Arrested Psychological Development and Age Regression

Traumatic life events can cause the child to become 'stuck' at a particular level of psychological development for an extended period of time - s/he may, therefore, often seem immature as development was frozen at an earlier stage. For example, an eleven year old child who was abandoned by his/her primary carer at age four may throw tantrums similar to those one might expect of a four year old when left with an unfamiliar baby-sitter. In other words, s/he may regress behaviourally to the developmental stage at which s/he became frozen. Such regressive behaviour is a temporary reaction to real or perceived trauma.

Severe trauma can result in commensurately severe developmental delays. For example, a ten year old child who has experienced severe trauma may not yet have developed a conscience (even though a conscience usually develops around the of ages six to eight). This does NOT mean that the child is 'bad', it is just that s/he has not yet reached the relevant developmental stage. This can be rectified by the child identifying with a parent or carer and internalizing that identification.

It is vital to point out that if a child has never had the opportunity to identify with a safe and rational adult and has not, therefore, been able to internalize adult values, we cannot expect that child to have developed a conscience. Indeed, if there has been little or no justice or predictability in the child's life, and s/he is ill-treated for no discernible reason by adults in a position of trust, developing a conscience may not even have been in the child's best interests. In extreme circumstances, for example, it may have been necessary for the child to lie, steal and cheat purely in order to survive; once s/he has learned such behaviours are necessary to his/her very survival, these same behaviours become extremely difficult to unlearn.

Below I list some of the main factors that may lead to arrested development.

EXAMPLES OF TRAUMAS WHICH CAN INTERRUPT PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT :

- separation from the primary care-giver
- all forms of abuse
- foster care
- adoption
ATTACHMENT DISORDER:

One of the main traumas a child can suffer is a problematic early relationship with the primary care-giver; these problems can include the primary care-giver having a mental illness, abusing alcohol/drugs, or otherwise abusing or abandoning the child. In such cases, attachment disorder is likely to occur in the child - this disorder can impair or even cripple a child's ability to trust and bond with others. In such cases, it is the child's ability to attach to other human beings which is impaired by developmental delays.

Since such a child's development has essentially become frozen in relation to his/her ability to bond with others, s/he will not 'grow out' of the problem behaviours associated with attachment disorder without a great deal of emotional 'repair work.'

WHAT KIND OF BEHAVIOURS MIGHT A CHILD WITH AN ATTACHMENT DISORDER DISPLAY?

*the main examples of these are listed below:*

- little eye contact with parents
- lack of affection with parents
- telling extremely obvious lies
- stealing
- delays in learning
- poor relationships with peers
- cruelty to animals
- lack of conscience
- preoccupation with fire
- very little impulse control/hyperactivity
- abnormal speech patterns
- abnormal eating patterns
- inappropriate demanding behaviour

- inappropriate clingy behaviour
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