

RUPTURE & REPAIR

Analyzing the Importance of Reconnection After
Disconnection Between a Parent and a Child

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“He didn’t just wake up and become bad, there was something brewing in him.”
– Mother of victim Maddie Clifton (age 8) on Joshua Phillips (age 14)

What drives a 14-year-old boy from Washington to open fire on his Algebra teacher and hold his classmates hostage? What causes a 14 year-old-boy from Florida to stab his playmate 11 times and hide her in his waterbed or a 13-year-old boy to strangle, smash the head of, and sexually assault another boy? In this article, I will show that rupture negatively impacts the neurological development of children and when rupture is not repaired, it can make it difficult for children to manage stress, deal with conflict, and develop self-esteem. When a child lacks these characteristics it can lead to inappropriate aggression, depression, hypersensitivity, and harmful behavior.¹ This article will explore David Siegel’s rupture and repair concept and it will analyze it through the stories of Barry Dale Loukaitis, Eric Smith, and Joshua Phillip whose childhood abuse led them to commit murders.

Ruptures are breaks in the nurturing connections between a child and a parent. They are inevitable and vary in degree of trauma. There are four types of ruptures: oscillating disconnection, benign rupture, limit-setting rupture, and toxic rupture. In oscillating disconnection and benign rupture, there is a connection between child and parent and it is always changing. There are moments when both child and parent feel understood, aligned, and positive but there are other times when they both struggle with needing the connection as well as solitude. There is a constant battle between the child needing a connection and the parent needing time to themselves. When the parent feels forced to connect they foster a sense of resentment towards the child that can lead to the

¹ “About Early Trauma.” *Building & Enhancing Bonding & Attachment*, <http://beba.org/early-traum>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2015.

child feeling rejected or confused. Limit-setting ruptures are when children are given limits as to appropriate behaviors. Often times this occurs when a child wants something and the parent cannot comply with the request. For example, if the child wants ice cream before dinner, the parent has to set the limitation and make the child understand that they cannot have it before dinner. Setting limitations are healthy for children but if they are not done in a way that allows the child to see why they cannot do what they want to do either because it is not safe, or socially appropriate, it can cause distress in the child. Toxic ruptures are those that involve intense emotional distress and despairing disconnection between parent and child. Toxic ruptures are very harmful to the child's sense of self and can make the child feel rejected and hopelessly alone. Shame is also a characteristic and it causes the child to have stomachaches, chest heaviness, and an impulse to avoid eye contact. Toxic ruptures occur when a parent has leftover or unresolved issues and they project them onto the child.²

Repair is an interactive experience that begins with the parent calming down, reflecting, and reconnecting with the child. Repair is difficult to do when the parent is still upset and it is difficult for a child to initiate repair when they have become disconnected to the previously enraged or frightening parent. While a parent may want to forget about the rupture and move on positively without repair, it causes confusion in the child and causes them to disconnect from their own feelings. Repair is not easy and it may take time to achieve depending on the rupture and the child. It is important to respect the child and to keep trying even if initially the child does not want to reconnect. The child does want to be in a positive and warm relationship but it takes time. In situations

² Siegel, Daniel, and Marietta McCarty. *The Mindful Parenting Collection*, Chapter 8. Penguin Publishing, 2012.

where there has been an oscillating and benign disconnection, it is important to make repairs in a timely and caring manner so that child builds and maintains a sense of resilience and vitality. In limit-setting ruptures the repair comes from letting the child know you understand that they want something but you are not agreeing to the request because it is not safe or it is not appropriate. An explanation as opposed to yelling, no, at them is much more accepting to the child. This allows the child to self regulate. The child understands that he cannot have what he wants but he isn't being punished or feeling scolded. In toxic rupture it does not matter what experience the parent had with their own parent, they are able to repair the damage with their own child. They have to gain perspective and try to initiate a reconnection with the child by explaining that parents also have meltdowns³.

