APPLICATIONS OF SELF PSYCHOLOGY
TO THE PROBLEM OF CHILD ABUSE

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Abstract: This article examines the application of self psychology to the problem of child abuse. The understanding of child abuse has evolved and, through the application of psychoanalytic principles, has come to be viewed as a breakdown in the parent-child relationship. Self psychology provides a furthering of this understanding and suggests treatment modalities. The case illustration demonstrates the usefulness of self psychology in both understanding and treating abusive parents.

Few social problems are as distressing and enigmatic as is the willful abuse and neglect of children. Historically children have been viewed as the property of parents with license to treat them as they saw fit, resulting in emotional and physical mistreatment without concern for legal reprisal. As recently as the 1870s, there were laws in the United States to protect animals from abusive conditions but none to protect children. The famous case of Mary Ellen, a child found chained and undernourished had to be tried under the law against cruelty to animals, catalyzing an eventual change in the legal status of children (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979). This change, which accorded to children legal standing, provided the basis from which society’s attitudes and choice of intervention have evolved.

Shortly after the case of Mary Ellen, a movement was begun to establish private organizations for the protection of children, closely followed by the early efforts to pioneer social reform and to establish social work as a profession (Helfer & Kempe, 1972). The provision of child protective services became a mandate of the social work profession. Initially this mandate was carried out largely by the provision of casework services or, in extreme cases, by the removal of children to institutions or foster homes. However, our understanding of child abuse has evolved from a social perspective to a psychodynamic one, with the
choice of intervention being modified accordingly. Through the application of psychoanalytic principles, child abuse and neglect have come to be viewed as a treatable syndrome resulting from a breakdown in the parent-child relationship, with such analysts as Brandt Steele (1970), Richard Galdston (1979), and Selma Fraiberg (1980) illuminating our understanding of the personality structure of abusing parents.

There have been, however, more recent contributions to analytic theory which may be employed to advance our understanding of abusive parents and to refine our approach to treatment. The self psychology formulations of Kohut (1971) provide an enlightening perspective on the child abuse syndrome. In this article we will review the analytic discussions of abusive parents. Next, we will demonstrate that the common theme throughout the literature is that a high proportion of abusive parents display a particular cluster of symptoms which relate to deficits in self esteem and needs for narcissistic supplies. This view concurs with our own clinical observations gleaned from treating abusive parents. We will sketch aspects of self psychology as they apply to the psychic functions of abusive parents, illustrating these through a case vignette and through a concluding discussion of practice implications.

Traditional Analytic Theories

Steele (1970), Fraiberg (1982), and Galdston (1972) approach the syndrome of child abuse with differing foci and emphases. They provide, however, clear and evocative descriptions of the parent-child interaction which are remarkably similar. These descriptions point to early traumatic interferences in the development of narcissism of the parent. An intolerably painful psychic state occurs when such a narcissistically injured parent as a last resort looks to the child for reassurance and love and is once again disappointed.

In discussing the abuse of infants and young children, Steele (1970) finds no single diagnostic category which would encompass a majority of abusing parents. Almost universally present in these parents, however, are psychosomatic complaints and chronic, low-grade anaclitic type depression (1970). Child abuse is thought to be “best understood as a particular type of parent-child interaction which can exist in combination with any other psychologic state” (p. 450). In her work with abusive and neglecting parents, Fraiberg (1980) also found a range of diagnostic categories.

A definable pattern of child-rearing is characteristic of the abusive parent. Steele finds that abusive parents unconsciously hold “that infants and children exist primarily to satisfy parental needs, that children’s and infant needs are unimportant and should be disregarded and that children who do not fulfill these requirements deserve punishment” (Helfer & Kempe, p. 96). The parents display a self-righteous ex-