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Advanced Interpersonal Communication Capstone

Understanding Behavior of Neglected Children: A Case Study

Katy Canavan

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Case Study

Grant's eyes opened wide, his face turned red, and in the blink of an eye, he darted after his classmate Mila, violently striking her on the head. Grant's aggressive outburst occurred after his classmate, Mila, grabbed a toy train out of his hand. Grant was in the middle of silently pushing a small green train around an old wooden railroad track, when Mila decided she too wanted the train. After Mila took the train from him, Grant shot Mila an angry glare, and proceeded to run after her. Grant unknowingly knocked into two other children in his raging sprint toward Mila. With his hand clenched in a fist, Grant raised his hand in the air. He nailed Mila right on the head, sending her into a tumble towards the ground. Grant swiped the train out of Mila's hand and ran away. Mid run, he noticed a shiny red box. He dropped his train, and went toward the box. He grabbed the box and attempted to pry it open. He could not figure out the concept of the latch and quickly lost interest.

The child described in this episode is Grant. Grant is a 26-month-old white male, who has severe developmental delays. It is quite possible that Grant is autistic and has ADD, but because of the extreme poverty he and his father live in, they do not have access to tests that could determine this. His father, Craig, recently enrolled him in the Children's Relief Nursery because he knew he and his son needed help. Craig is a 26-year-old white male. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. This is the result of Craig's father abusing him as a child. It is likely that Craig is also autistic. Craig often goes on long tangents about random subjects and is socially awkward. He does not understand the importance of interacting with Grant, especially when Grant is playing. He prefers to rough house with Grant or simply let Grant watch

television. Grant and Craig live with Craig's father and mother. There is often conflict in the home between Craig and his father, and Craig is currently looking for alternative housing because he does not believe the current living situation is a good environment for his son. Craig worries that his father will abuse Grant, much like he abused Craig. Grant currently goes to the Respite Room at the relief nursery twice a week and attends the 2-year-old Explorers class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Grant and his father also receive Child-Parent Psychotherapy, which is where a therapist watches Grant and Craig play and then helps Craig understand how he might better interact with his son.

Many of Grant's developmental deficits are evident when he is in the Respite Room on Wednesday afternoons. The Respite Room at the Children's Relief Nursery is essentially a day care where parents can drop off their kids, free of charge, for three hours. While in the Respite Room, children are free to play on their own, but all toys and activities in the Respite Room do serve specific therapeutic purposes. This past Wednesday, Grant's father dropped him off at the Respite Room. Craig had forgotten to change Grant's diaper so the classroom teacher asked him to do so. Craig started going on one of his tangents. The whole time he was changing Grant's diaper he was telling the teacher about a new jewelry project he was working on. He did not interact with Grant while changing his diaper. When Craig finished changing Grant's diaper, he put Grant down and Grant immediately darted off. Neither Grant nor his father attempted to say goodbye to one another. Craig said bye to the teachers and walked out. Diligently playing with a train, Grant did not notice his father left.

While in the Respite Room, Grant does very little in the form of communication. Although he often makes loud whining or grunting noises, he never uses words. As Grant was pushing a train on the floor, I attempted to talk with him. I asked Grant, "What is that you are

pushing?” Grant did not respond. I proceeded to ask him, “Where do you think that train is going?” Not only did Grant not respond, but also he appeared to be completely unaware of my presence altogether. Grant suddenly picked himself off the floor and ran over to the food cupboard. Grant attempted to open one of the drawers, but being old and sticky, he could not pry the drawer open. I sat next to him so he would know I was there as an outlet for help. After his strongest efforts to open the drawer were met with failure, Grant started making grunting noises. The more he tried and failed, the louder he grunting became. At this point, I asked Grant, “Can I help you Grant?” He looked at me but did not respond. He continued to struggle with the drawer. All of a sudden Grant stopped what he was doing and started dumping out the bowls of food that were sitting on top of the cupboard.

Grant has a tendency to lose focus very quickly when he is playing in the Respite Room. No sooner does he begin playing with one toy is he on to the next. As Grant started pouring the bowls of pretend food onto the ground, he interest was caught by a light up toy another child was playing with. Grant abruptly darted for the light up toy, dropping the food he was holding as he ran. Grant also tends to be unaware of his surroundings. He knocked into another child in a play car as he was running, but he was unfazed by this collision. Although Grant had been knocked to the ground, in what appeared to be a painful run in, Grant did not start crying or even appear to notice he had been run into. He just picked himself up, determined to reach the intriguing light up toy. When Grant reached the light up toy, he swiped it out of the hands of the child playing with it. The child who had been playing with the toy yelled at Grant saying, “Hey! That’s mine, I’m playing with that!” Grant did not even appear to notice the child yelling at him. He sat down with the toy, and began hitting the light up buttons. Before the child could even ask for the toy back, Grant had thrown the toy down and run off for something new.

