

Relational child psychotherapy and the child/adolescent interest group of IARPP

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Relational child (ages 0-18) psychotherapy has as its primary aim to honor the internal integrity of children and their development while working within their systemic attachment context. Toward that end, relational child therapists are taking up more than two subjectivities to establish coherent forward progress and the therapeutic playing field can become quite complex.

First, in relational child therapy, there is a therapeutic focus on the child's representations of his own body, mind, self, and relations, and the attendant feelings, thoughts and behaviors. Whether these representations are found in play, dreams, art, writing, verbal interaction, or use of electronic media, a therapist must facilitate the creation of a playground, as Winnicott describes it, in which the child feels more and more comfortable expressing the themes that structure his relationships to himself and to others. The child therapist seeks to understand and communicate the understanding of the child's non verbalized and verbalized communications to the child and his/her parents, such that their increased awareness and understanding yields a transformation of affect thoughts and behavior.

Second, the child therapist focuses on the concentric fields and systems of interaction in which the child's development is contingent: family, neighborhood, school, and culture. Beyond working within the immediate relational context of the children and their attachment figures, is the role of advocate on behalf of the child and consultant to schools and other institutions.

Third, the therapist must focus on her or his own relations with the child and with these non-linear interacting systems. The therapist must use the child's and parents' transferences to him, inevitable enactments and counter transference to find new meanings. All the while, to act effectively, the therapist recognizes her embeddedness in the assumptions of normality and deviance that are based on the therapist's own socioeconomic class, culture, health status, generation, race, religion, politics, country of origin, and sexual orientation.

Relational child psychotherapy holds relationships as central to development, pathology and therapy. The therapeutic action arises out of the therapist's ability to negotiate different points of view as he moves between the child's representational world, the child's systems of interaction, and the therapeutic relationships in which therapist, child, and parents participate. This professional lexicon has much to share and be enriched in interaction with our adult colleagues. Keeping the worlds separate, on opposing sides of a binary, is staring in the face of the relational objective we all share.

Work with children, adolescents, and families needs not to be marginalized in relational psychoanalysis. The group aims to make sure that affirmative action is taken to bring necessary attention to the complexity of these clinical concerns on behalf of children and families and the clinicians who serve them.

Toward that end we promote dialogue regarding research, development, theory and clinical applications within our interest group and with the members of IARPP. We see continuity in relational patterns from childhood to adulthood and prevention of intergenerational transmission of trauma as benefiting from our joint participation and consideration.

The IARPP child/adolescent interest group was established in 2009 by Neil Altman (USA) and Esther Bamberger (Israel) in order to promote the development of relational child psychotherapy at IARPP. From 2011 to 2013 Daniel Gensler (USA) joined Esther Bamberger in leading the group as Neil Altman stepped down. At present, the group is led by Esther Bamberger and Ann Marie Sacramone (USA) as Daniel Gensler transitions out of the leadership role. It is our intention that the leadership continue to reflect the international and collaborative nature of the group.

Today the group has 120 IARPP members from around the globe, communicating via a listserv. The group meets every year during the annual conferences, and has held 2 web seminars. The first in 2011, was led by Neil Altman, Elsa First, Pasqual Pantone and Linda Jacobs, on the topic of parent therapy. The second web seminar in 2013 was led by Brenda Lepisto, Larry Zelnick, and Laurel Silber, on the topic of teens and texting. We hope to continue the group's activities in the IARPP conferences and via the web in the future.

To join the group, please contact- Elisa Zazerra at the IARPP office, or Esther Bamberger- estherbamberger@gmail.com