

Attachment Parenting

Parenting is an art, not a science.

Many children with attachment disorders are adopted by well-meaning parents who are ill-prepared to handle the child's severe emotional and behavioral problems. These children are unable to give and receive love and affection, are physically and emotionally abusive to caregivers, siblings and peers, constantly defy parental rules and authority, and create ongoing stress and turmoil in the family. As a result of insufficient pre-adoptive and post-adoptive placement services families and marriages suffer.

Many parents of attachment disordered children have been "through the mill" of mental health and social service programs. They are commonly blamed for their child's problems, denied access to social service records, and thoroughly frustrated in their attempts to get help. They are angry with their child, feel guilty and inadequate, and are often on the verge of relinquishment. The therapeutic challenge is to enhance parents' positive emotion, instill hope, increase parents' motivation, and create a more effective model through which to view their parenting role and understanding of their child. Parenting an attachment disordered child requires a particular attitude, steadfastness, consistency and a tremendous amount of creativity and energy.

Emotionally healthy children have an innate desire to please their parents; attachment disordered children fail to consider the feelings of others. They are extremely self-centered and lack the desire for intimacy. These children developed these personality structures as a defense to their early life traumas. The defense is designed to avoid being hurt further either emotionally or physically. Although these defenses served a function early in life, which was to simply survive, they are no longer necessary for their physical or emotional wellbeing. Children cannot relax when they feel a constant need to control their environment; and unfortunately, the trauma has been locked in and prevents the child from recognizing he or she is now in safe hands. Therefore, it is necessary to create an environment that allows the child to relax by learning to trust the good caretakers in the child's life today.

Unfortunately, relaxation comes with a price, which for the child feels like complete terror of losing the power they once felt. Their ability to control the family situations must be lovingly removed, and they must be guided through the difficult reactions of feeling out of control. But first, parents must learn basic concepts that enable them to maintain a safe, loving, positive and powerful parenting style. If the parents are in control, the child will not need to be.

These basic concepts begin with parenting strategies developed by Dr. Foster Cline and Jim Fay. Parenting with Love and Logic is an excellent book that describes these basic concepts. In addition, Evergreen Consultants distributes a book, video tape, and audio tape series by Dr. Cline titled, *Success in Parenting* that is also an invaluable resource. These concepts are only the beginning and should be used with all children, attachment disordered or not. Our parenting strategies move beyond the basic concepts described by Dr. Cline and Mr. Fay. Nancy Thomas' book, *When Love is Not Enough*, has good descriptions of many of these strategies.

Our primary goal is to help children learn to be respectful, responsible, reciprocal and fun to be around. In order to accomplish this goal, parents must create an environment that provides a balance of structure and nurturance that is in sync with the capabilities of the child. As the child moves closer to these goals, the structure may be minimized.

Some basic strategies follow:

The number one rule of therapeutic parenting is Take good care of yourself!

Be proactive rather than reactive.

Avoid triangulation. Do not allow your child to play one parent against the other.

Create an emotionally as well as physically safe environment: Avoid sarcasm and anger.

Use natural consequences to teach life lessons.

Use empathy in the face of these consequences.

Communicate in a loving manner; set a positive tone.

Use thinking rather than fighting words.

Save the pizzazz for the positive behavior, use neutrality with the negative.

Allow your child to express his/her feelings verbally.

Minimize use of the television.

Only give choices you can live with.

Be consistent.

Avoid power struggles.

Determine whose problem it is and if it is not yours, stay out of it.

Assess what the child can handle and only allow freedoms and responsibilities that will result in opportunities for success.

Keep a sense of humor.

Remember, it is not the parent's job to "fix" the child, it is your job to create an environment conducive to healing and loving.