

Chapter 2

A Social Worker’s Story: How Can I Help This Young Mother and Her Little Children?



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Introduction

I was a social worker, new to the field. A young mother had been referred to my agency for neglectful care of her children and was assigned to me. When I knocked on the door, Lisa,¹ a very young African-American mother cautiously opened the door. I introduced myself as a case worker from Child Protective Services and asked permission to enter her home to ask her a few questions about the referral. Rolling her eyes with disgust, Lisa reluctantly waved me into the house. I stepped slowly into the small living room and saw her four small children peeking around the corner from the kitchen. According to the referral sheet, they were all under the age of five.

The youngest child, barely a year, held onto her older sister’s hand, curious about who was talking to her mother. She sucked contentedly on a bottle of what looked like grape Kool-Aid. Lisa bent down and protectively scooped up the toddler to her bosom. With carefully measured words and a trace of impatience, she asked me, “*What is it now?*” I moved further into her immaculately clean, sparsely furnished, government-subsidized, townhome. “*May I sit down?*” She motioned me to a plastic molded chair in a corner of the living room. Taking out my green referral sheet, I told her that the agency had received a call reporting that her young children had been left alone last night without supervision. “*Is that true?*” I asked. Breathing deeply and closing her eyes Lisa softly stated, “*I had to leave them alone. I knocked*

¹All names and other personal identifiers included in clinical stories/vignettes in this chapter have been changed to protect privacy and confidentiality.

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on the neighbor's door, but they wasn't home. Please don't take my kids. There was no one I could turn to for help. I had to get a restraining order to protect us from my baby's daddy, Jason. He will hurt them." She softly repeated, *"Please don't take my kids. I love them."*

Lisa told me her story as I listened carefully. She described her past year of living with domestic violence. Last week her twenty-year old boyfriend, Jason, got upset, because he couldn't find his solid gold neck chain. He repeatedly punched her as she held the baby, Tina. The baby slipped out of her arms and landed on the floor. Her infant daughter screamed in terror as she lay flat on the floor. At that moment, Lisa resolved to protect her children from Jason's temper and violence. She called the police and they asked if the baby had been bruised or injured. She replied, *"Not this time, but he left bruises on her in the past."* The police officer stated that without a restraining order, they could not order her child's father to remain off the premises. She had to go to the court to obtain the necessary order but could not take all four children on city buses to get to the courthouse. She continued tearfully, *"There was no one to look after them. I am all on my own."*

Lisa's Story

With substantiated neglect, I opened a noncourt case on 19-year-old Lisa and her four stair-step children, five-year-old Natasha, four-year-old Thomas, three-year-old Carlos, and 14-month-old Tina. After reviewing her thick, fifteen-year case file, I was saddened by the experiences of abuse and neglect Lisa had experienced throughout her childhood. Her mother had abandoned her and her two siblings shortly after Lisa's birth. They were moved about among the few family relations of her mother's already overwhelmed extended family. She recalls resentful remarks by their family caretakers. She and her siblings were viewed as burdens, *"...extra mouths to feed and more nappy-heads to comb, and no help from the government."* During this era in the child welfare system, relatives were not eligible for foster care subsidies.

Lisa continued her report of a childhood of trauma at the hands of relatives. Lisa described physical neglect and abandonment until she was finally removed from her relatives' home at about age six years due to sexual abuse by a male cousin. She lost contact with her birth family after her mother had been jailed and her parental rights terminated. As an older child and then a teenage mom, Lisa had been placed in a series of foster homes but never adopted. She finally aged out of the foster care system and was now in her own home with four young children. She had spent the majority sixteen of her nineteen years on earth, living in relatives or foster homes. She experienced many childhood traumas, including sexual abuse, foster care, incarcerated parent. What I didn't know how to assess as a new social worker, were her positive and protective experiences that led to her resilience (Briggs et al., 2021). Over the next several months, we developed a treatment plan to get her childcare

services and domestic violence counseling. My worry at the conclusion of each home visit was the same, *"With my limited skills, how can I help this young mother?"*

Noticing Lisa's Mood Barometer – What Was the State of the Children's Hair?

During my visits to Lisa's home to check on the status of the children, I noticed two things about her parenting skills. First, I noticed that her home, though sparsely furnished, was always neat as a pin. She took good physical care of the children. They appeared well-fed, with clean clothes, happy, and smiling. The second thing I noticed was that even though the children were neatly dressed, and the house was in pristine order, the children's hair was often sometimes uncombed. Unconsciously, I began to use the state of the children's hair as a symbolic gauge of Lisa's emotional state. When Lisa was having a good day, the home was clean, and her children's hair was neatly combed. When Lisa was in a depressed mood, although the home was clean, the shades were drawn, and the children's hair was matted and uncombed. It was as if she didn't have the emotional energy to take the last step to complete the children's hair combing routine: that is, to put her children's hair in order.