Rupture and repair is not a concept that occurs only in the toddler years of a child's life, rather it begins with a mother and child at conception. Trauma can occur during the pregnancy for many reasons including a mother losing a family member, not wanting the baby, or loss of a twin in the womb. Research shows that if early trauma is not healed it can cause problems with brain development, learning capacity, emotional stability, physical coordination, early language skills, and self-esteem. Repatterning and healing can help repair the rupture that a baby feels when there is trauma. Helping them feel safe and in a supportive environment is key. Babies whose trauma is resolved, sleep better during the night, are more alert, are better self-attached, and can better perceive someone else's state of mind. It is important for a mother to remember that trauma such as unwelcoming feelings at discovery of pregnancy, stress, chemically induced labor,

³ Siegel, Daniel, and Mary Hartzell. *Parenting From the Inside Out*. Chapter 8. Penguin Publishing, 2003.

maternal postpartum, death in the family and pain can adversely affect the development of a child. When a baby is experiencing early trauma they have glossed over, crossed, of divergent eyes, total or partial inability to orient when confronted by new surroundings, too little tone or too much tension in muscles, inability to grasp, arching, desire not to be held, and avoidance of eye contact. When an older child is experiencing trauma, there is hyperactivity, learning disabilities, aggression and rage, among others. In adults, who suffered early trauma there is aggression manifested in acting out, destructive or criminal behavior, excessive timidity, difficulty with empathy, failing to take responsibility for actions, and difficulty in foreseeing consequences in actions. When early trauma is not resolved in the beginning stages, it causes developmental issues that continue onto adulthood. Children who do not go through the repair process after rupture have difficulties being fully functional adults in society.⁴

Barry Loukaitis was born on February 26, 1981. His early life was spent in Iowa and Minnesota before moving to Washington. His parents owned a sandwich and ice cream shop. In Barry's early years he was bullied, beaten, and sexually harassed. He was diagnosed with hyperactivity and clinical depression. Despite these issues, Barry was involved in student counsel, had many friends, and was part of his school's honor roll. In 1995, Barry's parents separated after his mother discovered his father was having an affair. Barry's mother would talk about suicide and would tell Barry he had to kill himself with her on Valentines Day of 1996. After the separation and his mother's depression, Barry would spend most of his time in his room, not talking to anyone, not

⁴ "About Early Trauma." *Building & Enhancing Bonding & Attachment*, <http://beba.org/early-traum>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2015.

eating, or sleeping.⁵ On February 2, 1996, Barry opened gunfire on students and teachers at Frontier Junior High School. Barry suffered from bullying at the school and it is believed he wanted revenge. On the day of the shooting, Barry dressed as a Wild West gunslinger and was armed with 78 rounds of ammunition, 2 pistols, and a rifle. Barry killed his Algebra teacher and two students including the student who bullied him. Barry was eventually subdued by a teacher and was held until police arrived.⁶

On June 1996, the Spokane Court of Appeals decided Barry should be tried as an adult. His trial was moved to another county because the court did not believe that an impartial jury could be found in Grant County. Barry plead innocent by reason of insanity but the jury discarded the insanity plea. Prosecutors argued that Barry had planned the attack and got ideas from the popular song, “Jeremy,” where a troubled teenager commits suicide in front of his teacher and classmate. On September 24, 1997, Barry was found guilty and was convicted of two counts of first-degree murder, one count of second-degree murder, one count of first-degree attempted murder, and 16 counts of aggravated kidnapping. Barry was sentenced to serve two life sentences and an additional 205 years without the possibility of parole. He is currently at the Clallam Bay Corrections Center in Washington States. Barry was denied a request for new trial in 1999, but may be re-sentenced due to a 2012, U.S. Supreme Court decision that allows for the possibility of those convicted of murder under 16 years of age to be paroled in 25 years.⁷

⁵ “Barry Lee Loukaitis.” *Murderpedia*. <http://murderpedia.org/male.L/l/loukaitis-barry.htm>. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016.

⁶ “Barry Unusual Behavior.” *Killers Without A Conscience*. <https://krazykillers.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/barry-unusual-behaviour>. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016

⁷ “Barry Lee Loukaitis.” *Murderpedia*. <http://murderpedia.org/male.L/l/loukaitis-barry.htm>. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016.

Barry Loukaitis suffered a toxic rupture after the separation of his parents. His family unit and support was falling apart and he didn't know how to control his aggression and frustration. There have been no reported instances where his father tried to talk to him about the separation and his mother further aggravated the situation by planning a double suicide with Barry. Instead of Barry's mother talking to him about how this all made him feel, Barry was forced to try to reason with her. He would say, " Mom, don't kill yourself. I don't want you to die. Just write about it. Write it into a play."⁸ For any adult, the loss of the family unit can be traumatic but for a child it can be devastating. As previously discussed, it is the parent's job to initiate repair. Barry's parents should have first reflected on their issues and came to an agreement for a healthy separation. Then, they should have spoken to Barry, letting him know it was not his fault and that everything would be okay. If Barry's mother felt depression and suicidal thoughts she should have sought counseling. Barry showed signs of early trauma before the shooting. He was being anti-social, not eating, not sleeping, and was aggressive. He was angry and sad over the separation of his parents and the school bullying further triggered his rage. These signs need to be recognized early on in any child. At trial, Barry's mom testified that she would talk to Barry about her plan to tie up his father and his lover so that they could watch her kill herself. When asked about how she thought that would affect Barry she replied, " I didn't think about Barry at all."⁹ Barry Loukaitis is an example of early trauma and toxic ruptures that have not been repaired. It is important as parents to gain

⁸ "Barry Lee Loukaitis." *Murderpedia*. <http://murderpedia.org/male.L/l/loukaitis-barry.htm>. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016.

