

"He or She is So Smart!": The Many Facets of Intellectual Development

By Arleta James, PCC

It is quite common when a family enters our agency for services that they proclaim, "He is so smart!" "She scored so well on her intelligence test!" "Her teachers say she is so smart. She just won't work to her potential." And indeed, it is usually true. Intelligence tests confirm that many traumatized children who are being adopted today have a good level of overall intelligence, which is often translated into being bright. Unfortunately, the conclusion drawn is that because, "She is smart." or "He is bright." the negative behaviors are deliberate or intentional. That is, "He could stop lying anytime he wants." "She is smart enough to straighten up!"



Overall, the reality is that *intellectual* or *mental development* includes an array of cognitive activities,

- thinking
- perception,
- memory,
- reasoning,
- concept development,
- problem-solving ability,
- abstract thinking,

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- language (with its requirements of symbolism and memory, is one of the most important and complicated cognitive activities.)



So, for example, without the ability to reason, the smart child is impaired:

Alice is age 9. She was adopted when age 4. One evening, at age 1½, social workers had arrived at her birth home and removed her. Her birthmother did not participate in reunification efforts and so she never saw her birthmother again. Her perception of her removal is that she was “stolen.” This is certainly understandable. What else would a toddler think when women come into your home, take you, and then give you to another family? Alice has stolen on a regular basis since coming to reside with her adoptive family. Jewelry, video games, pens and pencils disappear routinely despite consequences much to Alice’s dissatisfaction.

Alice lacks basic cause and effect thinking—**reasoning**. She repeats the same behavior over and over. She does not learn from her mistakes or consequences. She is deficient in creating solutions to **solve her problem** of feeling stolen. The only way she is able to demonstrate her **perception** of the loss of her birthmother is to reenact the event of stealing.

Cause-and-effect thinking develops out of experiences. Rudimentary cause-and-effect thinking is in place by about 18-months of age. The child must have consistent care giving in order for this developmental task to come online. The act of crying and then being soothed is the impetus for cause-and-effect thinking. From this “cycle of needs” the child learns, “I cry and Mom comes.”—my action caused a reaction.

As a second example, concrete thinking is another area of cognitive development that poses difficulty for adoptive families. The concrete thinker sees the world as black or white. There is no gray. There is limited or no abstract thinking. The concrete thinking child often appears defiant.

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Cody, age 11, has been stealing since he was placed with Dan and Rita six years ago. Dan stated, “Cody, you have sticky fingers and it needs to stop!” Cody, puzzled, began to feel his fingers. He replied, “Dad, I washed my hands a few minutes ago. My fingers aren’t sticky.” Dan, annoyed, said, “Cody, you know what I mean.” Cody replied, “No really. I washed my hands just a few minutes ago.” Dan then stated, “Enough. I don’t want to hear anymore.”

Actually, Cody had no idea what his father was talking about. His immature thought processes only allow for literal interpretations, rather than **conceptual interpretations**. Because of this, arguments frequently occur due to the child’s exacting manner. Math, time and money also require this type of conceptual thought. It is quite common that children with histories of trauma lag in these areas.

Overall, the purpose of this post is to demonstrate that essential components of intellectual thought are underdeveloped or not existent in the cognitive abilities of the child who experienced abandonment, neglect, abuse or institutionalization. Intelligence without all its pieces, is the culprit in negative behaviors rather than, a deliberate or intentional desire to simply wreak havoc in adoptive families.



“Smart” parents (That is you!) come to understand this. They decrease their anger for their adopted son or daughter, and increase efforts to bolster cognitive abilities. Make intentional efforts—daily—to help your child become “bright” in all areas of intellectual development!

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