No Directions Included: Does My Adopted Child Need Therapy?
by Jean MacLeod

Parenting is a tough job. Adoption Parenting is a tough job that comes without directions. Baby books, Child-Care books, and Parenting and Discipline Books are all based off the societal, biological "norm". Without any kind of a map, how can you discern which of your child's problematical behaviors are derived from age-related flare-ups and which are evolved from the life-long issues of adoption?

Without some help, you probably can't. Adoptive parents are not prepared by the adoption process or by the model of child-rearing they themselves were raised with, to understand the extra layer of emotions that adopted children live with. Moms and Dads have not been taught to recognize the masked anger, sadness, shame or fear that is a part of some adopted and foster children's psyche, and they have not been trained to help their children deal with the emotions that spring from the pain and loss of their children's early lives. Adoption Parenting is different; children who were adopted domestically and internationally, at birth or as an older adoptee, will process core issues and experience life transitions on a different timetable and with a different twist than their biologically parented peers.

The cause of troubling behavior in a child is a tough call to make when a parent is left in this kind of uncharted Adoption Parenting twilight zone. It is easy when a child is young to rationalize his or her objectionable behaviors as being part of the terrible twos, threes or even fours. It becomes more difficult to accept as the child gets older, and it becomes terribly frustrating for an adoptive parent trying unsuccessfully to use traditional disciplinary methods on a rebellious pre-teen or adolescent. It's important for a parent to realize that a child's behavior is only a symptom. The real underlying problem may be an adoption-related issue; the difficulty is deciding if your child's issues are disturbing enough to himself or to others, to seek professional assistance. Children who harm others, animals or themselves, or act destructively, need immediate help. For other children, who move in and out of intense emotions or behaviors or who try to hide their trauma, it's harder to discern if therapy is required.

Questions adoptive parents can ask themselves to help evaluate the need for a therapist consultation

- Is your child's behavior interfering with a normal enjoyment of his/her life, school and family?
- Is your child's outward compliance or quiet opposition, really a control, anger or fear issue?

- Is he/she passively angry at you for leaving him/her at school or at daycare; are there hidden or underlying abandonment issues?
- Is your child acting out (angry, disruptive) or acting in (depressed, withdrawn)?
- Is your child's anger frequently inappropriate?
- Is your child's supreme "self-control" or manipulative behavior really an underlying need to control you, and everything else in his/her life?
- Do you find yourself parenting "around" your child's issues and hot-buttons?
- Do his/her tantrums (and the timing of when he/she decides to have one) control family life and activities?
- Does your child whine constantly?
- Does your child have anxieties and fears that he/she can't control?
- Do his/her fears change over time, but never really go away?
- Do they rule where he'll/she'll go, what he/she plays or whom he'll/she'll see?
- Does your child have difficulty with his/her identity?
- Are there cross-cultural or trans-racial concerns to factor in?
- Does your child's behavior affect her relationship with you, your spouse or his/her siblings?

Seeking out a therapist

All children may exhibit some of these issues while growing up, but parents usually recognize a red-flag behavior by its intensity and persistence. Worrisome moods and behaviors can fall at either end of the 'healthy' spectrum; everything is a matter of degree, but if your parent instinct has 'concerns', you are wise to listen to it and to seek help.

Attachment therapists recognize that a child's minor or major adoption issues can interfere with a secure, intimate attachment with his or her parents, and can negatively impact the family as a whole. Attachment is about relationships, and a reputable adoption/ attachment therapist will treat not just the child, but include the immediate family. Traditional talk therapy and behavior modification may not be as effective in correcting adoption-based problems as some of the methods used by attachment therapists. Theraplay, Biofeedback and Narrative Therapy are popular techniques, and a competent therapist should empower the parents with the knowledge and skills to reinforce the emotional work at home. When parents are finally at the point of seeking outside help for their child, they are usually stressed, worried and confused. Many parents have had no previous experience with psychotherapy and are not sure what to expect during the process. An initial parent-only consultation with a potential therapist to discuss his or her philosophy and methodology is important to finding the best 'fit' for your family.

