for most school-age children.

The school-age child has also developed the ability to consider and reflect upon herself and her attributes. She will perceive herself in concrete terms, however, and would describe herself to others as, "I'm a girl, I have brown eyes, I play the piano, and I like school." She is less likely to consider abstract qualities, such as, "I'm friendly," or, "I'm artistic."

The school-age child is able to consider two thoughts simultaneously. A preschool child might think, "I'm hungry," and would request something to eat. The school-age child might think "I'm hungry," and at the same time think, "If I eat something now, Mom will be mad because I won't eat dinner," and consider both perspectives in making a decision of whether, and how much, to eat.

The child has a good understanding of concepts of space, time, and dimension. School-age children understand how to sequence events in time, that is, first, next, and last, and can relate the events in a story in their proper, logical order so others can understand.

The school-age child understands that the identity of an object or a person remains constant, regardless of outward visible changes. (When Mother puts on a scary mask, she is still Mother. She hasn't been transformed into a monster.) Young preschool children, by contrast, are not able to separate the mask from the person, which accounts for their common fear of masks.

The age at which children evolve from concrete operations to formal operations, characterized by abstract and hypothetical thinking, is variable. Elements of abstract thinking may emerge in children as young as nine or 10, particularly if they are of exceptional intelligence and have received a high quality education. In general, abstract thinking is associated with pre-adolescence and adolescence.

Memory Improves

Children's memories improve as they grow. School-age children can remember events that happened weeks, months, or even years earlier. They also have an increasingly good short-term memory, which allows them to follow instructions, and, once they have learned the instructions, to repeat complex activities without assistance. These increased cognitive abilities promote the development of more effective coping skills, including the ability to behave in planful, goal-directed ways, and to control their behavior. For example, children at this age can think about past actions or events, and remember their consequences, and can use this information to plan strategies to solve problems and to meet needs.

School-age children also better understand how their own activities and behaviors affect other people and events. They learn, through observation, "When I do this, that happens," and can repeat a behavior to achieve a desired effect or goal.

Children's aptitude with language also increases their coping ability. They can "think to themselves," as well as better communicate with other people, both of which assist in solving problems and meeting their needs. Repeating rules to

themselves also helps to direct their behavior. The availability of multiple strategies to solve problems provides school-age children with greater control over the environment. They are less apt to respond to frustration with emotional outbursts, because they can think through alternate strategies to solve a problem, and can mentally guide or "talk" themselves through the steps in carrying out their solutions.

Social Development of the School-Age Child

The social environment of preschool children is generally limited to their homes, their immediate neighborhoods, and possibly a preschool or church. By contrast, the social world of the school-age child, while still focused largely on home and family, expands to include teachers, peers, and school mates, as well as the larger world learned about in school, through books, movies, or television, and through personal experiences.

School-age children's more sophisticated cognitive abilities and improved emotional control affect both the quality of their interpersonal relationships, and their behavior in social settings. School-age children are able to develop and maintain meaningful, mutual friendships with other children. School-age children may have a best friend and often belong to a peer group. Friends are often of the same gender. Many friendships between children develop through participation in common activities, or because of physical proximity. For example, a child might have a favorite playmate who lives next door, a different best friend in class, and yet another friend in church school or a scout troop. Friendships often do not cross settings.

Because many friendships are situation-specific, they may also be transitory. This is exemplified by the typical behavior of children leaving friends they met at a two-week summer camp. They claim undying friendship and promise faithfully to call or write, but they demonstrate little interest in maintaining the relationships once school and peer group activities resume at home.

Rules are important in guiding the school-age child's behavior. The child's ability to cope in a complex world depends upon how well the child understands and can adapt to rules. The child's understanding of the nature of rules and their utility becomes more sophisticated as the child gets older. Play, for example, is largely governed by rules. School-age children like board games, sports, and group or team play, all of which require that rules be followed.

The child's perception and understanding of the nature of rules changes as the child develops through the school-age period. At age five or six, children believe that rules can be changed to suit individual needs, and they will alter the rules of a game at whim to get what they want. This is a holdover from preschool egocentric thinking, in which the self is at the center of the world. By age seven or eight, the child is very conscious about obeying the rules, even though she will test limits and challenge authority. Rules are perceived as fixed, unchangeable, and handed down by an ultimate authority. This leads to strict interpretations of what is right and wrong. Issues of fairness are prevalent, and school-age children become angry, argue, and complain bitterly to adults if someone has broken an established rule or is not treating them fairly.