Grant's lack of focus can also be seen when he fails to respond to requests. Before having lunch in the Respite Room, the teacher's ask the children to wash their hands. I asked Grant, "Grant are you ready for lunch? How about we go wash your hands?" Grant did not acknowledge my request and continued playing with the toy car he found lying on the floor. I asked Grant a few more times and each time he ignored me. Finally, I took Grant by the hand and led him to the sink. He reluctantly followed, but as soon as I let go of his hand he ran away. I again brought him back to the sink and helped him wash his hands. Grant did not know what to do with the soap that I put on his hands so I had to guide him through the process of rubbing his hands together.

At the lunch table, Grant had a hard time following the rule of not leaving the table until you have finished eating. On multiple occasions, something would spark Grant's attention and he would leave the table. Each time the teacher said, "Grant we cannot get up from the table until you are all done with your food," but Grant disregarded this and continued to leave the table. The teacher picked Grant up and placed him back at the table. She appeared to be frustrated but did not reprimand Grant for not listening to her. When Grant was focusing on his food, he had a difficult time using his fork. Because he could not maneuver the fork, he resorted to using his hands to eat his spaghetti. Grant also kept dropping spaghetti on his head, and throwing it across the table. I tried to help Grant by guiding the fork to his mouth, but Grant would throw the fork on the table. I tried putting some of the food on his fork for him, but it did not seem like Grant liked this. While he did not vocalize his frustration, it was apparent in his actions. He started thrashing his fork back and forth as if to say he did not want the food on his fork. He also had a hard time with his cup. Each time he attempted to drink his milk, all the contents of the glass would miss his mouth and end up on his shirt.

While in the Respite Room, Grant also had a number of aggressive outbursts. After lunch, we took the children outside to play. A bright red plastic car intrigued Grant. As he was walking toward the toy, another child beat him to it. An angry look came over Grant's face, and he picked up his pace toward the car. As the child was attempting to get into the car, Grant knocked the child in the head, and tried to push the child out of the car. The child immediately began crying and Grant continued to push him until a teacher intervened. The teacher said, "Grant you need to not touch other people's bodies. That hurts when you hit people on the head. Please do not do that. Can you please say you are sorry?" Grant did not acknowledge the teacher. He spotted a red bike, and took off for it.

Inside Grant had another violent episode in which he slapped an infant. I was rocking a three-month-old baby girl who had been crying for about twenty minutes. As more time went on, the baby's crying became more intense and louder. Grant was busy playing with a ball when the baby let out a piercing cry. This startled Grant and I noticed him get up and walk towards the baby and me. As Grant approached us, I could tell he had a frustrated look on his face, but I was unprepared for what he did next. When Grant reached us he stared at the baby for a brief moment and then wacked the baby on the head. This set the baby into a louder cry and Grant raised his arm again to hit the baby. Seeing this I grabbed Grant's arm before he could hit the baby again. I asked Grant, "Why did you hit Saide?" Grant became frustrated that I had grabbed his arm and tried slapping me with his free arm. The teacher, seeing this, came over to Grant and said, "Grant we do not touch other people's bodies." Grant grunted a little bit and continued playing with his ball.

At the end of the day, Grant's father arrived to pick him up. When Craig walked into the room, Grant did not notice. One of the teachers said, "Look who is here Grant," pointing toward

Craig. Grant looked at Craig, but did not have any response. His emotional state remained the same and he continued playing with his toy. Craig began telling us about what he had been working on the past three hours. As he was rambling on, Grant tripped over a toy train and fell. He did a nosedive toward the ground and knocked his tooth into his lip. When Grant pulled himself up, he immediately began crying. He looked around, acknowledging both his father and the teachers. Instead of going to his father, Grant ran to one of the teachers for comfort. The teacher said, "Wow Grant that looked like it really hurt. I'm sorry that happened. Can you tell me where it hurts?" Grant did not answer, but continued crying. Craig patted Grant on the head and said, "O Grant, you'll be ok." Craig went back to discussing the jewelry he had crafted while Grant was at the Relief Nursery. The teacher finally handed Grant off to Craig and said "It's time to go home now Grant. We will see you next week!" Grant stared at his father for a moment. Craig immediately tossed Grant up and down in the air. Grant remained expressionless. Craig then put Grant on the ground and the two left.

The previously described episode is representative of most of Grant's experiences in the Respite Room. Violent out lashes, little social interaction, and no communication are common places for Grant. While some days he is less aggressive than others are, he has never exhibited communicative displays. On rare occasions, he will attempt to play with another child, but it almost always ends with Grant attacking the other child. Craig does not ever show much interest in how Grant fared while he was in the Respite Room and he usually always goes on a tangent about his personal life.

