

Same story, increasing damages – about “the new children” in Greenlandic Treatment Homes

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About the authors:

Torben Alne is leader of Meeqqat Illuat, an Observation and Treatment Home for Children with psycho-social difficulties, situated in Nuuk, Greenland.

Conni Gregersen is a psychologist working in The Section for Childrens' Homes and Other Day and Night Homes/Institutions.

Both are employed by the the Ministry of Families of the Greenland Home rule.

Introduction

We want to discuss our hypothesis of why we in these years encounter an increasing number of children with severe emotional damages and personality disorders in our treatment home and, moreover, to present our basic ideas for treatment of these children.

Torben has been involved in social work in Greenland for more than 30 years, and Conni has been working as a psychologist here for almost 10 years. Our hypothesis is based on our practical work. We hope, of course, that our presentation of our hypothesis will wake somebody's interest in making further investigation into the matter.

Our subject is an increasing number of children, who

- are difficult – if not impossible - to reach in contact, who
- are difficult – if not impossible – to form attachment with, who
- suffer from lack of confidence and trust, and
- suffer from lack of ability to develop social skills.

These children lack the abilities necessary in forming attachment, confidence and other deeper emotions towards other people.

We know these children from other places in the world as "early damaged children" but until recently we had very few of them here in Greenland. Why does the number increase now?

We have always had children with difficulties in managing their feelings, but they have usually had a sense of what attachment is. It has been possible to

engage them in responsibility to some extent. But this situation seems to be changing. In this paper we refer to the two groups of children as "the new" and "the old" children. What we are interested in is not any differences in the diagnosis of the children, but the way they react primarily in the pedagogic treatment. First a few words about the structured pedagogy we use in working with these children.

Treatment of these children demands a very structured pedagogy.

Predictability and recognizability are keywords or core ideas in the treatment. We sometimes meet the suggestion that this approach must entail a very sad and heavy atmosphere for the children, without fun or joy in daily life. This is, however, not the case. To illustrate this point, Torben has made a line of pictures of the children from Meeqqat Illuat. So while I am relating the heavy and sad words of this workshop, Torben is emphasizing the really important aspect, namely that respect and predictability in the daily work with these children make it possible for them to raise vitality – and joy follows "by itself". The children of course have a hard time accepting the structures at first. It can be necessary to physically hold a child in certain situations, to prevent him or her from damaging him/herself or other people. It has to be part of the treatment to make connections in the child to his feelings and emotions – and to train him in canalising feelings and emotions in proper ways. This is part of training his independence, and you will see, that daily life tasks as well as expeditions, fishing and hunting are used as tools in the work. And you will see that most of the time in treatment is not heavy and sad – so, the pictures are NOT just for your entertainment – it is part of the paper. And we kindly ask you to hold your eyes and ears open to take in from both channels at the same time. If you do so, you will get a touch of the polarization, you meet in treating damaged children – and a touch of the demand of being receptive on all channels if you want to get a deeper contact with children, who are either unaccustomed to or even afraid of contact.

The "old" and the "new" children

Our hypothesis has grown out of our knowledge of actual children's life stories. There are lots of resemblances between the stories we heard ten years ago and the stories we hear today. And then, there seems to be one particular difference between the stories of the "new" children and the "old children" and this difference has caught our attention:

Both groups come from families with lots of psychic and social problems, and typically abuse is involved. Alcohol, physical violence, sexual abuse – all this

is seen in the stories of both "old" and "new" children. So they have all experienced serious abuse and neglect. Often we recognize heavy trauma too, such as suicide or homicide in the nearest family as part of the children's life stories. Such experiences are a general feature for children placed in children's' homes, both the "old" and the "new" ones. Heavy abuse and neglect – patterns of abuse are an integrated part of their lives and tend to mark their personalities from young age. So why are some of the children able to attach while others are not? – Same story – different lives ...

There is one remarkable difference in the stories of the children, and this is about early care taking. In our work we usually make genograms for the children's' families. When making and reading these we have discovered, that while it is easy to find resourceful family members/adults in the "old" children's families, it is difficult in the "new" children's families. There is a fatal lack of adult persons who are able to manage their own lives.

Traditionally babies have been taken good care of in Greenland, even in circumstances where parents did not manage too well – other adult family members seem to have taken responsibility for the baby and the neglecting parents seem to have accepted this way of doing things, to the better for the baby. (Of course it is not that simple in reality, but tendencies point this way).

Contrary to that, the stories of the "new" children's are often about wandering around, looking for a place to be, looking for food in random places – even from quite a young age. And we do not find signs of other family members trying to organize strategies for the care taking of the baby.

In the stories of the "new" children we find instead a picture of misery or lack of resources in the extended family or the families' network. Our hypothesis, then, is that nobody has taken over when the parents failed in care taking. And seemingly nobody has reacted upon experiencing the obvious lack of care taking for the baby.

Why the difference?

How come, that people has stopped taking care of "other people's" babies?

One hypothesis stems from our knowledge about conditions in Greenland in the 1960's and '70's. At that time the consumption of alcohol in Greenland was very high, up to 22 litres of pure alcohol pr. adult person pr. year. In the same period people moved voluntarily and involuntarily from smaller to bigger towns, and some families were scattered. The young people and young

adults from that time are now grandparents. We therefore assume, that some of the grandparents nowadays are not available for their grandchildren because they are not living in the vicinity of their children and grandchildren - and others because they have integrated the indifference that often follow severe alcohol abuse in their lifestyle.