By age nine or 10, children begin to view rules as a useful means of regulating their activities, but they understand that not all rules are inflexible. Rules can be negotiated and constructed by equals to achieve an agreed-upon purpose. For example, if everyone in the group agrees that the rules of a game should be changed, so be it.

Rules provide the child with structure and security. Rules describe the laws of their world in concrete terms that they can understand. In a new or strange situation, the first thing a school-age child will do is observe and ask questions to determine what is permitted and what is not. Children respond with anxiety in situations where rules are ambiguous or absent. This is particularly important

when considering the effects on a school-age child of moving into a new home setting.

The school-age child is beginning to understand social roles, and recognizes that certain behaviors can be associated with certain people, even though at this level of development, the traits and behaviors that define the role are concrete and observable. In response to the question, "What's a mother?" the child might say, "A mother takes care of you, she takes you to school." A father "goes to work and helps you with your homework." A teacher "helps you learn and starts games at recess."

In the cognitive context of the school-age child, roles are fixed, inflexible, and situation-specific. It is amusing to observe the surprise on an eight year old's face when she sees her teacher at the grocery store. Mothers shop for groceries – not teachers. The behavior does not fit within the child's conception of the role.

An understanding of roles, and the characteristics that define them, helps children adapt their behaviors to fit different situations. A child may be a dominant leader and give orders to others on the school playground, sit quietly and be an attentive listener in church, and be helpful to his mom by watching his younger brother at home.

Children at this age are also beginning to understand gender role differentiation. They realize that girls and boys are different, and are often expected to behave differently. Comments such as, "Don't be silly, boys don't play with dolls," exemplifies the rigid role expectations of many children this age. Most children will emulate those qualities that are valued for their gender in their culture. While some contemporary cultures tend to promote a less rigid delineation of roles by gender, the expectation that males and females are different is fairly universal. Culture strongly influences a person's values about acceptable behaviors for boys and girls.

Emotional Development of the School-Age Child

Erikson considers "Industry versus Inferiority" to be the primary developmental task of school-age children [Erikson 1963]. "Industry" is derived from industriousness, or the ability to be self-directed, productive, and goal-oriented. Throughout the school years, children become increasingly decisive, responsible, and dependable about making plans and following through with them. They are productive and results-oriented, and experience pleasure and feelings of accomplishment as a result. By contrast, children who fail at being industrious are likely to experience feelings of inferiority, since the self-esteem of school-age children is largely dependent upon their ability to perform and produce.

The school-age child's increased awareness of other people's perspectives, combined with adherence to a well-defined set of rules that govern good and bad behavior, lead the child to be sensitive to other people's opinions. It is important to gain the approval of important others, to do well, and to be liked. The child is particularly sensitive to criticism, and feels personally inadequate when performance falls short. To help school-age children develop positive self-esteem, it is important to recognize their efforts, and commend them for their intent or a good attempt, rather than to measure their success solely on outcomes or final products.

Throughout the school years, children develop increasingly good self-control and frustration tolerance. They develop alternative strategies to deal with frustration, and are better able to control their emotions. They also develop ways to express their impulses and emotions in safe, socially appropriate ways. Emotional tension is often released through hard physical play. Older school-age children are also better able to delay gratification.

Application

The Effects of Abuse and Neglect on the School-Age Child

The chaotic, unpredictable, or explosive environment in an abusive family, or the absence of social and emotional structure in a neglectful family, can negatively affect both the behavior and development of a school-age child.

When the child's social environment lacks consistency and structure, the rules are rarely clear. Parents may impulsively change rules, or may respond differently and unpredictably to the child's behavior. In a neglectful home there may be no rules, leaving children without a clear structure to guide their activities, creating anxiety, and resulting in "out of control" behavior.

Abused and neglected children are also deprived of experiences that teach that their social behaviors can elicit reasonable and consistent responses from other people. This can interfere with the development of confidence in their ability to influence what happens to them, or how others relate to them. Similarly, when rewards are inconsistently given, or are absent, the child may learn that the only way to assure having something is to take it when you can. The child learns to behave impulsively and receives immediate reward, which counteracts development of responsibility, and the ability to delay gratification.

