Attachment Issues in Adoptive and Foster Children

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It can be frustrating when trying to form a connection with a child that has difficulty connecting to others. This is very common in adoptive and foster children who underwent some type of abuse or abandonment. Adopting or fostering a child can be a very exciting experience, especially to adults that may not be able to have children of their own. It gives them a sense of refreshment from dealing with the constant disappointment of not being able to conceive their own child. But, it is often that adoptive parents are never given enough information about the child they are adopting or fostering (Attachment Issues and Reactive, 2016). Knowing the history of an adoptive or foster child can help adults get a better understanding of the child’s cognitive, behavioral, and attachment issues. This will lead to a stronger bond between the parents and the child. It may take time, but eventually the children should come to terms with their adoptive parents.

*Exploring Psychology* (pg. 132) defines attachment as an “emotional tie with another person; shown in young children by their seeking closeness to the caregiver and showing distress on separation.” But, what about the children who seek more space and have issues trying to connect? This can be known as reactive attachment disorder (RAD). Children that suffer from attachment disorders may have difficulty forming a connection with others and/or have a hard time controlling their emotions. These issues can even develop as young as an infant child. A few of the reasons these issues develop include (Attachment Issues and Reactive, 2016):

1. If an infant is hungry or needs to be changed and is not attended to for hours.
2. If a young child or infant is mistreated or abused.
3. If a child or infant is constantly being moved from one household to another, this is most common in foster children.
4. If the child’s parent is not there for them emotionally due to substance abuse, an illness, or depression.

These examples are only a few of the problems that may trigger an attachment disorder in a child. Sometimes, it may be hard to avoid the problems that cause attachment disorders, especially if a child is too young to understand what is happening and why. When it comes to an older child, it comes off as more of an abandonment and trust is lost in others. However, there are ways that can help detect attachment issues in infants and children.

It is never too late to restore trust due to attachment issues that may have taken a toll on a child’s life. Once the problem is detected, steps can be taken to rebuild trust. As an infant, attachment issues are very easy to rebuild; However, the issues need to be noticed first. An infant struggling with insecure attachment will most likely avoid eye contact, reject any effort to be calmed down, is not interested in any physical contact, and prefers to spend a lot of time comforting themselves. These are all issues that are shown in not only children with attachment issues, but also children with ADHD and autism.

With older children, the symptoms are more noticeable and not as easy to rebuild. Each parent and child has to be willing to make a change so that a relationship can be built. Some common signs of an older child struggling with attachment issues will react when being touched affectionately. A child may flinch, laugh nervously, or even say “Ow” when being touched. Physical affection can be taken as a threat instead of something positive (Parenting Children & Teens, n.d). These children will most likely be disobedient, defiant, and argumentative (Attachment Issues and Reactive, 2016). Another sign of a child that is struggling with RAD may have difficulty controlling their anger and displays inappropriate affection towards
strangers. Children struggling with this disorder may also have an underdeveloped conscience. Meaning, they show little to no guilt, regret, and/or remorse. Foster children struggling with a reactive attachment disorder may develop inhibited or disinhibited symptoms as they grow older.

When struggling with inhibited reactive attachment disorder, a child may be extremely withdrawn, emotionally detached, and fights any kind of comforting (Attachment Issues and Reactive, 2016). The child will understand his/her surroundings, but will not react or respond in any way. Aggression may be a way of acting out when anyone tries to get close to a child struggling with this attachment disorder. Symptoms of a disinhibited reactive attachment disorder would be preferring anyone else, strangers included, over his/her parents. This type of disorder will allow the child to seek any type of attention from literally anyone other than their parents. These issues are hard to recover from, but not impossible. With the right people and loads of time, a child can recover from emotional issues and a relationship can grow between a parent and child.

