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Making Sense of Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Family Mental Health:
The Springboard to Success
for Children with ASD

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Rethink Autism Webinar

rethink

9/25/2013

Family Mental Health

("We give our children roots and wings" – Hodding Carter)

Family Mental Health is a key ingredient in outcome for all children, but especially for the child with developmental disability, who is less able to work around obstacles arising from family dysfunction than a child with normal development.

Signs of Family Mental Health

- **Systemic support for differentiation of all members as they are able**
- **Flexibility**
  - Shifting alliances (adults vs. kids, "boys vs. girls," etc.)
  - Shifting roles (role of "hero" or "in the doghouse")
  - Shifting solutions (one size does not fit all; "equitable" vs. "equal")
  - Shifting combinations for activities. All legitimate combinations should come up once in a while.
- **Sense of humor / playfulness**

Topics

- **Individual development (and the baggage we bring to adulthood)**
- **The Family System**
  - Triangles (and other alliances)
- **The Unit of Treatment is the Family**
  - First, do no harm
- **Suggestions for clinicians and families**

Family Systems Theory

Murray Bowen, 1913-1990

- **"A theory of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit"**

http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html

Family Systems Theory

- **"Emotional interdependence presumably evolved to promote the cohesiveness and cooperation families require to protect, shelter, and feed their members"**
- **People have a "thinking brain," language, a complex psychology and culture, but…** *the emotional system affects most human activity and is the principal driving force in the development of clinical problems***."**
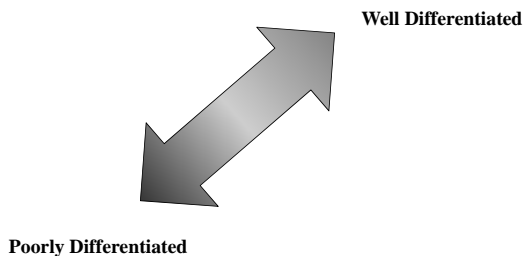
http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html

Family Systems Theory

- ➢ **Differentiation of Self**
- ➢ **Triangles**
- ➢ **Nuclear Family Emotional System**
- **Family Projection Process**
- **Multigenerational Transmission Process**
- **Emotional Cutoff**
- **Sibling Position**
- **Societal Emotional Process**

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Differentiation of Self

Well Differentiated

Poorly Differentiated

Differentiation of Self

- **"A person with a well-differentiated 'self' recognizes his realistic dependence on others, but he can stay calm and clear headed enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of the facts from thinking clouded by emotionality."**

http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html

Differentiation of Self

- **"People with a poorly differentiated 'self' depend so heavily on the acceptance and approval of others that either they quickly adjust what they think, say, and do to please others, or they dogmatically proclaim what others should be like and pressure them to conform."**
- **In both cases, the underlying objective is conflict avoidance (jc)**

http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html

Getting to Well-Differentiated
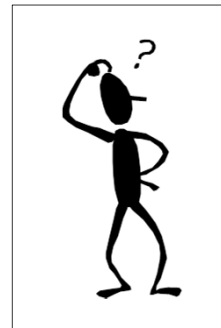
Becoming well-differentiated: Erikson's stages of psychosocial development
(Erik Erikson, 1902-1994)

Approx. Age	Psycho Social Crisis [2]	Significant Relationship[3]	Existential Question[3]
0–2 years	Basic Trust vs. Mistrust	Mother	Can I Trust the World?
2–4 years	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Parents	Is It Okay To Be Me?
4–5 years	Initiative vs. Guilt	Family	Is It Okay For Me To Do, Move and Act?
5–12 years	Industry vs. Inferiority	Neighbors, School	Can I Make It In The World Of People And Things?
13–19 years	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Peers, Role Model	Who Am I? What Can I Be?
20–39 years	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Friends, Partners	Can I Love?
40–64 years	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Household, Workmates	Can I Make My Life Count?
65-death	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Mankind, My Kind	Is It Okay To Have Been Me?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erikson's_stages_of_psychosocial_development

Sense of Self
(Adapted from Erikson)

- **Identity**
  - Adolescence
    - **Who am I and where do I fit into the world?**
- **Self-confidence: Childhood**
  - **The sum total of all of one's successes +**
  - **Successful recovery from life's bumps**
- **Trust**
  - **Infancy: I cry, and my mother meets my needs**

