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Council Room

‘Parenting together’ – reducing conflict and enhancing collaboration: a new intervention to strengthen the parenting alliance
(REPEATED)

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Parenting Together – from Conflict... to Collaboration

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training • research • psychotherapy • counselling

Who we are...

TCCR is in its 60th year

We are a voluntary sector organisation

We aim to provide services that:

- - improve the quality of adult couple relationships,
- - prevent family breakdown
- - enhance the lives of children

We provide a range of services:

- Parenting Together
- The Divorce and Separation Unit
- Relationship Counselling and Psychosexual Therapy
- Couple Psychotherapy

And we deliver:

- Workforce development for related professionals
- Practitioner training and CPD
- Consultancy and supervision to a range of professions (health, legal, mediators etc)

Why the need for “Parenting Together?” (PT) - 1

- We see many couples, whether living together, separated/divorced, whose differences around parenting becomes the arena for high conflict disagreements
- We also noticed that those who have high conflict in their relationship had more difficulty parenting collaboratively
- This affects children’s mental health adversely (problem behaviours for instance)

Inter-parental Conflict impacts on children





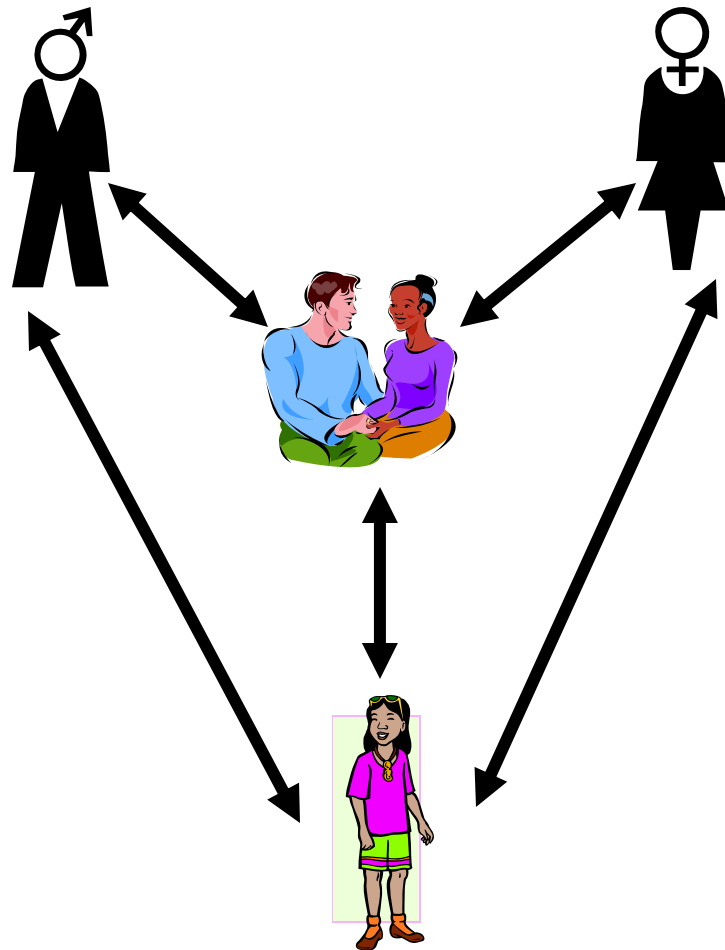
Why the need for “Parenting Together?” (PT) - 2

- Parents told us they wanted to talk about their problems without the children present
- Many were caught up in and preoccupied by the legal/child protection systems
- Few post separation and divorce services aimed at working with inter-parental conflict that are therapeutic rather than legal (mediation)
- Parents arguing about their children seemed more distressed and in higher conflict than those arguing about money, sex, work, friends etc etc

We looked at the research...

- Convincing evidence that inter-parental conflict adversely influences children's psychological development, social competence and academic achievement (Cummings et al, 2000; Harold et al, 2004)
- Convincing evidence that sustained inter-parental conflict increases risk of anxiety and depression, aggression, hostility and anti-social behaviour (Cummings and Davies, 2002; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey and Cummings, 2004)
- Inter-parental conflict adversely impacts parenting, and hostile couples are typically more hostile and aggressive towards their child(ren) (Erel and Berman, 1995; Harold, Fincham, Osborne & Conger, 1997)

“Spillover” from couple conflict to parent-child relationship to children’s adaptation



Note: daughters blame themselves

Note: “maritally” dissatisfied fathers of daughters were more critical and less loving (Cowan and Cowan 2004)

