

Does Your Child Really Play? Finding Your Traumatized Adoptee's Playful Side! (Part One)

Certainly, how kids play makes for enjoyable family interactions and long-lasting friendships! Play is also a vital component in facilitating development. Play is linked with enhanced,

- Language skills
- Literacy
- Problem-solving skills
- Memory
- Creativity
- Turn taking
- Collaboration
- Following rules
- Empathy
- Self-regulation
- Impulse control
- Motivation
- Muscle development
- Coordination ([Ziger, Singer & Bishop-Josef, 2004.](#))

The above list could go on. Parental observation of the child—young to adolescent—with a history of trauma playing alone, with peers and with siblings is time well spent. Frequently, children who have experienced abuse, neglect, institutionalization, abandonment, etc., lack the ability to play in accord with their chronological age. Below are some common play deficits that adoptive parents describe to us and that we clinicians see at the [Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio](#). This list is not exhaustive,

“My Friends Change Frequently”

The traumatized adoptee changes friends constantly. Peer relationships are short-lived. “Billy” comes to play a few times, and then parents don’t hear about or see anymore of Billy again. Billy is replaced by Sally, George, Mark, Matthew and so on! Friendships keep going around like a revolving door. A new playmate is always entering or exiting.

“I Flit from Toy to Toy”

Children, with difficult beginnings in life, may play with a toy for a few minutes and then move on to the next toy. Sustained interest in one toy or activity is lacking. Pretty soon, every toy available has been looked at and tossed to the floor. Play equals making a mess.

“I Prefer to be a Couch Potato”

Some adopted sons and daughters prefer to sit—chronically! These children can sit among a room full of wonderful toys, arts and crafts supplies, etc. and never make a move to sample any of this great stuff! Or,

Rose was adopted internationally at the age of 5 ½. Now age 11, she still hasn’t mastered playing outdoors. If seated in front of an Xbox or holding a Nintendo DS, she is masterful. Yet,

ask her to go outside on a beautiful summer day and within minutes she'll be at the screen door begging to come inside. With a backyard full of amazing play equipment, in a neighborhood replete with potential playmates, Rose is totally out of her element.

"I play the Same Thing Over and Over and Over..."

Randy is 11. He was adopted domestically at 10 months of age. He was significantly neglected during his early months. He reached all of his developmental milestones later than most kids. Today, his play continues to lag behind his actual age. In fact, Matchbox cars are his only form of entertainment. Each day after school Randy smashes all the cars into each other—repetitively! This destructive play has been going on as long as Randy's parents can remember. The cars are never used to transport people around town, even though he has a lovely carpet imprinted with a Main Street full of shops, a park, a school and two neighborhoods.

"My Play Involves No People"

Play lacking people is particularly common among previously post-institutionalized children. Actually, in this scenario, animals often dominate the play (i.e., stuffed animals, animal figures, etc.) instead of people. Animals are okay for a while as they serve as transitional objects in a similar fashion as does a favorite "blankie." However, children's play, especially from ages two and up should contain "people"—dolls, Fisher Price little people, imaginary friends, etc. [Fantasy play](#) in which kids work out feelings and act out all kinds of themes involving people—pretending to be Mom or Dad, launching astronauts in a spaceship made from empty boxes, teaching dolls in a classroom, hiding from "bad" guys in a fort—should be a predominate type of play.

"My Play is All Electronic"

Brian and Bryce, twins, were adopted internationally at 3 ½. They entered therapy at 13. The parents presented a laundry list of behavioral issues: lying, stealing, peeing everywhere but in the toilet, putting the dishes in the cupboards dirty, profanity, hoarding food until it rotted, throwing homework out the bus window, and being absorbed with PlayStation® about 25 hours per week! Board games, card games, arts and crafts, drawing, painting, playing an instrument—anything that required creativity—were snubbed in lieu of screen time!

The PlayStation was packed up and given to nephews when services were initiated. Mom and Dad replaced the PlayStation with an assortment of activities. For three months, Brian and Bryce sat on the couch looking at the empty table on which the PlayStation used to sit. They were totally perplexed as to what to do!

Finally, about four months into therapy, Mom left a voicemail for the therapist. The sound of laughter came across the phone. Then, Mom said, "You'll never believe it! That is Brian and Bryce having a good time playing Trouble! I can't believe they are actually playing and enjoying themselves! They have included our younger birth daughter (age 11), Marie. This is the first time I remember the three kids doing anything like this together!"

Traumatized adoptees are perfectly content to let screens be their BFFs! Interacting with machines is far less complicated and hurtful than connecting with people!

“I Break My Toys”

Parents lament, “Every toy he has is broken!” “Christmas morning, he’ll receive great new toys. By Christmas evening, they’ll all be broken or taken apart—the pieces will be scattered everywhere!” “She just trashes all her possessions, instead of playing with them.” Certainly, the child with a history of trauma views herself or himself as “broken.” “Shattered” by being abused and abandoned, “destruction” becomes the metaphor for their experiences.

“I Re-Enact My Trauma in My Play”

On a tragic evening, 4-year-old Kelly witnessed the murder, by physical abuse, of her younger sibling at the hands of her birthfather. Once the birthfather and birthmother realized the injuries, they placed both Kelly and her sibling in the car and drove to the hospital. En route, they concocted a story of innocence. Kelly, scared, was unable to speak to the police. However, the event was ingrained in her memory as was her last moment with her sibling, connected to life support. Eventually police arrested the murderer. Kelly was placed in foster care. Subsequently, at age 5 ½, she was adopted. Once in her adoptive home, Kelly relayed the details of the murder verbally and through play. All of her dolls were named after her sibling. She would sit for long periods of time meticulously bandaging their wounds. If she played house, the “Mom” and “Dad” fought violently. The pretend “family” scenarios ended with the police arriving. Kelly’s drawings were morbid—funeral scenes. Certainly, the doll play and the drawings Kelly created were shocking to her brothers and sisters who had lived a life enveloped by safe and loving parents.

All of these social skill and play deficits lead to heartbreak for adoptive Moms and Dads. The joy of attending birthday parties is rare. The fun of inviting kids over for play dates or sleepovers is on indefinite hold. Hosting the “after the game” celebration is left to other families. Even brothers and sisters withdraw from playing with the new arrival, or letting him or her tag along to friends’ houses. Family game night goes by the wayside as the adopted son or daughter is simply no fun!

There are ways to improve this situation. Come back next Thursday for Part Two of this post. I’ll pack it with ideas as to how to enhance the social skills of the son or daughter who joined the family by adoption! In the meantime, do some preparation:

- Think about the types of social delays that cause chronic issues between your adoptee, peers and siblings. Make a list. Prioritize the three greatest problems. Leave me a comment so; I’m sure to include your needs in next Thursday’s post.
- Think about play. That is, do you view play as structured activities? Is playing something your children do only in an organized manner? Is there time for unstructured play? What would unstructured play look like? Do academics dominate your household? Would you be willing to balance homework with play?
- Think about how you played as a child. What did you enjoy? Who did you play with? What was different about the way you played and the way children play today?