Still Face Experiment
(Tronick et al, 1978)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0

Sense of Self

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You can't belong to someone else until you belong to yourself

Well-Differentiated Adult

**Identity
Self-confidence
Basic Trust**
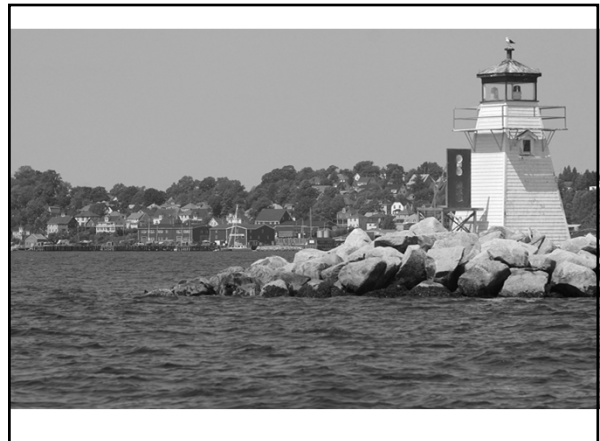
Family Systems Theory

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Triangles

• **A triangle is a three-person relationship system**
• **A triangle is the smallest stable relationship system**
• **Paradoxically, triangles can contain much more tension than a dyad [2-person system]… because the tension can shift around three relationships**
• **Triangles are building blocks of larger emotional systems**

http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html

http://pghbridges.com/basics.htm
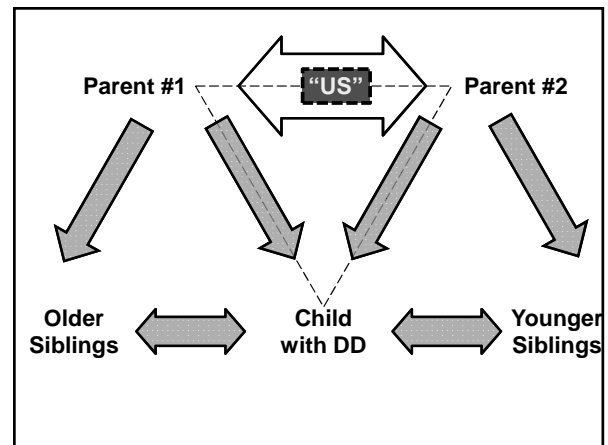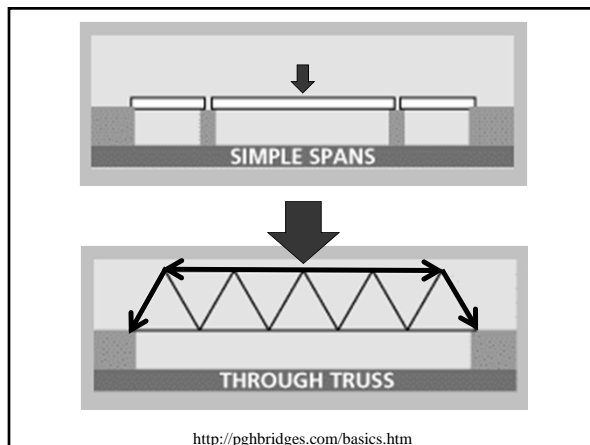
Triangles

• **The essential nature of triangles endows them with strength, because it permits *avoidance of one-on-one confrontation***
• **but at the same time, creates a situation with two "insiders" and an "odd man out," who is trying to become an insider**
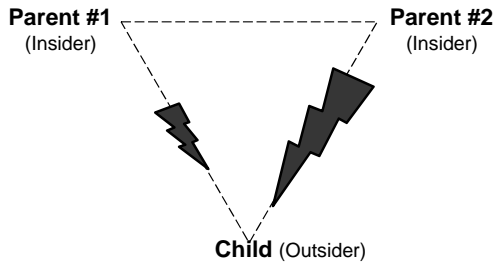
http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html

Triangles

Example: Mom is angry at teenage child. "Wait till your father gets home and hears about this!"
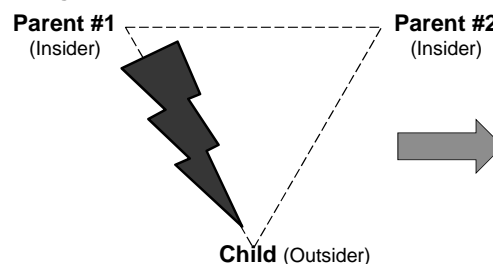
Triangles