What sort of intervention to use? -1

- Short term model
- Treatment aim focussed on collaborative parenting
- Engages both parents in thinking not just about parenting but also about:
 - their relationship with each other
 - their relationship with their children

What sort of intervention to use? -2

- Which uses the relationship between the parents as the port of entry for the intervention rather than the children but that keeps the children very much in mind.
- We decided a mentalizing based model of intervention would best fit

What is Mentalization Based Therapy? - 1

- A therapeutic approach developed by Peter Fonagy and colleagues
- Initially developed for borderline personality disorder where patients tend to have high levels of expressed emotion and labile feelings
- Often flooded with feeling making cognition difficult
- Now widely applied to a range of client groups including families

What is Mentalization Based Therapy ? -2

Brings together -

- the understanding of one's own thoughts and feelings that is so central to cognitive therapy *WITH*
- the understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others that is so central to family therapy, *AND INCLUDES*
- an appreciation of defensive processes and the reluctance to change that is central to psychodynamic therapy.

High Levels of Emotion - 1

- The couples we were working with, expressed very high levels of emotion
- Their feelings particularly ran high when trying to discuss matters relating to the children with their co-parent
- They found it almost impossible to THINK about their thoughts/actions/feelings especially in relation to parenting together
- These intense feelings were spilling over and affecting family life.

High Levels of Emotion - 2

- They could not regulate either their own or anyone else's emotional state – including their children's
- They suffered, their parenting suffered and more importantly, the children suffered **So.....**
- We decided a mentalizing based model of intervention would best fit

What is Mentalizing ? - 1

- The capacity for “mentalization” develops through secure attachment relationships (Bowlby 1973, 1982)
- We know from Attachment research (Fonagy 2001; Allen and Fonagy, 2006) that when feelings run high, it is more difficult to think about thoughts and feelings i.e. to mentalize
- We wanted a model which would specifically focus on the capacity to mentalize - i.e. to think and feel about thoughts and feelings -

What is Mentalizing ? - 2

- Holding mind in mind
- Attending to mental states in self and others
- Understanding misunderstandings
- Seeing yourself from the outside and others from the inside
- Creating curiosity about the feelings behind the behaviours
- Thinking and feeling about

thinking-and-feeling



A bit more about Mentalizing...

- The capacity to Mentalize is Context Dependent
- It is most often compromised in the context of Attachment relationships
- Heightened emotional arousal impacts adversely on the capacity to Mentalize because....
- The Attachment system is flooded with feeling

Why would this approach help improve the parenting alliance? -1

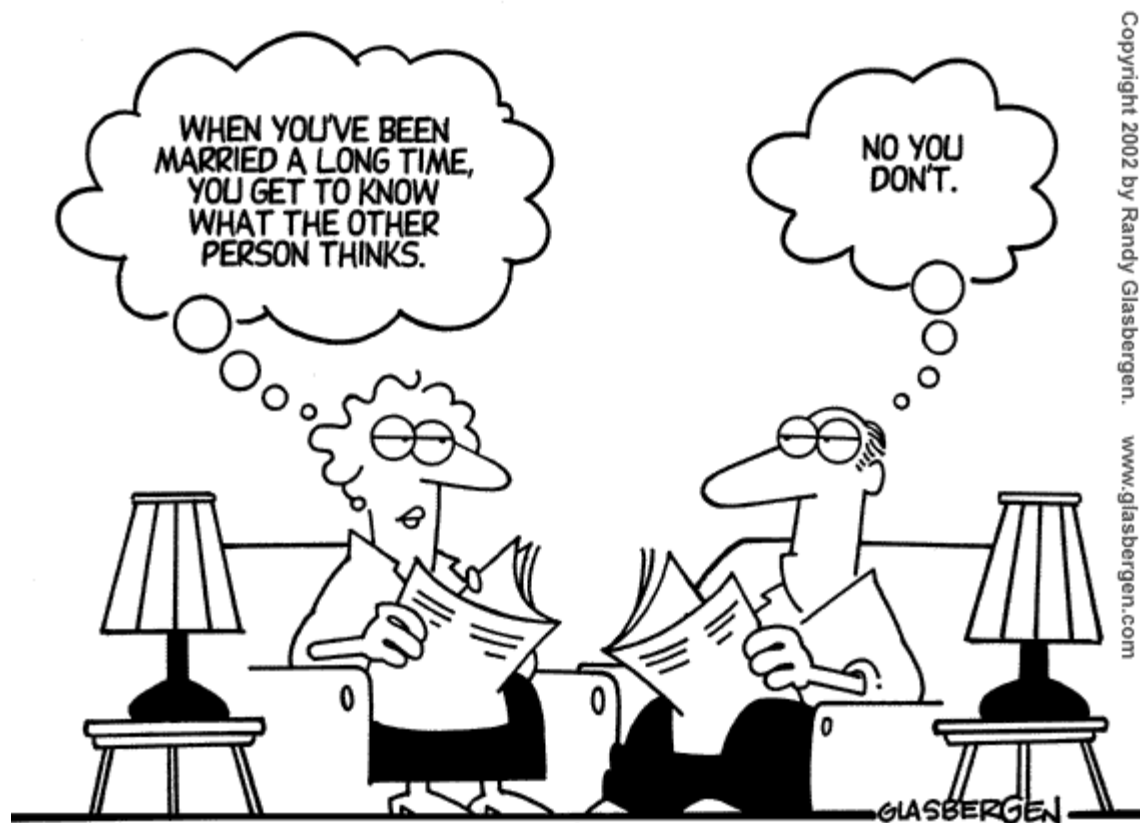
Because...