It can be very stressful when adopting or fostering a child dealing with any of these attachment issues. When taking on a child with an attachment disorder, there are steps that can be taken to help the process move more smoothly. First, imagine things realistically. Never expect things to be perfect and nothing will go wrong. Dealing with children who struggle with attachment issues will be a long road and will only inch forward. Every sign of success should be a celebration (Attachment Issues and Reactive, 2016). Secondly, patience is the key to success. Parents working with troubled children need to have patience. If parents do not act in a patient manner, the child will take it as a threat and progress will move backwards instead of forward. The next step to fostering a child with attachment issues is bonding. The child does not need to
be forced into anything, but these children need to feel like they are wanted (Treating Reactive Attachment, 2012). If they feel as if the world is against them, violent behaviors will resurface and the process of regaining trust will move backwards. Find things that the child enjoys and start from there. Study the child, learn his/her behaviors, moods, and likes and dislikes. All of these things will help a bond grow stronger between the parent and the child. Lastly, parents should stay positive when dealing with these types of children. Children can pick up on feelings of anger and distress. Never discourage them, be sensitive to the fact that they are troubled and just need someone to understand them. All of these steps will not only help a troubled child grow, but it will also help the parents. Parents will have a better understanding of children’s feelings and security and trust can be built.

According to the Institute for Attachment and Child Development (Foster Parents Find Missing, March 2015), there were two therapeutic treatment parents, Tom and Jan. They always dreamed of one day having an orphanage to help children find permanent homes. Tom stated (March, 2015), “years before we came onboard with the Institute, I naively pictured the house on a hill where I could teach the kids how to play baseball as the sun set.” Tom and Jan both had the experience and education to temporarily manage taking care of children in need of lifelong parents. But, what they did not realize was the support needed to foster children, especially those with reactive attachment disorders. “Kids with reactive attachment disorder sabotage their own well-being. They are so adept at manipulating their foster parents, parents, therapists, and social services,” states Tom (March, 2015).

As children came in and out of Tom and Jan’s foster home, there was one particular boy who made quite an impact on these two adults. James, a six year-old boy at the time, was settled
into Tom and Jan’s house and immediately started causing trouble. James was provided with therapy, but even those services seemed to cause more harm than good. No serious issues were addressed when James attended therapy. The other children in the home were constantly being attacked by James. He would bang his head against any hard surface around the house and threats were made to Tom and Jan’s pregnant daughter-in-law. He stated that he would stab her in the stomach so that her baby would be harmed. Eventually, Tom and Jan had enough. At seven years old, James was sent to a residential treatment center to get the help he needed. James ended up attacking one of the employees and James was permanently banned from the facility.

James ended up returning back into Tom and Jan’s home, creating the same behaviors he left with. As time went on, Tom and James began to bond. They found things they liked to do together and James showed less aggression in the home. Eventually, it was time for James to be settled into a permanent home, which ended up setting him back into the same state he showed up in. When a child finally becomes comfortable with a family, it is hard to let go. Children moving from foster home to foster home are almost always detached from reality and all people. James was moved in and out of foster homes for three years, until one day James made Tom and Jan’s home his own. Tom and Jan found out that before James was moved back into their home at age eleven, he was restrained about 40 times each month and constantly heavily medicated. Jan stated (March, 2015), “He had neglected all personal hygiene and smelled awful, he looked like a zombie.”

Tom and Jan began to attend therapy sessions with James at the Institute for Attachment and Child Development for nine months. James began to feel safe and his trust returned, not only for Tom and Jan, but for others as well. He no longer needed to be restrained or sedated. He was
able to get control of his emotions and behavior. Tom and Jan stated that they felt so good about the hardwork and success they put in with James, they ended up training at the Institute for Attachment and Child Development and became therapeutic treatment parents themselves (Foster Parents Find Missing, March 2015).

Attachment is a term defined as a bond that develops between a primary caregiver and a child, usually an infant (Parker, 1994). A parent feels affection and love for the child, and the child feels safe and secure. However, there are times when a child does not feel secure and the parent and child have trouble building a strong relationship. This is most common in adoptive and foster children, especially children who have bounced from home to home and/or went through some sort of physical or emotional abuse. Unfortunately, many adoptive parents go through the struggle of dealing with children who come from a devastating background. Not fully understanding the history of an adoptive or foster child could cause severe problems in the future. The developmental issues that need to be taken into consideration when fostering a child include (Developmental Issues, 2000): 1) Understanding the abuse, neglect, and placement that can come with foster care. 2) The challenge it takes to foster a child, not just physically but emotionally too. 3) The child’s sense of time in each foster care experience, and 4) how the child responds to stressful situations. It is best to understand that when a child enters a home that is not his/her’s there will be adjustment issues. Adoptive and foster parents should always learn the signs of attachment disorders to avoid any disruption in a home so healing can take place. With the right parents and time, a bond can be built between a foster child and adoptive parents.
References