⁹ "Barry Lee Loukaitis." *Murderpedia*. <http://murderpedia.org/male.L/l/loukaitis-barry.htm>. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016.

perspective about how they act in front of their children and to remain vigilant throughout any emotional event so that crucial signs are not missed.

Eric Smith was born in New York on January 22, 1980. Growing up he enjoyed spending time with his grandparents. He would goof around and give them kisses. Despite his close relationship with his grandparents he suffered from bullying due to his low set ears, thick glasses, red hair, and freckles. Eric was diagnosed with intermittent explosive disorder, which causes individuals to act out violently and unpredictably. During pregnancy, Eric's mother took an epilepsy drug, which was known for causing birth defects.¹⁰

On August 2, 1993, Eric was riding his bike in a local park when he saw 4-year-old Derrick Robie as he was going to camp. Eric saw Derrick and called out to him. Eric later said he knew he wanted to take him someplace and hurt him. Eric then asked Derrick if he wanted to take a short cut to the camp and lured him into a wooded area. Eric then began to strangle Derrick with his hands until he thought Derrick was dead. When Derrick began to gasp for air, Eric took a napkin and sandwich bag from Derrick's lunch and stuffed them into Derrick's mouth. When Derrick continued to move, Eric smashed Derrick's head three times with a rock. Eric proceeded to sodomize Derrick's body with a tree limb and checked on the body twice to make sure Derrick was dead. Eric later said to police "I wanted to double, triple check to make sure he was dead, I was worried if he wasn't then he might say something, however, I figured if he was, I won't have to worry about anything." Derrick's body was found hours later.¹¹

¹⁰ "Eric Smith." *Murderpedia*. <http://murderpedia.org/male.S/s/smith-eric-m.htm>. Accessed 6 Aug. 2016.

¹¹ People v. Smith, 635 N.Y.S 2d 824 (1995).

At the trial on July and August of 1994, even after the defense introduced multiple evidence of Eric's physical, developmental, intellectual, and emotional difficulties he was convicted of second-degree murder. The state argued that Eric did not lose control at any point and was able to understand and appreciate the nature of his actions. Eric was sentenced to serve 9 years to life in prison.¹² Eric has since apologized to Derrick's family and has said he would trade places with Derrick if he could. Eric has been denied parole eight times since 2002 and will be up for parole again in 2018. He is currently at Collins Correctional Facility in New York, a medium security prison.¹³

Eric's Smith's crime can be attributed to early trauma in the womb. Eric's mother took strong medication during the pregnancy that is known to cause birth defects. Early signs such as avoidance of eye contact or desire not to be held should have been noticed in the first years after birth. As Eric grew older, there should have been signs of aggression, failure to understand consequences of actions, or rage. If Eric was diagnosed at an early age with intermittent explosive disorder then that means there had been other incidents that the family noticed. They should have dedicated more time to Eric and to his problem. A more active and involved repair process was necessary for Eric to understand consequences of actions, empathy, and better control of rage. Harvard Health reports that there are a couple of options to handle intermittent explosive disorder. While there is limited research on drug treatment, there are various medications that help reduce aggression and prevent rage outburst. There are antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and antipsychotic drugs. In 2009, a study of 100 patients found that those people who took

¹² People v. Smith, 635 N.Y.S 2d 824 (1995).