Lisa had survived childhood trauma, abandonment, and multiple placements with strangers in the foster care system. She had no secure-base primary attachment figures to call for help. When we met, she was trying to protect her children. As a domestic violence survivor with few supportive resources, she had called the police to help keep her children from harm. Without an order for protection, the police could not help her. She made the desperate decision to leave the children alone to obtain this critical document to protect her children. Lisa's current turmoil and her story of surviving childhood trauma and domestic violence led me to consciously recognize the state of her children's hair as a metaphor for her emotional state.

Searching for Strengths: A Question for Research

Lisa's strengths propelled me to wonder as a novice social worker, how to separate an individual's strengths from alarming risk factors. This became the basis for the scientific study and my research on the everyday routine of combing children's hair. From the start, I was curious as to how this young mother who had experienced so many childhood harms, whose internal working model of attachment figures was barren and brutal, could have the emotional energy to form attachments with not one but four young, needy infants and toddlers? How could she manage to keep her home clean and in order, despite the memories of loss and disorder because of being moved from home to home? How could she build a protective attachment relationship with each of her children when she had so few memories of being protected and

loved herself? How could she build trust with me, a stranger, a social worker, another one in the nameless parade of social workers in her childhood? I stood there with the power to deem her an “unfit mother.” A stranger with the power to petition the juvenile court to remove her children from her custody and place them into the same foster care system she had spent her childhood in. How could this young mother build trust with people after her experiences of betrayal and violence from the father of her youngest child?

What was the significance of Lisa’s ability to keep her children dressed and in order during their daily routine, except for their hair? As I investigated hundreds of other referrals I received as a child protection worker, a foster care worker, and later as a prevention services worker, the image of Lisa’s daughter’s neatly combed hair stood out in my mental image of Lisa. This young lady had some psychological strengths that translated into protective parenting practices and loving order. It is important to understand, from birth to age three years – the same ages as Lisa’s youngest two children – children with disconnected and stressed parents are at highest risk for child abuse, neglect, removal from the home, and death (Hayes-Grudo & Morris, 2020).

During one of our home calls, Lisa shared her worry about her three-year-old child. She said that it was very hard to understand his words, as if his tongue was too thick in his mouth to form words. She asked the nurse at the free clinic, but the nurse had dismissed her concerns and simply said, “*Don’t worry, he will grow out of it.*”

During my conversations with Lisa and her children in her home, she would off-handedly refer to one of her children as having some “*tough, nappy hair to comb.*” My social work risk alert system went off in my head! These were the same dismissive words her family had used to describe her and her sister’s hair. I understood that the unconscious, unexamined, and negative stereotypes associated with African origin hair and dark or light skin may intensify the messages of acceptance or rejection for some children of color.

What was it about Lisa’s ability to keep her children’s hair in order? As an African-American woman, my memories of getting my hair combed unconsciously provided an answer, but I did not yet have scientific evidence to support my thinking. Lisa’s story awakened memories of a special time alone with my mother, of sitting on the floor between her legs, with my arms easily draped across her legs, and feeling the brush gently pulled through my mass of unruly, curly/kinky hair. My mother who started out her parenting role as a 17-year-old teen mother lovingly established order in my hair. My mother was far away in the northern environs of Michigan, far away from her extended family in the southern state of Alabama, where she and my father had left in the early forties with the great urban migration from the south to the north. My internal working model (Bowlby, 1969) based on loving interactions with my primary attachment figure, my mother, included our daily routine of hair combing time. Sitting in the warm embrace of her legs as she combed my hair, I gulped in my daily dose of warmth and connection, with all the attention focused on me and not my other seven brothers and sisters. Seeing 19-year-old Lisa, who looked like mothers in my community and network of friends and family, I was motivated to find answers. What were her strengths? How could I as a

novice social worker support Lisa's goal of lovingly protecting her children and interrupting the World of Abnormal Rearing (WAR) (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021), cycle of generational child abuse?