Analysis

It is possible to detect many problematic behaviors in Grant in the previously described episode. One of Grant's biggest problems is his lack of communication skills. Grant has not built any vocabulary thus far and does not seem to comprehend most phrases spoken to him. He also does not comprehend the concept of following rules. Because the Relief Nursery understands that the children they are dealing with do not know any better, they do not have a strong set of rules and consequences for not abiding by rules. This is unfortunate for Grant because they could be quite beneficial in teaching him normal behaviors. Grant's lack of focus is another major issue. He is unable to hold his focus on one activity for very long and is unaware of his surroundings. Another issue to note is Grant's aggressive personality. His violent outbreaks are quite common and very unsettling. Grant's motor skills are also quite lacking, as he cannot use any eating utensils and often has a hard time with latches. Finally, Grant has a poor relationship with his father. Various communication theories can further explain each of these issues as well as provide support for how they might each be remedied. It is quite likely that most of these issues are rooted in a pileup of stress in Grant's family that caused problematic behaviors to arise.

As the Children's Relief Nursery is a preschool for children who have experienced severe neglect, most of Grant's problematic tendencies can be directly related to his father neglecting him. Neglect is a very serious issue and according to Berry (2003) neglect is a very pervasive form of abuse in the United States. Neglect has the potential to have long lasting repercussions on children. Some common effects neglect can have on a child, include, but are not limited to severe physical, cognitive, and social delays (Berry, 2003). The neglect that Grant has

experienced manifests itself in numerous ways that all contribute to each of Grant's developmental delays.

Before working through each of Grant's problems, it is also important to note that many of Grant's issues may stem from the attachment style Grant has formed. According to Osofsky, Kronenberg, Hammer, Lederman, Katz, Adams, Graham, & Hogan (2007), attachment is one of the most critical developmental tasks of infancy. Early attachments and relationships with a primary caregiver are the most consistent and enduring influences on social and emotional development (Osofsky et. al, 2007). Because Grant's father is unresponsive and quite chaotic, it is likely that Grant has formed an insecure and disorganized attachment style. This attachment style can leave Grant feeling vulnerable with less ability to self-regulate arousal and distress. According to Osofsky et al. (2007), an insecure attachment style can cause a child to be unable to respond or adapt to stressful situations. This insecure attachment style may be a major factor in Grant's delays in cognition and learning, relationship dysfunction, and difficulty expressing emotions. An insecure attachment style might also account for Grant's aggressive tendencies.

An overriding factor that may explain many of the Grant and Craig's problematic issues is stress pileup. Stress according to Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel (2008), is a continuous variable that represents a change or disturbance in a family. There are a number of stressors that are present in Grant and Craig's life which all pile-up, creating an unsettled state for the family. Pileup explains the concept of stressors occurring in association with other issues, which add up to incredibly stressful situations (Galvin et. al, 2008). Some of the stressor that have piled up in Grant and Craig's family include hostility between Craig and his father, Grant's mother leaving Grant and his father, extreme poverty, alcoholism, and Craig forming various mental health illnesses. Each of these stressors contributed to a final state of crisis in which Craig lost the

ability to provide his son with adequate care and attention. A pileup of stress is often to blame for neglect, as parents focus their attention on the many problems in their lives, forgetting about the needs of their children altogether.

High levels of stress, an insecure attachment style, and neglect can provide a basis for many of Grant's problematic tendencies. However, specific communication theories can further explain each of Grant's developmental delays in greater detail. Communication is an important developmental milestone in young children. According to the National Network for Child Care (2002), at 24 months a child should have a vocabulary of at least 200 hundred words. A 24-month-old should be able to form two to three word sentences and should be able to name various toys and make requests (National Network for Child Care, 2002). At 26 months, Grant has yet to exemplify any of these abilities. A lack of communication in Grant's home can explain his delays in communication. As is evident when Grant's father picks him up from the Respite Room, Craig rarely seems to communicate with Grant. Thus, Grant's father takes on a laissez-faire communication style. According to Galvin et al. (2008), low conformity and conversation dimensions mark a laissez faire communication styles. This translates into very little parent-child interaction (Galvin, 2008). This lack of interaction means there is little opportunity for Grant to replicate verbal phrases or understand what normal relational interactions should encompass. This lack of interaction might also explain Grant's lacking motor skills. Finally, according to Howing, Wodarski, & Gaudin (1990), deficits in language skills may also result in poor social skills. This is quite true in Grant's case as he rarely, if ever, interacts with other children.

Grant also struggles with his levels of assertiveness. Grant is unable to hold his attention on one task for extended periods and he is unaware of his surroundings. Again, this can be

explained by a lack of intimacy between Grant and his father. Because Grant's father does not take the time to engage with his son, Grant does not learn the importance of managing one situation at a time. A lack of structure in Grant's home life may also attribute to his chaotic mannerisms. According to Pugh, Tepper, Halpern-Felsher, Howe, Tomilson-Keasey, & Parke (1997), increasing the structure in a child's life can greatly reduce many negative behavioral patterns in a child. Implementing structure and routine in Grant's home life can help him learn to focus his attention on certain tasks for extended periods.

