

“I don’t want to go to school”

A case of cumulative trauma, triggered by a present developmental demand

Presenting Problem: This 6 year old girl, beginning first grade, was refusing to go to school without her mother. She had become anxious and clinging about other kinds of separation; clinging, crying spells, irritability, sleep disturbance and generally regressive behavior. On the first day of school she had been locked in the bathroom for 20 minutes before someone noticed and let her out.

Background: The child was born to a single mother who suffered from post-natal depression. After the birth the mother returned to the dependence of her parent's home, where she often experienced a retriggering of her own abandonment issues .The mother described her child as a “difficult” baby who cried a lot, and herself as helpless, inattentive and lost during the child’s first year. The mother and child developed an anxious attachment pattern, which was stable enough to allow the child normal adjustment, until she met the developmental challenge of beginning school. The traumatic event, being locked in the bathroom shattered both the mother and the child’s abilities to contain anxiety. The anxiety spread to everything connected with school and into daily life.

Whenever the child cried the mother felt helpless and lost her confidence. She was flooded with anxiety unable to provide her daughter with the confidence she needed in herself to weather the traumatic incident and make the adjustment to the first grade classroom.