

**Parental Insightfulness and Child-Parent Emotion Dialogues:  
Their Importance for Children's Development**

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A long-held premise of child development researchers and clinicians is that the impact of experience on children's development is mediated through the affective meaning ascribed to the experience: the same event may have very different implications for the child's development depending on its emotional meaning for the child. Such meanings are not solitary child creations, however, but are co-constructed by children and their parents (as well as other significant persons in their lives). Both parents and children contribute to the co-construction process, with the parent – the more mature, resourceful, and experienced partner in the relationship – having a particularly important role in shaping the interactions with the child and, ultimately the affective meaning the child constructs. This chapter will focus on two aspects of parenting particularly relevant for children's affective meaning-making process: Parent's insightfulness – their capacity to “see things from the child's point of view” – and parent's sensitive guidance of dialogues about emotional experiences. Insightfulness is assessed by interviewing parents *about* the child, and sensitive guidance is assessed through observations of parents talking *with* the child, and our studies propose that both parental processes involve coherent, organized, and child centered affective meaning making which promotes children's flexible and adaptive coping, emotion regulation, and wellbeing.

In this chapter we will review our research on parental insightfulness and on parent-child dialogues. Both assessments are deeply rooted in attachment theory, and particularly its expansion by Main into the level of representations and construction of meaning (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). We will present the theoretical basis for each of these constructs, the methods used to assess them, and the findings that support these methods. In addition we will discuss the commonalities underlying both the capacity for insightfulness and for guiding dialogues sensitively. We turn first to a review of parental Insightfulness.

### **Parental Insightfulness: Background**

The concept of insightfulness is rooted in the work of clinicians and developmental researchers who have argued that a full understanding of parent-child relationships requires an appreciation of the parent's internal representation of the child, including the specific and unique emotional meaning the child holds for the parent. Perhaps the most well-known expression of this point of view was presented over three decades ago by Fraiberg et al. (1975) who described how the mother's representations of her child can be so intensely colored by trauma and unmet needs from her own history that she cannot, in effect, "see" the child. In such situations mothers experience difficulties in developing insight into the motives, thoughts, and goals underlying the child's behavior and in responding empathically to the child's signals and the emotional needs that underlie them.

Based on Fraiberg et al. (1975) as well as on Bowlby's concept of Internal Working Models (Bowlby, 1982) several researchers developed assessments of parents' representations of their children using interviews (see George & Solomon, 2008, for a review). This body of research has shown that mothers of secure children are flexible, balanced, and integrated in their

interviews about their children. Their interviews reflect their commitment, trust, cooperation, knowledge of self and child as individuals, and joy in the parenting experience.

But how do parents apply such representations when they try to understand specific, concrete moments in the life of their child? To assess this process we developed the Insightfulness Assessment (*IA* - Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2009), in which parents are shown several video segments of their child interacting with the parent and are asked about the child's thoughts and feelings during the segments. The goal of this procedure is to simulate moments from everyday life in which parents try to make sense of their children's behavior and understand the motives and emotions that may underlie the behavior. Unlike "real-life" moments, however, in which these meaning-making processes are implicit and operate mostly outside of awareness, the *IA* requires parents to make these processes explicit. Before describing the *IA* procedure in more detail, the central components of insightfulness will be described. These include *Insight* regarding the motives for the child's behaviors, an *emotionally complex* view of the child, and *openness* to new and sometimes unexpected information regarding the child.

*Insight* refers to the parent's capacity to think about the motives that underlie the child's behavior. Considering such motives is based on accepting the child as a separate person with plans, needs, and wishes of his or her own. The motives insightful parents suggest are framed positively and match the behavior they are intended to explain. Both understanding and acceptance are needed when considering such motives. The parent should be able to *understand* the motives underlying the child's behavior and accompany such understanding with *acceptance* of these motives. This stance is thought to provide the basis for appropriate parental responses especially toward challenging or unrewarding child behavior.

An *emotionally complex* view of the child involves a full and integrated portrayal of the child as a whole person with both positive and negative features. Positive features, which typically outweigh negative features, are described openly and are supported by convincing examples from everyday life. Frustrating, unflattering, and upsetting aspects of the child are discussed within an accepting framework and in the context of attempts to find reasonable and appropriate explanations for the child's negative behavior.