Grant's lack of focus is also seen in his disregard for authority. Grant rarely adheres to rules set in place at the Children's Relief Nursery, and they lack of consequences at the Relife nursery may further intensify this problem. This may be largely due to a lack of rules in his home. According to Galvin et al. (2008), rules in the family are probabilities and are a means for creating meanings. It is probable that there are very few, if any rules set in place in Grant's home. Because Grant has not learned how to follow rules, he is unable to understand the rules set in place at the Children's Relief Nursery.

One of Grant's most troubling problems is his tendency to be very aggressive toward other children and adults. Grant's common violent outbursts can be traced back to the conflict styles used in his home. Conflict is a common place in Grant's home, as his father and his Grandfather often argue. Grant's Grandfather also abused Grant's father, but it is not likely that the Grandfather ever abused Grant. According to Galvin et al. (2008), children learn conflict management from their parents. The conflict in Grant's home is likely not constructive and can be described as volatile. Volatile conflict is marked by disagreement and a lack of harmony. Volatile families tend to often intensely and frequently (Galvin et al., 2008). This example of

conflict may make Grant prone to act in an aggressive manner, thus explaining his violent tendencies.

Another likely explanation of Grant's aggressiveness is his deficits in emotional knowledge. According to Sullivan, Bennett, Carpenter, & Lewis(2008), emotional knowledge is a child's ability to discriminate expression and understand the context in which emotions occur. Emotional Knowledge gives children the ability to sense other's emotional states. The researchers note that children who have experienced neglect have deficits in emotional knowledge and thus are less able to recognize emotions in others (Sullivan et al., 2008). Grant clearly does not have strong emotional knowledge skills, which makes him unable to sense emotional despair he causes in others when he physically hurts them.

One final factor that may influence Grant's aggressive tendencies is how Grant's father handles Grant's emotional behaviors. It is evident that Craig tends to have an emotion-dismissing philosophy when it comes to Grant's feelings. According to Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina (2007), emotion dismissing is present "when parents are unaware of low-intensity emotions, view negative emotions as toxic or overwhelming, invalidate or criticize their children's emotions and want to avoid or protect their child or themselves from negative emotions." As seen in Craig's response to Grant falling and hurting himself, Craig does not seem to validate his son's emotions. Instead, he passes his feelings off as unimportant, or he does not address them at all. Emotion dismissing has many implications for a child's emotion regulation. According to Lunkenheimer et al. (2007), emotion dismissing can make a child more prone to aggressive behaviors. Emotion dismissing can also make a child less able to regulate their emotions, which most commonly manifests itself in either externalizing or internalizing

behaviors (Lunkenheimer et al., 2007). Thus, Craig commonly dismissing Grant's feelings may explain Grant's tendency to be aggressive.

Perhaps the most grave of Grant's issues is his lack of intimacy and closeness with his father. According to Galvin et al. (2008), intimacy relates directly to communication. Because there is a lack of communication between Grant and his father, they are unable to form a close relationship. Because Grant's father has not been as nurturing of a caregiver as he could be, Grant has not connected with his father on a deeper level. This is highly evident when Grant seeks aid in other adults over his father. Again, this stems back to the attachment style Grant has formed because of his father's parenting.

One final element to note is that Grant's father could pass many of his unresolved issues onto Grant. According to Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, Hillman, & Henderson (2003), children with poor attachment styles tend to be hyper-sensitive to the attachment style of their parents. Thus, if a parent formed a poor attachment style it may be possible that they pass that on to their child. In the case of Craig, he still has many unresolved issues with his father. As Craig also had a very unsettled childhood, one in which he was physically abused, it is likely that he too formed an insecure attachment style. Grant has been exposed to his father's issues and as a result has developed many of his father's worst tendencies. Thus, it is necessary to also work on fixing Craig's issues pertaining to his parents so as to ensure he no longer passes his problems on to his son.

It is the sad truth that neglect has become a common place in our world today. As seen in Grant's case, a child whose parent(s) have neglected him/her can suffer many serious deficits. It is important to note that neglect is usually the result of extenuating stressful circumstances.

Stress pile up is a major factor leading to a parent neglecting their child. Various internal and external factors may contribute to a stressful situation. For Grant and Craig, stress pile up was largely due to the unresolved issues Craig has been dealing with from his childhood. Poverty, mental illness, and parental conflicts were some other stressful factors that contributed to Craig neglecting his son. When working with a child whose parent(s) have neglected them, it is necessary to consider the many stresses that might contribute to their problematic behaviors. Only after the root of the problem has been determined, can one take the necessary steps to transform a child.

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