Maltreatment can have serious negative effects on children's relationships with their parents and other adults. Many maltreated children will not seek help or comfort from adults when in need. Experience has taught them that it will not be given, or that there may be painful consequences to help-seeking behavior. Many school-age children are emotionally insulated, and communicate, through words and behaviors, that they are able to care for themselves. This "pseudo-independence" is a defensive response to a pervasive lack of trust in adults. Some maltreated children are overtly suspicious and mistrustful of adults, or conversely, overly solicitous, agreeable, and manipulative. Some children do not

respond to positive praise and attention. All the above represent distortions in the child's ability to relate to others.

Yet, abused and neglected children generally talk in unrealistically glowing terms about their parents, perhaps in an attempt to convince themselves of the adequacy of persons on whom they must depend. Children also work hard to meet their parent's expectations for them, including, at times, assuming adult responsibilities in the family. Maltreated children often behave as little adults by regularly doing housework, assuming primary responsibility for the care of younger children, and at times, providing for the needs of their parents. This pattern of "role reversal" by a school-age child is often diagnostic of abuse in the family. (See related discussion in Section II-B, "Dynamics of Child Maltreatment.")

A child's ability to relate to peers is also damaged by abuse or neglect. Maltreated children often feel inferior, incapable, and unworthy around other children, especially if they lack age-appropriate social skills. They may be hypersensitive to other children's perceptions of them, and may be embarrassed and ashamed if they can't measure up to peer expectations.

Some children act out their feelings of inadequacy and helplessness by attempting to control, exploit, manipulate, or coerce other children. They may be bossy, a bully, or domineering with other children. They may blame others when things go wrong, or pick fights to legitimize the release of anxiety or aggression. The maltreated child's lack of social skills and inappropriate behaviors may also contribute to scapegoating by peers, which further damages children's self-esteem. Consequently, maltreated children often have difficulty making friends, may feel overwhelmed by peer expectations for performance, and may ultimately withdraw altogether from social contact.

School performance is almost always affected when children have been abused or neglected. The highly structured school setting, with its many demands and

academic challenges, can be very threatening. The child who has developed few problem-solving skills may lack the confidence and perseverance necessary to learn and master academics. In addition, maltreated children are often unable to concentrate on schoolwork. They expend their emotional energy trying to maintain self-control, worrying about what may happen when they go home, and coping with emotional distress. Frequent emotional outbursts, an inability to sit still or attend to task, and other inappropriate responses to frustration are typical.

A serious consequence of maltreatment in school-age children is the failure to develop industriousness, or self-directed and autonomous behavior. Children who are maltreated are often punished for autonomy and initiative. The abused child may learn that self-assertion is dangerous, and may assume a more dependent or compliant posture to avoid injury. These children may exhibit few opinions, and express no strong likes or dislikes. It may be hard to engage the child into productive, goal-directed activities, and he is often unable to initiate, participate in, or complete activities. He may give up quickly and appear to lose interest when activities become even mildly challenging. As a result, the child misses critical opportunities to develop and master age-appropriate skills, and the child may feel inferior when compared to other children.

Abuse and neglect deprive a child of the unconditional acceptance and nurturance that should communicate the child's fundamental worth. Maltreated children often experience severe damage to self-esteem from the many denigrating and punitive messages received from an abusive parent, or from the absence of positive attention and recognition in a neglectful environment. In addition, maltreated children are often scapegoated by other children. Maltreated children interpret these negative responses from other people to mean that they have done something wrong, that they have failed to figure out the right rule or formula for success, or that they are of little worth. Children's ability to trust can also be seriously damaged.

The absence of predictable outcomes in response to a child's acts or behaviors also interferes with the child's ability to learn coping strategies. The child may not develop constructive problem-solving skills. Maltreated children may have little impulse control, and often cannot prevent their feelings from being expressed in actions. The child may be easily frustrated, often feels helpless and out of control, and may behave explosively and inappropriately in minimally stressful situations. Anxiety, anger, and frustration may be acted out in negative and antisocial behaviors, including hitting, fighting, breaking objects, swearing, verbal outbursts, lying, and stealing. Sometimes the term "SBH" (severely behaviorally handicapped) is used to describe these children.

