

Affection is Wonderful: Will the Behaviors Ever Stop?

Often parents comment, “Of course, my son is attached! He is so affectionate.” Or, “She is definitely connected to us. She is always giving us hugs.” Such demonstrative displays are wonderful and heartwarming. Yet, cuddles and kisses are one component of a healthy attachment.

Attachment also includes that the child’s physical, cognitive, social and emotional development is proceeding along “normal” parameters as attachment is the context in which all development is set in motion. In comparison to peers, the child is walking, talking, playing, learning, expressing feelings and so on within the same time frames as children of the same age.

Many domestic and international adoptees arrive in the adoptive family with various developmental delays. [Complex trauma](#)—abuse, neglect, abandonment, pre-mature birth and hospitalization, pre-natal drug exposure, institutionalization, multiple moves—all interrupt the process of normal development. Such adoptees display various negative behaviors like stealing, breaking toys and other household items, verbal meanness, aggression, limited interest in school, disrespect and so on. Delayed moral development is one reason for such behaviors. It is also reflective of an insecure style of attachment—children who are attached act like their parents. The securely attached child internalizes the morals and values of the parents. We can all most likely recall a childhood situation in which our peers wanted us to do something that would definitely lead to parental disapproval and consequences. Immediately the following thought popped into our heads, “My mother would kill me if I did that!” Our moral system went into effect, and we were able to make a decision about how to best handle the situation.

[Moral development](#)—a process which involves acquiring and assimilating the rules about what people should do in their interactions with other people—consists of three stages. In *pre-conventional reasoning*, moral thinking is based on rewards and self-interest. Children obey when they want to and when it is in their best interest to obey. What is right is what feels good and what is rewarding. *Conventional reasoning* sees children adopting their parents’ moral standards, seeking to be thought of by their parents as a “good girl or boy.” *Post-conventional reasoning* is the highest stage at which the person recognizes alternative moral courses, explores the options and then decides on a personal moral code (Santrock, 1995). Adoptive parents may find that the child they adopt displays pre-conventional reasoning well into adolescence or beyond. They may not internalize the parent’s moral standards, or at least not quickly.

Moral development requires reasoning skills. As a parent, do you find yourself consequencing your adopted child for the same behavior over and over—month after month or year after year? Do you find that traditional parenting techniques—time-out, removal of privileges, grounding, lecture, reward systems and incentives—aren’t resolving the behavioral difficulties? This is because the child lacks cause-and-effect thinking—the pre-cursor needed to develop morals and values. That is, children move from cause-and-effect thinking to moral development. All of this starts by age 18 months, with these tasks operating in a basic way by age 3 and then solidifying by ages 10 to 12. Young children who display delays in this area of cause-and-effect thinking are at great risk for a compromised moral system.

A main recommendation to improve this situation—to help your child “do the right thing” – is to utilize [Parenting with Love and Logic](#). This parenting method’s foundation is the natural and logical consequence. For example, stealing may be resolved by having the thief pay for the item

stolen. Payment can be money, chores or the next time you are in the store you can be sad for the child as you say, "Well, I'd like to buy you that shirt. However, I'm putting that money toward the CD player you took from your sister." Once home, hand the child who has stolen the CD player the money and have him give it to his sister. He needs to "see" the exchange of money. Then, be done—move on! Don't say, "See, how do you like it?" "How does that feel?" This is anger talking and anger renders the natural and logical consequence ineffective.

Natural and logical consequences allow the child to experience the outcome of his actions and this, over time, contributes to the development of logical functioning thus allowing the child's moral development to move forward.

Parenting with Love and Logic and other books, CDs and tapes in the Love and Logic series by Foster Cline and Jim Fay makes sense, and it is fun parenting once you understand it. Having more fun is the best gift you can give any of your children and yourself!