

# *Does Your Child Really Play? Finding Your Traumatized Adoptee's Playful Side!*

*By Arleta James, PCC*



Certainly, how kids play makes for enjoyable family interactions and long-lasting friendships! Play is also a vital component in facilitating development. Play is linked with enhanced,

- Language skills
- Literacy
- Problem-solving skills
- Memory
- Creativity
- Turn taking
- Collaboration
- Following rules
- Empathy
- Self-regulation
- Impulse control
- Motivation
- Muscle development
- Coordination (Ziger, Singer & Bishop-Josef, 2004.)

The above list could go on. Parental observation of the child—young to adolescent—with a history of trauma playing alone, with peers and with siblings is time well spent. Frequently, children who have experienced abuse, neglect, institutionalization, abandonment, etc., lack the ability to play in accord with their chronological age. Below are some common play deficits that adoptive parents describe to us and that we clinicians see at the Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio. This list is not exhaustive,

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### **“My Friends Change Frequently”**

The traumatized adoptee changes friends constantly. Peer relationships are short-lived. “Billy” comes to play a few times, and then parents don’t hear about or see anymore of Billy again. Billy is replaced by Sally, George, Mark, Matthew and so on! Friendships keep going around like a revolving door. A new playmate is always entering or exiting.

### **“I Flit from Toy to Toy”**

Children, with difficult beginnings in life, may play with a toy for a few minutes and then move on to the next toy. Sustained interest in one toy or activity is lacking. Pretty soon, every toy available has been looked at and tossed to the floor. Play equals making a mess.

### **“I Prefer to be a Couch Potato”**

Some adopted sons and daughters prefer to sit—chronically! These children can sit among a room full of wonderful toys, arts and crafts supplies, etc. and never make a move to sample any of this great stuff! Or,

*Rose was adopted internationally at the age of 5 ½. Now age 11, she still hasn’t mastered playing outdoors. If seated in front of an Xbox or holding a Nintendo DS, she is masterful. Yet, ask her to go outside on a beautiful summer day and within minutes she’ll be at the screen door begging to come inside. With a backyard full of amazing play equipment, in a neighborhood replete with potential playmates, Rose is totally out of her element.*

### **“I play the Same Thing Over and Over and Over...”**

*Randy is 11. He was adopted domestically at 10 months of age. He was significantly neglected during his early months. He reached all of his developmental milestones later than most kids. Today, his play continues to lag behind his actual age. In fact, Matchbox cars are his only form of entertainment. Each day after school Randy smashes all the cars into each other—repetitively! This destructive play has been going on as long as Randy’s parents can remember. The cars are never used to transport people around town, even though he has a lovely carpet imprinted with a Main Street full of shops, a park, a school and two neighborhoods.*

### **“My Play Involves No People”**

Play lacking people is particularly common among previously post-institutionalized children. Actually, in this scenario, animals often dominate the play (i.e., stuffed animals, animal figures, etc.) instead of people. Animals are okay for a while as they serve as transitional objects in a similar fashion as does a favorite “blankie.” However, children’s play, especially from ages two and up should contain “people”—dolls, Fisher Price little people, imaginary friends, etc. Fantasy play in which kids work out feelings and act out all kinds of themes involving people—pretending to be Mom or Dad, launching astronauts in a spaceship made from empty boxes, teaching dolls in a classroom, hiding from “bad” guys in a fort—should be a predominate type of play.

### **“My Play is All Electronic”**

*Brian and Bryce, twins, were adopted internationally at 3 ½. They entered therapy at 13. The parents presented a laundry list of behavioral issues: lying, stealing, peeing everywhere but in the toilet, putting the dishes in the cupboards dirty, profanity, hoarding food until it rotted, throwing homework out the bus window, and being absorbed with PlayStation® about 25 hours per week! Board games, card games, arts and crafts, drawing, painting, playing an instrument—anything that required creativity—were snubbed in lieu of screen time!*

*The PlayStation was packed up and given to nephews when services were initiated. Mom and Dad replaced the PlayStation with an assortment of activities. For three months, Brian and Bryce sat on the couch looking at the empty table on which the PlayStation used to sit. They were totally perplexed as to what to do!*

Finally, about four months into therapy, Mom left a voicemail for the therapist. The sound of laughter came across the phone. Then, Mom said, "You'll never believe it! That is Brian and Bryce having a good time playing Trouble! I can't believe they are actually playing and enjoying themselves! They have included our younger birth daughter (age 11), Marie. This is the first time I remember the three kids doing anything like this together!"

