



# Assessment

## *The Whys & Whats*

By Arthur Becker-Weidman, Ph.D.

### **Why is a Comprehensive Assessment Important?**

Children who have experienced complex early trauma, maltreatment, institutional care, foster care or multiple placements often have equally complex difficulties. Effectively treating and parenting children with complex histories requires an understanding of what is causing the difficulties. After all, what we want to do is to remedy the underlying cause of the problems. The same symptom profile may have a variety of causes and, of course, it is the underlying causes that we treat, not the surface symptoms. For example, when you go to your physician with a cough, you want to know why you are coughing because it mat-

ters whether the cough is caused by allergies, tuberculosis or lung cancer; each of which has a different and effective treatment. Even the best provider delivering the best treatment will produce no improvement if the right cause is not being treated.

Correct diagnosis or assessment is vital; and the assessment should be focused on causes. Too often diagnoses are based on surface symptoms without considering the underlying cause. If I said to you, "I'd like to place an 8-year-old boy in your home who has difficulty in school and at home, often is 'in another world,' gets side tracked and is easily distracted, is forgetful, and often loses gloves, pencils, and books," you might think,

"ah, yes, a kid with ADD or ADHD." You might be right. However that same symptom profile can occur if the child has sensory-integration dysfunction, an anxiety disorder, a traumatic brain injury, prenatal exposure to alcohol or other toxins, early trauma, or a mood disorder; and each of these conditions has a different and effective treatment, but only for that cause. So, providing excellent treatment for ADHD will not remedy attention problems caused by an anxiety disorder or caused by sensory-integration dysfunction.

Anyone who begins treatment without a comprehensive professional assessment is violating an important standard of care. My professional opinion is that any therapist

Domain	Topics	Methods
<b>Attachment</b>	Trust, family relationships, peer relationships, empathy, secure base	Attachment Story Completion Test. Marshack Interaction Method. Adult Attachment Interview
<b>Biology</b>	Sensory-motor development, sensory-integration, sleep, eating, medical	Sensory Profile, review of medical records, clinical interview.
<b>Emotional Regulation</b>	Tantrums, emotional regulation, capacity to identify emotions	Child Behavior Checklist, clinical interview, Heart Drawing, House-Tree-Person
<b>Defensive Function</b>	Dissociation, Tension-Reduction-Behaviors, Source Attribution Errors	Clinical Interview, history, Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children
<b>Behavioral Regulation</b>	Impulse control, self-destructive behaviors, aggression, tantrums, defiance	Child Behavior Checklist, Clinical interviews, House-Tree-Person
<b>Cognition</b>	Attention, Executive Functions, Language development, cause-effect	Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF), Mini Mental Status Exam, Neuropsychological evaluation
<b>Self-Concept</b>	Autobiographical Narrative, body image, self-esteem, Shame/guilt	Clinical interview, history, Child Behavior Checklist
<b>Development Functioning</b>	Communication, Daily living skills, Socialization	Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales
<b>Prenatal Exposure to Toxins</b>	Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (Fetal Alcohol Syndrome - Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder)	BRIEF, Neuropsychological evaluation, Developmental Screening

who begins treatment without first conducting a comprehensive assessment is not practicing ethically, professionally, or in a manner consistent with current standards of care. I am frequently called as an expert witness in court cases and malpractice cases where the therapist has provided treatment without an evaluation and then faced legal problems later because of that oversight. There is no one treatment for all conditions. Accurate diagnosis and assessment of the causes of the difficulties is essential to selecting the proper treatment.

A professional assessment for children with complex histories, that is consistent with the current standard of care, must be comprehensive and address a variety of areas.

**What should an evaluation include?**

A comprehensive assessment must consider mental health issues, attachment and trauma, sensory-integration, and executive function and neuropsychological issues. In addition, the evaluation should include an assessment of the seven domains that may be affected by Complex Trauma (aka Developmental

Trauma Disorder): attachment, behavioral regulation, emotional regulation, cognition, biology, defensive functions and self-concept as well as possible prenatal exposure to toxins. The evaluation should include a review of all records such as previous evaluations, school records, adoption summaries, placement histories and other similar records. In addition, information should be gathered from the family, the child, and other sources such as the school. This is important since it can help differentiate whether the symptom is more emotional and psychological in nature or grounded in neuropsychological or brain functioning. The above table outlines the main domains that an assessment should cover and some methods to do that.

