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INTRODUCTION

Our Framework

Over the last half-century, the world has changed fundamentally, shifting the expectations and experiences of how parents raise their children (Faircloth, 2014). As family composition and living arrangements have diversified—with an increase of unmarried or divorced families, single and same-sex parents—so has the face of parenting. This shift requires a systemic and integrative clinical approach more than ever.

HOW WE DEFINE THE TERM *PARENT*

Throughout this book and the therapeutic framework it proposes, we take the term *parent* to be broad and encompass all who are in a parenting role, whether they are the parent of an unborn child or have lost a child, or parent children or young adults whom they did not give birth to. We recognize parenting as an identity, a role, and an experience that is not tied to one definition.

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Working With Parents in Therapy: A Mentalization-Based Approach, by N. Malberg, E. Jurist, J. Bate, and M. Dangerfield

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As pointed out by Sisk (2020), in the past 20 years, many psychoanalytically informed authors (Altman, 1994; Chazan, 1995; Lieberman & Van Horn, 2005, 2008; Novick & Novick, 2005, 2013; Siskind, 1996, 1997; Slade, 2008a, 2008b; Stern, 1995; Tsiantis, 2000) have advocated for increased work with and consideration for the parents of children in treatment. Our approach considers the impact of generational transmission of relational patterns, in the same way that many psychoanalytic authors (Badoni, 2002; Blos, 1985; Fraiberg et al., 1975; Hoffman, 1984) identified the intergenerational transmission of psychological disturbance as a critical factor in influencing the development of pathology in childhood.

Current evidence shows that maltreatment-related childhood adversity is the leading preventable risk factor for mental disorders and substance abuse (Teicher et al., 2016). This highlights the need for organizing frameworks and substantial treatments for parents to ameliorate present distress; alter historical patterns of dysfunction; and support a more permeating sense of recovery, revitalization, and strengthened capacity to engage meaningfully in life and relationships in the context of parenting. One must search books and articles on child treatment to find mention of parent work, often described as brief, cursory, and confined to what are viewed as practical considerations: how often to see the parents, how much to tell them, or how to gain their cooperation. Furthermore, too often one finds a cautionary tone when discussing parent work regarding parents as threatening or “attacking” the treatment by undermining the therapist’s work. As Siskind (1999) pointed out, there frequently seems to be an attitude of resignation—one that suggests that parents are the special burden that the child therapist must bear.

Approaches to parenting are rooted in parents’ value and belief systems (Bornstein et al., 2012). Parents, for example, orient their efforts toward important developmental goals they have for their children, which are rooted in sociocultural norms but are also personally motivated and inform their parenting style. For example, independent of culture, parents who aim for obedience, interdependence, and school achievement as primary goals in child-rearing tend to be more authoritarian and controlling (Meng, 2012). Moreover, migration and globalization have led to unprecedented ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity within many societies. Immigration to a country that differs in parenting norms, along with the subsequent changes in family structures, dynamics, and roles, presents significant challenges for families. For instance, parents may feel that their native sociocultural context prior to migration conflicts with the new one. This might be reflected, for example, in experiences with the legal and educational

systems, in which the parents feel an undermining of their family dynamics and values (Nauck & Lotter, 2015).

Although there are good reasons to question a binary perspective on gender, parenting tends to remain gendered, in terms of (a) the parents' experience and identity as a parent and (b) how parents approach their children. The experiences of parents and parenting are in a state of constant change, as they follow children's age and developmental stage. As a result, we need working frameworks that go beyond prescriptive and obscure ways of describing parent work. A developmental and relational framework informed by contemporary psychodynamic research and theory potentiates the emergence of a lens through which the therapist can organize, understand, and reflect on their work with parents and truly meet them where they are.

OUR APPROACH

In this book, we present a mentalizing framework for working with parents that aims to take into consideration the current sociocultural environment and how it impacts the developmental process of parenting. We do this by using a model that is based on developmental principles, thinking about the process of parenting as a developmental line (Freud, 1965)—one that fluctuates and transforms throughout the lifespan. This developmental approach structures the therapeutic process in our work with adults who are parents (Malberg, 2015). This means that the process of assessment, formulation, and tailoring of the intervention is informed not only by the specific challenges motivating the parent to seek help regarding their child but also by the individual characteristics of the parent, such as personality organization, attachment style, and temperament. In a nutshell, we propose a *transactional and developmental framework* of working with parents, one that considers what the parent brings, what the child brings, and what the therapist brings.

