

RHS 4.0

Overarching Affect in a Parent-Child Interaction

Introduction

When we look at indicators of relational health during the first 1000 days of life, we look for indicators of *mutual* competence and vulnerability in the parent-child relationship, not the skills, competence or vulnerability of one or the other person.

The first step in rating dimensions of relational health using the *Relational Health Screen* (RHS 4.0) is noting whether the overarching affective or emotional tone in the interaction is positive, or not.

When overarching affect is positive, we look at the robustness of relationship capacities, for example mutual engagement, mutual enjoyment, mutual responsiveness, and so forth. Skills or capacities may be rated 2 (observed), 1 (sometimes observed), or 0 (not observed). “Two” is the highest possible rating.

When overarching affect is not positive, we see weaknesses in skills or capacities and vulnerabilities in the relationship. “One” is the highest possible rating when overarching affect is less-than-positive.

There are subjective and objective indicators of the extent to which the overarching affective tone in an interaction is positive, or not.

Indicators of Positive Overarching Affect

Subjective indicators that an observer may experience while watching an interaction unfold are:

1. The observer has a sense that there is safety in the relationship
2. The observer has a sense that there is genuine, shared warmth in the relationship
3. While watching the video, the observer finds him/herself relaxing, smiling, nodding, maybe even feeling delight or pleasure while watching the interaction unfold
4. While watching the video, the observer finds him/herself thinking or exclaiming “That’s nice,” or “beautiful,” or “heartwarming.”

The observer may not experience all of these.

Objective, behavioral indicators that the observer may see as the interaction unfolds are:

1. Smiles on the faces of both the parent and child
2. Pleasant expressions on the faces of both the parent and child
3. Caresses
4. Gentle touches by both the parent and child towards the other
5. Snuggling
6. The parent and child lean towards one another
7. The child and parent are relaxed in close proximity with one another
8. The child reaches for the parent or climbs into the parent’s lap

9. The parent and child use positive words with each other
10. The parent and child use positive tones of voice with each other
11. The child is readily soothed by the parent
12. The postures of both the parent and child postures are relaxed

The observer may not see all of these.

Indicators of Less-than-Positive Overarching Affect

Subjective indicators that an observer may experience while watching an interaction unfold are:

1. The observer has a sense of ill ease, worry or sadness while watching the interaction
2. While watching the video, the observer finds him/herself tensing, holding his/her breath, shaking his/her head, or watching the interaction unfold with a serious, worried expression on his/her own face
3. While watching the video, the observer finds him/herself fidgeting, looking away or backing away slightly from the screen
4. The observer finds him/herself not knowing what to think about the interaction
5. The observer feels uncertain about the overarching affect

The observer may not experience all of these.

Objective, behavioral indicators that the observer may see as the interaction unfolds are:

1. Crying, especially crying that is not readily soothed
2. When the child is distressed or cries, the parent uses an object (instead of him/herself or reassurance) to stop the crying behavior
3. When the child is distressed or cries, the parent scolds the child to stop the crying behavior
4. The body of the parent or child (or both) is turned away from the other most of the time
5. The parent or child avert their gaze during encounters with the other
6. Flat facial expression on the parent's or the child's face
7. Frowns or grimaces on the parent's or the child's face
8. The parent speaks critically or sarcastically to the child or about the child
9. The parent attributes negative intents to the child's actions or expressions
10. The parent expresses anger, impatience or irritation at the child
11. Either or both the parent or child seems tense with the other
12. Wariness, especially on the part of the child towards the parent
13. The parent or child uses rough touch, hitting or slapping towards the other
14. The parent or child ducks or dodges movements of the other as if anticipating a hit
15. The child uses a "stop" gesture towards parent
16. The child stays out of arm's reach of the parent most of the time
17. The parent or child seems to be breathing shallowly, as if his/her holding breath
18. The parent shakes or hits the child

The observer may not see all of these.

Contextual Factors

Contextual factors can impact our impressions of the child and parent's emotional experiences during the interaction and the affective tone of their relationship, for example:

1. The child has just fallen or been hurt and is still recovering when videotaping begins
2. The child is overtired, has symptoms of physical illness, or has just taken medication that affects his or her level of alertness, interest and attention, or activity
3. The parent is overtired, has symptoms of physical illness, or has just taken medication that affects his or her level of alertness, interest and attention, mood or activity
4. A child is hungry but the parent is waiting to feed him/her until after videotaping is finished
5. The parent or child feel uncomfortable, unusually shy or ill at ease in the setting where videotaping is being done