

How to Heal from the Impact of Early Trauma

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In order to understand the meaning of tall, we need to understand the meaning of short. To know if something is hot, we must be familiar with something cold. Likewise, good is relative to bad, wet is relative to dry, and happy is relative to sad. The same is true in order to understand the impact of early childhood trauma and abuse on a child. We need to first understand the impact of positive early childhood experiences in order to understand the impact of negative early childhood experiences. With the comparison of this information, we can have insight into knowing how to parent and connect with a child who experienced early childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect.

This article is designed first to give you the information of what happens when children are raised in environments of love and attunement and then to give you information on how to recreate interactions with an adopted child whose early life experiences were void of these positive experiences and tainted by trauma and abuse. In order to heal the broken, we must first know what it looks like unbroken. Tools for the adoptive parent are given in order to empower you as a parent to overcome, with your child, the effects of toxic caregiving many adopted children experience in orphanages or foster homes.

The Right Brain

The first relationship an infant is designed to experience is the relationship with his mother. This relationship begins in the womb and is designed to continue at a high level of intensity for at least the next three years of the child's life. It is in these first three years that amazing development happens due to his mother's attention, attunement, devotion, and connection with him.

John Bowlby, considered the Father of Attachment Theory, identified this relationship between mother and child as critical to the development of a child's ability to relate to others during his entire lifespan. Bowlby stated that early life experiences create imprints that influence a child's capacity to maintain healthy and secure relationships as an adult. New research from neurological science reinforces this concept and shows that these early life experiences literally influence the development of a child's neurological system and influence the circuit wiring of his brain.

According to Dr. Allan Shore, the "King" of affect regulation, the development of a child's brain occurs primarily in the right brain the first few years of life. The right brain holds the capacity for emotional and nonverbal information processing while the left brain holds the capacity for language and logical processing. Thus, for the infant and toddler, with no or limited language skills, communication happens primarily in the right brain. These experiences occur at the emotional level, not at the cognitive or "thinking" level.

It is interesting to note that as adults, we operate from mainly our left brains. We think logically and we use words to express ourselves—all left brain functions. Yet, our babies and children are working from the opposite side of the brain. If you observe a mother with her infant, she has shifted out of her left brain and into her right brain. How logical is it to say, "Googoogaagaa?" Yet, when seen in the context of the parent-child relationship, it is perfectly acceptable and, in fact, necessary, in order to connect with this a child because the child's right brain needs emotional experiences.

As adults, it takes shifting back into our right brain, getting outside of being the adult, and meeting our child where he is at in order to create a healthy relationship. As adoptive parents, we need to realize that the bond we are trying to build with our children, at whatever age, needs to happen at the emotional level first. If we allow our children to experience what they missed with us in their early years—parenting from our right brains and being emotionally available and attuned—we will be creating an environment for healing and the development of meaningful relationships with our children.

Types of Communication

When a young child communicates with his mother, he experiences her being predictable and manipulatable. For instance, if the baby smiles, his mother smiles back. If the baby cries, his mother attends to him in a soft and soothing tone in order to calm him. The child's communication, while nonverbal, is used to make connection with his mother.

There are three main forms of nonverbal communication prevalent between young children and their caregivers. First, mothers and babies communicate through visual and facial expressions. The child is reading his mother's face and vice versa, the mother is reading her child's face. The baby smiles, the mother smiles. Through this communication, the baby develops a sense of coherence in his feelings. If the baby smiles and the mother frowns and becomes upset, the baby becomes confused and distorted in his understanding of feelings.

Second, the mother and child make connection through physical touch and with gestures. Think of the pleasant sensation you have when you touch a baby's skin. This is an important part of positive communication between parent and child. The skin is the largest organ in the body. It needs physical stimulation that is pleasant and enjoyable. This helps develop the child's sensory system. Children who are not touched or held are at risk of having sensory integration difficulties.

Third, the parent-child connection happens through the auditory senses whereby the mother's tone of voice influences the child's receptivity to his mother's verbal communication. The baby does not have the capacity to understand his mother's words and vocabulary, thus the baby is comprehending verbal communication solely through his mother's emotional tone of voice. It is not what the mother is saying, but how she is saying it. This verbal communication is essentially a function of the right brain, the feeling brain, not the left brain, the cognitive brain.

Through these nonverbal communications, the attachment system is being created by both the child and the mother. In this attachment system, the mother is helping the child regulate his states of stress and fear. The mother who attends to her child's negative states is helping her child shift back into a positive state. This is known as "affect synchrony." Affect synchrony is the regulatory means for developing and maintaining positive emotional states within the relationship of emotional communication. Positive states are amplified and maximized for the child while negative states are minimized and neutralized for the child.

