

MERTIL

A universal approach
to growing trust in the
face of early relational
challenges

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1



Acknowledging country,
extending respect.



2

The Bouverie Centre

An integrated practice-research centre of La Trobe University

Specialist clinical family therapy services, teaching, training and research in mental health, trauma and alcohol & drug contexts.

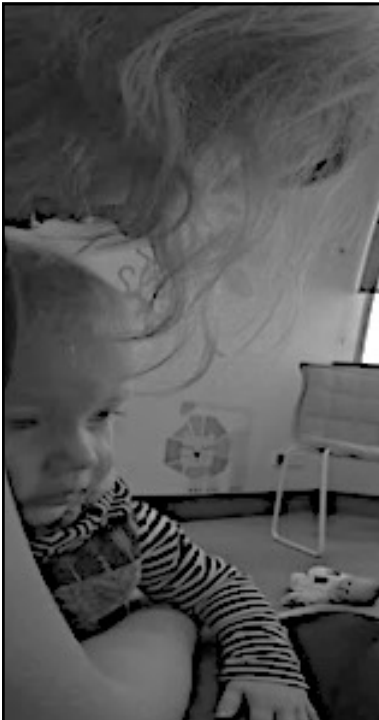
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3

Today's focus... the mutual contributions of the family to their infants' development, and the infant to their family's growth & healing.

An infant focused, single session application of **Mertil for Families**

4



The sigh of relief.... An archetype

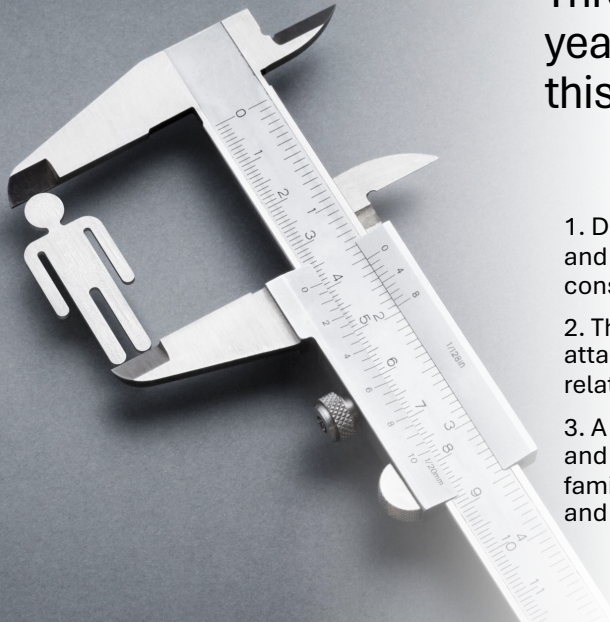
How do we help parents create that sigh of relief, amongst their own challenge, stress, interpersonal distress and intergenerational trauma?

5



Leveraging the language of infant development

6



Three things and 30 years that led me to this current work.

1. Despair about the weaponizing and commercializing of attachment constructs.
2. The *actual* evidence about attachment and the long arm of early relational trust.
3. A wish to put attachment research and language in the hands of families, freely, as tools for healing, and for prevention.


7

1. Language Getting the attachment vernacular “right”

The word “attachment” in the Bowlby/Ainsworth tradition has a very particular meaning. It should only be used by people certified in attachment research methods, who know how to use it and how not to use it. The rest of us should say what we mean.”

Everett Waters, 2011, in...

FAMILY COURT REVIEW
An Interdisciplinary Journal



ARE WE ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS ABOUT ATTACHMENT?

Everett Waters ✉ Jennifer McIntosh ✉

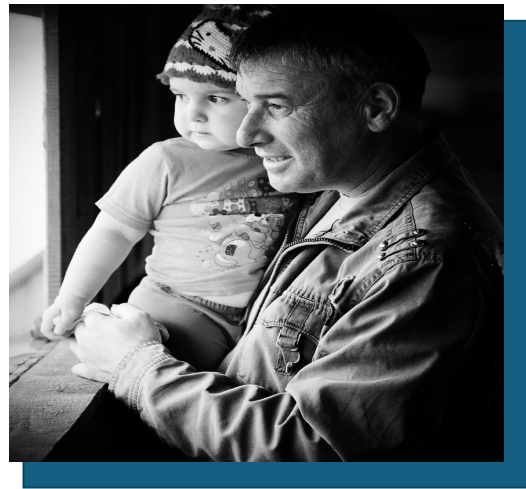
8

The “set goal” of the attachment system = Protection from fear

How? Physical & psychological proximity to the attachment figure

Secure attachment behaviour =

Confident proximity seeking that leads to rapid achievement of the set goal.



