

TAGS: Trauma Related Issues; Parental Attachment

When Parents Fail to Attach to Their Adopted Child

No parent ever imagines that they will fail to attach to their adopted child. Rather, we enter into adoption with such high expectations for the type of parents we will be— patient, understanding, and most of all loving! But what happens if this is not how we feel? What happens if a parent struggles to even like her child on most days and does not feel that sense of overwhelming attachment?

It's Painful in the Shadows

The issue of failure of parental attachment lives in the shadows. Parents are ashamed and most often feel intense guilt. No one ever goes into an adoption thinking that they won't love or feel attached to their child. When this happens, they feel like an uncaring freak. Or they blame the child. Seldom do they reach out to their agency to ask for help. The layers of shame, guilt and now isolation drive a parent further into those shadows.

What Causes Parents to Fail to Attach to their Adopted Child

Attachment is a two-way street. Not only does the child need to attach to the parent, but the parent must also attach to the child. Unfortunately, parental attachment does not always happen for a myriad of reasons.

Time

Sometimes parents simply haven't given it enough time. They expected attachment to happen automatically and quickly, but they are left feeling like a babysitter at best; or having been invaded by someone else's child at worst. Some people need to grow in love rather than fall in love. Adoption of a child past infancy can sometimes feel like an arranged marriage at first, and it is not unusual for attachment to take up to 2 years.

Unrealistic Expectations

Unrealistic expectations can hinder parental attachment. It is important when adopting an older child to not spend too much energy ahead of time making assumptions of how this child will be and how she will act. As Abbie Smith, an adoption social worker says, regardless of what you have been told by the child's caseworker, foster parent, or orphanage caretaker, enter older child adoption with a sense of wonder - I wonder what this child will like, I wonder what his strengths will be.... Be prepared for the unexpected.¹

It also helps to control your expectations of gratefulness. No child should be expected to be grateful to her parents, but it is tempting to subtly expect this when you are trying so hard to help this child and have worked so hard (and spent so much money?) to get her. Typically, most kids are not inherently grateful beings until they are in their mid to late 20's.

¹ From Creating a Family weekly radio show, When Parents Struggle to Attach To Their Adopted Child, Sept. 13, 2017, <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/parents-struggle-attach-adopted-child/>

In addition to the unrealistic expectations we may have about our child, it is also common to have unrealistic expectations of how we will be as new parents. Most parents expect to automatically love and feel attached to their child. After all, that is what normal parents feel! Right? They don't expect to feel like they are simply going through the motions of parenting.

The contrast between how they thought they would be and how they actually are can send them into a tailspin.

Post-Adoption Depression

Post-adoption depression is real and can interfere with a parent being able to attach to their adopted child. Adding a child to the family, regardless whether by birth or adoption, is stressful. Adopting an older child, even a relatively young "older child" multiplies this stress exponentially. Combine this stress with lack of sleep and having your entire world turned topsy-turvy and you have the makings for depression.

In addition to feeling depressed, parents also often feel exhausted because parenting a child that has experienced abuse and neglect (including institutionalization and prenatal alcohol or drug exposure) is hard work! Exhaustion can fuel depression.²

Infertility Grief

Grief can play havoc with attachment, and infertility gives us a lot to grieve. There are so many losses bundled up with infertility: loss of genetic continuity, loss of creating the perfect mash-up between yours and your partner's genes, loss of control over how and when you will create your family, and loss of the ability to parent. Adoption only helps to resolve one of those losses—the ability to parent.

Resolution of grief does not mean that it goes away completely, but it becomes more manageable and does not interfere with your life. The good news is that with therapy and hard work, most people get this grief under control.

Mismatch of Temperament

We all come into this world with basic temperamental characteristics: introversion/extroversion, sensitivity, flexibility, etc. While humans are very much a result of nature and nurture (genes and environment), research has found that our basic temperament is greatly influenced by genes. Some combinations of temperament/personalities inherently work better than others. Adopting a child can very well increase your chances of having temperamental differences. (Although it should be clear that just as many clashes can occur between parents of similar temperaments—imagine two strong-willed extroverts.)

² From Creating a Family weekly radio show, Post Adoption Depression: Causes and Prevention, June 12, 2013, featuring Dr. Jane Aronson, clinical assistant professor of pediatrics at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University, and the founder of World Wide Orphan Foundation, <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/post-adoption-depression-causes-and-prevention/>

Differing temperaments do not have to be a problem while building attachment, but the differences can be problematic if the parent is unaware of what is happening. As the adult in this relationship, the responsibility is then ours to understand that part of the problem is a personality clash and we are part of the problem.

Impact of Trauma

Children adopted past infancy have all experienced some type of trauma, abuse or neglect. Even infants may have experienced “trauma” in utero due to prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol. Trauma leaves scars that often come out in behaviors that can make attaching difficult. These children did not deserve what happened to them and their behavior may just be a symptom of their abuse, but it takes a lot of work to parent through these behaviors. Behaviors that are a result of trauma can make it harder for a parent to attach.

The Good News

If you are having trouble bonding to your adopted child, you are not alone, especially if you have adopted an older child. There may be lots of possible reasons why you haven’t been able to attach, but there are also things you can do to help yourself and your child.

Your first step needs to be getting yourself into therapy—preferably with a therapist that specializes in adoption. Your adoption agency may have a therapist on staff that can help or can recommend someone. Don’t, however, let the lack of adoption training or specialization stop you from getting therapy. A family therapist can also help.

Your second step is to start talking about your feelings. There is power in talking! Find an in-person support if you can; but also check out online groups, such as the one run by our partners at [Creating a Family - it’s a closed Facebook group](#) so that only those in the group can see the posts. They also offer the option of asking the moderators to post your questions anonymously.

A very popular but poignant post, also from our friends at Creating a Family is titled [“I Feel Like a Beast, but I Don’t Love My Adopted Child.”](#) It’s an answer to a vulnerable plea for help in a mom’s attachment to her older toddler and represents the experiences of many gaging from the many comments from other readers. Another helpful resource [from NACAC, called Helping Children Recover from Grief: Support is Essential](#), addresses the need to seek your own supports and healing. Dealing with a hurt child can result in painful wounds of your own and you need to be supported while leading your child to healing from his own grief and trauma.