Regulatory Difficulties

As babies and children experience these types of loving and calming interactions, their systems learn how to handle high levels of both positive and negative feelings. Their internal neurological systems become equipped to calm down on their own. Essentially, they begin to develop the ability to self-regulate.

For a child who misses these early positive experiences due to trauma, abuse, or neglect, he lacks the ability to read facial expressions and to feel a sense of internal security. If his cries

for help were either met with negative reactions from his parent, as in the case of abuse, or ignored by his parent, as in the case of neglect, the child quickly shifts from living in a state of love and peace to a state of fear and terror. When children miss having the experience of a loving parent or caregiver who helps them calm down, their systems stay in a state of stress, unable to regulate back down to a calm state. The result is a child who is very sensitive to stress and lacks the regulatory ability to calm down on his own.

In severe cases, children living in these environments reach a state of absolute terror and plummet to a state of survival—life or death. Their nervous systems remain in a constant state of stress and hyper-vigilance, unable to predict what type of reaction they are going to receive with each cry for help. Some children, characteristically those who are neglected, simply stop communicating and shut down from the world.

Healing for these children happens when the adoptive parent can recreate positive experiences in order to give the children the experience of being soothed through the parent-child relationship. The child's nervous system needs to experience the state of calm arousal instead of staying in a state of perpetual hyper-arousal. It takes parenting from a new understanding that says, "Children's behaviors are a cry for regulation – a cry for relationship, not a cry for punishment and consequences."

The child does not know how to say, "Hey, mom! I'm completely stressed out here! I'm scared, in fact, I'm quite terrified because my world has been turned upside down and I need your help in soothing me NOW!" The only communication the child knows at this point in his development is misbehavior. Thus, instead of parents working to extinguish and change the child's negative behaviors, it becomes clear that the child needs to be soothed and comforted by his parent. The child needs connection and needs interactions with his parents that provide safety, love, and security.

It takes going beyond the behaviors in order to create this necessary and essential parent-child bond. As adoptive parents, we have to learn the rhythms and flows of our children and then modify our own to fit into a parent-child matching. The focus of parenting then shifts from the goal of changing behaviors to building relationships. This is the essence of creating healing and safe homes in order to stabilize our children and prepare them for a future of peace, joy, and abundance.

In the past, parenting focused on ways to decrease negative behaviors and negative emotions. However, with this new understanding of brain development, we now see that parenting is about increasing positive emotions and creating positive experiences. Parenting emotionally healthy children is about joy, not fear-based punishments.

Interactive Repair

Interactive repair is the key to helping children heal from the effects of early childhood trauma. Repair to the nervous system and to the child's sense of self, safety, and security comes through interactions with his parent. As the relationship develops between the two, through loving, safe, and kind experiences, the child learns to tolerate negative emotions and eventually develops his ability to self-regulate. The key to this is the emotional availability of the parent and the intimacy offered by the parent, which is the central growth feature for all children.

When the parent is calm, regulated, in a state of peace, and open to connecting emotionally with the child, this influences the child's ability to shift into this state of regulation and calm. Interactive repair is essentially a body to body connection. In terms of these interactions, both the parent and the child are coregulating their central nervous systems and their

autonomic nervous systems. At a physiological level, the body is changing. Cortisol levels are dropping; oxytocin is increasing. Their endocrine systems and their immune systems are being regulated by the nature of their relationship.

Creating a Healing Environment

The number one person to help your adopted child is you. Every interaction you have with your child is a healing moment – a moment for interactive repair – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. This is especially true during the difficult interactions when your child is demonstrating difficult behaviors. That is when he is most “raw” and needing you the most. These are the healing moments we have traditionally missed! Instead of punishing the behavior, step inside your child’s pain, join him in relationship, and give him understanding and the opportunity to experience love and regulation through your relationship with him. Being mindful that his behaviors are requests for connection is essential to this process.

Be proactive in working to create experiences that build connection. Here is a list of playful activities for creating secure attachments:

- Carrying your baby
- Rocking your child
- Feeding your child
- Talking (It’s not so much as what you say as how you say it – tone of voice)
- Playing – letting the child lead the play experience
- Hugging
- Massage and gentle touch
- Cuddling
- Co-bathing (when age appropriate)
- Swimming (skin to skin contact)
- Creating a life book
- Giving your child his story
- Playing “hide-and-seek” (recreating the coming and going experience)
- Tickling
- Wrestling (great for dads!)

Face to face play experiences feed the wiring of the brain. Traditionally, we have underestimated the importance of play experiences in early human development. For many children who have suffered trauma, abuse, and neglect, they do not know how to play. Create these play experiences and you’ll be creating experiences that can truly repair the missing pieces from his past by changing his physiological system, decreasing his stress state, improving his relationship with you, and ultimately, creating the essential missing ingredient in his life: joy!