I wanted to find a way to understand the significance of hair combing in the context of family trauma and the worry of risk in intergenerational practices of child abuse or neglect. Many children experience the trauma of child abuse and the disruption of growing up in multiple foster homes. Unlike the outcome predicted by the WAR cycle, Lisa worked hard to protect her children from abuse and harm. Her children were thriving. Lisa's deep love for her children was reflected in their everyday routines of making sure they were fed, had clean clothes, and their hair neatly combed; this was a testament to her resilience in the face of a complex trauma history. On the days when she was emotionally exhausted, the children's uncombed hair became a barometer of her mood and the emotional energy needed to handle the memories of childhood trauma, or what pioneering psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg termed "ghosts in the nursery" (Fraiberg et al., 1975). It was in these times that Lisa's children's hair reflected her own childhood experiences of neglect, disorder, and disarray.

Hair Combing Time as a Psychosocial Tool for Assessment and Intervention. I began to understand that hair combing time offers an unrecognized opportunity for sensitive, responsive caregiving that leads to the formation of healthy parent-child attachment relationships. It was Lisa's story that propelled me back to graduate school to find answers to the question about what was cultural, what was abusive, and the power of the parent-child attachment relationship. Lisa's story also led to my curiosity and commitment to understand unconscious parenting practices based on an indelible characteristic of skin color and hair type that led to acceptance or painful rejection of their children

Lisa's demographic profile checked all the boxes of risk: her adolescent age, a history of child abuse, her placement in foster care, her status as a single parent household, and poverty. She had several other risk factors, including the number and developmental status of dependent children, the absence of a support network of extended family or friends, and the latest, domestic violence. Lisa was valiantly fighting a lonely parenting battle to simply keep her children safe.

But at that time as a young social worker with a mission to help children and families, I had no training to recognize Lisa's strengths – only the risk factors (Brooks, 2016; Martin & Martin, 1995; Narayan, Rivera, Bernstein, Harris, & Lieberman, 2018). I had no method to assess the protective factors that could support healthy attachment relationships or the loving memories that her children Carlos, Tina, Natasha, and Thomas would carry into the future. I wondered, "*What were her strengths? How could I sort out cultural practices, vulnerabilities, and risk factors for child abuse?*"

My observations of her pristine housekeeping and the general good care of her children left me wondering, "*How does she fit the traditional profile of a neglectful mother?*" There was no evidence of physical abuse, yet she had referred to spanking her young children. An alarm went off in my head. I wondered if she was simply parroting a widely held, cultural norm of "*spare the rod and spoil the child?*"

Understanding the strengths of cultural practices and the assessment of risk for child abuse and neglect in African-American families had been given little attention by social science researchers (Bass et al., 1982; Hale-Benson, 1982; Hill, 1972). As a new social worker, I had participated in a one-day training, then charged to make daily decisions on the welfare and safety of children in their homes. It was the mid-1970s, and we had few theoretical tools in our social work toolbox beyond Ray Helfer's and Ruth Kempe's work on the *World of Abnormal Rearing* (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021). This research documented that parents who had a history of being abused or neglected as a child were at higher risk for committing child abuse as a parent. This factor alone placed Lisa's children at high risk.

At the time, it was not well understood that the racial group of which Lisa was a member was disproportionately reported for child maltreatment and subsequently placed in the child welfare system (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2021). In a predominantly White urban community where African Americans composed only 11% of the population, her referral added to the pile of disproportionately high numbers of Black families on my caseload of 32 families to investigate. Lisa's 1978 social profile easily reflects the 2021 recognition of the racial adversities that impact families of color, (Shonkoff et al., 2021), and the racial disparities that may have contributed to Lisa entering and aging out of the foster care system.

How to help a young African-American single mother. I had enthusiastically entered the social work profession with the starry-eyed goal to "help people." Though only armed with a bachelor's degree in psychology, and with limited life-experiences of a 23-year-old, I was confident I could help families. Having grown up in a supportive all-Black community, and in a loving and supportive Black, two-parent, Christian family of eight children, and having come of age in the heady era of Civil Rights activism of the 1960s, I was especially committed to helping Black families. The thought of asking a juvenile court judge, at the time all White males, to remove these beautiful young children from this young mother who looked like the family I grew up with motivated me to find answers. To do the job that I loved, I needed more effective tools to help parents, such as Lisa.

Conclusions

In the mid-1970s, as a new social worker, I wanted to help Lisa, a young, struggling mother. As a member of the African-American community, having come of age during the Civil Rights era and the Black Pride movement, my heart was divided into two directions. One side of my heart filled with an urgent passion to help right the wrongs, the neglect, abuse, and trauma that this young Black woman had experienced in the hands of other African Americans. With the rallying cries of Martin Luther King's protests for social justice, I wanted to fight the racial disparities of the child welfare system that had harmed Lisa.

Lisa had survived childhood trauma, abandonment, rape, and repeated placements with strangers in the foster care system. When I met her, she was doing the

number one duty expected of parents, trying to protect the children she fervently loved from harm with few resources or social support. It was her story that propelled me to enroll into graduate school to find scientific answers to the questions and observations of what abusive parenting was, and what was cultural.