*Openness* refers to parents' capacity to see not only the familiar and comfortable aspects of their children but also to see, without distortion, unexpected behaviors, and to update the view of the child as they talk. Openness also involves a parent's attitude towards her or his own self: Insightful parents can reflect on these self-observations and child observations without excessive criticism or defensiveness.

Two negative features constitute barriers to insightfulness. First, high levels of *anger* or *worry* in parents' interviews often shift the focus of discussion from the child's experience. For example, parents' preoccupations with issues such as their marital relationship can dominate the interview and lead to a shift in the focus of the interview from the child's experience to the parent's self or other issues related to marital discord. Such shifts in focus prevent the parent from flexibly considering a wide range of possible motives or explanations for the child's behavior.

Second, *lack of acceptance* is expressed in derogation of the child, detachment from or indifference to the child's internal experience, or rejection of certain child behaviors or even of the child as a whole. Such a stance violates the basic function of insightfulness, which is to provide the foundation for caregiving that promotes healthy emotional development in the child. Interestingly, such lack of acceptance can sometimes be observed even in conjunction with a

moderate degree of insight into the child's motives and some understanding of what may lead the child to behave or feel in a certain way. For example, a parent may compellingly describe her son's shy, embarrassed, and self-conscious behavior but proceed to ridicule him for this behavior. In this example the child does not benefit from his parent's understanding of the motives underlying his behavior. On the contrary, from the child's point of view the combination of knowing that the parent understands his internal experience but, at the same time, rejects it can be particularly painful and confusing.

### **The Insightfulness Assessment (IA) Procedure**

In the IA, parents and children are first videotaped in three interactions. Parents subsequently watch short segments from the videotaped interactions and are interviewed regarding their children's and their own thoughts and feelings. Following each of the three segments parents are asked to reflect upon their children's thoughts and feelings during the segment while discussing whether the behaviors they saw on the video are typical of their child and describing how they felt when they were watching the video. At the end of the interview parents are asked two general questions about their children and invited to share their own thoughts and feelings regarding their children and their parental role. Throughout the IA, parents are asked to support their statements with examples from the observations of the videotaped segments and from everyday life.

Interview transcripts are rated on 10 scales and, based on the profile of the scales are classified into one of four groups. The first of the four groups, called *Positive Insightfulness*, indicates the capacity for insightfulness while the remaining three (*One-Sided*, *Disengaged*, or *Mixed*) indicate a lack of insightfulness (Koren-Karie & Oppenheim, 2001).

*Positively insightful (PI) parents.* The main characteristic of these parents is their ability to see various experiences through their child's eyes and to try to understand the motives underlying their child's behavior. They are flexible when viewing their child on the video segments, and they may gain new insights as they talk. Positively Insightful parents convey acceptance of the child, and they talk openly about both positive and negative aspects of their child's personality and behavior as well as of their own caregiving. While all Positively Insightful parents share the above characteristics, they are also quite varied. Some talk about their child in a very warm and emotional manner while others are more reserved and have a concise, focused style of speech. Other parents in this group have a didactic style and focus on their child's cognitive competencies and achievements, and still others are most noted by their self-reflection. Thus we do not look for surface similarity when we group these parents into one classification but try to identify the underlying features that reflect these parents' capacity to empathically "see the world from the child's point of view".

*One-sided (Os) parents.* One-sided parents have a preset conception of the child that they impose on the videotaped segments, and this conception does not appear open to change. These parents often find it difficult to maintain the focus of their speech on the child, and switch to discussing their own feelings or to other, irrelevant issues. Some One-sided parents overemphasize the child's positive qualities without being able to support their statements with episodes from everyday life or from the video segments. Others may describe the child as "all negative" and talk only about his/her faults and misbehaviors. Still others may show a good understanding of the child's underlying motives, but that understanding is coupled with a rejection of the motives. In other words, such parents show understanding without empathy.

*Disengaged (De) parents.* Disengaged parents are characterized by their lack of emotional involvement during the interview. Their answers are short and limited, and the idea of understanding what is on their child's mind appears new to them and they do not seem to find it pleasurable or valuable. When asked what their child might be feeling in the video segment they viewed, they provide answers like "I don't know." As a result, the reader does not get a sense of who the child is. Disengaged parents talk very little about their children's emotions and focus more on their children's behavior.

*Mixed (Mx) parents.* This category involves parents who do not show one style of narration as defined in the above categories. Rather, such parents may respond to one video segment in one style, and to another segment with a different style, and the reader cannot judge which of the styles is dominant. For example, a parent may sound overwhelmed, unfocused, or hostile in the responses to the three video segments, but insightful, complex, and open in the response to the two general questions.

