

Adopting a Child with a History of Trauma: Impact on Parents' Self-Image

This article is taken, with permission, from [Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents](#) by [Deborah Gray's](#). You can visit Deborah's website to learn about her clinical services at Nurturing Attachments, see her speaking schedule or read her article, Ten Tips for the First Year of Placement.



In Chapter 2, Challenges for Children and Parents, Deborah writes,

When children love their parents in return, it confirms to parents that they are lovable. When children are developing consciences on schedule, parents get feedback that they are doing a good job. When children are behaving sensitively, parents reflect that their home has promoted emotional sensitivity.

Parents with impacted children (i.e., children who have experienced abuse, neglect, abandonment, institutionalization, etc.) wonder, “Am I lovable?” “Am I doing a good parenting?” “Is our home a good place?” and they often answer their own questions, “No,” ignoring the facts that explain the problems. A sense of failure is normal. Parents are vulnerable to shame. They are sometimes too loyal to share their child's history. On the other hand, parents can feel embarrassed when their child takes a baby bottle, asks strangers to take her home, or acts like parents are repugnant. People-pleasers can find themselves apologizing for their child.

Parents need to develop a sturdy sense of self-esteem, buoyed by feedback from people who know what the parent and child are facing. Parent support groups or parent mentor programs are a wonderful way to meet this challenge. Therapists who recognize and comment on real accomplishments are another.

One woman came in to see me after a family reunion. Her daughter had melted down twice, for a total of thirty minutes, at the reunion. The mother told me, proudly, how she had handled it. She did not take on shame, go to the hotel, or allow it to ruin her image of competence. Her daughter got back on track much

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

more quickly when she realized that her mother never got off track. For the first time, her daughter got to go to the reunion and participate. Two years before, even one tantrum had lasted sixty to ninety minutes. Taking the whole family, and relying on progress, had been a courageous step. The mother's boosted self-esteem was based on their hard-won progress, not on her daughter's having behaved perfectly at the reunion.

Parents build up self-image with self-talk like this,

- “Not everyone could ignore whining with the dedication that I do.”
- “I see the value in my child, and do not need confirmation from her.”
- “My child is afraid of the love she wants, not unlovable.”
- “I am able to give my child consistent love.”
- “I am doing my best job almost every day.”
- “I wasn't part of the original problem; I'm part of the problem-solving team.”
- “Good parents treat themselves well. Self-pity will not get me to the movies—but a babysitter will!”
- “I need to share this success with my friend, so I will make time to call her right now.”
- “I can name three things that have changed since the beginning of placement—I am sleeping better, my daughter does not vomit daily and I have the hot tub working.”
- “I can plan an additional good thing today, if today seems too hard.”

Over time, most parents end up doing inner work on their own sense of self. They become impervious to casual feedback from the community. They rely on knowledgeable friends, who can understand the magnitude of the work that they are accomplishing with their child. They generate an inner picture of themselves and their efforts that matches their actual situation.