

Connecticut's Statewide and Community-Level Effort to Build and Support Secure Attachment

03-06-18

Overview

A number of staff members from Connecticut state agencies, community agencies, and community organizations have been joining forces since 2009 to create and grow a statewide effort to build capacity in CT communities to build and support secure attachment.

We began to realize that various capacities infants, children, students, and adults need to thrive in life, such as curiosity, self-regulation, joy of learning, impulse control, kindness, empathy, perseverance, self-motivation, safe, emotional connection, and trust, are built within relationships and best built in a quality of relationship that also builds and supports secure attachment. Essentially, this is a melding of attachment theory and James Heckman's character skills. These capacities are essential to children and adults thriving educationally, at work, with their health, and in relationships with other people. Thus, we view quality of relationship as the very foundation for children and adults' development.

Thus, at the heart of this effort is a focus on equipping parents, teachers, caregivers, and community members with the relationship tools that allow them to create a quality of relationship that gives infants, children, students, and adults these personal and relational capacities needed to thrive in life. We realized these capacities are not genetic endowments but are actually built within relationships with a good enough quality. Additionally, we have come to understand that too many infants, children, students, and adults in CT are missing some of these capacities or have them weakly.

This effort has surprised us because an ever-growing number of people from a wide variety of settings and disciplines are joining the effort. Clearly, this effort is meeting a strong but unmet need for tools to create better quality relationships in a wide variety of settings. One of the hopeful outcomes we are seeing is the fact that agencies, organizations, and programs are embracing the use of these new interventions that provide the new relationship tools.

Additionally, we have two communities, New Haven and Middletown, that are working to create a community-wide approach to build and support secure attachment. Other communities are working to add capacity in their communities to offer Circle of Security Parenting and to take teachers through A New Lens.

This document will cover a number of items.

- It will share about the interventions being used to provide parents, teachers, caregivers, and community members with these new relationship tools.
- It will list the new relationship tools being gained.
- It will, share about the statewide capacity to offer these interventions.
- It will share a systems change perspective about this effort and list the forces this effort and these interventions are tapping into that yield genuine and lasting change in relationship quality.

- It will cover the potential to use quality of relationship as an organizing principle for linking community organizations in a shared focus and shared community agenda on equipping infants, children, students, and adults to thrive in life.

1. Interventions Being Used

Initially, this effort began with the use of Circle of Security Parenting (COS P). Since 2010, over 1,200 people in CT have completed the four-day COS P training. COS P serves as the foundation for our attachment effort in CT. A crucial moment occurred in 2016 when the CT Department of Children and Families committed funding to training 900 people in COS P over three years.

What is particularly unique about COS P is that builds reflective capacity. This helps parents, teachers, and caregivers shift to a new way of looking at children and students' behavior. Essentially, the reflective capacity helps them to "see" that kids and students are communicating what they need through their behavior. They also learn to reflect on their reaction to the behavior and to reflect on the parenting they received in their own childhood.

Another crucial event occurred in 2016 when Barbara Stern, a retired elementary school principal and COS P facilitator, created a one-day training, A New Lens, to give teachers an attachment perspective of students' classroom behavior. Over 1000 teachers have completed this training. Teachers consistently report they have never received training on this topic and find it invaluable. Barbara reports that nearly 25% of the teachers completing A New Lens then request to complete a COS P group.

We have been identifying other potential interventions that also provide new relationship tools for parents of adolescents and for couples. CONNECT is an attachment-based intervention for parents of adolescents. Sue Johnson, the developer of Emotionally Focused Therapy, an attachment-based intervention for couples, has developed kits that allow people to run groups for couples and for parents of adolescents to use attachment concepts to improve the quality of these relationships.

We are also seeing the development of other trainings in CT that bring new relationship tools and new awareness of the importance of quality of relationship. Mary Dineen Elovich created a training, Leaning into Listen, which covers the impact of trauma on a youth's ability to learn and socialize within the school community. She has reached over 900 local stakeholders working for youth and family serving agencies from 142 CT cities and towns. One person has developed a training, Time In vs. Time Out for parents and teachers. Another person has been training health staff in Secrets of Baby Behavior which addresses infant feeding and infant relationship quality. Another person has developed trainings for education settings, Resilient Classrooms and Resilient Students. We also have a person who developed a presentation on attachment and trauma for people in the education, judicial, and law enforcement arenas.

2. New Relationship Tools

Conceptually, Circle of Security Parenting is providing new relationship tools that allow people to create better quality relationships. Rather than provide parenting education, COS P builds

reflective capacity. Rather than having to manage behavior, this new reflective capacity allows people to understand the need that is underneath a behavior and simple relationship answers to these needs. As a result, parents, teachers, caregivers, and other adults become bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind. These tools include:

- The Circle – this relationship tool helps parents, teachers, caregivers, and other adults categorize a child/student/adult’s behavior as either being exploration or as having distress and needing to be welcomed in. It also helps them determine what the child/student/adult needs. The Circle provides the foundation for building reflective capacity.
- Being With – this relationship tool helps parents, teachers, caregivers, and other adults learn to just be with a child/student/adult in their feelings without having to fix it or make the feeling or the child go away or stop the feeling.
- Shark Music – this relationship tool helps parents, teachers, caregivers, and other adults recognize the times when they are overreacting to the child/student/adult’s behavior due to the behavior triggering something from the parent/teacher/caregiver/other adult’s painful past childhood experience. This allows the person to own their reaction rather than blame the child/student/adult.
- Mean, Weak, Gone - this relationship tool helps parents, teachers, caregivers, and other adults recognize and own the moments when they are acting mean, weak, or gone with the child/student/adult.
- Rupture and Repair - this relationship tool helps parents, teachers, caregivers, and other adults recognize the times they have caused a rupture in a relationship, usually by being mean, weak, or gone. It also helps them understand the importance of repairing the ruptures and simple steps to take to provide the repair.

