

[“I’m Not Lazy”: The Development of Initiative in Traumatized Adoptees \(Part Two\)](#)

Welcome to Part Two of our blog about initiative. As we learned in Part One, children develop initiative in the pre-school years—ages three to five. Initiative is the third stage in Erik Erikson’s model of human development. It is a time of great activity and a surplus of energy! It is also the time of questions starting with “Why?”—which everyone who has parented a typically-developing pre-schooler likely remembers! During the development of initiative, we see children begin to plan, organize, and set goals. Emotional regulation advances as does moral development. Fantasy play flourishes and play reflects adult themes of life. Children want to study adults immensely—especially their parents—to decide, “What type of adult will I be?”, and “What type of person am I—good or bad?” Children who are encouraged to play and be curious will pass through this stage with flying colors. They will broaden their social world. Children who experience shame, ridicule, punitive consequences or being thought of as silly, will stagnate. They will continue to rely on adults, hesitate to join a group of peers and feel guilty about themselves through later stages of development.

Unfortunately, a child who lacks initiative is often perceived as lazy, uncooperative or irresponsible. “He can clearly see the dishes need to be done, but he just sits there.” “She relies on me to entertain her. She knows what she could do.” “He is so lazy. He won’t do anything to help out.” “He has a whole room full of toys. He won’t play with anything until I tell him.” Hopefully, this blog will help parents and professionals view children labeled in this manner differently.

In preparation for today’s content, *Facilitating Initiative in Traumatized Children, Part One* concluded with a series of questions parents could ask —about themselves and their child—in relation to initiative. If you’re ready, read on! If you need to view the questions now, go to *Part One*.

Facilitating Initiative in Traumatized Children

Play, play and play some more! Play is the “work” of children. Play is as essential to the pre-school age child as food, water and nurture is to any human. Do you remember: marbles, hopscotch, digging in the sandbox, coloring, learning to draw, following your Dad around with a Bubble Mower®, jumping rope, singing nursery rhymes, pretending a cardboard box was a house, wearing your Mom’s shoes and make-up, finger painting, using a stick as a horse, to play cowboys and Indians, molding homemade clay and on and on! Many children adopted—at older ages—from the child welfare system or foreign orphanages have never had these opportunities. Many children—in general—raised from infancy lack the types of play of a generation ago. All of this play had meaning and purpose. We were required to play with others of an array of ages—parents, siblings and kids from the neighborhood. The play itself, in combination with being facilitated by adults and children of mixed ages, contributed significantly to advancing all types of developmental skills—negotiating, compromising, establishing and following rules, joining a group already in action, learning to lead and to follow, and so much more. The kids who stomped home shouting that the play was “not fair” were back the next day to play again; they learned that to stay in the group means managing those emotions. Many of the elements of initiative are present in these interactions. So, if you want your adoptee with a history of trauma to develop initiative, turn off the television, Game Boy and the Xbox! Go outside with your child. Gather the neighborhood kids and play!

Create Opportunities for Your Child to Play with Younger Children

This suggestion relies on your adopted son or daughter being safe among younger children. If safety is ensured, follow this family's example:

Colleen lived in an abusive birth family for five years and then a South American orphanage for the next five years. Adopted by Sue and Howard, at age 10, she exhibited a social and emotional age of a two-year-old.

Sue, Howard and Colleen belong to a church with a large congregation and so there are many Sunday school classes. They made arrangements for Colleen to be a "helper" in the classes with children ranging in age from toddler through pre-school. They simply presented the idea to Colleen in terms of the teachers needing some assistance. Colleen has received the benefit of playing with children who helped her skills—in many areas including initiative—mature, and the Sunday school teachers have appreciated having a reliable assistant. Colleen is proud of her contributions to the church. Over this past year, Colleen has mastered many social tasks and so, has now moved on to be the volunteer helper in classes for five and six year olds.

Do you have an example of your own? Please share it with us by filling out a comment box at the end of this blog. Parents often have the best ideas for other parents!

Reduce Reminders. Children who develop guilt and shame, rather than autonomy, purpose and initiative remain overly-reliant on adults to do their thinking for them. The day starts with waking the child up, and then reminding him about everything from his back pack, breakfast, brushing his teeth, getting dressed, going out to catch the bus, the permission slip for the teacher and so on! Once home, this pattern of reminders starts again! If you are in this cycle, begin to reduce the reminders. Yes, the child may forget his math homework the next day. However, unless the child fails sometimes, he can't succeed! Initiative requires learning to think for oneself. Keep in mind the words of basketball superstar, Michael Jordan, when carrying out this recommendation,

"I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life, and that is why I succeed."

