

Bonded to the Abuser: How and Why Children Form and Maintain Attachments With Abusive Caregivers

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It is common knowledge among those working with maltreated children that despite the abuse and/or neglect experienced at the hand of a parent, children generally want to maintain a relationship with the abuser. The experience of the first author when surveying boys in out-of-home care is illustrative. The survey included asking the boys for three wishes. It turned out that many of the boys did not have three wishes. With few exceptions, each boy had only one wish and most had the same wish: to go home and be reunited with the parent who had hurt them. The second author's decades of clinical practice with maltreated children has affirmed this phenomenon as well. Although some children—especially older teens—may express their disappointment and anger at a maltreating parent, the majority perceive their abusive parent as an attachment figure and desire to repair the relationship and reunite with the parent. This is the subject of this paper. In part one, we identify six sources of evidence to support and explain the phenomenon of children being bonded to an abusive caregiver. In part two, we present common themes in the writings of adult survivors of different forms of childhood maltreatment.

Part One: Six Sources of Evidence

Source of Evidence One: Clinical Observations

Throughout the clinical literature in the field of child maltreatment, many statements reflect the proposition that abused children are bonded to an abusive parent. An early example is the work of psychoanalyst Fairbairn (1952), who observed that children will assume “the burden of badness” to avoid recognizing parental flaws. He found that children would rather be a “sinner in a world ruled by god than a saint in a world ruled by the devil” (pp. 66-67), meaning that it was too threatening for children to accept that their parents were evil or out of control, and that it was preferable to see themselves as bad than to see their parents as bad. This statement also reflects the belief that children may prefer the experience of control from assuming blame for the maltreatment rather than the experience of not being able to control their maltreatment. Child abuse expert Briere (1992) wrote about the “abuse dilemma” that children face in trying to maintain a belief that both the self is good and the parent is good when being abused by a parent belies that tenet.

Like Fairbairn, Briere noted that children will readily assume that they are to blame for their parent's ill treatment of them. Likewise, trauma specialist Herman (1992) observed that children will go to great lengths to construct an explanation for being abused that absolves the parent of blame. Blizard and Bluhm

(1994) also noted that, “One of the greatest conundrums for therapists treating abuse survivors is the problem of understanding the attachment of the victim to the abuser” (p. 383). Similarly, M. Scott Peck (1983) wrote, “To come to terms with the evil in one’s parents is perhaps the most difficult and painful psychological task a human being can be called on to face” (p. 130) and Alice Miller (1988) observed the psychological toll it takes when a child denies the harm caused by a parent. While much of the child maltreatment literature focuses on causes, consequences, and treatments for abused and neglected children, when the literature does note the felt experience of the child maltreatment victim, it is often observed to be reflected in a powerful bond with the abusive parent.

Source of Evidence Two: Primate Research

According to biographer Deborah Blum (1994), primate researcher Harry Harlow did not intend to study love and pain and the way they can come together in intimate relationships. Yet his most well-known research is on this very point. Harlow’s intention was to breed monkeys for his learning experiments; but he found that his desire to keep the monkeys germ-free by raising each baby alone in a cage resulted in damaged infants incapable not only of learning but of virtually all healthy social interactions. Absent any form of contact, these babies became “fanatically attached” to the cloth diapers lining their cages (Blum, 1994). They appeared to love these pieces of cloth as a baby loves its mother. From this observation, Harlow devised a program of research to identify the essential components of caregiving. The original study involved raising baby monkeys with two surrogate “mothers,” one constructed from soft cloth and the other from wire, with a feeding bottle attached. Harlow observed the babies’ interaction with these two mothers and found a strong preference for the cloth one. In fact, the baby monkeys only visited the wire mother for feedings, but otherwise spent their time clinging and cuddling exclusively with the cloth surrogate.

Harlow’s research took a darker turn when he explored how bad a mother surrogate could be while still eliciting attachment behaviors from the baby. To test this, he devised several “monster mothers;” one blew cold

air onto the baby, another poked the baby, and a third flung the baby to the side of the cage. Harlow measured how much time the babies raised with monster mothers spent clinging to their mother compared to babies raised with cloth surrogates, and found that the babies spent *more* time clinging to the monster mother (Rosenblum & Harlow, 1963). The aversive mothering induced *more* clutching and proximity seeking in the babies. The babies loved their mothers and sought comfort from them, despite the fact that it was the mother who inflicted pain on them.