### **Empirical Support for the Insightfulness Assessment**

#### **Insightfulness Assessment and Attachment**

The conceptual foundations of the IA are strongly rooted in attachment theory, particularly in Ainsworth's description of sensitive mothers as those who are able to "see things from the child's point of view" and her pioneering research showing the contribution of sensitive caregiving to children's secure attachment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Therefore, the goal of our initial IA studies was to establish its links with children's attachment to their parents. We hypothesized the following links between Insightfulness and attachment:

First, positively insightful parents will have children with secure attachment.

Insightfulness facilitates correct interpretations and empathic responses to children's signals, as

well as open examination of the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of the parent's caregiving behavior based on the child's reactions. Such caregiving is likely to be experienced by the child as matched to his or her emotional needs and thus to contribute to a secure infant-mother attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Weinfield et al., 1999).

Second, one-sided parents will have children with insecure-ambivalent attachments. The uni-dimensional view of the child characteristic of One-sided parents is likely to be associated with inconsistent care: When the child's behavior is congruent with the mother's expectations she may respond appropriately, whereas when the child's behavior is not congruent with the mother's expectations, she may ignore or respond in a way that is not matched to the child's needs. In addition, mothers classified as One-sided are also often preoccupied with their own emotional issues, and consequently their availability and capacity to focus on the child's inner world may be impaired. The parenting of mothers classified as One-sided may be experienced by the child as frustrating and confusing—the kind of caregiving found to lead to ambivalent attachment (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994).

Third, disengaged parents will have children with insecure-avoidant attachment. The lack of emotional engagement characteristic of the disengaged parent may lead to minimizing or even ignoring the child's bids for closeness and protection, which is experienced by the child as rejection. Disengaged parenting may leave children with the feeling that while their external behavior may be acknowledged, their emotional and psychological needs are unrecognized (Slade, 1999). These experiences are likely to lead to the child's inhibition of his or her emotional expression, particularly of negative affect and vulnerability, which is the hallmark of children with avoidant attachment (Zeanah, Benoit, Hirshberg, Barton, & Regan, 1994).

Fourth, parents classified as mixed will have children with insecure-disorganized attachment. The lack of a coherent strategy for understanding the child's motives and feelings may be reflected in competing or contradictory caregiving behaviors when interacting with the child. Such strategies have been described by Lyons-Ruth and colleagues (Lyons-Ruth, Bronfman, & Atwood, 1999) as being expressed in disruptive parental affective communication and leading to disorganized attachment.

Two studies of mothers and their typically developing infants supported the associations between the IA and infant-mother attachment (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Dolev, Sher, & Etzion-Carasso, 2002; Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, & Sagi, 2001). In both studies, as expected, mothers classified as Positively Insightful had secure children, mothers classified as One-sided had insecure/ambivalent children, and mothers classified as Mixed had children classified as insecure/disorganized. Unexpectedly, no associations were found between the Disengaged classification and children's attachment, perhaps because the samples (like all those based on studies conducted in Israel; van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999) included very few children classified as Avoidant. However, Disengaged were rated as less sensitive than those classified as Insightful, providing support for the validity of the Disengaged classification at least with regard to its linkage to maternal behavior (Koren-Karie et al., 2002).

Two studies of mothers and their atypically developing children also supported the associations between Insightfulness and attachment (Oppenheim, Feniger-Shaal, & Koren-Karie, 2010; Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, Dolev, & Yirmiya, 2009;). Due to the limited size of the samples in both studies, the associations were only examined dichotomously, linking insightfulness versus non-insightfulness with security versus insecurity. In a sample of preschool age boys with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) we found that maternal insightfulness was

associated with child attachment: Mothers who were insightful had securely attached children and mothers who were non-insightful had children with insecure attachments (Oppenheim et al., 2009). Additionally, we did not find an association between insightfulness and either the severity of the child's diagnosis on the Autism spectrum or the child's IQ, suggesting that insightfulness is more a reflection of the parent's meaning-making process and is less sensitive to characteristics of the child, such as the level of the child's impairment. We found similar associations in a sample of children with Intellectual Disability: Mothers who were insightful had securely attached children, and mothers who were non-insightful had children with insecure attachments (Oppenheim et al., 2010).

