

Nurture and the Sexually Abused or Aggressive Adoptee

Each time I conduct workshops, the issue of offering hugs, kisses, tickles, cuddles, squeezes and other kinds of touch to the child who experienced sexual abuse comes up. There is much advice offered to parents of the children who experienced this terrible trauma. Much of this information is to “back off” and let the child come to you when he or she is ready. I would like us to re-think this matter. So, I present the following example and points as “food for thought.”

The need for nurture is applicable to all children—even those with histories of sexual abuse. Here is one dad's account of increasing father nurture to his four adopted daughters. These siblings all experienced sexual abuse prior to being adopted by this dad and his wife:

“Parenting daughters who have been sexually abused requires much patience, compassion, creativity and humility. It requires much patience because all four of my daughters had a complete distrust of me. While I’ve never hugged a rock, I have a very good idea of what it must be like from hugging my daughters for the first three years of our adoption. This would be a slow process.

“The compassion comes from realizing that the two men they should have been able to trust—their birthdad and birthuncle, consistently abused them. It is illogical for them to trust me, when the only messages they received from their birthdad is that it is fine to be a drunk who both abuses his children and allows them to be abused. Obviously, changing such a deep, pervasive concept requires time. Understanding their past allowed me to not take the rejection of my daughters personally.

“I knew from the first that appropriate physical touch was essential for my daughters. If they couldn’t learn to accept my touch, they would look for physical touch from someone else. So I decided to make a game of it. Often when I was going up or down the stairs and one of my daughters the other way, I’d call out ‘cuota’”(toll). (Toll booths are extremely common in the country in which we live.) They would have to give me a kiss on the cheek to continue up or down the stairs. Or I’d reverse it and give them a peck on their cheek. I’d also ‘accidentally’, gently plow gently into one of my children in the kitchen, and say jokingly, ‘Honey, did you walk into me?’, and then hug her. With Carley, my oldest, we’d have pushing contests across the hall floor.

“You want to provide nurture—we have seen incredible changes in trust through non-coercive (not forced) holding. At times, their behavior makes it impossible, or at least seem impossible, to nurture them. Both my wife and I deliberately try to nurture through holding and other ways regardless of their actions.

“Humility comes from realizing (both my wife and I) that we needed professional help, because the problems of our children were so serious. It is amazing how professional counseling helped our daughters in being able to appreciate me and accept appropriate physical touch.”

Congratulations to this dad! He painstakingly and creatively worked for three years to revise his daughters’ perceptions of love and affection!, and it is working!

This dad offers us several important points, among which is that children who cannot accept healthy touch from their parents will seek to have their needs for touch satisfied elsewhere. Parents are often encouraged, by social workers and mental health professionals, to provide the

sexually abused child little to no touch. Their belief is that this violates the child once again, or that such activities will trigger traumatic memories. As stated earlier, this school of thought warrants some discussion.

Touch is an essential element of attachment, and thus, of growth and development. Touch is a means of communication—a handshake, a pat on the back, a pinch of the cheek, holding hands—each sends a message. Stress, anxiety and depression reduce with nurturance. Think of any nationally televised disaster like, Hurricane Katrina or the Haitian earthquake.—What did you see people doing? I saw people hugging each other and holding children on their laps. In times of sorrow and stress, humans instinctively reach out—literally—for comfort and to comfort. Touch is a critical component of how we humans relate to each other. Denying children the opportunity to learn how to give and receive “good touch” does them a *serious* disservice.

The aggressive child has learned that the means to fulfill his needs for touch is through hitting, kicking, pushing and shoving. He needs “good touch” to outweigh the seeking of “bad touch.” Adoptive parents adding hugs, back rubs, back scratching, and so on will eventually tip the scale in the direction of less violence in their home.

Lastly, I have often wondered how this type of “hands off” philosophy plays out in a home in which there is a combination of traumatized and typically-developing children. One or more children are receiving hugs and kisses, and another isn't? What message does this send?

Slowly and non-intrusively, parents must take the driver's seat and find the paths that enable their adoptee to accept and reciprocate physical affection. Of course, keep hugging the brothers and sisters as well! How about your husband, wife, partner or your sister or brother who is a single adoptive parent—did you hug them today? Did you call just to let them know you are thinking about them?