The first question that I asked led to this line of research, "How can secure attachment relationships develop while parenting in a social environment of stress?" Other questions relating to this followed. "Were spanking and corporal punishment necessary to rear children in challenging urban environments? What types of support and interventions could help parents find the joy and pleasure in carrying out their duties as parents?" The second set of research questions that came to mind included: "What was the role of culture in the childrearing practices of parents, and their beliefs about children? Were my observations of Lisa's care of her children's hair coupled with my personal memories of getting my hair combed a reflection of culture? Was studying hair combing an acceptable cultural practice for scientific study?"

The observation of Lisa's ability and capacity to maintain the simple everyday routine of combing hair as she struggled with daily stressors planted the seeds of what developed into a program for research. To understand the cultural significance of hair for African Americans, specifically to understand the meaning of Lisa's ability and inability to comb her children's hair, led to a series of research studies. The findings from this research served as the basis for the development of the tools presented in this book.

Lisa's story embodies the answer to "why" hair combing interaction provides an unrecognized opportunity to strengthen parent-child attachment relationships. Her story led to my commitment to understand the sociocultural meaning of hair and the psychological trauma of colorism (Lewis, 2015; Lewis et al., 2013), in families, as well as bias and discrimination within the child welfare system (Lewis & Swift, 2014; Lewis, 2017). Why might unconscious parenting practices, that had origins in the larger sociocultural environment, those "nappy-haired ghosts in the nursery," lead to the acceptance or rejection of children based on their skin color or hair type?

The evidence of the impact of toxic stress on the mental health and well-being of parents and children and the additional unrecognized historical and modern racial stressors facing African-American parents is growing (Ashing et al., 2017; Lewis, 2019). With these culturally valid tools, we hope you will be able to use the hair combing task to identify risk factors and yet find the parent's strengths and rich cultural protective factors (Lewis, 1999; Miller & Goodnow, 1995), to better support families of color with young children.

"The rest of the story." My story as a psychologist and researcher began with a worry about how I could best support a young African-American mother to care for her children appropriately and sensitively, breaking the predictable intergenerational cycle of child abuse and neglect. I wondered how I could build on her cultural strengths and prevent her children from entering the child welfare system. My motive stemmed from the universal wish of many helping professionals, social workers, and counselors, to "help children and families who are struggling." This might be part of your motivation to read this book.

Divided into four parts, the book tells the story of hair combing from a culturally grounded, relationship-based, reflective practice framework. Part I provides an overview of the research and cultural foundations of the hair combing task as a ritual and routine. The research conducted on the hair combing task provides support for understanding the behavioral structure of hair combing time that strengthens parent–child attachment relationships.

Part II focuses on the practitioner’s use of hair combing time as a context for observation, assessment, and intervention. We call attention to the “nappy-haired ghosts in the nursery,” of colorism – the practice of valuing lighter skin colors and straight hair – a legacy of the historical trauma of slavery as it impacts a parent’s perception of the child. Several chapters discuss reflective practice and supervision within a lens of culture, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Included are personal reflections about social work practice with very young children and families, as well as supervisory relationships, where race is at the heart of deeply felt discussions.

Part III presents the experiences of practitioners who implemented community-based interventions using the *Talk, Touch, and Listen While Combing Hair* curriculum. The authors reflect on their experiences as cofacilitators, students, and people of diverse identities and cultural backgrounds while implementing this curriculum.

Part IV introduces psychosocial tools for the practitioner for assessment and intervention using hair combing time. Case studies are presented based on the use of the “Neck-up” projective tool and the semistructured interview of Childhood Experiences of Racial Acceptance and Rejection (CERAR). Both tools may be used to simply begin a conversation with a client or parent group or used by a practitioner to assess a participant’s internal working model of their early relationship experiences in response to their racial features and developing sense of self.

The authors invite you, the reader, to create your own story of incorporating hair combing time as part of your practice or educational setting. Each chapter provides reflective questions to guide you in thinking more personally about issues of racial disparity, equity, and inclusion, and the psychological impact of racial trauma and colorism, during the hair combing experience.

Reflective Questions

1. After reading the story of the young social worker’s eagerness to help and lack of training and experience, what were your first thoughts about the first time you worked with a family of color?
2. Thinking back to your early years working with families from a different cultural background, do you recall your understanding of cultural practices and childcare routines?
3. What were some of your most challenging moments in work with families from a different cultural background?
4. How might knowledge of cultural practices help engage families in social work practice?

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