Is the therapist knowledgeable and experienced with:

- Attachment Theory and Treatment?
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?
- Sensory Integration Disorder?
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome?
- Institutional (physical or sexual) abuse?
- Transracial adoption issues?
- Does he or she understand that post-institutional or internationally adopted children may also display sensory, neurological, neurobiological or speech and language issues that need to be addressed by a "team" of specialists, concurrently with attachment therapy, for best results?

Domestic adoptions bring their own set of complexities. Is the therapist experienced with the intricacy of open adoption, birthparent search or the data compilation and personal review of a child's pre-adoption history? Many children adopted domestically, particularly from the foster care system, have vivid and often painful memories of living with their birth families.

An informed therapist will understand that your child's present behaviors are in part a consequence of his or her past, and will not blame the child's resulting conduct on your "inadequate" parenting.

Parents should not be afraid to ask what a therapist charges per session and how they accept payment. How long is each session and is there some flexibility built into the session time (can you go overtime five or ten minutes for an appropriate closure)? Is the therapist available for consultation in between sessions by phone or email, and does she or he charge extra for these services? How can the therapist be reached in a crisis? Parents should also ask what therapies will be used in the office and what your role as parent will be. Unlike most traditional therapy, you should expect to be participating fully, and interacting with your child in each session. For an adopted child, attachment and security with you is the primary point, with the ultimate goal of the child internalizing that relational strength and self-regulating their own behavior.

Every therapist works a little differently; styles vary with the different kinds of therapists, the work they do, and the needs of their clients. A child may really benefit from multiple approaches, including the services of other professionals from neuro-psychology, sensory integration, and speech and language. Your therapist may continue to strategize as your child progresses through the stages of healing, building on treatment with variations.

Successful adoption or attachment therapy takes a creative and united team of therapist and parents to support the child while trauma is resolved. The timeframe for treatment is also varied, ranging from a few consciousness-raising sessions to a much lengthier process for more severe problems. As therapy advances a therapist will constantly reassess the client's progress and treatment plan, and therapy can be either shorter or longer than originally anticipated.

Support for parents is an important component of successful adoption or attachment therapy. If a Mom or Dad is too overwhelmed, depressed or emotionally burned out to participate in the child's treatment, then therapy will fail. A therapist should ideally provide the parent with educational resources, a parent support group and if necessary, a referral to a personal therapist and anti-depressive medications. Recognizing that the parent continues the work done in the office at home, seven days a week, is vital on the part of an empathic therapist.

Adoptive parents need to realize that their child's troubled behaviors can be a normal result of what their child experienced before joining their present family. As parents, you look for ways to protect your children and to soften the kind of life-blows that some of our children have received, and that no child deserves. Therapy can be challenging work for any family, and it won't allow you to soften or protect. It will open feelings and conversations over the truthful realities of your children's beginnings and will give you the insight and the capability, the map and the directions, to bring your family very close together.

Resources

Finding a therapist skilled in the specific issues of adoption and attachment can be a challenge. Your home study or placement agency may have the names of highly

regarded local contacts. Adoptive families may also check out the Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children (ATTACh). ATTACh is a national organization that lists member therapists and clinics on their website. ATTACh has instituted a detailed membership registration, which is now required for qualified therapists who wish to be eligible for referral. Other highly informative websites that provide names of parent-recommended adoption and attachment therapists can also be found by doing an online search.

Source

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Jean MacLeod and The Write Magic www.TheWriteMagic.com

Article

Register for our June 26th Matching Event!

Our next Matching Event is Wednesday, June 26th at 1PM PST! This event will feature teenage girls. You can read the biographies of the children who will be featured in the event here, and you may sign up for the event here.

If you have a current home study that approves you to adopt from foster care, sign up for our Child Matching Events! These events are free, and are a great way to connect with caseworkers that have children on their caseload that are looking for their forever families. As the family, you will be presented with a child's biography by their worker, and will be able to ask the worker questions. At the end of the event, you may choose to have your home study submitted for any of the children presented. To learn more about our upcoming Matching Events and sign up, please visit http://www.afamilyforeverychild.org/Adoption/MatchingEvent/General2.php

1234 Main Street, Awesomeville, MA · 555.555.5555