

A guilty little girl

A case of complex, cumulative trauma

Presenting problem: A 7 year old girl whose behavior is erratic and sometimes bizarre. She always seems to be trying to smile, but has extreme outbursts, either of anger or fear or withdrawal. During these outbursts she often seems disconnected from the people around her. She is described in school as sometimes “a lovely child” and other times “a serious behavior problem;” gets upset when the teacher moves away from her part of the room; hits other children, crawls under her desk and wimpers or screams. She would also insist obsessively on sleeping at her grandmother’s house, screaming uncontrollably when she was told that she had to stay at home. She often says that the trouble at home is “my fault”.

Background information: This was the child of a mother and father who had both been involved with drugs. The mother was caring, but only sporadically available. The father, an immature man, finally left the family when the child was under 2 years and left the country.

Mother and child then moved to be closer to mother’s family and the mother became drug free. A boyfriend entered the picture and lived with the child and her mother, acting as a father in every way to the little girl. When she was 4, another little child was born; The boyfriend’s behavior changed; he became hard and punishing towards the 4 year old, said he had to take care of “his own little girl”. The mother finally asked him to leave when her daughter was 5. He would come weekly to pick up his own daughter with presents and hugs while the 5 year old watched. It was thought that her symptoms were explained in light of her entire background, triggered by this second desertion of a father.

When she had been in therapy for 8 months, without much improvement, she revealed to her grandmother that she had been sexually abused over a period of time by this man. He had offered to bathe her in the afternoon while the mother took a nap and this was when the abuse would occur.

Memory was beginning to surface in small bits as we processed her present symptoms.

Resources: A well developed little girl who is generally cooperative. She is intelligent, musically talented; singing and dancing. She likes to play and is drawn to other children, though often gets into conflicts. The grandmother is a strong, steady element in her life and there is an extended family.