- **Some of the anger shifts to dad-child side of triangle**
- **Mom's stress is reduced**

Parent #1
(Insider)

Parent #2
(Insider)

Child (Outsider)

Triangles

Example: Teenage child to Parent '#1': "Parent '#2' says it's alright with him/her if it's alright with you!"
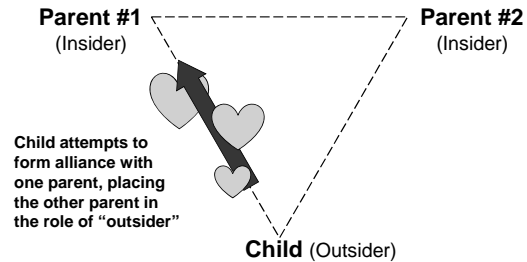
Parent #1
(Insider)

Parent #2
(Insider)

Child attempts to form alliance with one parent, placing the other parent in the role of "outsider"

Child (Outsider)

Family Systems Theory

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Nuclear Family Emotional Systems

- **"The basic relationship patterns result in family tensions coming to rest in certain parts of the family. The more anxiety one person or one relationship absorbs, the less other people must absorb. This means that some family members maintain their functioning at the expense of others."**
- **Triangles can lead to *dysfunctional* but *stable* interrelationships that work to the detriment of one or more family members**

http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html

Triangles

- **Example: Primary conflict is between parents**

Parent #1
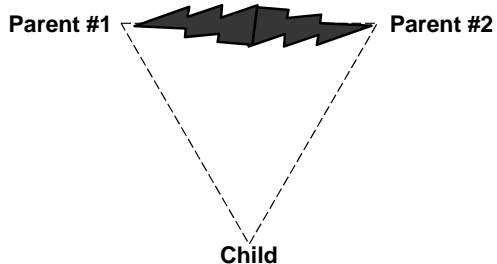
Parent #2

Child

Triangles

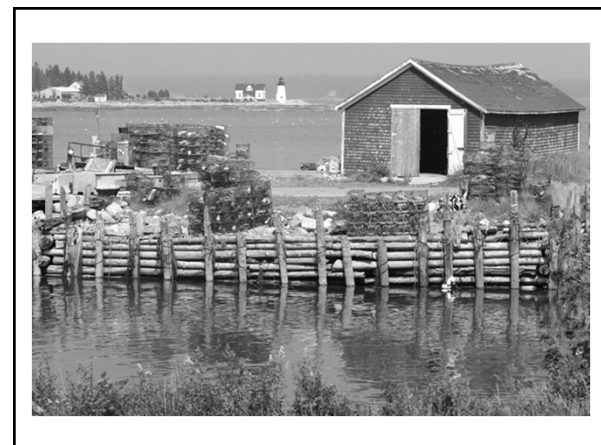**Each parent may vie for the child's loyalty, in order to place the other parent in the role of "outsider"**

Parent #1

Parent #2

Child is a pawn in parents' struggle, &/or smothered by "overprotection"

Triangles

OR: By common consent, the parents may both find it less stressful to focus on their child's failings (real or perceived) than to work on their own conflict.

Parent #1   **Parent #2**

Child ("Our troubled child")