Finally, abused and neglected children are at high risk of developing emotional disturbance as a result of maltreatment, particularly if chronic. A child's security is dependent upon a predictable and understandable world. When the world is erratic and incomprehensible, and when painful things happen routinely and capriciously, the child often becomes chronically anxious or depressed. The emotional toll is significant.

Case Example

The following case example describes the negative developmental outcomes in a young, school-age child who has been seriously maltreated for much of her life. The case is presented in the format of the psychological assessment, which was sought by Chrissie's social worker to assist in case planning.

Chrissie Atherton - age six years, 11 months

Referral

Chrissie was referred for psychological assessment by her social worker. She is one of four Atherton children in the custody of the Department of Children's Services. Chrissie was exhibiting serious developmental delays and behavior

problems, and a psychological evaluation was requested to assist in case planning, educational programming, and placement planning.

History

Chrissie is the third of four children. The Athertons have been known to the Children's Service agency for several years, during which time the family received intensive, in-home protective and supportive services from the agency.

The family has a history of chronic family dysfunction, domestic violence, and neglect and abuse of the children. Mrs. Atherton is reported to have been mentally ill for many years, and has been hospitalized several times. She was most recently hospitalized approximately two years ago in a psychiatric facility, and she remains there currently. About four months ago, Chrissie's oldest sister, Patricia, disclosed having been sexually abused by her stepfather, Mr. Atherton, who is the biological father of the three younger children. All four children have been in the care of relatives since Mr. Atherton's conviction and incarceration for this offense.

According to the social worker, Chrissie and her siblings were subjected to serious neglect while at home. Mr. Atherton was reported to often be away from home, leaving the care of the younger children to Patricia. The agency noted that the home was very poorly maintained, and that food was not always present for the children. The agency also reported that both Chrissie and her younger sister, Leah, were chronic bed wetters, that the bedding was rarely changed and laundered, and that the house often smelled of urine. Chrissie's brother, Shawn, had allegedly been physically abused by Mr. Atherton, and Mrs. Atherton filed several police reports regarding beatings she had been subjected to by Mr. Atherton. Chrissie had been removed from her home once previously, after having accidentally ingested an overdose of her mother's medication. She was returned to the family approximately a year later.

Chrissie was enrolled in Head Start classes, but her attendance was sporadic. Head Start staff reported her to be delayed in her development. She also exhibited behavior problems in the Head Start setting, alternating periods of stubbornness and defiance with periods of emotional withdrawal. In her school placement, begun in September of this year, Chrissie is reportedly exhibiting considerable disruptive behavior in the classroom.

More complete information regarding Chrissie's developmental history is not available. She has vision problems and must wear glasses. As noted earlier, she is also a chronic bed wetter. No other medical problems are known.

Present Assessment

The following tests were administered; Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children/Revised (WISC-R); Bender Visual Motor Gestalt Test (Bender); Rorschach; Stanford Binet Intelligence Scale (Binet); and the Adaptive Behavior Scale (ABS). The initial test results on the Binet and the Adaptive Behavior Scale indicated potentially serious developmental and emotional problems. Follow-up testing using the WISC-R, the Bender, and the Rorschach were used to validate and confirm the initial impressions.

Chrissie approached the test situation with some hesitation, but she was appropriate in her behavior and in her responses to the examiner. On the WISC-R she achieved a verbal I.Q. of 84, a performance I.Q. of 75, and a full scale I.Q. of 78, placing her in the borderline range. She shows comparative strengths in her concrete and abstract verbal reasoning abilities, as well as her ability to see relationships of parts to a whole. Both of these skills are within the average range of ability. No comparatively significant weaknesses are exhibited. The results of the Stanford-Binet support these conclusions.

Chrissie's score on the Bender places her below the range for a child of kindergarten age, suggesting significant perceptual-motor problems. This is supported by lower scores on the Coding and Mazes subtests of the WISC-R.