Patterns/Status of Attachment

1. Organized or Disorganized
 2. Secure or Insecure
 3. Secure, Avoidant, Ambivalent, or Disorganised
- First assessable at 11 months
 - Consolidate over early childhood
 - Are both prototypic *and* remain open to revision






All forms are the result of consistent *adaptation* by the baby to the caregiver they have..

- *This is the world I will prepare you for...*
- Security the sigh of relief..... is deeply and essentially relational...

11



Security is **not** not an inoculation against the life's challenges.

It is a moderator in the pathway, because...

12



13

November 6, 2025

Infant Attachment
Assessment for
Practitioners

The Bouverie Centre,
Brunswick

Prof Jennifer McIntosh



14



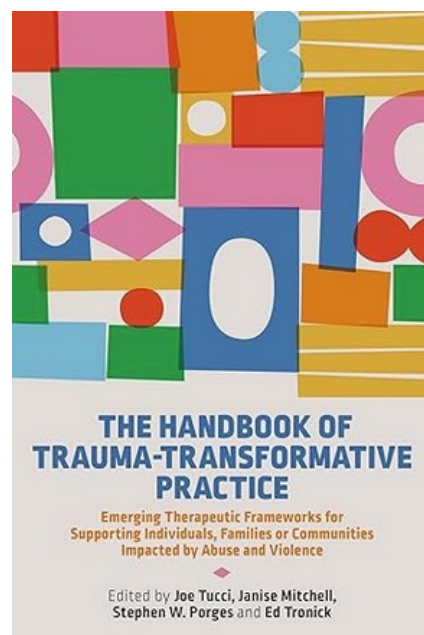
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Early Infant Disorganized Attachment

Amongst a cluster of key predictors of

- Chronic failure of co-regulatory processes: Results in developmental variations
- Behavioural, neurological and social-emotional problems in childhood
- Poor relational functioning
- Greater prevalence and severity of personality disorders in adulthood

*Early Predictors of Infant Disorganized Attachment as Levers for Risk Reduction by Frontline Workforces.
Chapter 12. McIntosh, Opie and Booth 2024.*



16

Review Manuscript

Mothers' Experience of Intimate Partner Violence and Subsequent Offspring Attachment Security Ages 1–5 Years: A Meta-Analysis



Jennifer E. McIntosh^{1,2}, Evelyn S. Tan¹, Alytia A. Levendosky³, and Amy Holtzworth-Munroe⁴

Abstract
Attachment status in early childhood is a key yet modifiable contributor to the development of social-emotional competence. The security and organization of the infant-mother attachment bond is particularly susceptible to stressors in the caregiving environment. While the impacts of normative interparental conflict on infant attachment are increasingly understood, the potentially unique place of intimate partner violence (IPV) in this pathway has been under-researched. This study surveyed all empirical work in this area, including unpublished literature ($k = 6$, $N = 3,394$), to examine meta-analytic associations between maternal experiences of IPV and offspring attachment security (ages 1–5 years) measured at least 6 months post-IPV exposure. Mothers' reports of IPV from pregnancy onward were inversely associated with offspring attachment security, $r = -.23$, $CI [-0.42, -0.04]$, $p = .02$. Sample risk characteristics (e.g., clinical vs. community) moderated this association; child's age at attachment measurement and method of assessing child attachment (e.g., observational, representational, parent report) also moderated at a trend level. Implications for early screening, intervention, and future research are discussed.

Keywords
violence, family, infant, attachment, longitudinal

TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE
2021, Vol. 22(4) 885–899
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DOI: 10.1177/1524838019888560
journals.sagepub.com/home/tva
SAGE

- 3,394 dyads
- Mothers' reports of IPV from pregnancy predicted subsequent offspring attachment insecurity at 1–5 years
- *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse. 2021*




17

The Australian Early Relational Health Network Our latest findings...

In a scoping review of 15,000+ studies, we found consistent evidence of enduring positive influence of infant-parent relationship quality for relational functioning well into adolescence.

- For some relationship forms, this extended into adulthood.

Felicity Painter... Jennifer McIntosh et al 2025.
Mapping the Influence of Infant-Parent Relational Quality on Life Course Relationships: A Scoping Review of Prospective Cohort Studies.
Clinical child and family psychology review



18

Early development is on the family's side....

Secure beginnings tend to stick...

> 1/3 of disorganised beginnings remain from infancy to school age...

> but 2/3 *don't*

We are, by default, **wired for security, and for repair.**

Opie, J., McIntosh, J.,Olsson, C.. (2021).
Early childhood attachment stability and
change: a meta-analysis.
Attachment & human development, 23(6).



19

3. A wish to put
attachment knowledge in
the hands of families, as
tools for healing and of
prevention.




20


MERTIL?