Source of Evidence Three: Pain Studies

Two studies have examined the experience and expression of pain inflicted by mothers and shed light on whether child abuse is actually felt differently than other kinds of physical harm. The first studied the pairing of smell and pain in rat pups (Moriceau & Sullivan, 2006). In one group the odor-pain pair occurred in proximity to the mother, and in the other group the pain-odor pairing occurred while the pups were away from the mother. The researchers found that only the group with the pairing away from the mother expressed fear of the odor, having learned the association between the odor and pain. Researchers concluded that the presence of the mother was a biochemical off switch for learning fear. They opined that nature makes it hard for the dependent and vulnerable rat pups to experience their mothers as aversive, because, “If a helpless newborn infant does not form an attachment to its caregiver, even to an abusive one, its chances of survival diminish” (Sullivan, Landers, Yeaman, & Wilson, 2000, p. 38). Later Sullivan and Lasley noted, “The fear, avoidance, and even memories associated with pain are extinguished—explaining why an abused child, even while trying to escape pain, will later seek contact with the abuser” (2010, p. 7).

In the second pain study, conducted by Drouineau et al. (2017), the sample was comprised of children seen in a hospital for serious injuries incurred either accidentally or through child abuse. Doctors, blind to the group status of the children, consistently rated the abused children lower on the pain scale than the accidentally injured children. In fact they felt less pain, it may be because—as with the rat pups—the mother’s

presence reduced the intensity of the pain, in order to preserve the parent-child bond. Alternatively, it may be the case that they felt the same level of pain but showed it less in order to protect the parent, minimize the harm, or some other related reason.

Source of Evidence Four: Attachment Studies

In 1958 Harlow presciently commented that, “the mother or mother surrogate provides its young with a source of security, and this role or function is seen with special clarity when mother and child are in a strange situation” (p. 580). Two decades later, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) published the results of their research on individual differences in infant reactions to the paradigm they referred to as “The Strange Situation.” The purpose of the paradigm was to elicit the infant’s attachment reactions much the way Harlow’s studies were designed to, albeit without the pain and cruelty. In the Strange Situation, infants are induced to experience curiosity as well as low levels of fear. Ainsworth observed whether the infant used the mother as a secure base from which to explore the environment while the mother was present, noticed and reacted to the mother leaving, and experienced connection and comfort from the mother when she returned. Those infants who could were considered securely attached, while those who could not were classified as insecurely attached.

Of particular significance is a meta-analysis of ten studies of attachment in maltreated children (Cyr, Euser, Bakersman-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2010). The results revealed that even maltreated children have an attachment relationship with their parent, although for the majority of them the attachment was classified as insecure. What varied was the *quality* of the attachment, not whether there was an attachment.

Source of Evidence Five: Foster Youth Research

There are surprisingly few studies in which children in foster care are interviewed about their experience in the foster care system. Researchers were able to locate just 27 studies that involved interviewing youth in foster care about their thoughts and feelings. None were

designed to examine the attachment of children in foster care to their birth families, but researchers examined each for any data on that point. Baker, Creegan, Quinones, and Rozelle (2016) independently coded each study for presence of three attachment-related themes: (1) missing and longing to be reunited with birth parents, (2) being afraid when placed into foster care, and (3) minimizing the abuse and/or assuming blame for it. Baker et al. found that of the 27 studies, 25 noted how the children felt about their birth parent and in all 25, the comments of the children focused on missing their parents and wanting to be reunited with them. Typical comments were, “Many young people took every opportunity to reiterate that they missed their families, would like more contact with family and friends and would like to return home eventually” (Timms & Thoburn, 2003, p. 19). Along the same lines, Bogolub (2008) concluded that, “No matter what their parents had done, all of the respondents missed and longed for their birth parents, and thought about them frequently” (p. 94). Likewise, Selwyn, Saunders, and Farmer (2010) noted that the desire to be reunited with their parents dominated the wish lists of the children interviewed.

In 18 of the 27 studies, there was some mention of how the children felt being removed from home, and in 83.3% of them, the children reporting feeling afraid. For example, Folman (1998) reported that, “The overwhelming majority of children reported feelings of fear, confusion, and an absence of coping strategies” (p. 16). Similarly, Mitchell and Kuczynski (2010) observed that, “Once notified that they would be moving to a new residence, children reported having concerns about whether the basic needs one would normally receive in a family environment would be provided once placed into care; that is, play, sleep, being fed, and companionship” (p. 441).

