

A self psychology perspective on the formulation and treatment of psychopathology in children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders

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Abstract

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) represent a major health, educational, and social challenge in South Africa. By evoking negative responses from the child's environment, the specific constellation of features associated with FASD pose a threat to the development of a positive self-concept in the developing child with FASD. These features particularly relate to mother-infant attachment disturbances, 'difficult' temperament, disruptive behaviour disorders and intellectual deficits leading to poor scholastic performance. While there is a high rate of psychopathology amongst children with FASD, little has been done to formulate these difficulties within established personality theory. Using concepts from self psychology theory, this paper illustrates how some of the features associated with foetal alcohol exposure may compromise the child's developing sense of self, which in turn may increase vulnerability to the development of psychopathology. An argument for employing Kohut's self psychology theory to attain a better understanding of, and clearer strategies for, the treatment of psychopathology in children suffering from FASD is presented.