Translating infant mental health science through


Practitioner development & Parent psychoeducation



mertil
MY EARLY RELATIONAL TRAUMA INFORMED LEARNING



mertil
MY EARLY RELATIONAL TRUST INFORMED LEARNING
For Parents

21


21

- Helping early childhood practitioners to come alongside parents in distress, to recognise early relational trauma, and to creating healing conversations.....
- “MERTIL” conversations..... about early relational trust.
- >4000 trained Australia-wide
 - **Evidence:** Clancy, McIntosh, Booth, ... & Newman, L. (2020).
 - An evaluation of the MERTIL workforce training. *Nurse education today*.

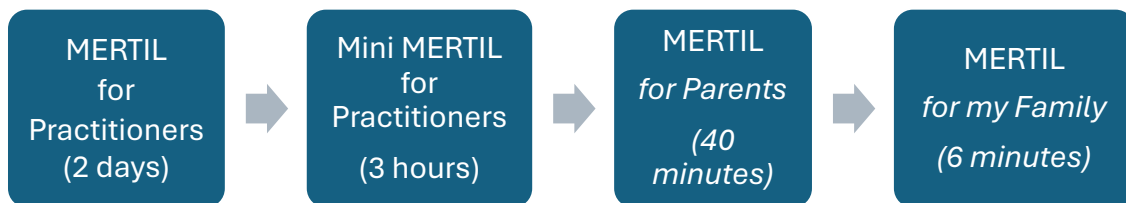


mertil
MY EARLY RELATIONAL TRAUMA INFORMED LEARNING



22

Meet the MERTIL family...



The MERTIL approach:

Preventing and healing Early Relational Trauma is not about doing more. It's about

- centering the baby's "voice"
- helping parents become "trust teachers"
- 'conversational moments' with parents to support that.

23

BUILT OVER MANY YEARS, WITH PARENTS AND CULTURAL ADVISORS

"A short online program that helps every parent to understand why trust matters so much to your young child's development, how to grow it, repair it and keep it."

- 35-min animated video with activities
- Audio-only option
- Downloadable tip sheets
- Video examples of trust in action
- See 'free access code'
- <https://shortcourses.latrobe.edu.au/mertil-for-parents>



MERTIL for Parents

A short online program that helps every parent to build **trust, safety, security, repair** and **joy** with their young child.

Understand why trust matters so much to your young child's development, how to grow it, repair it & keep it.

Suitable for all parents with children 0-5 years old

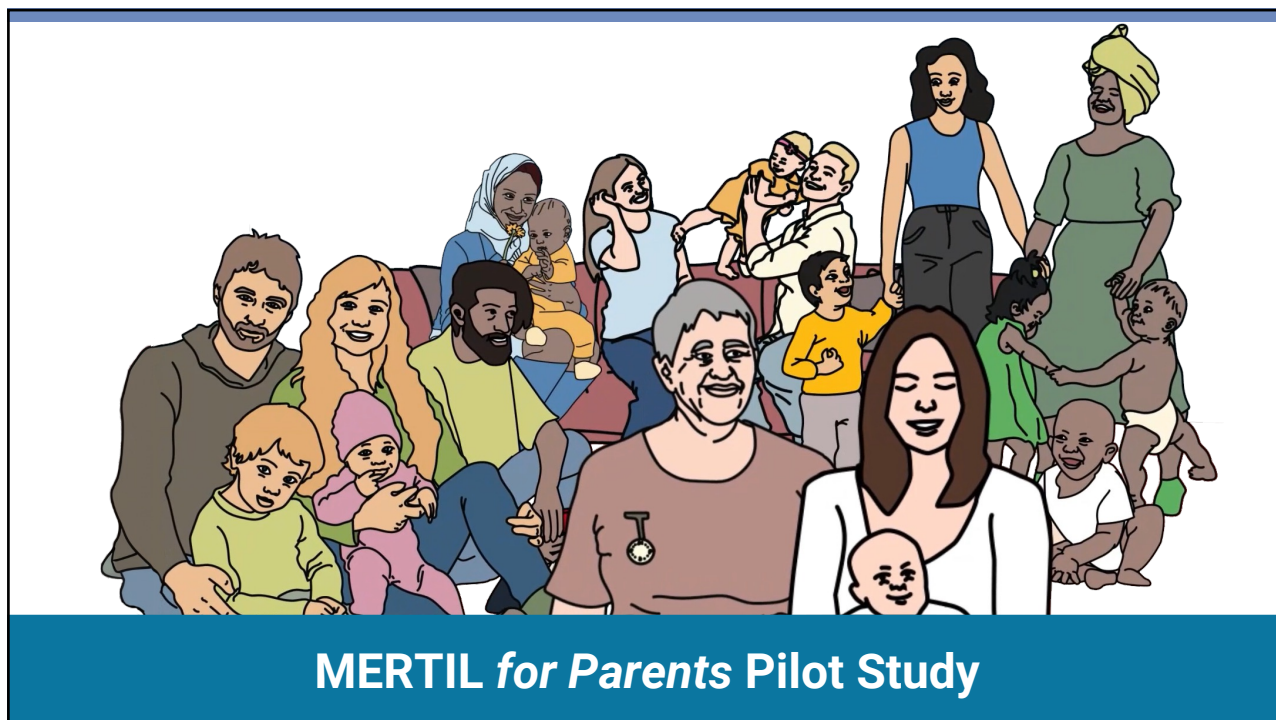
What's in MERTIL for Parents?