Interlocking Triangles

Parent #1   **Parent #2**

Our saintly child   **Our troubled child**
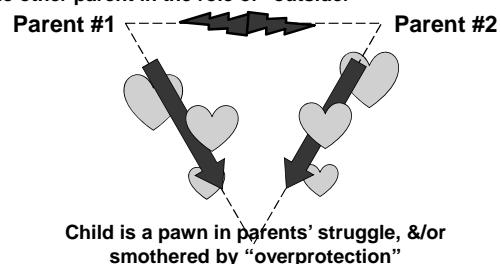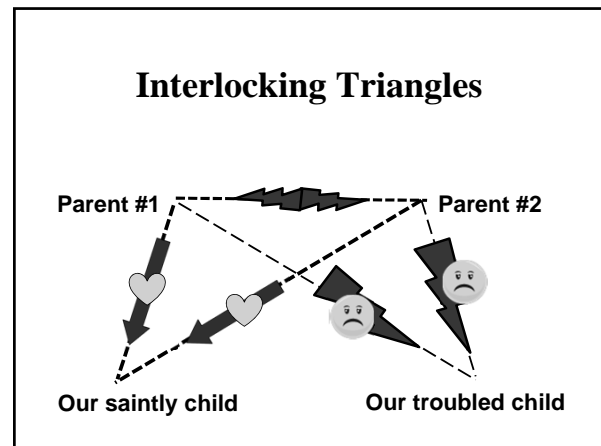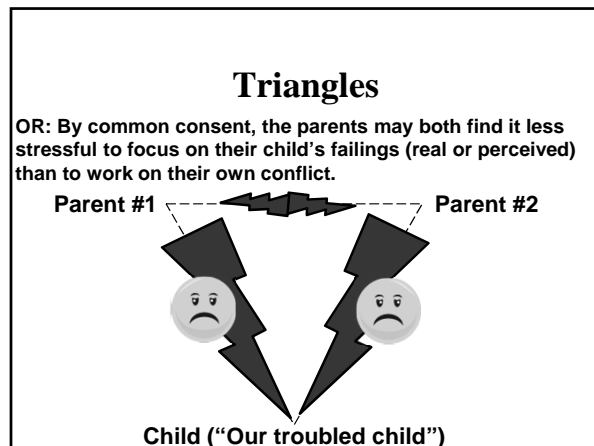
Where is the problem?

- **The person with the identified "problem" may not be the actual source of the difficulty**

You, Me, and US

You can't belong to someone else until you belong to yourself

Partner #1
Identity
Self-confidence
Basic Trust

Partner #2
Identity
Self-confidence
Basic Trust

Slide 1:

- Intimacy
- Interdependence ("US")

Autonomy   Autonomy

Partner #1
Identity
Self-confidence
Trust

"US"

Partner #2
Identity
Self-confidence
Trust

"US" = *The relationship* **(ex: " 'US' needs a vacation)**

Slide 2:

Love Triangle

Parent #1 ← **"US"** → **Parent #2**

Child
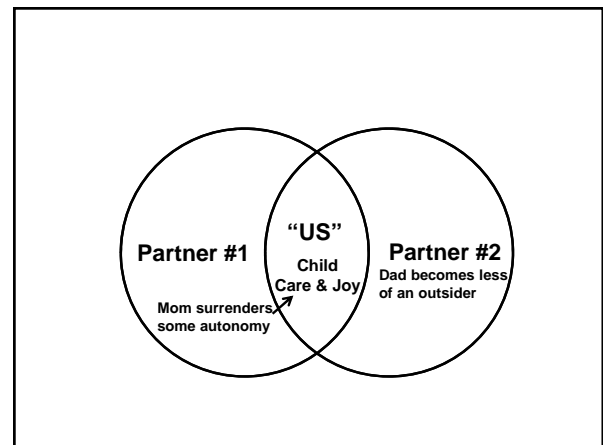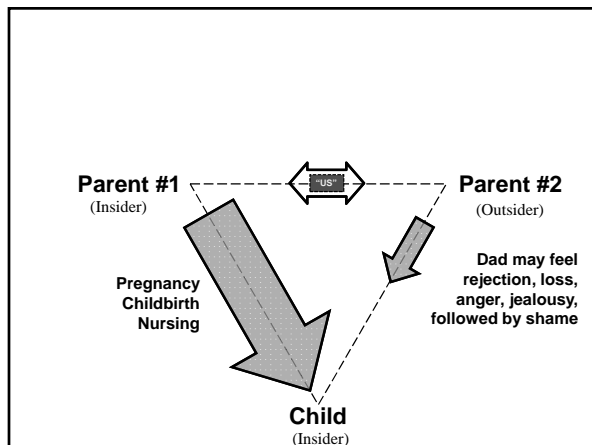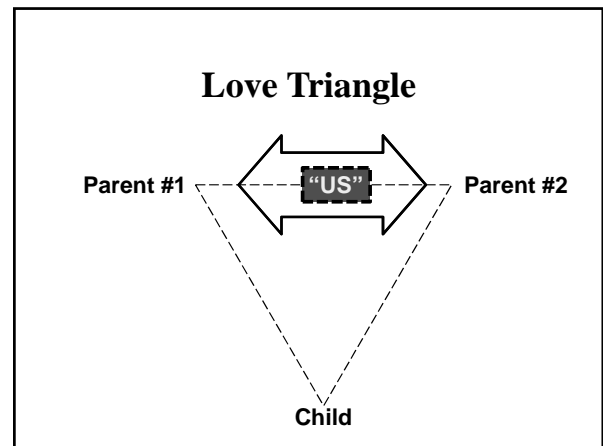
Slide 3:

Parent #1
(Insider)

"US"

Parent #2
(Outsider)

**Pregnancy
Childbirth
Nursing**

**Dad may feel
rejection, loss,
anger, jealousy,
followed by shame**

Child
(Insider)

Slide 4:

Partner #1

"US"
**Child
Care & Joy**

Partner #2

**Mom surrenders
some autonomy**

**Dad becomes less
of an outsider**

Slide 5:

Parent #1 ← **"US"** → **Parent #2**

Child

Slide 6:

Parent #1 ← **"US"** → **Parent #2**

Child with Disability

A parent reflects…

**"I would compare the experience of having a disabled child to the experience of parenting during the first eight weeks of an infant's life – intense, exhausting, you are always on duty (vigilant). All other aspects of your life fade into the background…. It's that intense, and the difference goes on for years"**

**Marshak, LE and Prezant, FP:
Married with special needs children
Woodbine House, 2007**

Parent #1   "US"   Parent #2

Older Siblings   Child with DD   Younger Siblings
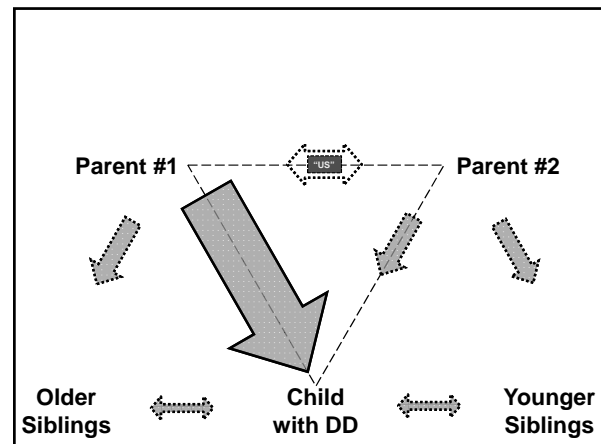
Dysfunctional Coping Styles (Sub-optimal, but common)

- **Utilitarian Model**
- **Enmeshment**

Utilitarian Relationship
(Child care is what holds us together)

Partner #1   "US" Child Care   Partner #2
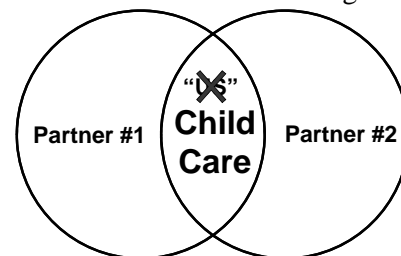
**Marshak, LE and Prezant, FP:
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Enmeshment
(No emotional differentiation between parent and child)

Parent #1   "US"   Parent #2

Leads to

Child with Disability

Enmeshment
(No emotional differentiation between parent and child)

Partner #1
- Relentless self-sacrifice
- Hypervigilance

"US"

