

Seeing the Forest Through the Trees: What to Pick?

John and his father arrived for therapy. As we were walking down the hallway, Dad stated firmly, "Stop it!" A few seconds passed, and again Dad said sternly, "Stop it!" A bit confused, I asked what John was doing that was so upsetting. Dad replied, "It's the way he's breathing. I can't stand it! He does it on purpose to annoy me!"

Over time, many adoptive parents have made similar comments. The number of negative behaviors presented by an adoptee with a history of trauma simply overwhelms adoptive mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. After a while, even the way the child breathes, walks, clears his throat and so on, drives adoptive family members crazy!

The day-to-day grind causes everyone to lose sight of the forest through the trees. Viewing behaviors along a continuum is lost. A continuum includes identifying those behaviors that the adoptee needs to change in order to function in the family, at school and in the community and also deciding what can be let go for the time being. Clearing one's throat likely isn't as detrimental to one's well being, or the family's sense of peace and order, as is stealing, swearing at educators or destroying property.

So, maintaining the capacity to rank behavioral problems in some order is essential. Almost no one, let alone a child disorganized by trauma, can change more than a few behaviors at one time. Let's just think about making a New Year's Resolution to understand this. (It is now June, do you remember what your resolution was?) Yet, we typically tend to battle adopted children all day! We remind, warn, threaten and bribe! We see little progress. We become more frustrated and angry! We battle harder. Time-outs get longer. All electronics are removed, instead of just computer privileges, etc., etc.!

If this cycle sounds familiar—stop! Get out a stack of index cards. If you have a spouse, hand him or her some cards as well. On each card, write one behavior your adopted son or daughter needs to change. Then, prioritize the cards. I recommend each partner do this separately. Then, go through the cards until you have *no more than three behaviors* you agree on jointly.

The behaviors ranked as the top three are those that you will be tackling. (Write them down and post them where you can see them frequently throughout the day.) The others you will let go. This is a difficult concept to comprehend. It feels as if the adoptee will be "getting away" with rule violations. He will for a while. *However, if you work at reducing fewer behaviors at one time, you will actually see more overall change.*

Keep in mind,

- Sons and daughters who arrive with a history of trauma often feel, "bad", "dumb" and "unlovable." After all, they believe, "I was too bad for my birth family to keep. How can my adoptive parents and siblings love me?" They use their chronic behavioral challenges to validate this belief. The daily bickering and angry reactions they receive from their brothers, sisters and parents allow them to say, "See I am bad. Everyone is always yelling at me." "I am stupid. I don't do anything right."
- Parental and sibling anger feels safe to the child who has had one failed relationship after another. Really, does anyone like to be "dumped" by a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife? The child with a history of complex trauma has been dumped time and time again. Anger, to this son or daughter, creates distance in familial relationships.

Anger inhibits attachment. Thus, the traumatized child thinks, “If I don’t get to close, it won’t hurt so much when you dump me.” Behaviors—lying, stealing, peeing and pooping (in all the wrong places!), hoarding food, mumbling, throwing homework out the bus window—guarantee an argument and so, the adoptee believes, “My heart is protected from further pain.”

- The traumatized child communicates the feelings for all of his experiences and thoughts via negative behavior. The child that continually loses things feels lost. Who wouldn’t feel lost moving from home to home within the child welfare system, or being taken aboard a plane and landing in a country where nothing is familiar? The child who steals feels stolen. When social workers take a toddler from his or her birth home, the child’s perception is that “I was taken—stolen!” He hopes that adults will demonstrate appropriate ways to express these emotions. Unfortunately, the end result of the behavior is usually an altered emotional climate within the adoptive home. Arguing, frustration and exasperation prevail.

These points demonstrate that less battles equal more progress! When you stop nagging, cajoling and screaming to get things done, fixed, returned, apologized for, etc., your child will heal. When he isn’t in “trouble” so much, he won’t be able to feel so bad about himself. He will learn to communicate more calmly when you model calmer responses or offer him no reaction! And, he will realize that you are a family he can’t push away!

A few tips to help you discern the continuum along which to place behaviors, or to decide “what to pick” are,

- Behaviors that jeopardize the safety of the adoptee, brothers and sisters, and parents are always selected first to extinguish—violence is a good example of a behavior in this category.
- Behaviors that lend to long-term impaired functioning of the adoptee are second – stealing, for example, may lead to incarceration. So, stealing should be a priority.
- After the above two categories are covered, any behavior can be selected keeping in mind that there are some battles you cannot win. You can most likely ask a child to go to his bedroom. You can’t make him sleep. You can make a child do his homework. You cannot make him turn it in. So, in deciding which behaviors to change, have realistic expectations of what you as a parent can and cannot change.

Remember—keep the typical children involved in this process of extinguishing their adopted sibling’s negative behaviors. Communication and education can help brothers and sisters understand that what appears “unfair” is actually going to contribute to healing their sibling. In the long run, everyone will benefit!

Parenting a combination of children with mental health issues and typical development will require parenting each type of child *differently*. Different won’t always be fair. If the child had autism, mental challenges or blindness we would make accommodations. We need to do the same for children with mental health issues. In the long run, parenting differently will lend to the overall healing of the adoptee and the entire family will realize an improved atmosphere. So, actually everybody will win in the long-term picture. Most healthy children do well with this concept as long as they are also helped to see the forest through the trees!

Once you have your behavioral behaviors clear, check out the “Readings and Resources” – today’s are packed with great parenting ideas!