- A 35-min animated video with activities
- A short animated message about trust narrated by a young child, to their parents
- Audio-only option available
- Video examples of trust in action with *real parents and children*
- Downloadable tip sheets & posters

To register for free until 30 Sept 2025 click here or go to: www.mertil.com.au/student-registration



24



25

First Pilot study

Conducted in partnership with Tresillian NSW services

Cloud, Opie, McIntosh.

Research questions:

- 1) Is **MERTIL for Parents** useful to parents?
- 2) Are changes in parental beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours sustained at 3-months post?
- 3) Does **MERTIL for Parents** increase confidence in help seeking and reduce parental distress?



26

Conclusions from the pilot study

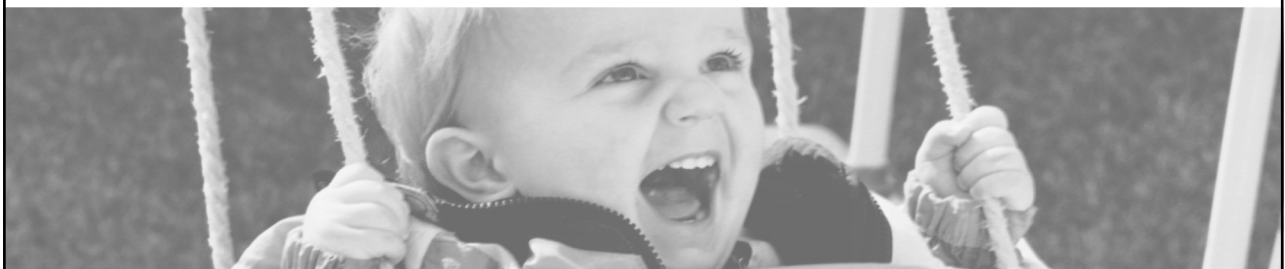
- The program is well received by parents
- 100% parents said they would recommend the program to others
- Demonstrated efficacy via significant improvements in five key areas of parenting and help-seeking amenability, sustained at 3-month follow up.



27

3 months later... Highly significant improvements (<.001- .004)

1. When I am with my child, I get enjoyment and satisfaction
2. Overall, I feel I am a good parent.
3. I can read my child's signals and know what she/he needs or wants
4. I feel confident seeking parenting or mental health support if I/we needed it
5. Recently, my child got on my nerves when he/she cried (decreased)
6. *Nearing significance*: My child does not like me or want to be close to me



28

My thought process....

- Babies need to trust, as much as they need to eat and sleep.
- But.. Trust is not something we usually teach new parents
- Trust is not something most families talk about together
- Infant mental health focuses on dyads – usually mother-baby



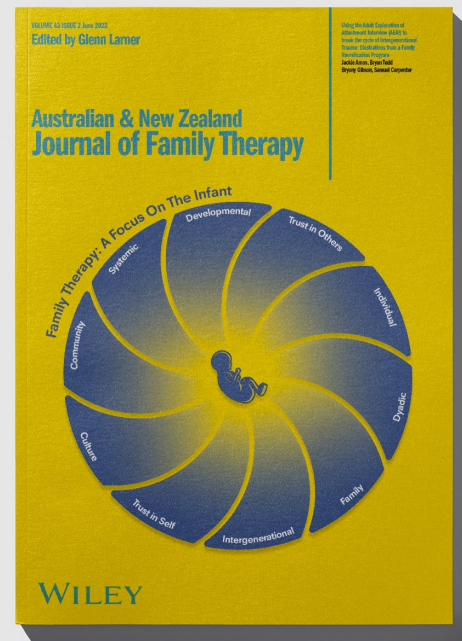
29



29

Toward integration of family therapy and infant mental health

- **Family Therapy: A Focus on the Infant**
December 2023, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*
- **Special Issue Guest Editors:**
 - Prof. Jennifer McIntosh
 - Dr. Jessica Opie