Traumatized adoptees are perfectly content to let screens be their BFFs! Interacting with machines is far less complicated and hurtful than connecting with people!

### ***"I Break My Toys"***

Parents lament, "Every toy he has is broken!" "Christmas morning, he'll receive great new toys. By Christmas evening, they'll all be broken or taken apart—the pieces will be scattered everywhere!" "She just trashes all her possessions, instead of playing with them." Certainly, the child with a history of trauma views herself or himself as "broken." "Shattered" by being abused and abandoned, "destruction" becomes the metaphor for their experiences.

### ***"I Re-Enact My Trauma in My Play"***

*On a tragic evening, 4-year-old Kelly witnessed the murder, by physical abuse, of her younger sibling at the hands of her birthfather. Once the birthfather and birthmother realized the injuries, they placed both Kelly and her sibling in the car and drove to the hospital. En route, they concocted a story of innocence. Kelly, scared, was unable to speak to the police. However, the event was ingrained in her memory as was her last moment with her sibling, connected to life support. Eventually police arrested the murderer. Kelly was placed in foster care. Subsequently, at age 5 ½, she was adopted. Once in her adoptive home, Kelly relayed the details of the murder verbally and through play. All of her dolls were named after her sibling. She would sit for long periods of time meticulously bandaging their wounds. If she played house, the "Mom" and "Dad" fought violently. The pretend "family" scenarios ended with the police arriving. Kelly's drawings were morbid—funeral scenes. Certainly, the doll play and the drawings Kelly created were shocking to her brothers and sisters who had lived a life enveloped by safe and loving parents.*

All of these social skill and play deficits lead to heartbreak for adoptive Moms and Dads. The joy of attending birthday parties is rare. The fun of inviting kids over for play dates or sleepovers is on indefinite hold. Hosting the "after the game" celebration is left to other families. Even brothers and sisters withdraw from playing with the new arrival, or letting him or her tag along to friends' houses. Family game night goes by the wayside as the adopted son or daughter is simply no fun!

There are ways to improve this situation. Before reading Part two of this article, think about the questions below,

- Think about the types of social delays that cause chronic issues between your adoptee, peers and siblings. Make a list. Prioritize the three greatest problems. Leave me a comment so I'm sure to include your needs in next Thursday's post.
- Think about play. That is, do you view play as structured activities? Is playing something your children do only in an organized manner? Is there time for unstructured play? What would unstructured play look like? Do academics dominate your household? Would you be willing to balance homework with play?
- Think about how you played as a child. What did you enjoy? Who did you play with? What was different about the way you played and the way children play today?

## ***Does Your Child Really Play? Finding Your Traumatized Adoptee's Playful Side (Part Two)***

Welcome to Part Two of this article about helping sons and daughters—who joined the family via adoption—learn to be more playful. As Part One pointed out, fun family interactions enhance the quality of life for each member of the adoptive family! A child's play also facilitates the development of skills essential for caring about others and succeeding academically. In Part One, we also learned that adoptees with a history of abuse, neglect, institutionalization, etc. are at risk for various types of play delays.

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Today, we focus on ways to find the playful side of these wounded children. Without further ado...

### **Play is an Activity**

A first step in improving the play of the traumatized adoptee is to reflect on your ideas about what play is. Play is an activity. Play involves **unstructured** time in which children can explore their environment, use their imagination, learn to negotiate, compromise and problem-solve amongst their peers, etc. Today, we structure most aspects of children's life. We organize play dates and sports. For many children, athletic practice and homework consume after school hours and portions of their weekends. Children are allowed little spontaneity and free time—two essential ingredients that go into making the play that lends to development!