- It places the relational processes between both parents at the heart of the model
- It places the interplay between feelings and behaviours that mediate them, at the heart of the model
- It encourages both parents to be curious about what the other parent is thinking and feeling
- It helps parents to regulate their feelings by thinking about them

Why would this approach help improve the parenting alliance? -2

- It reduces conflict and acrimony
- It promotes means of coping, especially in relation to the quality and supportiveness of the parenting alliance
- This in turn, helps both parents to have a better parenting alliance
- It promotes longer term resilience in families

A Non-Mentalizing Couple!





Mentalizing Behaviours

- Reflectiveness
- Lively consciousness
- Freshness of speech
- Capacity for humor
- Little self deception
- Ease and openness with the ability to alter one's views
- Ease with imperfections in self and others
- Compassion

How is Mentalizing different to just thinking?

- Thinking is thinking!
- Mentalization is:

“thinking about thinking...”

Whilst remaining within the emotional state

Strategies to Promote Mentalizing in Work with Parents - 1

- Maintaining an inquisitive stance, curious, not knowing attitude
- Promoting a level of emotional engagement that is neither too hot or too cold
- Engaging in a mirroring process (reflecting back to the parents)
- Offering interventions that are simple and to the point

Strategies cont'd - 2

- Maintaining a balance between engaging parents in exploring their own mental states and those of their co –parent and children
- Engaging parents to use multiple perspectives
- Acknowledging when you feel lost and confused - enlist the parent's help to move forward

Strategies cont'd - 3

- Validating each parents' experience before offering alternative perspectives
- Challenging each parents' experience before offering alternatives perspectives
- Letting parents know what you are thinking so they can correct your own distorted mentalizing
- Acknowledging your own mentalizing failures and endeavoring to understand your contribution to the parents' adverse reaction