¹³ "Growing up in Prison – The Eric Smith Story." *Killers Without A Conscience*. <https://krazykillers.wordpress.com/2012/06/16/growing-up-in-prison-the-eric-smith-story/>. Accessed 8 Aug. 2016

the medication had significant reduction in impulsive aggressive behavior. Aside from drugs, there is cognitive behavioral therapy which combines cognitive restricting, coping skills training, and relaxation. The University of Chicago conducted a study and found that those who were in individual or group therapy were significantly less aggressive, angry, and depressed.¹⁴

Joshua Phillips was born March 17, 1984, in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Joshua grew up with his parents and siblings. He had pets and enjoyed being active. He had a C average in school and liked playing with the other kids in the neighborhood.¹⁵ On November 3, 1998, Joshua and Maddie were playing baseball together until Joshua accidentally struck her left eye with the ball. Joshua's father was abusive and did not allow Joshua to play with Maddie because of their age differences. Fearful that his father would find out he was playing with Maddie, Joshua took Maddie to his room. After seeing that she was bleeding and crying loudly, Joshua hit her in the head with a baseball bat to silence her. Maddie began moaning and crying louder so Joshua took a knife, cut her throat, and stabbed her 11 more times. Joshua hid the body in his waterbed. Joshua's father had come home by this time and realizing that Maddie's breathing was loud enough for his father to hear, Joshua pulled her out again and stabbed her in the lungs to stop her from breathing. He then pushed her back into the waterbed. When Maddie's family was searching for Maddie, Joshua joined the search team and cooperated with the police by speaking to them while seated on his bed. Maddie's body was found days later

¹⁴ "Treating Intermittent Explosive Disorder." *Harvard Health Publications*. http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/treating-intermittent-explosive-disorder. Accessed 8 Aug. 2016.

¹⁵ "Joshua Phillips." *Murderpedia*. <http://murderpedia.org/male.P/p/phillips-joshua.htm>. Accessed 9 Aug. 2016.

when Joshua's mother was cleaning his room while he was away at school. She noticed a leak in his waterbed and when she pulled away the tape holding the bed together, she found Maddie's body inside. She contacted police and Joshua was arrested.¹⁶

On July 8, 1999, Joshua was found guilty and convicted of first-degree murder. The trial lasted two days and Joshua's attorneys produced no evidence or witnesses. Joshua's defense was that he was scared of his father punishing him for having played with Maddie and then having her in the house. Joshua's attorney's argued the crime was not premeditated or for vengeance. There were no great explanations for what occurred. Since Joshua was under the age of 16 when he committed the crime, he could not be given the death penalty but he was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Joshua is serving his sentence in Cross City Correctional Institute. In 2007, he attended Blackstone Career Institute, a distance-learning program, and he graduated with a paralegal degree. In 2015, Joshua's attorneys are considering the 2012 Supreme Court ruling as a basis for re-sentencing¹⁷

Joshua's actions can be analyzed through a limit setting rupture. In this case, Joshua's father did not want Joshua to play with Maddie because of the age difference. Joshua was 14 and Maddie was 8 years old. In can only be assumed that Joshua's father reacted with anger towards Joshua when he did play with Maddie. Perhaps, instead of only telling Joshua, no, in a menacing or aggressive manner, he should have sat down with Joshua and explained his reasons for not wanting them to play. He should have told Joshua it was not socially appropriate or that it would be better and more beneficial for

¹⁶ Joshua Phillips v. State of Florida. <http://cases.justia.com/florida/second-district-court-of-appeal/2D99-3734.pdf?ts=1396117211>. Accessed 9 Aug. 2016.

¹⁷ Joshua Phillips." *Murderpedia*. <http://murderpedia.org/male.P/p/phillips-joshua.htm>. Accessed 9 Aug. 2016.

him to play with other children his age. Joshua could have been confused as to why one day he was allowed to play with his friend Maddie and another day he simply was not. He did not accept it because he did not understand why he was not allowed to do this. He defied his father and continued to play with Maddie while his father was away. When Maddie became hurt, Joshua's confused state caused the line of right and wrong to blur in his mind. He was more terrified of getting punished by his father than he could not rationalize that he should have taken Maddie home or asked another adult for help. When a limit setting rupture is not adequately handled, the child becomes confused as to the consequences of breaking those rules and becomes terrified. Joshua was so caught up in his own fear that he could not comprehend that the death of his friend could bring far worse consequences than being punished by his father for playing with her.

As described by David Siegel, ruptures between a parent and child are inevitable in any relationship. There will always be breaks but it is crucial for there to be repairs after the breaks. It is a parent's job to initiate the repair process so that the child is not left confused, fearful, or in shame. Developmental problems can and will likely occur when ruptures are not repaired. While it may be easier for a parent to "get over it," it is necessary for them to have discussions with their children as to rupturing situations. Confused, aggressive, and shameful children will become confused, aggressive and shameful adults. The stories of Barry Loukaitis, Eric Smith, and Joshua Phillips, should be reflected upon so that parents can better understand the consequences of not initiating repairs. Children in fact do not just wake up and become "bad," they are ruptured through many repairable situations.