




# Minding the Parents:

## Supporting Your Most Challenging & Challenged Caregivers

### Presenters



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## Learning Objectives

- Define concepts such as Mentalization, Reflective Functioning and Epistemic Trust
- Better understand these concepts and the interventions used to promote parental mentalizing or reflective functioning
- Engage in a process of self-reflection in order to understand the unique interplay between your own state of mind and that of the parent

Why we decided to do this workshop

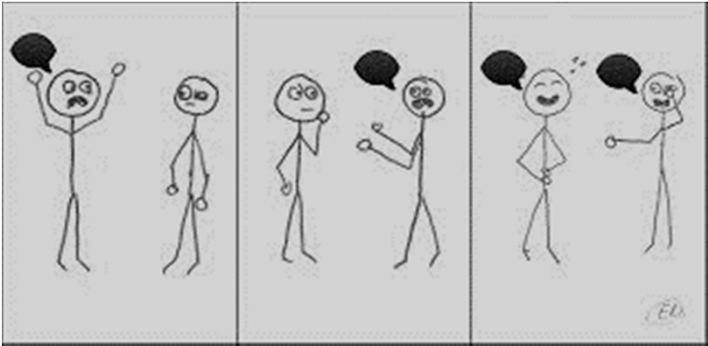


What's on Your Mind?



# Us Trying To Imagine Your Minds?

Hmmm????????



The comic strip consists of three panels. In the first panel, a stick figure on the left has a speech bubble above its head, while a stick figure on the right looks on. In the second panel, the stick figure on the left is thinking, and the stick figure on the right has a speech bubble. In the third panel, both stick figures are talking to each other, each with a speech bubble. A small signature 'EU' is visible in the bottom right corner of the third panel.

# What do we mean by 'Minding the Parent'?



A black and white photograph showing a close-up of an adult's hand firmly grasping a child's smaller hand. The background is blurred, focusing attention on the connection between the two hands.

# Mentalization

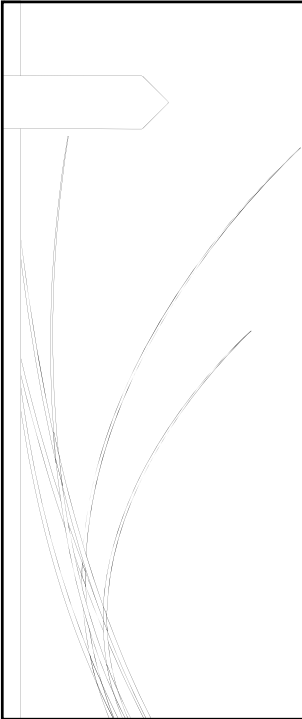


What's Going On In Her Mind?

# Mentalization



Is Fundamental To Being Human



“Life is rubbish for all of us, but if you can talk about your thoughts and feelings you don't need to do crazy things.”

Peter Fonagy, PhD  
Director – Anna Freud Center



## Mentalization & Reflective Function (RF)

### What is Mentalization?

A simple concept that it is hard to grasp or define. It is a mental activity concerned with perceiving and understanding one's behavior and that of others based on mental conditions or states.

### Different definitions:

- ▶ Holding mind in mind
- ▶ Seeing yourself from the outside and the other from the inside
- ▶ To have focus on both your own mental state and the mental state of the other
- ▶ Understanding misunderstandings
- ▶ Being able to understand behavior in terms of mental states

## Thinking about the work we do...

Why is understanding mentalization important for the work we do with parents?



## Mentalization

Let's let Peter Fonagy describe why it is important in our work with children and their parents:

<http://www.mbtchild.com>  
<https://youtu.be/MJ1Y9zw-n7U>



## Challenged and challenging parents revisited



### What might make someone challenged and challenging?

- ✓ The parents we work with may have underdeveloped or break downs in this capacity or function
- ✓ Parents that struggle in this way tend to have significant problems understanding their child's behavior as a communication of mental states.
- ✓ Parents with their own histories of insecure attachment may have more difficulty symbolizing the experiences and making sense of their own child's communication, because the child's emotions can easily dysregulate them as well. (children as trauma triggers)

## Where the challenge lies...

- ❑ We are often asking them to do something that they may be incapable of doing. Or failing to understand that the barriers to treatment progress are related to our own mis-attunement to these challenges which makes them challenging for us.
- ❑ Identifying these problems—Being able to recognize when a parent is in a non-mentalizing mode can help the treatment and is essential. Or even better, recognizing when we have become locked into a non-mentalizing dynamic with a parent.