30

1. A dialogue between infant mental health and family therapy (Opie,... McIntosh)

2. What infant observation offers family therapy (Bunston & Jones)

3. Transgenerational attachment trauma (McIntosh, George, & Newman)

4. The missing father (Lim...Fletcher)

5. First Nations approaches to infant-family work (Elliott, Slater... McIntosh)

6. Infant mental health within the training of family therapists (Elliot, Cousins)

7. Thinking three, revisited (McHale & Jenkins)

8. The Lausanne Trilogue Play: (Tissot & Favez)

9. Virtual delivery of whole family assessments & infant interventions (Philipp et al)


10. Adverse early intimate relationships & next generation attachment: (Olsson et al)

11. A charter for the rights of children yet to be conceived (Arabena)

12. Including the infant in family therapy and systemic practice (Opie et al)


VOLUME 44 ISSUE 4 December 2023
Edited by Glenn Lerner
Special Issue: Family Therapy and Infant Mental Health:
Exploring the Potential Space
Guest Editors: Jessica Opie and Jennifer McIntosh


Australian & New Zealand
Journal of Family Therapy



WILEY

31






A First Nations
approach to infant-
inclusive
family work

By the family coming to a therapy setting, rather than just the mother, the baby's nurturing community comes together.

Even when there's trauma, current or transgenerational, the family therapy context says, "the family might have been part of the problem, but they also hold the solution... even with a ledger full of debts".

(Elliott, Slater... McIntosh, ANZJFT, 2023).

From *Barrmarrany Miingi (Family Spirit)* by Miimi & Jiinda
Gumbaynggirr Country



- We frame our questions to the family in a way that shows they are the resource the baby needs. We resist the idea that “doing assessments on this little one” is better than helping the family perform their own reflection about the baby's needs, using their forgotten expertise.

• (Elliott, Slater... McIntosh, ANZJFT, 2023).

33



- How could we gather the care-giving village, to talk about trust?

34

Could we leverage MERTIL language and resources to help a family to think together about the foundations of trust for their baby – born or unborn- and for each other



35

MERTIL for
my family...

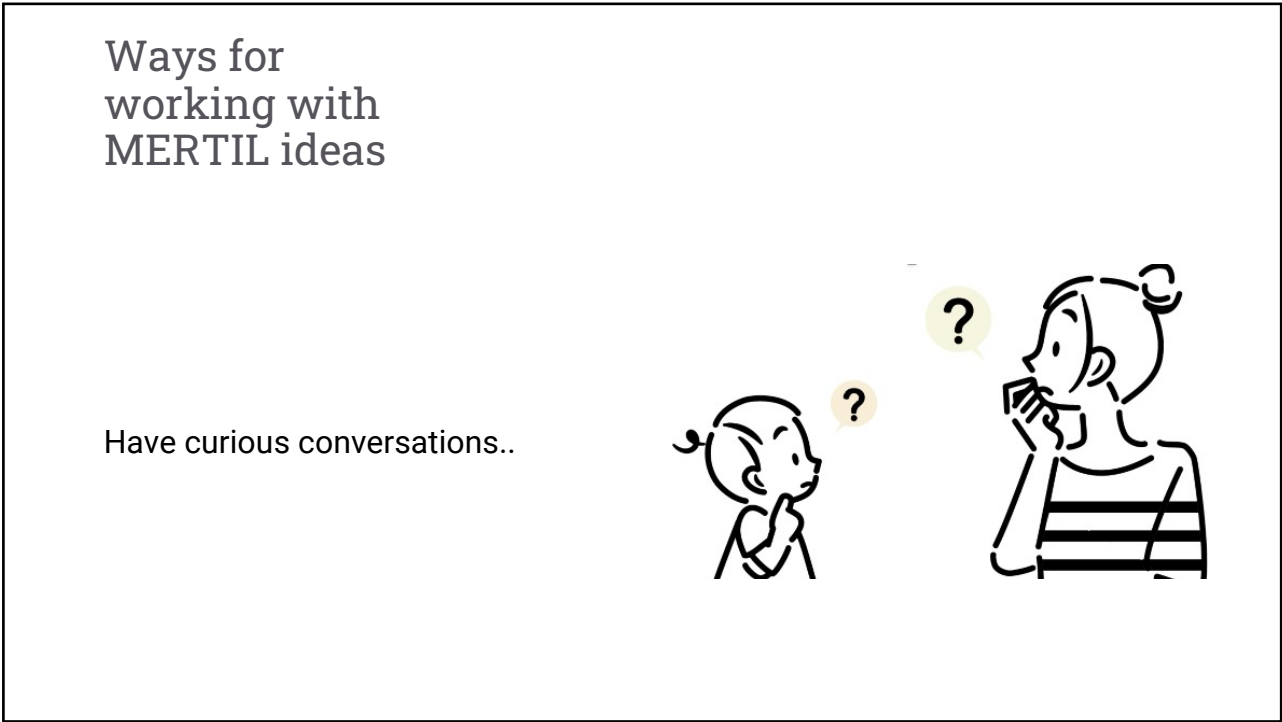
<https://vimeo.com/1055783340/d0ee631c54>



