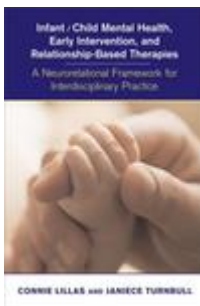


What's in a Name?

A review of



Infant/Child Mental Health, Early Intervention, and Relationship-Based Therapies: A Neurorelational Framework for Interdisciplinary Practice

by Connie Lillas and Janiece Turnbull

New York, NY: Norton, 2009. 570 pp. ISBN 978-0-393-70425-9. \$52.00



Reviewed by

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The title of any book should reflect the content and goals of the book. This book's appellation, *Infant/Child Mental Health, Early Intervention, and Relationship-Based Therapies: A Neurorelational Framework for Interdisciplinary Practice*, is an accurate reflection of the content of the book; at the same time, it does not begin to convey the gold mine of information that this book contains. The importance of early intervention for at-risk and atypically developing children has long been recognized and is legislatively supported by federal mandates in 1986 and 1997. Connie Lillas and Janiece Turnbull's primary goal for this book is to convey the conceptual model they have developed for assessing and intervening with this population and their families.

The book meets that goal and more. In presenting their model, the authors nicely summarize two-plus decades of research regarding the developmental neurobiology of the brain/mind. They also summarize concurrent developments in the area of early, and

accurate, identification of children with complex developmental disorders, particularly autistic spectrum disorders. Finally, the authors illuminate the multiple complexities inherent in assessing, intervening, and integrating service planning for these children and their families.

Using the early intervention service system as a jumping-off point, the authors assert that current multidiscipline-based approaches, rather than providing coordinated comprehensive care, instead often yield services that are fragmented and incomplete. They further assert that the service net often fails to comprehend and address the “big-picture” needs, thereby too frequently resulting in suboptimal outcomes.

To address these issues, the authors present a conceptual framework wherein brain development, as reflected in external behavior, serves as the unifying concept. They detail a neurologically based, multilevel, cross-disciplinary, functional approach to diagnosis and intervention. Within this neurorelational framework, the authors define four behaviorally indexed global brain systems, each representing a distributed brain system and a collection of brain functions: regulation (arousal, stress responses, and adaptive energy regulation), sensory (sensory registration, processing and modulation, vision, language), relevance (emotion, learning, memory, private and shared meanings), and executive (behavior activation and inhibition, thoughts, and the balance of thoughts and emotions). For each proposed system, they devote chapters to describing the brain components of the system, the functions and behaviors of the system, how to assess the functional level of the system, and a system-specific intervention strategy.

To illustrate, the authors define the *regulation system* as the foundation system influencing all other developmental systems and domains. Arousal processes emanating from the hypothalamus, autonomic substrates, and the neuron–chemical pathways originating in the brain stem and basal forebrain (p. 49) are defined as the cardinal feature of the regulation system. Arousal is defined along a continuum from sleep to a flooded, overaroused state such as that seen in many young children with atypical development. Behavioral indices of arousal are defined as cycling and frequency patterns, gradual state changes, sudden state changes, and modulation.

Case examples of altered learning and development based on arousal dysregulation are presented, and the approach to interventions based on the type and severity of dysregulation are described. There are parallel chapters and presentations for the sensory, relevance, and executive systems. The authors indicate that each system is in a dynamic, interdependent, and reciprocal relationship with every other brain system, the body, and the world (p. 32).

It is this reciprocal relationship with the world that contextualizes the *relational* aspect of the *neurorelational* framework. Recognizing that the developing brain/mind is more than, yet constrained by, the functioning of the central nervous system, the model also recognizes that the child’s developing nervous system/brain is both embedded in and modified by interpersonal relational experiences, particularly those found in the family or primary

caregiving unit. In so doing, the authors go beyond the universally accepted ubiquitous need for family support, extending that support to the recognition that diagnosis and intervention must address the dynamics of the relational unit as these dynamics affect the fit between the child's multilevel neurodevelopmental needs and the parent's understanding and ability to provide developmentally appropriate, supportive, and consistent parenting.

In addition to supporting the elements of the model with extensive background research and theory and with clinical examples of the application of the model, the authors go the next step in providing clinical worksheets as examples for aiding the practitioner wishing to apply the model. The worksheets are well organized and structured to provide both behavioral and procedural hinges so that the practitioner can comfortably approach the dual tasks of assessment and intervention within each system.

A real gift contained in this book is the supplementary CD that provides further background information, concise summaries of the concepts under consideration, and blank, ready-to-print worksheets for immediate use. At a minimum, the worksheets can provide often-needed memory prompts for the most seasoned practitioner; at the same time, the worksheets can serve to focus and support the efforts of those new in the field. If used as the authors intend, the model as enacted through the use of the worksheets can help support a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to early intervention.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the conceptual framework, the information provided in this book is vital background knowledge for anyone working with at-risk or atypically developing young children and their families. Further, the framework serves as a reminder that these children cannot be summarized by a single "diagnosis" and that effective service provision is far more than having biweekly visits from a speech therapist, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, and a developmental therapist. In retrospect, it seems that the federal mandates of 1986 and 1997 for multidisciplinary, family-centered, early intervention services were prescient, sagacious, and exceedingly naïve.