It would be interesting and helpful in social work to have further research carried out on this subject. In relation to society's planning in the area of child care we need more information on these subjects.

It would help those children if social authorities could effectuate adequate arrangements for the children as babies.

We know, that the social authorities sometimes place babies acutely in the care of foster parents and children's homes because they have been left alone. We do not know exactly to what extent the children we have in the children's homes have been left alone during their early childhood but we can see that there have been nobody to form attachment with them in infancy, since they do not manage attachment at all.

Even though it is hard for a baby to be rejected from his/her mother and be given to the grandmother or another foster mother, it is not necessarily fatal for his/her development, as is the very extensive neglect following insufficient and random care taking.

We think that one reason why the authorities have been slow to act upon the "new" children is, that the lifestyle in these children's families and the lifestyle of the "old" children's families seen from the outside look alike. The difference is not that visible from outside but it really makes a different imprint in the baby if he is taken carefully and sufficiently care of – even if not by the mother – compared to if the care taking has been casual or insufficient.

We know that it takes lots of loving care to develop a healthy personality. The "food" for developing the self is love and contact delivered in a way, which is recognizable to the baby.

When a human baby is born, he is helpless, even though he already has some competences. Most of the body is ready for use at birth, just not the brains (therefore he is that helpless), and today it is known, that loving care taking is necessary to mature the brains, and thereby make it possible for the baby to develop his resources and talents.

The baby is actively seeking contact and attachment, and he needs to be met. He is an active partner in the game of life, and it is in his relating to the mother/caretakers, that the baby develops his personality. The baby soon recognizes certain behaviours, feelings and atmospheres and is quick to learn to recognize faces, moods, and rhythms and so on.

The process seems to start from birth time (or perhaps even earlier) out of a innate organizing process. The baby organizes his experiences from the beginning – some are alike, others not - and seems simultaneously to recognize the organizing process, while it happens. This makes the first "spots" of experiencing a self. It seems to please the baby, when this process of organizing and recognizing the organizing takes place. Everyone, who has ever been recognized by a baby knows what I mean by this: It is a pleasure for a baby to recognize – you can see and feel it in the baby's explosion in vitality and joy.

The children, we talk about, has been cheated from a sufficient amount of this kind of experiences.

Sometimes a vicious circle starts: the mother has insufficient energy for the baby – she does not react to his crying, and he just lies there, helpless. He stops to cry. The mother is perhaps satisfied with having an easy baby – not demanding his mother all the time. But the baby suffers from lack of "psychic food", therefore his organization of the world and his self never really starts. Without sufficient rhythm in daily life, the organizing process must fail. The children have had too little to work with, so to speak. Consequently their personalities – like muscles not used - is "atonic". The babies tend to be quiet, they lose vitality, sleep a lot, stop exploring the world – they grow into "very easy babies" ...

Later in their lives, they fail in most of life's tasks, because they do not know how to do the most basic things: attaching to other people, feeling trust, and feeling, what they need. They tend to be like big babies: immature, impulsive children, without the ability to understand their part in relations with other people, specially other children. They seem unable to learn by experiences – things "just happens" without the child being able to se or feel his own part – and possibility – in it.

Treatment through structured pedagogy

To treat the children we use pedagogy and psychotherapy, and we have to start at the point of their deficits and to use their resources too. In order to awake the children's inner organizing processes, which is needed to establish the self, we have to create an environment so predictable that the children can experience things happening in certain rhythms. Therefore we use a structured pedagogy, where daily life runs strictly after certain attitudes, norms and plans according to the needs of the children, and with caretakers, trained to balance in the very difficult zone of being kind and firm at the same time.

The staff members need to feel humble respect for the children and to have knowledge about the deficits in the children. Our experience is that without knowledge and training, the professional caretakers will often fall in one of many traps. The extremes are something like:

- One is to feel sorrow for the child, meet him as if he is a helpless baby, doing everything for him – and thereby once more cheat him for learning what he has to learn to manage his life – and not respecting his resources and talents and
- the other extreme is to be strict to the extent, that plans are followed for their own sake and not for benefit of the child. The child is still not met then and gets no help in finding his inner organizing process.

There are lots of traps in treating these children. The children's deficits are basic and their behaviour often so immature and/or extreme that most people, if not trained to look behind the child's behaviour and react contrary to one's natural reactions in such situations, will react inadequately on the behaviour of the children.

It is hard to understand, that a boy or girl, who during a long period of time can succeed in stealing in the stores and hiding the loot without being detected in reality does not know, why it is wrong to steel. But the fact is, that the child hides his stuff, because he reads in other people, that it will cost trouble to tell about it - or eventually because he is ordered or threatened by somebody.

Just like the normal baby needs to experience things repeated in a loving atmosphere, the emotionally damaged older child has to experience care

taking repeated during a long time, before it can awake his inner organizing process and make imprints in his psyche.

At the same time, of course, the care taking must be adjusted to the need of a child, not a baby. He has to be related to with respect for his competences, and to use these as tools in developing his inner self.

Final remark

In conclusion, our hope is, that social authorities will recognise the need to act on the increasing neglect of babies to prevent fatal damages in the personality development of these babies – and to promote this, we hope, that somebody will be interested in doing research, that can take us from hypothesis to actual knowledge about the reasons behind the differences between what we have called "old" and "new" children in treatment of abused and neglected children in Greenland.

Thank you for your attention.