36



37



38

Utilising Family Systems thinking

We see “problems” as

- Shared
- Mirrors of old attempted solutions
- Invitations to update the family’s thinking and
- Opportunity to find new, generative patterns.
- Masking forgotten capacity



39

Bouverie's approach

- Single session thinking: “as if” this is the only conversation we will have
- Trust the family knows what it needs
- Be collaborative and transparent
- Assume complexity
- Expect and respect the presence of trauma
- A non-blaming *and* “No Bull” approach
- Define steps toward achieving their aim and steps toward future proofing it



40

Who might attend a MERTIL... *for Families* conversation

The primary carers decides, with our guidance

- Anyone connected to caregiving of the baby, who can be supported to safely contribute to the baby's foundations of trust
- Candidates: Parents, other carers, older siblings, grandparents, aunties, uncles, supporters.



41

41

Who might attend a MERTIL... *for Families* conversation

- Checking the choice: This conversation is most helpful when it includes the close people who they need to trust, who play a regular role in looking after the baby.
 - If your baby could talk, who would they say those people are?
 - If your baby could gather their caregiving team together, who would be in it?
 - What would it be like for these caregivers to talk together?



42

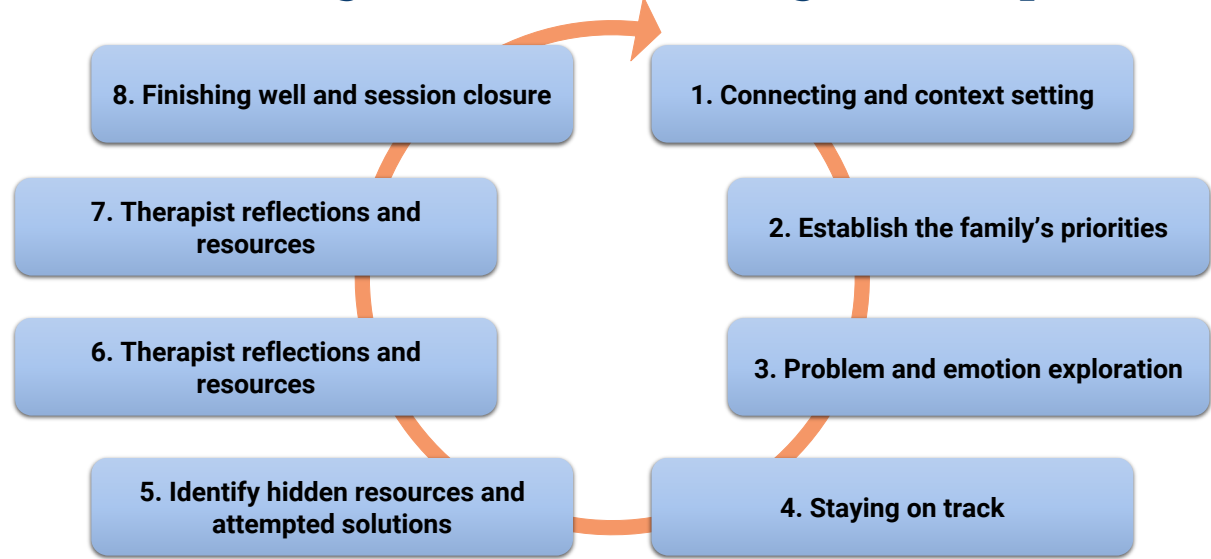
42

MERTIL... *for Families*
conversational structure



43

Bouverie’s Single Session Thinking Roadmap




44



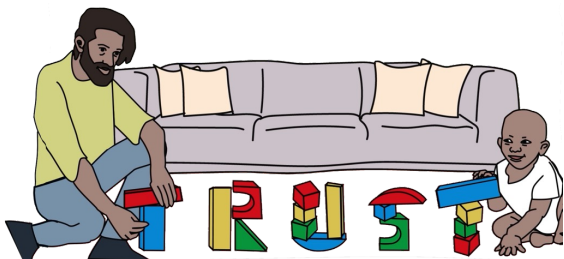
Hoyt, Young, Ryecroft 2023

44



MERTIL for Families application.

Before the session, adults have watched MERTIL for Parents



45

SST → MERTIL *for Families* roadmap

1. **Connecting and context setting:**
 - 'MERTIL' and the baby welcome the family and thank them for taking this time.
 - A conversation to be remembered
 - Establish the baby's priorities and the family's comfort
2. **Trust exploration**
 - Trust = safety, security, repair and joy.
 - As we work our way through these 4 pillars, what feels most important to you as a family?
 - Unpacking the 4 pillars with conversation prompts



46

MERTIL *for Families* roadmap

3. Staying on track

- The art and continual process of keeping the conversation focused, in order to help the baby & family achieve what they need to, today
- Writing down messages to the baby as they go



47



47

MERTIL *for Families* roadmap

4. Identify hidden resources and attempted solutions

- Now, and intergenerationally

5. Therapist reflections

- Therapist offers their views, and a synthesis.
- Suggests beginnings of a letter to the baby with the family...



