Circle of Security:
An Attachment Based Intervention

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Circle of Security

- Relationship based intervention designed to change child’s behavior through changes in parent’s behavior
- Developed by Bert Powell, Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper, and Bob Marvin
- Derived from attachment and object relations theories
- Shares features of
  - Interaction guidance
  - Child parent psychotherapy
  - CBT
**COS: An Intervention**

- Consistent with attachment theory and research
- Caregiver has greater degrees of freedom for initiating dyadic change
- Focuses on both the caregiver’s Internal Working Models of self and child *and* on his/her caregiving behavior
- Uses either group or individual therapy models
Components of Infant-Parent Relationship

Adapted from Bruschweiler–Stern and Stern, 1989
Basics of COS Protocol

- Pre-intervention videotaped, structured assessment to inform treatment goals
- Group-based parent education and psychotherapy lasting ~20-weeks using videotaped intervention
- Goals of video review are to:
  - increase sensitivity to the child’s cues
  - increase self-other reflective capacity
  - explore new representations and interaction patterns
**Circle of Security Graphic**

- A guide for the therapist to negotiate becoming a secure base and safe haven for the caregiver.
- Learning tool for caregivers to see, understand and support their children’s attachment and exploratory needs.
- Allows the clinician to assess caregiver/child dyad.
- Treatment plan is tailored to address particular dyad’s strengths and struggles on the Circle of Security.
Circle of Security
Parent Attending to the Child’s Needs

- Protect me
- Comfort me
- Delight in me
- Organize my feelings

Support My Exploration
- Watch over me
- Help me
- Enjoy with me
- Delight in me

Welcome My Coming To You

I need you to
- Protect me
- Comfort me
- Delight in me
- Organize my feelings

I need you to
(Almost) Everything I Need to Know About Being a Parent in 25 Words or less

- **Always**: be BIGGER, STRONGER, WISER, and KIND.
  - **Whenever possible**: follow your child’s need.
  - **Whenever necessary**: take charge.
Assessment

- Research
  - SSP plus read a book (5 min) and clean up toys (3 min)
    - Coded using Ainsworth or MacArthur system
    - Caregiver behavior coding system
  - COSI
    - 5 questions about SSP
    - 20 questions about perceptions of child
    - 6 questions about family of origins

- Clinical
  - Child’s attachment and exploratory behaviors
  - Parent’s behaviors responding to child’s needs
  - Parent’s perceptions, meaning of child and parent behavior
Circle of Security: Hands

ability to maintain a position of bigger, stronger, wiser and kind
Top of the Circle: Facilitating Exploration

- Watch over me
- Help me
- Enjoy with me
- Delight in me
Bottom of the Circle: Facilitating Contact/Proximity Seeking

- Protect me
- Comfort me
- Delight in me
- Organize my feelings
Circle of Security

Parent Attending to the Child’s Needs

- Protect me
- Comfort me
- Delight in me
- Organize my feelings

I need you to

Support My Exploration

I need you to

Watch over me
- Help me
- Enjoy with me
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Welcome My Coming To You

I need you to
Strange Situation Procedure

- Standardized, laboratory (playroom) procedure involving series of episodes
- Infant, caregiver and an unfamiliar adult (Stranger)
- Designed to examine balance between infant’s attachment (proximity seeking) and exploration.
- Lasts between 20-25 minutes
- Organization of infant’s attachment behavior towards caregiver--may differ with different caregivers
## Attachment Classifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infancy</th>
<th>Preschool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>Secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>Avoidant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant/Ambivalent</td>
<td>Resistant/Dependent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disorganized</td>
<td>Disorganized/Controlling</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insecure-Other</td>
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</tbody>
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Secure Attachment

- Distressed by separation
- Direct expression of negative affect
- Clear approach and expectation of comfort
- Settled by caregiver’s attempts to soothe
- 55-65% in low risk samples
Avoidant Attachment

- Minimal response to separation
- Either minimal reaction during reunion or active avoidance of caregiver during reunion; attention focused on toys
- Implicit claim of strength, independence, normalcy
- Hypoactivation of attachment system
- Physiologic arousal
- 15-20% in low risk samples
Circle of Limited Security
Child Anxious about the Parent’s Needs

I NEED YOU TO WELCOME MY COMING TO YOU BUT...

THAT MAKES US UNCOMFORTABLE SO...

I MISCEIVE YOU ABOUT MY NEED BY...

ACTING LIKE I NEED TO EXPLORE OR BE DISTANT
Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment

- Distressed by separation
- Unable to be soothed by caregiver
- Either passively overwhelmed or angrily preoccupied
- Hyperactivation of attachment system
- 5-10% in low risk samples
Circle of Limited Security
Child Anxious about the Parent’s Needs

I need support for exploration but...

