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Integrating Behaviorism and Attachment Theory in Parent Coaching

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*In memory of my parents,
Betty McClure Troutman and Gary Troutman*

Preface

“There is nothing more practical than a good theory.” (Lewin 1952)

“Each investigator begins with the paradigm of choice and discovers its inadequacies.” (Patterson 1982)

This book is for providers and trainees (infant and early childhood mental health therapists, home visitors, pediatricians, nurses, and other early interventionists) who advise and guide parents of infants, toddlers, and young children (0–8). The goal is to help providers address concerns about the parent-child relationship, the child’s emotional development, and the child’s behavior problems. This book provides a framework for early interventionists to incorporate the most recent research on behavioral and attachment approaches to parenting into their practice. There is a particular emphasis on addressing the types of concerns most likely to bring families to the attention of providers—conflictual parent-child relationships, harsh parenting or maltreatment, and child conduct problems.

Over the past 50 years, two different theoretical models have guided parenting advice and intervention—behaviorism and attachment theory. Each of these models has spawned rich programs of research and staunch supporters. These two traditions have also led to sometimes conflicting recommendations regarding how to best respond to infants/young children and sometimes conflicting views of “positive parenting”. With an increasing focus on research-informed interventions in work with families, these traditions have also led to competing claims regarding research support for various positive parenting approaches.

I speak both behaviorism and attachment theory. Although this sounds silly, there is some truth to it. Behaviorism and attachment theory have their own terminology which complicates communication between researchers and therapists in these two traditions and makes it difficult for providers to evaluate competing viewpoints.

As a clinical child psychologist whose interest in the field of infant and early childhood mental health began in the 1970s, I came of age as a parent-child therapist/researcher during the growth of interventions based on behaviorism and attachment theory. I find value in both theoretical orientations. My clinical training includes training in behavioral interventions for disruptive behavior, behavioral interventions for anxiety disorders, parent coaching interventions, and interventions

based on attachment theory. My research incorporates concepts from social learning theory, attachment theory, and temperament theory.

The goal of Part I is making research about behaviorism and attachment theory more accessible to providers. Chapter 1 provides an overview of how behaviorists view parent-child interactions and outcomes research on evidence-based behavioral parenting interventions for young children with disruptive behavior and families at risk for maltreatment. There is a particular emphasis on outcomes research for the behavioral parenting approach I have been disseminating for the past decade, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT). Chapter 2 provides an overview of attachment theory and outcomes research on interventions based on attachment theory. There is a particular emphasis on attachment theory-based approaches that influence my framework for working with families of young children. Chapter 3 summarizes some of the areas of disagreement between these two traditions and begins to explore how the two theories may complement each other.

Part II is the “to do” part of the book. The goal of Part II is providing therapists with a framework for integrating behaviorism and attachment theory when coaching parents of young children. If you’re more of a doer, you may want to dive into Part II of the book first and read the earlier chapters only as questions arise about theory, assessments, or methodology. (Of course, if you’re a doer, you’re probably one of those readers who skips the preface.) Chapter 4 lays out the rationale for using parent coaching to address problematic parent-child interactions and a framework for incorporating attachment theory and research into parent coaching. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 discuss tailoring parent coaching to different patterns of attachment.

Acknowledgements

This book owes its birth to the students and community providers I have trained. Your questions about research and your commitment to providing high quality parenting interventions spurred me to write a book describing my approach to parent coaching and the research that informs my approach. This book also belongs to the PCIT therapists who attended my presentation on *Using Observations of Attachment to Inform Parent-Child Interaction Therapy Coaching* at the 13th annual Parent-Child Interaction Therapy Conference in Los Angeles in 2013 and to Anthony Urquiza, Susan Timmer, and Emma Girard who facilitated the presentation. Your interest in knowing more about an attachment-informed approach to PCIT coaching made me realize there was more interest in this topic than I'd thought and, since few of you were likely to travel to Iowa for workshops, I was going to have to write a book in order to communicate my ideas. (Thanks to Marta Shinn for being one of the few Californians willing to brave Iowa weather and become an adopted Iowan. Go Hawks!).

I am indebted to Brenda Hollingsworth and Mary Mohrhauser for seeing my emerging capacities to train community providers before I truly saw them myself. Your faith in my abilities to train Iowa providers got this started and your enthusiasm and faith that I will figure out the next step keeps it going.

I owe a special thanks to participants in the attachment for PCIT therapists workshops and conference calls, especially those of you who attended the first attachment workshop for PCIT therapists and continue to promote it (Dawn Combites, Desiree Cunningham-Loggins, Leesa Dzuris, Kami Guzman, Mary Haskins, Jess O'Bleness, Sandy Pelzer, Kelli Slagle Radermacher, Nancy Wallace, and Claire Wofford). Your excitement and ability to see the potential of combining attachment and behavioral parent coaching approaches contributed to me continuing down this path. The kind words of first readers of early versions of this manuscript (Kelly Pelzel, Tania Cargo, Sue Morgan, and LeAnn Lape-Brinkman) provided me the encouragement I needed to try and get my ideas down on paper. Thanks to my editor Garth Haller for shepherding me through the process of actually getting my ideas in print and coming up with a title without a colon.

For me, John Knutson, Alan Sroufe, Betty Carlson, Dymphna van den Boom, June Sroufe, Cheryl McNeil, Kent Hoffman, and Ellen Moss embody the best of the

behavioral and attachment theory traditions. I feel fortunate to have learned behavioral parenting interventions and attachment theory from such excellent teachers. I am grateful to have learned behavioral parent coaching from John Knutson. Without this parent coaching experience, I doubt I would have come to appreciate behavioral parenting interventions. I am grateful to Alan Sroufe and Betty Carlson for teaching me to code attachment classifications from the Strange Situation Procedure. Your quiet patience as the first teachers to help me view interactions through an attachment lens is a model for how teachers can serve as a secure base. Once I learned to view parent-infant relationships through this lens, there was no going back. I am grateful to Dymphna van den Boom for sharing my passion for irritable babies, teaching me to code maternal sensitive responsiveness to the attachment signals of irritable babies, and teaching me her attachment theory-based intervention for irritable infants. Our discussions about coding, attachment theory, temperament, and academic camps are among my best training experiences and speak volumes about your brilliant mind. Your willingness to take the time for these discussions as a busy young faculty member speaks to your generous heart. I am grateful to June Sroufe for teaching me to code the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). You turned what I thought might be a tedious coding enterprise into one of the most enlightening trainings I have ever experienced and provided a model for creating a safe space for discussion and reflection. I am grateful to Cheryl McNeil for mentoring me in training community therapists in PCIT and for making several trips to Iowa and Nebraska to co-train with me. Our discussions about attachment theory and behaviorism during dinners and long drives across Iowa helped me think about how to explain attachment theory and research to behaviorists. I am grateful to Kent Hoffman for training in Circle of Security (COS), expanding my thinking about states of mind, and providing a holding environment to reflect on my own shark music. Our discussions about attachment theory and behaviorism helped me articulate the differences between these two approaches. I am grateful to Ellen Moss for teaching me to code attachment classifications in the modified Strange Situation Procedure for pre-schoolers. The opportunity to view attachment in goal-directed partnerships and learn about your efforts to train community providers in attachment and Relationship Intervention for Parents provided the missing ingredients for my training program. It was such a joy to meet someone else who spoke both attachment and behaviorism and to discuss how PCIT and attachment coaching approaches might complement each other.

It “takes a village” to do research on attachment theory. I have been fortunate to be a part of two such villages. My own village of research assistants, students, and colleagues who assisted with the infant emotional development study (Christian Aliaga, Steve Arndt, Callie Berry, Linsey Blair, Jamie Bulleri, Michelle Cardi, Christina Durham Weeks, Leanne Florke, Christina Franklin, Jennifer Gianone, Kate Hancock, Altier Juarez, Sarah Lowery, Erika Luttenegger, E. Imani Mitchell-Burrell, Allison Momany, Tracy Moran Vozar, Susan Ryan, Donna Stewart, Lisa Tibey, and Brooke van Horne) and Kristen Casper’s and Remi Cadoret’s village of researchers interested in adult attachment and adoption (Steve Arndt, Bruce Pfohl, Rob Philibert, and Becca Yucuis). I also benefited from being a member of Betsy Momany’s

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I learned much from the infants, children, and parents who have participated in my research, training, and clinical services. As a grandmother at an in-home visit once told me “each baby is as unique as each snowflake”. The opportunity to learn from each family’s unique strengths and struggles makes my work continually interesting and challenging. Your willingness to share your parenting experiences and let me hang out with your babies and young children makes my work continually enjoyable.

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Contents

Part I Two Models for Viewing Parent-Child Interactions: Behaviorism and Attachment Theory

1 Viewing Parent-Child Interactions Through the Lens of Behaviorism.....	3
2 Viewing Parent-Child Interactions Through the Lens of Attachment Theory.....	21
3 Comparison of Attachment and Behavioral Parenting Perspectives	43

Part II Integrated Model for Coaching Positive Parenting

4 Framework for Integrating Behaviorism and Attachment Theory in Parent Coaching.....	55
5 Ordinary Magic.....	75
6 Can't Live With Her, Can't Live Without Her	85
7 What Does Not Kill Me Makes Me Stronger.....	95
8 Like a Refugee	107
Index.....	125

About the Author

Beth Troutman, Ph.D., is a Clinical Professor in Psychiatry at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine. Her teaching, research, and clinical work has focused on improving parent-child interactions for more than 30 years. She has had a foot in more than one theoretical camp since graduate school, conducting research on parenting self-efficacy, temperament, and attachment theory and disseminating Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), a behavioral model for improving parenting.