### **Association between Insightfulness and Parental Caregiving Behavior**

Because insightfulness is thought to be expressed in sensitive and emotionally regulating caregiving behavior, studies using the IA have investigated associations between the IA and maternal sensitivity. In our study of typically developing infants mentioned above mothers classified as Insightful were more sensitive in their interactions with their infants in both home and laboratory observations than those not classified as insightful, suggesting that that insightfulness has its effects on child attachment through sensitive caregiving behavior (Koren-Karie et al., 2002). We replicated the insightfulness-sensitivity link in the sample of children with ASD described earlier and found that insightful mothers were rated as more sensitive during their interactions with their children compared to non-insightful mothers (Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, Dolev, and Yirmiya, 2011). Similar results have been reported by Hutman, Siller, and Sigman (2009), who found that mothers of children with ASD classified as Positively Insightful were more synchronous in their interactions with their children than mothers classified non-insightful, although Kuhn (2007) who also studied mothers of children with ASD failed to

replicate the insightfulness-synchrony association. Finally, in a study of children with Intellectual Disability we found as expected that insightful mothers were rated as more sensitive during their interactions with their children compared to non-insightful mothers (Oppenheim et al., 2010).

Two additional studies linked insightfulness to other aspects of maternal behavior that are closely related to maternal sensitivity. Fridman (2005) studied the “mind-minded” comments (Meins, Fernyhough, Wainwright, Gupta, & Tuckey, 2002) of the mothers from the Koren-Karie et al. (2002) study. Such comments of mothers toward their infants reflect the mothers’ orientation to their children as mental agents and individuals that have thoughts and intentions that guide their behavior. As expected, Fridman (2005) found that insightful mothers used fewer inappropriate mind-minded comments than non-insightful mothers. No differences were found regarding appropriate mind-minded comments.

A recent study of foster mothers (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Yuval-Adler, & Mor, 2012) showed a link between insightfulness and mothers’ sensitive guidance of emotional dialogues with their children. The mothers, each of whom fostered several children, were observed with both the most and the least challenging child in their care while co-constructing a conversation about emotional themes. Insightful mothers guided the conversation more sensitively than non-insightful mothers, and this was true of their interactions with both the least challenging and most challenging child. Thus, like the studies reviewed above, this study linked Insightfulness to the quality of mother-child interactions, supporting the idea that insightfulness has its effects on the child through maternal behavior. In addition, similar to the *lack* of association between insightfulness and the level of child impairment in our study of children with ASD described above, our foster care study showed that Insightfulness appears to be more a reflection of the

parent's meaning making process and is less sensitive to characteristics of the child – in this case, the level of challenge the child presented. We will return to the theoretical significance of this point in the concluding section of this chapter.

### **Effects of Insightfulness on the Child**

As mentioned above, the main source of validity for the IA was its associations with child attachment, and several studies documented such associations. Two additional studies examined the effects of insightfulness on additional aspects of children's development. The first study (Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, Etzion-Carasso, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2005) involved a low risk sample in which maternal insightfulness was assessed when children were 1 year of age, and children's Theory of Mind—their capacity to understand that the behavior of others is governed by internal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs—was assessed when children were 4 years old. As expected, mothers who were insightful when children were 1 year of age had children who showed at the age of 4 years higher Theory of Mind scores than children of mothers who were non-insightful when they were infants (Oppenheim et al., 2005).

The second study showed the contribution of insightfulness to children's therapeutic gains. In this study (Oppenheim, Goldsmith, & Koren-Karie, 2004), preschoolers with emotional and behavioral problems were in a day treatment program, and mothers received parent therapy. Only 9% of the mothers were classified as Positively Insightful prior to treatment, but 50% were so classified following treatment. The findings also showed that the gains mothers made in treatment were associated with improvements in children's behavior problems: Children of mothers who shifted from non-insightfulness to insightfulness showed a reduction in their behavior problems, whereas children of mothers who did not make the shift did not show such a reduction. Although it was not possible to determine whether changes in the mothers elicited

changes in the children or vice versa, the findings nonetheless point to the potential importance of maternal insightfulness in supporting therapeutic gains in young children.

In sum, when insightful parents generate emotional meaning from their children's behavior they show a capacity to *provide an emotionally complex, accepting picture of the child that includes a wide spectrum of contextually appropriate motives while updating their views of the child in accordance with new or unexpected child behaviors*. Studies of insightfulness have shown that it is associated with caregiving behavior that is sensitive to child's emotional signals, and that children benefit from parental insightfulness in terms of their security and emotion and behavior regulation.