In 16 of the studies, children made comments about why they were in care. In all but one, the comments reflected self-blame and/or minimization of the harm. As an example, in one study a young boy named Morris, whose mother was in jail, was reported to blame himself for being in foster care and noted that he did not think he would see his mother again until he could fix his behavior (Whiting & Lee, 2003). Gil and Bogart (1982) reported many instances of self-blame, includ-

ing a child who said he was in foster care because he was bad, and another who said that he was in care because he needed to solve a few family problems. In sum, an analysis of this set of studies produced ample support for the pervasive attachment of abused and neglected children to their caregivers in studies that were not even designed to study that phenomenon.

Source of Evidence Six: Memoirs

Memoirs written by survivors of childhood maltreatment represent the sixth source of evidence regarding children's attachment to their maltreating parent. Baker and Schneiderman read and analyzed 45 such memoirs (2015). Although the stories varied in many respects, the overwhelming theme that ran through them—regardless of the gender of the author, gender of the parent, age the abuse occurred, or type of abuse—was a profound attachment to the abuser and a desire for a repaired relationship with that caregiver. The authors of these memoirs revealed that as maltreated children they loved their abusive caregivers, no matter what.

Taken together, these six sources of evidence strongly support the tenet that children do form and maintain attachment relationships even with abusive caregivers. They cannot help but do so. They are hard-wired to form a preferential relationship with a caregiving adult who is likely to protect them from danger. Parental maltreatment affects the *quality* of the attachment, but not whether there is an attachment.

Part Two: Meaning of the Abuse

Next, we explore how children make meaning of the abusive experiences of their childhood. To do so, we synthesize the themes in the memoirs as reviewed by Baker and Schneiderman (2015).

Physical Abuse

While state definitions of physical abuse vary, they all involve caregiver behaviors that result in physical harm (or likelihood of harm) to a child. Without a doubt, the stories of adult survivors of childhood phys-

ical abuse all met this standard. They described being kicked and being beaten with hands, fists, belts, and other assorted objects. They described being whipped and burned. They described having scars, bruises, welts, and burns. There is no question that what each experienced would have met any state statute definition of physical abuse.

An overriding concern for these children was to understand why their parent was hurting them. They strived to make sense of the experience and to figure out how to avoid being hurt again. Many concluded that the problem lay with them, that they were naughty, bad, and deserved to be hit or beaten. Contributing to this belief were the statements made by the parents that linked the behavior of the child to the abuse. One abused girl remembered her mother saying, "You just love to make me hit you," reinforcing the idea that the child wanted and deserved to be hurt. Taking the blame for the abuse not only absolved the parent of guilt and responsibility but also met the child's need to maintain the image of the good parent and the illusion of control.

As noted above, the statements made to the children while being abused signaled that they were found by the parent to be so bad and wrong that they needed to be beaten as a corrective response. Thus, the abuse signaled to the children that they were deficient or damaged. While none relished being physically hurt or enjoyed being judged harshly, at the same time, the abuse was a relief in that it represented the parent's investment in the relationship and hence reassured them that the parent still cared and had not yet abandoned or given up on the child. In this sense the attention—even if negative—was better than no attention.

Many of the children experienced their parents as all powerful, all knowing, and god-like. In contrast, they experienced themselves as small, weak, and at the mercy of the parent. They felt exposed and vulnerable, as if their parent could see into their soul and know that they were bad. They did not feel safe anywhere, as if they were always being observed and judged. For this reason, some longed to be invisible, to be left alone without having to worry about what the parent was thinking or feeling. However, they rarely could let their guard down and were instead hypervigilant about

the location, state of mind, and mood of the abusive parent. They learned to read the sound of the key in the door and the sound of footsteps in the hallways to know whether danger was around the corner.

As scary and painful as the abuse was, many of the children were made to be complicit in their own abuse. The parents commanded, “Get me the belt,” “Pull down your pants,” “Lean over,” and, “You better not cry.” No matter what was asked of them, the children complied. To them, they simply had no choice. To disobey would only increase the rejection and anger of the parent. Moreover, because they never knew what triggered the parent’s anger and violence, they tried to be obedient as much as possible in order to avoid setting the parent off.

One striking element of the memoirs was that the physically abused children compared themselves to animals. They referred to themselves as a dirty cat, a submerged alligator, an unloved dog, a rat in a cage. This metaphor works on multiple levels, including connoting the degradation of unloved and uncared for animals, the innocence of animals, their helplessness and vulnerability, and their inability to protect themselves from a more cunning and powerful owner.