3. Systems Perspective

Initially, this effort focused on building capacity in CT cities and towns to offer Circle of Security Parenting to parents of infants and young children. We began to see it also worked with parents of older children. Then All Our Kin, a program that works with licensed family child care providers, began taking childcare provider through COS P groups to improve the social-emotional environment of their family childcare settings. Then COS P began to be used by a wider variety of programs, providers and settings, including:

Mental health program staff	Private practice clinicians	Home Visiting program staff
Parent educators	Child care providers	Teachers
School staff	Early childhood teachers	Social Workers
Supportive Housing	Pediatric clinic	Intimate Partner Violence program
Mental Health clinicians	DMHAS YAS staff	Early Head Start/Head Start staff
Family Resource Centers	Programs serving foster parents	
Programs serving families in	child welfare	Early Intervention program staff
Parents	Recovery programs	Child Welfare
Neighborhood Association	Churches	CASA
Community Health Center	Pediatricians	Youth and Family Services
Early Childhood coalitions		

Several agencies have taken most or all of their staff through COS P groups. This was done to ensure they all had a basic and working understanding of attachment and to provide a shared attachment-based language that allows them to bring an attachment perspective into their work with families. We also have agencies that have committed to having all of their staff who work with families trained in COS P.

4. A Systems Change Perspective

Achieving lasting change in parents, teachers, caregivers, providers, other adults, children, and students' behavior is challenging. We are finding that COS P and A New Lens provides a strong emotional pay-off for each of these groups. Our sense is these interventions are allowing kids and adults to have more genuine joy and life, which are vital to sustaining behavior change.

The lists below is our attempt to name the emotional payoffs that each group is getting from this initiative in CT.

Parents

- Infants, toddlers, children, and teens behavior makes more sense due to understanding the need they are using their behavior to communicate.
- Parents feel more in control and less overwhelmed about their child's behavior from using new relationship tools.
- Have stronger and more secure connections with their infant/toddler/child/teen.
- Have the capacity to repair relationships when inevitable ruptures occur.
- Parents have more joy in their relationship with their infant/toddler/child/teen.
- Have a sense of making a bigger impact on their infant/toddler/child/teen's life.

Teachers

- Students' classroom behavior makes more sense due to understanding the need students are using their behavior to communicate.
- Teacher feel more in control and less overwhelmed about students' behavior from using new relationship tools.
- Supports students' learning.
- Have stronger and more secure connection with their students.
- Have the capacity to repair relationships when inevitable ruptures occur.
- Teachers have more joy in their relationship with their students.
- Have a sense of making a bigger impact on their students' lives.

Caregivers

- Infants and children's behavior makes more sense due to understanding the need they are using their behavior to communicate.
- Caregivers feel more in control and less overwhelmed about infant and children's behavior from using new relationship tools.
- Supports infant and children's learning.
- Have stronger and more secure connection with infant and children.
- Have the capacity to repair relationships when inevitable ruptures occur.

- Caregivers have more joy in their relationship with infants and children.
- Have a sense of making a bigger impact on infants and children's lives.

Infants/Children/Students

- Builds capacities needed to thrive in life
- Taps into 2 powerful developmental forces – exploration and distress
- Meets foundational needs
- Builds deeper, safer, and more secure emotional connections
- Builds a strong, secure foundation for an infants, children, students' development

5. Quality of Relationship as an Organizing Principle

Given its foundational importance to children and students' healthy development and the potential to address it in so many settings in a community, quality of relationship has potential to be used as an organizing principle in communities. As such, it holds the potential to guide the design and funding of a community effort to help more infants, children, students, and adults to be equipped to thrive in life.

Many writers share about the silos in a community that are not connected. Quality of relationship holds the potential to link them together in a common effort that benefits the entire community. It also allows organizations to retain a focus on their unique purpose, such as focusing on education, health, employment, or other areas of concern.

Wisdom

Here is some of the wisdom we have learned from our efforts in CT.

- We have used the wisdom and insights gathered from this effort to create a theory of change.
- We're learning to frame this effort as providing new tools for existing programs, not creating a new program.
- We're learning to focus on building reflective capacity.
- We're learning to focus on the entire lifespan.
- We have learned it is important to design an approach for changing systems to initially focus on people who are motivated to learn about COS. That helps prevent people with less readiness to change from being forced to do something they may not be ready to do. In turn, the people who are trained initially will start to influence their peers, and their peers will often see the people initially trained enjoying their work more and having less stress. They then have a greater level of authentic readiness to change and become more ready to be trained.
- We have been realizing that COS P helps prevent shame in parents when sharing about their relationship struggles with their kids. We finally realized that the developers had built in enough empathy in to COS P to help prevent shame.

Community-wide model/state perspective