Partner #2
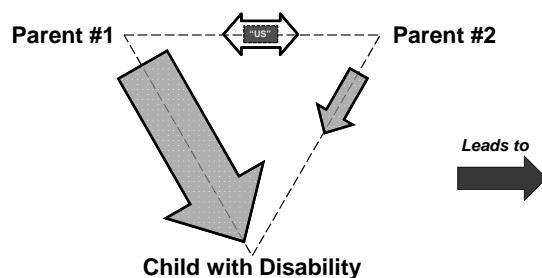
Child

**Marshak, LE and Prezant, FP:
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How professionals do unintended harm
(Parent-Therapist bond replaces marital bond)
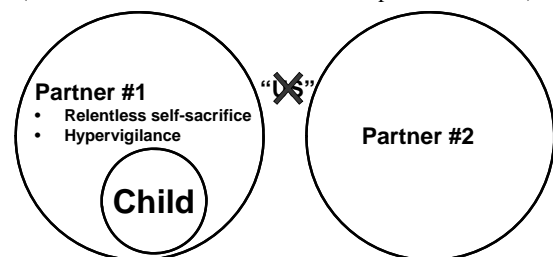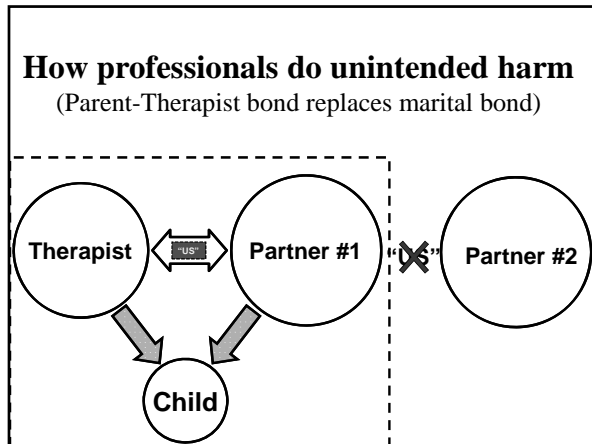
"House Rules"

- **Whenever possible, make sure that both parents are present.**
- **Exceptions:**
  - **One parent is:**
    - **In prison**
    - **Deceased**
    - **In the armed forces stationed overseas**

Family Mental Health

- **Your child with special needs is a *member* of the family, but should not become the *center* of the family**
  – **Ruby Moye Salazar, LCSW, BCD**

Family Mental Health

Your child with a disability is a member of the family, but *your child's disability* should not become the center of the family.

Adapted from Ruby M. Salazar

Making Meaning

- **It's not the disability *per se*, but the meaning we attach to it, that causes problems**
- **We "make meaning" by superimposing our interpretation on external events**
  – **Man's Search for Meaning; Viktor Frankl**

Making Meaning

- **What is the meaning of having a child with a disability?**
  - The "meaning" we find in events is preconditioned by:
    - our prior experiences, and
    - our biological makeup
  - But we also have freedom to decide how we *choose* to see things

The Duckrabbit Experiment

What kind of animal do you see?

http://www.wisc-online.com/objects/ViewObject.aspx?ID=I2P902

Joseph Jastrow, 1899

Making Meaning

- What is the "meaning" of having a child with a disability?
  - God's Will
    - Punishment
      - Guilt / Shame
    - Theodicy: "It's for the good"
      - Everything is a blessing
  - It's someone's fault ("Everything happens for a reason")
    - Self-blame
    - Blame others (Dr. / Spouse / ….) / Anger
  - "Sh*t Happens" for no reason
    - Life is out of control

Making Meaning

- What is the "meaning" of having a child with a disability?
  - God's Will
    - Punishment
      - Guilt / Shame ➜ Overcorrection
  - ➜ Self-Sacrifice (all-consuming effort on behalf of child)
    - Expiation for one's sins
    - Defense against overwhelming guilt / shame
      - Lady MacBeth ("Out, out damned spot")
    - Magical hope for cure
  - ➜ Over-Enmeshment with child

Making Meaning

- What is the "meaning" of having a child with a disability?
  - God's Will
    - Punishment
      - Guilt / Shame
  - Theodicy (Leibniz 1710)
    - An attempt to reconcile belief in a benevolent Deity with the existence of evil in the world
    - Disputed (and satirized) by Voltaire (Candide; "We live in the best of all possible worlds")
    - Post-Holocaust Theology: "Anti-Theodicy" - God's existence cannot be rationally proven or disproven based the existence of evil

Making Meaning

- What is the "meaning" of having a child with a disability?
  - God's Will
    - Punishment
    - Theodicy
  - It's someone's fault ("Everything happens for a reason")
    - Self-blame ➜ Self sacrifice
    - Blame others (Dr. / Spouse / ….) / ➜ Anger
  - "Sh*t Happens" for no reason
    - Life is out of control

Making Meaning

- **What is the "meaning" of having a child with a disability?**
  - God's Will
  - It's someone's fault ("Everything happens for a reason")
  - "Sh*t Happens" for no reason
    - Life is out of control: Scary!
    - Silver linings:
      - Not all bad things are Divinely intended
      - Not all bad things are someone's fault
        - No Guilt / Shame / Self-Blame / Anger
      - Acceptance of what I cannot change (Serenity Prayer)
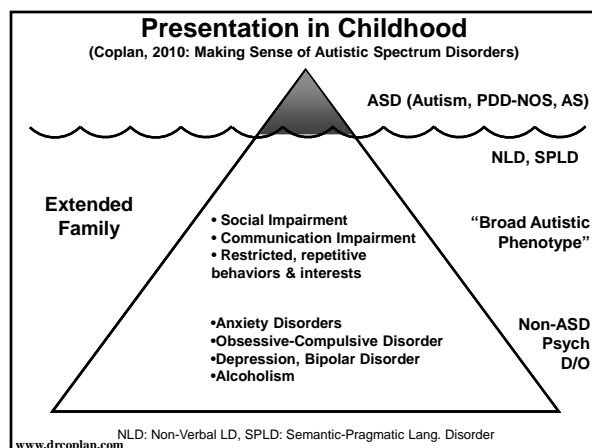   - Self-compassion rather than self-blame (or self-pity)

