

Attachment issues and developmental trauma



As an adoptive parent or foster carer, you may find yourself struggling with difficult and puzzling behaviours by your children. We may imagine that if only we love them enough, and give them time and patience, the child will grow to love us and feel secure. But in reality, many normal parenting strategies do not work.

Adopted and fostered children and their parents and carers face unique emotional challenges. Being prepared to tackle these issues can mean the difference between a healthy or a hurtful family life. For many families, this involves the parents learning intentional new 'therapeutic' approaches to parenting.

What is attachment?

Research is increasingly showing that the way a child is treated in the early years of their life can be really important and can influence the way they relate to other people.

Attachment develops when a baby instinctively turns to their caregiver for safety and comfort, and the parent or caregiver protects and cares for the baby. Attachment is the profound and deep connection established between the child and caregiver in the early years of life. It's a basic human need, and secure attachment is the foundation for healthy physical, emotional and social development. Children with secure attachments have the foundation they need to form a sense of themselves as lovable, worthy and capable.

'Attachment issues' is a phrase used to describe a variety of behaviours which may arise after a child has lost his or her 'primary carer', often the mother, and has experienced emotional abandonment

in early years. Even children adopted in the early days or weeks of life can suffer from attachment difficulties due to this early and fundamental loss. This experience can manifest itself in many ways. Children can become overly anxious to please, desperate to do anything to avoid being abandoned again. Some express their chaotic feelings in chaotic behaviour. Others turn in on their own pain and withdraw, unable to relate to others. They may act in some of the following ways:

- Lack of appropriate eye contact
- Poor impulse control
- Indiscriminate affection
- Weak cause and effect thinking
- Superficial charm
- Concrete thinking
- Lack of ability to give and take
- Poorly developed conscience
- Clingy and demanding behaviour
- Developmental delays
- Extreme control issues
- Persistent chatter and questions
- Destructiveness
- Abnormal eating patterns
- Cruelty, severe taunting
- Problems with wetting and soiling
- Ability to split partners
- Poor peer relationships
- 'Crazy' lying
- Unhealthy interest in violence, death

Symptoms from Adoption UK factsheet

A change of strategy?

When a child has suffered neglect, abuse or loss, isolating them through use of 'time out' or the 'naughty step' may simply reinforce their belief that they are shameful and deserved to be neglected and abandoned. Such children are unlikely to have the ability to regulate their behaviour and emotions; they may feel 'flooded' by anger, rage, shame or fear.

Tools that aim to reward, incentive or penalise can just add pressure and increase feelings of shame and failure. Children can demonstrate frequent outbursts of rage and anger, as a reaction to early abuse or neglect. Any attempt to impose control (for example by setting boundaries) can feel very threatening to a child who has learned at an early age that being in control and not being vulnerable is the only way to stay safe in frightening situations.

Therapeutic parenting involves seeking to understand the complex emotions that are driving our children's behaviour, and responding to those emotions in a calm, receptive yet assertive way, rather than just punishing the behaviour. Try to remember that traumatised children are often 'stuck' in the emotional and relational stage of an infant, and need handling accordingly.

What does this mean for parents and carers?

If trauma and attachment issues have affected your child, it can affect the whole family. Sometimes parents can become drawn into negative patterns of behaviour and response. You may feel that it's your fault or that you're not doing a good enough job; you might feel guilty and angry.

The good news is that it is possible to repair the child's pattern of attachment and behavioural response. Firstly, you can learn more to help you understand why your child has difficulties, including the impact of possible abuse and neglect in their early lives. Secondly, you can develop new parenting strategies to help the child learn new and healthier responses. Many children will benefit from therapy to address the cause and effects of early trauma and their attachment issues.

Take care

Looking after a developmentally traumatised child can be enormously draining and exhausting. Behaviour that could be labelled as relentless 'attention-seeking' might be more accurately described as 'attachment-seeking', as the child desperately seeks safety and security in what seems like a dangerous world.

- Keep reminding yourself that your child's behaviours are based in fear (and sometimes in shame), even though they may be expressed as aggression, violence and rejection.
- Remaining calm, regulated, and positive yourself is the key to making any strategy successful.
- Find others to reach out to for support and mutual understanding. There may be local support groups, or there are some great online communities of adoptive parents and foster carers, blogging and sharing their experiences.
- It's essential that you find ways to build in times of respite (breaks from your child), even if it seems impossible. This is important for each parent, for you as a couple if appropriate (date nights), and for you as parents to spend time with siblings. Take a look at Building a Support Network.

This brief article can only serve as an introduction to this topic. You may find these books helpful:

- *Why Can't My Child Behave?* Dr Amber Elliott

A readable, practical and illuminating book on empathic parenting strategies for adoptive and foster families.

- *The Unofficial Guide to Adoptive Parenting.* Sally Donovan

Sally is an adoptive parent, and her book gives realistic advice on how to be 'good enough' in the face of both day-to-day and more bewildering challenges such as responding to meltdowns, overcoming anxieties about changes to established routines and, most importantly, how to be a strong parent who can protect and nurture your adopted child.