The approach presented in this book is the result of integration of psychodynamic clinical research, theory, and practice. Each of the authors brings the experience of such integration in their daily professional functions. Norka Malberg, coauthor of the 2017 book on mentalization-based treatment (MBT) with school-age children (Midgley et al., 2017), has further elaborated—in the last 15 years of her career as a child and adolescent psychotherapist and MBT child and adolescent supervisor and trainer—models, to work with parents and teachers, that substantially support the work with children and adolescents (Malberg, 2015, 2019, 2020) in the context of mental health settings as well as the larger community. Her work emphasizes the

intersection of child and adult work in the context of working both as a child and adult psychoanalytic psychotherapist.

Elliot Jurist is a coauthor of the 2002 book (Fonagy et al., 2002) that first laid out the theoretical foundations for what is now known as MBT, currently a widely used, evidence-based clinical practice that has come to radically shift views about the role of the psychotherapist in the context of psychotherapy (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016). He has developed the construct of mentalized affectivity (Greenberg et al., 2017, 2021; Jurist, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2018) in the effort to focus on working with emotion in a more targeted and specific fashion supported by his extensive research and clinical practice.

Jordan Bate brings her clinical and research experiences in the context of contemporary attachment theory in the tradition of illustrious mentors and colleagues such as Miriam and Howard Steele, with particular emphasis on (a) parental and child reflective functioning in the context of adverse childhood experiences and (b) how to train therapists in these approaches (Bate et al., 2016, 2018; Bate & Malberg, 2020; Murphy et al., 2014, 2015; Steele et al., 2014, 2015; Talia et al., 2019). She is also a coauthor of *Deliberate Practice in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy* (Bate et al., 2022), part of the American Psychological Association's Essentials of Deliberate Practice series.

Mark Dangerfield (2020, 2021), a clinical psychologist; psychoanalyst; MBT for Adolescents (MBT-A) psychotherapist, trainer, and supervisor; and lead Adaptive Mentalization-Based Integrative Treatment (AMBIT) trainer, contributes both (a) his extensive clinical experience in working with families and adolescents with severe psychopathological problems and (b) his research and clinical explorations into the impact of adverse childhood experiences and their profound consequences on the lives of children and families—and, specifically, the process of parenting as well as adult psychological functioning. All four authors are psychodynamically informed in their clinical approach and strongly influenced by a tradition of clinical research that guides the process of formulation and treatment planning and implementation.

This book is a model of intervention based on a scaffolding process shaped by the core theoretical elements of contemporary mentalization theory and its clinical applications—not an intervention manual. We believe that working with parents, whether in parallel to our work with their children or in individual or couple's psychotherapy, is a process that is best served when the therapist can hold in mind the benefits of effective mentalizing as a protective factor in the lifelong journey that parenting represents. The framework presented in this book approaches the diversity in contemporary parenting configurations and practices by focusing on strengthening and revitalizing a

single capacity: that of parental reflective functioning (Slade, 2005), otherwise known as *mentalization*.

HOW WE DEFINE PARENTAL REFLECTIVE FUNCTIONING

We define *parental reflective functioning* as a caregiver's capacity to flexibly use different facets for mental reflection, by (a) focusing on self or other, (b) shifting between and integrating affective or cognitive ways of understanding, and (c) using external or internal sources of information as well as relying on quick implicit forms and more controlled explicit forms of reflection, specifically in the context of the parent-child relationship. In the next pages, we invite the reader to explore the elements that guide our intervention with parents and consider a specific way of relating, while keeping in mind the uniqueness of each parent's experience.

Our goal in this book is to provide the reader with parameters—guiding principles, if you will—to inform the process of evaluation, formulation, and treatment in the work with parents. Our emphasis on *parenting as a developmental process* allows for the necessary flexibility to *meet the parent where they are in the developmental line of parenting* and employ a scaffolding process to navigate the task of supporting and growing with parents as they define and revisit who they are, how they are, and who they feel they ought to be in the context of the parenting experience. Anna Freud (1965), one of the founders of child psychoanalysis, advocated for the use of the concept of developmental lines to articulate both the fluidity of the developmental process and its transactional nature. She felt that speaking of developmental lines to parents and teachers communicated clearly and effectively the importance of a flexible scaffolding to meet children where they are developmentally and as people. The framework presented here, as well as MBT, emerged from Anna Freud's legacy of clinical and theoretical integration.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

We begin by presenting the key concepts of mentalization and parental reflective functioning in the context of development and their clinical applications. Through clinical vignettes¹, Chapter 1 illustrates the clinical applications