It is noteworthy from a theoretical point of view that the assessment of insightfulness is not based on the specific behaviors or characteristics the parents describe or on the accuracy of their judgments regarding the motives underlying their children's behavior. Rather, it is in the flexible, open, and emotionally coherent way parents organize their thought process when asked to make meaning of their children's behavior, and in their capacity to develop an internal dialogue between their pre-existing knowledge about their children and the specific, *in vivo*, behavior of the child as represented in the video segment that they observe that appears to be critical for insightfulness.

In the next body of research that we will describe we propose that these parental capacities are significant not only when parents talk *about* their children, but also when they talk *with* them, particularly around children's emotional experiences. In particular, they support dialogues that provide children with a psychological "secure base". We describe our research on this issue next.

### **Parent-Child Emotion Dialogues: The Psychological Secure Base**

The secure base, a core construct in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), consists of the dynamic balance between children's attachment and exploratory behaviors. When children feel secure they are likely to distance from the parent and explore the environment, but when their sense of security is threatened, they increase the proximity with the caregiver. The hallmarks of a secure attachment are smooth transitions between exploration and attachment in which the child flexibly moves from one to the other in accordance with his or her needs (Main, 1996). For the secure base pattern to operate optimally, parents are expected to match their behavior to the fluctuations in the child's exploratory and attachment behaviors and to the child's emotional signals.

The secure base is considered pertinent not only in infancy but throughout development, although its manifestations change with development (Ainsworth, 1989). While during the early year or two of life many of the interactions that constitute the secure base are mediated through non-verbal emotional signaling, verbal interactions assume an increasingly important role in the following years. Parent-child dialogues, particularly those revolving around personal and emotional experiences, begin to assume central importance (Etzion-Carasso & Oppenheim, 2000). The sensitive matching of the parent's behavior to the child's emotional needs continues to be as important as in the early years, when exploration of the physical world was the focus (Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978, Biringen, 2000). But now exploration expands to new arenas, far beyond the child's immediate environment: It involves the psychological exploration of the past and the future, not only the present, of real worlds but also ones that are imagined, of events that are hoped and yearned for but also those that are dreaded and feared (Wolf, 2003). Bowlby (1988) described secure dyads as those in which there is free-flowing communication between

the partners, and in which the entire spectrum of the child's emotional signals is accurately perceived and sensitively responded to by the parent (Bretherton, 1990, 1993).

Empirical evidence supporting the idea that parent-child emotion dialogues reflect the secure base comes from studies that showed links between measures of attachment with mother-child dialogues. In a pioneering study of 6-year-olds Strage & Main (1985) showed that mother-child dyads in which children were secure in infancy had fluent and balanced conversations, included expressions of emotions, and elaborated on a variety of topics, whereas dyads whose children were insecure as infants had restricted or dysfluent dialogues, had frequent pauses between conversational turns, showed little elaboration of topics, and asked rhetorical and repetitive questions. Similar results have been obtained by Etzion-Carasso and Oppenheim (2000) and Klann-Delius and Hofmeister (1997).

Other studies measured attachment and dialogues concurrently and they too supported the link between secure attachment and mother-child dialogues. For example, Laible and Thompson (2000) assessed dialogues between mothers and their 4-year-olds about an incident in which the child behaved well and an incident in which the child misbehaved. Secure dyads made more references to feelings and had moral evaluative statements than insecure dyads (see also Fivush and Vasudeva, 2002 and Farrar, Fasig, and Welch-Ross 1997 for similar results).

In our own work on mother-child dialogues as providing a "secure base" we focused primarily on observations of mothers and children reminiscing about emotional events experienced by the child (following Fivush, 1991). Such dialogues reflect the way affective meaning is co-constructed between parent and child, parents' sensitive guidance of the process, and children's participation and exploration. In this task, referred to as the Autobiographical Emotional Event Dialogue (AEED), mothers and children are presented with five cards with a

name and a pictorial representation of a feeling. The feelings are happy, mad, sad, scared, and secure. Dyads are asked to remember an event in which the child felt each of the feelings and to jointly construct a story about each of the events.