## Parental RF and Epistemic trust

Both evolutionary findings and theory (Sperber et al. 2010; Wilson and Sperber 2012) and developmental research (e.g., Corriveau et al. 2009) suggest that it is **within the context of secure relationships with caregivers** who pay appropriate attention to the role of **internal mental states** that children develop the capacity for **epistemic trust**—the capacity to trust others as trustworthy sources of knowledge that is generalizable and relevant to the self.



Epistemic Trust:  
Trust In Social Information

Epistemic Trust  
Why it is important

A side-view photograph of a white cargo van with the words "FREE CANDY" printed in large, bold, black letters on its side. The van is shown against a plain white background.

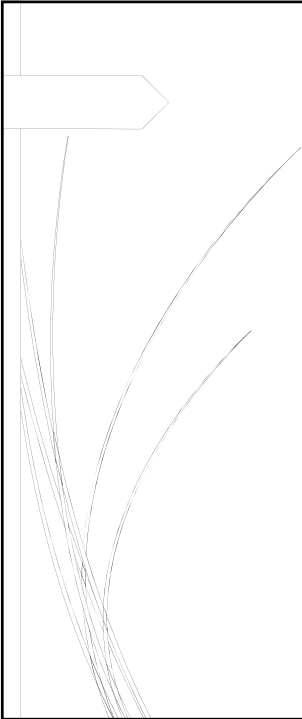
## Mentalizing can go disastrously “off line”!



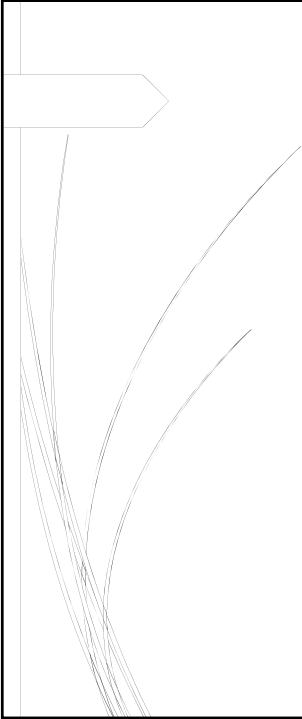
## Mentalizing and the family context

“There is no context that is more likely to induce a loss of mentalizing than family interactions. It is within the family that relationships tend to be at their most fraught, their most loving and their most intense emotionally; in other words the family is an environment with the potential to stimulate a loss of mentalizing in one or more family members on a daily basis.”

-Fonagy and Allison, 2012

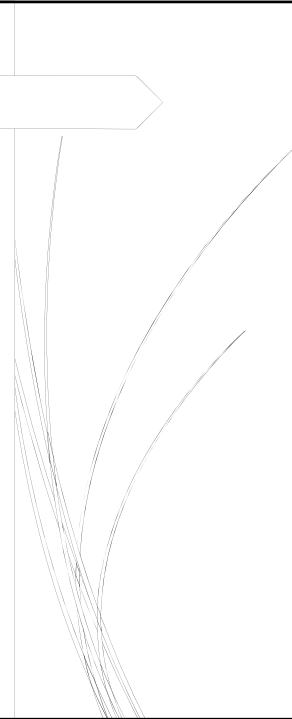


If we can understand vulnerabilities and identify in our work “off line” experiences we are in a better place to help parents!