¹ The cases in this book have been disguised to maintain client confidentiality.

of the concept of parental reflective functioning as a guiding lens in the process of assessment and treatment planning. Specifically, we explore the value of a therapist's mentalizing stance in eliciting and modeling the relational ingredients of reflective functioning. We underline the value of providing parents a safe environment where they can feel mentalized. Furthermore, as working with parents can often be experienced by the therapist as a treacherous and frustrating process, we illustrate, in this first chapter, the emergence of prementalizing modes of functioning and the value of both identifying them and working to return to mentalizing with parents in a coregulating, bidirectional fashion. We highlight how working with emotion from a mentalizing stance proves helpful in this context. The chapter ends with a clinical illustration of the case of the O family and their daughter, Cristina. This clinical example, which has been modified to preserve anonymity, will accompany us throughout Part I of this book, in which we explore the different pieces of the puzzle that form our framework.

In Chapter 2, we explore our mentalizing framework, based on a foundation of epistemic trust and mentalized affectivity. The concept of epistemic trust has been advanced in recent years by Fonagy and Allison (2014), in a search to expand the scope of attachment theory and for research to be more systemic and culturally sensitive by drawing from communication theory. The concept of natural pedagogy, derived from Gergely and Csibra's (2005) work and a developmental perspective, affords more freedom to the therapist working with parents—but also more responsibility in the context of the therapeutic relationship. As we reflected at the beginning of this Introduction, the expansion of diversity that we are encountering in contemporary society demands the exploration of valuable concepts such as epistemic mistrust, as well as a focus on rupture and repair within the therapeutic relationship with parents. We cannot any longer afford to work from a place of certainty and from the safety of our established wisdom. More than ever, in order to open the door to mutual social learning, we must work on our capacity for genuine interest, nonjudgmental attitude, and, most of all, sincerely a curious and not-knowing stance. We hope to illustrate these principles once more through clinical vignettes with Cristina's parents.

The other central component of our framework, that of mentalized affectivity, refers to a capacity that is central for the promotion of safety and social learning required to activate or rehabilitate a parent's reflective functioning. Often, when working with parents, it is easier to stay connected at a cognitive level; somehow, it seems to create the semblance of progress and of "fixing something." In this chapter, we attempt to illustrate the value of integrating both emotion and cognition in our therapeutic work—one of the four dimensions that

influence our capacity to mentalize. We take account of identifying, processing, and expressing emotions and strive to help patients integrate cognition and emotion by recognizing how emotions in the present are influenced by the past.

Chapter 3 addresses the “ghosts in the nursery,” a concept—coined by psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg (Fraiberg et al., 1975) and present throughout this book—that has been widely used, in the attachment literature, to speak of the impact of a parent’s relational past and its influence in the capacity and quality of parenting. Furthermore, the term addresses the strength of generational transmission of relational patterns in the context of potentially traumatic experiences and how it presents itself as a strong inhibiting force while working with and supporting parents. The concept of adverse relational experiences is explored in this context and illustrated via clinical vignettes.

In Chapter 4, we address what we understand to be an essential part of the therapeutic process—and one that will determine its outcome. We are referring to the assessment phase with parents from our mentalizing approach, in which assessing the complexities and conflicts around parenting is described in detail.

Finally for Part I, in Chapter 5, we bring it all together and present an integrative framework for assessment, formulation, and intervention, from a developmental and relational perspective, when working with adults who are parents, in the various clinical contexts. We offer an illustration of the application of this integrative framework to the fictional case of the O family.

Moving forward in this book, Part II illustrates the application of our mentalizing framework across the developmental continuum to diverse parenting situations in the context of today’s society, keeping in mind the role of a transactional model of parenting where the parent—with their relational history, personality, and temperament—impacts the child, and vice versa. We understand that parenthood is an ongoing developmental process throughout one’s life trajectory. However, in this book, as seen in Chapters 8 through 11, we focus our exploration in the period from infancy to young adulthood. Each of these chapters outlines key considerations for specific developmental stages of the child and the parent: the transition to parenthood and to parenting during infancy, toddlerhood, school age, adolescence, and young adulthood. Chapter 12 specifically addresses working with couples, and the overlap between couples therapy and parent work. In this concluding chapter, we highlight the impact, on the clinician, of parent work from a mentalization-informed perspective. From this perspective, a relational framework informed by mentalization principles includes the emotional impact of the work on the professional and the importance of supervision and peer support to encourage and sustain a mentalizing stance.