I act like I need comfort and/or protection

I miscue you and...

That makes us uncomfortable so...

Secure base

Safe haven
Disorganized Attachment

- Derived from aberrant organization of child’s attachment behavior in presence of caregiver
  - contradictory attachment behaviors
  - behaviors lacking goal orientation
  - direct indices of fear/apprehension
- Underlying pattern (secure, avoidant, or resistant) usually evident
Circle of Disorganization

I need you but you are so frightened or frightening that I have no one to turn to and I don't know what to do.
Protocol

- Week 1, 2 Introduce Circle, power of relationship, cues and miscues
- Weeks 3-10 Tape review #1
- Week 11 Introduce Shark music
- Week 12-19 Tape review #2
- Week 20 Graduation celebration
Port of Entry

- Core fear is abandonment.
- Therapist conducts a “differential diagnosis of each parent’s specific relational paradigm.”
- Based on belief that each parent approaches attachment relationships with a particular lens regarding sense of self and sense of other.
- Three core sensitivities that range from adaptive to personality disorders.
Three Types of Sensitivities

Adaptive
- Separation
- Esteem
- Safety

Disordered
- Borderline
- Narcissistic
- Schizoid
Separation Sensitivity

- To avoid perceived abandonment, they must comply with what others – including their children - want, need, and feel, while disavowing their own wants, needs, and feelings.
- Feel incapable of living without feeling the continual availability of significant others.
- Their job is to focus on another’s needs and appear to be helpless regarding their own.
- Struggle to allow their children an experience of autonomy while exploring but are unable to genuinely provide comfort.
Esteem Sensitivity

- Who they are, just as they are (imperfect, flawed, average) is not enough to be valued.
- Must prove that they and their children are worthy (unique, special, exceptional, anything but average, etc.) through performance and achievement.
- Vigilant about any implication of having failed or being inadequate as parents or having others see their child as inadequate.
- Pressure their children for achievement and performance and struggle to provide comfort and organization of feelings.
Safety Sensitivity

- Cost of being connected and emotionally close to their children is the loss of self-determination.
- Perceptions of being controlled and/or intruded upon by their children.
- Must maintain a position of self-sufficiency, and to expect self-sufficiency from their children.
- Child’s lack of fulfillment leads to demands that reconfirm the parent’s view of significant others as demanding and controlling.
Linchpin Issue

- **Linchpin struggle**—the key defensive pattern of attachment-caregiving interaction and caregiver internal working model that most maintains the pattern of insecurity in the dyad.

- **Questions**
  - Is the parent in charge—providing safety and structure? [Hands]
  - Can the parent reliably provide comfort to child? [Bottom of circle]
  - Can parent allow exploration for child? [Top of circle]
Tape Review #1

- Apply learning about circle to child.
- Highlight underutilized strength.
- Talk about child’s struggle on circle.
- Name that need.
- Learn about cues vs. miscues.
Welcome to the Club
- Everyone struggles

Shark Music

Need-Shark-Movie

Alternative
Key Features

- Actively engages parents wish to be a better parent
  - Beautiful tape
- Video rich
- Visual aids
  - Magnets
  - Handouts
  - Photographs
- Blending of psychoeducation with psychotherapy
Case

- Virginia 38 years old
- David 15 months
- 4 oldest in custody of state because mother abused drugs
- Later quite depressed
- Enrolled in SA Residential treatment with youngest
- Baby avoids mom—she feels pressure to create CPS proof bond with him.
Confident and Worthy

I can read his signals and respond

Old Working Model

Hurt, Ashamed and Empty

“He doesn’t need me”

I am a failure as a mother

Self Protection

New Working Model

Reflective Dialogue

Confident and Worthy

He needs me and will signal me

I can read his signals and respond

Virginia’s Representational World

“Virginia’s Representational World”

“Virginia’s Representational World”
Interactive Behavior

- Virginia will need to see how her wish to have her son “fill her void” is influencing her behavior
  - She is very intrusive
  - He is very avoidant
  - She experiences his avoidance as not “needing her” and, with the weight of having lost her other children, pushes harder for connection
You are special to David.
You feel pressure to make it work with him because you lost your other children.
You deal with this pressure by trying to control him (play on your terms).
This makes both of you feel bad.
You also isolate yourself socially—this compounds your distress.
In your desire to keep him close, you are pushing him away.
You are capable of more, and he wants to feel closer to you.
Circle of Change

Parent Prioritizing the Child

I need you to

Challenge Your Old Ways

• Take ownership of your part in the problem
• Be more protective of me
• Believe you can change
• Get the help you need to make changes
• Stabilize your life

I need you to

Prioritize My Needs

• Recognize my needs
• Accept & respond to my feelings
• Be willing to stand back and observe how you parent
• Be bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind