

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

Welcome to Part Two of our discussion about implicit memories. In Part One we learned that an implicit memory forms early in life prior to the individual having language. Implicit memory systems store emotions, sensory experiences (sounds, smells, etc.) and expectations and assumptions about relationships based on prior experiences. They cannot be recalled but they can be triggered (Briere & Scott, 2006). We exemplified implicit memory and its negative behavioral manifestations via the examples of Chris and Brandy.

### Early Sensory Experiences are Implicit Memories

Today we offer thoughts about reaching these deeply rooted memories. Dealing directly with the underlying problem will allow essential new growth. The traumatized child can then more fully branch out and connect to the family in a healthy manner.

*Parental Self-Preparation: The Child's Past.* Resolving implicit memories means dealing with your child's past. This will require reviewing the painful start of your child's life. It must be determined what types of early experiences—abuse, abandonment, lying in an orphanage, being left alone by a neglectful birth parent, and so on—are currently triggered by day-to-day situations. Thus, we must use empathy to uncover implicit memories. We must put ourselves in the child's place and think about how she interpreted her early experiences. Certainly, Moms and Dads may find themselves grieving for their adoptee with a history of trauma, and for themselves because that time together was lost. Parents are encouraged to take the time necessary to prepare themselves.

*Parental Self-Preparation: A Parallel Healing Process.* Parents need to examine the root of their reactions to negative behaviors. Ask, "Why is this behavior 'pushing my buttons?'" Often, the behavior is triggering a past issue. For example, in the case of Tara, Danny and Chris, Tara's father had an affair that ultimately ended her parents' marriage. Her father's lie destroyed Tara's family. When Chris lies, it triggers Tara's anger about her father's unsavory actions. Chris receives this stored anger as well as the anger for the chronic lying he commits in relation to his food issues. Once Tara was helped to see this, she realized that she needed to work at moving beyond her father's affair. In the meantime, she was able to manage her reaction to Chris better because she understood why his behavior so enraged her. Parents and their adopted children often experience a "parallel healing process" similar to Tara and Chris.

*Consider the Impact on the Typical Children.* Adoption often means that the resident children will be exposed to a sibling with very diverse life experiences. Certainly parents want to protect children from social ills—childhood should be a carefree time! Yet, the arrival of a child with a history of trauma will raise many questions and frequently, providing an understanding of the adoptee's past helps the typical kids accept their sibling more fully. Parents are encouraged to consider the topics that may need to be addressed in discussions with the children already in the family at the time the adopted brother or sister arrived.

*Restructure Implicit Memories.* The brain is truly amazing! It can take words—today—, connect this language to implicit memories and resolve the pent up emotions! Continuing with Chris, he would benefit from understanding that he whines and cries when denied food now because his brain remembers the time when he was hungry. Below is what I stated in therapy. Certainly, if you are the parent delivering this message, you will want to change Mom and Dad to "Dad and I", "We", etc.,

*“You might have been hungry in the orphanage because there wasn’t enough food. You might have been hungry because you dropped your bottle. You were too little to pick it up, so you went hungry. This was very scary when you were a baby. Now, when Mom and Dad tell you “no” your brain remembers this and you think you will go hungry now. Mom and Dad never run out of food. Mom and Dad tell you ‘no’ because they want you to eat healthy. Too many snacks make it so that you won’t have room for the good dinners your mom cooks.”*

Eventually, with repetition, Chris’ brain will integrate the new message and his preoccupation with food will decrease. Thus, new growth will flourish. The family climate will move from stormy to calm and serene!

The “story” would be incorporated into Chris’ lifebook—a truthful, chronological accounting of the events that led to the need for the child to be adopted. The “story” is also referred to as a “narrative.” Children who experienced neglect, abuse or abandonment need to “see” and “hear” information.

Many behaviors have their roots deep within the brain. Processing the implicit memories is called for so that the adoptee learns to differentiate past from present care givers. Through this process his thinking normalizes, and he is taught how to express emotions. Children who enter the family via adoption benefit from being told the truth, and in fact, the whole family gains. As the adoptee makes sense of his past, he is able to cultivate deeper attachments to parents, brothers and sisters.

If you are a parent who would like professional assistance with your child’s deeply rooted issues, visit [ATTACH](#) to locate an adoption-competent and trauma-informed mental health professional.

As was stated in Part One of this blog, the Reading and Resources (right) provide additional direction regarding the impact of early trauma on the development and functioning of the brain. There is currently an explosion of information coming forth in this area. Parents and professionals are strongly encouraged to educate themselves to this most critical material. It provides the knowledge to cope with and heal the child with a history of trauma—international or domestic.