Then, there are situations like this,

- In August, while getting a hair cut, the woman next to me was discussing that her son would miss the family vacation because he had opted to join the golf team. Golf practice started two weeks before school resumed. This practice was mandatory if he was to be part of the team. The vacation was planned in accord with the week the Dad was allotted by his employer.
- A Mom reported planning Mother's Day around her daughter's soccer game!
- Two children I know are practicing basketball from 8:30pm to 10:00pm. The practice time is dictated by the need to accommodate an array of after school activities. So, gym time is assigned as it can be. The family's sleep schedule has been altered to accommodate basketball participation!

These are but a few examples that could be provided. Certainly, athletics are wonderful. Yet, sports' infringement into family life is growing at a fast pace! Parents chronically state, "We are so busy!"

Parents are encouraged to reflect on what family life means. Prioritize what your children need, rather than give in to the pressures of what your neighbors or the school expect.

### **Play Starts with Parents**

Parents are a child's first playmates. Peek-a-boo, imitating facial expressions, shaking rattles, singing lullabies, etc. are the foundation of play. Play is built by parent-child interaction. As was explained in, *How Full is Your Bucket? Reciprocity and the Traumatized Adoptee*, these joyous activities act as scaffolding for later, more complex social and play skills. Thus, play grows from parent-child interactions. Actually,

- Social competence is rooted in the relationships that infants and toddlers experience in the early years of their life. Everyday experiences in relationships with their **parents** are fundamental to children's developing social skills (Peth-Pierce, 2000).
- In particular, **parental** responsiveness and nurturance are considered to be key factors in the development of children's social competence (Casas, 2001). Children who have close relationships with responsive **parents** early in life are able to develop healthy relationships with peers as they get older (Peth-Pierce, 2000).

Today, we often opt to place the socially delayed child in a group of peers. We believe he or she will absorb the skills of the surrounding children. For many children, this is putting the cart before the horse,

*Bobby, age 7, was adopted by his single parent, Marge, when he was 5. Bobby's early years were spent with a birthmother who neglected him due to her addictions. So, he entered Marge's home with residual trauma issues.*

*Within a short period of time, Bobby alienated the neighborhood kids. He was bossy, wouldn't follow rules, hogged the ball, stomped home if losing and so on. He rejected, rather than followed, the group norms.*

*Realizing Bobby lacked social abilities, Marge set aside 15 minutes each evening to play board and card games. At first, this didn't go so well. However, over nine months, Bobby gradually learned to play fairly, and to accept that playing is about "having fun", instead of "having to win."*

*Gradually, Bobby was able to return to the neighborhood as a new and improved playmate! With his new skills, he readily made lasting friendships!*

Moms and Dads are encouraged to follow Marge's example. If your adoptive family is comprised of typical kids, teaching play can become a family project. **"Going back"** and gaining the basics is often a more successful method than placing the child in a group of peers in order to "push forward."

### **Think "Younger"**

We must realize that the development of the adopted son or daughter is off pace with his or her chronological age. Thus, you are parenting a "younger" child. Provide toys, arts and crafts supplies and props that accommodate this developmental disparity. Likely, you will have less broken toys, and your child may actually move off the sofa to explore play items because they are of greater interest.

*Recently, we placed several empty boxes in our waiting room at ABC of Ohio. Tweens, adolescents and our littlest clients have been heard giggling and laughing throughout the office. The boxes have been a house, a fort, a source of hide and seek, a pirate ship, a kitchen and much more! Even though play has become electronic, **child development remains the same**. Kids prefer the box! This has been a good lesson for all of us!*

Thinking younger also includes providing opportunities for acting "littler." I offered examples of this suggestion in, "I'm Not Lazy!" The Development of Initiative in Traumatized Adoptees, Part Two.

