

Konferensrapport  
Konferansrapport

**Nick Midgley**  
London



## Mentalizing theory and practice with children, families, schools and communities

In May 2012 the 2<sup>nd</sup> international conference on mentalization-based interventions with children and families took place in the UK, organised by the Anna Freud Centre, London. The conference was a follow up to a similar event which took place in 2010, and aimed to bring together clinicians and researchers interested in the application of the concept of mentalization to work with young people. Over 200 people attended the conference, which was sold out.

The one-day conference was divided into four sections. The first part of the day offered an introduction to the concept of mentalization, covering theory, research and development. This part of the conference aimed to introduce key concepts for those who were new to the field; but also to provide updates on the latest research for those who were already familiar with the concept. Patrick Luyten and Pasco Fearon, both from University College London, spoke about the history and the meaning of the concept of mentalizing, with a particular focus on the way in which it can be considered a broad term which covers a range of different capacities – the capacity to mentalize about the self, for

example, being somewhat independent from the capacity to mentalize about others. Pasco Fearon set out some of the neural correlates for different elements of the capacity to mentalize, and Mary Target, also from the Anna Freud Centre / UCL, led an interesting discussion with the audience which covered some questions about the relation between the concept of mentalizing and other concepts (such as empathy or theory of mind). The questions from the audience also addressed the significance of the concept when thinking both about child development and child mental health.

Once the morning session was complete, the rest of the conference focused more explicitly on

the applications of mentalizing for work with children and families. Before and after lunch four groups of speakers spoke about different areas in which they have developed mentalization-based interventions. Leezah Hertmann and her colleagues from the Tavistock Centre for Couple Psychotherapy, based in London, spoke about how they had adapted MBT for Families (MBT-F) to work more specifically with parents on their own, especially parents who were in high-conflict and going through the process of divorce or separation. She argued that a major difficulty for many parents in such a situation is their difficulty with mentalizing the experience of their children, and she argued for the importance of finding ways to help parents to achieve this. In a similar fashion, Duncan McLean and Minna Daum, from the Anna Freud Centre, spoke about the value of using mentalizing techniques when working with young children and their parents, when there are serious issues regarding parental personality disorder and the capacity to parent. They set out the ideas behind their innovative Early Years Parenting Unit, and gave some moving examples of the work they do with parents and very young children.

After lunch two Dutch presenters described the way in which they have developed mentalization-based interventions for working with children. In Nicole Muller's case, she spoke specifically about her work with adopted children and their families, and described the importance of supporting the attachment relationship by focusing on the capacity to mentalize. She spoke extremely movingly of the ruptures and breaks in mentalizing which are an inevitable part of the parent- (adoptive) child and therapist-child relationships, and the value of attending to such ruptures as part of the therapeutic work. She was followed by Annelies Verheugt-Pleiter, who spoke of the way in which long-term psychoanalytic work with children and parents can be enhanced by a focus on mentalizing capacity. She spoke in particular about the three-fold focus on attention regulation, affect regulation and explicit mentalizing – and described (using video examples) how the therapist must work at these different levels, especially when dealing with children who have experienced trauma or deprivation.

The final session in the afternoon widened the perspective, to look at ways in which ideas about mentalizing could be used to support children and

young people more broadly, in school and community settings. Poul Lundgaard Bak, from Denmark, spoke about the 'Thoughts in Mind' programme, which is a form of mentalizing psycho-education for children, teachers, parents and those working in children's services. The speaker brought the work alive through enacting some of his techniques on stage – in particular the use of story-telling and visual techniques (such as holding a torch to his forehead – as he sometimes does when talking to children and parents – and showing how it could be turned outwards or inwards as a way of focusing one's attention). He argued that such techniques were a way of introducing children and adults to the idea of a mind which has thoughts and feelings that can be explored, played with and linked to behaviours and actions – and reminded us that such ideas can be very helpful for teachers and child-care professionals too.

The playful quality of the presentation was continued in the final session of the day, in which Peter Fuggle and Dickon Bevington, from the Anna Freud Centre, spoke about their work in supporting those who work with 'hard-to-reach' young people. They gave a very vivid example of how mentalizing can collapse in the professional network around young people, and emphasised the importance of supporting the maintenance of that process, especially through supervision 'on the go' (e.g. by phone, or in a short discussion in a corridor etc.). Their lively presentation made sure that almost everyone attending the conference stayed right to the end, even on a Friday evening.

Throughout the day there was space for audience members to ask questions or to bring in their own areas of interest. A number of people were interested, for example, in the use of mentalizing ideas when working with looked after children, or those who had experienced early trauma and abuse. There was also discussion about the relationship between mentalizing practice and other forms of therapy, such as CBT and psychodynamic work. Overall, there was a sense of excitement and interest in this quickly-evolving field of work.

The conference ended with a drinks reception to celebrate the publication of our book, *Minding the Child: Mentalization-based Interventions with Children, Young People and their Families* (Midgley and Vrouva, 2012). The book itself developed out of the first conference in 2010, and includes chap-

ters from many of the contributors to the original conference. There was a strong wish for the series of conferences to continue, with provisional plans for a third International Conference in 2014.

**Nick Midgley** is Director of the MSc in Developmental Psychology and Clinical Practice at University College of London. He is a child psychotherapist based at the Anna Freud Centre, with a long-standing interest in promoting clinical research in the field of psychoanalytic child psychotherapy and in the development of mentalization-based treatments for children and families. He is currently working as a Senior Research Fellow on the IMPACT Study – the largest study of the effectiveness of psychological treatments for adolescent depression ever carried out in the UK – and is the Principal Investigator of the IMPACT-ME Study, a qualitative companion to the main study, exploring the experience of young people and families living with depression and receiving treatment.

Nick Midgley co-edited the book, *Minding the Child: Mentalization-based interventions with children, young people and families* (Routledge, 2012) and is the author of *Reading Anna Freud* (Routledge/ New Library of Psychoanalysis, 2012).

[nick.midgley@annafreud.org](mailto:nick.midgley@annafreud.org)