As a consumer you should expect to receive an appropriate evaluation that is comprehensive and which specifies relevant and detailed treatment recommendations. Such recommendations will specify domains that warrant further evaluation by a specialist. For example, the Sensory Profile may suggest that an evaluation by an occupation therapist who is trained in sensory-integration may

be necessary. Or, the BRIEF profile on the parent and teacher versions may suggest that the deficits in executive function are more neurologically based than emotional and so a thorough neuropsychological evaluation is indicated. The recommendations should be specific regarding the type of psychotherapy needed and the basis for this recommended treatment. An attachment-focused treatment, which is a relationship-based, family-focused treatment may be indicated along with other interventions. In all instances it is essential that the provider of these treatment and interventions have relevant experience, training, licensing and certification in the recommended treatment.

Since there are different treatments for different conditions, it violates an important standard-of-care if treatment is started before and without first conducting a thorough evaluation. The assessment and recommendations based on the evaluation must then be discussed with the parents. Unless the family understands and agrees with the assessment, the treatment plan will not make sense and it is likely that the treatment will

be ineffective. Successful treatment usually requires the active involvement and engagement of the parents. You have a right and a responsibility to be fully informed regarding the professional assessment and the treatment recommended. All your questions and concerns should be addressed before any treatment begins and the professional should welcome your questions as an opportunity to further explain how the assessment relates to the recommendations and as an indication of your involvement and concern.

### **What are Some Resources About Comprehensive Assessments and Treatment Plans?**

If you are looking for someone who can provide attachment-focused treatment, you can look at the listing of therapists certified by the Attachment-Focused Treatment Institute in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy and Attachment-Focused Treatment at [www.attachment-focusedtreatmentinstitute.com/attachment-focusedtherapist.html](http://www.attachment-focusedtreatmentinstitute.com/attachment-focusedtherapist.html). In addition, you can look at the list of Registered Clinicians on the website for the Association in the Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children at [www.attach.org](http://www.attach.org).

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## Resources

A few books and DVDs that describe the assessment process, what is generally considered the standard of care, and effective treatments are the following:

***The Child's World: Assessing Children in Need*** by J. Basarabp-Horwath from Kingsley Publishers.

***Attachment Facilitating Parenting: Effective Methods for Parenting Children with Trauma and Attachment Disorders***, by Arthur Becker-Weidman, Three DVD set, Williamsville, NY: Center For Family Development.

***Assessing Children with Complex Trauma and Disorders***, by Arthur Becker-Weidman 2-DVD set, Williamsville, NY: Center For Family Development, ASIN: 0982288301 2007.

***Effects of Early Maltreatment on Development: A Descriptive study using the Vineland***, by Arthur Becker-Weidman Child Welfare, 88 (2)137-161.

***Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy: Essential Practices & Methods***, by Arthur Becker-Weidman Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson.

***Assessing Caregiver Reflective Capacity, Commitment, Insightfulness, and Sensitivity***, by Arthur Becker-Weidman 2-DVD set. Williamsville, NY: Center For Family Development.

***The Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy Casebook*** by Arthur Becker-Weidman Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson.

***The Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy Primer*** by Arthur Becker-Weidman Williamsville: Century Press.

***The Attachment Therapy Companion: Key Practices for Treating Children and Families*** by Arthur Becker-Weidman , L. Ehrlman, D. LeBow

***Creating Capacity For Attachment*** by Arthur Becker-Weidman and D. Shell, Oklahoma City, OK: Wood 'N' Barnes.

***Attachment Parenting: Developing Connections and Healing Children*** by Arthur Becker-Weidman and D. Shell, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson.

***Assessing Adult Attachment*** By P. Critenden & A. Landini

***Disturbances and disorders of attachment in early childhood*** by CH Zeanah In Zeanah CH (Ed.) Handbook of infant mental health (2nd ed.) pp. 358–62. New York: Guilford Press.



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All staff of the Center are certified Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapists and/or Attachment Focused Therapists.

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