### **Add, Reduce and Remove as Necessary**

We met 11-year-old Randy in Part One of this post. He smashed his Matchbox cars day after day, year after year! Fisher Price Little People were added to his car collection. Dad began making statements like, "Cars need drivers." "People go on vacation in their cars." "People go shopping in their cars." "People like to take drives to view scenery." Eventually, Randy's cars and people intermingled in the ways Dad suggested. Simply, Dad facilitated a dramatic, positive shift in Randy's play!

Don't be afraid to remove or reduce electronics. I believe kids need some electronic play or they wind up out of the loop with their peers. The Wii Fit offers a compromise—an electronic generated play that allows lots of human interaction.

If your child is over-focused on animals or anything else you find concerning, remove or reduce these too; this can be done gradually over a period of weeks or months. Simultaneously add—toys, people figures, props, crayons, paints, clay, beads, blocks, and so on! Provide directions like Randy's Dad. "Why don't you draw a house for me?" "Let's make some Christmas ornaments as gifts this year." "I would love to see you build an airplane with your Legos." Continue this until you have success. Realize this may take time. Unfortunately, reversing the ravage of trauma doesn't happen overnight. However, the sooner you get started, the sooner you will find your child's playful side!

### **Interrupt and Provide Corrective Experiences**

We also met Kelly in Part One. Kelly re-enacted the murder of her sibling. This death occurred at the hands of Kelly's birthparents. Kelly's play was full of violent themes in her adoptive home. Kelly's Mom and her older sister, Linda and Sally, made sure to interrupt Kelly's play as needed. When Kelly's dolls were beating each other, Linda or Sally would sit down with Kelly and say, "In our family, dolls don't hit each other. They play nicely. Let's have the dolls make dinner." Gradually, Kelly's play shifted from chaos to calm!

**"Set a Timer"** is another form of interrupting play to enhance its outcome,

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*Patty and Rich, ages 7 and 8, are a birth child and a child who is adopted. They were able to play well for only about fifteen minutes. After that, shouting, bickering and a cry of "Mom, he won't play fair!" ruined the fun.*

*Joyce, their mom, eventually decided to set a timer for fifteen minutes. At that point, she would casually call one of the children to the kitchen to help her "for a minute" or she would arrive in the play area with a candy kiss. She provided enough of an interruption to offset the argument that was certain to occur imminently. Patty and Rich continued playing for another fifteen minutes. By that time, dinner was ready.*

Joyce gives us a nice way to promote a positive ending to a situation that could easily conclude in an ugly manner.

### ***Development is Like a Set of Gears***

We must also understand that human development proceeds in domains: cognitive, social, emotional and physical/physiological. These domains operate like a set of gears—each domain influences the other. When one domain is bogged down, the others slow. Cognitive and emotional delays may be the culprits behind your child's social inabilities. For example, many traumatized children lack cause-and-effect thinking. Residence in abusive or depriving environments denies these kids opportunities to learn from their mistakes, or to discover that their actions cause reactions. Cause-and-effect thinking is the pre-cursor to moral development. Moral development lends to functioning in situations that require abiding by group norms. Improved cognitive functioning lends to enhanced social interactions.

My articles, *Affection is Wonderful!: Will the Behaviors Ever Stop?* and *"Sorry:" Building Your Adoptee's Moral Development* provide in-depth information about facilitating your child's cause-and-effect thinking.

Grief is also a problem that undermines fun and play. The child who spent months or years in an orphanage carries the anger and sadness for his or her abandonment, and for the loneliness that permeates institutional life. The abused child harbors intense feelings for the physical or sexual violation of his or her body. Often, adults believe that post-adoption these traumas and emotions will simply fade away. Reality—many adoptees will require significant parent and professional efforts to overcome their losses. The payoff will be a child who can attach to their Moms, Dads, brothers, sisters, peers and others. The connected, grief-free child flourishes in all ways—fun is possible and enjoyable! Chapters 9 and 10, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption* offer lots of ideas to help grief flow—away!

In conclusion, finding your child's playful side can be accomplished! Yes, it may mean making schedule changes, and a time investment on a regular basis. Yet, the benefits of enhanced play and social skills are untold to you, your typical children and your adopted son or daughter's future! What are you waiting for! Go play!