

Attachment: It Takes Two (at least)

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Attachment is a popular word in the worlds of adoption of foster care. The difficult thing is that it is being used in a pathologizing way that is not helping kids, but hurting them.

Of course the children who are adopted after abuse, neglect, war, several foster placements, domestic abuse, addictions by birth parents during pregnancy are going to have more difficulty with attachment than someone who has not had those experiences in utero and out! Did you know that even children born into a great and untraumatized family can have attachment issues? You may have four children by birth and the third may have some difficulty with attachment.

So why all of a sudden does every child who is adopted or in foster care who has any problems at all get labeled as having 'attachment disorder' or reactive attachment disorder?

All humans have to attach.

We are inter-relational beings.

So, why is it that we never look at the attachment styles of the adults when we are seeking a placement for a child?

And why is it that we never do the work to help the parent to attach with the child at placement and at post placement visits, rather than wait years until parents then say ' I never understood this child' ?

Many children are resilient, and can learn to reattach. Old school professionals used to think that if children were detached from their birth families, birth countries etc., they would be more available...like a clean slate... to attach to their 'new' family. We now realize that a sign of good attachment is learning to attach and trusting that attachments can happen again and again. This is why we try to keep the relationships that are not dangerous for a child in the child's life in some way. Once an attachment bond is formed, the child can learn to elicit appropriate attachment behavior from his her caregiver. Most individuals experience some trauma during their childhood. However, children are learning constantly, and as a result they are often quite resilient following these traumatic events.

Sometimes children's reactions occur by learned associations. It is helpful for parents or other caregivers to identify these. Some of their associations lead to tantrums. Abused children, for example, often suffer feelings of anxiety, shame, embarrassment, anger, or pain. These feelings often do not go away, and may be associated with other things. It is important to observe your child for what occurs just prior to and just after the problem behavior occurs. It is also important for the adults to be able to reflect on their own reactions and what things happen prior to and after their buttons are pushed. The consequences that follow a behavior influence whether or not the behavior is likely to be

repeated. It is very important to give a child attention for positive behavior and to ignore negative behavior when possible.

In some adoptive families, the parents are new at this and are not wanting to discipline too much as a child is settling in. It is usually important to help parents (and if a two parent family to help each parent) to identify bottom lines for what is 'allowed' and to start from the beginning to give the child a sense of safety by knowing what the rules are in this new environment. It seems counterintuitive to be setting boundaries for a child as you are trying to attach, and yet it is just this clarity and these boundaries that will be evidence of safety to the child. If a parent waits months and sometimes years to start setting limits, the child will already have had to develop his or her own way to behave in order to feel safe, and some of these behaviors will not be ones that are well liked by the parents.

The consequences that children want to achieve when they are behaving poorly are generally reasonable. It is the child's means of achieving the consequences that are problematic. When you know what motivates your child's negative behavior, you will be more likely to change the behavior by teaching the child the appropriate positive behaviors. This is difficult for parents who did not parent the child from the beginning, but it is not impossible and it must be begun at the beginning of the relationship.