Advantages of taking a Family-Centered Approach

- **Underscores that the "symptom-bearer" may not be the source of the difficulty**
  - Maladaptive behavior in a child often an early warning signal of family dysfunction (the canary in the mine shaft)
  - Look for triangles: Is the child's disruptive behavior actually the 3rd point of a triangle, in which tension between mom & dad constitutes the other 2 points?
- **Provides a relatively non-threatening way to broach issues of parental mental health**

Individual Mental Health as a contributor to family mental health

- **Parents of children with ASD: High frequency of neuropsychiatric disorders (esp. anxiety, depression)**
- **Limits adult's ability to achieve full differentiation**
- **Limits adult's ability to respond in a flexible manner to the extraordinary demands from child w. ASD**

Presentation in Childhood
(Coplan, 2010: Making Sense of Autistic Spectrum Disorders)

ASD (Autism, PDD-NOS, AS)

NLD, SPLD

Extended Family

- Social Impairment
- Communication Impairment
- Restricted, repetitive behaviors & interests

"Broad Autistic Phenotype"

- Anxiety Disorders
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Depression, Bipolar Disorder
- Alcoholism

Non-ASD Psych D/O

NLD: Non-Verbal LD, SPLD: Semantic-Pragmatic Lang. Disorder

www.drcoplan.com

Probe Questions
(In ascending order of intimacy)

- **Do you and your partner ever go out as a couple? When was the last time?**
- **Who else do you have as supports?**
- **What have you told your other children / parents?**
- **Tell me a little bit about yourself / how you were raised / your own mental health?**
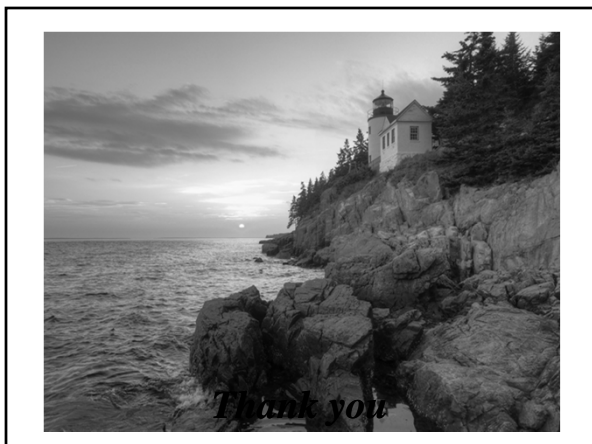- **What does it mean to you that your child has a disability?**

Summary

- **The family is a system**
- **Assess the individual mental health of all players**
- **Assess the relationships among the players**
- **Fostering the family's ability to move forward is your #1 goal. The child's parents & siblings will be involved long after you have left the stage.**

Signs of Family Mental Health

- **Systemic support for differentiation of all members as they are able**
- **Flexibility**
  - Shifting alliances (adults vs. kids, "boys vs. girls," etc.)
  - Shifting roles (role of "hero" or "in the doghouse")
  - Shifting solutions (one size does not fit all; "equitable" vs. "equal")
  - Shifting combinations for activities. All legitimate combinations should come up once in a while.
- **Sense of humor / playfulness**

Resources

- **Coplan, J. Making Sense of Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Random House, 2010.**
- **Married with Special Needs Children; A couples' guide to keeping connected. Marshak LE and Prezant, FP. Woodbine, 2007**
- **Voices from the spectrum. Parents, grandparents, siblings, people with autism, and professionals share their wisdom. Ariel, CN and Naseef, R (eds). Jessica Kingsley, 2006**
- **Man's search for meaning. Frankl, VE.**
- **The Bowen Center:** http://www.thebowencenter.org/
- **The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy** http://www.aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/

Thank you

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