Transcripts of the dialogues are rated on seven maternal and seven parallel child scales as well as two scales pertaining to the narrative produced by mother and child. Based on these scales, transcripts are classified into an *Emotionally Matched* category reflecting the “psychological secure base”, or one of three non-Emotionally Matched categories (*Excessive*, *Flat*, or *Inconsistent*) showing lack of a “psychological secure base” (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Haimovich, & Etzion-Carasso, 2003).

*Emotionally matched category.* The main characteristic of these dyads is their capacity to tell, in a comfortable and accepting atmosphere, coherent stories with a clear and believable link between the emotion requested and the story provided. The stories can be short, but the reader understands the event and how it evoked the feeling in the child. Both mother and child are involved in constructing the story. When discussing a negative event the mother guides the child toward a story ending that promotes feelings of strength, self-confidence, and being in control. The voices of both child and mother are clearly heard so that the interaction is not dominated by one of the partners. Both show patience and acceptance of each other’s ideas and suggestions. It is important to note that Emotionally Matched dyads are not necessarily very warm, and the content of their dialogues may involve difficult or conflictual moments in their relationship. In other words, the dyads are judged as Emotionally Matched not because they show high levels of warmth or because of inferences based on the emotional quality of the memories they conjure. Rather, the critical features are maternal structuring and organization and child cooperation and elaboration when discussing a wide range of emotional experiences.

*Non-emotionally-matched – Excessive category.* Dyads in this category are characterized by stories that are poorly organized, hard to follow, and may be flooded with negative emotional themes. There are frequent shifts to irrelevant details, repetitiveness, digressions, and excessive and over-dramatized talk. Mothers in these dyads often fail to pace their contributions to the child's rhythm. In many cases one of the partners dominates the conversation and is impatient and unreceptive to the others' contributions. In most cases there is inappropriate closure of the stories and no resolution for negative themes.

*Non-emotionally-matched - Flat (Fl) category.* Dyads in this category are characterized by limited dialogue and poor development of the stories. In addition, lack of involvement and interest in the task are central features. Both mother and child may mention the names of emotions or events that happened but there is almost no development of the idea or the story. The mother does not guide the child and does not encourage the child to develop the ideas that the child has raised. The resulting narrative consists of emotion labels without real substance.

*Non-emotionally-matched - Inconsistent (In) category.* In this category there is a significant gap between the styles of talk of the partners. For example, one of the partners adheres to the instructions and is cooperative and coherent whereas the other partner blocks the dialogue, directs the conversation to irrelevant details, confuses, or expresses hostility and anger. An additional type of inconsistency can emerge when mother and child construct full and matched stories in response to some of the emotions or themes but with regard to the others they become confused, digress, and fail to develop a story.

### **Empirical Research on Mother-Child Emotion Dialogues**

*Studies on attachment and mother-child emotion dialogues.* Because we conceptualized mother-child dialogues as reflections of the secure base, our first research steps were to examine

longitudinally the associations between attachment in infancy and such dialogues, hypothesizing that secure attachment would be associated with Emotionally Matched dialogues. We assessed children's attachment at the age of 1 year using the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), and mother-child AEED dialogues at ages 4.5 and 7.5 (Oppenheim et al., 2007). The results showed that, controlling for children's vocabulary, children who were securely attached as infant were likely to engage in Emotionally-Matched dialogues and those who were who were insecurely attached as infants were likely to engage in non Emotionally-Matched dialogues. This was true both at the age of 4.5 and at the age of 7.5. Somewhat surprisingly the prediction to age 7 dialogues was even *stronger* than the prediction to age 4.5 even though the time lag from the infancy attachment assessment was *longer*, perhaps because the maturity of linguistic and conversational skills of 7-year-olds permitted a more accurate assessment of the dialogue as a secure base.

Would similar findings emerge if other types of emotion dialogues would be observed, or is there something unique to dialogues involving reminiscing? One way to address this question is to compare reminiscing dialogues with other emotion dialogues not involving reminiscing. For this purpose we observed the dyads from the Oppenheim et al. (2007) study in two additional dialogues: the first was a Separation-Reunion Narrative Co-Construction (SRNCC; Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997), in which mothers and children were asked to jointly develop a play narrative, using dolls and props, about parents leaving their children for the weekend and then returning (for full details see Oppenheim et al., 2007). The second was the Joint Storytelling Task (JST), in which mothers and children were asked to jointly develop a narrative based on a wordless picture book that showed a child returning home after school and discovering that the

door is locked, and that the mother who was supposed to be at home is not there (Gini, Oppenheim, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2007).