Psychological Data

Chrissie is currently struggling to contain volatile emotions. She exhibits poor emotional control when confronted with complex or emotionally laden situations. She is presently experiencing conflict between the expression or suppression of her emotions, and much of her energy is used in attempts to control or tone down her affect. The emotional pain she is feeling contributes to a tendency to withdraw.

The vacillation between containing and expressing emotions is closely tied to her lack of ability to see reality clearly. She is not able to organize her day-to-day world. Her test performance shows considerable reality distortion and psychopathology. She has learned to view her world as hostile, threatening, and harmful. She is particularly threatened by emotional situations, as when others are angry at her, and she is quick to view even commonplace events as threatening. She spends much energy withdrawing from these perceived threats. At times she seems to become so overwhelmed by the demands of her environment that she regresses to a safer haven of fantasy. She is better able to correctly interpret her environment when it is not highly charged with emotion. It is important to note that Chrissie is not always detached from reality.

Chrissie has an extremely poor self-image. She also exhibits considerable hopelessness and despair, and appears to have abandoned any hope of her needs being met. She denies the need for emotional closeness. Chrissie also expresses a rather morbid view of life and exhibits many depressive characteristics. When this occurs in a child of this age, it tends to be a rather durable characteristic.

Chrissie is a child who experiences significant reality distortions of considerable degree and duration. To what degree these are part of her inherent make-up, or a reaction to a series of severe traumas is unclear. However, since she is known to be a victim of an abusive environment, we believe that her perception of the world as a hostile and threatening place is at least partially in response to maltreatment. As a result of traumatic early experiences, she now views many nontraumatic events as scary and threatening, and may withdraw, act out, or distort reality in response. She has a damaged sense of self, and has discarded the need for emotional closeness.

Recommendations

- 1) Chrissie needs a consistent, stable, predictable, nurturing family environment. Without the immediate provision of such a family milieu, Chrissie's prognosis for healthy emotional and psychological development is extremely poor.
- 2) A family for Chrissie should be consistently stable and nurturing, with no expectations for immediate reciprocal response from Chrissie. A family will need considerable ability to understand and tolerate Chrissie's inability to trust emotional closeness, while continuing to support and nurture her. A quiet, predictable, low-stress environment is essential.
- 3) Chrissie should receive intensive individual therapy with a therapist who specializes in the treatment of children with severe emotional problems. She should attend therapy weekly at a minimum, and preferably twice a week. It should be cautioned, however, that without implementation of recommendation #1, therapy will not be effective.
- 4) Chrissie's emotional outbursts, defiance, and aggressive behaviors should be handled in a firm, consistent, matter-of-fact manner. Expectations should be clearly stated and quietly reiterated whenever necessary.

Negative behavior should be responded to with natural consequences as often as possible; for example, if she leaves her bicycle in the street, it should be put away. Chrissie should not be disciplined with physical punishment, or harsh verbal admonishment. The use of time-out should also be considered. She should also receive frequent positive reinforcement, praise, and reward for desirable behaviors.

- 5) Specialized educational programming should be provided for Chrissie, either within a special education class for emotionally disturbed children within the public school system, or in a specialized day treatment program. The school setting must also be highly supportive and encouraging. The local special education resource center should be contacted for assistance in specialized educational planning.

Discussion

Chrissie is at risk of serious emotional disturbance. While her family history of mental illness might suggest a predisposition to emotional problems, the abusive and neglectful environment in which she has been raised has certainly contributed to, if not caused, such serious emotional problems at such a young age. In a young child, the effects of chronic maltreatment are usually exhibited in generalized developmental delays. In school-age children, delays in emotional development may become fixed into more fundamental disturbances in personality development. Chrissie's denial of interpersonal need, and withdrawal from interpersonal contact is characteristic of a more enduring personality trait that will not be easily modified. In this sense, Chrissie is at a watershed. Immediate and intensive intervention are necessary, if there is to be hope for her normal and healthy development.

Epilogue

Chrissie was adopted by a single parent. The first few years were rocky at best. Chrissie received regular mental health services, and at one point was hospitalized for a brief period. Her adoptive mother stayed committed to Chrissie, however, and after seven years the placement is intact. The agency also arranged with the adoptive families for periodic visitation between Chrissie and her younger sister, Leah. While Chrissie still exhibits emotional problems, with therapy and support, she has continued to develop and function within a normal environment.