

[“How Full is Your Bucket?”: Reciprocity and the Traumatized Adoptee](#)

I am truly fortunate in that my clients often suggest the best activities, books, movies, etc. to use in therapy. Today’s post features, [How Full is Your Bucket? For Kids](#) by Tom Rath and Mary Reckmeyer. This story of Felix was a gift to me from a wonderful Mom and Dad who work hard to help their son recover from his early deprivation. It has rapidly become my favorite therapeutic tool! It’s simple story and vivid, delightful illustrations exemplify for kids the concept of reciprocity. Young children and adolescents enjoy this book!

For years, I have tried to help children with histories of abuse, neglect, abandonment and institutionalization gain the ability to understand and implement reciprocity. Reciprocity is really such a simple concept—respond to a positive action with a positive action. Yet the adoptee that joins the family after trauma is far more likely to respond to a positive action with a sense of entitlement, a negative action or no action.

Reciprocity begins early in life—within minutes, days and weeks after being born. The infant communicates by crying. The responsive parent seeks to comfort the newborn. Thus, infants are not passive recipients of care; they are actively involved in directing, if not orchestrating, their social contact with adults (Caulfield, 1995.) Infants’ ability to interact socially is amazing—who can resist a baby? We all love to hold, caress and talk to babies! We are overjoyed when our affection is returned with a smile or a reach to play with our hair or touch our face! Infants and adults engage in mutual reciprocal interactions! Early in life the child (and the adults) learns the benefits of engaging and being engaged with others.

Overall, reciprocal interactions, with a parent or responsive care giver, help a baby learn to be sociable, to see themselves as others see them, to learn how to effectively communicate, how to think and how to cope in their world! (Kaminski, online.) Vice-versa, Moms and Dads gain confidence as parents. They learn how to meet the baby’s needs and how to talk with the child. Reciprocity helps parents spur the child’s social, cognitive and emotional development.

Eye contact and language are important components in reciprocal exchanges. Let’s take peek-a-boo for instance. Initially, a parent covers the child’s eyes and then expresses exaggerated surprise along with “peek-a-boo” when the child re-appears (i.e. is uncovered.) Over time, the child learns to cover and uncover himself. Once uncovered, he revels in the parent’s joy of his return! Parents try to time their actions in such a way that the infant takes turns with the parent. In addition to peek-a-boo—pat-a-cake and “so-big” are other caregiver games that exemplify turn-taking sequences and scaffolding. Scaffolding is an important technique for transferring skills from adults to the child. Children who have more scaffolding experiences with their parents—especially in the form of turn-taking—are more likely to engage in turn taking as they interact with their peers (Santrock, 2008; Vandell & Wilson, 1988.) Thus, as with all human development, one skill lends to the development of other essential life-skills!

In [How Full Is Your Bucket](#), Felix learns, from his grandfather, that he has an invisible bucket—and so does everyone else. Every day experiences with peers, parents, siblings, teachers and so on, can “fill” or “empty” Felix’s bucket and theirs! Filling buckets results in mutually rewarding experiences for Felix and for those toward whom he shows positive actions. Every drop of kindness adds up to a bucket overflowing with good feelings about self and others!

Prior to having this valuable resource, I asked the standard types of questions at the start of each therapy session, “How are you?” “How has it been going since the last time I saw you?”

Now, I ask, “How have you filled Mom and Dad’s bucket since our last session?” I encourage parents—teachers, siblings, Sunday school teachers, neighbors, etc.—to do the same! Kids need to know they affect those around them. They have the choice to give, rather than just take.

I am encouraging parents to take their “buckets” into consideration day-to-day. “I am giving rides to my sons and daughters that filled my bucket today.” “I will buy new clothes this weekend for the kids who gave me at least 4 drops this week.” Statements like these help children think. “What is Mom talking about?” “What can I do to give Dad a drop?” Some kids will figure out the answers on their own. They will scurry to complete chores, or ask Mom if they can help with dinner. Other sons and daughters will likely need some hints.

Of course, as an attachment therapist, I do believe in going back and repeating—with children—the types of early life experiences that contribute to the development of skills like reciprocity. As I have pointed out previously on this blog, the child who arrives at later ages—*anytime after birth*—has already missed tons of eye contact, verbal exchanges, parent-child play and opportunities to move around and explore his or her environment. Thus, there is a gap between this child’s chronological age and his or her social and emotional age. Deprivation and abuse delays the development of all kinds of skills including reciprocity. So, no matter the child’s actual age, go back and repeat the types of games and intimate moments—with deliberance—that should have occurred. Keep in mind, some children will readily go along with this, and others will follow after some effort. However, the effort will be worth it!

Your whole family will benefit when each member knows the value of a drop!