The results showed that the same attachment-dialogue associations that we found when we used the AEED were obtained using the SRNCC and the JST. Children who were securely attached as infants were more likely to be partners in dyads classified as emotionally matched in the SRNCC (Oppenheim et al., 2007) and as Mutual-Balanced in the JST (a classification similar to Emotionally Matched, see Gini et al., 2007). These findings suggest that the associations we found between early attachment and later mother-child reminiscing dialogues are not unique to such dialogues. Perhaps this commonality was because all three assessments involved conversations about emotional themes and focused on the co-constructive dialogic *process* between parent and child rather than on the specific content of the dialogue.

*Mother-child dialogues and parental and child risk status.* Though it was important, as a first step, to establish the link between early attachment and later mother-child dialogues in order to support the idea that such dialogues reflect the psychological secure base, we contended that mother-child emotion dialogues are not only interesting and important as outcomes of early attachment. Open, coherent, and emotionally regulated dialogues are of importance because they form a psychological secure base and can contribute to children's emotional and behavioral regulation. Thus we would expect, for example, that children experiencing behavioral and emotional problems might have difficulties engaging in emotionally matched dialogues with their mothers, and that intervention may increase their capacity to engage in such dialogues. This was examined in our study of young children enrolled in a therapeutic preschool (Oppenheim et al., 2004).

The sample consisted of children manifesting high levels of behavioral and emotional symptoms. Many of the children had been expelled from several preschools and had a history of abuse and/or exposure to violence. Many of the mothers were single and experienced multiple stressors involving poverty, physical and sexual abuse, and drug abuse. The intervention involved a therapeutic preschool program based on attachment principles and designed to enhance children's feelings of security and their capacity to express their positive and negative emotions while challenging their negative expectations from others (Oppenheim et al., 2004; Goldsmith, 2007). In addition, mothers met with therapists to discuss parenting issues and strategies to support children's therapeutic progress.

Our findings indicated a significant increase in the number of dyads showing Emotionally Matched dialogues following treatment (Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2009). The main improvements were in shifts from the Excessive classification to the Emotionally Matched classification indicating improved organization, emotional regulation, and coherence in the dialogues. There are limitations to this study: Because both children and mothers received intervention we do not know whether improvements in the mothers or improvements in the children led to the increase in the number of Emotionally Matched dialogues. And, because this study did not employ a control group we do not know if the improvements are a function of treatment or other factors. Nonetheless the results are consistent with our expectations that when the parent-child relationship is disturbed, such as when children experience significant behavioral and emotional disturbances, the capacity to engage in emotionally matched dialogues is very limited, and that with treatment this capacity improves.

In this study the focus was on children being at high risk, but what happens if the risk is associated with the parent? We examined this issue in a study of mothers in treatment for the

sexual abuse they experienced as children. The mothers were recruited from agencies specializing in the treatment of adults with a history of sexual abuse. They were observed in the AEED with one of their children, and in addition completed several questionnaires assessing the extent to which they have resolved the trauma they endured, their general psychiatric symptoms as well as symptoms of dissociation, intrusion, and avoidance of the trauma that are characteristic of many adults who have experienced trauma.

The goal of the study was to examine whether the degree to which mothers resolved the trauma they experienced would moderate the effect of the trauma on mother-child emotional dialogues (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim & Getzler-Yosef, 2008). Thus, the impact of the trauma was expected to be less evident among mothers who were more resolved with respect to the trauma and more evident among mothers who were less resolved. As hypothesized we found that mothers who were more resolved guided the dialogues more sensitively, had children who were more cooperative and exploratory, and produced with their children narratives that were more emotionally coherent when compared with mothers who were less resolved. These results appeared specific to resolution of the trauma and were not explained by mothers' symptomatology, dissociation, intrusion or avoidance, which were all unrelated to the dialogues.

Finally, in the foster care study mentioned earlier (Koren-Karie et al., 2012), in which mothers who fostered several children were assessed with the most and least challenging child under their care, we observed the mothers during emotion dialogues with the children (in addition to obtaining IA assessments as described earlier). We hypothesized that because emotion dialogues are strongly influenced by the parent's capacity to sensitively guide the dialogue in a way that is matched to the child's emotions, needs, and competencies, mothers'

guidance of the dialogues with both children would be similar, even though the children were selected to present different – and highly contrastive – levels of challenge.