Strategies cont'd - 4

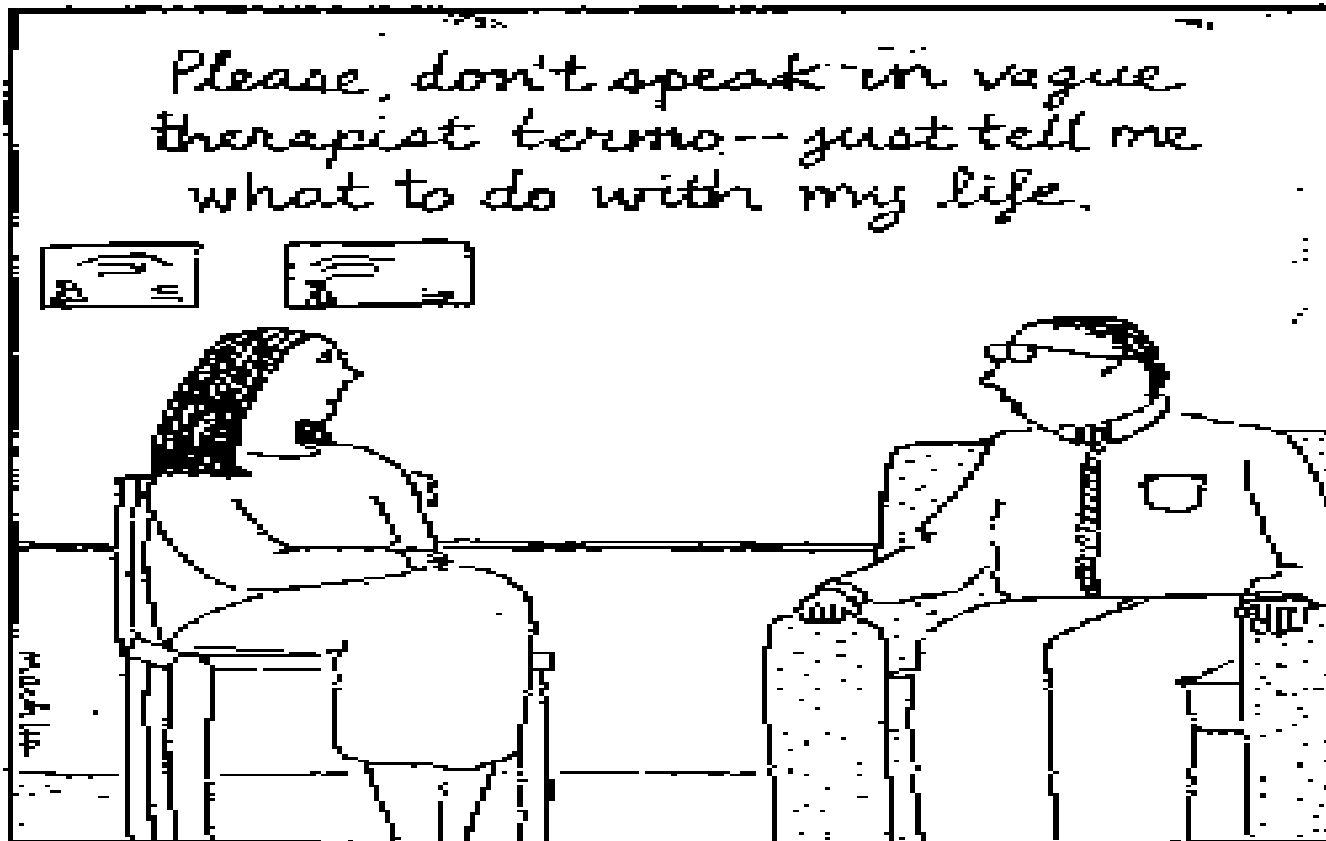
- Examine the context/episodes where there is a loss of capacity to Mentalize by parents
- Helping recover Mentalizing:
 - Explore your relationship with the parents
 - Validate the experience of the parents in their relationship with you
 - Praise mentalizing as soon as it's evident
 - Presenting an alternative perspective
 - Collaborate in arriving at an understanding
 - Monitor and explore the parents' reactions to the therapy

Strategies cont'd - 5

- Check (clarification)
- Rewind (Elaboration)
- Empathy
- Name the Feeling /Confrontation
 - Why is this feeling emerging at this time?
 - When else do you feel like this?
 - Careful challenging of the feeling and the beliefs behind them
 - Understand the feeling – where it has come from? (old and new relationships)

Making help accessible!

QUALITY TIME *Gail Mochlis*



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How do we do this in Parenting Together?

- The focus of PT isn't only on parenting
- We focus on the couple relationship and their capacity to MENTALIZE about:
 - themselves
 - their co-parent
 - their children
 - the court/social services process (if applicable)
 - the therapy process
 - their own family of origin and links to present

We also focus on...

- When MENTALIZATION breaks down
- Explore how this happens
- Explore why it might be happening
- Explore strategies about how they can restore their capacity to MENTALIZE (see previous strategies)



The Parenting Together Pilot

What we noticed ...

- Couples often in process of divorce/separation
- Often tentative family formation
- Some in ongoing relationship but very unsure of future commitment

What else did we notice?

- All the couples showed deep distrust of their co-parent
- High levels of protective feelings to child with other parent seen as threat
- All parents described disrupted or negative experiences of at least one parent in their own childhood
- Frequent instance of women feeling threatened by their (ex) partners



Challenges for therapists

- Pressure to take sides and behave as judge and jury
- Managing the balance between concern for child(ren) and concern for parents needs
- Pressure to “unpick” or “pass judgement” on old wounds and hurts
- Simmering parents down without being over controlling



A Typical Case

- Steven and Helen
- 4 children
- Helen breadwinner
- Steven depressed
- Violence – the chain
- Process of therapy

Empowering partners to parent together



“The work being done on your marriage---are you having it done, or are you doing it yourselves?”

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