

PSYCHODYNAMIC INTERVENTIONS

Introduction

When Kanner (1943) first described autism he initially speculated about potential biological/genetic aetiology. However he also commented on the lack of warmth shown by the parents of the children he studied and their tendency towards mechanical human interaction. Probably as a result of the prevailing psychoanalytic climate of the time, Kanner and other influential theorists, assumed that autism was an emotional disorder caused by emotionally 'cold' parents, especially mothers, who subconsciously rejected their offspring. This developed into the theory of 'refrigerator parents' or 'refrigerator mothers' despite the lack of empirical evidence to support the theory (Jordan, 1999). These theories and the treatments that sprang from them were popularized by Bettelheim (1967) who was a concentration camp survivor. He had observed first hand the extreme symptoms of social withdrawal, anxiety, depression and stereotyped behaviour resulting from trauma to the concentration camp inmates. When he observed similar behaviours in children with autism in America he assumed that these children had suffered a similar extreme trauma which could only have happened at home at the hands of the people the child spent most of his or her time with, their parents. Because parents were assumed to be the primary source of the child's disorder, removal from the home and placement in residential institutions ('parentectomy') was often recommended as treatment (Bettelheim, 1967).

There is some evidence that severely traumatised children demonstrate behaviours that are initially compatible with a diagnosis of autism. This was observed in children who had suffered severe abuse and deprivation in Eastern Europe before they were adopted into British families (Rutter, 1999), however, the response of these children to treatment showed a very different pattern to the treatment outcomes for children with autism.

Severing all ties with their 'toxic' parents and psycho-dynamically oriented play therapy were key components in the psychodynamic therapeutic process (Mesibov et al., 1997). Although the psychoanalysts claimed dramatic cures and recoveries as a result of this intervention there is virtually no evidence to support the efficacy of either removal from the parents or traditional play therapy (Jordan, 1999; Mesibov, 1997).

There continues to be some support for a psychoanalytic approach to autism today from researchers such as Hobson, (1990) who suggests it may be useful because of its emphasis on object relations and affective contact. Howlin (1997) points out that for older more able individuals with autism individual psychotherapy or counseling may help them deal with anxiety and depression arising from recognition of their difficulties and differences.

Examples of Psychodynamic Interventions

Holding Therapy

This intervention is based on the work of Tinbergen & Tinbergen (1983), who claim that autism is caused by an ‘anxiety dominated emotional imbalance’, which leads to social withdrawal and a failure to learn from social interaction. This imbalance was said to result from a lack of binding between mother and infant, which could be ameliorated by Holding Therapy. Howlin describes Holding Therapy as a “process [which] involves holding the child tightly, to ensure eye contact, with the aim of deliberately provoking distress, until he or she needs and accepts comfort.” (Howlin, 1997 p. 58). No adequate research evidence evaluating this approach was found.

Pheraplay

This approach was developed by DesLauriers (1978), who essentially proposed that autism was a failure of emotional attachment compounded by sensory impairments. Pheraplay was advanced as the best way to provide stimulating experiences intense enough to overcome the sensory impairments of children with autism. The intervention focused on providing highly stimulating interpersonal interactions rather than learning specific play skills (Mesibov, et al 1997). No adequate research evidence evaluating this approach was found.

Summary

Today, clinicians in the field of autism in Australia infrequently use psycho-dynamically oriented approaches. The evidence that autism is a developmental rather than an emotional disorder is strong and there is now empirical evidence demonstrating the ineffectiveness of these interventions (Mesibov et al., 1997).