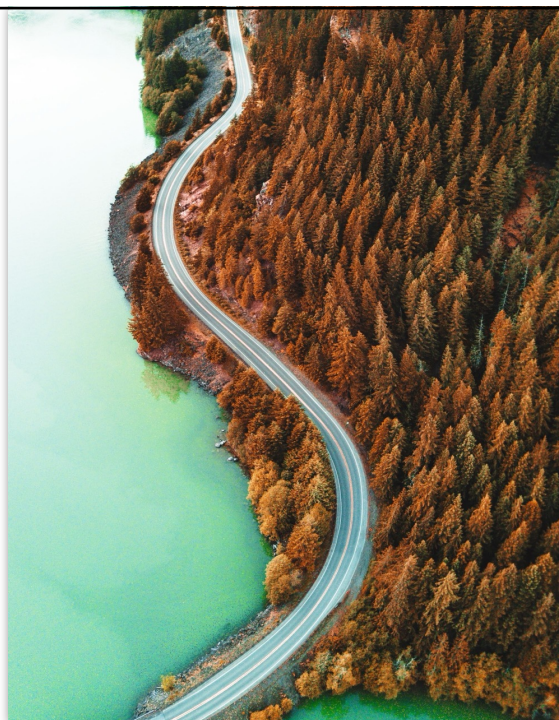
48

MERTIL *for Families* roadmap

6. Hear all members responses and contributions to the letter

7. Finishing well and session closure

- Thank the baby for inviting us to talk about trust together
- The therapist compiles the messages/letter
- Additional resources and referrals given



49

Prelude. A welcome from your baby

Thank you for coming together today, as my caregivers.

I come into this family as the new generation... needing to learn from you each about trust.... curious what lessons your elders taught you about trust.

I don't need perfect. We will all make mistakes. I just need you to be good at repair. I know you have your own stories about trust.

We can write our own story of trust.



50



50

The four pillars of trust



*Safety, security,
repair and joy.*



Conversation
prompts.



It's useful to start
backwards....

51

4. Please, find joy with me

I need a **pattern of joy**, everyday. That means:

- You enjoy being with me
- You and I smile about things together
- I feel lighter and happier because of those times



52

4. Please, find joy with me

I need a **pattern of joy**, everyday. That means:

- You enjoy being with me
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Some prompts to help a family talk together about joy:

1. What sort of everyday joy do you and your baby have? 'How do they show their joy?
2. Would your baby say that a little joy is part of most days in this family?
3. Growing up, what did you learn about joy in your family?
4. These days, what might get in the way of having some joyful times together?
5. What do you want your baby to remember about joy in their family?
6. What's a next step toward creating good memories about joy in their life?

3. Please repair mistakes with me

I need a **pattern of repair**, everyday.

When you make a mistake that hurts my feelings or confuses me:

- Notice how I feel, and show me that you understand, and are sorry.
- Don't try to be perfect. Good enough is what I need



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Some prompts to help a family talk together about repair:

1. What kinds of emotional “mistakes” might your baby be talking about?
2. How do you repair things with them, when you’ve made that kind of mistake?
3. How does your baby show that your repairs have worked for them?
4. Growing up, what did you learn about mistakes between people, and about repair?
5. How would you want your baby to answer that question, when they are an adult?
6. Is there a simple promise you might make today to your baby about that?



55

2. Please help me feel secure

I need a **pattern of security**, everyday. That means:

- Notice and try to understand how I am feeling
- Believe that my behaviour always has a meaning
- Sooth me when I become upset, until I feel ok again



56

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- Notice and try to understand how I am feeling
- Believe that my behaviour always has a meaning
- Sooth me when I become upset, until I feel ok again



Some prompts to help a family talk together about security:

1. How does your baby show they feel secure with you?
2. What do you each usually do to soothe them? Are there differences in what you do?
3. Growing up, what did you learn about security in your own family?
4. How would you want your baby to answer that same question, when they are older?
5. Is there a simple promise you want to make to your baby about that?
6. How might you help each other with that?



57

1. Please keep me safe

I need a **pattern of safety**, everyday. That means, keeping me safe from:

- being hurt
- feeling frightened too much or too often.
- hearing or seeing scary behaviour, especially in my home.



58

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- being hurt
- feeling frightened too much or too often.
- hearing or seeing scary behaviour, especially in my home.



Some prompts to help a family talk together about security:

Of all the pillars, some families find this one harder to talk about, because it can trigger difficult feelings. So let's take it slowly.