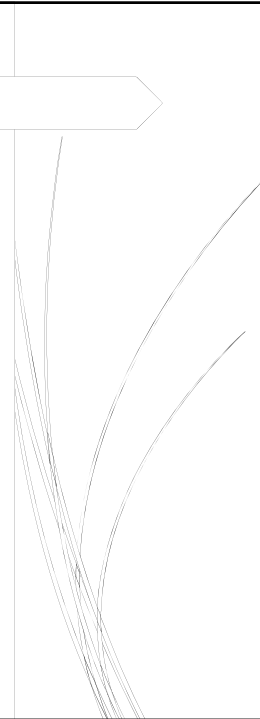


## Indicators that a parent is struggling to mentalize:

- ▶ They **focus on their child's behavior** without attention to their mental states or internal experience--There seems to be an overall lack of curiosity about what the behavior could say about their child's feelings, wishes or needs
- ▶ Excessive **blaming** or **fault finding**
- ▶ Excessive **attempts to control** child's behaviors
- ▶ Exhibiting **unmodulated mental states** themselves; without awareness of the impact these may have on their child
- ▶ Demonstrating **negative distortions** and **attributions** about their child (e.g. She is crying “because she wants to punish me.” Or, “She's just a spoiled brat, purposely trying to be difficult, just likes to embarrass to me,” etc.)
- ▶ Use of phrases and fixed explanations like: “he **always**,” or “she **never**.” Or, an **all knowing** of their child, “Oh, I know why she acts like this—I already know what she is thinking.”



# Non-mentalizing Modes or Mentalizing Failures



<b>Teleological mode:</b> "Quick fix thinking"	Mental states are expressed in targeted actions rather than through words or thoughts. <b>Quick fix thinking:</b> e.g. "The only solution is for my son to be on Ritalin."
<b>Psychic equivalency mode:</b> "Inside out thinking"	Equivalency created between reality and mental states. "Whatever I think and feel is real. That's how it is." <b>Alternative perspectives disappear</b> and there is an exaggerated sense of one's own opinions. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9jdezXALNI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9jdezXALNI</a>
<b>Pretend mode:</b> "Elephant in the room thinking" "Whatever mode"	Mental states are not flexibly related to reality. Can be seen through pseudo-mentalizing, intellectualizing, and "psychobabble." Monologues without concern for listeners. <b>Therapists can fall into this mode:</b> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_TotOAQyul&amp;t=22s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_TotOAQyul&amp;t=22s</a>

# Interventions

Ok this is all great, but what do we do?



# Recognize our own reactions may be a mirrored experience

What happens in us...  
our thoughts,  
and feelings about them,  
may be mirroring their own experience...

may be mirroring their own experience...  
and feelings about them,  
our thoughts,

## Clues for Us

Reactions we might be having that can be clues of falling into a **non-mentalizing** state of mind:

- Boredom
- Blanking out
- Confusion

When we offer **elaborate explanations** for the child's behaviors based on **theory or other knowledge** base; start giving a lot of **"interventions and tools"** to try; **presuming to know** why a child or parent is acting in a certain way.



## A Mentalizing Stance: Not Knowing

- Using expertise to **describe possibilities**—Wondering **along side** the parent
- Being **genuinely curious**
- Giving **authentic value** to the **inner experience of the parent** with their child
- Helping parents to **press the pause button**. Or, **stop and rewind** incidents/interactions with their child to see when they went "off line"
- Working in the **here and now**
- **Repairing** mis-attunement
- **Validating**, reflecting

## Flying at the right emotional altitude



## Resources/Books

- The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families <http://www.annafreud.org> (for professional training in MBT)
- The Center for Reflective Communities <http://reflectivecommunities.org> (for professional training in the Reflective Parenting Program)
- The Reflective Parent: How to do less and relate more with your kids Pally, R. (a great resource/book for parents)
- Mentalization Based Treatment for Children: A Time Limited Approach Midgley, N., Ensink, K., Lindqvist, NM, & Muller, M. (for professionals)
- Minding the Child with children, young people and their families. Midgley, M & Vrouva, I. (for professionals)
- The Mentalization Guidebook, Oestergaard Hagelquist, J. (professional resource)
- Parenting and Substance Abuse: Developmental Approaches to Intervention 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Suchman, N., Pajulo, M. & Mayes, L Eds.

## References/Further Reading

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