Letting go of managing the child's responsibilities is explained in detail in our posts, "Shhh!: Quiet Parenting Zone Ahead and Getting Started with "Quiet Parenting."

Facilitate Grief. Grief is one of the greatest contributing factors to developmental delays in traumatized children. Grief causes,

- Decreased social, emotional and cognitive developmental growth
- Regression to earlier stages of development for an extended period of time
- Inability to concentrate—impaired academic progress
- Physical difficulties—fatigue, stomach aches, appetite changes, headaches, tightness in chest, shortness of breath, low energy, difficulty sleeping, etc.
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Withdrawal from friends or extra curricular activities.

Initiative will be more readily achieved if the child is helped to process the grief resultant from his trauma. The life book, children's books, professional assistance and simply having conversations with the child about his birth family, orphanage residence and abuse, will help the child express his feelings of anger and sadness for his pre-adoptive experiences. Once the grief flows, so will cognitive, social, emotional and physical gains.

Evaluate Your Parenting Style. Traumatized adoptees move into the family and as time passes parents frequently find themselves angrier than they thought possible. [This phenomenon is called inducement](#). Conflict becomes the norm! Consequences are doled out in great quantities! Punitive and angry interactions thwart attachment, autonomy and initiative—the three major foundational developmental tasks essential to healthy interactions throughout life. If you see yourself described here, you need to make changes. Seek professional help if need be. The [ATTACH](#) organization offers a listing of adoption and trauma competent therapists.

Adjust Your Expectations. Trauma interrupts development. The adoptee with a history of abuse, neglect and institutionalization is “younger” than his or her chronological age. This is described in more detail in several previous posts, Affection is Wonderful!: Will the Behaviors Ever Stop?, Having Fun in Adoptive Families: Not an Oxymoron, “Act Your Age: The Vineland Adaptive Behavioral Scales and I'd Like to Trust You, But Can I? Parents need to educate themselves about “normal” child development (see Readings and Resources to the right). Once you realize that your child is “little” well into his teens, then you will be less angry. You will have the patience to invest more time in teaching the child the skills she needs.

The expectations that “love will be enough” and he or she “will grow out of it” also need to be shed. Developing initiative won't just happen on its own! You have to take the initiative and make it happen for your child!

Involve the Typical Kids. If your family is comprised of typical children, let them help advance the development of their traumatized sibling. Frequently, their expectations of a “fun little brother or sister” or “someone to teach things to” are dashed post-placement. They too had expectations that their new brother or sister would “act his age.” When this doesn't happen, parents soon here such statements as, “Do I have to play with him?” “I want to go to my friend's house without him!” “Does he have to be at my birthday party?”

Turn this situation around. Start with a family meeting with an agenda to educate your healthy kids about initiative. Let them generate some ideas as to how they can help their adopted brother or sister develop this most important life skills. In one family I work with, each of the five typical children decided they could devote 15 minutes of their time, one day per week, to help their adopted brother move forward developmentally. They worked on playing board games, molding play doh, imaginary play, creating solutions to problems and so on! After nine months of consistent work, there was much success! Their brother could actually suggest activities, and he could occupy himself for about 20 minutes! Wow! What can your family accomplish? You won't know until you get started!

Balance Parent and Peer Time. Today, we have a tendency to believe that peers are better teachers than parents, and academic learning is the ultimate key to success. Starting at very young ages, children are involved in an array of organized sports and enrolled in educational settings. *In actuality, from birth through the pre-school age years, children's primary reference for development is their parents. They can't develop if they aren't with you!* Provide your children ample opportunities to spend time with you! Balance the time spent with peers and in

academics. Keep in mind the words of national trauma child trauma expert [Bruce Perry](#) and his co-author, Maia Szalavitz,

“Our educational system has focused nearly obsessively on cognitive development and almost completely ignored children’s emotional and physical needs. Only two decades ago elementary schools had both significant lunch periods and recess times. Homework rarely took more than an hour to complete each night and children were thought to be capable of remembering deadlines and meeting them on their own.

“In our rush to be sure that our children have an environment as ‘enriched’ as that of the neighbors’ children, we are actually emotionally impoverishing them. A child’s brain needs love and friendship and the freedom to play and daydream. Knowing this might allow more parents to resist social pressures and begin to push schools back in a more sensible direction” (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006).