Many of the memoirs included background information on the childhood of the maltreating parent, especially whether and how the parent had been mistreated himself. It appeared that part of the recovery process was to see the abuser as a victim and not just a perpetrator. This seemed to create a feeling of connection with and empathy for the abuser. It helped the adult survivor make meaning of the abuse and allowed them to understand that it was not their fault as they developed an alternative explanation of why the parent abused them.

Sexual Abuse

There are three main types of sexual abuse, according to federal and state statutes: sexual activity between parent and child, sexual activity imposed on one person by the other with force and/or threat of harm, and sexual activity between an adult and a minor. The stories of sexual abuse presented in these memoirs involved at least two if not all three of these types.

Nonetheless, the memoirs written by adults who were sexually abused as children revealed how enthralled the children were of their molesters. They described these parents as charming, captivating, dynamic, and exciting, conferring on them a near celebrity status. At the same time, they reported being afraid and disgusted by that parent, especially during the sexual act, which transformed the parent into a more demanding, intense, and selfish version of themselves.

Like the physically abused children, the sexual abuse victims felt powerless both emotionally and physically. They felt overwhelmed by the physicality of the sexually abusive parent, and the strength of that parent’s needs. They lacked the tools and the context to process what was happening to them. For the most part, they were treated as if they had no will or voice and they internalized that message and felt themselves to be lacking in agency, control, and power. They were treated as objects, and that is how they experienced themselves.

One way of coping with the confusion of the sexual abuse experience was for the children to psychologically split the abusive parent into a good parent and a bad parent, a daytime parent and a nighttime parent, a safe parent and a scary parent. Because the sexual abuse often occurred at night, the children could engage in a kind of shared delusion with the abuser that it didn’t really happen, some other parent did those things, not the parent sitting at the breakfast table serving them pancakes. This allowed the child to preserve the good and loving parent, to relegate the abusive behavior to someone else.

Another coping strategy used by these children while being sexually abused was dissociation, by separating the mind from the body. When the abusive act became too intense and intimate and painful, the children allowed their minds to wander away to a safer place (or experienced this wandering in a more passive, non-volitional manner), a place where parents didn’t do these things to their children. This was another way of protecting the abusive parent from being held accountable because the abuse was less real for the child.

Many of the sexual abuse victims felt themselves to be sullied, soiled, damaged, and dirty. They felt that they had been marked by the experience, as if they had a

permanent stain or smell that separated them from other people, people who hadn't been touched or fondled or molested. They felt exposed, as if anyone could just look at them and know that they were dirty and damaged. They experienced themselves as ruined, not just in an immediate sense but also long-term, as if the stain of the abuse would be on them forever.

As improbable as it seems, many of the sexual abuse victims came to believe (partly because they were led to believe and encouraged to believe) that they had asked for the abuse, had invited it, and were, therefore, ultimately responsible for its occurrence. They felt guilty and ashamed and confused by this idea that they were complicit, as if they had seduced or enticed their parent to molest them.

Many of the memoirs of sexual abuse survivors mentioned that what they wanted (and felt they needed) as an adult was for the perpetrator to acknowledge what happened, to admit it, take responsibility for it, and ask for their forgiveness. It is clear that for most of them, forgiveness would have readily been forthcoming if only the parent had allowed the child to have a shared understanding with them that what had happened was not their fault. For most, however, this had not happened, and they were left feeling alone in their abuse experience and frustrated that the abusive parent could not or would not take responsibility for their actions.

Emotional Abuse

According to the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), psychological maltreatment has six major subtypes that reflect either emotional abuse or emotional neglect (Hart, Brassard, Baker, & Chiel, 2017). With respect to emotional abuse, four of the subtypes are relevant: spurning, terrorizing, isolating, and exploiting/corrupting. In the memoirs of adult survivors, these types of emotional abuse were not only prevalent, they were pervasive. On a routine basis, these parents berated their children, humiliated them, called them denigrating and demeaning names, threatened to hurt and/or abandon them, said hateful things to them, and conveyed contempt and disgust at their mere presence.

In response to this barrage of hostile rejection, the children experienced three main reactions. The first was that they felt that they were not acceptable or accepted for who they were. The hostility and rejection of the parent conveyed to the children that there was something fundamentally flawed about them. The children experienced their parents as being outraged and disgusted at their very essence, their very being. The message conveyed to the children by the emotionally abusive parent was, "How dare you be who you are," and the children took this message to heart and internalized the belief that they were unlovable, unwanted, and unworthy.

