



In This Issue ...

Article:

Attachment:

The Tie That Binds by Dr. Rick Delaney

Parent Chat:

Conversations from the FPC Discussions Boards

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Attachment: The Tie That Binds By Rick Delaney, Ph.D.



All foster parents seek positive relationships with their children. Foster parents want their relationships to be warm, honest and open. Their care, concern and daily efforts should make a constructive impact on the child. The parent hopes their child will feel safe enough to connect with them.

Here is how one foster mother describes her life with a daughter who struggles with connection in a parent-child relationship.

"I feel disconnected from my eight-year-old foster daughter, Haley. She came to me at three and was taking care of her two twin brothers who were only 18 months old. And she was abused a lot by her parents. She doesn't seem to know how to relate to me. And, honestly, I'm not sure how to relate to her either. She says what she thinks I want to hear. She never gets angry around me. It's like she totally goes along with everything

I ask of her. She's super-compliant. Haley, you might say, goes along to get along. The upshot is, though, she comes across as phony. She never really shows her true feelings and always wears a saccharine smile on her face. I wish she would disagree with me just once. I think she isn't bonding to me or me to her. It's difficult to love a child you don't know, a child you can't read."

Kids like Haley are slow to warm up to foster, kinship or adoptive parents. They behave in ways that bewilder parents. At first parents think, "Great! Finally! A child who obeys." Eventually, though, these parents realize this child behaves like a whipped puppy. Something is lacking. Bottom line: it is not easy to feel loving and warmly connected to these children because they do not act like most kids. They conform and comply compulsively. Further, they are hard to read since they do not show spontaneous or real emotion thus not allowing parents to really understand their child.

Continued on Page Two

Parent Chat - Conversations taken from the FOSTER PARENT COLLEGE online discussion boards. Visit WWW.FOSTERPARENTCOLLEGE.COM for more information on FPC.

Q. Where do I take my child? He is two-and-one-half and shows ALL the signs of being emotional promiscuous child with reactive attachment disorder (RAD). Should I take him to a regular pediatrician or try to find a psychologist?
~Regards, Brooke

A. Is this your foster child or adopted child? If foster, you might want to talk with your caseworker to help you find out where to go to evaluate your child. In any case, letting your caseworker know your concerns is good idea.

If he is your adopted son, you might want to seek out a psychologist.

There is no best way to locate a good therapist. If you are part of an adoptive parent support group, you might ask about the reputations of local licensed psychologists. I would strongly suggest you avoid any mental health professional that uses "holding therapy" or any other coercive approaches that could potentially harm your child. Try to select a psychologist who will work with you rather than merely see your child alone.
~Dr. Rick Delaney

For more information on RAD, you might want to read my book, "Fostering Changes: Myth, Meaning and Magic Bullets In Attachment Theory," available from SocialLearning.com.

Attachment: The Tie That Binds

Continued from Page One

So what makes Haley tick?

Attachment theory to the rescue! Attachment theory (along with the research that backs it up) provides one fruitful way to make sense of Haley's behavior and to better guide her.

Attachment — as defined by John Bowlby, the founding father of attachment theory — is “an emotional bond that ties the child to one or a few figures.” Bowlby speculated that emotional bonds eventually provide children with a secure base that allows them to explore the world around them. It helps kids feel solid, supported and at-ease around others.

Kids who lack this solid foundation may instead develop insecure attachment. They feel uneasy around their parents. Many abused and neglected children like Haley, as you might expect, fail to develop a secure base and a level of comfort around adults.

Why Do Kids Act This Way?

The central purpose of attachment is survival. In the animal world, physical closeness between adult and offspring increases the chances of surviving. Attachment, again, is the tie that binds child to parent and parent to child. Youngsters come equipped with and/or learn ways to gain and maintain that closeness.

It is this parental closeness that generates feelings of safety and security. It may be a physical closeness at first and, later, as the child grows, an emotional closeness develops. The children feel solid, supported and at-ease. In homes where closeness and trust are difficult to achieve and maintain, children often develop unusual approaches to keep caregivers involved and engaged.

In abusive homes, it is tricky. The child may seek some closeness and

attention, but it is not always safe for them to be around an abusive parent. They may need to be close and not-close at the same time.

Haley relates to her foster parents in ways that serve a purpose or function related to attachment and to her early abuse. The way she acts is a vestige — a leftover pattern of surviving mastered earlier in her life. Haley drifts physically close to the foster mother, but she remains emotionally distant — close-but-not-close. She shows few true feelings, especially negative feelings. It is a question of treading lightly around parents. You see, Haley has an insecure attachment and her total super-compliance might be an outgrowth of that insecurity.

Can this be changed? In a word, yes. But can you help kids like Haley? Yes, but...

First the foster or adoptive parent has to recognize the nature of her problem. Understanding attachment is important, as you might suspect. Moreover, you find the solution by exploring what purpose the child's behavior serves. To do that, you must detach yourself from your obvious concern about the child's history and focus on the here and now, her immediate needs and situation.

Consider this approach.

- ▶ First, identify the behavior or behavioral problems that most concern you. In Haley's case, it's her lack of expressing her negative feelings, her disagreement, her saccharine phony smile and her resolute compliance.
- ▶ Second, determine how widespread the super-compliant behavior is by pinpointing or tracking the conduct. You can frequently identify when, where and with whom she most often reveals these problems.
- ▶ Third, search out how this behavior works for Haley. This “how it works” is better known as the function of the behavior. For example,

how does the behavior serve her needs? Does it keep her somewhat close yet safe? Does it reduce her anxiety? Does it earn her attention and approval? Alternatively, does it offer her self-protection? Function is ultra-important.

In the case of Haley, her lack of expression of honest emotion served a function in the past of keeping her safe around her abusive parents. It should not be surprising that many formerly abused children conceal negative feelings around adults. Their chances of avoiding abuse depended on muffling any protest or outcry. If you never complain, you might improve your chances of avoiding harsh punishment.

- ▶ Fourth, develop a plan to invite, elicit, encourage and reward honest vocalization of both positive and negative feelings. You may have to coach Haley and reassure her that it's okay for her to say how she feels, even if — especially if — it's negative. When you sense she is holding back feelings, you might help her label them.

Encouraging comments such as, “If I were in your shoes right now, I might feel...” or “Some kids tell their parents they don't want to go to bed early on a summer night. Maybe you'd like to tell me that right now?”

- ▶ Fifth, evaluate how your plan is working. Is your child attempting to vocalize how she feels? And, by the way, ask yourself, too.” How do I feel about inviting my child to be more direct and outspoken?”
- ▶ Finally, while there are many ways to view kids' behavior and behavioral problems, attachment is a helpful notion to keep in mind. Yes, attachment truly is the tie that binds. More importantly, how each child bonds to a parent is critical. Kids with insecure attachments require a healing connection and a very sensitive and consistent approach.