The findings supported this hypothesis by showing an association between mothers' sensitive guidance of the most challenging child and the least challenging child under her care, and by showing no differences in the level of sensitive guidance as a function of the challenge the child presented. These findings highlight the importance of the parent matching his or her input to the specific characteristics of the child, and the resulting possibility of establishing emotionally matched dialogues even with children who are challenging. We will return to this point and its theoretical implications in the concluding section of this chapter.

### **Conclusion**

We highlighted two parental capacities – insightfulness into the child's inner world and sensitive guidance of emotion dialogues – and presented assessment methods designed to measure these capacities. We also reviewed a body of research findings that support their validity and demonstrate their implications for children's socioemotional development. We would like to conclude by speculating regarding common parenting processes that underlie both assessments, based on attachment theory's relational and organizational view of parenting (Main et al., 1985; George & Solomon, 1999; Bowlby, 1988).

In both assessments the level of organization – often referred to as the “how” – appears to be more important than the specific contents or themes that emerge – the “what”. In the IA we do not code the specific thoughts or behaviors the parent attributes to the child. The parent may describe various behaviors or characteristics, including positive and challenging behaviors of the child vis-à-vis the parent, but this tells us little about the parent's insightfulness. The parent may even describe symptomatic behavior, such as temper tantrums, separation difficulties, or in the

case of children with disabilities – various symptoms related to the child’s disorder, but we do not make inferences from the description of the child’s behavior, including the behavior toward the parent, as to the insightfulness of the parent.

It is only when we begin to look at the “how” of parental talk, and the thought processes that underlie the talk, that we can begin to assess insightfulness: Can the parent talk about thoughts, feelings, wishes, fears that underlie the child’s behavior and are these convincingly linked to the behavior? Or is the parent limited to describing surface behavior, or, alternatively, invoke thoughts and feelings that are not tied to the behavior they are supposed to explain? Can the parent link general statements about the child to specific examples from the video segments? Or does the parent fail to provide the link or provide a link to behavior that is not in the tape? Can the parent bring examples from everyday life that match the characteristics the parent attributes to the child? Or, does the parent claim that the behavior in the segment is not typical and fail to explain the discrepancy? Can the parent acknowledge unexpected child behavior in the video segment and accommodate his or her view of the child to match the actual, observed behavior? Or does the parent impose a preset view of the child, dismissing the behavior on the tape as “atypical”? These are but a few examples of the emphasis on what we mean by the “how” – on the way parental talk is organized.

Similarly, in the context of mother-child dialogues, the themes that parents and children choose to bring up when discussing memories of different emotions tell us little about the degree to which the dialogue functions as a secure base, but the way the dialogue is organized is much more indicative. For example, children and parents often bring up memories that involve their relationship: an example for happy may be a fun outing, and an example for mad can be a conflict between the parent and child. In judging whether the dialogues are matched we do not

infer from the content of the description what kind of relationship the parent and child have. Rather, we look at how they discuss the memory: Does the episode match the emotion they are supposed to talk about or does the dyad bring up a memory that does not match the emotion? Do both partners contribute to the dialogue or is it dominated by one of the partners? Does the dialogue remain focused on the child and the child's experience or does it get derailed to other topics, including the mother's experience? And, in the case of memories that involve distress, does the parent guide the dialogue to stress the child's successful coping with the challenge or difficulty, or does the dialogue end with the child's unresolved experience of distress?

Thus, as we tried to illustrate, both assessments share a few common elements: promoting security and emotion regulation in the child depends on the parents focusing on the child's experience in a non-defensive, open way in which the entire spectrum of behaviors and emotions can be brought up, thought about, discussed, and accepted, with a focus on the child's successful coping. "Goodness of Fit" between parent and child is crucial in both assessments, involving matching the descriptions of the child (in the Insightfulness Assessment) or the responses to the child (in the emotion dialogues assessment) to the specific and unique characteristics and needs of the child with the goal of creating an experience that puts the child's needs in the center. It follows that our approach does not offer a parenting "prescription" for insightful talk or sensitive guidance of dialogues – at least not in a simple that can be generalized across children. Rather, our approach is fundamentally relational, and emphasizes the parent's capacity to perceive the child's signals openly and match the parent's thoughts and behaviors to the rhythm, needs, and capacities of the child. We believe that in such an emotional climate children can develop a sense of security not only at the level of being protected and comforted in

times of distress, but in feeling that their inner world is meaningful and that their thoughts and feelings are appreciated, understood and accepted.

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