The second response to the emotional abuse was that the children felt that they were not important. The message the parent conveyed was that they would do and say whatever they wanted regardless of the impact on their children. These parents revealed through their actions and words that they would pursue their pleasures regardless of how it hurt or inconvenienced others. Some of these parents engaged in substance abuse, some were mentally ill, others were preoccupied with their own emotional gratification. All were unwilling or unable to modify their behavior to attend to the needs of their children. Reasonably so, the children concluded that they were not important enough for the parent to set aside their own desires for their benefit.

The third response to emotional abuse was to feel unsafe. These parents failed to consider the impact of their behavior, words, and actions on their children. They did not filter their language, protect their children from exposure to adult behavior, nor consider how frightening and confusing their behavior might be. The children were left feeling overwhelmed, hurt, and confused, and sometimes terrified.

While the parents in these stories varied in many respects including the specific form of emotional abuse they perpetrated, what they shared was an inability and/or unwillingness to appreciate that their children were separate people with their own needs, experiences, and perceptions. The emotionally abusive parents exhibited what Shaw (2013) refers to as "traumatizing narcissism," in which the parent fails to grasp the separateness and integrity of the child as a separate

individual. The parent relates to the child, if at all, as an extension of his or her own needs. The child's subjective reality is invalidated by the parent, especially the child's needs that are threatening, embarrassing, or inconvenient for the parent. As a result, the children of these parents experienced themselves as unlovable, unimportant, and unsafe.

Emotional Neglect

Whereas emotional abuse is reflected in acts of commission, emotional neglect is expressed through acts of omission, what the parent does not do. According to APSAC, denying emotional responsiveness to the child (essentially a synonym for emotional neglect) is one of the major forms of psychological maltreatment (Hart et al., 2017). While the specific acts of omission varied from memoir to memoir, the commonality was the parent's inability or unwillingness to pay attention to, be present for, and show love and affection to the child.

Each of the memoirs of emotional abuse was a story of a child's search for the love of the parent. This search was represented in a number of specific themes. The first theme was the strong emotional connection the children had to the scent of the mother. They spoke about how evocative the mother's perfume was for them, how breathing in her aroma helped them to feel close to the absent or emotionally unavailable parent. They were drawn to her scent in order to elicit a feeling of emotional connection that was not available otherwise.

The second theme was the preoccupation the children had with recapturing the unavailable parent's attention. Because many of the parents were able to focus their attention on the child periodically, the children were intermittently rewarded for their efforts. As learning research has established, intermittent reinforcement is extremely difficult to extinguish (Kendall, 1974), meaning that the children were caught in a web of persistent hopefulness that soon their parent would pay attention to them, shine their love upon them.

In many of the stories, the children told of being left behind or forgotten by the parent who was emotionally absent, preoccupied, and inwardly focused. The

experience of being forgotten in a literal sense (i.e., waiting at school to be picked up) mirrored their emotional experience of being forgotten and acted as a foreshadowing of their greatest fear, which was that the beloved parent would disappear altogether.

The inconsistent attention from the parent resulted in the children longing for them as a low-level form of constant hunger and craving. They never felt satisfied because they never knew if the parent would disappear forever. Each moment of connection was bittersweet, as it held within it the potential for the end of the relationship. To them the parent was magical and enchanting when present, even more so perhaps because the parent came and went regardless of the needs or wishes of the child. The very unavailability of the parent made the parent that much more desirable.

These children would have done almost anything to ensure that their beloved parent would stay and be available to them. In some cases, the children assumed responsibility for the parent's emotional and physical well-being in a misguided attempt to ensure that the parent would pay attention and be available to them. They fed their parents, brought them medicine, cleaned the house, in an effort to protect and care for the fragile parent. In many cases the parents did not even notice the love and devotion showered on them by their children and, in response to the failure to notice, many of the children experienced themselves as not mattering, of being invisible. What they longed for more than anything was to look in their parent's eyes and see themselves reflected back as a child who is loved and seen. In the absence of that they felt not just invisible to the parent but also to themselves. They needed to be seen and validated by the parent in order to feel real to themselves.

Physical Neglect

Children who are physically neglected do not have their basic needs for food, shelter and clothing met, usually for reasons above and beyond poverty. In the memoirs, the parents were not simply unable to provide for the physical safety and well-being of their children, but were in some way making a choice to withhold the necessary nurturance and protections from them. How the parents managed and allocated

family resources was what resulted in the neglect, over and above the scarcity of resources. In many of the stories written by adult survivors of childhood physical neglect, the parents suffered from alcoholism, drug addiction, hoarding, or some other mental illness that compromised the parent's ability to prioritize the child's need for food and shelter.

