

A Checklist: Does My Child Need Residential Treatment? Fostering Families Today: March/April 2013

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Parenting is hard work.

Even the most socially-defined “perfect child” can be a challenge and cause mom, dad, grandma, or grandpa to question their parenting skills.

So why then, should parenting a child who has suffered abuse and trauma seem anything other than nearly impossible?

John Roope, Director of Early Childhood Mental Health Services at Chaddock, often remarks, “No role is harder or more important than raising our children, including the one or two in ten who carry the extra challenge of a label. Never let anyone do that amazing job alone.”

But how do you know when it is time to take the next step? When is it time to consider placing your child in a residential treatment center? Some parents can just sense what to do, others make logical decisions, but for many others it can be an overwhelming decision clouded with guilt and doubt. So for parents who are overwhelmed, we offer a simple checklist to focus on the important issues at hand while addressing some of their concerns.

Question 1: Is your child making progress in outpatient therapy?

If your child is making progress in outpatient therapy...great! Chances are you have found a good therapist who is addressing the concerns of both you and your child. Continue what you are doing while making time for self-care, reflection, and special family time.

For those whose children have stopped making progress in outpatient therapy or...have stopped going to therapy altogether, you might want to consider residential treatment. But before you take that next step, consider finding a therapist who has extensive training in the trauma and attachment field. Perhaps, a new therapist who more fully understands the unique needs of your child could provide the guidance your family is seeking.

Question 2: Has your child become aggressive?

If your child has recently become aggressive take a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on the situation. Find a trusted friend to watch your child so you can devote an hour or two to clearing your mind and focusing your attention on the needs of your child.

Was there a trigger to the aggression? What could've been done differently to prevent the aggression? What steps can be taken to prevent aggression in the future? These are all questions you can ask yourself and those who support your family. The goal should be to assemble a plan that addresses your concerns while offering a feeling of confidence and strength in future situations.

If you are unable to establish a plan that safely supports you, your child, and those around you, it might be time to think about residential care.

In a residential treatment facility you will find caring professionals who have been trained to assist children who struggle with the same issues as your child. Therapists and staff members have received training in multiple models and evidence-based practices and remain focused on the successful progress of your child.

Question 3: Are other children in your home afraid of your child?

Caring parents share the desire to provide a safe and loving home for all of their children. It can be traumatic for other children in the home when that safe environment is disrupted by a child who is struggling with attachment issues. Difficult decisions must sometimes be made out of love and concern for all of the children in the household.

Question 4: Has your child been psychiatrically hospitalized several times?

Nothing can be more overwhelming than admitting your child to a hospital for psychiatric care. It is difficult and frightening. However difficult, quite often it is helpful for both you and your child. One or two hospital stays can provide an opportunity to explore additional options for your child with the goal of meeting their unique needs.

When you find that your child is in need of frequent hospital stays, it could be time to explore residential care. Residential treatment should be a last resort. Regardless of how they act or what they will tell you, children who struggle with attachment and trauma issues want to be with their family. Due to the trauma they have experienced they are unable to properly express how they feel and just how much their family means to them. But, after all options have been tried, it is okay to turn to a residential treatment facility to find other ways of providing the care your child needs.

Sometimes, the greatest act of love can be letting go and letting your child experience the intensive treatment of a residential care facility designed to understand and meet their unique needs. Although parents may not be the "on-call" primary caregiver, they remain engaged in the life of their child while having the opportunity to find rest, strength, and renewal.

Just remember, you are not giving up...you are giving hope.