

Language, Social Pragmatic Communication, and Childhood Trauma

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case focuses on the effects of trauma on the language and social pragmatic communication of a 10-year-old girl who was one of the many children separated from familial caregivers between 2016 and 2019 when she and her parents came to the U.S. from Central America seeking asylum due to gang violence and economic reasons. The child spent 8 months in the detention center without her parents and then was transferred to a foster home where she suffered neglect as well as physical and psychological abuse. This case study focuses on the long-term effects of structural violence and maltreatment on child development, and specifically on language and social pragmatic communication.

INTRODUCTION

Disclaimers: The case discussed in this chapter contains facts from a real case; however, some of the events were changed and others were added. The events that were added are actual events from a compilation of real cases occurring in the current U.S. news or seen at a midwestern transdisciplinary clinic that provides comprehensive assessments to children and adolescents with histories of maltreatment and prenatal alcohol exposure. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved with the case. Some parts of this case were presented in the article and presentations cited below, and have been used in Dr. Hyter's course on Disordered Language Development:

- Hyter, Y.D. (2012). Complex trauma and prenatal alcohol exposure: Clinical implications. *ASHA Perspectives on School-Based Issues*, 13(2), 32 – 42. doi/10.1044/sbi13.2.32
- Hyter, Y.D. & Ciolino, C. (2017, November). Providing SLP services through a trauma informed lens. Seminar presented at the annual convention of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Los Angeles, CA.
- Hyter, Y.D., Henry, J., Sloane, M., Suarez, M., & Ciolino, C. (2018). The effects of complex trauma and alcohol exposure: The brain, language and skills for daily living. Short course presented at the Annual Convention of the Michigan Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Kalamazoo.

Global Connections

How Isidra came to live in the U. S. from Guatemala is a story of how all humans on earth are all linked through global connections. Isidra was one of the many children separated from familial caregivers between 2016 and 2019. Isidra and her parents came to the U.S. from Central America seeking asylum due to gang violence and economic reasons. The CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement – implemented in 2006) has had outcomes in Guatemala and other Central American countries that are not equivalent to the results CAFTA has had in the U.S.

CAFTA was designed to eliminate “barriers to U.S. exports, improving U.S. competitiveness against Central American and third country [*sic*] suppliers” (Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, 2004; Perla, 2016; U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2019). In the U.S. CAFTA has helped to create new jobs and has benefited small companies (Murphy & Busch, 2015). CAFTA, however, has resulted in limited governmental basic services for populations in Central America, displaced farmers who cannot compete with low prices of goods imported from the U.S., high levels of unemployment, poor working conditions for laborers, and low wages (Beneria, Berik, & Floro, 2016; Burgos, 2007; Perez-Rocha & Paley, 2014). CAFTA is the context in which powerful gangs have risen, and has motivated migration to the U.S.

Migration by the Numbers

While in Guatemala, Isidra’s home country, her family began receiving threats from gangs to pay a protection price. Her father and mother worried about Isidra’s safety and made the decision to leave their home country for the U.S., which they perceived as a safer place to raise a family and one that would provide a future for Isidra. Upon arrival at the U.S. border, Isidra was separated from her parents.

Although there is no U.S. law or court ruling that requires systematic removal of children from their families, and detention of children (Binford, 2019; Rizzo, 2018), according to the ACLU (2019), as of October 2018, there were 2654¹ children determined to be separated from their parents. Of these 2654 children, 525 (20%) were girls like Isidra, 10-years-old or older (ACLU, 2019). Some of these children were detained without their parents for up to a year (ACLU, 2019). An executive order ending the current federal administration’s policy of separating migrant children from their parents was signed on 19 June 2018 (Gonzales, 2018); nevertheless, family separations continued well into 2019 with at least 700² more children being separated from parents or grandparents (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

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