As a response to the chronic experience of hunger and physical discomfort the children had three basic reactions. The first was the experience of being an outsider. They spent an inordinate amount of time outside, usually because their parent pushed them outdoors with the expectation that they would stay away for hours at a time. They also felt like an outsider with respect to their peers and "normal" people who had homes, clean clothes, and enough food. The physically neglected children felt that they did not belong. They were banished from their homes, shunned by their peers for being weird or dirty, and were looked down upon by neighbors, shopkeepers, peers, and others.

Many also wrote about being highly attuned to the suffering of their parent. They appeared to be more empathic towards their parents than their parents were towards them. They saw that the mental illness or drug addiction that consumed their parent's time, energy, and money was a blight on the parent. The suffering and incapacity of the parent was visible for the child, which made it hard for them to sustain their anger at the parent.

At the same time, many of the stories contained an epiphanic moment when the child realized that the parent was in fact making choices that resulted in the suffering and deprivation of the child. There was a moment when the child realized that there would have been enough money for food and clothes and shelter if the parent hadn't spent it on alcohol, drugs, or other pursuits. The children witnessed their parent's ego or desires taking priority over the parent's need to protect and nurture them, and that was what hurt the most. That the suffering was preventable made it all the more painful.

In sum, regardless of the type of abuse inflicted on a child, the child's attachment to the abusive parent was not likely to be destroyed, erased, or made irrelevant.

The attachment persisted, and appeared to be virtually indestructible. The evolutionary advantage of having a caretaking adult is so powerful that the attachment is preserved regardless of the quality of the parenting provided to the child. The common thread among the memoirs was the child's desire to be loved and approved of by the parent, no matter how cruel, unavailable, or irresponsible that parent was. Like Harlow's baby monkeys clinging to their monster mothers, abused children may be more attentive to and focused on their parent than other children, precisely because they have not had their needs met.

Clinical Implications

There are many practical implications of the information presented here, whether the abuse survivors are still children or are adults. Perhaps the most important one relates to the cognitive distortions that generally accompany maltreatment. There are several that were particularly observable in the memoirs, including that the abuse was deserved, that the child needed the parent's love and acceptance to feel good about himself, that the world was unsafe, that they had been ruined, and that people could not be trusted. These beliefs are common among maltreated children as byproducts of the abuse (Kolko & Swenson, 2002). Some of these beliefs were encouraged by the parents and some of the beliefs allowed the child to maintain the fantasy of the good and loving parent. In other words, the distortions worked for the child—up to a point.

The goal of therapy whether for the child or the adult survivor, therefore, would be to encourage them to describe their thoughts and feelings in order to correct dysfunctional and distorted thoughts and beliefs that might underlie ongoing emotional issues and dysfunctional interpersonal functioning. Maltreated children and adult survivors need help to change their self-perceptions and develop a sense of mastery and stop seeing themselves as defined by their victimhood. One possible tool in the therapeutic healing process is for abuse survivors to tell their stories as a way of taking ownership and gaining mastery and control over their maltreatment experience. Storytelling has a long history in the healing arts (Pennebaker, 1997) and practitioners have incorporated it into a whole generation of trauma-informed treatments (e.g., Kolko & Swen-

son, 2002). This process of storytelling is an essential component of many evidenced-based interventions for traumatized and abused children, commonly referred to as the trauma narrative or “processing the trauma,” such as in Trauma-Focused CBT (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2012), Trauma and Grief Component Therapy (Saltzman, Layne, Pynoos, Olafson, Kaplow, & Boat, 2018), and Trauma Systems Therapy (Saxe, Ellis, & Kaplow, 2007). It was clear from the memoirs reviewed for this paper that telling the story was a rich and powerful part of the healing process for these adult survivors of childhood maltreatment.

With respect to treatment providers, the data strongly suggest that people working with maltreated children as well as adult survivors of childhood maltreatment need to be educated about the cause and the strength of the attachment abusive victims feel for their abusive

caregivers. Training about the topics contained in this paper (the reasons why children bond with abusive parents, the abuse-specific experiences) should be mandatory for all mental health professionals. The training could help therapists be more empathic of the attachment dynamic in abusive relationships so that they can help abuse victims accept their own grief reactions in response to being separated from abusive caregivers.

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