1. How does this idea about safety seem to you?
2. How does your baby show they are feeling safe with you?
3. How confident do you feel these days, about keeping your baby safe from these things?
4. Growing up, what did you learn about safety in your family?
5. If we asked your baby that question in 20 years time, what would you hope they'd say?
6. Is there a simple promise you want to make to your baby about that?
7. What would it take to make that real?



59

A letter to our baby (template)



Dear Bub,

We are writing a letter to you for the future, as the people who love and care for you now you are a baby/XX years old. We've talked together about what you most need from us now you are little: **safety, security, repair and joy**. We want you to grow up trusting us to give you these things. We want you to feel confident about being cared for, so when you grow up, you will become someone who trusts and cares for many other people.

When you are older, we hope you look back and remember feeling looked after by us. We hope you can say, *"They kept me safe. I felt secure. They knew how to repair things with me when that was needed. And we had times of real joy together."*

With our love and care, XX YY



60

**Sure...
fine for the
worried well,
but what
about a case
like this...**



61

A letter to Ben

Dear Ben,

You are three years old. We are writing a letter to you for the future.

We are the people who love and care for you. Honestly, we screwed up a bit as parents when you were little. We don't live together and we haven't agreed on many things. We are sorry about the tough days. We are working it out.

Wherever we live, we agree on this promise to you: We will both keep you safe, help you feel secure, and fix things when we make mistakes. You are loved by us both. When you are older, we hope you remember the good days and feeling looked after by us. You are amazing and we love you mate, always.

Mummy and Dad.

62



62

Sure...
but what
about a case
like this...



63

Imagine.....

You enquire gently who cares what happens for Jane these days?

She nominates her maternal uncle and aunt, who gave her an “on and off” home during adolescence, and remain supportive in her life now.

They agree to watch *MERTIL for Parents* with Jane.

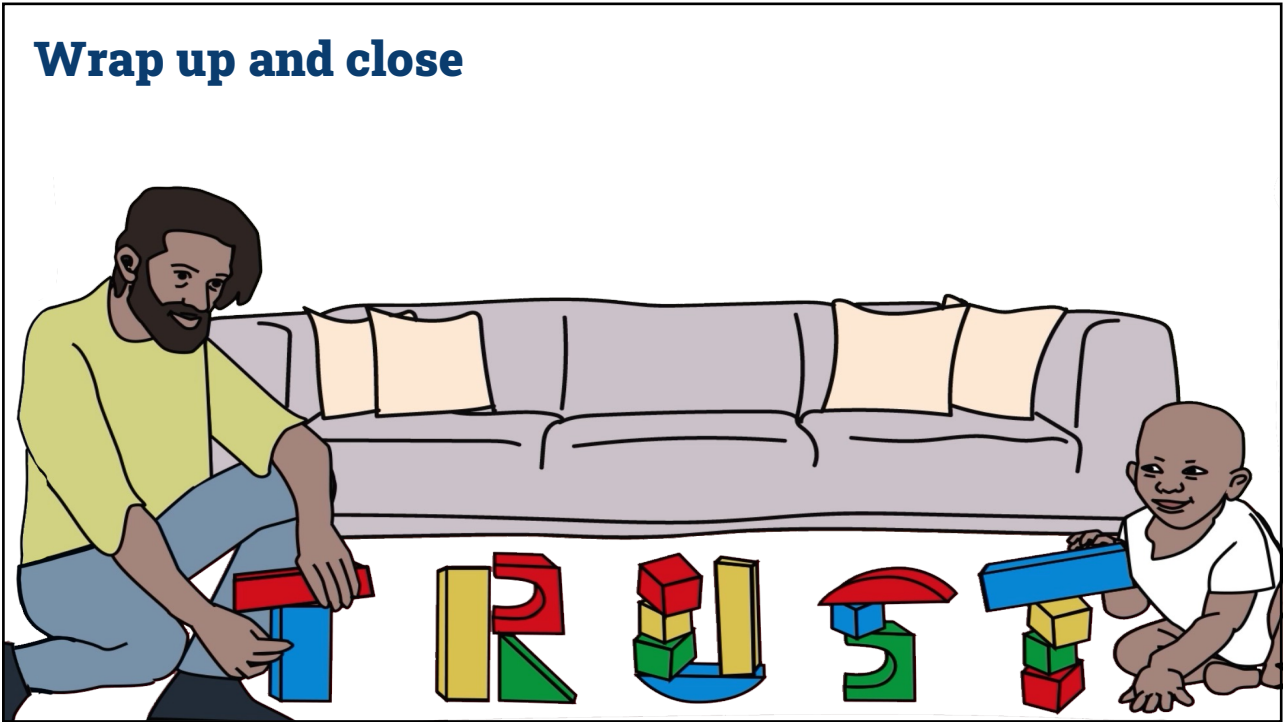
You then help them have a MERTIL conversation.



64



65



66

Thank you

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