

## Implicit Memories: The Roots of Today's Behavioral Challenges – Part One

“On our trip to Florida, we went whale watching.”

“In first grade, I’ll never forget Jean Marie winning the spelling bee.”

These are declarative or explicit memories—events we can recall. We have a conscious ability to retrieve the memory and state the facts and events.

Nondeclarative or implicit memory operates very differently. Implicit memory systems store emotions, sensory experiences (sounds, smells, etc.) and expectations and assumptions about relationships based on prior experiences. Implicit memories form early in life prior to the individual having language. They cannot be recalled but they can be triggered (Briere & Scott, 2006). For example,

*Tara and Danny parent their birth daughter, Mary Ellen, and their son, Chris, whom they adopted (at age 17 months), and who are ages 13 and 9 respectively. Chris is obsessed with food. He hoards food in his room. A trail of wrappers from candy, granola bars and cupcakes can be found in his locker, in his desk, under his mattress, in his backpack and in his closet. He constantly asks, “When will dinner be ready?” “Can I have a snack?” If told, “No, it isn’t time for a snack” or “You just had a snack,” he whines, shouts and cries.*

*While vacuuming, Tara found numerous wrappers and several empty yogurt containers behind the couch. She placed this trash on the kitchen counter. She stewed the entire afternoon. She was angry that Chris kept stealing food. “Why does he do this? We provide plenty of food. He gets plenty of snacks,” she wondered. She was also mad that he wouldn’t put the packaging in the trash can.*

*As soon as Chris entered the house from school, Tara confronted him. “Did you put this garbage behind the couch? Did you steal this food?”*

*Chris said, “No, Mom. Really, I don’t know how those got behind the couch.”*

*Tara responded, “You’re lying.”*

*Chris again said, “No, Mom really, I don’t know where they came from.”*

*The argument carried on for about twenty more minutes. Chris was sent to his room “until your father comes home.”*

*Danny arrived home about an hour later to find Tara still upset. He went to Chris’ room and informed him that there would be “no snacks for a month.” Hearing this statement, Chris swirled totally out of control. He had a complete meltdown. In the midst of this storm, Mary Ellen decided to go to a friend’s house for dinner.*

Chris dysregulates when he is told, “No, you can’t have a snack.” A current situation triggers his implicit memory of having little to eat in the orphanage. Lying in his crib, hungry, his brain absorbed the emotions associated with this experience, and his brain learned to expect that care givers are people who do not meet your needs.

Sleep difficulties and problematic car behaviors are other areas of struggles that often have their origins in the implicit memory. Nighttime can be scary in an orphanage or a dysfunctional birth family. This is a time when abuse is likely to occur. Or, a youngster awakens to find she is alone, which is frightening to a little child. The car can be a reminder of leaving the orphanage. The car can be a trigger for moving from foster home to foster home. The car may be reminiscent of the reunification visits conducted after the child is in foster care. Brandy's story provides additional insight into the workings of implicit memories,

*Brandy is age 5. She was removed from her birth home at 14 months due to severe neglect that actually required a three week hospital stay before she could go to a foster home. Subsequently, she was transported to visit her birthmother every Wednesday. As time went on, Brandy physically fought the foster mom and social worker on Wednesday mornings. She would scream, hit, kick, head butt and bite. The two women had to physically restrain her to get her into her car seat. Even after she was buckled in, she continued screaming all the way to the visitation center. These visits upset her greatly. Because she could not talk, she used her behavior to demonstrate her anxiety about what was now occurring in her life.*

*Nine months passed, and Brandy was returned to her birthmother's care. The foster mother was assigned the task of driving Brandy to the birthmom's home and handing Brandy and her belongings back to the birthmom. Within a few days, the birthmother called the foster mother to come take her for the day. The "day" soon became a pattern—the foster mom had Brandy many days and some weekends. The foster mother provided this child care as she was afraid the birthmother would leave Brandy alone if she didn't take her. In Brandy's implicit memory this translated into, "My good mom keeps giving me back to the mom who doesn't take care of me. Neither of these moms seems to want me. I must be a bad baby. Sometimes I get good food and my diaper gets changed, and sometimes I am dirty and hungry—Moms can't be trusted."*

Ultimately, Brandy was again removed from her birthmother and parental rights were terminated. The foster family adopted Brandy. To this day, the car presents various problems. Brandy won't stay buckled in. She screams and cries in her car seat. She throws objects if she can. She kicks the back of the driver or passenger seats. Brandy's implicit memory system remembers and reacts to her early experiences. Obviously, the entire adoptive family is disrupted by these behaviors.

In conclusion, some behaviors have their origin deep within the brain. So, behavioral change requires more than doling out consequences or earning rewards. We need to pull these pre-verbal memories out of the brain. Then, the behavior associated with the past trauma will wilt away. Part two of this blog, coming on Thursday, will provide the suggestions to accomplish this.